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## Women's Agency and Pastoral Livelihoods in India: A Review

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### Abstract

The role of women in promoting and sustaining pastoral livelihoods remains an under-researched area across the world. Often, studies discuss pastoralism as a male-oriented enterprise, thus overshadowing or ignoring the part played by women in such livelihood practices. In India, where pastoralism itself is essentially a neglected area of research, such discussions remain even sparse. Pastoral communities depending on migratory livestock rearing practices for their livelihoods exhibit gender-based differences in their everyday life in terms of division of labour, mobility patterns, and rights over resources. Women play different roles and responsibilities at the household and community levels that remain intertwined with their pastoral livelihoods. Drawing from the available literature, we aim to synthesize the situated agency of these pastoral women in their everyday lives and their collective activism in the face of mainstream models of development. We engage in a thorough analysis from a gender perspective in this paper to discuss specific cases of Indian women and their influence on pastoral livelihoods and interests. We aim to reframe and undo the invisibility women in pastoralism have faced thus far by re-telling their stories from a gendered perspective.

*Key words:* Pastoralism, Livelihoods, Situated Agency, Women's activism, Gendered Perspectives, India, Indian women, Pastoral women

### Introduction

Pastoralism involves migratory livestock rearing practices that vary according to socio-ecological landscapes resulting in a wide range of diversity. FAO (2021) defines pastoralism as an animal husbandry practice that follows a specific grazing itinerary across spatio-temporal scales. It includes rearing different types of livestock in variable ecological conditions extending from dry, arid rangelands to the mountainous alpine grasslands, while following appropriate mobility patterns. An estimated 500 million people across the globe derive livelihoods from this practice (Manzano et al., 2021). While in India, a considerable population of around 13 million depends on the traditional pastoral activities to earn a living (Kishore & Köhler-Rollefson, 2020). Despite such an expanse both in terms of nature and praxis, pastoralism is limited to discussions within academic circles with a major proclivity for ecological governance and resource management-related aspects. The remaining socio-cultural predicaments within pastoral livelihoods are not adequately examined yet, despite being frequently acknowledged. Gender within the pastoral communities and households is one such underexplored aspect.

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Gender, just like the other intersectional attributes of society, plays a vital role in structuring pastoral livelihoods. Within the gigantic livestock economy of India, women comprise a majority of the available workforce, especially at the rural and household level enterprises (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2006). Nonetheless, most of the available scholarship either overlooks the gendered underpinnings or overtly discusses pastoral issues from a male vantage point, leaving out concerns and challenges of women. Very few scholarly studies (Bhasin, 1991, 2011; Eneyew & Mengistu, 2013; Flintan, 2008, 2011; Fratkin & Smith, 1995; Hannah, 2007; Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008; Köhler-Rollefson, 2018; Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007; Rangnekar, 1994; Venkatasubramanian & Ramnarain, 2018; Verma & Khadka, 2016) have dealt with the gendered differences across the pastoral contexts essentially influencing the division of labour and resources, workload, ownership rights and access to resources, along with the decisions regarding mobility and marketing. These studies, even if numerally limited, indicate the relevance of gender as a crucial analytical lens to understand how pastoral livelihoods are organised. A gendered focus is essential for the pastoral livelihoods to be mainstreamed, as is acknowledged by the international bodies like the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). A recent compilation on variability in pastoralism by FAO (2021) highlights the lack of disaggregated data and research on pastoral women, who despite their integral roles in pastoral livelihoods stay in the back benches of socio-economic development. According to this report, such an information deficit and skewed focus is likely to result in misplaced priorities regarding the gender dynamics, thus hampering the overall socio-economic development within the pastoral contexts. Women in pastoralism acquire different roles considering the type of pastoral activities<sup>4</sup> prevalent within their household and the communities (Verma & Khadka, 2016). In India, around 46 specialized community groups have traditional pastoral affiliations, rear a variety of livestock<sup>5</sup> and follow different mobility patterns<sup>6</sup> suiting their geographical positioning (Kishore & Köhler-Rollefson, 2020). These basic criteria play a major role in defining the contributions of women towards livestock, land and households, and also, govern their resource ownership, control and access rights (Jaweed & Khan, 2015). For instance, among the agro-pastoral community of *Gaddis* located in the hilly terrains of Northern India, women do not migrate along with the herds, only men perform all the animal husbandry related activities on the move. However, in the case of semi-nomadic *Raika* pastoralists of Rajasthan who rear camels, or the buffalo rearing *Van-Gujjars* of Uttarakhand, the whole family migrates as a unit. Such variations--in types of livestock reared, patterns of migration followed, along with intersectional and socio-cultural factors that are exclusive to pastoral livelihoods--have far reaching impacts on the role played by the pastoral women and their ability to exercise agency.

