



Losing livestock, losing land, losing face: pastoralist women and change in Gujarat, India

While there is consensus globally on strengthening women's access and control over land, ***the understanding of women's land tenure security in India remains limited.***

Even though there is a movement towards women's individual land rights promoted by NGOs and Government over the last few years, it fails to shine a light on the

customary rights of women on commons or on the role women have had in protecting these commons.

Pastoral land is a major part of the commons in India.



Lack of data on pastoralists and commons in India

Commons in India are categorized in many ways including grazing land, pastureland, forest commons, non-forest commons, or wasteland. The status of both pastoralists and commons in terms of ***data on pastoralist populations and common land is not available but it is widely acknowledged that both are declining rapidly***. The existing research on the impacts of declining commons on the pastoralist community is limited in India, and therefore the status of social, economic and political relationships of pastoralist women with commons is also not known. It is understood that ***women are more likely to lose access to land*** and resources as commons are privatised, with men usually given land titles. Better understanding of pastoral women's access to land and resources and its implications for communities and their land resources is expected to result in better targeted land and pastoral policies, legislation and development strategies.

Research was conducted by MARAG and ILRI in 2018 and 2019 to better understand pastoral women's perspectives on the status of land tenure rights, their pastoral systems and trends, women's role in land resource management and the status of investment in sustainable land management. The study was set in Gujarat, a state in Western India. A survey of 300 pastoralist women from *Rabari*, *Bharwad* and *Jat* communities from the districts of Kutch, Patan, Rajkot, Botad, Banaskantha and Surendranagar was undertaken in addition to 25 focus group discussions with pastoralist women and men. The research focused on geographical areas covering all forms of pastoralism including sheep, goat, cow, buffalo and camel production.

Pastoralists in Gujarat

Over 63% of the families in the survey depend solely on livestock while 37% are agro-pastoralists who also own land for crop farming. Sixteen families do not own any livestock, not even a single goat, which is unusual for pastoralist households in the area. Thirteen of these households are involved in the business of providing tractor rental services to farmers or other large machinery such as a digger or plough. In the last 10 to 15 years, ***several pastoralist families have sold all their livestock to buy a tractor or digger, mainly due to challenges faced in access to and availability of grazing areas.***

Ex-pastoralists now migrate with a tractor or a digger, just like they used to migrate with livestock in the past.

The discussions revealed decreasing herd size due to lack of access to grazing and an aspirational shift towards education for their children. Pastoralism is labor intensive and requires the equal involvement of women, men and children in the family. ***There is lack of labor for herding now that young children are in school.*** It was said that one man can take care of 100–150 sheep and goats while herding, thus limiting herd size. In *Rabari* families in the survey, the average sheep flock size is 141.

Who owns the livestock?

Livestock is the main asset for pastoralists. However, 'ownership' is sometimes unclear. The initial responses during discussions wavered between 'man [husband] is the owner of the livestock' (most common answer) and 'both husband and wife are owners.' The concluding sentiment was: 'Maliki ben ni che pan ben bhagdaar che,' which means 'Ownership of livestock is with men but women are partners.'

Pastoralist women as household finance managers

Women take responsibility for household chores, child care, new-born and sick animals and market transactions related to selling livestock products such as milk, 'mawa' (condensed milk) and *ghee* (clarified butter). Men are mainly involved in herding. Milking is done jointly by women and men.

The general agreement pointed toward ***men taking the the decisions to buy and sell livestock products and services but in consultation with women.***

However, *vahivat ben paase che* (management of money is with women). The words *vahivat* (management) and *vyavhar* (cash transactions related to social customs and business) invariably came up in all discussions and interviews. Traditionally, ***household cash is kept and managed by pastoralist women*** because men go herding during the day and it may not be safe to carry it. This is why *Rabari* and *Bharwad* women in Gujarat, like the *Rabari* (or *Raika*) women in Rajasthan are referred to as 'household finance ministers' (see Köhler-Rollefson 2017). Thus, by tradition, pastoralist women manage both financial and social transaction for the family.

Arduous migration patterns

There is a high dependence on the use of private cropping lands of farmers for grazing in winter and summer rather than on commons. More than 80% of pastoralists graze their livestock on crop stubble. In the monsoon season, they graze livestock in village gauchar, wasteland, hilly areas around villages and vidis. ***The dependence on cropping land is lessened but still substantial for 43% of families.*** In general, the family migrates together, following the cropping and harvesting seasons. Access to cropping and grazing land is governed by informal agreements between farmers and pastoralists, which are built on relations the two actors have in many cases maintained over generations. However, ***the nature of the relationship with farmers is changing from social or in-kind to monetary transactions.*** The dimensions of tenure security as it applies to customary or common land property does not apply to private cropping land.

Pastoralists can travel up to 500 kilometres in a year for up to nine months from October to June in search of grazing land, fodder, access to water and to access markets. Nearly three-quarters of pastoralists move up to 10 kilometres during the monsoon and the distances covered in winter and summer seasons are much greater; up to 500 km. If it does not rain in their home village during a monsoon season, they continue to migrate.





Women pastoralists – shifting relationships and social status

Men do not need money when herding and it is risky to carry money on migrations. In agriculture and other livelihoods, men regularly need money to buy seeds or fertilizer or make payments to hire a tractor, get repairs done or buy fuel.

