Reviewing the role of women pastoralist in conflicts in the Horn of Africa

Kenneth Victor Odary,  Everlyne Komba, Walter Nyamato,
1 Police Reform Working Group, Kenya & MyRita Consultants, knnthodary@gmail.com, Nairobi, Kenya
2 County Government of Kajiado & Egerton University, evakomba@gmail.com, Nairobi, Kenya
3 National Police Service & Tangaza University, nyamatowalter@gmail.com, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

The Horn of Africa has seen its fair share of natural resource conflicts among and between competing pastoralists communities. The conflicts hitherto associated with men, ignored women pastoralists' role in the same conflict. Using an existing data and an open-ended qualitative approach the study sought answers on the role of women pastoralists in conflict in the horn of Africa. Results show that women have a hand in conflict either by offering active or passive support. The review takes note that women's involvement in conflict has evolved to peace-building. In conclusion, the study notes women play a role in conflict which however remains under-valued. Further, the emerging spaces occupied by women led conflict mediation has yet to challenge institutionalized discrimination of both traditional and contemporary systems by way of strong women movements. Therefore the study recommends the need for policies that support more inclusivity including adoption of better integration and harnessing of conflict mechanisms to benefit women.

Keywords:
Gender
Women
Conflicts
Pastoralists
Movements
Peace

Received in : 7-09-2019
Reviewed in : 3-10-2020
Accepted in : 15-11-2020
Published in: 30-11-2020
1. INTRODUCTION

Pastoralist communities living in the borderlands between Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia, occupy a fragile conflict affected environment (competing interests, claims and tensions) over natural resources. These communities include the Gabraa, Borana, Dasanech, Rendille and Hammer referred to as the Oromiya cluster populous in South Omo Zone, Ethiopia and North Horr Sub-county Kenya. To the west is the Mandera Triangle also referred to as Somali cluster, a geographical region in the Horn of Africa where Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia borders converge. It is almost entirely inhabited by Somali communities consisting of Garre, Degodia and Ajuran populous in North-Eastern Kenya and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. To the East is the Karamoja cluster comprising of the Turkana and Pokot from Kenya, the Dodoth, Jie and Karamojong from Uganda, the Toposa from South Sudan and the Merille from Ethiopia. The ‘Karamoja Cluster is inhabited by pastoralist communities sharing the same ethnic roots and the Ateker language.

![Map of the region](image)

**Figure 1**

1.2 Shared Characteristics

Among these pastoral communities their livelihood, social and economic life revolve around livestock. More recently agro-pastoralism and trade has gained currency. Communities in this region share almost identical socio-cultural values such as heroism associated with cattle rustling and killing of opponent ethnic group, clan, or revenge attacks. There is also a hallowed attachment by Pastoralists’ communities to their cattle, believing that they rightfully belong to each respective community. There is also the aspect of shared language stemming from common ancestry or intelligible dialects. Another characteristic is the shared historical burden of marginalization coupled with the harsh climate conditions, where people have to struggle to meet basic needs in an environment where resources are scarce. The pastoral communities have to cope with livestock diseases and reduced availability of land and water following desertification/changing climatic conditions, bush encroachment, soil erosion, and population growth, political and economic marginalization.
Pastoralists also share distinct disrespect for national and international boundaries. Land in the pastoral community is collectively and communally owned, limited only by whether the land is owned by the community or not. Thus, the communities’ seasonal mobility, makes them encounter each other. Consequently there have always been conflicts between different communities living in the border regions, involving cattle rustling, grazing rights and water making many conflicts in this region, distinct, and related. Disputes have occurred in this region for ages, however in the last five decades with the influx of modern weaponry, the conflict has led to an arms race with deadly consequences. Notably is the rise of frequent raiding of livestock, by small groups for quick sale on the black market for cash. This pillaging of livestock has become commercialized, so much so that powerful elite are alleged to have become involved.

