

## **Being with donkeys: Insights into the valuing and wellbeing of donkeys in central Ethiopia**

Geiger, M.<sup>1</sup>, Hockenull J.<sup>2</sup>, Buller H.<sup>3</sup>, Engida, Gebre.T.<sup>4</sup>, Jemal Kedir, M.<sup>8</sup>, Goshu, L.<sup>7</sup>, Getachew, M.<sup>4</sup>, Banerjee, A.<sup>9</sup>, Burden, F.A.<sup>5</sup>, & Whay, H. R.<sup>2&6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, WC2A 2AE

<sup>2</sup> Animal Welfare and Behaviour, Bristol Veterinary School, University of Bristol, Langford, Bristol BS40 5DU

<sup>3</sup> Department of Geography, College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Prince of Wales Road, Exeter, EX4 4SB

<sup>4</sup> c/o College of Veterinary Medicine, Addis Ababa University, P. Box 34, Bishoftu, Ethiopia

<sup>5</sup> The Donkey Sanctuary, Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0NU

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Vice President International, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland H91 TK33

<sup>7</sup> Born Free Foundation, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

<sup>8</sup> Eshet Children and Youth Development Organization, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

<sup>9</sup> Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices, New Delhi, India

**Abstract:** This paper explores the interwoven lives of donkeys and the people who depend on them for their livelihoods in central Ethiopia. Drawing on data from twelve participatory workshops, insights are elicited into the ways donkey guardians value and treat their donkeys. Methodologically, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) techniques were merged to explore the complex and multi-dimensional contributions donkeys make to participants' lives. Findings reveal the keeping of donkeys can make the difference between destitution and modest survival, but societal perception of donkeys as low-status animals has an impact on their owners' lives and donkey wellbeing. This research contributes empirical insights on the valuing of donkeys and enables a deepened understanding of human-donkey relations. The combination of PRA and AI in the methodology demonstrates how to formulate a compassionate and empathetic approach for exploring donkey value and wellbeing with marginalised groups.

**Keywords:** Donkey, value, social status, care, participatory methods, Ethiopia, livelihoods

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**Corresponding author:** Martha Geiger, [m.geiger@lse.ac.uk](mailto:m.geiger@lse.ac.uk)

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### **Introduction**

Ethiopia is home to approximately 19% of the estimated global donkey population of 45.8 million (FAO, 2018). These donkeys' lives are intricately linked with lives of people who own and work with them, often some of Ethiopian society's most impoverished and marginalized members (Admassu & Shiferaw, 2011). Through their labor, donkeys provide transportation and draught power and can make a significant contribution to peoples' livelihoods, enabling access to water, food stuffs, education, and healthcare (Geiger et al., 2020; Maggs et al., 2021). But the social, economic, and cultural value of donkeys is more nuanced than this broad statement suggests, differing with the intricacies of the lives and requirements of the human(s) with whom they co-exist. To support donkeys and those who depend upon them, it is necessary to further our understanding of the value placed on donkeys and the subtleties of their impact on people's lives. Despite their important contributions to many of Ethiopia's impoverished, donkeys remain absent from government non-human animal-health and welfare policies; are overlooked in development goals and undervalued by wider society. Thus, exploring how humans affect donkeys' wellbeing is crucial for understanding and valuing donkeys' impact in low- and middle-income countries.

While the number of recent studies analyzing the health and welfare of donkeys in Africa (Stringer et al., 2017; Hiko et al., 2016; Burn et al., 2010; Geiger et al., 2021; Farhat et al., 2020), has increased, little research has been conducted on social, economic, and cultural contributions of donkeys in these contexts (Maggs et al., 2021; Valette, 2015). Only a few studies focus on relationships between donkeys and their human counterparts (Geiger et al. 2020; Geiger & Hovorka, 2015). Methodologies in this scarce published literature have primarily been surveys, focus groups, questionnaires, and interviews (Sawi & Bwanga, 2008; Hassan et al., 2013; Vasanthakumar et al., 2021; Maggs et al., 2021). Few go beyond donkeys' socio-economic and socio-cultural value to draw insights from data concerning impacts of these animals on human lives, particularly in the Global South (Geiger & Hovorka, 2015; Geiger et al., 2020; Vasanthakumar et al., 2021; Maggs et al., 2021).

