

Empowerment in Transition: A Study on the Power Dynamics of Settled Pastoralist Women in Inner Mongolia

Sunaer
University of Sanya

Sumiya
University of Sanya

This study examines the empowerment status of settled pastoralist women in Inner Mongolia during grassland social transformation. Using a mixed-methods approach combining the Women's Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI) with in-depth interviews, we assess women's empowerment across six key dimensions. Our findings reveal multidimensional, non-homogeneous empowerment patterns: women maintain a high autonomy in domestic domains such as nutrition (81%) and time management (65%), while experiencing limited power over credit access (7%) and land control (20%). This study introduces the concept of "complementary empowerment" to describe this domain-specific power distribution, characterized by domain differentiation, cultural embeddedness, adaptive strategy and contextual relevance. The results indicate that settlement opportunities do not automatically translate into substantive empowerment. Policy interventions should adopt culturally sensitive approaches, address the gap between opportunities and outcomes, and balance workload with decision-making power to promote sustainable development.

Keywords: women's empowerment, pastoralists, Inner Mongolia

INTRODUCTION

"When I first got married, our family still lived in a yurt, following the cattle and sheep through seasonal migrations." Sitting on the steps of the town's train station, Su Rina (pseudonym) recalled. Now working as a part-time security inspector in town. After finishing her night shift, she hurries home for a brief rest before attending to household chores and dairy production. While her children pursue education in town, she and her husband continue the pastoral way of life inherited from their family for decades. Despite having gained a stable income and a degree of economic autonomy, she faces subtle resistance to her outside employment reflected in her neighbors' comments like "the men in her household cannot get hot meals"—suggesting the invisible constraints in traditional gender norms. Su Rina's life transformation mirrors the profound changes in the grassland society over the past two decades.

These individual experiences unfold against a broader backdrop of rapid transformation in the Inner Mongolian grasslands. Under the multiple influences of national policy adjustments, grassland ecological degradation, economic modernization, and sociocultural changes, nomadic peoples who once followed seasonal migrations have gradually shifted toward settled lifestyles (Wang 2014; Zhang 2006; Du 2019;

Christensen et al. 2005). This transition has not only changed production and living patterns but has also affected the power structures and gender dynamics within families.

Compared to traditional nomadic groups, settled pastoralists face unique adaptive challenges. While settlement has reduced for them the burden of seasonal migration and provided relatively stable living environments with better access to public services, the gender division of labor and complementary cooperation patterns formed in traditional nomadic culture now face restructuring, requiring adjustments in gender roles and power relations in this transitional environment (Marin 2008), which provides a valuable analytical window for studying the evolution of gender power dynamics in cultural change.

Current academic research on pastoral women tends to focus on two extremes: gender relations under traditional nomadic lifestyles (Dahl 1987; Bhasin 2011) or the adaptation of fully urbanized pastoral families (Linna & Fakhrudin 2024; Wang et al. 2013). Research on groups in transition—settled but still engaged in pastoral production—particularly regarding women's empowerment, remains relatively scarce. Yet these transitional groups best reflect the adjustment process of gender power dynamics during social changes, offering significant value for theoretical innovation and policy guidance.

Understanding the empowerment status of women in settled pastoral households requires moving beyond the limitations of traditional feminist theoretical frameworks, particularly the challenges of applying Western empowerment models centered on individual autonomy in cultural contexts that emphasize collective survival strategies (Kobra et al. 2025). Through preliminary fieldwork, this study found that traditional feminist theoretical paradigms revealed epistemological limitations in analyzing gender power dynamics in settled pastoral societies. Gender power relations in these households are not simply patterns of opposition or domination but rather present a "complementary empowerment" structure: in daily life, men and women address survival challenges through division of labor and cooperation; however, when critical change points (such as new career opportunities, changes in production modes, marriage dissolution, or land rights disputes) come along, potential structural inequalities emerge. In this context, the concept of empowerment transcends the rights dimension in Western feminist discourse and points toward a deeper mechanism of cultural reproduction and social reconstruction.

Through a systematic ethnographic investigation of Inner Mongolian settled pastoral society, this study constructs an analytical framework of "complementary empowerment and power dynamic disruption", aiming to: 1). Analyze the gender complementary cooperation mechanisms in the daily lives of settled pastoral households and their structural contributions to family social resilience; 2). Examine how major life events disrupt this apparent gender balance, revealing latent structural power asymmetries; 3). Explore how to enhance the protection of women's rights and agency at key social turning points while respecting cultural internal logic.

