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Capturing Women's Voices: Socioeconomics and Gender-Roles in Pastoralist Households in the Ruaha Landscape, Tanzania

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Pastoralists in East Africa face a multitude of challenges relating to land ownership, environmental concerns and access to government services. These difficulties may disproportionately affect women due to traditional gender roles within pastoralist society. HALI project team members conducted an assessment of gender-roles in pastoralist households during a longitudinal survey of study households and focus group meetings in an effort to include women's voices in socioeconomic research investigating interactions between disease and water scarcity, and to identify challenges to empowerment facing these women. Findings revealed that women's participation in decision making in pastoralist households within the Ruaha landscape is limited to traditional socially assigned gender roles, most often child care; water collecting; animal and household husbandry; construction; food preparation; and production of milk, eggs and chickens; a finding consistent with other GL-CRSP research on gender roles and pastoralism conducted in Ethiopia and Kenya. In addition, women in Ruaha are often less likely to attend school. At the community level, women's participation in decision making remains low, as they are often reluctant to speak freely and confidently in the presence of men and community leaders. Despite these obstacles, experiences from HALI project research suggest that women's participation in decision-making in the study area is increasing as they are becoming active in women's associations and small enterprises, entities that enable women to collectively voice their concerns and foster greater social and economic independence, and that should be further evaluated as potential strategies to improve development efforts focused on women and children. The authors conclude, however, that a more detailed gender assessment is warranted, as the roles, constraints and experiences of women vary, and too little is understood about the role of these women's associations and microfinance groups.

Background

Pastoralists in East Africa face a multitude of challenges relating to land ownership, environmental concerns and access to government services. In traditional pastoralist societies, including those in the Ruaha landscape, land is not owned but 'belongs' to a group linked by descent or cultural affiliation. Despite the fact that pastoralism is the predominant production and livelihood system in the arid and semi-arid dry lands of East Africa, its value to household food security and national economic development is hardly considered (Coppolillo and Dickman, 2007). Policy makers tend to demonstrate little regard for pastoralism and pastoralist interests (Odhiambo, 2006). This lack of appreciation for the contribution of pastoralism to national economies and poor access to education and medical and veterinary services has further marginalized pastoralists, with women in particular being severely affected. This is especially true for women's contributions to pastoral systems. In this research brief, the authors consider gender roles and their implications for development among three ethnic groups living in the Ruaha Landscape, Tanzania.

Gender Roles in Pastoralist Societies. Understanding the role of gender in traditional livestock production systems is essential for effective research, development and policy formulation. In Tanzania, gender roles differ in the management and ownership of cattle, goats, chickens and other animals. Gender dynamics also vary among pastoralists, agropastoralists (permanent settlement with crops and animals) and intensive production systems (high population density, crop-oriented systems with animals playing a supplementary role). Each has developed different ways to control resources, divide labor, and make decisions that are often poorly understood by outsiders. In traditional pastoralist systems, for example, almost all cattle belong to men, and women control only cattle allocated by men. Household management and decisions about animals are usually made by older men with young men responsible for herding, while women are responsible for the milking of cows and care of young animals. For agropastoralist communities, management of livestock is usually done by men, with the processing and marketing of milk and butter primarily performed by women. Although women may own some animals through inheritance and may purchase more through income earning activities, they still consult with husbands regarding livestock decisions. Generally, in intensive systems, men control land and livestock, but women control food crops and are responsible for the management of poultry. Unlike

pastoral livestock systems, men also may be more likely to consult with their wives regarding major decisions.

