

POLICY BRIEF

JUXTAPOSITION OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND INNOVATION: IS ONE A PATHWAY TO THE OTHER?

Milcah Asamba and Tigist Kebede

Key messages

- **A coherent policy pathway emerges when the following four levers are sequenced:** finance unlocks resources; infrastructure ensures that those resources improve productivity and reduce losses; capability and accreditation sustain service quality; and social norms and care solutions safeguard gains and make them durable. Together, these policy options create an enabling ecosystem for women-led livestock innovations, strengthening resilience, food security, and gender equality.
- **Social innovations are categorised along three levels:** incremental, changes to practices (e.g. social enterprises produce new goods and services); institutional, changes to market or policy structures (e.g. new rules); or disruptive, changes to existing cognitive frames (e.g. to develop new values) (Sarkki et al., 2021). In spite of limited external support, women in Somaliland catalyse change through both social and market innovations
- **Applying a gender lens to livestock policies and programmes unlocks disruptive change:** engaging men for women's empowerment catalyses transformative change.

Woman camel producer. Baidoa, Somalia, 2022. Photo credit: E. Millstein, Mercy Corps



Introduction

Climate variability and recurrent droughts undermine pastoral livelihoods by degrading rangelands, destabilising prices, and increasing household risk. Women's work, often invisible, anchors herd management, processing, and local trade, yet is constrained by limited assets, restrictive social norms, and time-intensive care responsibilities. Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is not solely about cash-income growth; it is the power to make and act on economic decisions. The research shows that women pursue such empowerment; they actively innovate around the obstacles that they face, including societal and cultural barriers.

Somaliland's economy is anchored in livestock exports (camels, sheep, goats) with high exposure to drought and limited capacity to buffer shocks. In this livestock economy, the community defines women's economic empowerment as manifesting in several forms: as entry into male-dominated nodes (veterinary, export preparation); as asset accumulation; as autonomous enterprise management; and as visible community leadership. However, empowerment brings trade-offs, such as domestic labour reallocation, social scrutiny, and, at times, marital strain, requiring programme designs that also address social norms and the necessities of unpaid care.

SPARC conducted a qualitative study on the relationship between women's empowerment and innovation. The analytical framework took a feminist theoretical perspective: a transformational and transnational lens focusing on the ways in which place, power relations, and social identities shape what counts as innovation, whose innovations are supported, and how benefits are distributed. This lens foregrounds structural barriers (finance, policy coordination, norms) alongside agency and collective action. The study objectives are:

- to understand local definitions of WEE and innovation
- to identify formal/informal innovations created or adopted by pastoralist women, especially during crises
- to explore the drivers of innovation and strategies that women use to advance economically
- to examine links between women-led innovation and empowerment at practice, institutional, and normative levels.

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted comprising six focus group discussions and eleven in-depth interviews across villages in Hargeisa and Wajaale town. Participants represented multiple nodes of the value chain and governance, enabling a 360-degree view of constraints and opportunities.

Forms of innovation observed

Social innovations have been categorised as operating on one of the following three general levels: incremental, when they seek to change practices (e.g. social enterprises produce new goods and services); institutional, when they tend to change market or policy structures (e.g. new rules); or disruptive, when they attempt to change existing cognitive frames (e.g. to develop new values) (Sarkki et al., 2021). Considering the context, women are catalysing change through both social and market innovations – albeit at an incremental level. They are finding new ways to solve problems and improve their practices to better meet evolving needs. Although most participants do not label these practices as 'innovation', they clearly deviate from traditional approaches and measurably increase agency, income, and resilience. Four main types of innovations were observed.

Women's groups/cooperatives that are being used to access and repay loans from financial institutions. The women collaborate in groups to access funds and support operations, guided by rules that are clearly laid out. If a member is unable to repay, group members assist, ensuring the group remains in good standing. These cooperatives thus reduce risk for the lending institutions, act as guarantors for formal loans for the members, with the members rotating duties to balance care and commerce, and enable collective market access. Rotating duties actively solve time–use conflicts between domestic and business responsibilities.

