



# Rural women of Mongolia

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## Summary

Mongolia is one of the least populated countries in the world with only 2.4 million inhabitants, of which 51% are women. Mongolia's principal ethnic group are the Khalkh Mongols (86%), of which 7% are Khazakh. The other ethnic minorities include Tuvan, Chinese, Buriat, Russian, and Uigur. According to the 2000 Census, 43% of the population lives in rural areas. Urban dwellers constitute 57% with one-third of the population concentrated in the capital city. The recent census data indicate that young people below 20 years of age constitute a significant 46.5% of the population. The dominant religion is Buddhism, and it is undergoing a major revival in the new democracy after suppression during the Socialist period. The Khazakh population is Islamic.

After three centuries of Manchurian rule, Mongolia achieved independence in 1911. The Chinese attempted to re-occupy it in 1919, but were repelled with the assistance of the Soviet People's Republic. Power was assumed by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and the Mongolian People's Republic was declared in 1924. The MPRP, with backing from the Soviet Union, ruled as a one-party socialist state until 1992, when a new democratic constitution was adopted and the first multi-party elections held. Since then, the former centrally-planned economy has transformed into an open-market one. Economic liberalisation and structural adjustment have had a major impact on all areas of life, particularly employment and social welfare services. Women, particularly rural women, have been the group worst affected during the transition.

The semi-nomadic herders living in remote areas herd livestock as their primary source of livelihood. Herders account for 17.5% of the productive population of Mongolia and between 35 to 42% of the total population. Before 1991, herders belonged to collectives of specialised production brigades called *negdels* and received a wage. With the introduction of the open-market economy, the livestock of *negdels* were privatised and distributed among households. Many households depend on livestock for their livelihood and food security.

Although largely patriarchal, the division of labour between the men and women in the herder communities is not rigid. Women usually take primary responsibility for housekeeping, milking and processing of dairy products, combing cashmere, taking sheep wool, cleaning/spinning camel wool, tanning hides, and gathering fuel and water for domestic use. They also participate in herding tasks which are the primary domain of men and require physical strength and long periods of travel. A survey of women herders indicated that 62.5% of them chose to be herders and 15.6% became herders because they had lost their jobs. The remaining were either married to herders or had no choice since their livestock had been privatised.

Men are primarily responsible for those herding activities that require physical strength, travelling long distances for longer periods of time. This relates to herding large animals, trading, or searching for livestock. Other tasks that men are responsible for are raising and taking down gers in seasonal moves, packing stock for seasonal moves, training animals, and building or repairing shelters. The most strictly gender-defined task is animal slaughter, which is undertaken by men solely.

On privately-owned farms, women do not have legally-defined working hours, wages, or paid vacations. Surveys show that rural women work six hours per day more than rural men do. Their unpaid work has not been recognised, and the tradition of valuing men's work more than women's is strongly maintained. The Best Herder Award is given by the state only to men. Men dominate conferences of herders. One example of such low recognition of women's contribution to rural economic survival and development is the fact that women constituted only 28 out of the 500 participants.

Herders have limited access to local administrative *aimag* (provincial) or *soum* (sub-unit of a province) centres, but herder women have even fewer opportunities since they are less mobile. This limits their opportunities for receiving medical care, education or training, and economic opportunities, and generally restricts their political participation in local development. It is mainly men who attend the regular meetings at the community level, receive local and national news, and acquire market updates.



The economic transformation of the last decade has left some herders able to achieve adequate living standards, but a majority live close to or below the poverty line. Female-headed households have been the most affected by poverty. In 1998, 10% of all households were female-headed; moreover, the number of female-headed households increased by 44% between 1993 and 1998, and the number of single mothers doubled between 1990 to 1998. Female-headed households with four or more children below 16 years of age were defined by the Poverty Alleviation Office as the most vulnerable to poverty.

The author points to the urban-rural disparities in housing, electricity, and telephone services: in rural areas, only 2% of households have telephone and only 34% have electricity. Thus, women have to perform their tasks manually and walk longer distances to gather dung or wood for fuel to cook for their families. Out of all households living in gers, only 42% of households get water from a river, lake, or spring; others obtain it from snow or rain. Women collect water and boil it for cooking and food, all this adding to their burden of unpaid domestic work.

In 1997, life expectancy at birth for women was 67.7 years compared to 61.1 years for men. The average age of women at first birth was 21.6 years and is consistent with the average age of marriage, which is 20.8 years. On average, rural women have more than the Mongolian average of three children, with less than three years separating the length of time. In 1998, maternal mortality was 158 per 100,000 live births, whereas it was 131 in 1991. The causes were related to transitional hardships in mostly remote rural areas. In 1999, 70% of all maternal deaths occurred in rural areas. Infant mortality rate was also high at 65 per 1,000 births in the first years of transition. The rate of births in hospitals or maternity homes is 99.9% in urban areas compared to 94.1% in rural areas. Girls in rural areas are twice as likely to begin child-bearing between the ages of 15-19.

According to the 2000 Census, women's literacy rate was 97.5% compared to 98% for men. Surprisingly, rural literacy was three times higher than in urban areas, with a greater number of female students at all levels of education. Partially this is because herder families in rural areas demand more male labour, so boys often drop out of school. In 2001, women constituted 22.9% of the elected representatives of the local khurals (local parliaments) on average, with no significant difference between urban and rural areas. Notably, women's representation is significantly lower in the remote rural *aimags* than in those centrally situated. In the far western Bayan-Ulgii *aimag*, for instance, women's representation is only 5.7%, whereas it is 28 to 30% in the central *aimags* such as the Bulgan, Dornogobi, Dornod, Khentii, and the Tuv *aimag*. Among the 275 local governors, only 14 are women.

## Conclusion

Herders' livelihoods are largely dependent on the weather. In the last three years, Mongolian herders experienced the worst winters in 30 years when temperatures dropped by 5 to 10 degrees centigrade. Prior to winter, the affected areas had suffered the worst drought in 60 years as much of the pastureland was overgrazed and destroyed by rodents in some areas. *Dzud* was a natural disaster in the winter, causing mass death of livestock and affecting 500,000 people. Herders were forced to move outside their normal grazing areas, putting additional burden on areas not directly affected by the *dzud*. In the most affected areas, animals were the only source of food, transport, heating materials, and purchasing power by cash/barter. Rural herder women suffered short- and long-term effects of the *dzud* on their incomes, nutrition, and health status, apart from the trauma of losing their livestock. There were suggestions that the increased number of cattle after privatisation led to overgrazing pastures above their natural capacity that further worsened situation. Policies need to be implemented to prevent and decrease the devastating effects of weather.