Through this research, we can not only understand the multiple dimensions of women's empowerment in specific cultural contexts more precisely but also provide culturally appropriate policy recommendations for pastoral areas in social transition, promoting more inclusive, culturally sensitive gender equality practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Pastoral Social Changes

The pastoral areas of Inner Mongolia have undergone a significant social transformation driven by multiple factors. Since the 1980s, government policies have encouraged the shift from nomadic to sedentary pastoralism through the Livestock and Rangeland Double Contract Responsibility System (LRDCRS), which allocated pastureland to individual families. While aiming to enhance sustainability and productivity, these policies produced unintended consequences: privatization led to fragmentation of grazing areas, weakened herders' flexibility to respond to environmental changes, undermined traditional *otor* (seasonal mobile grazing) mobility strategies, and exacerbated inequality among herders (Li & Huntsinger 2011; Taylor 2006).

Environmental degradation has intensified in these areas due to overgrazing, land privatization, and agricultural expansion (Torgonshar 2013; Zhizhong & Wen 2008). These challenges have increased

herders' vulnerability to drought, leading to food insecurity and economic hardship, and threatened traditional cultural practices (Wang & Zhang 2012; Williams 2002). In response, herders have developed adaptive strategies, including forms of "everyday resistance" that avoid direct confrontation (Fu 2016), and maintaining traditional mobility practices despite the push toward settlement (Xie & Li 2008).

Culturally, settlement has profoundly influenced pastoral identity, eroding traditional social structures and cultural practices (Sneath 2000; Williams 2002). However, herders actively shape their own development and maintain cultural identity through daily practices, upholding their visions for the future while adapting to changes (Zhang & Shang 2020; Fu 2016). This active role emphasizes the importance of recognizing herders' autonomy and the need for policies that respect and support their cultural knowledge and traditions.

Theoretical Frameworks of Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment constitutes a multidimensional concept rooted in diverse feminist thought and social practices across cultural contexts. Mainstream feminist theories address gender inequality and social injustice, positioning empowerment as a strategic approach to poverty alleviation and social development. However, empowerment practices and conceptualizations vary significantly across cultural settings.

Overview of Mainstream Feminist Theories and Empowerment Strategies

Feminist theory has evolved along multiple trajectories—liberal, radical, cultural, Marxist, and socialist feminism—each offering distinct analyses of gender inequality and social justice (Naples 2020). Within this theoretical landscape, empowerment functions as a strategic mechanism enabling women to overcome structural barriers and enhance their agency. These strategies encompass skill development, resource access, and decision-making participation (Dandona 2015).

The Western-centric orientation of mainstream feminist theories often overlooks the specific experiences of women in non-Western societies. This limitation has generated substantive critique, suggesting these frameworks inadequately represent the lived realities of women in non-Western regions and potentially constitute cultural imposition (Lundén 2006). In response, postcolonial feminist theory challenges Western feminism's universality, advocating for culturally situated understandings of empowerment that recognize local contexts and resist the uncritical application of Western models (Razvi 2007; Lundén 2006).

Reconstruction and Application of Empowerment in Cultural Contexts

The empowerment process is largely constrained and influenced by community norms and value systems. Research shows that cultural norm factors have stronger predictive power for women's empowerment status compared to individual characteristics. This finding highlights the importance of paying attention to and appropriately adjusting community cultural norms and values in women's empowerment practices (Mason & Smith 2003).

Empowerment models in specific cultural contexts have been validated in practice. For example, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India has developed culturally targeted education and empowerment strategies for women in different industries and classes based on local cultural characteristics. This model demonstrates how to reconstruct empowerment theory and practice based on the cultural and social realities of non-Western societies (Razvi 2007). Recent research has further proposed new theoretical frameworks, advocating for understanding empowerment from a socio-cultural status perspective, integrating socioeconomic and cultural factors into a unified analytical framework (Kobra et al. 2025).

Review of Research on Pastoral Women's Empowerment

Research on Mongolia reveals that while women contribute significantly to pastoral work, their decision-making participation remains limited (Meurs et al. 2021; Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013). During economic transitions, women face both opportunities and challenges, influenced by cultural factors such as nomadic traditions and Asian collectivism (Burn & Oyuntseyseg 2001; Aramand 2012).

Exploring the issue of Mongolian women's economic empowerment reveals that they face challenges such as gender violence, poverty, and income inequality during the market economy transition. Despite improved education levels, their participation and income in the labor market are generally lower than men's, and they bear heavier domestic and care responsibilities (Altankhundaga 2023). Efforts to promote Mongolian women's empowerment should fully consider the influence of these cultural factors and address existing gender decision-making gaps. However, the issue of empowerment still requires more exploration and investigation.

Ethiopian studies reveal women's disadvantage in controlling productive resources like livestock, land, and income. This inequality often remains "invisible" to women themselves who accept local customs, while society lacks gender issue awareness and intervention measures. Violence against women based on traditional beliefs persists there (Eneyew 2013).

Ecological migration and sedentarization profoundly impact pastoral women's status. For some groups, settlement led to loss of autonomy and decision-making power shifting from collective discussions to male control (Guyo 2017). While settlement introduces challenges, many women still wish to maintain relationships with livestock during sedentarization. Livelihood diversification provides economic independence opportunities but may exacerbate socioeconomic disparities (Joeke & Pointing 1991).

