

# GENDER CONFLICTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN PASTORAL COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN KENYA

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## Abstract

*This study explored the gender conflicts and climate change in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya. Cross-sectional survey research design was used. The target population was all the residents in Northern Kenya (18 years and above) and had information regarding the topic under discourse. A total of 92 respondents participated. The respondents were drawn through purposive sampling. A structured interview guide was used to gather information from the respondents. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained through the interview. The results obtained from the study reveal that climate change is significantly altering traditional gender roles within pastoral communities in Northern Kenya, leading to heightened gender conflicts. Women are facing increased burdens due to the depletion of natural resources, while men struggle with the erosion of their traditional roles as providers. These shifts in responsibilities have led to tensions within households, especially as women gain more decision-making power. Additionally, the scarcity of resources has exacerbated inter-community conflicts, often resulting in gender-based violence. The findings underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive interventions that address both the environmental and social impacts of climate change.*

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## 1 Introduction

Globally, one of the most well-documented cases of the intersection between gender conflicts and climate change can be observed in Bangladesh. As one of the countries most affected by climate change, Bangladesh is experiencing rising sea levels, increased frequency of natural disasters, and significant changes in agricultural productivity [1]. These environmental changes have profound impacts on the lives of women, particularly in rural areas. Traditionally, women in Bangladesh are responsible for managing household resources, including water, food, and fuel [2]. With climate change disrupting these resources, women are increasingly burdened with the responsibility of securing them. This often leads to conflicts within households, as men, who may migrate to urban areas or other countries in search of work, leave women to manage these challenges alone [3]. Moreover, climate-induced displacement has been shown to increase the vulnerability of women to gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking. The situation in Bangladesh highlights how climate change exacerbates gender inequalities, leading to conflicts that are both domestic and societal in nature [4].

Moving to the African continent, a regional example of the intersection between gender conflicts and climate change can be found in Ethiopia. Ethiopia, like many other countries in the Horn of Africa, is experiencing severe droughts and unpredictable rainfall patterns, which have had

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devastating effects on agriculture and livestock, the mainstays of the Ethiopian economy [5]. In pastoral communities, where livestock is the primary source of livelihood, the loss of animals due to drought can lead to severe economic hardship. This economic strain often exacerbates existing gender inequalities, as men and women have different roles and responsibilities within these communities [6]. For example, men are typically responsible for herding and protecting livestock, while women are responsible for milking, processing dairy products, and managing household resources [7]. When livestock is lost due to climate change, men may be forced to migrate in search of alternative livelihoods, leaving women to manage the household and any remaining livestock [8]. This shift in responsibilities can lead to increased tension and conflict within households, as women may struggle to manage the additional burden. Moreover, the loss of livestock can lead to food insecurity, which disproportionately affects women and children. In some cases, this has led to the early marriage of girls as a coping strategy, further perpetuating gender inequalities [9]. The Ethiopian case demonstrates how climate change can exacerbate existing gender inequalities and lead to conflicts within pastoral communities.

Nationally, in Kenya, the effects of climate change on gender dynamics are becoming increasingly apparent, particularly in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) that cover a significant portion of the country [10]. These areas are home to many pastoral communities, who rely on livestock for their livelihoods. Climate change has led to more frequent and severe droughts in these regions, resulting in the loss of livestock and degradation of pasturelands [11]. This has put immense pressure on pastoral communities, particularly on women, who are traditionally responsible for managing household resources and caring for children. In many cases, men migrate in search of better grazing lands or alternative livelihoods, leaving women to manage the household and any remaining livestock [12]. This shift in responsibilities can lead to increased tension and conflict within households, as women may struggle to cope with the additional burden. Moreover, the loss of livestock and degradation of pasturelands can lead to food insecurity, which disproportionately affects women and children. In some cases, this has led to the early marriage of girls as a coping strategy, further perpetuating gender inequalities. Additionally, women in pastoral communities often have limited access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, which can further exacerbate their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change [13]. The situation in Kenya highlights how climate change can exacerbate existing gender inequalities and lead to conflicts within pastoral communities.