The role of women as ‘*money managers*’ is changing with shifting livelihoods. For example, the income from crop farming or alternate livelihoods such as driving and rentals of diggers or tractors remains with the men without passing through women’s hands. Men do not need money when herding and it is risky to carry money on migrations. In agriculture and other livelihoods, men regularly need money to buy seeds or fertilizer or make payments to hire a tractor, get repairs done or buy fuel. Women’s authority and responsibility over household finances has diminished, affecting their status in the family, and may have far-reaching impacts on their identity and feelings of self-worth.

Vat ochchu thai gayu. Maal bhi gayu,vat bhi gayu. Have behenon koi na pooche. We lost livestock as well as our status. Now no one gives us importance. In the past we would negotiate for food grains with farmers and sell milk in the village. Now we have to ask men for even small sums of money.

Women who no longer migrate feel they have lost their distinct relationship with their animals, with milk, with wool, with farmers and with other communities. These relationships are changing, as are their roles, skills and identities. Most women no longer process milk and prefer to sell raw milk to wholesalers. Many women have lost the skill to make *ghee* or *mawa* (condensed milk). There is a common observation that women who used to migrate were not afraid of anyone or anything, unlike women who have never migrated.

The decision to sell livestock to start an alternative livelihood is also mainly taken by men. Some women said that herding is a hard and challenging task and hence men have the right to decide to sell livestock and buy a tractor digger or to start another type of business.

There is a common observation that women who used to migrate were not afraid of anyone or anything, unlike women who have never migrated.

In recent years, incidents of livestock theft and violence while on migration have increased. ***In many areas, there are organized armed gangs that come with pick-up trucks to steal livestock.*** This is a new risk for women to deal with which they counter by moving in groups and keeping a pile of stones ready to hurl at thieves.

Little investment in sustainable land management

Women do not feel they have tenure secure to grazing lands and are not investing in land improvements or resource management. Women feel greater security with individual cropping lands that are becoming increasingly important in the more integrated crop-livestock systems that are developing. There is little investment in sustainable land management practices although there are some traditional methods of doing this in which women play a significant role. ***If the rangelands of Gujarat are to be protected and reach their full potential, then pastoralists should be given assistance*** in expanding these practices and investing more in rangeland management and restoration activities.

Pastoralism also needs production support through policies, subsidies and appropriate investments. A process like *participatory rangeland management (PRM)* would be a strong framework for developing and implementing this (Flintan and Cullis 2010).

There are some traditional methods of doing this in which women play a significant role

This brief draws from the research study by M. Agarwal, F. Flintan, N. Pandya, A. Assefa and B. Eba (2021) *Women's perceptions of tenure security and governance of land and resources in pastoral areas of Gujarat state, India*, in collaboration with MARAG (Maldhari Rural Action Group). For the full study: <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/115745>

References

- » Köhler-Rollefson, I. (2017). *Purdah, purse and patriarchy: The position of women in the Raika shepherd community in Rajasthan (India)*. Journal of Arid Environments 249:30–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2017.09.010>.
- » Flintan F. and A. Cullis (2010). *Introductory Guidelines to Participatory Rangeland Management in Pastoral Areas*. Save the Children, Addis Ababa. <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/99430>

Photos: ILRI/MARAG.

Citation: ILRI and MARAG, 2021.





RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON
Policies,
Institutions,
and Markets

Led by IFPRI



RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON
Livestock

This brief was produced for a study on *pastoralist women, land and natural resource and governance in Ethiopia, Tanzania and India* for the **CGIAR Research Program (CRP)** on **Policies, Institutions and Markets (PIM)** flagship project on land and natural resource tenure and governance.

ILRI thank all donors and organisations that globally support their work through their contributions to the **CGIAR Trust Fund** and other funding mechanisms.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the **CGIAR Research Programs on Policies Institutions and Markets**, and **Livestock**. Its contents are the sole responsibility of ILRI and do not necessarily reflect the views of donors.



Reflections

Pastoralist women and men have complimentary roles and responsibilities to sustain pastoralism and thus are equal partners in business.

They also have the same access to commons and other grazing land resources. However, their role depends on their ability to access and use commons. Increasingly, commons are being encroached and pastoralism is on the decline. Only 3% pastoralist women in the survey can read or write. They have never needed formal education to take care of their herds or finances.

Now, with loss of land and livestock, pastoralist women's traditional knowledge and skills are becoming redundant and this is affecting their identity and status.

Most pastoralists, men and women, want to continue the pastoralist way of life. However, it is getting increasingly difficult to do so. Pastoralists have been deserted by both the state and development agencies and are struggling to survive in an increasingly inhospitable environment. There is a clear need to redirect investments and support in these areas towards pastoralism and not away from it.

ILRI
INTERNATIONAL
LIVESTOCK RESEARCH
INSTITUTE



This publication is licensed for use under the *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence*. To view this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.

The International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) works to improve food security and reduce poverty in developing countries through research for better and more sustainable use of livestock. ILRI is a CGIAR research centre. It works through a network of regional and country offices and projects in East, South and Southeast Asia, and Central, East, Southern and West Africa. <https://www.ilri.org>