



Women Herders and Pastoralists

Valuing their Contribution to Rangeland Stewardship and Resilience

Rangelands consist of vast natural and semi-natural grasslands, shrublands, woodlands, and deserts which are grazed by either livestock or wildlife or both. Healthy, productive, and resilient rangelands provide a wide range of goods and services that support pastoral livelihoods and grassland communities and provide huge benefits for the society at large. They also regulate critical ecological functions on regional and global scales, including the carbon, nutrient, and water cycles. However, land use change and development pressures (e.g., cropland expansion, grazing management, urbanisation, infrastructure), and the effects of climate change (e.g., rising temperatures, drought, wildfires) pose significant challenges to the protection and restoration of rangelands and their communities worldwide.¹

Women herders and pastoralists are often under-recognised stewards of these vast landscapes. In rangeland communities around the world, male emigration and changing livelihood strategies have led to the feminisation of agriculture. In addition to household duties, women herders and pastoralists are now increasingly responsible for livestock management and the daily governance of land and water resources.² When their ownership rights are recognised, livestock is typically one of the most important assets held by women in the rangelands. Even when high-value large animals remain under the control of men, goats and chickens managed by women contribute significantly to household income,

food and nutritional security, and provide a safety net during times of stress.³ Many pastoralist systems depend on shared governance arrangements to optimise natural resource use and build resilience to drought and other stresses, often considering gender-responsive participation as essential for the long-term health and productivity of the rangelands.⁴

Despite their multiple roles and responsibilities in pastoralist systems, women's contributions are often limited by persistent structural and institutional barriers. Patrilineal inheritance systems, discriminatory customary and social norms, and male-dominated decision-making processes tend to restrict women's access to and control of productive assets, undermining equity, productivity, and security.^{5 6} Consequently, women experience the impacts of climate change,⁷ desertification, land degradation and drought⁸ differently, in large part, due to their obligations to family and community wellbeing. Their unequal access to credit, resources, technology, and services exacerbates these disparities.^{9 10} Nevertheless, women remain critical rangeland actors: they tend livestock; manage birthing and milking; secure feed, water, and veterinary care; and process livestock and other value-added products that sustain household incomes and local economies.^{11 12} Enhancing women's rights, leadership roles, and access to resources must be considered a strategic investment in the rangelands, as well as a matter of gender equality and social inclusion.

Figure 1 Women are key to building resilience in rangelands



1 Manage land and care for livestock

Women manage land and livestock, including breeding, milking, daily care and harvesting, which can generate a significant proportion of household income.



2 Steward natural resources

Women make decisions about grazing patterns, and the allocation of feed, forage and water resources that support rangeland health and productivity.



3 Nurture human and social capital

Women lead caregiving networks and savings groups that strengthen community bonds and improve educational and health outcomes in times of need.



4 Support diversified livelihoods

Women process and market value-added products, such as milk, meat, hides and wool, creating diversified income streams and boosting livelihood resilience.

Systemic Barriers Faced by Women Herders and Pastoralists

Women pastoralists shoulder growing responsibilities in extensive livestock production systems, yet persistent gender norms, power imbalances, and institutional neglect continue to limit their rights, visibility, and influence in decision-making.

Although women play an indispensable role in pastoralist systems, their contributions are frequently overlooked or undervalued.¹³ At policy and operational levels, data collection and programme design often treat households as a single entity, concealing intra-household dynamics and systematically underestimating the value of women's contributions to agricultural production, rangeland stewardship, and economic decision-making processes. In practice, women juggle domestic responsibilities, childcare and education, and income-generating activities alongside livestock husbandry and natural resource management. Community and social obligations are additional roles that tend to restrict women's time, mobility, and capacity to engage meaningfully in management and leadership positions.¹⁴

Beyond these responsibilities, women herders and pastoralists face structural constraints to equality, such as male-dominated decision-making hierarchies and restricted access to productive resources.^{15 16} Although women play a key role in animal health, feeding, herding, milking, marketing, bookkeeping, and monitoring,¹⁷ the ownership of livestock (acquisition, transfer, slaughter, and inheritance) and control over land, water, and other resources largely remains in the hands of men.¹⁸ For example, cultural norms may prevent women from owning or trading livestock of a higher value, such as cattle or camels, even in customary systems where land is collectively owned.¹⁹ In some pastoral societies (e.g., in the Central Asian and Andean regions), long-standing

traditions that featured strong female leadership have been displaced by colonial and post-colonial governance systems that have diminished women's public roles and formal authority.^{20 21}