Key limitations in existing research include: insufficient localization of theoretical frameworks; lack of comparative research across different pastoral regions; focus on single dimensions rather than multidimensional analysis; absence of long-term effectiveness evaluation for interventions.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs the Women's Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI) as the foundational framework for evaluating women's empowerment status, with adaptations to better reflect Inner Mongolia's sociocultural context. The adapted index encompasses six critical dimensions:

1. Access to and Control over Resources: modified to accommodate Inner Mongolia's "three-rights separation" (collective ownership, household contracted rights, and transferable management rights) grassland management system. The original land transaction dimension was adjusted to align with China's land policy framework.
2. Income Control and Utilization: expanded to capture women's participation in diverse economic activities, including traditional activities and emerging opportunities in the value chain, such as dairy product processing and marketing.
3. Access to and Control over Opportunities: focuses on women's capacity to not only access but actively control developmental opportunities, including participation in local organizations and skill acquisition.
4. Workload and Personal Time Control: adapted to assess the changing nature of women's labor following sedentarization, including time allocation patterns and control over daily schedules.

The scoring criteria for the WELI index are presented in Table 1, wherein indicators under each dimension must reach specific thresholds to be considered adequately empowered. This localized framework enables precise assessment of empowerment status within the specific context of Inner Mongolia's settled pastoral communities.

TABLE 1
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DIMENSIONS, INDICATORS, TOPICS COVERED,
AND ADEQUACY THRESHOLDS

Empowerment Dimension	Indicator	Topics Covered by Indicator	Indicator Adequacy Threshold
1. Livestock Production Decision-making	a. Participation in production decisions	Decisions on selection of livestock species or crops, breeding strategies, inputs, labor, etc.	6 out of 17 questions
	b. production autonomy	Responsibility for animal health and food safety management	2 out of 5 questions
2. Nutrition-related Decision-making (including safety issues)	a. Participation in nutrition decisions	Decisions on types and quantities of food and their preservation and consumption	2 out of 5 questions
	b. Nutrition autonomy	Responsibility for activities related to food supply	1 out of 3 questions
3. Resource Access and Control	a. Ownership and control of livestock assets	Decisions to purchase, sell, or transfer livestock assets	2 out of 7 questions
	b. Land and livestock asset contract rights and control	Decisions to lease or transfer land and livestock assets	2 out of 5 questions
	c. Credit access	Whether there are loan recipients in the household	1 out of 1 question
4. Income Control and Use	a. Control of pastoral income	Decisions on how to use income generated from pastoral activities	3 out of 8 questions
	b. Control of non-pastoral income	Decisions on how to use income generated from non-pastoral activities	3 out of 9 questions
	c. Expenditure control	Decisions on how to use income to pay for household expenses	2 out of 5 questions
5. Opportunity Access and Control	a. Market entry opportunities	Decisions on choosing which markets to sell in	2 out of 5 questions
	b. Non-pastoral income opportunities	Decisions on whether to pursue non-pastoral business or employment opportunities	1 out of 4 questions
	c. Access to training, information, and social groups	Whether able to access information and training or be a member of social groups	1 out of 2 questions
6. Extent and Control of Work Time	a. Total workload	Time allocated to production and household tasks	≤ 10.5 hours per day
	b. Proportion of income-generating work	The proportion of income-generating activities in total workload	> 20%
	c. Control over one's time	Responsibility for allocating work in pastoral and household affairs	5 out of 14 questions

Research Sample

This study employed a stratified purposive sampling to select 30 women from settled pastoral areas in Y Gacha, Zhenglan Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia. Sample selection was based on three key dimensions: settlement time (early settlers over 10 years, mid-term 5-10 years, recent under 5 years), household economic status (high, medium, low income), and age distribution (25-35 years, 36-50 years, 51 years and above), to ensure coverage of women from diverse backgrounds.

Within the respondent sample, middle-aged women (36-50 years) constituted the highest proportion (56.7%); education level was predominantly junior high school (53.3%); settlement time distribution was relatively balanced; household income was primarily medium (50.0%); nuclear families (56.7%) slightly outnumbered extended families; and combining pastoral and non-pastoral livelihoods (46.7%) had become the main livelihood approach. The representativeness of the sample is reflected in: its socio-demographic characteristics being generally consistent with local census data, coverage of women from different social strata and livelihood modalities, and maintaining diversity in key variables. The study also acknowledges sample limitations: limited size, single geographic coverage, and a relatively low proportion of highly educated women. Nevertheless, the study sample provides a reliable empirical basis for understanding the empowerment status of women in Inner Mongolia's settled pastoral areas.

