

Pastoralist Women's Roles, Livelihood Risks and Resilience among Borana Oromo, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract

Pastoralist women's active role in the household economy and livelihood diversification cannot be overestimated despite their marginal position in terms of access to basic health and education services, and decision making. This study is, therefore, aimed at exploring women's livelihood risks, roles, and resilience among the Borana Oromo pastoralist community in the Yabello district of the Oromia National Regional State. The study employed a qualitative-ethnographic research method. Participants were selected purposively and data was collected using in-depth and key informant interviews, observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The study participants include pastoralist women, men, community elders, experts from Woreda sector offices and NGOs implementing projects in the study area. The field data was analyzed thematically and data quality has been maintained through triangulation, peer debriefing and presentation of the preliminary finding at a stakeholders' workshop. The findings of the study showed that pastoralist women play a key role in the socioeconomic, political and cultural lives of Borana Oromo parallel with experiencing challenges related to poverty and job burden. The coping strategies include engagement in self-help social support systems, sharing tasks during difficult times, the moral incentive, courage and motivation they earn from the communities. Borana women also have opportunities for getting primacy, such as their engagement in petty trade, women empowerment activities of local organizations, and promising prospects of supportive policy in education and healthcare services. The study recommends research on strengthening indigenous community practices in support of women.

Keywords: Borana, Oromo, pastoralist women, resilience, challenges

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Introduction

In Ethiopia, pastoralist communities are in constant pressure due to scarcity of resources, lack of rural market, absence of education and public health facilities, drought and loss of livestock (CSA, 2013). To overcome the economic constraints, women engage in non-farm and off-farm activities such as the sale of forest products including firewood and charcoal, petty trading, migration and the sale of handicrafts (Degefa, 2005; Doyo, 2018).

Moreover, pastoralist women are increasingly engaging in agriculture and market based activities as a strategy to diversify income for the family livelihood and that complemented the customary support network which has been the only resource to rely on, for pastoralist families, during hard times (Baird et al., 2024). Besides, the study has made it clear that pastoralist women experienced multiple risks related to lack of access to education and health services and systemic neglect of their contribution to the community.

The problem has a gender dimension since in pastoralist communities of Ethiopia men play instrumental roles and make major decisions related to the household economy while women manage the household, milk animals, process dairy products and care for the child with limited control over livestock ownership. Hence, although pastoral communities as a whole are constrained by resource degradation, poverty and food insecurity, given their critical role in the family, women suffer the double burden of being both pastoralists and women (Adugna & Sileshi, 2013).

Hence, the study illuminated the factors for pastoralist women's resilience as their role intersects with gender, livelihood, indigenous knowledge and practices in the context of pastoralist communities of Borana.

Literature Review

Resource loss, climate shocks, conflicts, and adverse policies affect pastoralists, while their impact is felt more severely by pastoralist women, who have been historically marginalized (Fernández, 2017). Every pastoralist community is different, but they share some basic similarities. Women have low social status, limited education levels, restricted involvement in public life, and restricted ownership of livestock. These issues result from limited access to education, training, and information, as well as restrictions on mobility, exposure to early marriage, and harmful traditional practices. Gender inequality in pastoral communities is acute and deep-rooted. With a rigid gender division of labor, the exclusion of women from ownership of the main store of wealth is central to gender disparity in pastoral communities (Livingstone & Ruhindi, 2013).

In pastoralist communities, customary labor arrangements mean women spend considerably more of their time on domestic tasks, such as walking to

collect water, firewood, and grass for livestock, as well as cooking and child care. Thus, they have limited time for revenue-generating tasks. Walking in pastoral areas can be a high risk and exposes them to experiencing theft, rape, and violence (IFAD, 2020). Similarly, pastoralist women are also socially, economically, and politically marginalized in many countries. They are further marginalized as a result of their restricted decision-making role and the limited attention they receive within the national development framework (IFAD, 2010). For instance, women play a key role in the production of livestock among the Kuchi pastoralist communities who raise sheep and goats in the rangelands of Afghanistan. Kuchi women are unskilled, illiterate, and underserved and remain constrained by cultural beliefs (Schloeder et al., 2013).

A study on pastoralist women in Kenya underscored that they endure delivery at home because of a range of factors, including distance, poor roads, and the difficulty of accessing and affording transport and cultural values related to women and birthing (Caulfield et al., 2016).