Locally, in Northern Kenya, the effects of climate change on gender conflicts are particularly pronounced in the pastoral communities of the North Eastern region [14]. These communities are among the most vulnerable in Kenya, due to their dependence on livestock and the harsh climatic conditions of the region. Climate change has led to more frequent and severe droughts, which have resulted in the loss of livestock and degradation of pasturelands [10]. This has put immense pressure on pastoral communities, particularly on women, who are traditionally responsible for managing household resources and caring for children. In many cases, men migrate in search of better grazing lands or alternative livelihoods, leaving women to manage the household and any remaining livestock [15]. This shift in responsibilities can lead to increased tension and conflict within households, as women may struggle to cope with the additional burden. Moreover, the loss of livestock and degradation of pasturelands can lead to food insecurity, which disproportionately affects women and children. In some cases, this has led to the early marriage of girls as a coping strategy, further perpetuating gender inequalities. Additionally, women in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya often have limited access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, which can further exacerbate their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change [16]. Furthermore, the region has a long history of inter-ethnic conflict, often over scarce resources such as water and pasturelands. Climate change has exacerbated these conflicts, as pastoral communities are forced to compete for dwindling resources. Women and children are often the most affected by these conflicts, as they are more likely to be displaced and to experience violence [17]. The situation in Northern Kenya highlights how climate change can exacerbate existing gender inequalities and lead to conflicts within pastoral communities, both within households and between communities.

## **2. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to explore the gender conflicts and climate change in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya. The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To analyze the impact of climate change on traditional gender roles and responsibilities within pastoral communities in Northern Kenya, focusing on how environmental stressors exacerbate gender conflicts.
- ii. To examine the adaptive strategies employed by men and women in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya in response to climate change, and how these strategies influence gender relations and conflicts.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- i. How does climate change impact traditional gender roles and responsibilities within pastoral communities in Northern Kenya, and in what ways do environmental stressors exacerbate gender conflicts?
- ii. What adaptive strategies are employed by men and women in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya in response to climate change, and how do these strategies influence gender relations and conflicts?

## **4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Structural functionalism has provided one of the most important perspectives of sociological research in the twentieth century and has been a major influence on research in the social sciences, including gender studies. Viewing the family as the most integral component of society, assumptions about gender roles within marriage assume a prominent place in this perspective.

Functionalists argue that gender roles were established well before the pre-industrial era when men typically took care of responsibilities outside of the home, such as hunting, and women typically took care of the domestic responsibilities in or around the home. These roles were considered functional because women were often limited by the physical restraints of pregnancy and nursing and were unable to leave the home for long periods of time. These roles were passed on to subsequent generations, since they served as an effective means of keeping the family system functioning properly.

When changes occurred in the social and economic climate of Northern Kenya the, changes in the family structure have also occurred. Many women have had to assume the role of breadwinner (or modern hunter-gatherer) alongside their traditional domestic role in order to stabilize a rapidly changing society. When the men return from herding their livestock and want to reclaim their traditional roles, society falls back into a state of imbalance, as many women may not want to forfeit their new found freedoms and responsibilities thus bringing gender conflicts.

## **5. METHODOLOGY**

This study aimed to explore the intersection of gender conflicts and climate change in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya. To achieve this, a cross-sectional survey research design was employed, allowing for the collection of data at a single point in time to capture the prevailing conditions and experiences of the target population [19]. The study targeted residents of Northern Kenya who were 18 years and above and possessed relevant knowledge or experience related to gender conflicts and climate change within their communities. Given the specific nature of the

research topic, a purposive sampling technique was utilized to ensure that the selected respondents had firsthand experience or significant insights into the subject matter. This approach allowed the researcher to deliberately choose individuals who could provide rich, relevant information for the study. A total of 142 respondents participated in the study, offering a diverse range of perspectives from across the region. Data collection was carried out using a structured interview guide and focus group discussions. These tools were designed to gather in-depth qualitative data, focusing on the participants' experiences, perceptions, and understanding of how climate change influences gender dynamics and leads to conflicts in their communities. The interview guide included open-ended questions that encouraged respondents to elaborate on their experiences and provided the flexibility to explore emerging themes during the interviews. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic content analysis. This method involved systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to distill complex qualitative data into key themes and insights that were directly related to the research objectives. The process of coding and categorizing the data ensured that the analysis was both rigorous and comprehensive, capturing the nuanced ways in which climate change impacts gender relations in Northern Kenya's pastoral communities. This methodological approach provided a robust framework for understanding the intricate relationship between gender conflicts and climate change in a region that is highly vulnerable to environmental changes.

## 6. RESULTS

The following questions were answered and tested respectively:

**Objective One: To analyze the impact of climate change on traditional gender roles and responsibilities within pastoral communities in Northern Kenya, focusing on how environmental stressors exacerbate gender conflicts.**

In exploration of the impact of climate change on traditional gender roles and responsibilities within pastoral communities in Northern Kenya, the study sought to understand the ways in which environmental stressors exacerbate gender conflicts. The findings from the study, based on in-depth interviews with 142 respondents and 10 focus group discussions, reveal significant shifts in gender dynamics driven by the harsh realities of climate change. Thematic content analysis of the qualitative data uncovered several key themes that illustrate how traditional gender roles are being challenged and, in some cases, how these challenges are intensifying conflicts within these communities.