Methodological Triangulation and Data Integration

This study adopted a methodological triangulation strategy, systematically integrating quantitative assessment and qualitative interview data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the empowerment status of women in settled pastoral areas. The two methods formed an organic complementarity and cross-validation at the stages of research design, data collection and analysis.

At the research design stage, quantitative assessment and qualitative interviews guided each other. The WELI indicator system initially constructed on the basis of literature review was localized through preliminary interviews with six local women to ensure the cultural appropriateness of indicators; simultaneously, the quantitative indicator framework provided structural guidance for subsequent in-depth interviews, ensuring coverage of key empowerment dimensions.

At the data collection stage, the two methods employed a sequential integration strategy. First, 30 women took structured questionnaire surveys to obtain WELI quantitative data (see Table 1). Based on preliminary quantitative results, 15 women demonstrating typical characteristics in different empowerment dimensions were selected for in-depth interviews to explore the cultural meanings and power mechanisms behind the data. During interviews, researchers referenced quantitative scores of interviewees, asking them to explain the high and low differences in specific indicators, thereby establishing direct associations between quantitative results and subjective experiences. When the two methods produced divergent results, these differences were explored through an in-depth analysis for their theoretical significance. For example, some respondents scored low on quantitative indicators but demonstrated strong subjective feelings of empowerment in qualitative interviews. This discrepancy prompted the authors to develop the concept of "complementary empowerment," thereby enriching their theoretical construction.

Quantitative Methods for Women's Empowerment Assessment Framework

First, at the question level, each question assessed whether a woman met the minimum empowerment standard through self-reporting. For example, regarding participation in decision-making, if a woman could independently make household economic or production-related decisions, or had certain influence in the decision-making process, she was considered to meet the standard for that question; regarding workload, if a woman's daily working hours did not exceed 10.5 hours, and at least 20% of her working time was used for income-generating activities, she was deemed to have met the empowerment standard. The answer to each question was coded according to whether it met the minimum standard, with 1 for meeting the standard and 0 for not.

Second, at the indicator level, multiple questions under each dimension were aggregated into a single indicator. If a woman met the empowerment standard for a sufficient number of questions under that indicator, the indicator was considered to have been met. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the

assessment, this study adopted relatively stringent standards, requiring at least one-third of the questions under each indicator to meet the empowerment standard for the indicator to be considered as met. This standard differs from the traditional WEAI method, which typically requires only one question to meet the standard for the indicator to be considered met.

Finally, all indicator scores were weighted and aggregated according to their respective weights to generate a comprehensive empowerment score that reflects the overall empowerment level of women during the ecological migration process, ranging from 0 (lowest level of empowerment) to 1 (highest level of empowerment). The empowerment assessment framework of this study not only provides a quantitative analysis tool for changes in Mongolian women's empowerment during ecological migration but also offers strong support for understanding the impact of policy interventions on women's empowerment.

ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE AND INTERVIEW RESULTS

This study applies the previously defined "complementary empowerment" framework to analyze how women in settled pastoral areas experience domain-specific autonomy variations. Table 2 presents data revealing the multidimensional characteristics of women's empowerment across different domains. The following section systematically analyzes performance across each dimension and examines their intrinsic connections, demonstrating how women navigate spaces of both constraint and opportunity within the existing gender structure.

Comparative Differences Between Nutrition Dimension and Production Decision-making

The research data shows that the nutrition decision-making domain is one of the areas with the highest level of women's empowerment, with nutritional autonomy reaching 81% and participation in nutrition decision-making at 64%. In contrast, participation in pastoral production decision-making is only 35%, and production autonomy is 49%. This significant difference reflects the structured pattern of gender division of labor in settled pastoral areas.

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE RESPONDENTS MEETING STANDARDS AT THE INDICATOR LEVEL

Empowerment Dimension	Indicator	Percentage Meeting Standard	Indicator Adequacy Threshold (Minimum Number of Questions That Must Be Answered)
1. Livestock Production Decision-making	a. Participation in production decisions	35	6 out of 17 questions
	b. Production autonomy	49	2 out of 5 questions
2. Nutrition-related Decision-making (including safety issues)	a. Participation in nutrition decisions	64	2 out of 5 questions
	b. Nutrition autonomy	81	1 out of 3 questions
3. Resource Access and Control	a. Ownership and control of livestock assets	31	2 out of 7 questions
	b. Land and asset contract rights and control	20	2 out of 5 questions
	c. Credit access	7	1 out of 1 question

4. Income Control and Use	a. Control of pastoral income	31	3 out of 8 questions
	b. Control of non-pastoral income	9	3 out of 9 questions
	c. Expenditure control	43	2 out of 5 questions
5. Opportunity Access and Control	a. Market entry opportunities	46	2 out of 5 questions
	b. Non-pastoral income opportunities	39	1 out of 4 questions
	c. Access to training, information, and social groups	50	1 out of 2 questions
6. Extent and Control of Work Time	a. Total workload	23	≤ 10.5 hours per day
	b. Proportion of income-generating work	17	> 20%
	c. Control over one's time	65	5 out of 14 questions

Women have a relatively high autonomy in household internal domains (such as food preparation and nutrition distribution), which is consistent with the traditional Mongolian cultural role of women managing "household" affairs. Meanwhile, men still dominate in core production activities concerning family economy. This "internal-external differentiation" in division of labor has both cultural traditional factors and is influenced by market economic transformation, reflecting the domain-specificity of empowerment.