As a result of the many challenges that pastoralist women have been experiencing, eastern Africa and the Horn have attracted international attention over the last decade, yet concern for pastoralist women has regrettably lagged behind. Thus, small numbers of organizations that are established and directed by pastoralist women themselves have played their part in this regard. These organizations are working to secure women's rights, build up livelihoods, and deliver education and healthcare. Even though the implementations remain inadequate, the efforts led to the establishment of women's groups and cooperatives, building capacity, advocating against FGM, and encouraging the role of pastoralist women as peacemakers. These organizations are backing women's participation in pastoralist development, which was previously overlooked in the pastoralist economy. Currently, women are encouraged to multiply their earnings by establishing savings and credit groups and are provided with access to education and healthcare (Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008). Moreover, collective actions, as well as associated activities such as microfinance and livelihood diversification, offer opportunities to create wealth, better manage risk, and enhance lives for pastoral women and their families living in settlements in northern Kenya (Coppock & Desta, 2013).

The fundamental rationale behind empowerment initiatives (micro-credit, asset transfers, skills training, or market access) is to provide women with the means to exercise their rights and responsibilities in decision-making processes in their communities, to play a fuller role in society, and to contribute without restriction to national development in their respective countries (Livingstone & Ruhindi, 2013). Furthermore, safeguarding access to natural resources and economic opportunities is central to empowering pastoralist women. To uphold the

rights of pastoralist women, civil society organizations could help strengthen pastoralist women's access to resources by supporting women's groups in claiming their rights, assessing if laws and policies are responsive to the needs of both men and women, and supporting appropriate education for pastoralist girls and women (Fernández, 2017).

Women constitute about 50% of the population of Ethiopia. However, they are vulnerable due to cultural, economic, and institutional constraints. Women suffer from a lack of decision-making power on issues that affect their lives, have limited access to various socio-economic services (such as education and health services), suffer from gender-based violence, and carry more domestic responsibilities that put them under physical and psychological stress (ACORD & DCA, 2017). Additionally, pastoralist women bear substantial burdens to serve and look after their families; this in turn affects their education and hinders them from taking part in public life. On one hand, pastoralist women have to work extensively and firmer than men, accomplishing “female” tasks in the domestic spheres and earning money from chores culturally labeled as “women's work” comprising collecting firewood and producing and marketing handicrafts. On the other hand, because of those aforesaid tasks, they are detached from school enrollment, and they do not appear at several social events at which men make judgments that impact the larger community. Despite their role in livestock production and this becoming the major source of revenue and status for pastoralists; policymakers have failed to be aware of their contribution (Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008).

In spite of the challenges, women are playing great roles in their communities. Women are the household resource managers, and, increasingly, they play important roles in livestock management and economic activity outside the household (Livingstone & Ruhindi, 2013). Similarly, women play a vital role within the pastoralist world, not only as livestock herders, income generators, and caregivers but also as key organizers and keepers of local knowledge. They are essential to sustaining pastoralist community life and identity (Fernández, 2017). Women's own perspectives and the livelihood settings in which they perform their work are crucial for understanding Borana women's role in livestock management. Borana women categorize among their favorite activities the two arduous tasks of fodder collection and livestock watering, explaining their preference through emotional expressions such as “I want to feed them from my hands”. This illustrates that caring for livestock is seen as a satisfactory and meaningful task, although it is arduous at the same time. Beyond the call of responsibility, the women show great love for their animals, considering themselves “the mother of livestock” (Hertkorn, et al., 2015).

Another local study by Anbacha and Kjosavik (2018) was conducted on “*Borana* women’s indigenous social network-*marro* in building household food

security: a case study from Ethiopia.” The findings showed that *marro* is a voluntary social support network between friends, neighbors, and families in which all women participate, especially when the need arises, while a significant number of poor and elderly women depend on it for daily survival regardless of livelihood bases, economic status, and age differences. Besides, research was carried out by ACORD and DCA (2017) on “Enhancing pastoral women’s economic empowerment in lowland *Borana*, Dire, and Miyo districts, *Borana Zone*, Oromia Regional State”. The finding revealed that the project was intended to enhance the social and economic empowerment of women by promoting their role, participation, and influence in decision-making both at household and community levels.

In summary, many studies reveal that pastoralist women, in Borana Oromo community, prevailed strong in their community particularly in promoting indigenous knowledge, sustaining local support system, and took active part in the family livelihood despite their marginalization from socioeconomic benefits lack of access to health and education services, and limited participation in local development initiatives. Some civil society organizations have attempted to empower women by organizing savings and credit cooperatives and creating access to financial services, providing capacity building training and initiating education and health services but they have limited scope given the enormity of the problem.