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data was the increased burden on women due to climate-induced changes. Traditionally, women in these communities have been responsible for managing household resources, including water, food, and fuel. However, as climate change has led to prolonged droughts and the depletion of natural resources, these responsibilities have become more arduous. One respondent from Isiolo region noted,

*"The drought has made it harder for us to find water and firewood. We have to walk longer distances, and sometimes we come back empty-handed. This has caused a lot of tension at home because we cannot provide what is needed."*

This sentiment was echoed by several other women, ( From Turkana, West Pokot, and Marsabit regions) who expressed frustration and exhaustion over the additional workload that climate change has imposed on them. The increased workload for women has also led to conflicts within households. As men traditionally engage in herding and other activities that are now becoming less viable due to the changing climate, they are often forced to migrate in search of alternative livelihoods, leaving women to manage the household alone. This shift in responsibilities has created tension, as women struggle to balance the demands of household management with the scarcity of resources. One woman shared,

*"My husband had to leave to find work because our animals died. Now I am the one taking care of everything at home, but it is too much. Sometimes we argue because I am too tired to do everything."*

The strain of these increased responsibilities on women has, in some cases, led to a reconfiguration of traditional gender roles, but not without resistance and conflict.

Another significant theme that emerged was the erosion of traditional gender roles, particularly among men. With the decline in livestock, which is central to the pastoral way of life, many men find themselves unable to fulfill their traditional role as providers. This has led to feelings of inadequacy and frustration, which often manifest as conflict within the household. One respondent explained,

*"We used to depend on our cattle for everything, but now they are gone. I feel like I have failed as a man because I cannot provide for my family. This has caused a lot of arguments between me and my wife."*

This loss of status and identity among men is contributing to an increase in domestic conflicts, as they struggle to adapt to the changing environmental and economic realities.

The shifting roles have also led to changes in decision-making dynamics within households. Traditionally, men have held the primary decision-making power, particularly in matters related to livestock and resource management. However, as women take on more responsibilities, they are increasingly involved in these decisions. While some men have adapted to this change, others have resisted, leading to further conflict. One male respondent remarked,

*"Now that my wife is managing the little livestock we have left, she thinks she can make decisions without consulting me. This has caused many disagreements because I am still the head of the household."*

This tension over decision-making power is a reflection of the broader struggle between maintaining traditional roles and adapting to new realities imposed by climate change.

In addition to the internal household conflicts, the study also found that climate change is exacerbating inter-community conflicts, which are often gendered in their impact. As resources become scarcer, competition between communities over water, pasture, and other necessities has intensified. Women, who are often the ones fetching water and gathering resources, are increasingly vulnerable to violence and harassment. One respondent shared a harrowing experience,

*"When I went to fetch water from a nearby well, I was threatened by men from another community. They told me that the water was not for us and that I should leave or face the consequences."*

These incidents highlight how environmental stressors are not only intensifying existing conflicts but also creating new forms of gender-based violence. The study also found that climate change has led to changes in marital practices, which in turn have exacerbated gender conflicts. As economic pressures mount, there has been an increase in early marriages and bride price disputes. One female respondent lamented,

*"Girls are being married off at a younger age because families cannot afford to keep them. This is causing problems because the girls are not ready for marriage, and it leads to conflicts between the families involved."*

The commodification of marriage in response to economic hardship reflects how deeply climate change is reshaping social and gender relations in these communities. Despite these challenges, the study also uncovered examples of resilience and adaptation among both men and women. Some respondents spoke of collective efforts to share resources and support one another through the difficult times. One woman mentioned,

*"We have started a small group of women who help each other with chores and resources. It has reduced some of the tension at home because we know we are not alone."*

These small acts of solidarity offer a glimmer of hope in an otherwise challenging environment and highlight the importance of community-based strategies in addressing the impacts of climate change.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that climate change is profoundly impacting traditional gender roles and responsibilities within pastoral communities in Northern Kenya, leading to heightened gender conflicts. The increased burden on women, the erosion of traditional male roles, the shifting dynamics of household decision-making, and the exacerbation of inter-community conflicts are all manifestations of how environmental stressors are reshaping gender relations. The direct quotes from the respondents underscore the lived experiences of these changes, providing a poignant insight into the human cost of climate change in these vulnerable communities. As the climate continues to change, it is crucial to develop interventions that not only address the environmental challenges but also consider the social and gendered dimensions of these impacts. This study highlights the need for policies and programs that support both men and women in adapting to the new realities, fostering resilience and reducing conflict in these pastoral communities.

