

POLICY BRIEF

GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES IN PASTORAL AREAS

Good practices and recommendations

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Key messages

- **Integrate intersectional approaches early in livelihood programmes.** Situational and context analyses often inform programming decisions about who to engage and why. In pastoral systems, power is shaped by intersections of gender, generation and religion that, if overlooked, may reinforce inequality and exclude certain social groups.
- **Improve inclusive engagement through multi-generational and family-based approaches.** Engage with elders and customary institutions. Plan how programmes will engage with family members in diverse arrangements that include polygynous marriages to avoid reproducing inequalities between co-wives through exclusion.
- **Bolster the voice and agency of pastoralists in setting pastoral development agendas.** Tiered capacity-building approaches are needed to address perennial challenges in pastoral areas. These should include leadership and advocacy, while also improving technical capacities to build resilience and restore rangelands.
- **Link and foster relations between local champions and leaders of grassroots efforts between national, regional and global platforms** on pastoral advocacy and rights.
- **Improve the documentation of impact, including through innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for mobile populations.** Evidence is critical to advance understanding of what works, where, for whom and why. Robust research design and mixed methods approaches can improve the evidence base. Partnerships with research institutions and technological and digital innovations can bolster citizen science.



Pokot keeping livestock in Baringo.
Photo credit: Georgina Smith

Introduction

Many pastoral societies in African contexts feature gendered divisions of labour, unequal access to and control over resources, and asymmetries in decision-making authority. These have differential impact on the livelihoods, well-being and resilience of women and men. Livelihood programmes must address structural constraints in contexts where norms disadvantage women through practices that compromise their health, dignity and well-being, and limit their influence in household decision-making.

Gender transformative approaches (GTAs) engage with and address deeply embedded structural inequities. By addressing the harmful and restrictive gender norms that drive these inequities, GTAs can support equitable pastoral development.

We reviewed primary and secondary sources to understand GTAs in pastoral contexts in SPARC countries in Africa. Primary sources include 11 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 5 participatory stakeholder workshops across East and West Africa (Bullock et al., 2025).

Findings and recommendations

The data sources provide insight on the primary foci of GTAs, target groups, impacts, mechanisms used to implement GTAs and, lastly, metrics used to assess impact.

GTAs are implemented unevenly geographically, and they are often embedded in other sector-specific or cross-sectoral programmes. Perhaps because of this, it is often unclear the extent to which GTAs are tailored or adapted to the unique characteristics of pastoral areas. Such lack of clarity makes it difficult to co-create, design and implement context-relevant and sustainable interventions to address challenges around mobility, political and economic marginalisation, and unequal power relations. This includes within and between pastoral communities at the intersection of age, ethnicity, religion and other social factors.

Our key recommendations are premised upon principles to amplify local agency and voice. In turn, this will lead to social change that generates equitable and resilient livelihoods for women, men, girls and boys.



Pokot women on a field day in Baringo.
Photo credit: Renee Bullock

Interventions should address perennial challenges in pastoral areas

Interventions often aim to improve livelihoods and health, enhance resilience, reduce harmful practices, and strengthen resource governance. The most common focus of GTAs is to improve livelihoods, often supporting diversification into agricultural activities over livestock-based activities. However, few GTAs are embedded in conflict resolution and peace-building programmes.

Transformative impacts occur most frequently in women's decision-making, reductions in harmful practices and in changes related to resources, namely the role of women in their management and governance. Changes in intra-household dynamics have been reported by fewer than half of the interventions. Fewer changes have been found in norms affecting women's mobility, educational outcomes for both women and girls, women's roles in peace-building, and health- and nutrition-related norms and practices.

Mechanisms to implement GTAs should describe engagement processes

Collective action in groups, community dialogues and working with champions or change agents are the most common mechanisms used to implement GTAs. Among the approaches considered, published or otherwise, information is not well detailed about: (1) who is engaged and how; and (2) how the approach is tailored to a pastoral system.

Interventions must integrate impact metrics at various stages

Less than half of the interventions include monitoring and impact evaluations. Robust and rigorous approaches have relied on mixed methods to identify and attribute changes to GTAs, specifically where changes in norms and behaviours are explicit aims of the project. Metrics are implemented at various stages of interventions and most commonly prior to the onset of intervention activities, or as part of planning.

