



EMPOWERING WOMEN TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY RIGHTS TO LIVESTOCK

BETH A. MILLER

FOCUS 6 • POLICY BRIEF 4 OF 12 • AUGUST 2001

More than 70 percent of rural people own livestock. It provides a higher share of household income among poorer and landless families, especially for women, than among wealthier ones. Demand for livestock products is expected to double in developing countries in the next twenty years, making it the fastest growing agricultural sector. To maintain and expand the benefits this growing sector can bring to resource-poor women, new policies and practices must protect women's ownership and use rights, favor small-scale operations, and provide strong training programs in group development and the production, processing, and marketing of animals and products.

Women's livestock projects in developing countries are increasing. When rural women have access to cash or microcredit, they usually choose to invest in livestock, which provide food, cash, draft power, and fertilizer, and gain value through reproduction. With increasing male outmigration and the feminization of rural poverty, women have a greater need and desire for livestock to improve their food security and income levels.

Livestock may be distributed to alleviate malnutrition, because foods of animal origin, including milk, eggs, and meat, contain high-quality protein and needed calories, vitamins, and minerals. Livestock have important cultural meanings, and their exchange through gifts builds social capital. It is increasingly recognized that animals under women's control are more likely to improve family nutrition and education than similar assets held by men. Heifer Project International (HPI), an international nongovernmental organization with nearly sixty years of experience with grassroots-based livestock development, has found that with careful planning women's livestock projects can lead to both economic success and empowerment.

ANIMAL OWNERSHIP

Women benefit most when they have decisionmaking authority about the animals they manage, even without legal ownership rights. Women's rights vary by culture, class, and type of animal. Asserting claims to smaller species such as goats, sheep, poultry, and pigs, rather than cattle, camels, or buffalo, is usually easier for women. Micro-livestock (guinea pigs, silkworms, snails, honeybees, and rabbits) are especially important. It is easier to operate a productive enterprise with smaller animals, since the initial costs are lower. Profits may be low, but so are the risks, and men are less likely to interfere. When possible, women prefer to own larger animals such as dairy cattle, because they are more profitable and bring greater personal status.

Women often have access to livestock through family ties. A man may own a donkey but permit his wife to use it to carry water

or vegetables, increasing her productivity by saving time and labor. A man with a dairy cow may sell the morning milk but permit the women to use the evening milk for household consumption.

However, livestock projects that distribute animals to families do not necessarily benefit the women in the household. Women usually provide most of the labor for stall-fed dairy cattle and other animals kept near the home, but may not realize benefits commensurate with their contribution, limiting their incentive to increase production. Traditional usufruct rights and ownership are in transition due to privatization and commercialization, so project planning must intentionally include labor and benefit analysis for all family members.

With privatization, women often lose traditional rights to both household animals and land, since ownership and decisionmaking become concentrated in a single, usually male, individual. This is a real risk when women's traditional activities such as dairying or poultry production are commercialized, and there is no replacement of their income. Policies encouraging privatization should consider gendered impacts, so that poor women are not further disadvantaged.

Joint ownership is a strategy to protect a woman's right to household livestock after a husband's death. Heifer Project requires the wife as well as the husband to sign its livestock contract, to prevent "property grabbing" by the man's relatives when he dies. Local authorities are asked to enforce the contract. Projects with polygamous families decide on the most equitable contracts to protect women's future livelihoods.

Some livestock schemes allocate animals only to women, assuming they make decisions independently and will improve their bargaining position by bringing wealth into the household. These projects are most successful when men are included in discussions of workload and benefits, so that the project does not increase women's workload but her husband takes the income. As with any form of microcredit, appropriation or domestic violence may occur when men's interests are not addressed. In Kenya, some women's groups maintain legal ownership of animals and may remove them from homes where a husband treats his wife badly.

WORKING WITH GROUPS

Women's empowerment is strengthened through group action and support. Group discussions help communities explore women's decisionmaking power, especially over large and valuable animals, so that men do not feel threatened. Facilitation by a respected leader or professional helps clarify the benefits of livestock to all family members.

Heifer Project requires a written contract with all project



IFPRI

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE • 2033 K STREET, N.W. • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20006-1002 • U.S.A.
PHONE: +1-202-862-5600 • FAX: +1-202-467-4439 • EMAIL: ifpri@cgiar.org • WEB: www.ifpri.org

IFPRI, a Future Harvest center, is part of a global agricultural research network, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

recipients to “repay the loan” through “passing on the gift.” This involves giving the first female offspring (or cash equivalent) from a cow, goat, or other animal to another needy family in the same group. The payback is essential for active participation in group training and other activities. Projects that hand out animals without requiring repayment usually fail. Projects have better success where animals are managed by individual families rather than by groups, unless there is a strong tradition of group herding.