Male-dominated or patriarchal hierarchies are not confined to traditional or pastoral systems in the Global South. In developed countries, the livestock sector – including research, extension services and institutions – is still predominantly controlled by men.²² Although women often drive innovation, diversification, and entrepreneurship aimed at more sustainable management practices,^{23 24} their efforts are often dismissed as 'non-traditional' or 'hobby farms'. Industrialisation, rapid technological change, and the mechanisation of agriculture have further marginalised women, reinforcing gendered divisions of labour and authority.²⁵

Policy and governance frameworks often fail to address gender imbalances in practice. Although many countries have laws that commit to gender equality and promote women's land rights, these laws are not always effectively implemented and enforced,²⁶ or fail to protect existing arrangements that allow women to access land and water resources.²⁷ For example, in some communal rangeland systems, land tenure reforms that introduce formal titling can expunge the land use rights that women held under customary systems, effectively institutionalising their exclusion.²⁸



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Visibility and Innovation among Women Pastoralists in Spain ²⁹

Although women have long been active participants in Spain's extensive livestock systems, their roles have often been undervalued and recognised unevenly across regions. The transition towards intensive, industrial livestock production after 1950 contributed to rural depopulation, land abandonment, and the further masculinisation of the sector. However, in recent decades, women's participation has increased significantly, with the number of women working in the livestock sector now almost equivalent to the number of men, and one-third of livestock operators being women under the age of 25. Nevertheless, statistics can overstate women's actual influence, as men often retain primary decision-making authority, even when grazing lands are officially registered in women's names. The 2011 Law of Shared Ownership attempted to address these issues, but limited uptake due to bureaucratic hurdles and entrenched household power dynamics has hindered its implementation.

The experiences of women in Spain's livestock sector vary significantly depending on how they enter the sector, for example, through family inheritance, community partnerships or as individual entrepreneurs starting from scratch. Those who marry into pastoral households often encounter restricted ownership rights, limited autonomy, and imbalanced household power relations. Meanwhile, women who start out independently can face significant barriers regarding access to markets, credit, and social services, with these challenges being further exacerbated by factors such as age, ancestral origin, and marital status. Despite these constraints, many Spanish women pastoralists have become important innovators and stewards of rangelands. They often lead in the adoption of sustainable livestock and livelihood strategies, such as transhumance, heritage breeds, organic farming methods, added-value processing, direct marketing, and agritourism. Women also tend to build and rely on informal and virtual networks for knowledge exchange, policy advocacy, and socioeconomic solidarity, thereby reshaping livestock systems from the margins while continuing to navigate gender discrimination within institutions and rural society. One prominent example is *Ganaderas en Red*, a self-support network specifically targeting and led by pastoralist women.³⁰

The impacts of climate change and other environmental stresses have become systemic in the rangelands and further exacerbate the challenges for women herders and pastoralists. While men typically manage the financial risks associated with drought or market shocks, women bear the brunt of the resulting increase in manual labour and care work, such as collecting forage and water, managing animal health and reproduction, and maintaining household wellbeing.³¹ When men emigrate, the full burden of household and agricultural work often falls to women and girls.³² However, this feminisation of agricultural labour in the rangelands rarely leads to a corresponding shift to greater decision-making power or more equitable benefit sharing.³³ This further weakens adaptive capacity at both the household and community levels,³⁴ failing to recognise the value of women's place-based knowledge (e.g., animal health, forage quality, water sources) to cope with rangeland degradation and climate change.³⁵

The challenges and opportunities faced by women herders and pastoralists are also shaped by intersectionality. Access to resources, education, and extension services, as well as decision-making spaces is influenced by factors such as age, marital status, social position, and economic standing.³⁶ For example, young women and girls often carry heavy domestic workloads while being largely excluded from capacity building



activities, such as educational platforms, extension services, and leadership training.³⁷ Poorer households may lack access to labour-saving technologies or hired labour, which can limit livelihood diversification and children's education.³⁸ This represents a lost opportunity to leverage women's knowledge and experience for critical leadership roles that are needed to strengthen their voices in negotiation and decision-making processes that impact rangeland health.