Previous studies either failed to emphasize on or gave very limited attention to the factors that are keeping pastoralist women resilient amidst the precarious conditions they are experiencing in their community. In short, coping strategies and factors that are contributing to Borana Oromo Women’s resilience have not been adequately studied and, thus, this research attempts to fill this knowledge gap. Therefore, this study investigates the coping strategies and resilience of Borana pastoralist women amidst the multifaceted challenges they are facing in their community. The study specifically addresses the following questions:

- How do participants perceive women’s role in the socioeconomic and political lives of the Borana Oromo community?
- How do research participants describe the risks of women in pastoral communities of Borana?
- What are the coping strategies that contribute to the resilience of pastoralist women?

Research methods

Description of the study area

The study was undertaken in the Yabelo district of Borana Zone, Oromia National Regional State. Yabelo is 575 km from Addis Ababa. The district is inhabited by pastoralist Oromo communities and the area is also among the highly affected districts by frequent droughts which, by and large, affect the lives of women and children. Since the district town Yabelo is surrounded by the pastoralist communities, the study site was purposively selected because of its rural location and interaction with an urban setting.

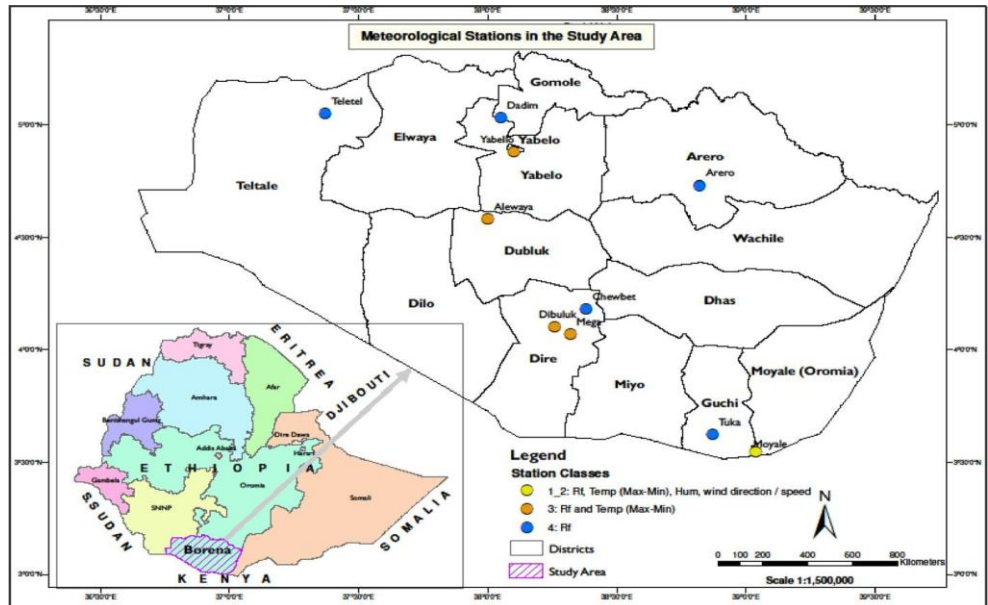


Figure 1: Map of Borana Zone and the districts

Source: Shibiru et al., (2023)

Research design

The research employed a qualitative ethnographic research design and social constructionism as an overarching framework informing the selection of research method, sampling, data collection and analysis. Accordingly, the subjective experiences of purposefully selected study participants (Guba & Lincoln, as cited in Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) regarding the lives of pastoralist women was explored allowing them to express their distinctive perspectives in responding to the interview questions.

Sampling

The study used a purposive sampling technique. Participants were selected purposefully based on their prior experience and knowledge of the group or culture being studied (Gentles et al., 2015). They constitute pastoralist women and their husbands, community elders and officers from woreda sector offices. The selection criteria were willingness to participate in the study, knowledge of pastoralist women's life situation and understanding of local development programs initiated targeting the empowerment of women. Accordingly, focus group discussion, key informant interview and in-depth interview were conducted with a total of 36 participants.

Data collection and analysis

Before commencing the field data collection, the research team had contacted Woreda and Kebele level administrative officials and got permission to undertake the research. Local kebele officials helped in identifying the gatekeeper who guided the researchers during identification and interview of research participants. The data collection was cross sectional and completed within duration of one month in the year 2022.

The data collection tools and protocols were developed consistent with filling the knowledge gaps identified in the reviewed literature, and with the core issues coined in the research questions. It was tested for clarity in conveying the required message and updated by incorporating inputs obtained from the pre-test. Three sets of data collection methods were applied. An in-depth interview with 15 participants (8 pastoralist women, 4 men, and 3 community elders), key informant interviews with 6 knowledgeable individuals drawn from NGO workers, health extension workers, and Children, Women and Youth Affairs Bureau. The third data collection method was Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that was conducted with two groups of 8 participants each, and finally the researchers' field observation notes have been essential sources of data focusing on women's interactions with their families, communities and peers.

