

**Indian Farmer**

Volume 13, Issue 03, 2026, Pp. 131-134

Available online at: www.indianfarmer.net

ISSN: 2394-1227 (Online)

Popular Article

Women Behind the Herds: Recognizing the Role of Pastoralist Women

Kt Vahhoithem Khongsai*, Supriti Chatterjee* and Vikash Kumar¹**Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Agricultural Extension, ICAR-Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi-110012**¹M.Sc. Scholar, ICAR- National Dairy Research Institute, ERS, Kalyani, Nadia, W.B. India- 741235***Corresponding author: vahhoithemkhongsai@gmail.com**Received: 23/03/2026**Published:26/03/2026***ABSTRACT**

Pastoralism is one of the world's oldest livelihood systems where livestock rearing and seasonal mobility sustain rural communities, yet the contributions of pastoralist women often remain underrecognized in policy and development initiatives. This study highlights the diverse roles of pastoralist women in livestock management, preservation of indigenous knowledge, livelihood support, and environmental stewardship. Based on a synthesis of existing literature, the study shows that women perform the majority of labour in pastoral livestock activities, spending nearly (85%) of their time on tasks such as fodder collection, feeding, grazing management, milking, and processing milk products. Their close interaction with livestock enables early detection of animal health problems and supports the conservation of indigenous breeds and traditional veterinary knowledge. Recognizing and empowering pastoralist women is therefore essential for strengthening pastoral livelihoods, conserving biodiversity, and promoting sustainable livestock production systems.

Keywords: pastoralist women, livestock management, indigenous knowledge, environment

INTRODUCTION

Pastoralism is one of the world's oldest livelihood systems and it is not merely an occupation but a distinct way of life. Pastoral communities depend largely on livestock such as cattle, sheep, goats, camels, and yaks for food, income, and cultural identity. To sustain their herds, they migrate seasonally in search of grazing lands and water sources, developing a deep understanding of the ecosystems they inhabit. Within this system, women play a central yet often unrecognized role. Pastoral women share an intimate bond with their livestock and possess extensive knowledge about animals and the environment. Their connection with livestock is reflected in the folk songs sung during celebrations, marriages, and religious ceremonies, where animals are celebrated as part of everyday life (Rangnekar, 1994). Through daily interactions with animals and nature over time, pastoral women acquire valuable knowledge about feeding patterns, breeding, and animal health.

Women at the Centre of Livestock Management

In pastoral households, women are deeply involved in daily livestock management. Their responsibilities include collecting fodder, fetching water, feeding animals, cleaning sheds, milking livestock, and processing milk into products such as curd, butter, and ghee. Studies indicate that women contribute the majority of labour in livestock-related activities. Women spend nearly 85 percent of their time engaged in dairy production tasks such as fodder collection, feeding, and grazing management (Verma & Khadka, 2016). On average, women may spend about five hours per day on livestock activities compared to roughly one hour spent by men (Tulachan et al., 2002). Their continuous interaction with animals allows them to detect health problems early. A sudden decline in milk production, changes in feeding behaviour, or signs of discomfort are often first noticed by women. Even when men migrate with large herds for grazing, women remain responsible for managing animals kept at home for breeding and household consumption.

Guardians of Indigenous Breeds and Traditional Knowledge

Pastoral women also play a crucial role in preserving indigenous livestock breeds and traditional knowledge systems. Over generations, they have developed expertise in breeding practices, fodder selection, and disease management. The Raika community of Rajasthan, known for its camel herding traditions, provides a notable example. They have maintained distinct camel breeds such as Bikaneri, Jaisalmeri, Mewari, and Malwari through careful breeding practices embedded in community traditions (Köhler-Rollefson, 1992). Women also possess detailed knowledge of medicinal plants and natural remedies used to treat livestock ailments. They collect herbs, shrubs, and tree products that improve animal nutrition and health (Rangnekar, 1994). In Andhra Pradesh, documentation of traditional livestock breeds and medicinal plants was made possible through the knowledge shared by pastoral women (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007). Such knowledge plays a critical role in conserving indigenous livestock germplasm and sustaining traditional livestock systems.

