

# The Need for a Gender Perspective in China's Rangeland Policies

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**A**n examination of rangeland projects in China reveals that if the gender dimension is not integrated in policies, those policies are likely to contribute to increasing – or even generating new – gender inequalities, and to reinforcing patriarchal systems, because women are losing control over fundamental assets while their workload is increasing.

A case study to identify the impacts of the Grassland Improvement Policy (GIP) on women was carried out in 2007. Through questionnaires, the study interviewed 360 women from 12 villages of six counties of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Ningxia and Gansu provinces. It shows that although the Grassland Improvement Policy has brought some economic benefit, it changed the traditional animal husbandry production style, decreasing men's work intensity but increasing women's work time

Zoige, Sichuan, China (below); Tibet AR, China (right)



and workload. Women increasingly carry out more of the grazing work, but are losing their rights to land and are rarely included in training to increase productivity. Thus, the policy is further intensifying gender inequities.

### When traditions and laws deprive women's rights to land

A Land Contract Law was promulgated in China in 2002, and has been effective since March 2003. The article on protecting women's land rights specifies that



a woman who marries is unable to obtain a new land allocation in her husband's village if she retains her land rights in her place of origin.

However, in practice, women can rarely maintain their land rights in their place of origin after marriage. Since originally land was allocated to the entire household, no one can in practice claim part of the whole as one's own. This applies both to the land tenure right and the share of output from the land. Second, women's claim to their land rights in their place of origin is against the interests of their family as it would be perceived as a rebellion against the patriarchal system, and is thus unlikely to succeed. As a result, women's loss of their land rights directly reduces their capacity to participate in the family decision-making.

It would be imperative to ensure women's rights to land in the implementation guide for land distribution and ensure their participation in decision-making.

### When the promotion of new practices increase women's burden

A component of the project aiming to improve the management of rangeland resources focused on

the construction of fences and a shift to shed raising livestock instead of rangeland herding. This component brought about some economic benefits for both women and men who participated in the construction of the infrastructure. However, the shed raising method contributed to freeing men from the task of herding the livestock, and considerably increased women's workload by an average of two hours a day. Women must fetch sufficient fodder and water for the now stationary livestock and take care of the lambs.

The table below shows the division of labour between men and women in the case study.

| Working tasks                                 | Labour division proportion by gender |          |
|---|--------------------------------------|----------|
|   | Male %                               | Female % |
| Lamb delivery and care                        | 10                                   | 90       |
| Grazing                                       | 80                                   | 20       |
| Stall breeding                                | 40                                   | 60       |
| Prevention and treatment of epidemic diseases | 50                                   | 50       |
| Wool clipping and grading                     | 20                                   | 80       |
| Milking and processing                        | 0                                    | 100      |
| Cutting grass and making meadow fences        | 50                                   | 50       |
| Planting feed                                 | 60                                   | 40       |
| Breeding and genetic improvement              | 50                                   | 50       |
| Selling products                              | 60                                   | 40       |
| Cooking and gathering firewood                | 0                                    | 100      |
| Feeding pigs and chickens                     | 0                                    | 100      |
| Cleaning cow dung                             | 10                                   | 90       |

In most rangeland areas, the project's most popular activities with women were warm shed construction, irrigation, breed improvement, and grass species improvement because the activities directly increase their income. With this income, women invest in purchasing more livestock, improving the breed, building a warm shed, sending their children to college, and improving their living conditions. However, despite their role in income generation, the social status of women in the community and in family decision-making does not seem to change.

This raises the question of whether rangeland management projects should aim merely to improve people's material living conditions or aim to promote the all-round development of people. The former goal gives importance to economic projects in which women can take part. The latter focuses on improving women's abilities to make sensible choices to ensure that women will benefit.

If rangeland management projects do not consider women's roles and the gender division of labour, they only change the traditional stockbreeding production patterns and increase women's workload, which ultimately results in the deterioration of women's livelihoods and quality of life.

Hence, it is important to integrate the gender perspective in project planning and implementation phases. The first step is to conduct a survey of local people's requirements – in consultation with both women and men - and establish development goals that consider the gender

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perspective in the project's general goal, sub-goals, and expected results. This will enable women to have equal opportunities and benefit from projects for livelihood improvement. Also, using a participatory approach in the project design process that seeks the suggestions and requirements of both women and men will ensure that women are at least equal participants in the projects in which they do most of the work.

### When service delivery mechanisms do not favour women's outreach

Although women do most of the production activities and therefore have more need for training, their lower social status and heavier workload means that they rarely get opportunities to participate in training. A survey conducted by the Research Centre for Rural Economy in three rangeland regions in 2007, showed that all the counties surveyed provided technical training for herders, but only 10% of the participants were women.

In the traditional local culture, men make decisions and apply new techniques, so the few opportunities for technical training and services become a man's prerogative. Men also outnumber women by three to four times in agricultural technical extension professionals and technical personnel, according to the first agricultural census held in 2000 by the National Statistics Bureau.

Integrating a gender perspective in service delivery can contribute to improving the effectiveness of training that aims to increase production. Technical training should directly target women or men according to their field of intervention taking into account the gender division of labour. Different training and extension services should be designed to address the different needs of women and men. For example, training on breeding should specifically target women because they are the main producers, which will improve the production efficiency.



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### Conclusions

Rangeland management policies and programmes are not neutral: they affect women and men herders differently. The case studies clearly show that failing to acknowledge the different roles women and men play in the production system, especially in livestock raising, not only limits the benefits for women but also contributes to increasing gender inequality.

Thus, it is essential to recognise and value women's role in the rangelands in order to provide the right support for increasing productivity and reducing poverty among rangeland communities. For this purpose, we need first to document better the division of labour and the access and control over production assets from a gender perspective, which must then be integrated fully in development and environmental programmes.

Policies must also be analysed according to their impacts on women and men. The sustainable development and management of rangelands can only be achieved when policies and programmes properly integrate a gender perspective and value the contribution and roles of both women and men.