WEALTH & WARRIORS
ADOLESCENTS IN THE FACE OF DROUGHT IN TURKANA, KENYA

In the arid plains of Turkana, Kenya, swept by gusts of hot winds and dust, Alimlim sits under a thorny tree that serves as the communal meeting place. She is 18 years old. She wears a metal ring around her neck, which means she is married. She has one child. Her parents raised her to be beautiful to enhance the value of her dowry. Her dream has always been to have a family of her own. Alimlim never went to school. Today, she is burning wood to make more charcoal to sell so she can afford to buy food and clothes for herself and family.

Turkana, located in Northwestern Kenya along the border with South Sudan, is among the most remote, harsh and poorly understood places in the world. Within this context, pastoralist girls face a triple challenge: their gender, age and geographical isolation place them among the most marginalized. From a young age girls are groomed for marriage, with their value to the family determined by the livestock they will bring through the traditional dowry. Education is seldom a part of girls’ lives. Rather, their duties as domestic caretakers, income-generators, and future brides and mothers preclude their ability to develop and realize their full potential as agents of resilience and change within their households and communities. Taken together, the challenges facing girls place them and their families in a cycle of poverty and marginalization that persists from one generation to the next. This situation is further exacerbated by the recurrence of major climatic shocks, such as drought, that deplete the already limited natural resources available. When livestock die of hunger or disease, pastoralists’ wealth and sources of food disappear, placing additional strains, first and foremost, on women and girls.

Despite the growing interest in food security and pastoralism, there has been relatively little research about the lives of girls in pastoralist communities and the role they play in household and community resilience. The invisibility of pastoralist girls in research is a symptom of a wider phenomenon: the invisibility of adolescent girls in many development interventions.

We believe adolescent girls have been overlooked as potential agents of change, able to move their households and communities towards resilience. To better understand the barriers that girls face within a constantly changing and often vulnerable pastoralist livelihood system, Mercy Corps carried out a study in Turkana County, Kenya, in April 2014. Data was collected over 15 days through 40 focus group discussions, 87 semi-structured interviews in 20 communities, and key informant interviews with representatives of NGOs working in the region, local government officials and regional experts. This study complements Mercy Corps’ 2014 research in the Sahel that illustrates the powerful influence gender dynamics have on household and community resilience.¹

“My parents denied me a chance of going to school. They don’t allow me to go to church. They guide me to get married to a wealthy man so they can benefit.”
(Adolescent girl from Lopiding, pastoralist community)

¹ Our research in Mali, Niger and Nigeria reveals nuanced ways in which men, women, boys and girls perceive, are affected by, and cope with shocks differently. These findings have serious implications for how we design, implement and evaluate resilience building programs. For more information, visit http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/rethinking-resilience
As the discourse around resilience continues to revolve around identifying the key capacities and assets to reducing vulnerability to shocks, understanding the critical role that women, and especially adolescent girls, play in their households and communities will continue to be an important area for research and policy action. A better understanding of the intersection of gender, youth and resilience is needed for donors, practitioners and other stakeholders to leverage the potential of adolescent girls in efforts to strengthen vulnerable pastoralist households and communities.\(^2\) To this end, the findings from this study provide new insights into the evolving roles, opportunities and constraints of girls in pastoralism, through a formative investigation of the lives of pastoralist girls in Turkana, Kenya.

### Key Findings

1. **The contribution of pastoralist girls to their household food security and resilience is critical.**

   Turkana girls’ contribution to their household’s immediate food security is key and increases in times of crisis. Their contributions differ from boys’, whose responsibilities lie mainly in caring for livestock with their father. While men and boys are often forced to leave the homestead to seek pasture for their herd, women and girls become the primary providers of money and food for their households. Girls specifically take on multiple tasks – from fetching water, often miles away, for both the livestock left behind and the needs of the household; to taking care of the household, and their siblings, while the mother is off looking for food; to searching for wild food in often dangerous places; and engaging in collecting *aloe vera* and weaving mats or baskets for sale. In particularly stressful times, girls are sent to live with relatives and friends in cities to work or beg for food and money.

2. **Responsibility for and ownership of livestock are governed by complex cultural traditions that define duties and impact the development of adolescent girls.**

   Livestock dictates the life of pastoralist girls, from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. As children, girls are responsible for watering the animals; as adolescents, they are responsible for both watering and milking the animals; and when eligible to be married, the amount of livestock that the future husband can offer to the bride’s family will determine her future. Though girls have no decision-making power related to animals, when they marry—a sign of their entrance into womanhood—they are allowed to maintain control over milk production, a key source of nutrition and income for the household. Hence, contrary to popular assumption, responsibility over livestock in Turkana is governed not only by gender, but, most importantly, by maturity and eldership. Specifically, it is the household’s male elder who ‘owns’ livestock, so defined by their authority to sell or slaughter an animal. Though neither girls nor boys and married sons remaining in their parents’ homestead own livestock, both sexes, nonetheless, have specific realms of responsibility in the maintenance of household herds. For a pastoralist girl, this responsibility is a fundamental part of each key development stage in her life.