However, robust methodologies to assess impact are an exception and are more common in large interventions spanning regions within or across countries. Often, funding agencies have implemented rigorous methods to evaluate progress against targets. Yet observations of change are mainly anecdotal, shared through blogs, stories, reports and other grey literature.

Strengthen pastoral voice and agency in collaborations

Organisations and forums that advance gender transformation and social change operate across both pastoral and agro-pastoral contexts. They focus primarily on advancing women's empowerment, improved land rights and peace-building efforts in areas of conflict. International, national and local organisations across East and West Africa engage men and community leaders to address deeply rooted norms and support transformative outcomes. Platforms, forums and networks support gender transformation that advances local and regional advocacy and that builds capacities to contribute to global efforts to strengthen women's roles and rights in pastoral and agrifood systems.

GTAs exist in multiple and diverse forms. They can amplify existing grassroots and community-led efforts by addressing root causes of inequitable pastoral development: restrictive social norms and harmful practices. To improve the ways in which these approaches embed or resonate with local socio-cultural contexts, partnerships should be developed and deepened with local civil society organisations (CSOs) and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Such partnerships should link with wider platforms and networks to garner locally embedded and led sustainable social change.

Conclusion

Efforts to implement GTAs are gaining momentum in Africa and elsewhere. While pastoral systems share certain features with other livelihood systems, their unique characteristics require that GTAs are tailored or adapted to address particular perennial challenges. This includes climate change and rangeland degradation. Tailoring GTAs is essential to also ensure that interventions do not unintentionally reproduce inequalities through exclusion.

GTAs must consider how to reach and work with mobile and remote populations with limited access to services, including educational and health facilities. Engaging with complex familial arrangements and with customary institutions is critical to embed GTAs in interventions; however, more efforts are needed to enhance pastoralists' agency in setting the development agenda. Also essential are practical guides and metrics to build the capacities of practitioners and policy-makers to work in diverse pastoral settings and develop a better understanding of what works for whom, where, how and why.

WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

East Africa regional workshop

- Participants argued for engaging local actors and institutions in the implementation of GTAs. This is especially important because of diverse norms, policy structures and conflict dynamics.
- Recommendations include: ensuring that design is inclusive; strengthening coordination and accountability mechanisms; and developing and deepening cross-sectoral partnerships and cross-border regional cooperation through policy harmonisation.

West Africa regional workshop

- Participants identified structural barriers including gendered land access and highlighted that women's empowerment in pastoral systems is poorly funded.
- Recommendations include: inclusive governance; institutionalising or implementing inclusive and gender-sensitive laws; and mobilising resources to fund local-level action.

Tanzania national workshop

- Participants identified practical entry points for GTAs in pastoralism – such as rangeland resource management and governance, women's economic empowerment, and land rights.
- Persistent gaps were identified in funding and capacity, low literacy and lack of awareness regarding harmful norms and practices.
- Policy reforms sensitive to gender and pastoralism were emphasised, along with the importance of engaging men, strengthening leadership capacities, and responsible coordinating mechanisms for NGOs that focus on pastoralism.

Ethiopia national workshop

- Participants reported widespread challenges to implementing GTAs in pastoral systems, largely due to discriminatory social norms, underrepresentation of women in decision-making spaces and resource-based conflicts.
- Recommendations include: emphasising local ownership; increasing gender-responsive budgeting; and better alignment of policies with local realities, in both creation and implementation stages.

Nigeria national workshop

- Participants highlighted interlinked challenges in pastoral communities, including climate impacts, conflict and insecurity, weakened customary institutions, and political marginalisation. These obstacles are compounded by restrictive norms and limited access to resources and services for women and girls.
- Recommendations include: tailored approaches to reach pastoral communities that consider seasonal and transboundary mobilities; supporting community-led peace-building efforts; generating evidence about intersectional power dynamics; and ensuring sustained investment in local ownership of interventions.

References

Bullock, R., DuttaGupta, T., Majiwa, H. and Tavenner, K. (2025) *Gender transformative approaches in pastoral areas: a review of current trends and key issues*. Technical Report. London: SPARC Knowledge (<https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/gender-transformative-approaches>) (<https://doi.org/10.61755/UBPJ9797>).

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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