The contributions of pastoral women are often overlooked

LARIM WOMEN IN EAST AFRICA

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At a passing glance, women in East African pastoral or agropastoral societies are chattels, bought with cattle and set to work for men. Close up, their role is far more complex. Certainly, compared with women in some communities of West Africa, who can take over the market trading and become powerful in their own right, their access to wealth and decision making is indirect and fragile. Discovering it and capitalizing on it are a challenge to policymakers with money to spend on development. If they don't take up the challenge, they risk not only eroding the status of these women but also endangering the livelihood of about 70 percent of the populations of tribes like the Larim, Karamojong, Turkana, and Samburu.

These societies are cattle-centred cultures, with public status, marriage, and wealth revolving around the acquisition of large herds of cattle. Cattle herding is the men's domain. Thus, observers have concluded that cattle are the economic base, that men hold all political power and status, and that women hold a secondary and inferior position in social, economic, and political life.

A year living in a Larim village permitted me to observe something quite different. I found women working together in villages as breadwinners in an economy quite separate from that of herdsmen.

The Larim people live in permanent villages. While the adult able-bodied men take the cattle to watering holes during the dry season, sometimes being away for four to six months a year, the centre of daily life for the Larim women is the village. Northern Larim is divided into clan areas.

Villages, each with about 300 occupants, hug the hill bases. A small patch of bush separates one village from the next. The Larim are polygamous, a man marrying again and again as his herd gets larger and allows him to pay for new wives. Most men in the village are related; sons will bring wives from a different clan to live with them in their natal village.

A woman, on marriage, builds her own hut. She builds a huge table inside to store grain, and a granary outside. She is allotted two fields by the clan head, land that her husband initially helps to clear. After that, she grows sorghum, millet, sesame, groundnuts, and vegetables, tends the growing crops herself, harvests them, and carries the grain to her hut. All produce belongs to her. With it, she must feed her household. She also makes sorghum beer for her friends, and for her husband's mates. Beer drinking is an important component of a man's acquisition of status and influence. A man is dependent on a wife to provide it. A man visits his wives, but he has no hut of his own. In village terms, he is "outside."

From an early age, men are oriented toward cattle and goat herding, and women to village life and agricultural production — although the boundaries overlap at the margins. Women are responsible for the total nutritional requirements for themselves, the children, the old, sick and infirm, as well as warriors and husbands during the wet season, and those who visit during the dry season. Women — the "hidden" 50 percent of the population — are often ignored in economic analyses. They contribute sustenance.
They also have responsibilities in relation to cattle and goats. When a woman marries, she is allocated a cow for milk. She may also acquire cattle when close kin marry — a fact not usually noted by observers of pastoral societies. Women are responsible for supervising calves and kids when they are in the village. Blood and meat from animals are sent to women, although slaughtering and bleeding are men's tasks. Cattle are only slaughtered during feasts, or eaten if they die naturally. Goats may be killed for food, but meat slaughtering and bleeding are men's animals are sent to women, although women's work burden they are introduced or evolve are a supplement rather than a staple in the villages.

A man's household consists of his wives and children, unmarried kin, and widows of close male kin. A woman's household depends on the size of the harvest. In most years, her view of her household may coincide with that of her husband; it may also include close male and female kin from her own clan. In times of scarcity she breaks ties with all but her own children.

The Larim live in a marginal area. When the rains failed at the end of 1979, there was no agricultural produce for 1980. The women resorted to gathering for their sustenance. In convoy, they walked up to 12 kilometres for palm fruits, spinach leaves. Able-bodied men stayed with the cattle, eating carcasses of animals dying from the drought or caught in the wild, and occasionally sending some back to their wives in the village. Women fed themselves, the children, the old, and the infirm. The women preserved the

Not just abstract economic units, but people. Photo: Patti Langton

NOT A SEPARATE REALITY

"There is a need to develop a well-rounded view of pastoral society and to ensure that the study of social change is a study of people — men, women, and children — and not just abstract units, such as households," social anthropologists Patti Langton, Vigdis Broch-Due, and Elsie Garfield say in a report presented to an IDRC-sponsored conference on the future of pastoral peoples.*

Economic development — in particular changes from one production system to another — often leads to a situation where women lose power and status, the authors say. Woman find that their traditional fields of control do not have the same significance in the new context. For instance, case studies have shown that the transition from subsistence agriculture to the production of cash crops for an external market has adversely affected women's position. Men accrued the benefits of cash-crop production, whereas women's work burden increased and they became marginal producers in the increasingly important market economy. Such studies have led scholars to generalize that economic development per se has adversely affected women; another possible interpretation is that development policy is the underlying problem because it concentrates on men as cash earners and decision makers and fails to view women as participants.

The report notes some encouraging results from recent studies in pastoral settings in Kenya — involving the Somali, Maasai, and Turkana. These seem to show that socioeconomic change has led to greater economic opportunities and control over resources and decision making for pastoral women. However, Langton and her colleagues believe it is too simple to conclude that pastoral women will gain more by development than agricultural women. Any generalizations that ignore the great diversity of social-cultural systems, environmental conditions, and the nature of new economic possibilities and how they are introduced or evolve are equally unsatisfactory.

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