



Adapting decent work (SDG 8) for sustainable pastoral systems: meanings and challenges of decent work for Mongolian herder women

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Abstract

The UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 includes “decent work for all” as a sustainable, inclusive economic growth component. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines decent work as productive in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Yet, almost no research or development initiatives have considered how decent work applies to pastoral systems. Therefore, we explore the meanings of “decent work” for women herders in Mongolia and compare these meanings with the ILO’s criteria. We facilitated two workshops with women specifically focused on decent work (n=34) in 2023. For Mongolian herder women, “decent work” means “meaningful work” related to their cultural heritage, pastoralist identity, personal satisfaction, and the interdependent health of land, livestock, and people. “Opportunities for learning and professional development” also emerged as a key meaning not captured in existing ILO standards. Herder women face numerous barriers to decent work conditions, including long working hours, caregiving responsibilities, social isolation, domestic violence, lack of social and health services support, and limited alternative employment opportunities. Yet, ILO’s decent work indicators and Mongolia’s legal frameworks fail to address these issues adequately. This exploratory research highlights the mismatch between ILO’s generic decent work criteria and indicators and the lived reality of pastoralism. Given the paucity of decent work research in pastoral systems, this study has broad relevance to pastoral systems globally as governments, donors and NGOs consider how to support socially just and sustainable pastoralism.

Introduction

The concept of “decent work” is defined as “productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity” (Oya 2015, p.8). According to the ILO (2018), promoting jobs and enterprise, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection and promoting social dialogue are the four main pillars of decent work. With the help of these pillars, all workers should be able to access social security, fair pay, safe working conditions, and the opportunity to influence decisions that impact their professional lives (Aufderheide et al. 2013). Yet, putting these ideas into practice can be difficult, especially in the rural and agricultural sectors. Employment in rural areas is often seasonal and informal, so the ILO’s indicators and standards frequently fail to adequately address these conditions. These difficulties are made worse in the case of mobile pastoralism, especially among women. Women pastoralists are responsible for reproductive labour (child rearing and household management) and productive labour (herding and processing livestock products), as well as community roles. These overlapped responsibilities are frequently unacknowledged and unpaid, which makes it more difficult to implement decent work standards (Köhler-Rollefson 2012). At the same time,

the growing global emphasis on sustainability in rangeland management is making the issue of decent work for pastoralists increasingly relevant. Furthermore, both the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP2026) and the newly adopted International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF2026) highlight the challenges and importance of women's roles in pastoralism.

In this article, we address a gap in the literature on decent work in pastoral settings, focusing on Mongolian herder women. This study uses qualitative research methods to illuminate what decent work means to Mongolian women herders and the challenges to achieving it. We also aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of herder women in Mongolia and to suggest actionable implications that respond to their specific needs in achieving decent work.

Methods

We organised participatory workshops with 34 herder women aged 20–70 in two provinces, Arkhangai and Bayankhongor, each with distinct ecological environments. Arkhangai lies in the Khangai Mountain region, with rich pastures and dairy production. In contrast, much of Bayankhongor lies in the Gobi desert-steppe zone, where cashmere from goats is a primary source of household income. In the workshops, we used the World Café method (Löhr et al. 2020) to foster deeper discussions on specific questions related to decent work. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English and analysed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Data analysis began with open coding, generating 165 initial codes, redefined to 291 after a second review of coding. We then conducted axial coding, connecting codes to create key concepts that define “decent work.” In the final stage, we organised axial codes to identify a theoretical framework with nine main meanings of decent work as explained by herder women.

Results

The nine key meanings of “decent work” for Mongolian women herders identified through participatory workshops reflect cultural identity, a sense of responsibility for herd and pasture health, and economic and social aspirations.

- 1. Meaningful Work:** Meaningful work for women herders is work that inspires pride in one's occupation and provides physical and mental enjoyment of one's herding lifestyle. During workshops, a woman herder expressed “*Decent work is work that fulfils the mind, body and economy of the household*” (Bayankhongor, May 2023). Pastoralism is a way of life, identity, culture and tradition, and these meanings are critical to a sense of purpose and dignity.
- 2. Healthy Land:** The health of livestock, herders' livelihoods, and the long-term persistence of their nomadic lifestyle depend on healthy and productive pastures. This dedication to environmental sustainability includes avoiding excessive grazing by moving seasonally, safeguarding nature, and guaranteeing the land's ability to sustain its herds in a healthy pasture. Furthermore, healthy land is deeply connected with the Mongolian cultural concept of *nutag* (homeland) as an interconnected web of land, livestock, people and other more-than-human beings (Baival 2012, Ichinkhorloo 2017). Moreover, in contemporary Mongolian, the word *nutag* also fluidly embodies a much wider range of things and ideas, such as the environment, nature, resources, history, origin, authenticity, identity, sovereignty and spirituality (Bumochir 2019). Women herders acknowledge their cultural role in the countryside and identify themselves as custodians of the land.
- 3. Healthy Livestock:** The health of their herds directly impacts herders' economic stability, as healthy livestock produce high-quality products that lead to a stable income. For centuries, herder women have been taking care of their livestock, preparing for natural disasters, tending baby animals and maintaining the overall wellbeing of their livestock. Additionally, most of their household income comes from livestock products, including dairy products and cashmere, which are made by women herders. During the workshop, participants stated “...*Our livestock should be fat and strong [healthy] so that the prices will go up*”; on the other hand, another participant said “*These cattle are your cash; sheep are your pennies.*”
- 4. Sufficient and Stable Income:** A sufficient and stable income is a key element of decent work globally, including for herder women in Mongolia. Herder livelihoods depend on environmental conditions and are