Among these pastoral communities, patriarchy remains a resilient social cultural defining characteristic. Strong cultural norms run deep and define roles for both men and women. In this context, literature has tended to portray pastoralist’s men as the natural leaders and decision makers while the women, vassals with no say except to perpetuate traditional culture upon which patriarchy is founded. As a result, gender inequality is thought to be deeply entrenched in these societies since women are limited from being given the space to input into important discussions happening within the community on matters of development, economic growth, food resources, conflict and peace-building. This is coupled by the fact that women who are mostly illiterate, remain unaware of their rights. Their participation in decisions affecting their lives and their ability and confidence to assert their rights is considerably low while the protracted conflict exacerbates their exclusion. This overt lack of influence among women in the pastoralists communities has rendered them being portrayed as nothing more as victims of the conflicts plaguing the horn of Africa.

2. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY
This paper sought answers on the role played by women pastoralists in prior, during and after conflicts in the horn of Africa. The paper is informed by insights from gender and conflict studies that show conflict is a gendered experience. The study used both an existing data approach (EDA) and an open-ended qualitative approach, the study sought to answer what the role of pastoralist women is in conflict in the horn of Africa. The EDA data was obtained mainly from existing literature both published and unpublished. Some primary data was also secured through open-ended interviews with knowledgeable persons. A dozen Interviews were conducted in the counties of West Pokot, Marsabit, Mandera and Kakuma refugee camp in Turkana in Kenya. These areas are proximate to the international borders of Kenya with the Republic of Uganda, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. The analysis draws on the wide spectrum of views from literature and individuals.

2.1 Theoretical framework
Across the body of literature on gender, conflict and peace the relationship between women and peace has gained prominence. In this regard, feminist scholars and gender activists studying and/or working in conflict areas had long highlighted the need to focus on the roles played by men and women leading to peace. This notion is now embodied in the International recognition and acceptance of women’s inclusion in conflict/peace-building activities with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. The resolution recognizes that women: have been active in peace-building.
and conflict prevention; have rights to participate as decision makers at all levels in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peace-building processes. However, some feminist theorists have challenged the exclusion and marginalization of women’s experiences, voices, and perspectives from conflicts. Thus, the review applied a gender conflict analysis framework through which a woman is viewed both as a connector (mother of peace) and a divider (mother of war).

3. ROLE OF PASTORALIST WOMEN IN CONFLICT – DIVIDERS AND SPOILERS
The literature on conflict in the horn of Africa is extricable one sided with the portrayal of women as weak, needing male protection, through violence if necessary. This paper set out to examine the role played by women pastoralists prior, during and after the conflicts plaguing the horn of Africa particularly in the Karamoja cluster, Mandera triangle and Ormiya zone. The findings across the different clusters exhibit some defining characteristics and traits as discussed in the sections below.

3.1 Karamoja Cluster
Among communities in the Karamoja cluster, women are known to exploit their close marital and filial relationships. According to literature on pastoralist’s women, in their quest for prestige through marriage, contribute to conditions that exacerbate conflicts. In this regard, women have benefitted from payment of high bride wealth. According to respondents, the realization that they are of age, young women have been known to act as triggers for raiding parties by praising raiders who bring in the largest number of cattle while deriding those who fail. The result has been a cycle of cattle raids by young males. This is particularly common among the Turkana and Pokot. Notably, the Karamojong, believe that woman married to a man without enough cows and cannot raid, is at liberty to leave for someone more stable (Ninsiima 2006). Such cultural pressures by women are thought to be behind the escalating price of dowry and the resulting conflicts. So significant is this pressure that it has created a scramble among Karamoja cluster communities in South Sudan. According to a report by SHIA, 2011, this became a major contextual factor for the escalation of communal violence and conflict. According to the UN, in the first half of 2010 700 people had been killed and over 152,000 displaced as a result of conflicts over cattle. Watakila (2014) observed that in situations of conflict, women in pursuit of communal recognition encourage warrior folks to violent attacks. While respondents indicate that, among the Pokot, after the circumcision, the brave girls are considered mature women and are ready for marriage. Interested men seeking brides offer a symbolic walking stick, with the promise of delivering a certain number of cows. This according to respondents is what translates into conflicts. Equally, among the Pokot, women reward the brave warriors by decorating them with products of their own handicrafts such as jewellery. Closely related is the aspect of clannism and clan dynamics that are used to drive conflict which involve or require female collusion and cooperation. Tulel (2013) observes that social organization within the Pokot community is based on mutually reinforcing principle of agnatic descent and labour relations that ties women in conflict through contractual ties between the livestock and social status. Therefore, women are involved in pastoral production as they influence decisions on the need for raiding through their mockery of men who fear going to raid and praising brave warriors. From the experiences gathered from Pokot women revenge is also an important driver for their continued support of conflict. Closely related is Women’s nurturing role that is equally responsible for fanning the warrior culture. The role of preparing the next generation of warriors falls squarely on the laps of women. In this regard,
respondents indicated that Pokot women are charged with the singular responsibility of equipping boys as young as 3 years with firearm handling skills. The use of symbols is also common in the cluster, for instance, among the Karamojong, the woman wears a special cloth when her man is out on a raid. Similar practice is also said to be found among Pokot women who wear a birth belt called leketio, in the belief that a by wearing it a woman can protect her son from external harm of any kind. It is considered a powerful charm such that before a warrior sets out for a raid, each of them inform his mother to wear the belt. There is also a culture of keeping secrets by Karamojong women about the whereabouts of the men especially when on a mission. Among the Pokot, with the birth of first son, the man receives respect in Pokot society and the livestock is conceptually apportioned. The wife with a son gets a bigger share. Among the Pokot, women are considered the best medicine persons in the community while others have acted as seers called kapoloktin (Tulel, 2013). In the unlikely event of causalities occurring, it is these Women who tend to do the care for the invalid and the household at the same time. As culturally-designated caregivers, women must struggle to support their families and keep their households together when conflict occurs. This is worsened by the fact that the husbands and sons end up in the fighting and are unable to provide for their families. Thus women have normalized the consequences of conflict within their households.