Livelihood Support and Income Generation

Livestock not only provides food but also serves as an important source of income for pastoral families. Women often manage the sale of milk, wool, manure, and other livestock products in local markets. In some situations, they also negotiate prices for animals and livestock products. Pastoral women frequently supplement household income by collecting and selling non-timber forest products such as herbs and medicinal plants gathered from nearby forests or during seasonal migration (Kelkar, 2004). In certain regions, this additional income contributes significantly to household savings. When women control or contribute to household income, it can influence decision-making within the family. Greater financial participation has been associated with improved investment in girl child education (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007).

A Close Relationship with Nature

Pastoralist women maintain a deep connection with the environment. Their daily work keeps them closely linked to grazing lands, forests, and water sources, enabling them to develop strong ecological awareness. They understand when grazing pressure becomes too high and when pastures need time to regenerate. In many communities, grazing is rotated between areas to allow vegetation to recover naturally (Kaur et al., 2022). These practices help maintain ecological balance and support

biodiversity. It is also mentioned that as compared to the traditional grazing grounds, the grazing pasture where the Raika habituate are in better condition (Hannah, 2007).

Women as Agents of Change

Despite numerous challenges, pastoralist women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and leadership. In several regions, they have organized themselves into groups to protect indigenous livestock breeds and pastoral livelihoods. In Rajasthan, women from pastoral communities formed the Janki Mahila Mandal to conserve the indigenous Tharparkar cattle breed, which faced threats from crossbreeding and declining fodder resources (Flintan, 2008). Collective initiatives such as these illustrate how pastoral women actively safeguard livestock biodiversity. In some cases, women have also resisted policies that restrict their traditional access to grazing lands. One such example is; pastoral women in Andhra Pradesh protested forest restrictions by deliberately grazing their livestock in protected areas to assert their rights (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007).

CONCLUSION:

Pastoralist women remain the unseen force sustaining pastoral societies. From caring for livestock and preserving indigenous knowledge to supporting household incomes and maintaining ecological balance, their contributions are profound. Recognizing the women behind the herds is therefore not only a matter of gender equity but also a crucial step toward sustaining pastoral livelihoods and protecting fragile ecosystems. Empowering pastoralist women ultimately strengthen pastoral communities and ensure that this ancient and resilient way of life continues to thrive.

REFERENCES:

- Flintan, F. (2008). *Women's empowerment in pastoral societies*. World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism, International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- Ghotge, N. S., & Kishore, K. (2016). Pastoralism in India: the Warp and the Weft. *Rainfed Livestock Network*.
- Hannah, J. (Ed.). (2007). *Women pastoralists: Preserving traditional knowledge, facing modern challenges*. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.
- Kaur, G., Kaur, P., Pawar, S., & Kumari, P. (2022). *Understanding pastoral women's work: An exploratory study*. Institute of Social Studies Trust. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/qxjgc>
- Kelkar, G., & Tshering, P. (2004). *Themes from celebrating mountain women*. International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. <https://doi.org/10.53055/ICIMOD.424>
- Köhler-Rollefson, I. (1992). The Raika Dromedary Breeders of Rajasthan: A Pastoral System in Crisis. *Nomadic Peoples*, (30), 74–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43123358>
- Ramdas, S. R., & Ghotge, N. S. (2007). Whose rights? Women in pastoralist and shifting cultivation communities: A continuing struggle for recognition and rights to livelihood resources. In S. Krishna (Ed.), *Women's livelihood rights: Recasting citizenship for development* (pp. 41–61). SAGE Publications.

- Rangnekar, S. (1994). Women pastoralists, indigenous knowledge and livestock production in Northern Gujarat. *A Collection of Papers From Gujarat and Rajasthan* (pp.15-16). Overseas Development Institute.
- Tulachan, P., Jabber, M., & Saleem. (2002). *Smallholder dairy in mixed farming systems of the HKH: Issues and prospects for development. Kathmandu, Nepal: ICIMOD*
- Verma, R., & Khadka, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Gender and pastoralism in the rangelands of the Hindu Kush Himalayas: Knowledge, culture, and livelihoods at the margins of the margins.* International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. <https://doi.org/10.53055/ICIMOD.633>