

Women and their role in the dairy and livestock sector

Small and landless women farmers as the custodians of biodiverse ecosystems

Soil, water, seed, other natural, productive and genetic resources, biodiverse ecosystems, and climate systems form the base of our food and agriculture systems. For centuries, these complex and interdependent ecosystems have been sustained by small and landless farmers (an overwhelming majority of whom are women) through their tireless efforts and traditional practices informed by indigenous knowledge.



Women farmers have played an unparalleled role in food and agriculture; they have been instrumental in conserving local and indigenous livestock breeds, as well as in saving and evolving indigenous seeds for

grains, vegetables, fruits and medicinal plants. Though women's role in preserving and multiplying seed is well recognized, their equally pivotal role in sustaining and evolving livestock genetic material is largely undervalued. These processes are just a few of the countless that are integral to promoting and preserving biodiversity through the millennia. Women farmers' role is thus crucial for the food security and livelihood of millions of farming and non-farming households.



Women farmers as the key workforce in livestock management

In livestock-owning and/or livestock rearing rural households, women are intensely engaged in all stages of livestock care, maintenance and breeding round the clock.

They clean animals' living space and preserve animal manure for further

utilization, venture out to collect fodder and then proceed to cut and prepare it for feeding the animals throughout the day, as well as assume responsibility for milking them twice a day. Women process, utilize and sell animal bi-products: they dry animal manure for land fertility and to make dung cakes (for sale and to be used as fuel at home) and also sell fresh milk. Women also convert milk to other dairy products like yoghurt, butter and ghee for household use.



Land and livestock: a guarantor of food security, nutrition and livelihood for rural communities

In Pakistan, small and landless women farmers are the key custodians of livestock and are responsible for approximately 80% of national milk supply. Their lives and livelihoods are inextricably linked to land and livestock - although the burden of livestock care and management exacts a huge toll on women, livestock care is still positively linked to

food security and nutrition for rural households; the availability of fresh milk guarantees consumption of nutritious dairy items such as *lassi*, butter and *ghee*. Consequentially, this reduces the probability of stunting and wasting in young children and also adds a nutritious component to rural women's otherwise insufficient dietary intake, much of which can be attributed to patriarchal norms and the inequitable gendered distribution of food and other resources.

For rural households who do not own land, leasing agricultural land is often the only way to rear livestock. Livestock rearing generates income through the sale of milk and dung, income that is crucial for the fulfillment of daily household expenses and in accessing agricultural inputs for land. Dung availability has numerous other benefits; it is a major saving as women do not have to purchase wood for fuel and at the same time, they are saved the extra labour of gathering wood for household use. In rural areas, cattle serve as liquid asset; they act as a safety net in case of an emergency (health-related or otherwise). It is also a common custom to give young women livestock as part of their dowry.



However, while we can argue that livestock 'ownership' by women offsets some of the gendered economic disparity that is characteristic of a feudal and patriarchal society that denies many rights to women, patri-

archy is still prominent! For example, sacrificial animals sent to cities on the occasion of Eid ul Azha are a good source of yearly profit for farmers; however, the male members keep a significant amount of income generated through the sale of cattle while only a small amount is shared with the women who work tirelessly to raise livestock.



So, where does the problem arise?

It is clear that women farmers' relationship with their livestock cannot be reduced to a purely economic relationship; women take great pride in nurturing their animals and perceive them almost as a household member. Livestock is crucial to their identity, subsistence and way of life.

However, as other primers in this series explain in detail, corporate hegemony is set to wrest control of the livestock and dairy sector from small and landless farmers, through a complex set of international stan-

dards (directed by Codex and WTO), processes (artificial insemination techniques and genetic manipulation), products (mechanized milking equipment, specialized, packaged fodder and seeds) and markets. In this context, the imposition of anti-farmer, pro-corporate standards and policies is a direct threat to rural women's lives, livelihoods and their right to food sovereignty.

It is also critical to highlight international aid agencies as well as the corporate sector's inclusion of women in the livestock dairy sector ostensibly as a means to empower them; in reality, women are only being used as an eyewash to make anti-women, anti-farmer projects seem 'inclusive' and promoting women's rights. True recognition, protection and promotion of women's rights in this sector can only be achieved through ensuring women's control and access over productive resources with a prime focus on land, livestock and seeds that guarantee decent livelihood for small and landless women farmers. Women farmers and women human rights activists across the globe have fiercely demanded the corporate sector to get its tentacles out of food and agriculture.

Trade liberalization and corporatization in the sector will keep pushing both regulatory mechanisms and prices such that women farmers will be forced to sell their livestock, a key productive resource they can no longer afford to sustain! Since milk, milk products and dung sales finance daily household expenses and access to fresh milk works to offset the rural nutritional deficit, rural women will face the double burden of financial distress and negative health outcomes for themselves and their families! It needs to be restated that lives, livelihoods, land and livestock are a complex unity of rural economies – taking any one component out imbalances the intricately interwoven ecologies and disrupts social relations.

There is an urgent need to end corporate control in the agriculture, livestock and dairy sector and revert to traditional practices. Fossil-fuel driven industrial meat and dairy production has catastrophic consequences for the environment; the world's top five meat and dairy corporations are one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gas and also relentlessly push for sugarcane, GM soybean and maize production for animal feed. On the contrary, traditional livestock-rearing practices (e.g. small herd sizes) are ecologically safe, sustainable and provide farmers with decent livelihood and a control over productive resources.



As a strategy to combat carbon emissions, ethanol is being promoted as a substitute with a resulting surge in sugarcane production. Feudal lords are using landless women's need to access fodder for their livestock to engage them in intense labour: women clean off the vegetation from the cane and cut it just to access the vegetation as fodder. Rich landlords accrue huge profits by producing raw material for ethanol while landless women farmers undertake intensive labor get paid in kind which in

monetary terms is a pittance. This is the very base of vicious attacks on women's livelihood and labor while benefiting the feudal landlords and the corporate sector.

It is crucial to note that the transition to just, healthy, equitable and sustainable food systems is impossible without women farmers who are the reservoirs of traditional and indigenous knowledge. They must be at the helm of all decision-making!

For more information and further analysis on the ways in which global dairy corporations are snatching away the livelihoods of small and landless farmers, please refer to the other primers in this series.



Secretariat:


Roots for Equity

A-1, First Floor, Block 2, Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Karachi, Pakistan


Ph: +9221 34813320

Blog: <https://pkmt.noblogs.org/>

Website: <https://rootsforequity.org/>

 <https://www.facebook.com/RootsforEquityPKMT/>

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