Gender Equity: A Distant Goal Yet to Be Achieved - Women Participation in Rangeland Resources Management in Northern Afghanistan

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Women in the pastoral societies of Afghanistan are playing a very important role in the sustainable use of rangeland resources. They are engaged in activities from purely domestic chores to farming and business running. However, at individual level, what a woman can or can’t do depend on a wide range of factors including family wealth status, age, life cycle, cultural stigma, religious sect, household labor composition, ethnicity, and so on. Though both men and women have access to most of rangeland resources, the “control” of these resources mostly lies in the hands of men. Women’s role in decision-making is very limited, even at household level. A recent national survey indicated that in over 80% of the cases the decisions on household issues such as food purchase, family lending or borrowing, and medicines for women were made by men only and women were sole decision makers in less than 10% cases. At public decision level, women’s role is much more negligible. For instance, in spite that most of the district development agencies (DDA) have women members, in 60% of DDA, women members never attended any DDA meetings; in another 30% of the DDA, women members participated in less than 50% of the formal meetings. Women’s representation in the community based natural resources management institutions is also extremely low. For example, out of over 70 community-based pasture management committees supported by Aga Khan Foundation, only 9 have 1-2 female members. Not surprisingly, female-headed families in the pastoral societies are also often the poorest group with the least landholding. There are encouraging signs that women are becoming more actively involved in economically productive or public activities. But unless vigorous and continuous policy and programmatic efforts are made to break the political cultural, economic and capacity barriers faced by women, gender equity will only remain a illusion for women in Afghanistan pastoral communities.