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Women's empowerment for demographic issues and conflicts in African pastoralist societies

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Key words: women, conflict, pastoralism, demography

Abstract

Widespread conflict is a recurring issue in African pastoralist societies. While its roots are debated, there is a missing link with prevailing poverty among communities and particularly among women. We here apply a gender perspective to establish a hypothesis on the role of women in pastoralist conflicts.

The existing polygynic system establishes a violent frame for pastoralist women, who would be sold at increasingly early ages to provide in turn enough resources for furnishing the dowry needed by their brothers. The control on them would thereby be transferred from their own families to their husband and his family, where they have also to endure competition for resources with other wives. Survival strategies are linked with fertility, as a higher offspring allow women a higher access to power and resources. This has, however, negative individual consequences in terms of personal health and workload, as well as a higher collective burden on reduced per-capita income and increased poverty. The latter is more severe for women, having restricted access to resources and decision-making

Delivery of formal education is particularly weak among pastoralist societies. It is, however, an empowerment tool that contributes to higher well-being across the community. Firstly, it allows economic diversification and establishment of independent income sources. And secondly, it provides women with the tools to decide on their reproductive health that have consequences on poverty - both at controlling fertility and increasing investment in children's education. ICT brings here a further possibility to access information not subjected to the control of men in their family, potentially being an important empowerment tool for women and thereby a tool for conflict mitigation or resolution.

Introduction

The arid belt of the Sahel and the Greater Horn of Africa (GHA), where pastoralist societies have traditionally developed, experiences recurring conflict that has gained international attention (De Haan et al. 2016). Conflict between wildlife-based and pastoralist uses, as well as over land ownership, are prevalent in the East, including Tanzania (Manzano and Yamat 2018), Kenya (Fox 2018, Mkutu 2019) or Ethiopia (Feyissa 2014). In the Sahel, conflicts between crop farmers and pastoralists are more dominant, with notable examples from Nigeria (Abbass 2014, Seignobos 2015) but also from other countries ranging from Ghana (Bukari 2017) to Mali (Bagayoko et al 2017). The weak presence of the State is identified with instability, facilitating terrorist groups (AQMI, Boko Haram; De Haan et al. 2016). While conflict factors has yielded widespread common explanations at the local or the subregional level, they have been contested by a number of evidences. A cross-regional perspective could offer more consistent results for identifying root causes.

Methods and Study Site

We reviewed the available literature explaining conflicts in the Sahelian and GHA regions, using the search strings "pastoralism" and "conflict" combined with relevant geographical tags (country or subregion names). We also built on widely shared papers at relevant pastoralist forums, such as FAO's Pastoralist Knowledge Hub or CELEP's mailing list. We applied a test-and-rebate methodology for widespread hypotheses, using a trans-disciplinary approach (Manzano et al. 2021), and we later looked for root explanations in the literature based on gender and education, building on previous work by Manzano and Sloomweg (2018).

Results

Weaknesses in existing sub-regional explanatory theories

In the Sahel, weak law enforcement in pastoralist areas, which are sparsely populated and have weak State infrastructures, are frequently used as an explanation for prevailing conflict (Seignobos 2015, De Haan et al.

2016). This fails to explain, however, why conflict is present both in drier, more northern locations, and in more humid and southern areas – even if the repression mechanisms are clearly more efficient in the south. It also fails to explain why violence is steadily increasing (Krätli and Toulmin 2020) in spite of the increased deployment of national and international forces in the sub-region.

Climate change is also routinely given as an explanation for dwindling natural resources and increased competition around them both in the Sahel (Abbass 2014, Bagayoko et al 2017) and in the Greater Horn of Africa (Manzano and Yamat 2018). However, such explanations clash with climatic evidence that shows the Sahel is actually re-greening and that rainfall in both regions is increasing due to anthropogenic climate change (Molina-Flores et al. 2020:182). Misleading factors include erosion due to unsustainable uses that decreases plant productivity in areas of shallow soils (Dardel et al. 2015) and change in rain patterns (Wainwright et al. 2019) to which local management systems may still have not had time to adapt.

Prevalent farmer-herder conflict is increasingly present in West African media, usually with negative depictions of pastoralists (Krätli and Toulmin 2020). Increased competition for land is exacerbating conflict situations in the Sahel (Molina-Flores et al. 2020:58). But such increase in conflict is happening in the Greater Horn of Africa as well in non-farming areas (Manzano and Yamat 2018, Mkutu 2019). It is related to a general increase in violence and conflictivity, happening also among farmer communities (Krätli and Toulmin 2020). Claims for ancestral bad relationships ignore the mutualistic relationships between farmers and herders, which have depending on each other based on barter or monetary exchanges around manure, milk, meat, hides, transport, grain or use of fallows (Krätli and Toulmin 2020, Molina-Flores et al. 2020).

In the Greater Horn of Africa, claims around competitive land use between conservation and pastoralism ignore the possible coexistence, and even facilitation, of wildlife and domestic herbivores (Schultz and Rubenstein 2016). Interpretations of general livestock increases that would exacerbate competition with wildlife do not match long-term observations when measured in Tropical Livestock Units – a fairer way to compare mixes of livestock species, and which indicates stability of the herd. This is the case both in Kenya (Ogutu et al. 2016, contested by Manzano and Sloomweg 2017), and in Tanzania (Veldhuis et al. 2019, contested by Manzano and Yamat 2018). In both cases, the decline of wildlife seems to be rather related to poverty factors than to competition for grazing resources (Manzano and Abella 2020). The same data on stability of herd numbers, and the spread of the community conservancy model (Ogutu et al. 2019, Manzano and Abella 2020) show the weakness of the land grabbing argument to explain the very recent (<15 yr) increases in violence and conflict.