Young Pastoralists at the Intersection of Age, Gender, and Rapid Change

Young pastoralists are absolutely critical to the future of rangelands and pastoralist livelihoods. Yet, across most regions, they have limited or no access to land, livestock, and other rangeland resources due to their age, gender, and socioeconomic status. In some cases, customary governance systems privilege seniority, typically favouring older men with serious implications for inheritance, asset transfers, and knowledge transmission. In spite of being better educated and more familiar with digital tools and emerging technologies than previous generations, high entry barriers, such as limited access to grazing land, ownership of livestock, and start-up capital, constrain their ability to remain in or return to pastoral systems. Young women herders and pastoralists experience additional barriers, which reinforces their dependence on men and impedes their ability to innovate or invest in their future.³⁹

Climate change, land fragmentation, and rangeland conversion further intensify the pressures on pastoralist youth, accelerating emigration and disengagement from the rangelands and pastoralism. Evidence shows that when young people are supported through education, mentorship, secure tenure, and meaningful participation in governance, they are better able to innovate and strengthen intergenerational knowledge transfers to improve rangeland stewardship and resilience.⁴⁰ Recent youth-led initiatives, including regional declarations and pastoralist youth networks, demonstrate their growing political engagement and demand for the recognition of communal land rights and mobility for climate-resilient rangeland management. Empowering young pastoralists, especially young women and girls, is a strategic investment in the long-term sustainability of pastoralist systems, as well as a social equity imperative.⁴¹



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Empowering Women as Agents of Rangeland Stewardship

Empowering women pastoralists with legitimate land rights, a voice in decision-making, and access to livestock and natural resources makes rangeland management more inclusive, resilient, and socially and ecologically sustainable.

Empowering women in pastoralist and rangeland management systems can deliver measurable benefits for households, communities, and the environment.

Supportive national policy frameworks based on more inclusive governance can facilitate collective decision-making processes and partnerships that deliver more equitable outcomes, ensuring that the diverse needs, knowledge, and priorities of community members are reflected.⁴² Evidence shows that women-only, women-led, or gender-inclusive community groups often demonstrate higher levels of trust, cooperation, and social cohesion than male-dominated groups. Strong social networks based on trust and reciprocity are particularly important in pastoralist systems, where coordinated responses to drought and water scarcity, mobility, and grazing pressures often determine environmental and livelihood outcomes. Such networks reduce the transaction costs associated with collective action and improve the management of shared resources. In many contexts, female heads of households who are older, more educated, and highly experienced represent a valuable source of leadership needed for strategic decision-making.⁴³



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Women's Leadership in Rangeland Management in Mongolia⁴⁴

Mongolia has a strong legacy of women's leadership. Mongolian women have traditionally been warriors, rulers, and judges, and the country adopted gender equality as a priority early on, granting women the right to vote in 1924. Today, women account for over half the population and more than 40% of the agricultural workforce.

Women herders and pastoralists play a central role in sustaining household wellbeing and pastoral livelihoods in Mongolia. In the 1990s, Mongolia began recognising that community-based rangeland management groups, alongside traditional pastoralist systems, could improve environmental and socioeconomic outcomes, including higher pasture biomass and herder incomes. Gender-responsiveness has emerged as a key factor behind many of these successes. Women-led community groups demonstrate leadership performance equal to that of men, with higher levels of trust among members. This has strengthened social bonds, facilitated knowledge sharing, and reduced the costs of collective action. At the household level, female heads are often older, better educated, and more experienced than their male counterparts.

The Mongolian experience shows that empowering women in leadership roles can improve rangeland stewardship, provided that their multiple caregiving and community responsibilities are recognised and supported.

Equitable sharing of economic benefits between men and women can significantly improve sustainability, stability, and security for rangeland communities.

Women who earn an income are more likely to invest in the future of their households (e.g., children's nutrition, education, health) or manage their finances through community-based savings and credit schemes. Livestock ownership can substantially increase women's bargaining power and decision-making authority. Several studies show that when women own livestock, they are more likely to direct incomes to activities that lead to improved resilience, food and nutritional security.⁴⁵

⁴⁶ In many pastoral settings, women's control of and access to land can be better protected through collective governance arrangements, rather than through modern tenure reforms which can exclude women.⁴⁷ Strengthening women's land rights and economic empowerment through communal tenure systems is seen as critical for both gender equity and sustainable rangeland management in many countries.⁴⁸

Gender-Responsive Approaches to Building Resilience in the Rangelands

Women in the rangelands often drive innovations that blend traditional practices with scientific insights and experiential learning to enhance adaptive management approaches.