All protocols of research ethics were maintained such as briefing about the purpose of the research, confidentiality of their information, voluntary participation, protection from harm, avoidance of deception, and signing of a consent form (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Thus, the pictures depicting the economic roles of pastoralist women in Borana Oromo were included in this article with the full consent of the women. The field data was analyzed thematically. The audio recorded interview was transcribed verbatim into textual material from which coding, categorization, searching for similarity of patterns was carried out rigorously until themes and sub-themes were identified. Besides, methodological

and data source triangulations have been made as a strategy to ensure the validity and reliability of the field data and to maintain data quality.

Findings

The roles of pastoralist women

The findings showed that the roles of pastoralist women are multiple and vital in the social, economic, political, and cultural lives of the Borana Oromo. Women are building blocks in families and in the community as a whole, and their participation in multiple tasks is illuminated below.

Social interaction/support

The women have immense roles in social and family building through their participation in Buussa-gonofaa (indigenous social protection), Marroo (indigenous women's social network), cultural ceremonies, and giving gifts (Gumaata) during community ceremonies. Participant (P: XII) said:

In practicing Buusaa-gonofaa, woman can be involved in giving milk, water, and wood, searching if one got lost, burying the deceased villager and fellow clansperson, without informing her husband because it is an emergency to participate. Nonetheless, a woman may discuss the issues with her husband and children when it is needed.

The data from FGD-I showed that women have multiple roles at the household level through engaging in managing the family's logistics, caring for and socializing children, caring for husbands, and milking cows. In addition, they engage in household chores including sweeping the floor, constructing the house, cooking, fetching water, scraping the hide, grazing the herd, cleaning milk containers or fumigating milk pots, collecting wood, washing clothes, and pounding or grinding maize.

In the economy

The data from participants shows that women are the backbone of the pastoral economic structure, as they are the ones who manage livestock products. Women have a big role in building and taking care of the economy of the family. In a pastoralist community where the economy of the family entirely depends on livestock, women play a critical role in keeping and feeding, searching for water, and for pasture for livestock. They play a critical role in the carrying of fodder for weak cattle and calves, particularly during times of difficulty like prolonged drought. For instance, the participant (K: V) said, "Women contribute to all

economic activities that help boost the economy at the household level. They participate in managing household daily consumption; engage in petty trade that can help the family secure household daily demand."

Furthermore, the participants in FGD-II indicated that pastoral women play a vital role in family and community economic management. They engaged in small income-generating activities, including selling livestock products (e.g., milk, butter, and yogurt), tobacco, coffee, salt, sugar, clothes, charcoal, firewood, and traditional handicrafts.

In rituals

As to the participants, there are no cultural practices that can be undertaken without the involvement of the women. Starting from preparing traditional coffee ceremonies at the household and community level, preparing food, building homes for certain ceremonial occasions, participating in ritual ceremonies, and head-shaving for the husband during the Gadamojiii ceremony and normal time are the domains of women. Moreover, one participant (P: XV) stated that "It is only a woman who engages in weaving milk pots and stitching leather dresses, and they are experts in crafting materials and actively participating in the retirement process of their husbands during Gadamojji (the last stage of Gada)."

While expressing the critical role of women in rituals, one of the participants (P: V) stated that "Akkuma ilmeellee nu malee hin dhalle, jilaallee nu malee hin obbaafanne." Meaning: It's impossible to have a child without women, and it's also impossible to undertake any cultural ceremonies without women's presence. In line with this, our overt observation confirms that women have immense role in cultural ceremonies. During the Gubbisaa (first son name-giving ceremony), they engage in building, lashing thatching, and decorating the Galma (the grass hall built by women's group for Gubbisaa name-giving).

In politics

Politically, Borana has a vibrant structure called *Gada* that rules the community, and women join their husbands in the ruling generation called *Luba*. But in the modern government system, they also get involved in different political structures at the local level. Additionally, one participant (P: X) said:

"Niitiin Hayyuu Hayyuu; niitiin Qaalluu Qaalluu," which implies the wife of Hayyuu (a knowledgeable person elected to lead a clan) is respected and recognized as Hayyuu; the wife of Qaalluu (a religious leader) is respected and recognized as Qaalluu (but traditionally she is Qaallittii). She can do what her husband does; she is respected equal to her husband. Also, she is

called “haadha nama cufaati” (the mother of all Borana), and she commands the respect of all other women and men as well.

Furthermore, The participants in FGD-I indicated that, even though the women do not directly hold Gada power like the Abbaa Gada, they provide comments and propose the best candidate for the position, or they propose the nominee who will lead the Gada or clan in the future, and provide special hospitality to their husband during his movement of Gooroo (ceremonial sites).

