

Donkeys could help protect Ethiopian women from destitution, study finds

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Rubbish collecting in North Addis in Ethiopia Credit: The Donkey Sanctuary

Donkeys are vital to the lives of women in Ethiopia and could be the difference between destitution and modest survival, new research has found. The study also revealed that societal perception of donkeys as low-status animals has an impact on both the owners' lives and the well-being of the donkeys.

The findings of the University of Bristol led study, [published](#) in *Society & Animals*, are being released to coincide with the United Nations' International Day of Rural Women on Sunday 15 October 2023.

Researchers analyzed the responses of 137 participants who worked with donkeys from 12 workshops to understand how humans value and treat their donkey co-workers. Despite the lower status of donkeys in comparison to other domesticated animals, such as cows, their contribution was valued by both female and male co-workers.

Through their work, donkeys can help their human co-workers sustain and improve their livelihoods by helping them to earn an income, send their children to school, acquire land and contribute to savings schemes. They make a vital contribution to women's domestic work and substantially reduce the physical burden of carrying water, firewood, and crops from the fields to homesteads.

However, the study also revealed that both donkeys and their human co-workers experience marginalization by the wider population and their communities, and this was most keenly felt by poorer women in rural areas. Both are subjugated, given lower status, their labor under recognized and undervalued.

Importantly, the study also demonstrated that while owning a donkey can be the difference between modest survival and destitution, the bond formed between women and their donkeys was based on more than just utility—one woman described her donkey as 'a member of my family',

and another as 'my friend'.

Supporting these women by giving them access to employment opportunities, education, and donkey welfare programs, has the potential to improve the lives of both women and donkeys. It is also possible to elevate the status of both by highlighting the value they bring to their communities and broader Ethiopian society.

Martha Geiger in the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), formerly at the University of Bristol, and corresponding author, said, "We hope our work brings attention to the nuances and complexities of human and donkey lives in Ethiopia, where both work in often difficult circumstances in harsh environments at the margins of society, with little protection or support from the state."

"Our research highlights the important, but often under-recognized and undervalued labor women perform with donkeys to support their families. When my fieldwork revealed that donkeys and women were equated and that their alignment affected both their respective social status and well-being it became clear to what degree both women and donkeys are marginalized."

"This research underscores the important and valuable role donkeys play in the lives of poor women who are often the most disadvantaged in their communities. Donkeys and their labor should therefore be considered within development work that is focused on elevating the status of women."

Becky Whay, Vice-President International and Professor of Sustainable Global Animal Welfare at the University of Galway, formerly at the University of Bristol, and one of the co-authors, added, "When I first heard the quote 'Women and donkeys are the same, they both like to be

beaten', it caused a feeling of physical shock. That shock has never gone away and reminds me why research which gives a voice to these issues is so important."

"The link between the social status of women and donkeys also highlights the opportunity for partnerships between animal welfare organizations and NGOs who focus on the empowerment of women, to deliver mutually beneficial interventions."

Dr. Faith Burden, Executive Director of Equine Operations at The Donkey Sanctuary, explained: "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. This study demonstrates the crucial economic and social role donkeys play in some of the most marginalized communities in Ethiopia."

"Donkeys and the communities that depend on them, in Africa and around the world, are currently under threat from the growing demand for ejiao, a traditional Chinese remedy made from donkey-skin gelatin. "

"Around 4.8 million donkeys are slaughtered each year to meet this demand, and the decimation of China's own donkey population has led skin traders to target countries like Ethiopia to meet this growing demand. It's crucially important that governments enforce legislation to protect their precious donkey populations and the citizens who rely on them."

Dr. Getachew Mulugeta, Senior Global Researcher at The Donkey Sanctuary Ethiopia said, "These animals are often invisible, ignored by governments and policymakers despite their huge number and immense socio-economic contribution. The main reason, often raised, is the lack of in-depth quantitative socio-[economic studies](#) that show their

contribution to a country's GDP."

"I believe studies such as this are invaluable and contribute to making these animals more visible, not only to the communities and the government, but also to the scientific community. Further in-depth study is needed—not only of their socioeconomic value, but also the health and welfare of these animals. Poor welfare often hampers their working efficiency and reproductive performance, which can have a direct or indirect impact on the livelihoods of donkey-dependent and resource-limited communities."

Gebre Engida from the College of Veterinary Medicine at Addis Ababa University, said, "Donkeys are the backbone for the livelihoods of rural communities in Ethiopia where there is little access to clean water in the dry season. The typography of the land and distances make this task even harder. People must travel long distances to find water and this responsibility falls on the [rural women](#). So, donkeys are the only means of reducing this burden, the time and effort they spend collecting water."

Ethiopia has the largest donkey population of any country and is home to approximately 19 percent of the estimated global donkey population of 45.8 million. Despite their important contribution to many of Ethiopia's impoverished communities, donkeys remain absent from government animal health and welfare policies and are overlooked in sustainable development goals.

The researchers suggest their research could be included in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The contribution of donkeys is significant to many of the goals and currently policymakers don't recognize, protect or support the role of [donkeys](#) in delivery of the SDGs. The study's findings could inform the thinking of governments, especially when donkey populations are vulnerable and under pressure.

More information: Martha Geiger et al, Being with Donkeys: Insights into the Valuing and Wellbeing of Donkeys in Central Ethiopia, *Society & Animals* (2023). [DOI: 10.1163/15685306-bja10134](https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-bja10134)

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