

## Livestock projects in southwest China

# Women participate, everybody benefits



Photo: Chen Yong

Women farmers, including two Lisu Tibetans in traditional clothing, discussing their experiences in a “villager experimentation group” workshop in Gongshan.

**Women play an essential role in animal production in the rural northwestern region of Yunnan province, China. However, women are often left out of extension activities and training opportunities. A recent project has found various ways to better target women farmers. By increasing their participation, as well as the professional training of women field workers, risks in livestock production were reduced and household economies improved. Women farmers also became more confident and aware of their rights as decision-makers on the farm.**

Shen Shicai and Qian Jie

Livestock production serves various crucial roles in the livelihoods of marginalised and poor people. It contributes to local diets, provides cash, draught power, organic fertilizer, and is a means of transportation of heavy equipment. Those whose livelihoods are most dependent on animal husbandry are the poor, especially women, in remote mountainous areas that have little access to information, infrastructure and employment opportunities.

Gongshan county is just such a region, situated in the northwest of the province of Yunnan, China. To the west, Gongshan borders Burma and to the north, Tibet. Gongshan is a typical agro-pastoralist region and is home to a great variety of cultures and considerable biodiversity. In 2008, 32 percent of farmers’ incomes came from crop products and 29 percent from animal husbandry. Crops include maize, rice, vegetables, potato and cash crops. Livestock consist of yaks, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses and poultry. Crop cultivation and livestock production are strongly linked. Livestock also has a social function in this area, such as for gift-giving (exchange), and in wedding, funeral and religious ceremonies.

### Women’s agricultural roles in Gongshan county

Women and men have different roles and decision-making responsibilities in their agricultural activities. In general, women farmers are mainly responsible for subsistence crops such as maize, rice, vegetables and potato, whereas the men mainly carry responsibility for cash crop production. Subsistence crops are cultivated near the home, mostly for food for the family and livestock fodder. Cash crops grow relatively further away from the village and are usually sold on the



Photo: Shen Shicai

**Farmer Huxiaohua milking one of her cows in the village Dimaluo in Gongshan. Once the cattle are brought home from the grasslands, women are usually responsible for this work.**

market. Men make more of the decisions regarding purchase and sale issues for both cash and subsistence crops.

In livestock production, women mostly raise pigs and chickens, whereas men are usually responsible for feeding and grazing of cattle, goats, sheep and horses. Both men and women are responsible for the care of their respective animals, preparing fodder, cleaning the stable, disease treatment, and buying and selling. Male farmers are also responsible for heavy projects such as building fences, pens and silos for silage, while female farmers work on tasks such as making barrel silage fodder and grass production. In the summer months, men accompany the cattle, goats and sheep to grazing grounds in the mountain grasslands, while women stay close to home, where the pigs and chickens are kept. In the winter, however, the animals are brought back, and men and women share the responsibility of carrying manure and preparing fodder. This division of roles indicates that men have decision-making rights over the higher (monetary) value animals, while women care for the livestock having less value. More recently, however, there has been an increase in the number of young men travelling long distances to engage in labour, leaving more and more young and old women in charge of all agricultural production and other activities.

There are certain limiting factors restricting the development of animal husbandry in Gongshan, including disease, lack of green fodder sources in winter and spring, alpine grassland degradation and low local extension services. The project “Enhancing agro-pastoralist livelihoods in NW Yunnan province” was therefore initiated in 2003 by the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK) to identify and try to solve these problems. An important part of the project was a study carried out in the following year to clarify social factors and gender issues in this country. The results of this research were useful for determining how new policies could be implemented.

### **Men targeted, but for women’s activities**

From conversations with village leaders, government officials and women’s groups, it emerged that men often have access to more opportunities for receiving information, training and extension services in the community than do women. Government extension programmes, however, are usually focused on the most common agricultural products produced by women (i.e., pigs, chickens and subsistence crops), and less on larger livestock and commercial crops. But because women do not participate in these programmes, extension has had little impact on the capacities, social relationships and economic status of women. As a result, household economy and food security (which depends to a large extent on the contribution of livestock, in the form of meat, oil and milk) have not improved.

### **Targeting women in the office and in the village**

One way to improve services to women farmers is to strengthen the capacity and role of female staff at extension agencies, such as the Gongshan Animal Husbandry Bureau, as well as local veterinary stations. Field technicians carry out field inspections, on-the-spot training, and disease treatment, as well as organising farmers’ meetings in villager experimentation groups (VEGs). Following the participatory technology development (PTD) approach, male and female workers were divided into single-sex or mixed groups, which were responsible for extension work in the VEGs. The extension staff, both men and women, visited and interviewed villagers’ groups each month to learn what developments had taken place, how villagers understood and interpreted the information they received, and what the impacts of introduced technologies were, and then shared their findings at VEG meetings. Besides participating in research, the women technicians also received training in special topics, such as ethno-medicinal and traditional knowledge, livestock marketing and fodder resources. So far, 13 women have been trained successfully at four agencies (76 percent of the total female staff).