## Methods

This paper details findings from a broadened approach, investigating donkeys' contributions by employing 12 participatory workshops involving nine interactive exercises. Exercise development was informed by data from 30 in-depth interviews held with 20 donkey keepers and 10 key stakeholders such as vets and extension workers (Geiger et al., 2020) in Oromia, Ethiopia. Interviews provided an overview of different social, cultural, and economic impacts donkeys can have in communities and on individual keepers. Interviews yielded seven themes (listed below) that informed research questions and guided choice and adaptation of participatory exercises facilitating deeper investigation into human experiences of working and being with donkeys.

The seven themes:

- 1) Economic impact of donkeys: Economic drivers, expenditures, contributions, and constraints of donkey use and keeping.
- 2) Provision of care to donkeys: Amount of husbandry and attention given to donkeys.
- 3) Empowerment: How or if working with donkeys empowers individuals and the community.
- 4) Gender: Men's and women's relationships to one another through donkey use, guardianship, and care.
- 5) Social status: Donkey keepers' position within society and donkeys' position within society.
- 6) Affect: Emotions expressed about living and working with donkeys.
  - 7a) Vulnerability: Ability to handle unexpected loss of donkey support.
  - 7b) Resilience: Capacity to manage, maintain, or recover livelihoods after unexpected donkey loss; ability to prevent loss to livelihoods.

To expand methodological breadth, the study design combined two principal methodologies Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI). PRA's inclusive and interactive techniques have been used extensively for data gathering across the Global South. PRA enhances

people's workshop participation and is versatile; adaptations can explore a myriad of topics in different contexts (Chambers, 1998; Mueller et al., 2010; Quigley et al., 2017). Using exercises designed to be accessible to the disenfranchised, most marginalized participants, PRA aims to empower participants to take ownership of exercises, to voice opinions on matters affecting them, and to build capacity to analyze their own realities and perceptions (Chambers, 1998; Quigley et al., 2017). Participants are encouraged to think of solutions to issues they raise themselves (Chambers, 1998; Quigley et al., 2017). With PRA, learning is regarded as mutual and not exclusive to facilitators, researchers learn from and with people in ways that do not recreate prior assumptions. During the exercises, participants were encouraged to create their own content, including their own categories to indicate what was important to them.

For the 12 workshops, researchers combined PRA with Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a methodology seeking to identify and explore the perceived 'best' in a topic or situation so participants can envision possible positive futures and generate new knowledge (Michael, 2005; Reed et al., 2002). This asset-focused approach can yield more nuanced understandings of positive and negative aspects of a practice, experience, or social system than a traditional problem-solving approach. The latter starts negatively; its focus on what is wrong, can get participants stuck on the present and less able to envision new methods or a better future (Reed et al., 2002). While AI is typically used as a framework for organizational change, it has been applied in qualitative field research in African contexts (Michael, 2005; Govender & Edwards, 2009; Moagi et al., 2020). AI helps workshop participants discover and build on what already works well for them; clarifying what led to positive aspects of situations helps replicate past successes to improve circumstances. This approach can engender individual and collective empowerment and invites extensive storytelling which, as a method of discovery, fits well within the Ethiopian context where communities have long-standing traditions of orally sharing stories and histories (Hassen, 2015; Lydall, 2016).

To the best of our knowledge, combining PRA and AI as a research instrument to study human-equid relationships is unique. This hybrid approach shifted questions away from hardship, too often the focus of work with marginalized groups, creating an engaging and empowering atmosphere

that allowed for a more holistic breadth of learning, sharing, appreciating, and enacting collectively, with greater momentum. Workshop exercises captured local reflections on donkeys' value and narrowed down participants' thoughts and opinions to the most important aspects, providing rich data for analysis. Workshop findings were used in two ways: to test and validate the research tool in a case study setting, and to provide new insights into donkeys' role in lives of marginalized people living in Ethiopia.

### *Location*

Twelve workshops were conducted within six donkey-owning communities in central Ethiopia in 2015. Three rural sites visited were located in the Rift Valley area of Arsi Negele with the communities of Meti, Argeda, and Dawe in the Oromia regional state. Three urban sites visited were in and around Addis Ababa: CMC North, Burayo, and Summit 30.

