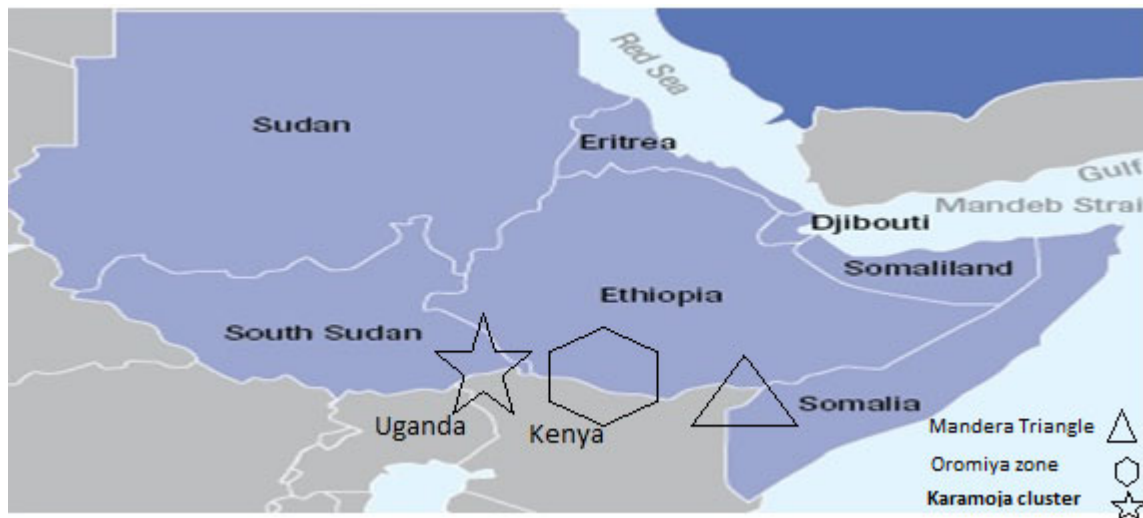


Reviewing the role of women pastoralist in conflicts in the Horn of Africa

Background

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 Gabra, 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 in the Mander Triangle¹ is the Somali Cluster² consisting of Garre, Degodia and Ajuran populous in North-Eastern Kenya and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. To the East is the Karamoja cluster³ comprising of the Turkana and Pokot from Kenya, the Dodoth, Jie and Karamojong from Uganda, the Toposa from Sudan and the Merille from Ethiopia⁴.



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 socio-cultural⁵, religious⁶, language⁷ and historical⁸ characteristics⁹.

¹ The Mander Triangle, a geographical region in the Horn of Africa where Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia converge.

² The Mander Triangle is almost entirely inhabited by Somali communities with centuries of blood relations. The common Somali identity of the local population that lives within Mander, and also in the bordering regions of Ethiopia and Somalia, provides a strong bond that holds the people together.

³ The 'Karamoja Cluster', also known as the 'cattle corridor', is inhabited by pastoralist communities sharing the same ethnic roots and the Ateker language.

⁴ According to the Intergovernmental Authority of Development (IGAD)

⁵ Heroism in cattle rustling and killing of opponent ethnic group, clan, or revenge attacks are acknowledged as cultural values among most of the pastoralist communities.

⁶ Pastoralists' communities believe that all cattle rightfully belong to their respective communities.

⁷ Among the Somali it includes a common language, the strongly Cushitic physical appearance, clan-based identity, similar historical and cultural events, a widespread adherence to Islam, and largely pastoralist livelihoods.

⁸ For instance the Gabra are linguistically intelligible with their neighbours, the Borana of Kenya and Ethiopia and experience intermarriages

⁹ History and culture of Dasanech Kenya closely interlocks with that of Dasanech Ethiopia

Because of the harsh climate conditions, 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.¹⁰ 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 consequences¹¹. Notably is the rise of frequent raiding of livestock, by small groups for quick sale on the black market for cash¹². This pillaging of livestock has become commercialized, so much so that powerful elite are alleged to have become involved¹³.

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 founded¹⁴. 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.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the role of women pastoralists as connectors, dividers and spoilers in conflicts ongoing 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

¹⁰ Key Informant Interview (KII).

