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Rural Indigenous Women and Girls Livelihoods in Kenyan Drylands

Expert paper prepared by

Jane Meriwas, Samburu Women Trust*

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Kenya, the powerhouse of East Africa like its neighbours experienced severe natural disasters in the past decade. The main ones manifested in the form of droughts, floods and recent terrorism reported in the last 2 years. In the Kenyan Drylands, these disasters have increased in intensity and frequency. The Kenyan's Arid and Semi-arid lands (ASALs) cover about 467,200 square kilometers and make up 80% of the country's land mass and are home to over 15 million people. This is approximately 25% of the country's population of 42 million. ASALs also host over 75% of country's livestock, the only lifeline for these pastoralists.

Climatic changes have created resource-poor communities with many new challenges. The plight of indigenous pastoralists' women in Kenya has never been the same since 2000 where drought escalated killing over 4 million livestock and thousand women and children died from hunger in the pastoral drylands. Consecutive droughts resulted in more human and animal deaths. Women and children continue to be at the receiving end since men migrate with livestock in search for pasture leaving women to struggle for themselves for food, healthcare services, shelter, and school fees for their children and loneliness for staying for months without seeing their sons, daughters and husbands.

On 10th of February 2017, the Government of Kenya declared drought a national disaster with 23 of 47 counties affected. The number of food insecure people majority of whom being women and girls more than doubled from 1.3 million to 2.7 million with an astonishing about half a million children, pregnant and lactating mothers acutely malnourished-357,285 to be exact is the media report but the reality is this could always double or triple. The Sustainable Development Goals 1 through 5 calls for actions geared at addressing poverty and human well-being. However, despite the Kenyan government being cognizant of these challenges facing indigenous women in the Drylands and most remote part of the country there is still a lot of outcry and loss of human lives.

For a long time these ASALs have had the lowest development indicators and the highest incidence of poverty in the country. For instance, the northern Kenya over years have displayed characteristics of remote rural areas caught in chronic poverty traps, which face multiple and interlocking forms of disadvantage, isolation, insecurity, weak economic integration, limited political leverage and challenging natural environment combine produce high levels of risks and vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, women and girls have always been the most affected by these problems.

With the enactment of the Kenyan new constitution, there has been a paradigm shift in the policy making and legislative processes with regard to ASALs. Recognizing the different livelihood options and community rights over land and resources existing therein, the talk to day within government and private sector is going the ASAL way and that Kenya's future is in the ASALs. With this new wave of investment, the challenge remains that communities; women and girls in particular living in the ASALs might continue losing access to their ancestral lands or continued disruption of livelihoods systems and emergence of new ones. We know that development interventions comes with a price tag and that these communities living in the ASALs will face new challenges with new development initiatives if not well prepared.

Cognizant of the abovementioned challenges, we the indigenous elites with the help of friends and well-wishers around the world went to give back to our communities and have been blowing the whistle. In a bid to build the women and girls' resilience, we have trained numerous women from different pockets of the rangelands in different areas. Specifically, we are exploring potential bio-enterprises e.g. beekeeping, resin and gum enterprise, poultry production, rangelands reseeded, camel milk and milk products production as well as agro-pastoral production systems. Yes, the women are fully involved in conserving and preserving their successor, Mother Nature. We still have a long way to go. We still need more whistle blows from different corners of the globe and most importantly, support to initiatives geared at addressing these myriad challenges.

There is still need to create conditions where these women and girls in the Drylands of Kenya can empower themselves since groups of empowered individuals create strong resilient, and empowered communities. There is still need to respond to the concerns over the capacity of indigenous pastoralists' women and girls to manage current and future risks as well as the sustainability of the livestock production in the Kenyan Arid and Semi-arid lands (ASALs). Grassroots organizations and implementing partners ought to promote pastoral livelihood diversification, facilitate robust markets for livestock and livestock products, and consolidate the knowledge base to enhance climate change adaptation and market orientation. The women need to be trained on alternative sources of livelihoods i.e. enhance vibrancy of women in the livestock markets e.g. commercialization of camel milk, leather and leather products and on how to access appropriate grass seeds, as well as to improve grass harvesting and marketing, haymaking and hay storage.

During periods of drought, lack of fodder is often a major cause of livestock mortality. Since the 2000 drought to date, many households lost up to 70% of their herd, directly resulting in increased levels of poverty and food insecurity. In fact, the recent droughts in Kenya led to relief fodder for the livestock early this year. We believe that when women are trained on sustainable fodder production and marketing, communities can benefit from less volatile/fluctuating incomes and reduced livestock mortality during drought, as they will have access to affordable hay.

Success stories

Although their challenges are common, in the counties of Laikipia, Isiolo, Samburu and Marsabit where Samburu Women Trust (SWT) operations are based, women have devised varied ways of coping with their peculiar situations. Being the custodians of their cultures, with trainings from SWT and other actors, women have commercialized beadwork as an alternative source of income across the 4 counties.

The Samburu Women Trust started a girl's mentorship program in 2016 that has resulted in the training of 120 girls on leadership, health care, HIV/AIDS awareness and coping with adolescence. One girl has joined University and several others expected to join colleges soon. About 100 Women paralegals have also been trained from the 4 counties with the support from SWT's donors and partners.

Recommendations

Through the Samburu Women Trust researches and linkages, we recommend the following to up the game on indigenous pastoral women and girls empowerment in Kenya:

1. Water development projects. Water is the gold , our gold. With water and availability of manure women can engage on small garden work
2. Bio-enterprise development e.g. beekeeping,
3. Micro-credit financing training
4. Micro-enterprise development
5. Adult and girls training
6. Health care trainings e.g. prevention of water related diseases and HIV/AIDS
7. Technical trainings e.g. the SWT as the anchor to train women groups on entrepreneurship
8. Commercialization of camel milk and milk products
9. Reduction of firewood use in charcoal production by using simple alternative technologies.
10. Rangeland reseeding trainings