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## Gendered and intersectional access to social protection: Evidence from cattle-rearing women in Gujarat, India

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### Abstract

Access to social protection is crucial for enhancing the resilience of vulnerable households to food insecurity. This research examines the experiences of women in cattle-rearing households in Gujarat, India, as they navigated multiple intersecting crises during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges included income instability, health shocks, and illnesses affecting their primary source of income – cattle. The study focuses on the intersectional barriers these women faced in accessing social protection measures during this period. Qualitative data from 29 semi-structured interviews with community health workers, dairy cooperative heads, and local shop workers, five key informant interviews, and one focus group discussion with nine women from the Pethapur Mahila Dudh Mandali, along with quantitative data from a structured survey of 445 women from small-holder cattle-rearing households, was analyzed. The findings suggest that due to social distancing regulations, WhatsApp groups became popular platforms to disseminate information. However, these groups systematically excluded illiterate women and women from marginalised castes, who often did not have access to mobile phones. Even in cases where information was disseminated door-to-door by community health workers, they excluded marginalised caste women, citing geographical barriers, thereby reproducing existing intersectional inequities. The study also explores the challenges faced by daughters-in-law. Post-marriage surname changes created bureaucratic and institutional barriers to accessing food security schemes, as their new identity often remains undocumented. This results in a unique challenge: they face social stigma when accessing benefits from their parental home and documentation barriers in their marital household. Consequently, their inability to avail of food security schemes reduces the household's total food supply. In patriarchal settings, where daughters-in-law typically eat last, this often means they are left with insufficient food, impeding their resilience to food insecurity in times of crisis. This study highlights the critical need for inclusive social protection design to ensure equitable access to food security for all, especially during crises.

**Keywords:** Food security, gender, Gujarat, India, intersectionality, social protection