Production innovations that raise milk yields and sale weights, and reduce drought exposure. Examples include:

- **Enhanced feeds:** Locally blended rations (sorghum, maize, bran, peanuts) and packaged feeds raise milk output and sale weights, presenting an opportunity to organise input sourcing at scale.
- **Closed/enclosed (zero-grazing) systems:** Growing adoption of these systems during droughts helps to manage disease as well as to spread and reduce labour.
- **Cross/selective breeding:** Cross-bred dairy improves yields but increases management complexity; selective goat breeding (twinning) accelerates herd growth.

Service innovations by animal health service providers. Veterinarians are training women veterinary assistants to reach women livestock producers. Women who are informally trained blend traditional knowledge with formal training, increasing animal health access. They also act as community advisors and role models.

Use of digital tools including high uptake of mobile money and WhatsApp for communicating input orders,

price updates, and photo-based remote selection. These compress transaction times, enable remote price discovery, and streamline aggregation. While there is limited awareness of other digital services, phone access is critical for women engaged in business; all study respondents had their own phones. Existing USSD (short-code) helplines connect communities to veterinary advice; websites are less accessible for rural users.

It is worth mentioning the heightened context for innovations that arises during crisis. Droughts can catalyse shifts toward closed systems and improvised feeds. Resilience therefore hinges on the affordability of livestock inputs and reliability of supply. Social and financial networks intensify (through group purchasing, rotating labour, etc.), showing how crises accelerate institutional innovation.

Mobile phones enable women to seek and share information, supporting their agency. Somalia, 2017.
Photo credit: P. Canton/Mercy Corps



Barriers that constrain scale

Barriers to scaling fall into four broad categories.

Cumbersome access to credit, limited financial literacy, and social stigma around women borrowing money

Women in Somaliland face limited access to formal financial institutions; borrowing from banks is often a lengthy and complex process requiring substantial guarantor support. As a result, many turn to informal lending networks or operate in partnerships to manage their financial needs – however, these remain inadequate. Social norms also discourage formal borrowing, making women reliant on family or personal savings. The women themselves are reluctant to seek loans, which limits their motivation to borrow. Men interpret this norms-driven reluctance as a lack of ability to repay the loans.

Cultural norms and care burdens that constrain women's mobility and role diversification

Women experience pushback against women's mobility and their changing role within the family. Resistance from family members remains a key obstacle, with many women reducing or ceasing economic activities after marriage. While men express support for women's economic empowerment, many are uneasy about women leaving home daily due to the weight of their domestic responsibilities. They recognise that livestock rearing and trading can be physically demanding, time-consuming, and sometimes unsafe during travel to and from the markets for women. Some men observe that women pursue economic activities more out of necessity than personal choice. There is also concern that financially independent women might undermine traditional family structures or respect for the husband, reflecting anxieties about shifting gender dynamics. Notably, men strongly advocate for their daughters' education and acknowledge that reliance on a single income is increasingly untenable due to inflation, climate change, and other economic pressures.

Skills gaps in business management, cost accounting, and specialised husbandry for cross-bred dairy

Lack of formal education among most female participants impacts their ability to benefit fully from market opportunities. Many women overlook key costs like livestock maintenance, loan interest, and default risk, reducing their profit margins.

Policy coordination limitations, including a lack of supportive regulations or specific policies designed to safeguard or advance women traders

A key informant within the government noted that the overlapping of mandates and responsibilities across ministries creates coordination issues and leads to duplicated effort, limiting effective rural development and women's enterprise support. However, it was noted that the government is now collaborating with

development partners and NGOs to improve planning and implementation, especially in rural development and women's economic empowerment.

Gender-responsive policy pathway for women-led livestock innovations

To unlock the next productivity and women empowerment frontier, policy must meet practice. Applying a gender lens to livestock policies, we recommend potential policy options that can engage men and transform women's participation from marginal inclusion to central leadership. This proposed framework integrates finance, infrastructure, skills, and social norms into a single pathway.

