



SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY
AND THE ENVIRONMENT



Women in herding societies: directions from Mongolia

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Portugal

Women Herders

In Mongolia



In Kyrgyzstan



Kazakhs in Mongolia



Female pastoralists

Shared lives

Family responsibilities

Animals, climate, nature

Social pressure – culture, religion, history

Money, education, equality

Mothers, daughters and the future

We know much about herding

Talk of Mongolia's challenges

Climate change, land degradation, water, mining, pollution

Education, money, social, settlement, policy, fencing, migration

Mongolian positives

Free choice, mobility, elections, information, rights

Other herding countries

Population, conflict, wars, autocrats, ethnic, lack rights

Women at the centre of the pastoral world

Pastoral women

- Milkers, mothers, household managers

and / or

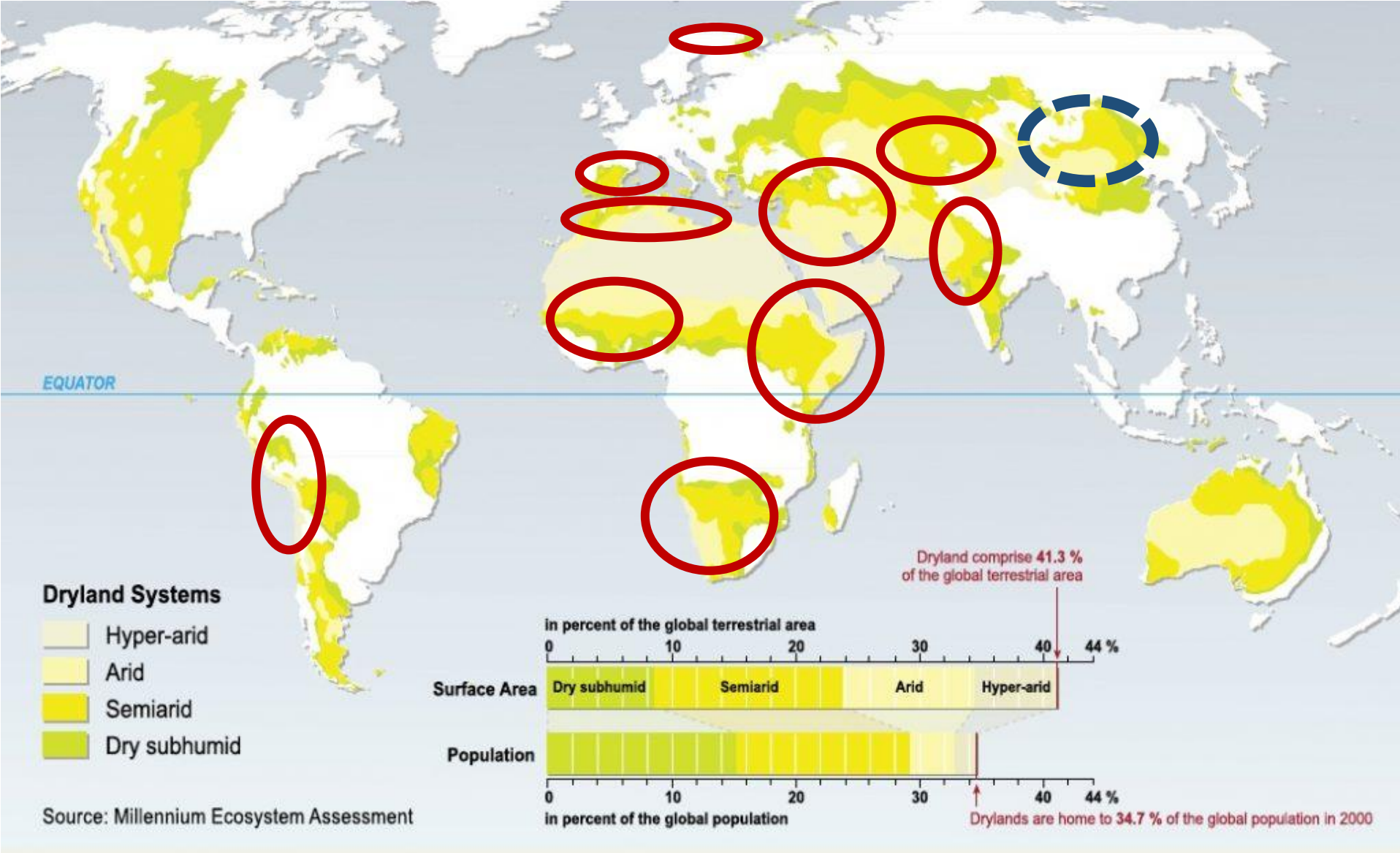
- Organisers, decision-makers,
business people, educators

‘Men are titular heads,
what about women’s lifetime contribution?’