COMMERCIALIZATION

Managing their own small-scale livestock enterprises provides rural women with more benefits than paid employment as unskilled workers on large-scale commercial operations typically managed by men. Also, serious environmental and animal welfare problems associated with large-scale confinement operations can usually be avoided on small-scale farms.

Women are the majority among the increasing number of peri-urban livestock producers providing milk and meat to informal urban markets. Many governments try to regulate their activities due to legitimate public health concerns. Including women when planning sanitation or marketing improvements is critical so they do not lose their livelihood to industrial-scale producers.

Women’s livestock activities have the potential for great financial success, but they need strong financial training to avoid losing control to men when expanding their enterprises. Cooperatives have also helped many small-scale male farmers market their products, but may disadvantage women. If meetings are held when women are busy with other tasks, they cannot effectively participate in decisionmaking. Sometimes women form their own cooperatives. Other solutions include electing women to the co-op managing committee, or changing the rules regarding membership, payment, and meeting times. In Uganda and India, women opened group bank accounts that only they could access to receive their dairy payments.

Commercialization of livestock production can affect family nutrition and women’s status if all of the milk, rabbits, or chickens are sold rather than used for home consumption. This risks increasing women’s financial dependence on men by having to ask for money to purchase food they once produced.

Some livestock programs include human nutritional education and should address both men and women. Men can determine food distribution patterns, while women often only control food preparation. Out of respect, a woman in Tanzania or Bangladesh would not limit the high-quality food of animal origin she offers to her husband in order to improve her own or her children’s diets. Often, husbands, when well fed themselves, are not aware that other household members receive less. In times of nutritional stress, women typically reduce their own food intake the most. Thus, although nutritional education is traditionally a women’s program, targeting men can benefit the entire household.

TRAINING

Animal distribution or credit schemes without technical training have limited success. Technical training helps women ensure that their rights to livestock lead to increased food, income, and deci-

sionmaking power. Training programs that are held in the local language and provide child-care and meals increase the chances of meaningful participation by women. One day of village-based, hands-on, and participatory training is best for illiterate women with restricted mobility. Follow-up, refresher courses and farm visits are also important. Single-sex groups often help women improve their confidence with unfamiliar tasks, such as working with large animals, without interference from men.

Training in animal health and management, and access to veterinary care can control animal diseases that reduce productivity, especially with exotic or crossbred animals. In developing countries, most veterinarians and livestock extension specialists are men and target their expertise to other men. One solution is to recruit and train more women as professionals, another is to train and reward all professional staff for providing outreach to women. Existing women extension agents—now mostly home economists—can be trained in animal husbandry, which is important to all rural women.

In remote areas, community animal health workers may provide the best type of animal health care. When women are selected and trained, they perform as well as men and increase other women’s use of animal health services. Unfortunately, the numbers so far are small. Successful recruitment strategies target older women with fewer domestic responsibilities or husband and wife teams, when contact with the opposite sex is severely restricted. Having women work in pairs is also helpful.

CONCLUSION

Most women owning livestock report that the animals provide food security, income, and status in the community. They are more portable than land and crops and are a “living savings bank” that may be used throughout the year. Women with limited resources who receive animals through group distribution schemes also note that the group itself provides numerous benefits, such as increased confidence and leadership skills. In general, women prefer to work with all-women groups until they feel confident enough to speak in the presence of men. Membership in mixed groups offers access to additional valuable assets. By joining community-level committees, women begin to influence more of the decisions that affect their lives.

Livestock projects can be the entry point for other types of group-based interventions on health and sanitation, education, and land rights. Training in animal reproduction increases groups’ ability to discuss human reproduction and health. Group savings can increase women’s potential to invest in other enterprises. The social contact builds trust and mutual support for crisis times. In HPI’s experience, the attraction of livestock and their tangible benefits create the economic opportunity, while the social impacts provide the most significant and long-lasting results. ■

For further reading see J. Curry, “Gender and Livestock in African Production Systems: An Introduction,” *Human Ecology* 24 (No. 2, 1996); M. Niamir-Fuller, *Women Livestock Managers in the Third World: A Focus on Technical Issues Related to Gender Roles in Livestock Production*, IFAD Staff Working Paper 18 (1994); M. Richter, *Who Milks the Cow? Gender and Development in Livestock Farming*, Schriftenreihe der GTZ No. 261 (German Agency for

Beth A. Miller (beth.miller@heifer.org) is the director of the Gender Equity Program at Heifer Project International, U.S.A.