Despite the diversity of pastoral contexts, women in-general play a significant role in sustenance and maintenance of pastoral livelihoods (Flintan, 2008; Verma et al., 2016). Apart from being the caretakers of the livestock and the family, they often play the roles of a herder, trader, knowledge-bearer, healer, as well as a political activist (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007; Rangnekar, 1994) when needed. Requirements of mobility, arranging the resources for self and livestock and trading activities put these pastoral women at the forefront where they negotiate and bargain on an everyday basis (Köhler-Rollefson, 2018). Although, pastoral women in India

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<sup>4</sup> Types of pastoral activities include- pure pastoralism, where only herding is practiced as the main economic activity or agro-pastoralism where migratory herding and subsistence agriculture are practiced in combination.

<sup>5</sup> Pastoral communities across India rear different livestock based on their geographical and ecological conditions. It ranges from yaks, buffaloes, sheep, goats, and camels to ducks, horses and donkeys. Many times, traditional pastoral communities also have mythological reasonings for the type of livestock they rear.

<sup>6</sup> Diversity of mobility patterns are followed by the pastoralists to secure the critical resources for their livestock. Pastoralists can be nomadic (without permanent settlements), semi-nomadic (have permanent settlements but migrate for most of the time in year) or can follow transhumant patterns (seasonally defined movements between fixed points).

are constrained by predominant patriarchal norms that often put them in positions of subjugation--to assume them as powerless victims would be misleading. Therefore, there is a need to challenge such assumptions and recognise their central roles in functioning and sustenance of pastoral livelihoods in tune with their situated agency.

A majority of the existing studies on pastoral contexts take the gender aspect into peripheral consideration, arriving at conclusions that point towards women to be subservient and doubly marginalized or situated at the margins of the margin (Bhasin, 2011; Eneyew & Mengistu, 2013; Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008; Verma & Khadka, 2016). These simplified inferences are often borrowed without contextual assessment and critical engagement to claim that pastoralism, in addition to the mainstream gender-based discrimination, adds onto the existing vulnerability of women (Bhasin, 2011). They consequently label pastoral women as oppressed and voiceless, which further leads to the inception of skewed development interventions that often do more harm than good (Köhler-Rollefson, 2018). We do not intend to entirely discard the assertion that pastoral women are vulnerable to various hardships; however, rendering them deprived of voice and agency in the context of their livelihoods is highly problematic as well as deceptive. Therefore, in this paper we aim to question these generalized inferences and their policy based implications by discussing the role of women in influencing pastoral livelihoods within the Indian context. To this end, in our assessment of selected literature, we bring to light the exercise of 'situated agency' by pastoral women as it has a significant bearing on the survival of pastoral practices and futures.

Situated agency as a concept has been applied across disciplines in several ways as it provides ample space for multiple localized interpretations (Gammage et al., 2016; Nandigama, 2020). However, to clarify from the outset, in this paper we borrow from the work of Naila Kabeer (1999), where she conceptualizes agency to be more than the decision-making ability - that extends to bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, and resistance - both in individual as well as collective capacity. Such processes are situation-specific where the aspects of agency including voice or actions could manifest in various ways. In this paper we review the cases of Indian pastoral women, using this conceptual framing to challenge the reductionist idea that assumes them to be doubly disadvantaged and marginalized. Through an in-depth analysis of literature, we conclude that Indian pastoral women navigate patriarchal norms with their situated agency and are not necessarily marginalized, in the way marginalization in pastoral contexts is generally perceived. With their integral roles and positions, pastoral women influence pastoral livelihoods in multiple ways. Essentially, we argue that there is a need to look beyond the conventional lens of resource ownership, control or access to understand pastoral women's everyday agency in influencing their traditional occupation.