3.2 Mandera Triangle

According to the respondents, it is said that among the Somali, arranged marriages are undertaken between an individual family and an individual fighter or leading militia member. A girl or young woman is offered in marriage to armed aggressors or potential aggressors in the hope that she and other family members will gain protection from further violence. Thus through marriage, the aggressors become protectors of the wife’s family. In this way, a woman may facilitate important alliances for her father’s clan or she may lose them and her offspring may end up as the new enemy. This eventuality is conveyed in the Somali proverb ‘a daughter is the enemy you are raising’. Also, among the Somali, loyalty to one’s clan is used to manipulate and mobilise individual clans against the others, and in some cases even among sub-clans of the same clan. Somali women often find themselves torn, as they are regarded as belonging to both their father’s and husband’s clans. While the identification of others by clan is not in itself a conflict trigger, it has become another major impediment to peace. Similarly, in the Mandera triangle, women are said to encourage men and boys to take up arms. According to a study by the life and peace institute, this is underscored by a Somali adage: ‘If a woman shakes her hair loose, it is worse than being hit by a spear’. According to various respondent accounts, women persuade and cajole those who are reluctant, sometimes by humiliating them in public or in private. They push men with words meant to gender shame and humiliate for instance accusing men and boys of being women. Some threaten their husbands that if defeated, they will go for the winning men forcing them to comply and fight. Another characteristic found among the Somali communities relates to family or clan lineage which is considered only as strong as its male numbers. Thus, Men embody clan honor and clan identity according to matrilineal lines of descent, or those inherited from a son’s father. Hence the customary celebration of the birth of male children by the entire community as opposed to female children while the women bearing male children are celebrated by other women and accorded social status. Women in
Mandera also stand accused of encouraging conflict using folklore[^1], despite the fact that they are more likely to suffer than men in the vent of conflict. According to respondents, dirges and songs in praise of heroes and demeaning perceived enemies are said to be common. These have sometimes been employed to drive conflict in Mandera triangle particularly using derogatory songs and inflammatory statements. Various forms of oral folklore have been used to provoke clan militias and prolong conflict in Mandera triangle. Creatively delivered insults targeting leaders and clan identities have been used to excite belligerents. Women, in particular, use a genre called Saar to praise their clans and to demean rival clans. Also noted in a study by the Life and Peace Institute, Women in the Mandera triangle have been known to take it upon themselves to demand revenge or to some extent undertake the rebuilding of the respective communities depleted warrior class (i.e. the male youth in a clan) to avenge their humiliation in future. Furthermore, according to respondents, women have been complicit and even instrumental in the rape of other women. In this role, womenfolk help identify who to target and urge their men folk to fight because ‘they want other women to be raped’.

