

Gender in light of livelihood trends in the Karamoja Cluster

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Elizabeth Stites, PhD
Feinstein International Center, Tufts University

Overview

When we talk about gender, we often end up discussing simply women, or women versus men. When we think about gender and pastoralism, we may think about men controlling livestock and women controlling milk. When we think about gender and agro-pastoralism, we think about men engaging in livestock production while women pursue cultivation. In reality, however, gender in pastoral and agro-pastoral societies is much more complex and dynamic than these dichotomies imply—and always has been (Hodgson, 2000). We cannot examine gender in isolation, but rather as one the multiple and often overlapping identities that may be just as or more important than the gender binary. These intersecting identities include: young and old, ethnic/tribal/or territorial groups, the poor and better-off, married and unmarried, initiated and uninitiated, those with cattle and those without, those with access to natural resources and those without, those who engage in the market and those who do not, those are sedentarised and those who pursue transhumance, urban and rural, and educated and non-educated—to name just a few. The experiences of men and women differ within and across each of these categories.

An analysis of gender is an analysis of power. In the complex categories listed above, we can imagine how power plays out. These relations are not just between women and men, but also among different men and among different women. We can consider, for instance, power dynamics and interactions between urban and rural men, between young and old men, between officially and unofficially married women, between educated and uneducated youth, between those who have cows and those who do not. These categories themselves are not static, but are rather in a constant state of change, negotiation, and reformulation. Both the categories shift—e.g., the relative state of poverty, of being educated, or of being urban—and the group of people who inhabit the categories changes. As these shifts occur, so too do their inherent gender relations and power dynamics.

Economic systems in the Karamoja Cluster of today are diverse and dynamic, extending far beyond simple control over livestock versus milk or responsibility for livestock versus gardens. This paper examines the overlap between shifting livelihoods and gender roles in an attempt to understand current trends in the region. This paper focuses on the gendered impacts of several broad processes across the region, including the decline of pastoral production, commercialization and sedentarisation. Migration, another widespread trend with important gender implications, is covered briefly here as an adaptive strategy and is covered in more depth in an accompanying paper.

Shifts away from pastoral production

A number of shocks and stresses have taken a toll on pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods in the Karamoja Cluster in recent years. In response, many households have diversified—by choice or necessity—into non-livestock sectors. Economic activities include wage labor in towns, cultivation, and sale of natural resources; women play a dominant role in many of these activities. At the same time, patterns of animal loss and growing inequity of herd size are pushing many men out of their traditional

roles within animal husbandry. The combination of these processes means that women's economic contribution has increased in many locations, and they have become the primary providers in numerous households across the broader region.

The increased economic role for women at the household level may have strengthened their independence and social standing. Research with the Turkana in Kenya finds that women who are successful at generating income are often admired. At the same time, however, very high rates of intimate partner domestic violence prevail in many locations. In the case of Karamoja, some analysts see a link between high rates of domestic violence and declining opportunities for men coupled with women's growing economic role.

The loss of livestock and associated duties has a profound impact on the notion and nature of masculinity in the region. Although deferential in authority to their male elders, young men were the pillars of their communities as the caretakers of the herds. In this role, they were both the providers and the protectors, and their protective reach extended to both animals and humans. With the decline in livestock numbers across the region and growing inequity in animal ownership, many young men have lost this position and associated status. Furthermore, the loss of animals has implications for important life-events and processes, including marriage, initiation, and ritual exchange.

Commercialization

Commercialization and monetization of pastoral economies are occurring, to varying degrees, across the Karamoja Cluster. These processes vary by context and location but always affect men and women differently. Commercialization has allowed new actors to engage in the markets, including in the livestock sector. Although still dominated by men, women are increasingly visible at livestock markets, and not only making distress sales. Commercialization has brought new opportunities for women, but also detriments. Increased use of cash may crowd out barter, which women often dominate. In addition, commercialization has increased wealth differentials and economic stratification in many areas, further complicating gender relations.