In countries such as the United States and Australia, for example, women have played a pivotal role in the management of rangeland systems, outreach to non-ranching communities, and the facilitation of intergenerational knowledge transfer.⁴⁹ Despite facing barriers to land ownership, finance, and extension services, many women pastoralists and ranchers have successfully adopted sustainable rangeland management practices, often pursuing innovative marketing, diversification, and processing strategies.⁵⁰

Adopting multidimensional rangeland strategies can empower women to make informed life choices that advance gender equality within households, communities, and local economies.⁵¹

Institutional arrangements that promote shared access to resources, knowledge exchange, and collective action can enhance women's bargaining power and social status within households. In parts of Kenya, for instance, women have been able to manage and inherit land during times of crisis, contributing to improved food security and facilitating the recovery of livestock following droughts. In matrilineal societies in South Asia, women's land rights and the ownership of livestock have enabled households to withstand the economic consequences of male emigration. In India, women's groups have successfully secured collective rights to communal lands, ensuring that their priorities, such as water and fodder allocation, are appropriately considered in local decision-making forums.⁵²

Although women are often portrayed as being disproportionately vulnerable to climate-related stress and economic shocks, this overlooks the crucial role they play in building resilience.

Women herders and pastoralists contribute to many aspects of resilience in the rangelands. They manage livestock (providing income), allocate forage and water resources judiciously (ensuring food and nutritional security), build human and social capital through caregiving networks and savings groups (creating a safety net), and generate diversified income streams through value-added products (supporting livelihoods and resilience).^{53 54}

As the effects of climate change intensify, including more frequent droughts and increased water scarcity, women and girls will continue to take on additional coping responsibilities. However, with the right support and incentives, current trends could also provide an opportunity to reshape gender relations, recognising the valuable contribution of women to rangeland health and secure livelihoods.⁵⁵

Participatory Rangeland Management Empowering Women in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania^{56 57}

The Participatory Rangeland Management (PRM) project is being implemented in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the International Land Coalition (ILC), with funding from the European Union. The project demonstrates how inclusive governance can empower women and strengthen rangeland stewardship. It brings pastoralists together through community-led processes to map rangelands, agree on grazing rules, and collectively manage resources. It has created opportunities for women pastoralists to participate in decision-making processes, leadership roles, and natural resource governance – areas from which they have traditionally been excluded. Evidence shows that women's participation increased significantly when they were included in planning meetings, rangeland committees, and monitoring activities. They reported more confidence, improved negotiation skills, and greater influence over grazing decisions and household resource use. Rather than focusing on individual land rights, the PRM project has strengthened women's voices within collective tenure systems, helping to protect their access to shared rangeland resources while reinforcing customary governance structures.

International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists and International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026

The United Nations General Assembly designated 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), marking a critical moment to elevate the global importance of rangelands and the pastoralist communities who steward them. This momentum was reinforced in 2024, when the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), held in Riyadh, adopted the Convention's first-ever decision on sustainable rangeland management. In the same year, Mongolia's Parliament approved a national resolution outlining a roadmap for the IYRP and allocating funding to support rangelands and pastoralist livelihoods. At UNCCD COP17, hosted by Mongolia in August 2026, the Rangelands Flagship Initiative will be launched as a global, multi-partner effort to scale up investment in rangelands and pastoralist communities in support of land degradation neutrality and broader sustainable development goals. In the lead-up to COP17, a symbolic journey from Riyadh to Ulaanbaatar along the historic Silk Road will draw international attention to rangelands and their custodians, showcase national efforts in sustainable rangeland management and restoration, and mobilise political commitment, culminating in a global call to action at COP17.⁵⁸