### *Participants*

A total of 137 donkey-keepers participated in 12 workshops. Workshop groups of 5 to 15 participants were large enough to generate rich discussion and small enough for the facilitator to manage. Because of societal gender sensitivities, men and women participated in separate workshops (see table 1). However, women working with donkeys in some urban areas proved difficult to find and consequently one location, Burayo, had no workshop for female participants. An important aspect of participatory workshops is awareness of community dynamics and positions of power held by certain roles (Quigley et al., 2017). Since power dynamics can reduce vulnerable people's ability to share opinions and experiences, community leaders, veterinarians, and extension workers were not invited to participate in workshops. The study was approved by the Faculty of Medical and Veterinary Science Research Ethics Committee, University of Bristol (January 2015 Ref 16721).

**[Table 1 here]**

### *The Workshops*

The 12 workshops employed nine participatory exercises (see table 2). Each workshop was two days, three hours each day. Exercises ran in the same order since they were designed to build on one another.

**[Table 2 here]**

Workshop content and format were piloted in three locations in central Ethiopia in the Oromia region of Bekoji, Awassa, and Arsi Negele with donkey keeping communities to ensure exercises could be easily understood and completed by participants. When the pilot phase was complete, workshop content was refined in response to feedback from pilot study participants.

### *Analysis*

Workshops were facilitated in the local language, Afaan Oromo or Amharic, and audio recorded and translated into English in the field by two research assistants and the lead researcher. The research assistant not facilitating the workshop recorded the physical and social environment of each session, interaction among participants, what was being said by participants, and use of language. The recorder took pictures of exercises and recorded final outputs from each exercise to aid analysis. At the end of each workshop, the lead researcher worked with the two local researchers to capture participant observations which were transcribed in a field notebook and used in analysis. These efforts to capture local reflections and discussions, as well as the process of helping participants narrow down their thoughts to identify the most important points provided tangible data for analysis and led to our key findings (Ansell et al., 2012; Morters et al., 2014; Okell et al., 2013).

The seven themes of socio-economic value listed above were used as a framework for analysis. The first step was thematic analysis of notes and transcripts from each workshop. Structured content analysis followed, exploring what was and was not said in each workshop. Photographs taken during workshops were used as reference for participants' responses to each exercise and discussions between participants during workshop exercises. Consequently, a large body of different modes of

data was used for analysis. This multi-modal approach generated a richer account of workshop discussion than could be generated from a single methodology (Sawyer, 2000).

## **Results and Discussion**

Findings are reported and discussed in alignment with the seven themes of socio-economic value described above in Methods. The social status of donkeys and their keepers was a cross-cutting theme arising in discussions within most of the other themes of donkeys' socio-economic contributions. The social status of donkeys affected all facets of their lives, from their economic position in society to their communities' perception of them.

### *Theme 1: Economic Impact of Donkeys*

Economic impacts of donkeys in Ethiopia in rural and urban areas have been well documented in the literature, so the paper will not explore these findings in detail (Geiger et al., 2020; Hiko et al., 2016; Admassu & Shiferaw, 2011; Tesfaye & Curran, 2005). In summary, donkeys were reported by participants to generate income directly and indirectly for keepers. Donkey labor enabled people in urban and rural areas to save money, send funds to relatives, and contribute to traditional, local community financial saving schemes. In rural areas, donkeys' predominate work involved harvesting crops from fields and transporting these crops to market. In urban areas, donkeys were used in the construction industry and rubbish collection. While rubbish collectors mainly co-owned donkeys, construction working groups owned and used a greater number of donkeys, enabling them to increase their work-outputs, earn and save more. Since people in urban areas were not involved in subsistence farming, they could not meet their own and their families' basic needs without the income-generating help of donkeys. Income was named the most important contribution donkeys make in urban areas.

Participants explained they rarely take their donkeys to the veterinarian unless the donkey was ill; they did not often spend money on health care for donkeys, findings are consistent with the literature (Tesfaye & Curran, 2005; Herago et al., 2015). Average expenditure on donkeys was not reported by participants. Admassu & Shiferaw (2011) reported the average yearly spend on equine related-care in central Ethiopia was 904 ETB (\$67USD). Participants explained that replacing a

donkey after one died or ran away was the highest cost of keeping and working with donkeys. A donkey in urban areas cost 4,000 to 6,000 ETB (approximately \$125 to \$185USD), a significant amount where reported weekly income from donkey labor in urban areas was 200-1,500 ETB (\$10-72USD) and in rural areas 0-140 ETB (\$0-6.77USD) (Geiger et al., 2020); thus potential yearly income ranged between \$520-4,176USD in urban areas to \$0-392.66USD in rural areas.