Women engage in commercial exchanges in different ways than men, and may be more willing to try out different options for entrepreneurship and diversification. At the same time, women in many areas may face greater difficulties in accessing assets and resources than their male counterparts. Men have also engaged with the market economy in new ways in parallel to the market expansion. Some have found work in the expanding trading sectors, while others have expanded into artisanal mining, casual wage labor, and service provision. Growing urban centers in pastoral areas draw men and women, particularly young people, from rural areas. These areas offer the promise of economic opportunity, improved access to services, and exposure to modern amenities. Many of the livelihood opportunities are not, however, sustainable over the long term.

Sedentarisation

The increased sedentarisation of pastoralists is common across the Karamoja Cluster. The nature of this process differs widely by location, with implications by wealth group as well as gender. For example, in Karamoja it may be those who have been pushed out of pastoralism that move into crop production, whereas in the case of private farms and ranches it is more likely to be the better off (or outsiders

entirely) who benefit. In either case, the agrarian areas often overlap with grazing or natural resources locations, and can cut people off from pasture and other resources.

Although sedentarisation of pastoralists generally has negative livelihood and development outcomes, such analyses may miss variations in impact by group. Women may benefit from living closer together and may have better access to health care and education. At the same time, women may have to travel farther to access natural resources and may bear the burden of increased crop production. However, women in some areas have greater influence over income from crops than income from other sources. Women are also more likely to control cash from their wage labor and entrepreneurial activities, including petty trade and brewing.

Some research shows that gender-specific spheres of responsibility and influence are becoming less defined due to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. Men and women who spend more time living together may also increasingly share household decision-making and are more likely to partake in activities typically associated with the opposite gender. On the other hand, more time in the same location, coupled with economic stress and the erosion of the masculine norm, may contribute to the high rates of domestic violence in the region.

Migration and adaptation

Intra-household migration strategies are a form of adaptation to both periodic shocks and longer-term livelihood change. In times of livestock abundance, migration of individuals within the household primarily entailed young men heading to the kraals with the herds in the dry season. Various systems of individual migration existed to ensure adequate access to animal protein for the most vulnerable or to lessen household burdens during lean times. The decline in widespread pastoral production have made these decisions more complex. Making ends meet often involves household splitting or migration of specific individuals. As gender roles and responsibilities become more dynamic, so too do decision making about these roles. Such migrations may be temporary or long-term, and have implications based on gender, wealth, individual status, and household demographics.

The increased enrollment of children in school arises from a growing urban population but is also an indication of longer-term adaptations. Parents are recognizing that educated children are more likely to find employment and to support their parents in the future. As with migration, intra-household educational strategies are gendered, though how such decisions are made may vary from one household to the next. There is at times a bias expressed against sending girls to school because the investment is considered “lost” once they marry into another family. Many households, however, make the decision based on labor needs. A household with livestock will keep some sons out of school to herd, and a household with many younger children may keep an older daughter home to help with domestic duties. Education becomes part of diversification, risk-mitigation, and hedging bets against the future.

Implications for Resilience

Shifts in livelihoods across the Karamoja Cluster are unlikely to reverse course. Inequity of livestock ownership will continue to rise, lands will becoming increasingly privatized, pressures on natural resources will grow. Urban areas will expand simultaneously, as will networks of trade, exchange, and migration from pastoral areas to other parts of the region. At present, vulnerability is on the increase in many such locations, as people struggle to adjust to a changing economic and ecological environment.

Gender roles are up-ended and the generational divide is vast. Policies, norms, and values, however, can evolve and adapt in response to these changes. Already, more men are farming, more women are trading animals at the markets, and more children are going to school. A generation ago, these things were unheard of in many locations across the region. Gender roles and the changes therein are at the root of all social interactions and exchanges. If we look at these adaptations and their gender implications as areas of potential growth and promise instead of sources of vulnerability, we can see resilience in action and hope for the future.

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