Strength of gender and related demography-poverty effects as an explanatory theory

The explanatory power of gender dynamics is firstly conditioned by increasing poverty. While West Africa is constrained by poor data, especially in Nigeria (Molina-Flores et al. 2020:152) where conflict is becoming more visible in the media (Krätli and Toulmin 2020), the Greater Horn of Africa allows for some case studies with better statistical data. In the Ngorongoro Conservation Area poverty has been continuously increasing since the 1960s and as the local population growth has not been accompanied by income diversification policies or value addition strategies within the livestock sector (Manzano and Yamat 2018). Kenya at large suffers similar problems, with the pastoralist population increasing in numbers¹ but relying on the same economic base, i.e., the same livestock herd (Manzano and Abella 2020). A useful indicator of the increased poverty among pastoralist communities is the balance between goats/sheep and cattle – an increase in sheep/goat proportion shows cash-oriented economic strategies motivated by short-term needs.

Polygamous marriages are a cross-cutting characteristic of the increasingly violent social landscapes of the Sahel and Greater Horn of Africa. Such polygynic systems exacerbate the poverty-driven violent frustration of unaffordable dowry (Hudson and Matfess 2017) – a prevalent system in the whole continent. The violent frame experienced by women starts with the dowry transaction itself, as they become a good to be sold in order to mitigate the poverty at their parental household and to cover the dowry expenses of the household's sons. The poorer the household, the more urgent is the need to put brides in the market, so women will marry at an earlier age. Because of the increasing poverty-mediated inequalities, as observed e.g. in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (Manzano and Yamat 2018), men with higher economic capacity – who are usually older, because of more time available to increase capital – will grab more spouses, leaving a big collective of young men that are unmarried and frustrated, and prone to engage in non-legal economic

¹ This link with population growth departs from misidentified neo-Malthusian perspectives, as in Weldemichel et al. 2019. It is not about growth *per se*, but about providing growing income sources for growing populations.

activities such as cattle rustling (Gaskell et al. 2018:66, Hudson and Matfess 2017:29-34), or in abducting women (Hudson and Matfess 2017:23-28). This is a powerful explanatory factor of the increased violence in the Sahel and Greater Horn of Africa, but which is almost regularly overseen. The violent frame does not stop at the young population, but continues within the new, polygynous household, where wives compete and engage in harassing behaviors towards co-wives and children (Geary et al. 2014). In such a setting, the placement of the women in the marriage hierarchy is a very important factor, with high fertility rate being a key factor to access power and to gain from a preferential access of resources for her and her children (Madhavan 2001).

The psychological and often physical burden both to mothers and to their children, irrespective of their sex, becomes clear. A derived heightened fertility rate arises from the early access of women into marriage, which extends their fertile years, and the competitive factors which stimulate a higher fertility at the individual level. Such high fertility rates have, however, a collective burden, especially if the resource base is fix as in the case of pastoralism-based societies that do not have income diversification opportunities. Women bear the severest consequences: an increasingly unequal society undermines their access to resources even further, and inequality also cuts any avenues into decision-making, deepening patriarchal structures.

Discussion

Conflict in the Sahel and the Greater Horn of Africa is routinely explained by a deterioration of the natural resource base or by competition among ethnic groups. However, we have identified here the gender inequalities and the disempowerment of women in increasingly unequal polygamous marriages as a powerful explanatory root cause. While the way to disempowerment is clear, the way to empowerment is also well defined. Formal education has a multidimensional transformative effect, allowing for diversification of income but also for creating new opportunities within a sector – the livestock sector in our case. Pastoralists in general and women in particular are, unfortunately, subjected to particularly weak delivery of education services (Pearce 2009), in countries where access to education is already weak (de Haan et al. 2016, Manzano and Yamat 2018).

Violence is likely to be greatly reduced through improved education delivery by a wide array of factors. Firstly, higher education levels imply more and better income sources, and less inequality. The inequality tensions among young single men that tend to lead to violence are improved through diversification and derived improvement of income, to which educated men are more much more prone (Bruyere et al 2018). Reducing inequality in the access to dowry seems to have been key in Saudi Arabia's strategy to mitigate social tensions (Hudson and Matfess 2017:34-37). Higher education in women translates into a higher incorporation into workforce, meaning also reduced inequality and poverty (Canning et al. 2015:24). Secondly, economically empowered women are much more independent (Flintan 2009), therefore being less vulnerable to violence and much less likely to reject entering inequal settings such as polygynous marriages. A higher independence translates into more control on reproductive health, which implies decisions towards less fertility (Upadhyay et al. 2014) and a higher investment dedicated to educating each child (Canning et al. 2015:114).

The scope for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to bring additional opportunities is becoming a reality. Pastoralists can benefit from such tools for education to reach remote areas (Swift and Krätli 2010). ICT is expanding across farmer settings in Africa with the increased use of mobile phones (Abdulai et al. 2019). A very interesting avenue to explore is the role of such technology for accessing information independently. Support and counseling networks established in Kenya are increasingly providing psychological support anonymously, helping women to manage situations of violence or forceful conception within the marriage. They also provide tools to escape undesired settings or strategies to mitigate or resolve conflicts within the household. A characterization of such arising networks is a promising research avenue that can also clarify how digital literacy can become a tool to mitigate widespread societal violence that originates in deep gender inequalities at the household level.

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