### *Theme 2: Provision of Care to Donkeys*

During the two-day workshops, three cross-exercise sub-themes related to donkey care were explored; they touched on people who owned and used them and how care was provided.

#### *Who Cares for and is Responsible for Donkeys?*

Individual donkey keepers were usually the active decision-makers in determining care. Such attention largely depended on keepers' and communities' perceptions of their animals' social, affective, and economic value, and the animals' biological needs. As accounts of donkey keepers' economic priorities show, many donkey keepers struggle to meet the needs of themselves and their families, let alone their animals' needs. Yet, as a men's urban group point out, "If our animals do not get enough care we can't survive and can't work because our lives are dependent on animals" (21/07/2015). Previous research revealed that efforts to maintain and ensure donkey health and wellbeing are often compromised by heavy workloads (Geiger & Hovorka, 2015; Valette, 2015). People most dependent on donkeys—those with the least socio-economic means—often lack capacity to address donkey care in meaningful ways, especially when they are unable to address their own basic needs (Geiger & Hovorka, 2015; Pritchard et al., 2005). Poverty can complicate participants' abilities to provide enough material care for their donkey to work at full capacity, meaning donkeys often work with compromised welfare given keepers' acute dependency on them (Geiger et al., 2021). An urban men's group explains, "We have a responsibility to provide care for animals. The reason why the majority of donkey owners do not accomplish their responsibilities is because of poverty" (21/07/2015).



Rural participants reported that since donkeys cost less than horses, cattle, and oxen, they are given lower priority for daily upkeep tasks and veterinary attention. The price of donkeys indicated their market value and low socio-economic status in Ethiopia (Admassu & Shiferaw, 2011). Participants explained oxen needed the most care because they were the most expensive to buy and their keepers did not want to lose that asset. Oxen traditionally hold higher socio-economic status in Ethiopian society than donkeys (Goulder, 2019) and researchers observed oxen often painted on rural gravestones; donkeys were never observed featured this way. In terms of care, cows are given priority over donkeys because they provide milk and meat, hold greater status, and are considered more fragile than donkeys. Participants perceived donkeys as animals that did not get sick often and able to adapt to harsh conditions like drought and heavy rainy seasons. Participants believed donkeys foraged for their own food more effectively than cattle, and therefore were not a priority for additional food provision. In these ways, donkey care and keepers' understandings of donkeys' needs are affected by comparison with other animals' perceived value and needs.

#### *End of Life Philosophy*

When donkeys could no longer work, the majority of participants explained they would not discard them—demonstrating respect for their working counterpart and a feeling of moral obligation to continue to provide care beyond their working life. As Charles (2016) notes in observations of interspecies care, caring involves responsibility for another living being which can extend beyond the human sphere. She also explains that care is inherently unequal because decisions about amount of care rest with the human counterpart. This holds true with humans and their donkey counterparts, where human keepers are decision makers for the kind and amount of care donkeys receive. As discussed below, donkeys also provide care to their human counterparts through livelihood tasks keepers require them to perform as animal subordinates. An urban participant described their long-term care strategies for donkeys: “When the donkey can no longer work I will care for her until her death. Even when the donkey dies I will bury her, I respect her like a human being” (15/07/2015). Here, there is a blurring of human practices that have been extended to donkeys, practices that break down the animal-human divide; such care practices have been well documented between humans and

other domesticated animals like dogs, cats, and horses (Charles, 2016; Haraway, 2003; Hockenhull et al., 2010). By describing their donkeys as hard-working counterparts deserving of respect and attention, participants demonstrate empathy towards their donkeys. Only two of the 12 groups said they would not keep their donkey to the end of its life. Both groups were urban rubbish collectors who explained they could only afford to keep an income-generating donkey.

### *Interdependence of Care*

In central Ethiopia, not only do humans care for animals but animals care for humans by assisting with work and day-to-day livelihood tasks. Just as donkeys rely on humans for water, food, shelter, access to grazing and veterinary attention, humans depend on donkeys for income generation, transport, and/or food production. Therefore, while interdependent and vital, the care relationship is bounded by unequal power relations as donkeys are unable to choose the care tasks they perform, whereas humans do determine what work donkeys do and how much care they receive. A participant in an urban men's group adds,

Donkeys have high contributions behind all the construction buildings. Care for animals is very important, but the care is not properly given to animals. Care is given properly to humans but animals need more attention than they are getting. Donkeys are important to the life of the community (15/07/2015).