A GENDER LENS

A gender lens involves adapting flexible training schedules to fit women's domestic workloads, provide childcare support during trainings, and designing curricula that use participatory, low-literacy methods. Approaches include:

- Introduce male engagement programmes co-led by religious and community leaders promoting shared care work and decision-making.
- Celebrate by recognising and incentivising 'role-model women' and 'champion households' that support women by encouraging and enabling them to pursue economic activities.
- Provide on-site childcare at markets and cooperatives and develop safe-travel protocols for women that could include not travelling alone or passing through areas prone to attacks to reduce risks during market or service delivery.
- Position women and male champions as community role models, breaking stereotypes and legitimising their leadership.
- Addressing social norms secures long-term inclusion and prevents personal costs from undermining women's empowerment.

Finance for women at scale (institutional entry point)

Lengthy and complex bank processes, extensive guarantor requirements (e.g. a letter from the local administrative leaders), and stigma around women borrowing leads to dependence on family and/or personal savings and informal lending networks, which

are inadequate. Women often lack collateral and formal credit history. Access to finance is fundamental for enabling women to participate fully in livestock economies. Examples of gender-responsive finance approaches include:

- cooperative-anchored credit lines which, with partial guarantees, can address access barriers by pooling women's resources and lowering individual risk. Combined with first-loss protection from donors, this can unlock lending at scale. The simplified individual profiling (Know Your Customer) through group vetting lowers barriers to entry by reducing bureaucratic hurdles that disproportionately affect women without ID or property titles
- mobile-based micro-asset loans which would help women access small but critical investments (feed, goats, cold boxes), supporting incremental growth in line with women's risk profiles. This type of financing lays the groundwork for subsequent investments in infrastructure and services
- ensuring products are tailored to women's repayment cycles, literacy levels, and asset needs (e.g. smaller loan sizes and flexible repayment aligned to milk/market cycles). The options can be co-designed with the communities.

Productivity and quality infrastructure (process/product)

With finance in place, women can channel resources into community feed hubs (bulk sourcing, local blending), basic animal diagnostics (weigh tapes, pregnancy strips, body-condition scoring kits) and modular solar cold-storage units for milk and meat. These investments improve productivity, reduce post-harvest losses and waste, and strengthen value-chain quality.

- Community feed hubs, especially at marketplaces, would reduce the burden of sourcing feed individually which is often a time- and labour-intensive task for women.
- Diagnostics services in marketplaces would enable women to make informed livestock management decisions without needing expensive external vets. This would be paramount for women who want to get into the export market.
- Modular solar cold storage ensures women can preserve milk and meat, reducing losses and providing flexibility given their competing care responsibilities.
- Consumer education delivered through community leaders, civic education and radio programmes on nutritive content of preserved milk and meat products

- to cut through the ‘preserved = lower nutritional value’ misapprehension for the local market.
- Infrastructure investments maximise the impact of credit and ensure livestock products retain value. Design infrastructure that is physically accessible, safe, and affordable for women, and ensure women are represented in the management committees of feed hubs and storage facilities. Targeted training could also enhance market efficiency – and promote community buy-in, considering the expected widespread change.

Capability ladders and accreditation (institutional support layer)

Financial and infrastructure gains must be matched with skills and professional recognition. Tiered training pathways can support women through progressive learning, allowing women to advance step-by-step and accommodating varying literacy levels and availability. This could begin from financial basics and progress to advanced husbandry, complemented by certification of the various levels. Simultaneously, Community Animal Health Worker (CAHW) accreditation gives women recognition, credibility, and career progression opportunities in a male-dominated sector. This also ensures service quality and trust.

Social norms and care solutions (disruptive, cross-cutting layer)

Even when women gain finance, infrastructure, and skills, social constraints can limit their progress. Women face backlash when stepping into economic leadership roles, with risks of marital strain, social criticism, or overwork. Some empowered women reported personal costs such as divorce, while younger female veterinarians anticipated halting their careers upon marriage. Addressing these pressures is essential. Empowerment strategies must therefore also engage men and communities to prevent personal costs such as divorce or career withdrawal.