¹¹ Ame Abdurahman, (2006). Cross border livestock trade and Small Arms and conflict in Pastoral areas of the Horn of Africa: Case Study of Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya

¹² Ngeno Mark (2011) Factors Influencing cross border conflict resolution

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Narengo (2011), Kipuri N. (2008)

knowledgeable persons. The analysis draws on the wide spectrum of views from literature and individuals.

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).

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 necessary¹⁵. Nowhere is this notion strongest than in women's exploitation of 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 wealth¹⁶. With realization that they young women, they triggering raiding by praising raiders who bring in the largest number of cattle while deriding those who failed. The result has been a cycle of cattle raids by young males. This is particularly common among the Turkana and Pokot¹⁷. For instance in South Sudan, the escalating price of dowry created a scramble in some communities, to the extent that it became a major contextual factor for the escalation of communal violence and conflict (SHIA, 2011)¹⁸. Also observing the same is Watakila (2014), who states that in situations of conflict, women in pursuit of communal recognition, encourage warrior folks to violent attacks. Among the Pokot, after the circumcision, the brave girls are now 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 is at the later stage translates to participation in conflicts (Tulel, (2013).

¹⁵ Lang L (2013). Gender Dynamics in Peace and Conflict: A Critical Study on Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo

¹⁶ Tulel (2013) observes that bride wealth is not uniform because it is pegged on the beauty, character and education level of the girl.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ In the first half of 2010 it was reported by the United Nations that 700 people had been killed and over 152,000 displaced as a result of conflicts over cattle.

According to the Life and Peace Institute, 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'.

Another aspect of culture driving women to cause conflicts relates to the social norms that require men to rise to the defence of their sisters or close clans woman from harm. For instance, among the Hamar people, bull jumping remains a unique culture and customs, marking a rite of passage for men and initiating boys into manhood. Notably, the ceremony is beatified by female relatives who are whipped by men who have recently been initiated. This is done to compliment the initiate while at the same time ensuring they get scars that give them a right to demand for help in future.¹⁹ In other instances, among some pastoralist groups, one must kill a member of a contending group to get married. Thus, among the Rendille, it is said that a young man will never feed from the hands of a woman (even from his mother), unless they commit a raid or kill in order to get privilege and respect from the community and recognition as a warrior (Watakila, 2014).

Pastoralist communities such as 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 peace²⁰. 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.

Also, in the horn of Africa, pastoralist communities practice cattle raiding which highlights the intertwined 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 dowry²¹. As such a number of studies have shown that conflict arises when cattle raids against smaller unsecured communities are undertaken with a view of accumulating wealth. Women in this case 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

¹⁹ [www https://africageographic.com/blog](https://africageographic.com/blog)

²⁰ Life and Peace Institute (2014)

²¹ Birchall, J. (2019).

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.

Although other evidence suggests that 'predatory raiding' is mostly orchestrated by individuals with criminal political or commercial intent²², 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 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. Similarly, among the Somali women encourage men and boys to take up arms. 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.

During conflict, the reproductive and caring role of females assumes a greater significance of being regarded as the symbols of their community or nation, and thus in need of protection. Thus Women's reproductive role also places them at the centre of the conflicts as embodiments of the nation. Thus women become targets of violence aimed at destroying a culture or community (Seifert, 1996, Buss, 2009) and, are likely to be kidnapped, raped or killed (Kipuri N. 2008). 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. As noted in a study by the Life and Peace Institute, Women finding themselves in such situation 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 the Life and Peace Institute report, there is evidence that shows how 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'. From the experiences gathered from Pokot women revenge is also an important driver for their continued support of conflict²³.

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 the Pokot women are given the responsibility by the community with the responsibility of equipping boys as young as young as 3 years with handling firearms²⁴.

²² Tulel (2013)

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Key Informant Interview (KII)

Among the Karimojong, the woman wears a special cloth when her man is out on a raid²⁵. Similar practice is also found among Pokot women who wear a birth belt called leketio, in the belief that a woman can protect her son from external harm of any kind by. It is considered a powerful charm such that before a warrior sets out for a raid, each of them informs his mother to wear the belt.

Among pastoralist communities, a lineage is only considered as strong as its male numbers. 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. Among the Pokot, 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. In the unlikely event of casualties occurring, Women 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. Among the Pokot, women are considered the best medicine persons in the community while others have acted as seers called kapoloktin (Tulel, 2013). 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.