Although some participants reported that caring for donkeys showed how they value them, keepers typically and not unexpectedly prioritized their own needs over their donkeys'. Consequently, to the detriment of donkeys' health, the care relationship is unequal. However, donkey keepers did recognize that donkeys' needs were not always met by keepers and the importance of improving donkeys' care.

Interspecies care activities were discussed by participants in urban and rural areas: donkeys provide support for other animals. As one urban male participant explained: "Donkeys are carrying food and water for other animals like cows and they are transporting food and water to where the cows are kept" (15/07/2015). Thus, donkeys are not only vital to providing care for their human

counterparts, they are also important for the upkeep of other domesticated animals, as demonstrated by acts of trans-species care. Care tasks that donkeys have been observed performing for other animals have included transporting animal feed from fields to homesteads and fetching water, transporting ill calves to veterinary clinics, and locating lost animals. Therefore, interdependence of care is multispecies, expanding to include other domesticated animals' dependence on the work donkeys perform.

### *Theme 3: Empowerment*

Empowerment was a theme explored in six of nine exercises within the workshops. For the purpose of this study, personal empowerment can be described as an individual's agency, strength, and ability to access and manage available resources. People are empowered if they have motivation to act to claim their right to quality of life for themselves and their family, and to participate within the community (Moyle et al., 2006). Interestingly, participants identified donkeys as directly and indirectly empowering their keepers.

### *Pathways to Empowerment*

Participants explained they could live empowered lives if they had freedom, strength, and independence. Although participants never used the word 'empowerment,' it became clear they appreciated how donkeys improved their knowledge, opportunities, income, health, and success. Their increased empowerment was evident through pride in their successes and their strengthened commitment to themselves and others. One urban women's group explained that formal education was crucial for developing power over one's life: "If you are not educated you will work hard, but you need to have some authority over your work so you can feel successful in life. If there is no authority there are no feelings of success" (18/07/2015).

In all 12 workshops, participants discussed the importance of donkey health and wellbeing in connection to their livelihoods: work with donkeys creates independence; income generation donkeys provide creates economic empowerment; and personal empowerment is gained by safeguarding their health through sharing their physical burdens with donkeys. Donkeys are indirect agents of

empowerment by enabling income generation and providing relief from the toil of rubbish collection. Donkeys are also direct agents of empowerment through the accumulation of more donkeys. In their study of collective efficacy, Moyle et al. (2006) argue that a shared understanding or belief in a group's capabilities to organize and execute a course of action can produce desired outcomes. During workshops, participants also related their personal empowerment to collective efficacy, noting they have been able to make positive changes together such as collectively purchasing one or more donkeys to collect rubbish or collectively recognizing the importance of keeping their donkeys healthy.

### *Inhibitors of Empowerment*

Despite recognizing what creates empowerment for donkey keepers and communities, participants saw a major inhibitor to empowerment was low social acceptance of donkey keepers by the wider community or population. One urban women's group explained the adversity they faced in their community; they reported receiving little respect from community members and suffering unkind treatment from strangers. The group felt stigmatized collectively and individually because of the type of work they performed and because their work was done with donkeys.

Groups explained that while they were poor, they were not the poorest, that those who did not own donkeys and had no families to support them had to beg on the street. This finding is supported by other studies reporting similar findings in Ethiopia. For example, using PRA methodology, Gemtessa et al. (2005) found households in pastoral areas with five or more donkeys were considered wealthy and households without a donkey were deemed poor or destitute. Yet, those who worked with donkeys were stigmatized for keeping 'low-class' animals rather than celebrated for their ability to work hard. An urban women's group participant noted that, "While we are working with our donkeys some people will insult us. If we try to dispute the problem we may be insulted more or beaten" (18/07/2015). Findings revealed men's groups were more empowered through their work than women's groups. Urban women's groups were pleased they were earning an income and meeting their needs, but they find the work difficult and report not everyone in the community respects them. In

contrast, the urban men's groups felt they earned respect, social connections, and support through their work and were able to save money and meet their needs.

