

Women, transport energy and donkey work

by

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Introduction

Although donkeys are universally ridiculed, they can be invaluable providers of transport energy to women in semi-arid and mountainous areas. Donkeys are more gender-neutral than other work animals and in many societies, it is uncomplicated for women to own and/or have access to donkeys. By facilitating women's access to donkeys, development programmes can have important social and economic impact.

Transport, animal energy and gender

A great deal of the energy and time of rural women is spent on the transport of domestic requirements (water, firewood) as well as of farm produce and traded goods. Transport systems based on animal energy can have several social and economic benefits for women and communities. The tiring and time consuming tasks of transporting water, fuel wood and grains for milling can be greatly relieved using animal energy. If animals (particularly donkeys) are available, women may be able to delegate water collection to children. The woman gains important extra time, while the children often find driving an animal-drawn cart is as much a recreation as a household duty.

Marketing by women is very important for the rural economy as a whole and their domestic economy in particular. In many circumstances women's trade and marketing has been restricted by their capacity to 'head-load' goods. Farmers with animal transport (carts or pack animals) have larger circles of contacts and trade. The resulting enhanced market access allows them to increase their production and their profit. Using animal energy for transport, greater use is made of manure and crop residues, which also increases overall farm production. As women farmers and traders are freed from the limitations of head-loading, more is produced and traded, increasing profits and overall economic activity.

In most of the world, there are major inequalities relating to the ownership and control of animals and vehicles. People of wealth have used large animals, including oxen, horses and camels, for transport. Cattle represent wealth and in many societies cattle ownership denotes social status. In most societies, animals are owned and used by men. Men also own most vehicles, including animal-drawn carts. Gender relations reinforced by social traditions can make it difficult for women to own or use work animals. Women can have great difficulty obtaining access to animal-powered transport, and so may gain little relief from repetitive, energy-consuming transport tasks.

In some cases, women may have access to male-owned animal-powered transport, through lending or hire arrangements. However, men may not want their animals to be tired by unpaid transport operations for women, even if they are family members. Even if rural women are able to hire transport for income-generating operations, it is unlikely they could afford to hire other people's animals for energy-consuming domestic tasks, such as water collection.

Changing circumstances and gender implications

In most rural areas the pressure on women's time and energy is increasing. Climate changes, deforestation and population pressures mean the women have to travel further in search of firewood and perennial water sources. As land close to villages is increasingly allocated to income-generating crops (often 'men's' crops), women have to walk greater distances to their own fields that provide family food and vegetables.

Changing economic conditions are also having an impact on women and traditional gender divisions of labour. As rural economies are increasingly linked to urban and global produce and labour markets, men are tending to work in towns, leaving rural women to take over many of the tasks that were traditionally performed by men.

In countries where men are the traditional owners of transport technologies, male out-migration from villages to towns means that women may take control of animal-powered transport for food production and marketing. In rural areas where modern motor technologies (eg, motorcycles, power-tillers, pickups) are being adopted (mainly by men), animal power does not immediately decline. Rather overall transport capacity increases, and the older transport technologies using animal energy become available to new people (notably women) who did not previously have access to them.

In some areas, the development of roads suitable for carts and motor vehicles has altered power and gender balances. For example, in Mali, women used to head-load goods between isolated villages and regional towns. However, as roads developed, the owners of animal-drawn carts and motor vehicles (usually men) were able to dominate marketing channels. Unless they had access to road transport (eg, animal-drawn carts) women traders became restricted to within-village transactions. While this reduced transport drudgery, it also reduced women's incomes and independence (SOS, 1995).

Donkey energy for women

Donkeys are valuable transport animals in semi-arid and mountainous areas. Although they are small (compared with cattle, horses and camels) they can be used for riding, pack transport and pulling carts. The world population of donkeys is increasing (Starkey and Starkey, 1997). Recent areas of donkey expansion include the mountainous regions of Asia (including Pakistan) and parts of Latin America (including Colombia). However the greatest growth in donkey populations has been in sub-Saharan Africa: in some countries donkeys have increased ten-fold in the past thirty years. In West Africa, the geographical range of donkeys has been expanding southwards, while in Southern Africa it has been expanding northwards (Starkey, 1994). This means that donkeys can now assist women and men in areas where there has been little tradition of employing animal energy.

Donkeys are generally inexpensive, resistant to disease (in dry zones) and of low risk (they are seldom stolen). They are easy to manage and train and are particularly appropriate for small-scale transport operations. In areas where cattle have succumbed due to drought, donkeys have been instrumental in allowing rural communities to continue to survive and produce. Donkeys have often been associated with poverty (unlike cattle, camels or horses). Despite their low status (and even because of it) donkeys have played an important role in the lives of the poor, particularly poor women. Women are often major beneficiaries of donkey energy for household and farm transport, riding and/or trading.

Gender differences in the ownership and access to use of donkeys vary according to different cultures and social systems. In most societies, donkeys have none of the 'masculine' characteristics associated with wealth and status and therefore are often used by women.

Thus, in societies where it is easy for women to own assets, women may own donkeys. For example, in rural South Africa, where there are many female-headed households, women may purchase donkeys to assist with their transport and production tasks (Starkey, 1995). In the predominantly cattle-keeping area of Western Zambia, women farmers and female heads of households are increasingly using donkeys. In this area, women now own most of the donkeys, and use them for domestic transport and work in the fields (Bwalya 1997).