vulnerable to drought and winter weather disasters, and livestock income is highly seasonal. Herder women emphasised their interest in adding value to raw livestock products to market them at higher prices. To facilitate this, appropriate training and, in some cases, machinery (e.g., butter churns, knitting machines) are essential. Women also spoke of the need to diversify rural economies to include alternative, non-herding jobs, especially for young people.

5. **Human Health and Safety:** Women herders mentioned having a healthy body is essential to their daily lives. Ensuring a healthy body and human safety requires the ability and resources to care for personal and family health, such as regular medical check-ups and access to adequate community health services, including local hospitals, and safe working conditions.
6. **Social Safety Net and Welfare:** The existing legal framework in Mongolia characterises herders as self-employed individuals, accommodating them in the voluntary social insurance scheme (ILO 2024). To get unemployment benefits, pensions and other social protection services, herders must pay their taxes accordingly. However, in 2020, the social insurance coverage rate for Mongolian herders was 16.4%, and health insurance coverage was 25.1%, although mandatory (ILO 2022). According to women herders in both workshops, an incomplete understanding of social and health insurance schemes leads to a lack of enrolment and payment, resulting in a lack of coverage and social protection services.
7. **Opportunity for Professional and Personal Development:** Women herders seek professional and personal development opportunities that allow them to improve their skills in value-added product processing, adapt to new technologies, and face daily challenges. Many mentioned that “*khorshoo*” (cooperatives) play a key role in supporting herders to work together and overcome challenges. Women also expressed interest in leadership and literacy training.
8. **Social and Cultural Participation:** Many herder women experience social isolation due to their remote locations and home-based care work. Participating in community social and cultural activities helps women feel engaged with society and a part of their community. Participating in these events also gives them the chance to network with other herders to accomplish common goals, like preparing hay and feed together, and exchanging livestock and human health-related traditional and practical knowledge.
9. **Herders’ Rights:** Last but not least, herder women highlight legal protections for herding communities, including the rights to education, healthcare, pension support and protection of pastures. They advocate for government investment in local economies, ensuring fair rights and opportunities for all herders. Furthermore, culturally nomadic people move seasonally to keep their pasture and animals healthy; thus, they highlight the right to move freely in the countryside. One woman mentioned: “*We have freedom. We can move wherever we want*” (Bayankhongor, 2023). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge their cultural and human rights at the same time to maintain sustainable pastoralism.

Discussion

Mongolian herder women hold a holistic view of decent work that integrates the health and wellbeing of humans, livestock and the environment as interdependent elements. Furthermore, women herders’ experiences highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches within decent work standards. Pastoral women’s triple-burden workload—care for home, including children and family members; care for animals and product processing; and care for the community—significantly impacts women’s health and may contribute to rural gender imbalances that threaten pastoralism’s future (Köhler-Rollefson 2012, FAO 2023, Fernández-Giménez et al. 2024). Our findings align with research that emphasises the challenges many pastoralist women face, including limited access to productive resources, adaptation to climate change and the undervaluation of their work, and therefore the need for gender-sensitive policies that address the inequities (Anbacha & Kjosavik 2019, Po & Hickey 2018, Wangui 2014, Flintan 2008). Literature on rural social protection emphasises the importance of adapting social safety nets to the unique risks faced by rural women, whose contributions to pastoralist households often go unrecognised (Po & Hickey 2018).

To conclude, Mongolian herder women’s understanding of decent work extends beyond ILO’s four pillars—productive work, rights, social protection and dialogue—by highlighting *meaningful work*, the *interdependence of healthy land, livestock and people* in pastoral work settings, and women’s desire for life-long *professional development opportunities*. These additions highlight the importance of intertwined

occupational and cultural identities. In supporting herders' holistic vision of decent work, we recommend that ILO standards reflect the interconnected health of people, livestock and land and address social issues specific to herding community cases, as there is a broader challenge in operationalising decent work standards and indicators in rural and smallholder agricultural systems throughout the world (Oya 2015).

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