#### *Theme 4: Gender*

Workshops revealed differences in donkey use between genders and across spaces. Donkeys were found to be feminized in urban and rural areas in central Ethiopia; all donkeys regardless of gender are referred to as 'she,' reflecting that women in Ethiopia often hold less power in their domestic and formal roles (Abbink, 2003). Regardless of sex, donkeys are aligned with women which affects donkeys' societal value and reinforces the view of women as lesser than men and therefore subordinate. Nevertheless, donkeys support women immensely in their work, and participants in urban and rural workshop groups said they felt cared for because of the animal's assistance.

In separate workshops, women and men discussed common cultural sayings that perpetuate marginalization of women and donkeys. Female and male participants in rural and urban groups expressed similar thoughts and reiterated similar proverbs indicating donkeys' feminization and women's subjugation. For example, "The roles of women and donkeys are the same; they are working day and night for the survival of the family so their role is very similar" (12/07/2015); "The least of animals is the donkey, and the least of human beings is a woman" (19/07/2015). These comments demonstrate normative perceptions of women holding lower status than men and donkeys holding lower status than other animals. Both bodies have been articulated as under strain through shared burdens from the social construction of gender roles and gendered spaces which (re)produces this alignment and treatment. Further common gender proverbs from workshop groups are listed in table 3.

**[Table 3 here]**

Myths or stereotypes often reinforce gender roles, identities and responsibilities, creating and sustaining inequalities between men and women. In Ethiopia, the human class system and the power dynamic in human gender relations affect donkey labor, care, and keeping more than the actual biological capabilities of the animals. The species gender preferences are shaped by human cultural

attitudes towards class, poverty, gender, and physical labor. Similarly, research by Geiger and Hovorka (2015) revealed the lowly position of donkeys in Batswana society results from perceptions that they are low-cost, self-sufficient animals not requiring veterinary care or government attention and thus are not allocated the physical space within broader society assigned to other animals like cows. The status of donkeys, then, undermines people's ability to recognize donkeys' performance as dynamic contributors to people's lives and sense of purpose.

Despite the relationship between donkeys' feminization and women's subjugation across locations, and despite gender-related differences in how donkeys are utilized in rural and urban areas, workshops revealed donkeys as catalysts for enhancing women's socio-economic livelihoods.

### *Rural Gender Relations*

Donkeys in rural areas were reported to reduce women's physical labor burdens significantly. Donkeys help women transport products to markets to generate household income. They also help women provide improved childcare for their families because they no longer had to leave young children alone at home while they carried wood on their backs. Rather, they could carry their young children on their backs while their donkeys carry wood. As the three rural women's focus groups explained, donkeys were indispensable for their personal wellbeing as well as their families' because of assistance in completing their daily workload. One rural women's group said,

Donkeys are helping women and children in different ways and the support they provide is very high. For example, we are carrying water, firewood and grain and are expected to carry it on our shoulders, but when we have donkeys we don't have to carry the grain ourselves (17/06/2015).

In rural areas, responsibility of care for donkeys is assigned primarily to women because donkeys are not seen to hold significant value and are generally used for home-based tasks like carrying water or firewood. Among animals owned by subsistence farmers, oxen were identified by participants as the main generators of income because they plough large agricultural fields, pull heavy carts, and sold for high prices on the livestock market. Typically, men are the main caretakers of oxen

and cows; through this guardianship they achieve higher socio-economic status than their female counterparts. As oxen-keepers, men also have control over their households' primary income-earning assets.

### *Urban Gender Relations*

Participants' comments demonstrate issues of guardianship, gender relations, and care dynamics manifesting differently in urban and rural areas. The difference lies predominantly in who owns or works with donkeys and the gender dynamics around donkeys' utility. In urban areas, men are the major keepers of donkeys; they work only with male donkeys because of concerns participants expressed about female donkeys distracting male donkeys from work. For example, one urban men's group said,

People don't prefer female donkeys for their business because they couldn't carry these loads; it's better for female donkeys to stay in rural areas for breeding and to send the foal to us to use. We need the female donkeys' foals to work (09/07/2015).

Female donkeys were restricted to the rural areas and not allowed to be sold at urban markets. Yet, despite the fact that men, not women, work with and hold responsibility for donkeys in urban areas, donkeys' social status remains unchanged; the donkey remains feminized, and its low social value persists. The men's groups explain their status in society improves with donkey keeping in urban areas where they can monetize their donkey's work; the men engage donkeys in the construction industry to transport cement, bricks, and sand, which is cheaper than using trucks or heavy machinery.