### 3.4 Oromiya Zone

In the Oromoya zone, culture is also a key factor driving women to cause conflicts. In particular, this relates to the social norms that require men to rise to the defence of their sisters or close clans woman from harm. Thus, among the Hamer people, while bull jumping remains a unique culture and customs, marking a rite of passage for men and initiating boys into manhood, the ceremony is often marked by the symbolic whipping of female relatives to compliment the initiate while at the same time ensuring they get scars that give them a right to demand for help in future. According to respondents, this bond is what result into conflict to avenge the loss of close kin. In other instances, among some the Rendille pastoralist groups, one must kill a member of a contending group to get married. Thus, the Rendille, consider a young man who has yet commit a raid or kill as unworthy of feeding from the hands of a woman (even their own mother) (Watakila, 2014). Similar to other zones in the horn of Africa, pastoralist communities in Oromiya practice cattle raiding exhibiting some high degree of intertwining between nature of gender roles – both masculine and feminine – with other social and economic factors leading to conflict. For instance, among the Dasenach, women are known to ‘push their sons’ to raid to get cattle for dowry.’ As such a number of studies have shown that conflict in this zone has arisen whenever cattle raids against smaller unsecured communities are undertaken with a view of accumulating wealth. Women in this region encourage the youth by preparing meals, amulets for or after successful, raids that in the long run perpetuate the general state of insecurity. For women’s with sons, successful cattle raids translates to receiving a share from the spoils of conflict in the form of livestock. According to Tulel (2013) at this level, the woman’s control over the livestock is seen as important as she assumes the role of the custodian of her son’s future anticipatory inheritance. In return therefore, the woman is expected to make sure that the son, once grown is equally responsible and courageous to add to the livestock by raiding. In the longer term this leads to direct engagement in conflicts. According to Wright (2014), young men are not considered to be ‘men’ until they are married and men who have not gone on a cattle raid or who have failed to bring back cattle may be shamed in their communities. If

[^1]: Oral folklore including oral storytelling, fables, songs, poetry, and proverbs are one of the richest and best known features of Somali culture.
the flock available is not enough, it means that a man will remain a bachelor (Tulel 2013). This is considered shameful, a burden carried by the man’s mother who is blamed for her son’s failure. The study also found some interconnections between women and hero worship. Accordingly, respondents reported that the Gabra warriors sever the private parts of their victims and carry such home to the arousal welcome from their women. On the other hand, Dasanech combatants carry home blood-stained clothes of slain warriors to their women in elaborate ceremonies. Within the Boran community, women are also known to use jokes or play referred to as qoosa taapa to attack males. They also use folk songs to praise or ridicule social realities within Borana society. Though uncommon, respondents noted that women’s reproductive role also places at great risk of becoming targets of violence aimed at destroying a culture or community either through kidnapping, rape or death. This is especially so in situations where males are eliminated because they are enemies or as a way of either dishonoring communities or depriving it future capabilities to mount revenge.

4. WOMEN AS CONNECTORS

Women in this context are also critical in breaking the vicious and violent cycle of conflict. In both the literature and open ended interviews there is consensus that whatever their role may be, women bear the heaviest brunt during conflict. Further analysis of the literature and open ended interview accounts seemed to acknowledge the emergent role of women as peacemakers in many conflict situations. Disparate women across the communities found in the horn have utilized their feminine strength to negotiate peace. In these role women as non-combatants led the way in making peace. Even though women have gained increased space to act during a conflict, they tend to be marginalized and disempowered, and their access to power in post-conflict processes is restricted. In other case, their involvement has been largely through donor funded support. However, one initiative by Ms. Dekha Ibrahim a Somali from Wajir, Kenya, stands out as model for grassroots peace-building. Indeed the lesson from Wajir shows that women can leverage informal grassroots networks more easily than males. In this regard, through both maternal and marital links, a woman is better placed to leverage kinship groups beyond her primary one with her matrilineal kin unlike Men, who tend to align with only one strong kinship relationship. Whereas for a man the lifelong demonstration of clan loyalty is a must, for women, by just evoking the kinship that unites them, women are able to get much more from conflict situations such as negotiating safe passage for themselves and wounded clansmen through enemy-held territory or bring combatants to the negotiating table. While regional governments acting on their own motion or through the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) have recognized and are addressing the conflicts. Many reciprocal grazing agreements or peace writs have often been authored in official business and diplomatic language of English. This not only disadvantages women who are mostly illiterate but hands more power to men, who do the translating of the agreements. Furthermore, the place of women in peace is underscored by the symbolism that comes with being able to find