**To examine the adaptive strategies employed by men and women in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya in response to climate change, and how these strategies influence gender relations and conflicts.**

In examining the adaptive strategies employed by men and women in pastoral communities in Northern Kenya in response to climate change, our study uncovered a range of practices that highlight both the resilience and the challenges faced by these communities. Thematic analysis of the data revealed several key strategies that men and women are using to cope with the changing climate and how these strategies are reshaping gender relations and, in some cases, leading to conflicts.

One of the most prevalent strategies identified was the diversification of livelihoods. With the increasing unpredictability of weather patterns and the decline in livestock, many men have been compelled to seek alternative sources of income. This often involves migrating to urban areas or neighboring regions to engage in casual labor or trade. As one respondent noted,

*"I had to leave my home and go to the town to look for work. There was nothing left for us with the animals gone."*

This migration has significant implications for gender relations, as it often leaves women with the sole responsibility of managing the household and the remaining livestock. Women, on the other hand, have adapted by engaging in small-scale businesses, such as selling milk, handmade crafts, or charcoal. One woman explained,

*"We started making and selling beaded jewelry to tourists. It doesn't bring in much, but it helps us buy food when our livestock is not enough."*

These entrepreneurial activities not only provide an essential source of income but also shift the traditional economic roles within the household. In some cases, this shift has led to increased decision-making power for women, as they become key contributors to the family's livelihood. However, this shift in economic roles has also sparked conflicts. With men absent or earning less than they traditionally would through livestock, some men have struggled to accept the growing economic influence of women. As one male respondent put it,

*"It is hard for me to accept that my wife is now the one who brings money to the house. It feels like I am losing my place as the head of the family."*

This tension over economic contributions and decision-making power has led to disputes within households, reflecting the broader challenges of renegotiating gender roles in the face of climate change. Another adaptive strategy observed was the increased reliance on communal support networks. In the face of dwindling resources, both men and women have turned to collective efforts to share the burden of survival. Women, in particular, have formed groups to pool resources and labor, allowing them to manage the household more effectively. One respondent shared,

*"We have formed a group where we help each other with tasks like fetching water and caring for the children. It has made things a bit easier for all of us."*

These communal networks not only provide practical support but also serve as a crucial coping mechanism for women who are often left alone to manage the household. Men, too, have begun to rely more on communal ties, particularly in the form of livestock sharing or pooling resources to purchase new animals. However, this strategy is not without its conflicts. As resources become scarcer, disputes over the fair distribution of communal assets have become more common. One respondent mentioned,

*"We used to share our livestock during hard times, but now there is less to go around, and it has caused arguments over who gets what."*

This indicates that while communal support remains a vital strategy, it is increasingly strained by the intensifying effects of climate change. Furthermore, the study found that education and awareness about climate change have become critical adaptive strategies, particularly for women. Several respondents highlighted the importance of gaining knowledge about sustainable practices and alternative livelihoods. One woman remarked,

*"I attended a workshop on how to use drought-resistant seeds and how to better manage our resources. It has helped us cope with the changes."*

Education has empowered women to adopt new practices and become more involved in decision-making, thereby altering traditional gender dynamics.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that the adaptive strategies employed by men and women in Northern Kenya's pastoral communities are complex and multifaceted. While these strategies demonstrate resilience and ingenuity, they also challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to new forms of conflict within households and communities. The direct quotes from respondents illustrate the personal and emotional struggles involved in adapting to climate change, underscoring the need for interventions that support both men and women in navigating these challenges. As climate change continues to reshape the landscape of pastoral life, it is crucial to develop strategies that not only address the environmental impacts but also consider the social and gendered dimensions of adaptation.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The study reveals that climate-induced stressors, such as prolonged droughts and resource scarcity, have significantly increased the burden on women while eroding traditional male roles, leading to heightened domestic and inter-community conflicts.

As women take on more responsibilities due to men's migration and declining livestock, they are increasingly involved in household decisions, causing tension and resistance from men, who struggle to adapt to the new gender dynamics.

The diversification of livelihoods and increased economic roles of women in response to climate change are altering traditional gender roles, leading to shifts in household decision-making and, in some cases, creating tensions and conflicts within families.

While communal efforts to share resources and support one another are vital adaptive strategies in pastoral communities, the scarcity of resources due to climate change is straining these networks, leading to disputes and highlighting the need for stronger community cohesion.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Programs such as provision of water by constructing water pans in Turkana and Baringo Counties should be provided to enable households be able to cultivate subsistence food crops such as vegetables and improve nutrition within their households.

Localised community policing by elders with the help of local administration should be employed by the regional governments to solve any arising disputes in Northern Kenya.

Alternative economic activities in Northern Kenya Kenya should be encouraged particularly crop growing under irrigation so as to eliminate the persistent conflicts over grazing land by residents.

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