Our donkeys are benefitting us because we have a business by using them. We have clients who we can get income from and we are known in the community so clients are calling us to do different work. This work is very important to give us respect in the community (09/07/2015).

However, women did not participate in construction sectors in urban areas, where there were clear distinctions between spaces where women could work with donkeys in contrast to men. Women could engage donkeys in domestic spaces for collecting water or rubbish; men could enlist donkeys in

economic spaces such as construction. As noted, in domestic and economic spaces in urban areas work is only done by male donkeys.

Equality between men and women was cited by all three urban men's groups as an important value that is becoming better recognized. Participants explained their communities are becoming more cognizant of discrimination and, at times, acknowledged that common proverbs diminished important roles women and donkeys perform for communities. One urban men's group explained,

Women and donkeys play the most essential role for the survival of the community as a whole. Women care for their family, children, their husbands, and even other animals.

Donkeys are also serving the family in all domestic work and other activities. Today, donkeys and women have been given special emphasis and are both respected and considered as most necessary for the community (22/07/2015).

Despite the men's groups acknowledging the importance of gender equality, women's groups maintained that their status in society and communities is not equal to men's.

#### *Theme 5: Social Status*

Although donkeys were found to have a lower value in society overall, that value did not always correlate with how individual donkey keepers felt about themselves or their work, an intersecting theme that arose in many of the participatory exercises. Donkeys' social status affected all facets of keepers' lives, from their economic position in society to their communities' perception of them. In urban construction businesses where men's donkeys were transporting construction materials, male participants explained they felt community respect. A male construction worker participant explained, "Before you start this work no one knows you and you do not get respect. But now because of our work many people know us and respect us" (10/07/2015). All three urban men's groups expressed pride at working with donkeys because they felt they had identified a gap in the market where their services were needed. Contacts made through their work generated respect from other community members. Thus, urban construction workers felt there were advantages to their work regardless of



society's perception of donkeys and their association with poverty. Urban male participants felt their income sufficient to sustain a viable livelihood and gain social acceptance.

In contrast, women working as rubbish collectors did not feel similar community respect. They reported being ridiculed for their low status job and for exposing themselves to health problems; they were deemed 'unhealthy' by the community. Women felt stigmatized by working in what was considered a 'dirty job,' an occupation not socially acceptable for women. According to urban female participants, "Many people in the community do not have a good perception of us" (11/07/2015); "When you are lower class you are forced to accept everything in life whether you like it or not" (11/07/2015). Therefore, the types of work done with donkeys in urban areas influence social status. Women working in rubbish collection using donkeys feel stigmatized and undervalued by their communities, whereas men working in construction with donkeys feel proud and accepted by society.

In rural areas, the social status of work performed differed. Animals used and owned represented status within the community. Those without donkeys were seen as the poorest in the community, whereas those who owned oxen and mules were seen to have more wealth and social status. Donkeys were seen as a help to the community and as animals important to people's survival. Donkeys provided rural keepers a social position as contributors with some decision-making power.

The status of donkeys in Ethiopia is not representative of their true worth as economic contributors, as friends, and as kin. At community, household, and individual levels donkeys were seen by participants as important animals, friends, or even part of the family since people would find it difficult to make ends meet or provide for their families without a donkey. However, these animals' contributions were felt to remain largely invisible to wider society.

#### *Theme 6: Affect*

The affective valuing of donkeys was demonstrated the most during the 'Who is your Donkey' exercise where participants were asked to draw pictures of their donkeys and explain who the donkey was as a being and how that donkey interacted with them and expressed agency. Three different categories of emotion were expressed by participants throughout the 12 workshops: concern, relief,

and happiness/gratitude (see table 4). All donkeys were given names and an identity by their keepers, suggesting a sense of individual value, importance, behavior, and close connection to caretakers.

**[Table 4 here]**

Beyond donkeys' external economic or monetary worth, donkeys held value in and of themselves as beings, as animals symbolizing positive change or stability for keepers. Donkey keepers expressed acute dependence on donkeys and articulated feelings of love and friendship, even respect. Donkeys were understood as animals making people's lives easier and acting as mutual friends and life supports.

#### *Theme 7: Vulnerability and Resilience*

Resilience can be defined as people's ability and capacity to respond and cope with life's difficulties and adapt (Pain & Levine, 2014; Clancy et al., 2021). Vulnerability can be defined as the extent people, systems or processes are exposed to risk and their capacity to cope with impacts of that risk (Jones & Shahrokh, 2013).