Additionally, the data from government offices shows that due to the expansion of education and awareness created by the government offices and NGOs, women in the study area are getting the chance to engage in local leadership at different offices at the Kebeles, Zone, and Woreds levels. Apart from the traditional practice, this advanced women's empowerment has facilitated their participation in political decision-making.

The community's perception of women

The data from FGDs (I and II) pointed out that there are many positive traditional sayings about women in pastoral areas. Borana says, in their day-to-day lives to appreciate the contribution of women, “warii namaa nadheen” which implies women constitute a family. Furthermore, one participant (P: IX) expressed that “Dhiira jabduu duuba haadha manaa jabduutti jira” meaning: Behind a successful man there is a strong wife. To explain, women's contribution is reflected in men's jobs. “Dubartii jireenna; Dubartiin hormaata”. Meaning: Women are life; women are prosperity. “Namii niitii dansaa argate ya hormaataa bultuma argate” means: a person who is married to a humble wife is blessed by God with a good life and all good things.

All the sayings signify that women's roles are crucial in the social, economic, political, and cultural lives of the Borana Oromo and that has endowed them community's respect and protection from harm. In this regard, one KII participant had to say that (K: II):

I believe that community members have a good attitude and respect for women. Borana gives priority to women in every aspect. There is even a saying that “nadheen muka laafa”: women are vulnerable, and protection must be given to them. At the meeting place, the cases of women must be heard. Affirmative action is given to women in many aspects.

Challenges of pastoralist women**Job burden**

As to the participants, the gender division of labor puts a serious burden on pastoral women as they are almost accountable for domestic activities including fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking food, and taking care of children, the sick, and the elderly. For instance, the participant (P: X) stated, "*Ka garaacha qabnu loon elmina, ammoo elemaa deebinee dhalla.*" Meaning: that we are involved in milking cows while we are pregnant; immediately after getting back home from milking, we give birth.

Similarly, the participant (P: II) stated that:

The community doesn't allow men to be involved in household chores. In our community, when the husband supports his wife by sweeping the floor and cooking food, the people may react by saying, Oh, what a shame; he is involved in what is out of his business! Bittaa isa nitiitti bulchaa; inni qara dhiira maanii (meaning: He is under control of his wife; really, he is not a man). However, this is not always true because some men support their wives and engage in household chores.

Poverty

The finding showed that, due to their livelihood (pastoralism), pastoral women are very poor because their daily lives are based on climate conditions and they are vulnerable to drought and poor social service.

For instance, a participant (KI: V) stated that:

Poor social services in the area have an adverse impact on women. Women have poor access to education, market opportunities, and healthcare facilities and face high maternal mortality rates. Economic decisions are dominated by men (husbands). The rights to control productive assets, including wealth inheritances, are given only to male groups.

The data from health extension workers also showed that the recurring drought exposed Borana communities to poverty in general and Borana women in particular. They asserted that, for instance, the current drought, which has happened due to the shortage of rain, has complicated the lives of women in Borana. They are challenged to access water for their families and cattle and witness while their livestock suffer and die of thirst helplessly.

Moreover, the data from FGDs (FGD I and II) reveals that women are the most vulnerable group because they travel long distances to fetch water, collect grasses, and forage, especially during severe and prolonged droughts. Also, the frequent drought has brought different challenges to women, like *adeenna* (a lack of butter in women's hair or unattractive dry hair). Due to this drought, women are not engaging in income-generating activities (e.g., selling milk, yogurt, and butter), and they become poorer than ever.



Figure 2: Pastoralist women in Poverty fetching water from ponds during the dry season

Source: Photograph by Hasan Wako, April 21, 2022.

In earlier days, women were not allowed to go anywhere at night, but nowadays, due to the frequent drought, which has totally changed, they leave the village early in the morning, traveling a long distance to fetch water and feed livestock, and come back at night. Also, due to the current drought, women have been involved in means of getting income, like selling charcoal and firewood, which has negative health impacts.



Fig 3: Women selling charcoal and logs as coping strategies

Source: Photograph by Hasan Wako, April 20, 2022

Who is most affected?

All pastoralist women are vulnerable and affected by the above-mentioned problem. But, among these women, some are more affected compared to others. For instance, a participant (KI: I) asserted that:

Divorced women and young females have mostly affected groups, among others. Even a name is given to divorced women, and they are called Gursumaa, i.e., informally, divorced women who got back to their families. The stigma is highly attached to this case. If she remarries, people may call her “isiin ibidda hedduu bobeessite” (she is married to many people, which has a negative connotation). Next to divorced women, young girls face even greater challenges, such as early marriage and sometimes forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and a lack of access to education.