In this paper, we address the inconsistency in literature where pastoral women are often labelled as marginalized and voiceless because of their patriarchal subjugation, but are also recognised as active agents influencing the direction of change within pastoral livelihoods. Thus, to untangle what role women play in pastoral systems, we ask the following key questions: What kind of implicit or explicit actions do women take? How do those actions affect pastoral livelihoods? And finally, what do these roles and actions say about their situated agency? To answer the same, we look at women's everyday decisions, actions and choices that otherwise get neglected under the assertion of their weaker socio-economic positions. Although the narrow literature available in this direction limits our capacity for generalization, we recognise that whatever finite information is available remains noteworthy to initiate this much needed discussion. This further lays a foundation for future research in pastoral studies probing comparable contexts with a renewed focus on gender dynamics, pastoral women and their situated agency.

## Women in Pastoral contexts

Pastoral livelihoods that revolve around migratory animal husbandry remain dependent on women in more than one way. Apart from their direct contributions within pastoral systems that include rearing the livestock, milking, taking care of calves and the sick animals, feeding and arranging fodder, women also are responsible for other tasks including subsistence agriculture, household chores and subsidiary economic activities like weaving, cheese-making and producing other by-products (Rangnekar, 1994; Rota & Sperandini, 2010; Verma & Khadka, 2016). However, they continue to remain invisible without due acknowledgement both in research and practice as their roles in pastoralism are rarely recognised (Rangnekar, 1994). Lack of gender disaggregated data from pastoral households limits the scope for understanding actual gender relations in pastoral communities. This often leads to sweeping generalizations of pastoral women as voiceless and vulnerable within the dominant discourses on gender inequality and paternalistic prejudices (Köhler-Rollefson, 2018; Rota & Sperandini, 2010). Inadequate narratives and superficial representations of pastoral women as victims of patriarchy, deprived of resource ownerships and access with excessive unpaid workloads stay in circulation without any contextual examination and critical analysis. Gradually, such arguments also become the basis for their socio-economic development and policy interventions to introduce various measures for women's empowerment. Such policy narratives seem to operate at various levels without fully engaging with the consideration of pastoral women's already existing agency (Flintan, 2008; Köhler-Rollefson, 2018; Rota & Sperandini, 2010), and could very easily go against their interests as is shown below in the case of pastoralists from the Deccan region and Rajasthan among the others.

## Indian pastoral women and their situated agency

Out of the existing accounts that outline the struggles and contributions of pastoral women in maintaining and supporting pastoralism, we identified some cases that shed light on their situated agency. Although, these studies engage with the issues of women's resource rights, impacts of climate change on women's labour and their possession of local ecological knowledge (Bhasin, 2011; Köhler-Rollefson, 2018; Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007; Venkatasubramanian & Ramnarain, 2018), we utilize them to critically interpret the role of women in pastoralism and to provide a base for conceptualizing the exercise of their situated agency.

Beginning from the North of the country, among the *Gaddi* agro-pastoralists of Western Himalayan region, women play an important role in the dual enterprise comprising migratory herding and agricultural activities as documented by Bhasin (2011, 2013) and Mehra (1992). These pastoralists rear herds of sheep and goats following a seasonal vertical movement across the plain and hilly terrains in search of pasturage. In this community, men carry out traditional migratory pastoral practices while women stay in the settled villages where they look after the larger cattle that need to be stall-fed. As men stay on the move year-round, women take charge of most of the household chores and decisions. They also are significantly responsible for agricultural activities that supplement household nutrition as well as their earnings. Agro-pastoral pursuits within this community continue because of this gendered division of labour at the household level. With their sedentary status, *Gaddi* women assert a stronghold over the household economic decisions and indirectly contribute in sustaining the migratory pastoralism by mutually sharing the workload with their male counterparts. Such a combination of factors including the absence of men because of their constant migration, economic contribution of women through participation in cultivation activities and rearing of animals can be considered as some of the underlying reasons for the alleviated social status and autonomy of the *Gaddi* women (Mehra, 1992).