Participants in 10 out of 12 groups identified health as the most important attribute to possess and value in life; health provides people with resilience they need to create a livelihood. They asserted that "If a person is healthy they will feel generous and care for others and can fulfil all of their responsibilities if they are mentally and physically healthy" (18/07/2015). Participants largely engaged in physical, unskilled work: all groups named health as one of their top three most important values for work and life. While the health of animals was not listed explicitly as being within their top three priorities for work and life, participants described the health of their animals as a key aspect of their own resilience and ability to maintain livelihoods. Whether urban or rural, animals people owned created a large part, if not all, of their financial security.

In the urban areas, vulnerability articulated by women's groups was two-fold: first, if they lost their donkeys, they were vulnerable to increased exposure to harmful waste substances because they would be carrying them on their backs. Second, if their donkey died and they lost the use of a cart, they would be unable to earn enough to meet basic needs. Men were less vulnerable because they

owned multiple donkeys and would not immediately suffer if they lost one. Human development research on gender in the Global South reveals that women in the informal economy are the most vulnerable and undervalued members (Ulrichs, 2016).

### *Human and Donkey Welfare Complicated by Societal Tensions*

The social status of donkeys and their keepers influenced their communities' perception of them and their economic position in society. Donkey keepers expressed acute dependence on their donkeys and articulated feelings of love, friendship, even respect. The findings supported the literature on donkeys' work: they are often understood as life supports to guardians and their communities (Maggs, et al., 2021; Geiger & Hovorka, 2015; Geiger et al., 2020; Stringer et al., 2017). However, donkeys were considered undervalued and underappreciated by broader Ethiopian society (Geiger et al., 2020). Donkeys are seen as 'low-class' animals of the working poor and the immense benefits they bring keepers remain largely invisible. Viewed neither as livestock nor companion animals, they are absent in government policies (Geiger et al., 2021).

Tensions were evident in perceptions that there were appropriate and inappropriate places for female donkeys and women to work. While female and male donkeys were employed in rural areas, only male donkeys were welcome on urban area male-dominated worksites. Participants resisted the use of female donkeys in urban spaces because they were seen as distractions to male donkeys. They held the inaccurate view that female donkeys, like women, were physiologically too weak for labor-intensive construction work. Urban societal views on the greater value of men in comparison to women, the greater value of men's work over women's work, and the overall greater value of male donkeys, all subject male donkeys to extremely hard labor on construction sites and, unlike rural areas, a lack of choice to interact with both male and female donkeys. Unequal valuing of women and assumptions about their lesser strength excludes them from some work opportunities, particularly in urban areas, and relegates them to lower-status work, like rubbish collection; where they use male donkeys for this work, women face disapproval and disdain.

Comments throughout urban and rural workshops suggest women share with donkeys a low social position, a view complicating their wellbeing. While this view of women is not necessarily general throughout Ethiopian society, situations in regions under study revealed both women and donkeys have bodies required to carry, under strain, large loads on their backs; both are rendered submissive to men. Close alignment of women and donkeys in people's perceptions currently does little to benefit either group and highlights tension even between the use of male and female donkeys and the spaces they can occupy and interact. More positively, workshop comments indicated that shared status with donkeys creates empathy and closeness among women and donkeys not evidenced among male donkey keepers.

### **Conclusion**

This study's combination of AI and PRA adds to the repertoire of qualitative research methodologies for investigating impacts of donkeys, especially in marginalized communities. Specific findings demonstrate donkeys' contribution to people's survival, health, well-being, and sense of empowerment. Analysis shows that societal tensions obscure the impact of donkeys' use on keepers' well-being. These findings can inform the work of human-focussed NGOs and policy makers.

Across the seven-theme framework, social status and gender issues arose as a persistent focus. Discussions revealed difficulties donkey keepers face and allowed participants to develop a deeper understanding among themselves about successes and local constraints. Keepers could envision positive futures for themselves and their donkeys. With improvements to their livelihoods they could aspire to send their children to school, save to buy land, build homes, increase their savings, buy other animals, and safeguard their health and their donkeys' health. Discussions demonstrated donkeys, despite wider societal perceptions of lowly status, were catalysts for guardians' future achievements. Future research could further explore the complex economic and socio-cultural dynamics of urban donkey keeping, donkey care, and gender relations in Africa.

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