Why Women's Voices Matter. The Global Livestock CRSP (GL-CRSP) Health for Animals and Livelihood Improvement (HALI) project is investigating the effects of water limitation and disease on the health and economic well-being of pastoralist and agropastoralist households, as well as assessing people's attitudes toward disease, disease management and livestock/wildlife extension in order to identify strategies to more effectively address zoonotic disease and development at the human/livestock/wildlife interface. In this high conservation-value but water-restricted ecosystem, competition for scarce grazing and water resources is increasing. In addition, potential for disease transmission among human, wildlife and livestock are growing as pastoralists, agropastoralists and their livestock are forced to share common dwindling water sources with each other and wildlife. Given the differential effects that health and water scarcity may have on pastoralist women, it was essential that women's perspectives be heard in HALI project research activities, and that varying gender roles be considered. For example, perceptions about disease and actual disease risk may differ by gender; men make most livestock management decisions (including health care) but women often attend to daily husbandry needs (milking, calf management, tick removal). Accordingly, women may be more at risk for health problems and important sentinels for recognizing livestock disease, as they may be able to more rapidly recognize livestock changes and may be exposed more frequently to animal-source disease because of their more regular and close contact with livestock and animal products (mostly milk, meat, fat and occasionally blood). Furthermore, water scarcity may disproportionately affect women and children, who are primarily responsible for collecting water for household needs. Here the authors report on efforts to include women's voices in HALI project socioeconomic research, the challenges faced, and the initial observations on gender roles based upon findings from surveys and focus group meetings.

Methods. From December 2006 through November 2007, HALI team members interviewed 160 pastoralist and agropastoralist households among Maasai, Sukuma and Barabaig ethnic groups to assess the impact of water and disease on the health of the household, its livestock, and the household economy. The team collected information concerning livestock, water and sanitation; household structure; labor and health; agriculture; and other income generating activities performed by members of the household (see Research Brief 08-03-HALI for more survey details). At each household, the survey administrator made efforts to incorporate women into the interview process. Women's participation, the types of questions women answered, and the interactions between women and men were noted during the interviews. Information regarding gender division of labor and education level was captured in the questionnaire. In addition to household-level surveys, data was collected on health, water and economic issues at the village level by soliciting information from village leaders, in particular village executive officers and village chairmen. The number of village leaders that were female was recorded. Village focus groups were also conducted. Groups consisted of five to 12 members representing leaders of various groups such as women's associations, pastoralist associations, water users associations, village leadership, small business owners and religious leaders. Data concerning problems and challenges encountered with respect to agricultural activities, livestock, health and education in each village were collected. These meetings were led by a female administrator (Nugavava) with occasional assistance from other male HALI team members (Masozera and Sadiki). Women's opinions and the degree of women's participation in these meetings were monitored.

Preliminary Findings

Efforts and challenges of including women's voices in household surveys. Consultation with women on survey questions was challenging in pastoral communities. Most commonly, data were collected from men, and when they were unavailable, women often declined to be interviewed. Sometimes when the male head of house was absent and his wife and their children were present, the wife would invite a son to respond to the survey. Most wives would explain that they have no authority to talk to strangers. When the male head of household was present and a request was made to talk with the wife or wives in front of the husbands, most women tended to talk very little. When women did participate in the absence of their husbands, most gave more detailed information than male respondents, especially with respect to water and sanitation and household health. In general, the male interviewer reported more difficulties in obtaining information from women.

Observed gender roles in household interviews and village meetings. During the household interviews, wives were most often some distance away from the conversation area. For questions concerning family structure, most husbands gave information about the name, age, education and health of each member of the family. However in some instances, particularly for households of the Sukuma tribe, husbands invited their wives to answer these questions, indicating that the wives knew this information better. In contrast, husbands in Maasai and Barabaig households were typically the only respondents and answered most questions about the family.

Among the heads of household interviewed, 29% (47/160) had more than one wife. Polygamy tends to be

more common in Sukuma than in Maasai and Barabaig households. The average family size for interviewed households was 15 (including members of the extended family). Sukuma and Maasai households who had large families also tended to have large herds of cattle. Among the Sukuma, large families were due to the tendency of a father, his wives, his sons and their wives and the grandchildren to stay together in the same household. Conversely among the Maasai, a large family size was due to the head of household having many wives and hence many children and other live-in relatives. Barabaig men interviewed were more likely to have only one wife, hence the average number of people in their families (7.9), was lower than Maasai (11.25) or Sukuma (13.2). Barabaig tended to be more strictly nomadic, and smaller families are likely easier to organize and mobilize for frequent movement. Survey questions regarding education revealed that boys are more commonly selected to go to school and girls generally remain at home. There remains a high illiteracy rate among women and girls. This was attributed primarily to maintenance of traditional gender roles, lack of family resources and distance from households to schools. A higher proportion of children in Sukuma and Maasai households attended school compared to Barabaig households. Sukuma and Maasai households were settled closer to the villages and potentially had better access to schools.