Similarly, in the case of the *Raika* pastoralists of Rajasthan, women actively participate in nomadic pastoral shepherding where they watch over both the livestock and finances along with their men. In common parlance, very often they are expected by the *Raika* community to act docile in face of the stringent patriarchal norms that govern their education and marriage, and are lauded for their veiled outward appearance, and their silent behaviour around men. However, Köhler-Rollefson's (2018) account on *Raika* women explains how they wield the power behind the scenes. According to her, *Raika* women perform exceptionally well in managing the money matters and are at times addressed as the 'family finance ministers' by their male counterparts (Hannah, 2007; Köhler-Rollefson, 2018). While the *Raika* men are out grazing their livestock, women handle the interactions with traders and agriculturalists to finalize animal and manure related transactions, which facilitates their economic independence. Their role and position in pastoral practices, which involves caring for the new-born calves, handling family income and managing the camps during migration are also highly valued within the community and remains crucial for keeping the pastoral economy of the *Raikas* intact. Despite the stringent patriarchal norms prevalent in Rajasthan, *Raika* women are able to uphold strong social as well economic positions by the virtue of their participation in pastoralism. However, in recent times women of the community expressed a declining interest in pursuing a migratory lifestyle with the emergence of numerous challenges including dwindling resources, state imposed restriction on grazing, children's education and their own aspirations for a modern sedentary lifestyle. Acting on their will, they are shunning the marriage alliances with the pastoral men, leaving deeper impacts on the generational renewal of *Raika* pastoral practices. Considering their centrality and strategic role, Köhler-Rollefson (2018) identified the *Raika* women as the lynchpin when it comes to the continuance of traditional practices of migratory sheep husbandry.

The case study of *Dailibai Raika*, (Hannah, 2007), the owner of a small herd and a traditional animal healer, provides a vantage point to our understanding of the situated contexts in which women's agency get articulated during the pastoral lifestyles. *Dailibai* is known for representing her community across several important governmental and non-governmental platforms to voice concerns regarding declining access to the grazing lands that affect the pastoral pursuits. She steers across powerful patriarchal settings to raise the livelihood related problems pastoral women and men face at multiple public forums despite the aversion of a few powerful community members. By doing so, she challenges the general perceptions regarding the pastoral women being inarticulate and voiceless. This bias against politically active women has been observed among many other pastoral contexts across the world (Eneyew & Mengistu, 2013; Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008). According to *Dailibai*, 'if *Raikas* are not able to safeguard their pastoralism, not only many valuable livestock breeds, but also a large pool of knowledge would be lost. People would also have to settle for low paid city jobs that hold no honour' (Hannah, 2007). More voices like hers are needed to protect the pastoral interests and also raise the issues of pastoral women to draw required support.

Another significant illustration of pastoral women's agency is documented by Ramdas & Ghotge (2007) where they discuss the collective resistance of pastoral women against the state. *Kurma*, *Kurba* and *Dhangar* pastoral communities of the Deccan region in India, who depend on livestock rearing for the majority of their earnings, have been constantly subjected to the state's development measures that claim to promote gender equality and promote women's empowerment. Restrictions imposed on these shepherding communities by the forest department amidst the already shrinking common grazing resources, and introduction of foreign breeds of livestock that can be stall-fed, led to a collective mobilization of women against such sedentarization policies of the state. Pastoral mobility and resource dependence on the commons have always been the points of contention since colonial times in India (Chakravarty-Kaul, 1997; Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007). Following this outlook, when the

pastoralists in the region were dissuaded from entering the forests and using the common state-owned grazing resources on which they have traditionally depended, women-led groups resisted such changes. For these pastoralists for whom the small livestock including goats and sheep remain integral assets, losing access to common grazing grounds and shifting towards larger cattle rearing, meant a weakening of their socio-economic status and deprivation from the traditions of independent decision making (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007). They also perceived the introduction of non native breeds of livestock as a looming threat to the indigenous genetic resources held within the native breeds that they rear. Therefore, as an act of resistance the women of these communities collectively rejected the foreign livestock breeds that promoted stall feeding and also countered the state measures that prevented their mobility and resource access through deliberate everyday actions. Ramdas & Ghotge (2007) call these, acts of non-cooperation where pastoral women acted against state impositions through actions like taking their livestock to forest plantation areas for grazing, or intentionally using the wrong lopping<sup>7</sup> methods to collect fodder. These everyday forms of resistance used by women pastoralists in their situated contexts, boldly asserted their agency and the choice of livelihood as well as their access and user rights over common resources they protected for generations.

