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“Filling gaps and removing traps  
for sustainable resource management”

## Professional Grouping as a Tool for Bridging Gender Gaps in Pastoralist Communities in Northern Benin

GEORGES DJOHY<sup>1,2</sup>, ANGE HONORAT EDJA<sup>2</sup>, NIKOLAUS SCHAREIKA<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Parakou, School of Statistics, Planning and Demography, Benin*

<sup>2</sup>*University of Parakou, Dept. of Rural Economics and Sociology, Benin*

<sup>3</sup>*Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Germany*

### Abstract

Pastoralism faces major challenges that compromise its practice and drive actors into a vicious circle of vulnerability, marginality and poverty. Women in pastoralist communities in northern Benin have increasingly less access to cow's milk, their main socio-economic resource. Herd loss, large-scale migration and difficult livestock mobility make Fulani households more precarious and further weaken the socio-economic conditions of women.

This ethnographic study analysed how the advent of professional associations in this context helped Fulani women to influence gender power relations and (re)negotiate better access to resources. The study approach moved away from male-centred ideology, with the premise that a more processual analysis of the complexity of social relationships between men and women could enable better understanding of ideas and actions of Fulani women in various spheres of society, as they are embedded in greater diversity of socio-cultural and power relationships.

Fieldwork was carried out in three districts in northern Benin (Gogounou, Banikoara and Nikki) where Professional Groups of Female Herders of Ruminants (GPFERs) were set up and developed over the last two decades. Semi-structured and open-ended interviews as well as focus group discussions were conducted with Fulani women and men of various ages, educational level and membership status. Fulani women and their groupings were followed in daily activities over one year, as part of participant observation.

Results reveal that: (i) GPFERs are not homogeneous entities that embrace and reflect the development brokerage-based aspirations of the male Fulani leaders who put them in place. Rather, they are structures modified and renegotiated by women to serve various purposes of emancipation and empowerment vis-à-vis men; (ii) Despite the influence of men in the establishment and functioning of the groups, Fulani women take advantage of support and capacity building by external development actors to promote socio-economic activities (crop farming, agroprocessing, livestock fattening, petty trade), diversify their livelihoods and improve their incomes; (iii) GPFERs enable Fulani women to strengthen their contribution to household social needs (food, health and education) and gain political power at local and regional level.

These findings are useful for decision-making on food security, women's empowerment and sustainable development in pastoral areas.

**Keywords:** Food security, Fulani women, gender power relations, pastoralism, professional association, sustainable development