Sukuma women preparing food for a wedding ceremony in a village in Pawaga Division, Tanzania. Women's participation in decision making in this area is restricted to traditionally assigned gender roles. Research by the HALI project, however, shows that their participation may be increasing, due in part to the presence of women's associations and small enterprises. Photo by David Wolking

At the village level. Preliminary results from focus group meetings and village leader interviews show that most economic activities are conducted and owned by men. Women do participate in activities such as chicken husbandry, operation of local restaurants and selling of local alcoholic brews. Women have also started creating and becoming involved in agriculture associations, which are mainly sponsored by the government. In regards to governance, only 9.5% (2/21) of participating villages were led by women.

During the village focus group meetings, most participants were men, and even when women attended, they did not talk or participate much. Encouraging women to speak was challenging, and when they responded, most times they repeated what the men had said. The women who attended these meetings were often members of women's associations. Sometimes these women tried to explain the problems they were having in their associations, especially their need for capacity building to enable them to more effectively utilize funds from donors, as well as their own return contributions.

Practical Implications

Findings from the HALI project preliminary gender assessment show that women's participation in decision making in pastoralist households is limited to socially assigned gender roles, most often child care; water collecting; animal and household husbandry; construction; food preparation; and production of milk, eggs and chickens; a finding consistent with other GL-CRSP research on gender roles and pastoralism conducted in Ethiopia and Kenya (McPeak and Doss, 2006; Ngari, 2008). At the community level, women's participation in decision making remains low despite evolving roles in community activities supported by governments and donors. Furthermore, the experiences and knowledge accumulated by women are rarely acknowledged or utilized.

Despite these challenges, initial findings and experiences suggest that the position of pastoralist women in the Ruaha landscape has improved slightly in recent years, as evidenced by women being allowed to leave the household more frequently. Despite this improvement, pastoralist women remain far from "empowered," and they most often have to get their husband's permission to attend community meetings, and rarely have the confidence to speak. However, women are becoming active in the women's associations that now exist in most of the study villages, and in some cases even contribute money, which in many instances is used for microfinance development activities for members. Accordingly, there is a need to increase education and confidence-building opportunities for these women to enable them to make decisions more effectively, and to encourage consideration of profitable

activities that will optimally benefit their households and villages, a role that can be supported to a much greater extent in the study area by government agencies and development organizations.

Addressing gender equality issues in pastoralist communities is a continuing challenge, as traditional gender roles are very much entrenched and there are few experts on gender issues in the area. There is a need to involve gender experts in projects such as HALI, but such experts should either be from the area or have a very good understanding of east African pastoral societies. In conclusion, though the current assessment did identify several gender-related issues and challenges in the study area, a more detailed gender assessment is warranted, as the roles, constraints and experiences of women vary, and too little is understood about the role of the women's associations and microfinance groups. It is clear from this preliminary assessment however, that the evolution of these women's groups as the nucleus for gendered empowerment should be evaluated as a key strategy to improve development efforts focused on education, household health, food security, and poverty reduction.

Further Reading

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The Health for Animals and Livelihood Improvement (HALI) project was established in 2006 and is a stakeholder-driven research and capacity-building program aimed at assessing the effects of zoonotic disease and water management on animal health, biodiversity, and livelihoods in the Ruaha ecosystem, Tanzania. The project is led by Dr. Jonna Mazet, University of California Davis; Email: jkmazet@ucdavis.edu.

The Global Livestock CRSP is comprised of multidisciplinary, collaborative projects focused on human nutrition, economic growth, environment and policy related to animal agriculture and linked by a global theme of risk in a changing environment. The program is active in East and West Africa, Central Asia and Latin America.

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