One more example echoing a similar sentiment surfaces from the Barmer district of Rajasthan, where women across caste and class groups came forward to protect their breed of cattle from getting diluted. These women organised themselves into an informal network referred to as *Janki Mahila Mandal* to protect the indigenous 'Tharparkar' bull breed native to their region (Flintan, 2008). This pure breed was under continual threat by the ongoing crossbreeding initiatives and dwindling fodder availability in the region. Taking charge collectively by defying the stringent caste hierarchies and class driven social structure, women of this region established a local help group that facilitated livestock rearing practices and established a credit system to help members in times of need. According to Flintan (2008), this case reflects how women-led initiatives not only strengthen pastoral pursuits but are also equally important to eliminate the social evils rooted in caste, class and gender based discrimination.

Furthermore, the *MERA declaration* that took place in 2010 at Gujarat in India brought together women pastoralists from 32 countries and is another example of women's agency and activism to safeguard their pastoral livelihoods. In this unique international gathering, women pastoralists participated and collaborated to propose a shared agenda regarding their common demands and form alliances to develop a global support network. Their declaration boldly affirmed that "It is by remaining pastoralists that we can be of great service to the entire human community" (*Mera Declaration of the Global Gathering of Women Pastoralists*, 2010). This participatory women-led movement demanded recognition for pastoral livelihoods, especially for the women of these communities who contribute immensely to the functioning of pastoral systems. They demanded the due recognition for their livelihoods as well as their specific roles that are usually unacknowledged by the development agencies including the governments, as a lack of such recognition adversely impacts their rights over resources and land. According to this declaration, rights to mobility, safety, representation, education, and capacity building remain the most important concerns of pastoral women. They believe that pastoral populations have been denied their fundamental rights, which jeopardises their livelihoods and significantly increases their vulnerability. The main objective of this united statement was to generate a political document that could serve as the basis for action for international development agencies to secure the pastoral futures. Apart from the above, this gathering reflected on the potential of pastoral women's collective agency towards protecting their unique way of life.

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<sup>7</sup> Lopping means methods of cutting the branches of trees that used as fodder for the livestock.

This, till date remains one of the historic landmark events that instigated an important discussion on commons, land rights and women in pastoralism across the world.

Similarly, the case of *Maldhari* pastoralists of Gujarat who are commonly subjected to land grabs and declining grazing lands saw mobilization of women against unjust laws, extractive capitalist interventions. The state's ignorance towards this pastoral community's interests is pointed by the *Maldhari* women when they argue that there is an urgent need for the pastoralist women to come to the forefront and articulate their demands (Duncan & Agarwal, 2017). According to these women, their participation in such activist movements increased due to the failure of their male counterparts in securing their pastoral futures. "Lots of land was available 15 years ago. Now it is not possible because of industry and land pollution. Land, grazing land, is not available. Before, men took care of women. Now there are no animals, no money and you see more violence. Men do not take care of women"(Duncan & Agarwal, 2017, p. 68), explained one of the *Maldhari* women when asked about the effects of declining pastoralism. In their opinion, collectivising and voicing the concerns on local and state levels would help the pastoral women in pushing their demands for securing the pastoral livelihoods and this also could help resolve the tensions between men and women that are stemming from the loss of livestock. According to them, 'to be a *Maldhari* is to own livestock' and thus, protecting their pastoral interests remains imperative to the survival of their community.