"In our family, I have full authority over meals and nutrition. I can make whatever I want, and family members never interfere. But when it comes to how many cattle and sheep to raise, when to sell them, and to whom, my husband makes these decisions. At most, I can offer suggestions." (Interviewee F-01, 46 years old, settled for 8 years)

"After settlement, I sell dairy products and some pastries I make on WeChat, but my husband is still responsible for selling beef and mutton. He understands the market better. Sometimes I learn information from others, but he generally handles these matters more." (Interviewee F-02, 42 years old, settled for 11 years)

Notably, this division is not simply power inequality but rather an adaptive strategy. While maintaining autonomy in traditional domains, women are also attempting to expand economic participation through new channels (such as online sales), demonstrating innovative attempts within the traditional framework.

Resource Access and Control: Structural Constraints and Negotiation Strategies

In settled pastoralist society, resource allocation exhibits a combination of structural limitations and practical flexibility. Data shows that women are in a relatively disadvantaged position in resource control: credit access at only 7%, land asset contract rights at 20%, and livestock asset ownership at 31%. These formal institutional limitations constitute structural barriers to women's empowerment.

However, interview data reveals more complex negotiation processes behind these numbers. Although asset registration formally favors men, actual decision-making processes often involve discussions and negotiations between spouses. While this negotiation may not change the formal power structure, it does provide women with a certain space for participation.

"When we apply for loans, we always discuss it together. They won't give us loans if we don't go together. However, the homestead and grassland use certificates are in his name. They are his family's ancestral property. I had my own grassland before I married, but I left it to my family. It depends on specific

situations. We use loans mostly to buy feed. But we also bought a large oven for making pastries, though I haven't found suitable buyers and haven't sold much." (Interviewee F-05, 38 years old, settled for 6 years)

"I mainly manage the sheep and dairy cows in our family, but large livestock and land are men's business. The homestead and contracted land certificates issued at that time were all in the name of the head of household (also referred to as huzhu in the Chinese hukou system). I never thought about adding my name. It seemed very natural." (Interviewee F-03, 51 years old, settled for 15 years)

The phenomenon that control rights over livestock assets are higher than land asset contract rights reflect women's actual participation in daily management, especially in small livestock and dairy processing domains. This informal management right to some extent compensates for the lack of formal ownership but also creates a situation of power and responsibility imbalance.

Comparing the control rights across different resource categories reveals a clearly gendered pattern of resource control. Women have a relatively higher control over livestock assets traditionally consistent with their roles (especially small livestock and dairy-related equipment), while having a significantly lower control over land, large livestock, and financial resources. This differentiated pattern further confirms the concept of "complementary empowerment", meaning that women's empowerment is not homogeneous but rather represents a relative autonomy within specific domains.

Income Control and Work Burden: Imbalanced Contributions and Returns

Women are at a medium level in pastoral income control (31%) and expenditure control (43%), but relatively low in non-pastoral income control (9%), while only 17% meet the standard for the proportion of income-generating work, and only 23% meet the standard for total workload. This data set reflects a clear imbalance: women invest substantial labor of theirs but have limited economic control rights.

This situation of "more work, less income, weak control rights" may have been exacerbated during the settlement process. Although settlement has provided women with more economic participation opportunities (such as dairy processing and tourism services), it has also increased the overall work burden without correspondingly enhancing economic decision-making power.

"I'm busier after settlement. Not only do I take care of livestock, but I also make pastries, produce dairy products, and care for the elderly and children. I wake up after 4 a.m. and can only rest at 11 p.m. Although the money from selling dairy products is earned by me, when it comes to major decisions like buying a car or building a house, I mostly listen to him (husband) because he drives the car more often and knows which car is better." (Interviewee F-09, 44 years old, settled for 10 years)

"Our neighbor previously had a tourism point (Ethnic Town) for rural tourism, and I sometimes helped to earn some money, responsible for receiving tourists and cooking traditional food. The working hours were quite long each day, and I still had to go home to cook. My husband manages all our family income. He is more familiar with banking and those things that I don't understand." (Interviewee F-11, 47 years old, settled for 12 years)

These interviews reveal a disconnection between work burden and income control. Women bear both traditional household labor and participate in new economic activities, but their rights to income control have not correspondingly increased. This situation is related to both the traditional gender division of labor and inequalities in market skills and information access. For example, the difference in banking operation skills mentioned by F-11 reflects the gap in gendered skills in the market economy.

