

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

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

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Motivation

In Somaliland, women's work, often invisible, anchors herd management, processing and local trade, yet is constrained by limited assets, restrictive social norms and traditional household responsibilities, such as caring for children, collecting water, cleaning and preparing family meals.

Purpose

Our objective was to explore the relationship between women's empowerment and innovation. Specifically, we sought to understand local definitions of women's economic empowerment and innovation; to identify formal and informal innovations created or adopted by pastoralist women, especially during crises; to explore drivers of innovation and the strategies women use to advance economically; and to examine links between women-led innovation and empowerment at practical, institutional and normative levels.

Approach and methods

Across villages in Hargeisa and Wajaale town, Somaliland, Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) researchers conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) with pastoralist and agro-pastoralist households. FGD participants were divided into male only and female only. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were held with 11 men and women from the communities and towns relevant to the FGD sites. Interviewees represented milk traders, fattening farm owners, meat traders, brokers, formal and traditional animal health workers, community leaders and government officials (Chamber of Commerce; Ministry of Livestock).

Findings

When women pursue empowerment, they innovate around the obstacles that they face including societal and cultural barriers. Innovations, such as locally formulated animal feed rations and local adaptations to accessing formal finance, within Somaliland's livestock raising and meat trading are shaped not only by technical or financial considerations but also by deeply-rooted cultural practices and policy environments. Women in Somaliland's livestock economy

are already innovating and adapting quietly, persistently and effectively. They face, however, 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 rooted in culture: empowerment is often viewed as an added responsibility rather than a departure from tradition. Even empowered women rarely abandon their cultural or religious values: economic advancement is compatible with longstanding social norms.

Policy implications

Sustainable change requires integrating new practices within 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, specifically digital communication networks, roads and water systems.

To push out the frontiers of productivity and women's empowerment, policy and public investments must match practice: finance that fits the needs of women's enterprises; digital communication as well as meat/milk infrastructure that raises quality and reduces waste; and integration of gender transformative approaches into development programmes to support redistribution of household workloads and shift norms that limit women's agency and contribution.

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