The study also explored the interconnections between women and hero worship. Accordingly it was found that within the Oromiya cluster the Gabra warriors reportedly sever the private parts of their victims and carry such home to arousal welcome from their women. On the other hand, Dasanech combatants carry home blood-stained clothes of slain warriors to their women in elaborate ceremonies²⁶. Equally, among the Pokot, women reward the brave warriors by decorating them with products of their own handicrafts such as jewellery. In the Mandera triangle an area dominated by the Somali, women in Mandera have been accused of encouraging conflict using folklore²⁷, despite the fact that their suffering is disproportionate to that of men. According to life and Peace Institute and NCIC reports, dirges and songs in praise of heroes and demeaning perceived enemies. 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 emotional outbursts of clan militias and to 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 clans²⁸. Boran women also use jokes or plays referred to as qoosa taapa to

²⁵ Odhiambo M (2012). Impact of Conflict On Pastoral Communities' Resilience In The Horn Of Africa: Case Studies From Ethiopia, Kenya And Uganda

²⁶ Odary K, (2013) Documenting the ECHO DG Funded Drought Risk Reduction Action Plan Best Practices and Lessons Learnt In Kenya and Ethiopia

²⁷ NCIC, 2016. Oral folklore including oral storytelling, fables, songs, poetry, and proverbs are one of the richest and best known features of Somali culture.

²⁸ Ibid

attack males. They also known to use folk songs to praise or ridicule social realities within Borana society²⁹.

Women as connectors

Women 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. However, 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 restricted³⁰.

Now and then, in the horn of Africa conflicts situation, disparate women have utilized their feminine strength to negotiate peace. In this role women as non-combatants are now leading the way in making peace. The activities Dekha Ibrahim a Somali ³¹ from Wajir, Kenya stands out as model for grassroots peace-building³². Indeed the lesson from Wajir shows that women can informal leverage grassroots networks³³ 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.

Furthermore, the place of women in peace is underscored by the symbolism that comes with being able to find 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

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. The evidence disproves the notion that the only important protagonists in conflict are male – women to do take part in conflict, invoking, fuelling and perpetuating

²⁹ Guyo F. (2017) Colonial and post-colonial changes and impact on pastoral women's roles and status.

³⁰ USAID, 2007

³¹ Kipuri N. (2008). 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.

³² Although like most women's conflict-resolution activities, Dekha Ibrahim's efforts have since faded to the periphery of peace negotiations.

³³ Dekha Ibrahim first mobilized market women to discuss peace Her efforts saw two warring Somali clans agree to sign a peace agreement under the Al-Fatah Declaration

conflict and violence in equal measure with men. Emerging also, is that pastoralist women's role in conflict is intertwined with other social, economic, cultural and political roles that are often overlooked. While the knowledge around pastoralist's women and conflict is scarce and scattered. Therefore, there is need for better analysis on the roles women play in conflict- both positively and negatively, and to look at other groups that fall victims to conflict and are often left out.

The review takes the view that while the role of women in conflict has been rightly acknowledged and appreciated across board, however it is still remains opportunistic and not strategic. For instance, the review notes that a majority of women led mediation and peace initiatives tend to be informal and grassroots oriented³⁴. Though very effective, pastoralist, the review shares the view that women generally still lack the collective social institutions³⁵ available to men and are not politically savvy³⁶. Thus, whereas the 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 the study recommends the need for policies that;

- Improve the socio-economic and political environment of women through empowerment to mitigate gender power relations imposed by biased socio cultural practices.
- Adopt a formalized mechanism for identifying and including women within local governance and access to decision making platforms for policing and peace.
- Support women and local initiatives building on their own capacities, by seeing women as untapped resources and dynamic elements of conflict prone societies.
- Further 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.
- Build knowledge base on the role of pastoralist's women in conflicts by setting up a dedicated institution that can serve the horn of Africa.
- Involve more women in formal peace processes at national, sub-regional and regional level to enhance women/gender inclusivity.

³⁴ Odhiambo M (2012) grassroots people who are most affected by the conflict and those who understand issues best - i.e. youth, women and herders - are usually left out in the conflict resolution processes.

³⁵ For instance, men have the council of elders.

³⁶ Sirleaf and Rehn 2002, Vol.1 women are disconnected from what is considered 'high politics' and 'seats of power',

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