Opportunity Access and Time Control: Gap Between Potentials and Reality

Data shows that women perform relatively well in market entry opportunities (46%), non-pastoral income opportunities (40%), and access to training, information, and social groups (50%). Meanwhile, control over one's time reaches 65%. These indicators reflect the expansion of opportunities in the sedentarization process.

Particularly noteworthy is the apparent contradiction between the relatively high proportion of time control (65%) and the low rate of meeting the total workload standard (23%). This difference may reflect the complex relationship between subjective sense of control and objective workload: even with a large

total workload, women still feel they can arrange the order and content of work to some extent, constituting a limited space for autonomy.

"After settlement, I participated in training courses and joined the village women's federation. They taught us how to make dairy products and handicrafts, lipstick, sheep milk soap, and something else I've forgotten. These don't sell well now, so I sell some dairy products on WeChat or ask my relatives in the city to help sell them at their workplaces. I can sell some overstocked products this way, like those ordered but no longer wanted. I think that's quite good. I arrange my time and workload for these activities myself." (Interviewee F-08, 39 years old, settled for 7 years)

"I now work as a security inspector at the town's train station. Since my child has grown up, I thought I could earn some extra money to supplement the family income. It's quite challenging. I still need to cook and prepare dinner after finishing my shift. Although he (husband) doesn't object, he doesn't actively share the housework. When I come home late, I still have to do the household chores." (Interviewee F-12, 40 years old, settled for 9 years)

There is an apparent gap between opportunity access and actual benefits. Although opportunities for training, markets, and information access have increased, the proportion of these opportunities being converted into actual economic control rights is relatively low. This phenomenon suggests the need to focus on structural barriers in the transformation process from "opportunities" to "results", including factors such as market skills, family division of labor, and social networks.

For example, F-08's mentioned difficulties in selling handicrafts and F-12's description of the double burden of work and household chores both illustrate the practical dilemma that expanded opportunities do not automatically lead to substantial empowerment. In this situation, time control may become an important strategy for women to seek autonomy under limited conditions.

Overall Empowerment Level and Distribution Characteristics

Analysis of the WELI overall scores shows that the empowerment scores of the interviewed women exhibit an approximately normal distribution, with most scores between 0.3-0.4, and the overall empowerment level is in the medium-low range. Individual differences are significant, with only 2% of women scoring above 0.8, indicating that the proportion of fully empowered women is extremely low under the existing social structure.

This distribution characteristic supports the concept of "complementary empowerment". The same woman may have a relatively high autonomy in some domains (such as nutrition decisions and time arrangements) while having limited power in other domains (such as resource control and income decisions).

"I think life is much better now than before. I can decide what to eat and wear, and for major matters, we mostly discuss them together. We generally consider how others make decisions, the economic situation of the year, and our family circumstances. This is our way of life, with different responsibilities for each. I don't feel that I have no power; it's just that power is in different places." (Interviewee F-07, 49 years old, settled for 13 years)

F-07's narrative reflects a subjective identification with "complementary empowerment", which has a certain tension with objective empowerment indicators. On the one hand, she believes "I don't feel that I have no power", indicating a subjective sense of empowerment; on the other hand, the expression "different responsibilities for each" reflects an internalized acceptance of gender division of labor, which may limit the pursuit of more comprehensive empowerment.

"Our neighbor collaborates with a dairy processing factory, providing them with milk and dairy products, and her income seems quite good, but I don't feel I can have time to do so many things. However, there are very few women like her; most women are like me, finding a balance between family and business." (Interviewee F-10, 45 years old, settled for 9 years)

The case mentioned by F-10 indicates that even within the same community, there are significant differences in the level of women's empowerment. Although successful cases exist, they represent a small proportion, with most women still seeking a balance between traditional roles and emerging economic opportunities, further illustrating the complexity and non-linearity of the empowerment process.

Notably, there may be differences in empowerment levels among women of different age groups and settlement durations. Although this study did not specifically explore the impact of these factors, it can be observed in the interview materials that the identification with and questioning of traditional roles differ among different groups, suggesting that the empowerment process may be intertwined with individual life courses and social change processes.

THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The quantitative and qualitative results of this study provide a multi-faceted empirical basis for understanding the empowerment status of women in Inner Mongolia's settled pastoral areas, with the following theoretical and policy implications:

Systematic Nature and Interconnectedness of Empowerment Dimensions

The study found close connections between different empowerment dimensions. Disadvantages in resource control and limited income control ability are interrelated, jointly affecting the overall level of empowerment. This interconnectedness suggests that policy interventions need to adopt a systemic perspective rather than targeting a single empowerment domain in isolation.