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2 Among the Somali, an older woman is respected and can take the lead in peace-making if she is wise, speaks the truth and is concerned with the welfare of all people, irrespective of clan or other allegiance.
3 Dekha's efforts exhibit the characteristics of women movements that are critical in creating change from individual to systematic levels both in informal and formal environments. This includes a constituency base, organization, political agenda, leadership from the constituency, joint actions, continuity over time and institutional and extra institutional strategies. More importantly are not donor driven.
4 Dekha Ibrahim first mobilized market women to discuss peace efforts that saw two warring Somali clans agree to sign a peace agreement under the Al-Fatah Declaration.
belonging across different clans and communities as a result of marriage. This is common among the Somali, where women are considered symbols of peace and the new life that comes with peace and stability. Hence young women are traditionally exchanged by warring clans who have reconciled. Exchanged to be married to one of their own clan’s former enemies, these brides are said to seal the peace – a traditional custom.

5. CONCLUSION

The studies discussed above provide insight on the links between women and conflict in general terms; overall, the evidence suggests that women are covert players in pastoral communal conflicts. Although the knowledge around the role of pastoralist’s women and conflict while available it is scattered. Notably, the evidence disproves the notion that the only important protagonists in conflict are male – women do take part in conflict, invoking, fueling and perpetuating conflict and violence in equal measure with men. In this regard, by virtue of their respective cultures, women automatically play an important role in conflicts. Similarly, their reproductive roles put women at the forefront of conflict. That apart from the foregoing roles, women engage in combat. Further, that pastoralist women’s role in conflict is intertwined with other socio-economic, roles that are easily overlooked. Whereas women pastoralists have carved out space to either precipitate conflict or negotiate peace this has yet to translate into their involvement in other important community matters. This includes issues to do with access, control and ownership of land and other community assets plus the gender inequities and harmful traditional practices which in the near future may spring another type of conflict. Therefore, there is need for better analysis on the roles women play in conflict-both positively and negatively with a view of granting them a greater say in charting solutions to the conflicts.

The review takes the view that while the role of women in peace has been rightly acknowledged and appreciated across board, however it lacks strategy. As such women initiated peace process in many parts of the horn have not grown into viable movements capable of addressing individual but also systemic issues that women generally face. The review shares the view that women generally still lack the collective social institutions available to men and are not politically confident. The review also notes that peace agreements are mostly framed in official business language of English that disadvantages Women who are less likely to know the content of such documents due to illiteracy. Also, a majority of women are never included in mediation or negotiations processes. Thus many agreements fall short of addressing matters to do with shared resources such as schools, health facilities or markets those are also likely to be considered important by women. Therefore the study recommends the need for policies and actions that;

National and sub-national governments

1. Support local women peace initiatives and movements, building their own capacities, by seeing women as untapped resources and dynamic elements of conflict prone societies.
2. Facilitate more grassroots women participation in conflict mediation and negotiations processes so that they can bargain for terms that are favorable to them.
3. Adopt a formalized mechanism for identifying and including women within local governance structures as a means to negotiate issues of access and control of community resources.

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4. Translate and create awareness of existing peace agreements into local languages/dialects to allow for greater involvement of women in implementation.

5. Improve the socio-economic and political environment of women through empowerment to mitigate gender power relations imposed by biased socio cultural practices.

Regional and International Actors

1. Build knowledge base on the role of pastoralist’s women in conflicts by setting up a dedicated learning institution that can serve the horn of Africa.

2. Regional and national conflict mitigation mechanisms to adopt a more visible preventative approach that is inclusive and cascaded to the grassroots level where more women are already involved.

3. Involve more women in formal peace processes at national, sub-regional and regional level as part of fulfilling UN resolution 1325 to enhance women/gender inclusivity.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors wish to thank the Africa Land Policy Center for the continued support and exposure to new opportunities for knowledge sharing.

7. FUNDING

This study was entirely self-funded by the authors.

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