Our overt observation confirms that during dry and drought periods, women's and girls' workloads increase dramatically, usually walking long distances to fetch water and collect firewood for their families. Also, female-headed households are more affected by the problem due to job burdens and role shifts. The absence of husbands can expose them to engaging in different roles, including productive and community roles.

Furthermore, data from FGD I showed that in the pastoral community, women in rich families (families with many livestock) due to job burdens are most affected because they have no time to rest as they engage in herding, fetching water for livestock, cutting fodder, milking cows and camels, and cleaning livestock dung. Unlike women in rich families, women in poor families are mostly affected due to a lack of food, milk, and butter. And this can force them to drop out of school and have exposure to early marriage.

Additionally, the participants in FGD-I indicated that women in the confinement period (Uulma) face challenges because they are not in a position to work and interact with the community. Besides, Caphana girls (unmarried girls who get pregnant) face a serious problem. In Borana, sex before marriage is an illicit sexual relationship and is stigmatized as taboo. When this happens, no Borana man marries a Caphana girl; such girls will move and marry into other surrounding ethnic groups. This will end in the total exclusion of the girls, no more family bonds, and being protected by Borana's law.

Women's resilience strategies

Reciprocal social support system

During our in-depth interviews with the participants, the strategies to overcome women's challenges in the Borana pastoralist community were identified. As a strategy for women's challenges, *Marroo* is used. It is an indigenous social network of women. They support one another during hard and normal times. In *marroo*, women support each other with grain, wood, water, labor, and other basic things like salts, sugar, and coffee. They believe in "*Harkii harka dhiqa*," which means hands wash each other; *waan facaafatan haamatan*, "you harvest what you saw"; this implies that women who contribute to other women today will receive their *marroo* during their time. It is expected that at some later date, the recipient (women) will reciprocate with an equivalent or more substantial contribution.

Furthermore, the participant (P: IV) said that:

As pastoralist women, we use different types of indigenous social support systems as a means of resilience. Among these, Gumaata is the one. Gumaata is the support given during normal times. It is contributed during traditional ceremonies including name-giving, marriage, childbirth ceremonies, and daboo (cooperative work). Affordable gifts are cattle, milk, yogurt, butter, water, wood, money, and human labor. Our role is significant in such Gumaata practice. We are at the forefront of Gumaata gift provision. We participate and provide support during funerals,

weddings, naming ceremonies, and other ritual events. So, this is one strategy that we have been using to support each other.

The finding showed that women have social support in the village, including weekly savings, which they use as a measure to help each other during social festivals and emergencies. While collecting firewood, fetching water, and cutting grass going around valleys and the apex of the hill, women move in a group to support each other. Generally, our overt observation confirms that they support each other by fetching water, sharing firewood, building a home, cooking food, buying food from the market, caring for children, facilitating ceremonies, and helping in emergencies.

The participants in FGD-II indicated that, during *Uulmaa* (the confirmation period or period of seclusion following childbirth), women help one another by asking or greeting, saying, *nagaan sablattee, uulmaan urgooftuu* (meaning: Did you give birth in peace? Is your confinement going well? Women support each other by fetching water, washing clothes, sharing firewood, cooking food during *uulmaa*, preparing coffee, and grinding grain.

Participant (P: VIII) stated that:

As pastoralist women, we go to the market, collect firewood and fetch water. As a strategy to mitigate the challenges, we bought donkeys to fetch water, collect firewood, and go to market. This saves our energy and time, and solves our problems.



Figure 4: Using donkey as a coping strategy when fetching water

Source: Photograph by Hasan Wako, April 26, 2022

Sharing tasks and respect

The findings showed that one helping strategy is that women are preserved from labor work. Most of the time, the Borana do not give hard work to women, like going on raids and hunting, using salt for livestock, going to cattle camps or grazing cattle far away from the village, and cutting the thorn branches to close the gateway to the kraal. They are only expected to be cared for and protected at home by engaging in home chores. But sometimes, if the family has no men or young boys, women can engage in the above activities.

One participant (P: IV) indicated that:

As a supportive strategy, our husbands and sons can help us through jaba (a big piece of firewood carried on the shoulder by men during their grazing and herding of cattle). Also, the community understands our situation by saying “nadheen muka laafa” (women are vulnerable, and they are expected to be treated well).

The participants in FGD-II indicated that pregnant women are protected and cared for by all community members. No one is expected to sit before them, and all parties should leave the chair for them. They are in a position to get the seat first. Similarly, if you slaughter cattle, you are not allowed to test the meat on a pregnant woman. You have to ask whether such women are in the village or not. They may accuse you, and the sanction is high for the refusal to test meat or for not announcing the slaughter of cattle to pregnant women. This special care is often facilitated by anyone in the community.