However, in many societies even donkeys are owned and controlled by men. Studies of communities in several Sahelian countries have shown that most donkeys are owned by men (SOS, 1995). Among the Maasai in Kenya, women have access to donkeys, and use them regularly, but a woman cannot sell a donkey without a man's permission (Mutharia, 1995).

Lack of assets or the right to dispose of them, restricts women's ability to purchase donkeys and/or equipment. Access to alternative credit arrangements can facilitate women's use of animals, carts and equipment. In the Tanga area in Tanzania, a labour-intensive road construction programme contracted farmers to bring gravel to surface the roads. The income they acquired from this activity enabled them to repay loans for purchase of donkey carts. Women subsequently started to use donkeys to assist their weeding work (Starkey and Grimm 1994).

In Western Kenya a collaborative project between IT Kenya and the local NGO, Future Forest, used an existing 'merry-go-round' savings and loan scheme to enable a women's group to acquire donkeys. Women collaborated in threes to save half of the cost of a donkey, with the balance provided on credit. The donkeys were mainly used for collecting water (twice as much as before) and the transport of soda ash, sand and grains. Loan repayment was been possible through income generation from hiring to others and from trading of transported goods (such as soda ash). Although women still spend a similar time on transport, their personal energy expenditure and drudgery has been reduced and their income and economic security has increased (Fernando and Keter, 1996).

In a recent survey in Ethiopia, women who were heads of households were very articulate in their analysis of the importance of donkeys. Not only could donkeys assist women in fetching water and firewood, they could provide income-generating opportunities through hire and trade that would enable women to make as much money as men. Donkeys for transport (a relatively gender-neutral technology) complemented the very 'male' technology of plowing with work oxen (Marshall, Ali and Tefera, 1997).

These are just some of the many examples of traditional and modern schemes that assist women to benefit from donkey energy. Such schemes have helped overcome gender inequalities, improved the status and income of women and changed power relationships.

Some implications

Awareness and participation

Most national authorities, donors and development agencies are committed to gender-sensitive policies, but this is not always evident in their programmes relating to energy, transport and rural development. Such programmes are often orientated towards men. Most project planners, directors and staff are men and most project actions involve men. Most development organisations would benefit from gender-sensitive training and greater involvement of women in energy-related programmes.

Planning

It is important to ensure that all programmes relating to energy, rural transport and animal power are planned taking into account gender issues. Programmes should not marginalise women through their activities. Women expend much energy and time in transporting

household inputs (water, wood, grains), crop harvests and produce for marketing, yet they have less access to animal-powered transport than do men. In areas where donkeys thrive, assisting women to own and use donkeys may be particularly helpful, since donkeys are inexpensive, easy to manage and have fewer gender-related taboos than do cattle. Planning processes should use participatory rural appraisals that heed the views and needs of women, and involve women in follow-up actions. Interventions may involve credit (eg, for animals or carts), training (eg, in use of donkeys for crop cultivation) or on-farm action-research (eg, potential for animal energy and innovative technologies to assist crops grown by women).

Status and image

Male-dominated societies may consider women as low-status citizens, while donkeys are low-status animals. While these two marginalised groups can clearly benefit from their affinity, it is important to ensure that the association does not reinforce prejudices against women and/or donkeys. The special benefits of donkeys to women are generally evident to rural women themselves. Nevertheless, the topic needs to be addressed with great sensitivity to ensure that other actors (male or female) do not manipulate issues of status to undermine valuable women's programmes.

Knowledge

Knowledge ('indigenous' and/or 'international') is a prerequisite for successful application of animal energy. Lack of information and training can be limiting factors to women using donkeys. Women must be aware of animal power techniques and possibilities before they can benefit from them. Such knowledge may be acquired through trial and error, informal discussions, observing others, from publications, the media, advertisements or extension advice. For women, village-based training schemes will probably be more appropriate than centre-based training. In areas with high levels of female illiteracy, radio-based publicity or meetings that clearly involve women will be more effective than printed information.

Credit

Credit programmes should ensure that their publicity, loan criteria and administrative procedures are appropriate to the energy expenditure, transport needs and life styles of rural women. For example, if women seldom visit towns, there may be need for itinerant loan officers. Existing indigenous savings and credit schemes can be adapted to enable women to purchase donkeys and/or equipment.

Technology

Most animal traction implements and operations have been developed assuming the users would be men. Rural women might benefit from modern, lighter implements and carts, perhaps designed for the energy available from a single donkey or cow.

Conclusions

Women waste a great deal of energy and time in repetitive transport tasks. This burden can be reduced by the use of animal energy. Donkeys are particularly suited to women, because there are fewer cultural taboos on their use and because they are more easily managed. Women's access to donkey power and equipment (carts) may be limited by lack of knowledge, inappropriate technologies or women's lack of assets and purchasing power. Programmes promoting rural development often fail to recognise the extent to which the transport burden consumes women's energy. Interventions to mitigate the burden should be based on participatory rural appraisal and use technologies, credit schemes and training programmes that suit the needs of the women.

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