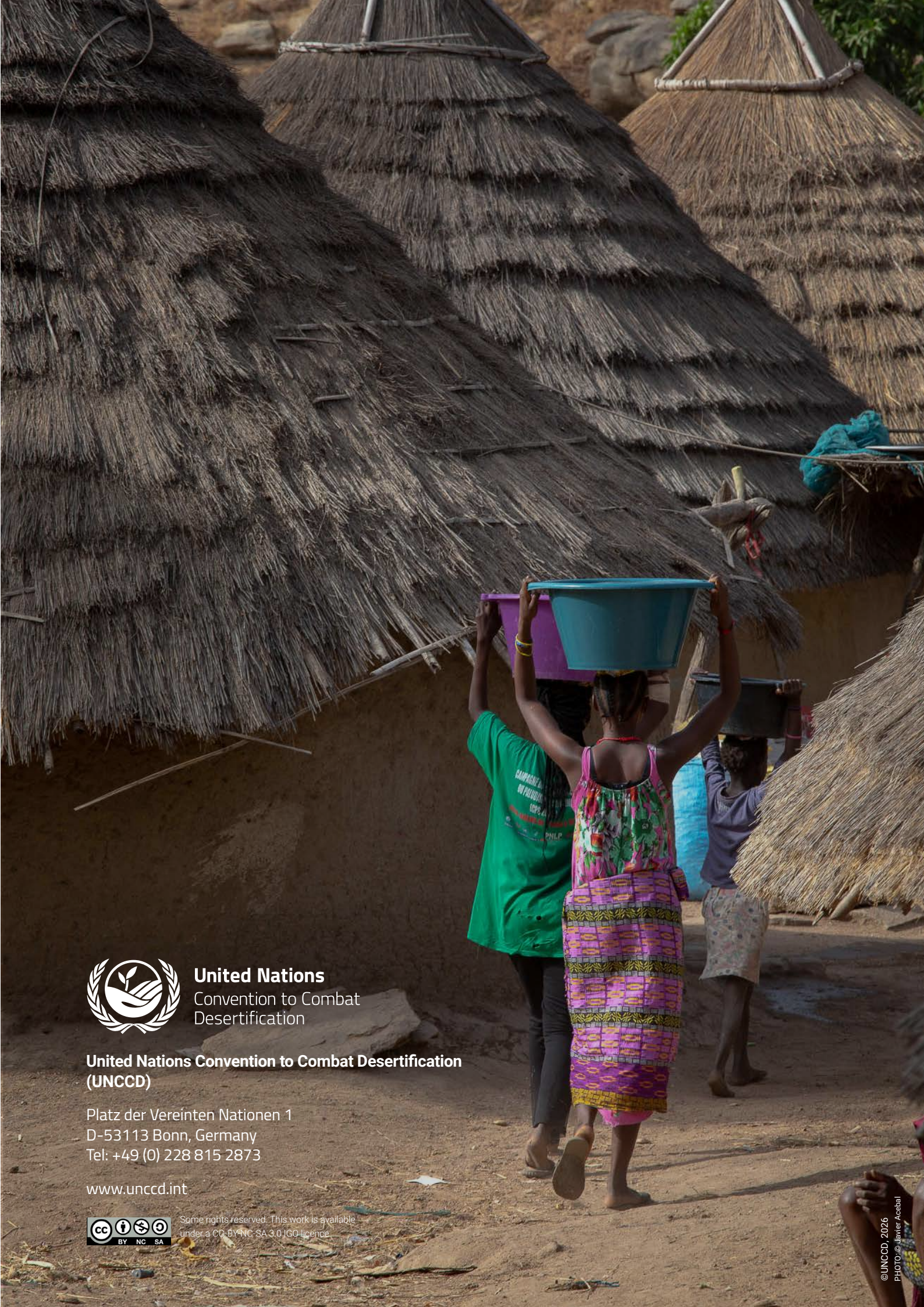
At the same time, the General Assembly has designated 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, explicitly recognising the contributions of women herders and pastoralists. Together, these two commemorations present a unique opportunity to spotlight the leadership of women farmers and pastoralists.⁵⁹ In 2010, representatives from 32 countries adopted the MERA Declaration – a 23-point charter calling for the empowerment of women pastoralists, equitable participation in decision-making, and recognition of the distinct social, economic, and ecological challenges they face.⁶⁰ The second Global Gathering of Women Pastoralists (MERA +16) held in May 2026 will assess the implementation of the MERA Declaration and seek to strengthen the collective voice of pastoralist women.⁶¹ Key messages from this gathering will inform debates and advocacy across international fora, including UNCCD COP17. The Gender Caucus at COP17 offers a strategic platform to align the IYRP with the International Year of the Woman Farmer by advancing concrete policy commitments that recognise and empower women herders and pastoralists as champions of rangeland stewardship, food security, and climate resilience.



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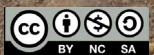


United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification

**United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
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