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\(^2\) For Mercy Corps, resilience is defined as the capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses. Our role is to understand how systems support the communities we serve, and to ensure that the poor and vulnerable have options and opportunities to become fully integrated into resilient systems.
3. **Droughts lead to a protection crisis for pastoralist girls.**

The increased responsibilities girls carry to support their families and themselves during times of scarcity, and the specific livelihood strategies they employ, may precipitate a protection crisis with increased risk to violence, exploitation and abuse. Youth are forced to engage in more risky activities to cope with the negative effects of drought and, while no longer inhabiting the protected spheres of their households or communities, expose themselves to a multitude of dangers. While much has been written regarding the dangers faced by girls as they fetch water, food and fuel farther from their homes and communities, the dangers associated with diversification of income generating activities have been less explored. Our study found that as the situation deteriorates during droughts, girls are sent to the city to live with relatives where they seek work as domestic servants, or engage in prostitution to meet their basic needs. To cope with the loss of livestock during drought and replenish their herds, families will hasten the marriage of girls, some as early as 10 years of age. Adolescent boys are equally affected by this protection crisis. As the providers and protectors of the home, boys face the danger of being killed by bandits or attacked by wild animals while migrating with their herd, and are encouraged to participate in raids and cattle rustling, placing them at the center of often-violent conflicts with other communities. Overall, the fragmentation of the family unit in times of drought in some ways increases the autonomy of both boys and girls, but also increases the risks of violence and abuse.

4. **Girls in communities in transition**³, while having more opportunities to increase their capacities, remain vulnerable to droughts.

As they move out of pastoralism, adolescent girls acquire the capacity to further contribute to the resilience of their families, households and communities. They report having more access to social services than girls in pastoralist areas – overall they spend more time under “normal” conditions in school, have access to health and family planning services, and are engaged in more diversified income-generating activities. This transition also provides more opportunities for increased decision-making power, for example in the choice of their husband. When asked about their aspirations, girls from communities in transition voice a more expansive vision of their contribution to their communities and the broader civil society than girls in pastoralist areas. They express a desire to work outside the home and community, and aspire to career goals requiring completion of higher education. However, when drought hits, these girls are pulled out of school to devote more time to income-generating activities, which increases their exposure to new risks.

³ Communities in transition are defined in this research as sedentary communities to which former pastoralists have migrated, and where pastoralism is no longer the primary livelihood.
Recommenda
tions

The findings from this research point to five significant recommendations that policy makers, donors, and local and international development organizations should consider when working to increase food security and build community resilience in the Turkana region.

1. Understand the contextual & age-segmented challenges that pastoralist adolescents girls face

Pastoralist adolescent girls have been virtually invisible as distinct and intentional targets for development programs. In pastoral cultures, a girl’s life stages come with specific roles and responsibilities. Similarly, their level of vulnerability evolves as they move from infancy through childhood and into adolescence. Between pastoralist societies these stages vary considerably. It is critical to develop an age-segmented understanding of these girls’ lives that informs a proper programmatic response. We need to successfully address the risks and vulnerabilities they face at each stage, and harness the capacities and resources they have to confront them. This will require funding rigorous and iterative analyses before and throughout the program cycle, and designing program objectives and measurement & evaluation structures around said analyses. We must create longer term time horizons and adaptive management structures that foster learning and encourage impact-driven measurement.

2. Reinforce pastoralist girls’ capacities to diversify their sources of food and income during crises

Pastoralist girls’ substantial contribution to the food security of their households relies heavily on natural resources that are being degraded by climate change, and on ancestral knowledge rapidly losing currency within a changing context. Programming interventions that broaden their livelihood skills will help improve their contribution to the food security and resilience of their household. It will allow them to engage in safer and more lucrative income-generating activities, reducing their exposure to violence. Simultaneously, providing them with opportunities to increase their networks and relationships within their communities or beyond through economically or socially-motivated groups will expand their access to informal safety nets and empower them to take collective action.

3. Address the social and economics drivers behind early marriage

As the status of girls within pastoralist households and communities revolves primarily around the worth of their dowry, marriage plays a central role in the lives of Turkana girls. Early marriage leads to early childbearing, which carries with it adverse health effects, decreased access to education, and increased likelihood of domestic violence. All of this has the potential to negatively impact girls’ development and the well-being of their children and households. Concrete actions to mitigate some of the underlying causes of early marriage include sensitizing males on marriage related laws and the negative effects of early marriage and childbirth, and improving drought resilient livelihoods of pastoralists. Further research to identify ‘positive deviants’ (i.e. those fathers who decide to delay marriage for their daughters), their motivations and strategies, can enhance our understanding of the local drivers and barriers to shifting early marriage practices and help transfer positive deviant behaviors to others in the community and beyond.

4. **Leverage the opportunities offered to the girls in communities in transition while overcoming inherent protection challenges**

Families and communities that transitioned out of pastoralism did so in a time of crisis – often during drought or after a conflict. While the evidence is inconclusive as to whether such transitions represent an adaptive strategy that has allowed communities and adolescents in particular, to become more resilient to drought, it is clear that education and diversified livelihoods, both of which are more accessible to girls after transitioning out of pastoralism, play an important role for youth in communities in transition. At the same time it is vital that programs understand and address the ways diversification of income-generating activities may also exposes girls to new risks including sexual violence and child labor. With this in mind, development programs that seek to leverage girl’s potential to build resilient households and communities must address the specific protection concerns and challenges for girls, while simultaneously leveraging their new autonomy gained to help them attain greater empowerment, development and security.

5. **Establish and promote adaptive basic social service provision models**

Education programming, specifically for pastoralist girls, needs to address the trade-off between the value of increasing one’s opportunities and well-being with the need for labor at home and role of marriage in Turkana society. To increase demand for education in pastoralist areas, future research may be required to better demonstrate its benefits for long-term resilience as well as to develop new models for education that are more compatible with the pastoralist way of life. Similarly the delivery of health services must balance quality of services with appropriate outreach structure that responds to the needs of mobile populations. The concept of adaptive social service provision models provides a potential solution to increase pastoralist girls’ human capital, and requires evaluation through further research, funding streams, and coordination with governance structures.