



Peru. Mother teaching daughter to knit alpaca fibre. Photo: Petra Dilthey

Building on the knowledge and initiatives of pastoralist women

SUMMARY BRIEF PREPARED BY THE IYRP
WORKING GROUP ON PASTORALISM & GENDER

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Ethiopia Nyangatom woman.
Photo: Katy Gomez Catalina

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2026 as both the **International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP 2026)** and the **International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF 2026)**. These dual designations create a double opportunity to spotlight women pastoralists. This policy brief illuminates how to support pastoralist women to expand their contributions to pastoral systems and community wellbeing.

Pastoralists are the key stewards of rangelands, which occupy half of the Earth's land surface. Pastoralism—grazing domestic livestock on natural vegetation to produce food, fibre and other goods—is the world's most widespread land use and a critical food source for many rural people. Over two billion people across varied rangeland landscapes depend directly or indirectly on pastoralism and related value chains and foods. About half of all pastoralists are women and girls, whose specialised knowledge, skills and contributions are essential to the sustainability and continuity of these diverse biocultural systems.

Gender and power relations influence how pastoralists access and manage resources, make decisions and relate to political, socio-economic and environmental processes. Despite pastoralist women's contributions to tradition-keeping, innovation and adaptation to global changes, and their recent development of national and regional networks, the women continue to face obstacles to equitable access to land, livestock, financial services, technology, information and participation in household and community decision-making processes. Lack of appropriate and mobile health, education and social services for pastoralist communities also disproportionately affects women and girls.

Women in pastoral systems: tradition and change

Women's knowledge, expertise and labour related to livestock, plants, land and water are essential to pastoralism, as is their care work for home, family and community. Pastoralist women hold and transmit cultural heritage comprising language, identity, knowledge and practices. Women pass critical pastoralist knowledge and skills from generation to generation, including knowledge of livestock health, nutrition, reproduction and mobility, along with the skills to transform raw animal products into food, textiles and other goods for consumption and sale.

For centuries, pastoralist women have innovated to improve livestock-management practices and creatively developed new ways to generate income from livestock products and rangeland landscapes. In areas where pastoralist men migrate for wage labour, women assume additional responsibilities, including increased involvement in livestock, dairy and fibre markets, keeping their communities resilient. Yet most pastoralist women do not have the same opportunities as men. Even in countries where women and men officially hold equal rights, women often face challenges in accessing land rights, animal ownership and financial services. In addition, political conflict, gender violence and misguided development initiatives have frequently eroded women's customary rights over land and animals.

Women pastoralists are often passionate advocates for rangelands and pastoralism, defending pastoralists' mobility and land rights in the face of rangeland appropriation, commodification and conversion to other land uses. At the same time, lack of health, education and social services adapted to pastoralist living conditions disproportionately impacts women and girls. Governments often justify initiatives to settle pastoralists with arguments about providing better services. Yet pastoralists know that staying in one place reduces livestock productivity, degrades rangelands and raises pastoralists' vulnerability to climate extremes, increasing poverty and compromising sustainability. Accordingly, women pastoralists call for services well adapted to their mobile lifestyles.

Women's participation in decision-making varies greatly among pastoralist groups. However, in many cases, women are limited to indirect involvement rather than full participation. This is sometimes due to cultural norms, but often it is because women's triple burden—productive work in livestock husbandry, reproductive work and carework for family and community—restricts their time and capacity to participate actively in land management, markets and governance. As a result, women's critical contributions are often missing.

Pastoralist women's initiatives in the face of change

Pastoralist women are developing their own initiatives to address emerging problems and opportunities and are becoming active in policy advocacy. The Mera Declaration issued by the Global Gathering of Women Pastoralists in 2010 called for the recognition of women pastoralists and advocated for pastoral mobility and access to land and other resources. Women pastoralists in regions from Europe to Africa and Asia have built networks for mutual support, knowledge exchange, empowerment, public communication and advocacy, creatively conveying their messages through song and film. Development interventions that take pastoralist women's potential and skills into account are supporting successful women-led initiatives in dairy production, animal healthcare, fibre processing and grazing management, benefitting their communities and the rangelands.



China. Altai nomad. Photo: Marc Foggin

Call for action

We encourage governments, policymakers, development organisations, grassroots networks, community leaders and influencers to promote and implement gender-responsive pastoralist programmes and policies and to improve rangeland governance systems in the following ways,

- ▶ **Acknowledge and support women's roles** in caregiving and peacebuilding in pastoralist families and communities, and encourage men to share in carework, reducing women's triple burden.
- ▶ **Recognise and reinforce pastoralist women's rights** to use land and other resources as well as their contributions to biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation and mitigation by supporting livestock mobility, protecting women's customary rights to land and other resources, and promoting multifunctionality of rangelands and diversity of pastoral systems.
- ▶ **Involve pastoralists in land-use and rangeland-management planning** using gender-responsive participatory frameworks, protect pastoralists' collective use of land and stop converting pastoral lands to other uses (e.g. mining, protected areas, tourism, intensive crops, energy production) in ways that exclude pastoralists.
- ▶ **Focus on the rights of pastoralist groups** as well as women pastoralists, by respecting the collective rights of pastoralist communities while building women's capacity to directly manage land, water, enterprises and income, and to access financial and technical assistance and appropriate technology.
- ▶ **Eliminate gender-based violence** and address its drivers through education programmes for men, women, youth and children that ensure that women understand and exercise their rights.
- ▶ **Promote and support education, health and other social services** adapted to the needs of pastoralist women and girls by developing high-quality mobile services, distance-adapted solutions, pastoralist-friendly schedules and flexible and gender-sensitive approaches to deliver critical services for pastoralist communities.

- ▶ **Open avenues for pastoralist women to advocate for themselves** at all governance levels by financing participation in international processes, supporting women-only and women-led groups to strengthen women's confidence and capacities, educating women leaders and creating leadership opportunities for them.
- ▶ **Prioritise support for pastoralist women's networks and social movements**, including international gatherings of women pastoralists, and incorporate these movements into all rangelands and pastoralism initiatives, including the IYRP2026.
- ▶ **Educate development actors on gender issues in pastoralism**, with sufficient depth of understanding that they can effectively engage in gender-responsive development work.
- ▶ **Integrate pastoralist women and girls** into action research and build their capacities to carry out their own research on pastoralism and rangeland issues, building on their own specific knowledge, innovations and initiatives.
- ▶ **Recognise and encourage women scientists and professionals**, and provide safe, non-discriminatory, violence-free and gender-sensitive workplaces in the rangelands and pastoralism sector, including support for parenting and other forms of family care.



Russia. Autumn migration Nenets reindeer herders Yamal Peninsula.
Photo: Philip Burgess/ICR

This summary brief was compiled by *Pedro M Herrera* and *María Fernández-Giménez* on the basis of a longer policy brief with the same title (<https://tinyurl.com/iyrp2026gpb>), which was developed by several members of the IYRP2026 Working Group on Pastoralism & Gender.

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