"Market opportunities alone are not useful; we need land, loans, and technology. Current policies are all targeted at families, without special consideration for women's needs. If there could be small loans and training specifically for women, the situation might be different." (Interview with a Women's Federation cadre, O-01)

This view emphasizes the synergy between resource access and capacity building, suggesting that policy design needs to comprehensively consider the interactive relationships among multiple empowerment elements.

Complex Relationship Between Development and Empowerment

The research data reflects a complex relationship between sedentarization development and women's empowerment. Although sedentarization has brought more opportunities for access, the latter have not automatically translated into substantial empowerment. This finding challenges the linear assumption that "development automatically brings empowerment", emphasizing the need to focus on structural factors constraining women's agency.

"After sedentarization, the government said our lives would improve, but for women, there's more work without increased power. Previously on the grassland, at least herding was a shared task for men and women. Now the division of labor is clearer, with women managing household chores and men managing external affairs." (Interviewee F-11, 50 years old, settled for 14 years)

The interview with F-11 demonstrates the complex impact of sedentarization on gender dynamics: while it may reinforce certain traditional gender divisions of labor, the broader settlement process has provided some women with new social participation and economic opportunities, as observed during our fieldwork. This plurality suggests that policymaking needs to more carefully consider the differentiated needs of different groups, avoiding a 'one-size-fits-all' development model.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This study systematically examined the empowerment status of women in Inner Mongolia's settled pastoral areas through a combination of quantitative analysis using the Women's Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI) and qualitative interviews. The research results indicate that women's empowerment in settled pastoral areas presents complex characteristics that are multidimensional and non-homogeneous, leading to the following conclusions:

Theoretical Findings and Contributions

This study's primary contribution is the concept of "Complementary Empowerment", which emerged from our systematic observation of power distribution patterns among women in Inner Mongolia's settled pastoral areas. Unlike traditional empowerment frameworks that operate on a binary of "disempowerment" versus "full empowerment", our findings reveal a more nuanced reality where empowerment is domain-specific and culturally embedded.

While drawing from Kabeer's (1999, 2001) understanding of empowerment as a "multidimensional process" and Nussbaum's (2000) "Capability Approach", our framework extends beyond these by incorporating specific cultural contexts of pastoral societies. The concept encompasses four distinct elements that previous theories have not adequately integrated:

1. **Domain Differentiation:** The empowerment levels of pastoral women vary significantly across different life domains, challenging linear empowerment models (Trommlerová et al. 2015).
2. **Cultural Embeddedness:** Power distribution patterns are deeply rooted in specific ecological and social conditions of pastoral communities (Sneath 2000).
3. **Adaptive Strategy:** Gender-based power distribution reflects rational family adaptation to environmental challenges rather than simple inequality (Li & Huntsinger 2011).
4. **Contextual Relevance:** The specific manifestation of empowerment is tied to particular social transformation stages, reflecting both traditional culture and modern economic influences.

This theoretical framework offers a more culturally appropriate tool for understanding women's empowerment in transitional societies, particularly in non-Western pastoral contexts where collective survival strategies often take precedence over individual autonomy.

Policy Implications

The research results indicate that women's empowerment is a complex multidimensional process, with close interactions between resource control, income decision-making, and time allocation dimensions. This means that policy interventions need to adopt a systemic perspective rather than focusing solely on a single domain. As Bayissa et al. (2018) pointed out, fragmented intervention strategies are unlikely to achieve lasting effects. Therefore, policy design should comprehensively consider multiple empowerment elements to create synergistic effects, consistent with the integrated empowerment framework proposed by Bayissa et al. (2017).

Culturally Sensitive Intervention Strategies

Research data shows that gender roles and power structures are deeply rooted in specific cultural backgrounds, reflecting the intertwined influence of traditional culture and modern transformation. In this complex context, the most effective interventions are those designed based on local cultural resources. As a local village cadre stated:

"We Mongolians have our own traditions; women have their status, and men their responsibilities. Modern society emphasizes gender equality, but we cannot simply copy the urban model. We need to respect our cultural traditions and seek changes on this basis." (Interview with local village cadre, O-02)

The view of a government committee worker further supports this finding:

"After settlement, women's roles have become more complex. They need to maintain traditional virtues while adapting to modern life. Some external training programs do not consider our actual situation, and the effects are not good. The most successful projects are those that find resources from our traditions, such as developing dairy processing, which aligns with women's traditional skills." (Interview with Party committee worker, O-04)

These findings echo Ghimire et al.'s (2024) discussion on understanding gender power in cultural contexts. Policy-making should seek resources and opportunities within the culture while respecting cultural traditions to promote gender equality.

Transformation Mechanisms from Opportunities to Results

The data in this study reveals a significant gap between opportunity access and actual economic control rights. Although settlement policies have provided women with opportunities to participate in the market economy, these opportunities have not automatically translated into substantial decision-making power. Policy interventions should not only focus on providing opportunities but also on eliminating structural barriers in the transformation process, including enhancing women's market skills, optimizing family division of labor, and expanding social networks. This finding supports Schischka et al.'s (2008) theory of dual intervention involving capability development and elimination of structural barriers.