Programmes that focus on young girls to prepare them for economic activities

Fathers encouraging their daughters to go to school is an important progressive shift in social norms: one that can be used as an entry point for programmes that will focus on girls and their families to prepare them for economic activities. This also presents an opening for conversations about adult women and their involvement in economic activities.

Conclusion

Innovations within Somaliland’s livestock and meat trading sectors are shaped not only by technical and financial barriers but also by deeply rooted cultural practices and policy environments. Women in Somaliland’s livestock economy are already innovating quietly, persistently, and effectively. However, they face competing priorities as they advance. The community strongly values individuals, especially women, who contribute to the welfare of others. This emphasis on collective progress and support is culturally rooted, and empowerment is often viewed as an added responsibility rather than a departure from tradition. Even empowered women rarely abandon their cultural or religious values, indicating that economic advancement is compatible with longstanding social norms.

Sustainable change therefore requires integrating new practices with local values, ensuring that empowerment efforts enhance, rather than disrupt, the fabric of community life. Success hinges on a delicate balance of community acceptance, external support, and continued investment in education and infrastructure. To unlock the next frontier for productivity and women’s empowerment, policy must meet practice: finance that fits the needs of women’s enterprises, infrastructure that raises quality and reduces waste, and programmes that redistribute care and shift norms.

References

Sarkki, S., Dalla Torre, C., Fransala, J., et al. (2021) 'Reconstructive social innovation cycles in women-led initiatives in rural areas' *Sustainability* 13(3): 1231 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13031231>).

Further reading

FAO (2003) *Gender and sustainable development in drylands: an analysis of field experiences*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization (www.fao.org/4/j0086e/j0086e00.pdf).

Golla, A.M., Malhotra, A., Nanda, P. and Mehr, R. (2011) *Understanding and measuring women's economic empowerment: definition, framework & indicators*. Washington, D.C.: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Understanding-measuring-womens-economic-empowerment.pdf).

Rota, A. and Chakrabarti, S. (with Sperandini, S.) (2012) *Women in Pastoralism*. Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development (www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/39148759/Women+and+pastoralism.pdf).

Tiessen, R., Laursen, T. and Lough, B.J. (with Mirza, T.) (2021) 'Gender-focused social innovation and the role of international development volunteers in promoting women's economic empowerment' *Voluntaris* Special issue: 91–107 (<https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748924951-91>).

Acknowledgements

This policy brief is published through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which is supported by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

The authors would like to extend their deepest thanks to the Mercy Corps Somalia team including Daud Jiran, Mohamed Abdilatif Hajji Yusuf, Abdulrahman Ali Mohamed, Ubah Egeh, Abdirahman Adam Abokor, and members of the field research team for their excellent and timely support in getting this study completed. Their insights were invaluable. We are grateful to Carmen Jaquez for her patience and overall direction of this study along with our reviewers Ramona Ridolfi, Sahar Alnourhi, and Elizabeth Daley for their productive and supportive feedback. Your insightful comments helped us improve the quality of this report.

Thank you to the SPARC communications team, including Julie Grady Thomas, along with Ruby Cowling for copy-editing and Valerie Geiger at vtype.co.uk for design and typesetting.

About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

SPARC aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the FCDO, donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

© SPARC Knowledge 2025

How to cite: Asamba, M. and Kebede, T. (2025) 'Juxtaposition of women's economic empowerment and innovation: is one a pathway to the other?' Policy brief. London: SPARC Knowledge (<https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/juxtaposition-womens-economic-empowerment-innovation>) (<https://doi.org/10.61755/GCOH1605>).

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. SPARC Knowledge requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the SPARC Knowledge website.

Views and opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s) and should in no way be attributed to the institutions to which they are affiliated or to SPARC Knowledge.

Funded by



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.