Opportunities for pastoralist women

Getting primacy

The findings showed that pastoralist women experience not only different challenges but also opportunities. As to the culture, they are protected from being engaged in difficult tasks. In line with this, the participants from FGD-II indicated that in the Gada, people were always ready to support and shield them from any harmful events. They are trusted. When a woman accused a man of doing wrong against her, there was no need to search for evidence; the defendant (a man) would get sanction for what he did. Borana believes, “dubbiin nadheeni dhara hin qabduu dhugaa itti hin barbaadan”. This implies the word of women is true; there is no need for further investigation because it is believed that no one commits a crime against them in the presence of a witness. Also, it is believed that if a woman has lied, this evil will turn back on her and harm her family. Borana says that “nama dubartiin himatte jecha aadaa malee jecha dhugaa irra hin fuudhan.” This means

when a woman accuses a man of doing wrong to her, there is no need to detail the accusation in words, time, place, or action itself. Rather, it is only indicators that are needed because the victim (the woman) may feel ashamed to express more about the real action. In addition, one participant (P: XV) stated that: *For instance, if he accused a man of saying "he forcefully catches me."* That is enough. There is no need to justify what the forceful catch mean.

The participants from FGD I, stated that any conflict between husband and wife doesn't lead them to divorce, and their patrimony will not be partitioned in Gada because the role of the clan is paramount in preventing divorce and sustaining the family's life. During a meeting or clan's meeting, if a woman comes with any cases, priority is given to her. Hence, women's demand can be entertained within the cultural realm to the extent of possessing properties that do not belong to her. A participant (P: VI) explains the Borana community practice stating that:

If she desires what belongs to others, craves another person's things, or requests for something, you are not allowed to reject the request. Even if she requests the cattle you seized from the enemy during a raid. So, any culturally accepted requests from women are highly welcomed.

Engaging in petty trades

The findings indicated that pastoralist women have an opportunity to engage in petty trades. Accordingly, one study participant (K: III) indicated that, *"Traditional engagement in the management of livestock products is an opportunity for women's economic empowerment. The traditional technical knowledge includes milk processing, crafts making, and marketable natural resources found in the environment, e.g., aloe vera, soap etc."* In line with this, one participant (P: VII) said, *"To overcome our challenges related to poverty, we are participating in income-generating activities like selling firewood and charcoal, selling livestock products (i.e., milk, butter, and yogurt), and other petty trade (retailing sugar and tobacco)."*

Promising awareness

The finding showed that pastoralist women have a better understanding of their rights. The key informant (K: V) from the government office stated that the expansion of formal education and the availability of many NGOs in the area are big opportunities since through their projects many women have engaged in education, and awareness is being created concerning their rights to participation, and decision-making. According to participant (P: IV), many women are economically empowered and indicated that *"Due to the expansion of education,*

we learned a lot about small businesses, gender equality, harmful traditional practices, saving culture, and family planning. Also, we learned about the importance of education and sending our daughters to school."



Fig. 5: Education service for women by local NGO

Source: Photograph by Liban Godana, May 18, 2022

Gender empowerment

The local government and different NGOs have been doing different projects that focus on the improvement of the livelihoods of poor households, including market value chain opportunities like milk production, stone energy savings, and aloe soap production, and providing humanitarian aid.

In line with this, one key informant (K: IV) from NGOs stated that:

In the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), women's empowerment is a common goal in interventions that aim to support food and nutrition security while progressing towards gender equality. Every aspect of ILRI is gender-inclusive for pastoral women.

Moreover, the other key informant (K: II) from NGOs stated that:

NGOs have provided support to pastoralist women, including empowering them through leadership and the economy. Economically organized women into different groups were provided with initial funds to involve them in small businesses such as petty trade, small ruminant businesses, and others: As a result, some women have actively managed small business in our project intervention. Our organization has provided capacity-

building to women engaged in business and others. We promote new approaches such as village-level saving associations (VSLA), multipurpose cooperatives, and women-focused groups. We provided them with health and nutrition education in order to improve food preparation for their children and households.

Discussion

Pastoralist women in the Borana community play multiple roles broadly classified under sociocultural and economic terms for ensuring the continuity of community traditions and family livelihoods respectively. Participating in culture, caring for families and clans, executing domestic tasks, and helping others through the tradition of marroo are the tasks they have been contributing to in the Borana community. Congruent with this, Diallo, Secretary of UNCCD and IFAD (2007), contends that women perform a vital part within the pastoralist way of life, accepting different accountabilities with respect to the animals, the land, and the family.