Balancing Work Burden and Decision-making Power

The research results reveal a noteworthy paradox: women's work burden has significantly increased after settlement, but their economic decision-making power has not correspondingly improved. This phenomenon confirms Faria et al.'s (2023) discussion on a disconnection between unpaid labor and decision-making power. Policy design should simultaneously address reducing work burden and enhancing decision-making power, avoiding intervention approaches that only increase participation without changing power structures. Measures to reduce women's unpaid labor burden, such as community childcare services and household chore sharing mechanisms, should be implemented in sync with strategies to enhance decision-making power.

In summary, this study recommends that policy interventions should adopt a holistic, culturally sensitive approach, focus on transformation mechanisms between opportunities and results, and balance work burden with decision-making power. These recommendations are not only applicable to development policies in Mongolian pastoral areas but also provide a theoretical perspective for understanding and promoting gender equality in other transitional societies.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

Despite employing mixed research methods to investigate the empowerment status of pastoral women, this study exhibits several methodological limitations. Primarily, the cross-sectional research design struggles to comprehensively capture the dynamic evolutionary process of empowerment. As a gradual process of social transformation, the complexity and temporal dimension of empowerment can only be fully revealed through longitudinal data. As one respondent articulated:

"I never used to question my husband's decisions, believing it was natural for men to decide things. Though he still makes many decisions now, I express my thoughts and sometimes argue with him. This change happened slowly, and it might take several generations to see true equality." (Respondent F-04, 41 years old, settled for 8 years)

"I've contributed to this family since I got married, but many things aren't in my name. I can't go back to my parents' home to claim anything, so I truly have no land anywhere, and I don't understand the legal regulations." This straightforward narrative reveals a dilemma in property rights faced by pastoral women after marriage. In subsequent conversations, she further explained:

"For those of us who have married in, our names aren't on the grassland contracts, and livestock are registered under our husbands' names. Any government subsidy policies are also issued to the household head." (Respondent F-04, 41 years old, settled for 8 years)

This narrative reveals the processual nature of empowerment: even without significant changes in objective power distribution, the enhancement of subjective cognition and expressive capacity itself constitutes an important link in the empowerment process. Standardized cross-sectional measurements may fail to adequately capture such subtle changes.

This study primarily focuses on women's perspectives, with relatively limited collection of male viewpoints. Considering the interactive nature of gender relations, this orientation may restrict a

comprehensive understanding of pastoral gender dynamics. Future research could incorporate men as research subjects, exploring the interactive mechanisms underneath gender relations. Men's attitudes toward and participation in women's empowerment are key factors affecting empowering outcomes, requiring a holistic examination at family and community levels. As Hart (1996) pointed out, gender relations are mutually constructed, and male transformation is crucial for women's empowerment.

Furthermore, although the WELI indicators have undergone localization adjustments, they may still not fully reflect Mongolian culture-specific empowerment dimensions, such as special skills and knowledge systems related to nomadic traditions. Finally, the research fails to adequately differentiate between women's groups of varying ages, educational levels, and settlement durations, potentially obscuring important intra-group variations.

This study could not have addressed all the deep structural issues observed during fieldwork. One significant issue concerns women's resource access within the pastoral patrilocal marriage model, where women may experience limitations in resource allocation from their natal families. While the Inheritance Law and the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests theoretically guarantee women's rights of equal inheritance, our observations suggest that in pastoral practice, traditional patrilineal inheritance patterns often persist. This creates a dual vulnerability for women regarding land rights: they may neither inherit from their natal families nor secure formal rights in their marital households. The gap between legal provisions and local implementation creates space where gender inequality persists. For female pastoralists who have internalized traditional notions and face legal resource constraints, these structural predicaments deserve particular attention in research, as land rights form the foundation for women's economic independence and status enhancement. Therefore, future research could employ large-sample surveys and cross-generational and regional investigations into women's land rights.

Future research could also explore the possibilities of collective empowerment, transcending the limitations of individual empowerment. Pastoral societies traditionally emphasize collective action and mutual aid networks; future research could focus on women's groups, cooperatives, and other forms of collective empowerment, exploring alternative pathways to individual empowerment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sumiya is a professor and Vice Dean of the School of Sociology at Sanya University. He specializes in social governance, social work, and pastoral society studies. Sunar is a teaching assistant at Sanya University. Her research interests include migration, gender studies. Her e-mail address is: Sonra011@outlook.com. The study of this paper was funded by a grant from the National Social Science Foundation of China "Research on the Modern Transformation of Pastoral Culture in China's Northern Border" (我国北疆牧区文化的现代转型研究, Grant No. 22XSH001).

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