Herding regions

pastoral drylands



Project – Herder Women in Mongolia

co-researchers:

Bayartogtokh, Tugsuu. Mongolian National University

Focus on womens' daily lives and roles

asked about family, work, nature, changes

Interview herder women (21), Ovorhangai and Zavkhan aimags

Women interview women

August to October 2023

A woman's life - not queens, martyrs, mothers, symbols



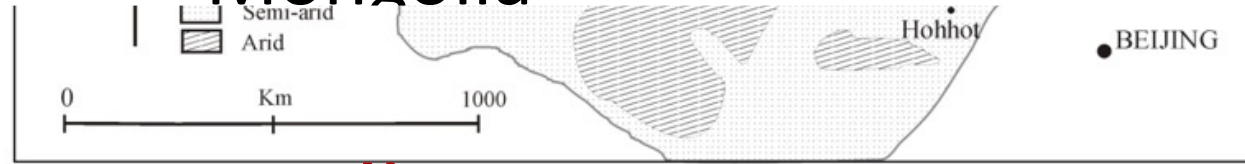
Want to know:

- women's perspective on responsibilities, rituals and transitions in Mongolian pastoralism.
- gender in herding's contribution to food security, livelihoods and socio-ecological systems.
- understand female herder's actions, strategies and objectives
- Decision-making, rights, equality
- view to the future ➡ children's education



Generations

Mongolia



Zavkhan

Kyrgyz-
stan

X

Kharkhorin



Herder/
researcher

Questions

Favourite part of herding

Roles, responsibilities, changes

Nature and rituals

Household decision-making

Views on equality

Daughters as herders?

Women in community – representation

Future . . .



Outcomes

- Age of herder women - elders
- Difference between regions –
more remote, more traditional
- Changing dynamics
 - Roles, children, livestock, climate, technology
 - Share financial decisions
- Education for women - themselves, children
- Uncertain future
 - ‘when girls leave for town they don’t come back’**



Women's age

- Majority 50+

grew up during Socialist era. Different expectations from today.

Youngest 36

- Hard work for herder women
- Environmental and climate changes herders' lives
- 'even parents want children to get educated'
- 'herder women going extinct'
- 'Daughter loves nature, wants to herd'
- Want daughters to get educated, not be herders

Flow of life

Find satisfaction in their role

raising children

value nomadic life

milk tea for nature every morning

like lifestyle

Hard work

up at 5 am in spring

always watching, waiting for the next challenge

nature – dzud, mice



Age-based differences

- Older women identify husband as the decision-maker in the family
- Women in their 30s think decisions should be made jointly.
- Elders express that 'outside work' is a man's domain. Thus the husband makes decisions on livestock, movement/migration, animal sales and environmental decisions
- Women do 'inside work'. Household and family work - cooking, cleaning, caregiving for children and elders, milking, preparing dairy products, children's educational

Female do 2 additional hours work per day than men (SDC 2015)

Making
dairy
products



Women's role in society

- Business, politics not for females - 'no one represents us'
- Herder women not appreciated
- Politicians do not try to understand
- Herdswomen too busy to work for better conditions
- Should be government support for women

Rights, equality = good, herding more effective

- women's position and agency in pastoralism.
- women spoke openly, variety of views amongst respondents rather than a clear perceptual framing.
- Some expressed near equality between women and men
- Others less so. '70 – 30 men to women in making decisions'
 - Men – livestock, money, moving. Women – household, children
- So much work to be done there was not time to consider gender positions. 'You cannot live alone in the countryside'
- Younger women felt more equal



‘We work as a team’

Education for girls drives change

Women spoke about how hard herding was and that they wanted their daughters to have a better life

'I am sorry I did not have the chance to get educated. So I want all my children to be educated. Then they can decide'

'when girls leave for town they don't come back'

Mothers want daughters to be educated; optional for sons

'I tell my son he will get married, there is someone for him. But he is 39'

Younger women spoke about the choices to make about children

- stay in countryside with husband, go to town for school

Covid-19

Limited impact on herders

Women reported "everything is in our hands - meat, milk"

- Covid-19 considered an inconvenience rather than a threat

Conditions were poor in Mongolia during Covid and that the country lacked effective vaccines.

Issues with vaccines and their perceived effects - getting confused, blood pressure, memory loss. 'Was this old age or 3 vaccine doses?'