Another way to enhance the capacity of women farmers to solve their farming problems was to establish women-only villager experimentation groups. Through these groups, women farmers gained more opportunities to work together, share their experiences, express their opinions and also train new groups.

### Different strategies for targeting poor farmers

Due to economic and social constraints, poor farmers in the community were only rarely able to participate in the project's activities. This was a special concern for the staff, who assessed the current situation and issues of poor farmers. To encourage their participation, the project offered more economic, social and institutional support to them than to wealthier farmers. The most important strategy for targeting poor farmers turned out to be the establishment of a "technology innovation fund". The fund was managed by a committee composed of only poor farmers, with at least half of them being women. The committee was responsible for establishing regulations for the fund, such as allocation of loans, repayment, and monitoring. In addition to this financial support, the project offered free training to poor farmers and gave them more opportunities to speak out at monthly and seasonal meetings. According to interviews with poor farmers, these strategies and activities played an important role in their lives, solving their immediate financial needs and developing community cohesion. In fact, some of the regulations and approaches developed by the farmers' committee were subsequently applied by the local government on a larger scale.

### "We can do anything now!"

After four years, all villages now have more female than male villager experimentation groups, with 67 percent more female groups in total. Women farmers now have easier access to new information, training and extension assistance at the community and county level. According to the 2008 assessment, 95 percent of villagers interviewed (men and women) reported that women played important roles in the project's activities. According to many, few women liked to attend community and extension activities prior to the project, and even when attending the meetings, they said nothing. Four years after implementing the

VEGs, many villagers confirmed that the women had improved their capabilities, social position and economic benefits. For example, animal death rates were reduced by organising the livestock medical fund and establishing village veterinary monitoring and vaccination supply systems. Also, growing green fodder through bio-fencing and implementing silage-making were instrumental in solving fodder problems. As some of the women villagers said: "We can do anything now – even the men's work; we should have the same rights and opportunities in community activities as men. We have more confidence and greater awareness than before".

Each year, several (monthly, half-year and annual) village meetings are held in different parts of Gongshan. At these meetings, VEGs and female and male extension workers participate actively, sharing their experiences and new knowledge and designing plans together. Good relationships and a broad network have been established through these meetings, and have resulted in women farmers being more visible and being asked to help teach new participants in other villages.

Although CBIK held very few formal gender training events for farmers and field workers, the organisation of VEGs, the innovation fund and the various meetings, all helped to increase the participation of poor and women farmers, and the capacity of women extension workers. This experience shows that the more women who participate in the development process, the greater will become the capacity of women farmers, resulting in stronger livestock production, improved household economy – and ultimately, the achievement of food sovereignty.

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## Women farmers on food sovereignty: Peru



My name is Teresa Yacsavilca de Casas. I am married to Laureano Casas, and we have four children. Three of them are already married and have their own children, so our family has grown quite a bit.

We produce organic vegetables and avocados in Ayas, in the province of Huarochiri, which is not very far from Lima. We sell them at the weekly market for organic products that is organised in the city. Selling organic products has helped us feed our children. It has also helped us provide better education for the two youngest ones. We earn more money, and I am also happy that many of those who buy our vegetables, acknowledge the fact that we are providing them with healthy and good quality products. Every time I can, I talk with those who come to buy products and promote the advantages of our organic products. In this way, women like me are contributing by disseminating our ideas. We also try to influence other farmers, by showing them the ways we control pests and diseases.

What we produce is good to sell, but it is not enough to feed us all, so we need to buy potatoes and maize in the market. This is basically because we don't have enough hands. Our children help us as much as they can, but they are busy studying and working. This is one of the big problems we see in the field: young people go to the cities or are less engaged in agriculture. And then we have to compete with large landowners...

Another important problem is that not all farmers produce healthy products. It is a pity that only those who have more money seem to be more aware of the importance of eating healthy products. Many of our neighbours do not share these concerns. Still, I suppose we are giving a good example. Katty helps us selling every Saturday, Paula helps us with the paperwork and accounts, and Marianella takes care of the small animals. As a result, we all have better incomes and better products.

Interview and photo: **Teresa Gianella**, editor LEISA Revista de Agroecología, the Latin American edition of the LEISA network.