All these cases represent the uniqueness and diversity of pastoral contexts besides the specific motivations and constraints that drive the pastoral women's agency in individual as well as collective capacity. Their actions and choices by virtue of their position within pastoralism remain integral for safeguarding their pastoral interests as well as securing their gendered opportunities.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we reviewed the literature offering specific cases of Indian pastoral women to locate their situated agency in the context of their livelihood activities. Women in pastoralism are often portrayed as highly vulnerable and oppressed under the combined burden of their livelihoods and gender. However, in contradiction, our assessment of the literature using the lens of situated agency proves otherwise, and allows us to queer the existing representations available in the scholarly as well as the policy circles. The cases of Indian pastoral women discussed above provide enough evidence to support the claim that women in these communities are not simply passive or voiceless victims. Based on their situated contexts and within the limits of their roles and responsibilities, pastoral women found ways to exert their agency in everyday lives by the means of representing, bargaining, negotiating, subverting and resisting. As an outcome, their actions and choices influence the pastoral livelihoods in a myriad of ways that are contingent on various contextual factors.

The situated agency of pastoral women is manifested through diverse ways on an everyday basis. Strategic dependence of the entire community on women's roles within various pastoral practices, such as their crucial contributions to animal rearing and household economies, the emphasis placed on their choices of marriage alliances, and their migration, along with their collective actions to resist and demand external interventions, are but a few of these manifestations. In some pastoral communities, women hold independent ownership rights over a variety of livestock that remain their major assets (Ramdas & Ghotge, 2007). Besides, they also have extended control over the financial matters at the household level (Köhler-Rollefson, 2018). As far as the other resources including land are concerned, pastoralists in general get marginalized amidst the shrinking commons and lack of access to formal land tenures. As stated in the *MERA* declaration, secure land tenure remains the foremost demand of all pastoralists across country contexts irrespective of their gender. However, additional

recognition to women pastoralists in such areas certainly is a desirable step towards strengthening their socio-economic status.

In our review, we also corroborated on how the gender-based division of labour in pastoral households acts as a source of situated agency for the women. Absence of men during migratory periods often translates in increased responsibility and autonomy over household decisions for women. The complex gender dynamics that pastoral communities showcase while being located within the patriarchal settings are crucial for managing and sustaining the overall pastoral practices. It is almost as if pastoral women run an efficient parallel sub-system that works hand-in-glove with the mainstream patriarchal set-up, which often results in mixed outcomes for women. For instance, cases such as the *Raika* women, exemplify both negative and positive impacts that women's agency can generate for pastoral livelihoods. Where, on the one hand, women's active participation streamlines the functioning of nomadic pastoralism among the *Raikas*, on the other, women's declining desire to migrate in the face of increasing uncertainties generates undesirable outcomes (Köhler-Rollefson, 2018). Such negotiations within the existing paternalistic rubrics manifest either as acquisition of valuable economic roles or as expressions of dissent for marriage alliances with the pastoralists are some of the indirect ways in which *Raika* women assert their situated agency. Their choices implicitly influence the continuity and future of the community's pastoral way of life as well as their livelihoods.

Apart from the individual and household level influence, we also discussed the cases of collective agency and activism reflected through *MERA* declaration, protest demonstration by the women of pastoral communities from the Deccan region and the formation of *Janki Mahila Mandal* to safeguard an indigenous breed and organise a self-help group. These variety of examples from across the country become relevant in establishing that pastoral women's collectives harbour enormous potential to raise their needs and demands on the national and international fora. This form of collective agency bringing together a multitude of voices in a coherent manner is crucial for putting the needs of pastoralists on the table and to seek appropriate interventions to secure the future of pastoralism in India. The so-called patriarchal pastoral leadership across various regions of India, could learn a thing or two from their women and their confident assertions of situated agency for productive purposes.

In our analysis, we found diverse situations that interacted with women's agency leaving notable impacts on the functioning of pastoral systems on the whole. Therefore, to avoid premature judgements and extrapolations regarding the status of women in pastoralism, we propose that a careful scrutiny of contextual differences should be considered. In addition, a layered analysis of the actual forms of women's oppression attempted through the lens of situated agency, rather than using the assumed forms that are readily available in the literature, would contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways that women need support and how their societies can advance the status of their women. With limited research insights available on this matter so far, a potential for further empirical enquiry exists that could systematically explore the terrains of gender dynamics, women's agency, and transitions in pastoral livelihoods. This would help in filling the existing knowledge gap and would simultaneously inform the policies that could secure the current pastoral livelihoods as well as their futures.

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