'Cured Covid with milk tea and mutton soup'

'City people struggled but we have livestock'

'The main pandemic impact was that prices went up.'

Nature, ritual

- 'Worship nature every morning with fresh milk. For pasture, family, for nature to not get frustrated.' A beautiful winter camp, cleans the area. Prays for family, the river and surroundings.
- 'Nature is mother, ask if I can take. Not religion, love for nature.' Follows lunar new year, Moves often to protect nature. Shaman does fire ritual to protect lineage.
- 'Worship the mountain with milk tea. Do this and feel better inside, not like a duty. Pray for good weather. Used to be more rain, better pasture. Winter comes sooner.'
- 'Need to protect pasture, hard - have many livestock. Vegetation was greener, taller. Now dzud most years. Sing songs to babies if mother rejects.'
- 'Ovoo rituals continue. Good for nature'.



Environment

- Climate affecting herding
- Increase in livestock
- Weather changes, summer colder

Moves

‘husband decides, women prepare’

- Zavkhan families moved more often and further. All respondents migrated at least 5 times a year over distances to 300 kilometres
- Kharkhorin herders moved between 2-4 times annually, usually for short distances less than 10 kilometres.

Finances

- Women mostly control household finances
- Younger families more likely to split income ~ equally
- Women's extra work – dairy, make *deels*, food for spending money – to buy things for children

Decision making

- Children
- Household
- Education
- Money
- Perceived right to equality



Mongolian Graduate,
University of Oxford

Future challenges

Climate change

Economic change

Social change

Where will herder women come from?

- marriage, mothers, milkers, managers

Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Mongolian herders:

Without women, what will men do? Go to town

- the end of nomadism ?

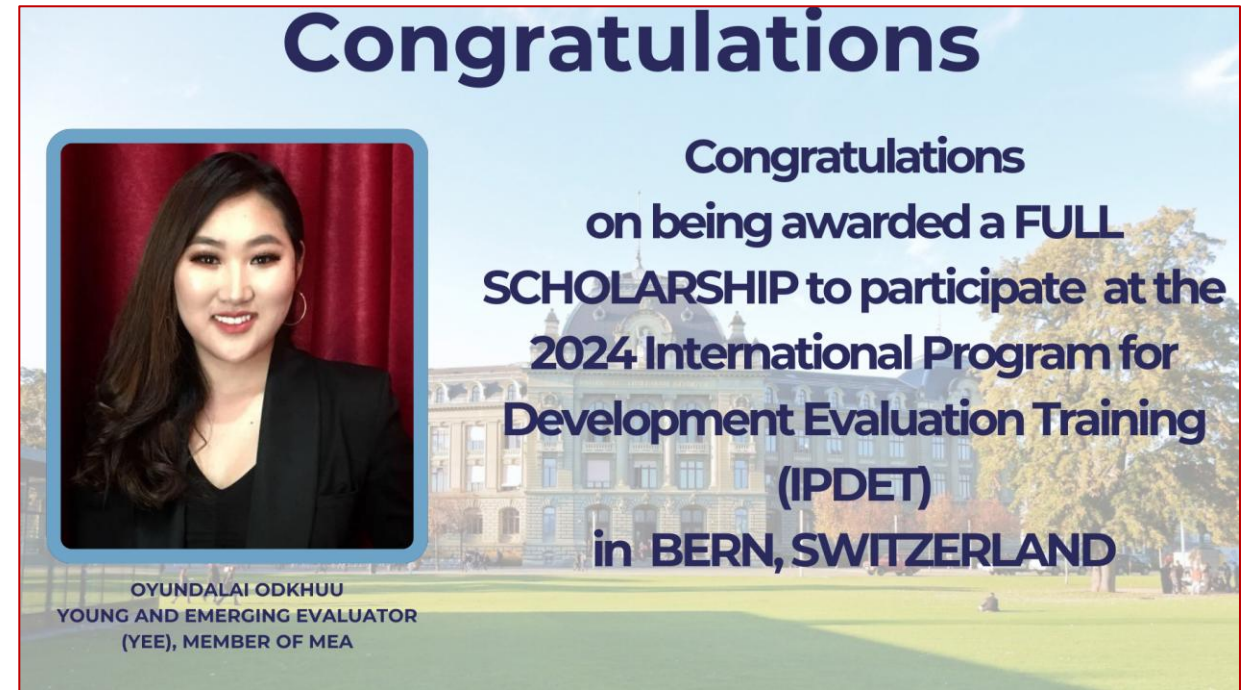


Personal experience

2006



2024



*From the Gobi to Switzerland
Now doing Masters degree in Taiwan*