As per the findings, the domestic roles of pastoralist women are identified in such a way that they engage in food preparation, childcare, fetching water, collecting firewood, cleaning the dung, cleaning the house, looking for grazing of small stocks, and many more tasks in their day-to-day activity. But this is because of the nature of their livelihood (pastoralism), and task-sharing between the genders that exists in the community. Correspondingly, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (2020) asserted that in pastoralist communities' women spend significantly more of their time than men on residential assignments, such as strolling to gather water, kindling grass for small-stock, as well as cooking and child care. This in turn not only constrained the women's time for revenue-generating errands but also prevented them from taking part in public life (Coppock et al., 2013; Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008). In addition, like in many parts of Ethiopia, women's engagement in multiple household tasks is considered by the community as easy tasks. The community's belief of women as vulnerable and the sympathy not to engage them in what is assumed as difficult jobs such as hunting, going on raids, and long distance travel for grazing cattle which are set aside for men, has implicit implication that women are incapable of doing tasks that require physical strength. This is a wrong comparison about the capacity of women in society, and creates power differences between the genders alienating women from major economic decisions in the household and community.

Hence, the risk factors or challenges of pastoralist women include flawed community perception of gender roles, abject poverty due to recurrent drought, household burden, and lack of basic services. The recurrent drought, which happens due to the shortage of rain, overwhelms pastoralist women because it

forces them to walk long distances to get water and grasses for grazing their cattle, collect firewood, and facilitate domestic endeavors. It is evident that drought affected year's experiences in the Borana zone, with the scarcity of rain, agonizing animals and people immensely. Consistently, Addis Standard (2021) uncovered that many women are confronting serious well-being issues related to ailing health coming about during the dry season caused by the deficiency of rain in Borana, Oromia regional state. Thus, it is understandable that poverty is among the main challenges for pastoralist women since they depend on the periodic rain to get grazing for their cattle, which supports their subsistence and future endeavors.

Though pastoralist women in the Borana community have numerous challenges, they have different protective factors to cope with the challenges. Going in groups when traveling long distance to fetch fire wood and water, sharing tasks with others and receiving respect from community members are among them. To some extent, their husbands, children, neighbors, relatives, and the community share their tasks and support them. And the Borana community respects women as wives and mothers. In support of these notions, Hertkorn et al. (2015) argued that though the Borana community's custom prevented them from taking into account the workload and task-sharing between genders, the Borana community today demonstrates some flexibility in task-sharing between men and women. Typical of this flexibility is men supporting their wives in household chores despite the pressure from the community against their practice.

The study showed that the pastoralist women in the Borana community have an opportunity to utilize available resources to improve their lives, such as the social support system, gender empowerment, getting primacy, engaging in petty trades and promising awareness. For instance, the Marroo practice of helping each other during needy times among pastoralist women, the enabling support from the local government and non-government organizations can be stated. Similarly, Anbacha & Kjosavik (2018) confirmed that Marroo is a voluntary social aid network between friends, neighbors, and households in which all women participate, especially when the need arises, while a large number of poor and elderly ladies rely on it for day-to-day survival regardless of livelihood bases, economic status, and age differences. Moreover, safeguarding access to natural resources and economic opportunities is central to empowering pastoralist women (Fernandez, 2017).

Conclusion and recommendation

Women are building blocks in families and in the community as a whole. The pastoralist women play crucial roles in the social, economic, political, and cultural lives of the Borana Oromo. Besides, as challenges and risk factors, they experienced job burdens, low social status, poverty, and harmful traditional

practices. The coping mechanisms and resilience strategies included the utilization of traditional mutual aid and reciprocal support systems locally known as Marro, Gumaata, and Ulmaa, protection of their safety by travelling long-distance in groups while fetching water and fire wood, and participation in women empowerment programs of NGOs and government sector offices. The women's engagement in cooperatives and petty trade activities as an alternative household livelihood diversification strategies are also promising initiatives for increasing pastoralist women's participation in decision making on household resources and economy.

The study recommends conducting research on indigenous knowledge such as the traditional mutual support systems of Borana Oromo and strengthening them to meet the contemporary needs of women and other vulnerable groups will complement the individual and collective resilience strategies of community members. Organizing women under small business cooperatives, building the entrepreneurial and technical skills of pastoralist women, and facilitating access to capital for women's small businesses are crucial. Moreover, strengthening the policies that promote the welfare of pastoralist women, providing training on women's capacity building, enhancing women's empowerment, and encouraging their participation in the decision-making process are essential to mitigating the problems pastoralist Borana women face.

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