

Inter-Ethnic Conflicts, Counter Raids and Widowhood in North-Eastern Uganda

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Abstract

North-Eastern Uganda is a semi-arid region where inter-ethnic conflicts, cattle raids and violence are common. The nomadic Karamojong are the inhabitants of this region. A typical Karamojong man is socially defined by the number of his wives and cattle. As cattle, sheep, goats and camels are required for the payment of the bridal price, a Karamojong man spends most of his time raiding them in order to acquire more wives. Often, many warriors die in those raids, leaving behind young widows who, by age-old tradition, have to be inherited by the husband's brother or clan mate. This article discusses the centrality of women, widows and widowhood in the inter-ethnic conflicts, raids and counter- raids that have characterized north-eastern Uganda for centuries. Using a qualitative approach involving key informant's interviews, we analyzed the series of socio-cultural practices and customary laws that many Karamojong women and widows are subjected to during their struggles for basic needs, human rights, and dignity. The interviews were conducted from March to August 2021 in Karenga, Nakapiripirit and Amudat Districts of Karamoja, and in the suburbs of Mbale and Kampala Cities where a number of Karamojong women now live.

Keywords: cattle rustling, ethnic conflicts, Karamojong widows, widow inheritance

Although marriage is known to hold emotional costs for both men and women, social scientists now believe that the trauma for the loss of a spouse is greater for women than men (Umberson, Wortman & Kessler, 1992, p. 11). For Karamojong women of North-eastern Uganda, the stake is even higher since the loss of a husband means greater struggles for basic needs, human rights and dignity (UNPF, 2018, p. 6). The agony of Karamojong women begins right at childhood when the girl child is taught to be obedient to her brothers, father and uncles, and to labor for their basic needs of food, water and shelter when they are out raiding the culturally much needed cattle from neighboring communities (Interview with Jane, a Karamojong woman, aged 49 in Namwongo, Kampala).

The Karamoja region of Uganda covers an area of 27,200 sq. km., roughly 10 percent of the country's total land area. It is a semi-arid plateau of 3000 to 4000 feet above sea level (Gourlay, 1970, p. 114). The population of this region in 2018 was 1.2 million (UNPF, 2018, p. 2). There are a number of ethnic groups that live in this region, all belonging to a people collectively called the Karamojong. These are the Matheniko, the Tepeth, the Bokora, the Pian, the Pokot, the Jie and Tobur (sometimes called the Acholi Labwor). Others are the Dodoth, Nyangia, the Napore, and the Ik (Powel, 2010, p. 2). Their unifying language is NgaKaramojong (Ogalo 2017:48) except for the Acholi Labwor who adopted a Lwo language learnt from their Acholi neighbors to the west of Karamoja. Today, the Karamoja region consists of eight districts in northeastern Uganda, Kaabong, Kotido, Abim, Moroto, Napak, Amudat, Nakapiripirit and Karenga. The Karamojong don't believe that they are one united ethnic group or tribe (Ogalo, 2017, p. 48). The name "Karamojong" is a British colonial creation. A Karamojong sees himself or herself foremost as Dodoth, Bokora, Matheniko, Pian, and so forth, other than a Karamojong (Interview with Piyan in Nakapiripirit).

The Karamoja region suffers from chronic poverty and has the worst development indicators in Uganda (UNPF, 2018, p. 1). Protracted inter-and intra-clan conflicts over cattle and access to pasture and resources, cross-border incursions by groups from neighboring Kenya and Southern Sudan and a high level of small arms proliferation and violence have all negatively affected the region's socio-economic development (Powell, 2010, p. 1). Yet, Karamoja region is one of the major tourist attractions of Uganda as it boasts the Kidepo Valley National Game Park and beautiful mountain scenery: Mt. Morungole to the north; Mount Moroto in the east; Mount Kadam to the south while Mount Napak lies west of Karamoja.

Like many pastoralist societies of Africa, the Karamojong are patriarchal and sexist (Musubika, 2017, p. 65). From birth to death, a Karamojong woman is under the chauvinistic control of a male relative. Unequal power relations between men and women begin right at the family level. Hence:

A young, unmarried woman is, by custom, the property of her parents, who are entitled to choose her husband and force her to marry if she refuses. Brides frequently are very young relative to their husbands, who may already have other wives (Hopwood, Portor, & Nangiro, 2018, p. 144).

When their husbands die, they are inherited by a brother or clan mate of the deceased without the consent of the wife (Mkutu, 2008, p. 237). Widow inheritance is deeply entrenched in the culture of the Karamojong. All the women interviewed in Nakapiripirit confirmed the rampancy of widow inheritance in their region.

This research highlights the centrality of women and widows in the culture and daily life of the Karamojong. It has been stated that Karamojong women experience a “two-fold” discrimination, at the national level and within their own society (Powell, 2010, p. 23). Our research focused on the discrimination and the unprivileged position of women and widows within Karamojong society. We conducted extended interviews with Karamojong women and leaders in Karamoja, but also in the cities of Mbale and Kampala where many of them now live, having fled from socio-cultural and political injustices back home (Stites, 2020, p. 32).

According to oral tradition, the name “Karamojong” is derived from two Ateker words; “aikar” meaning “to tire” and “imojong” denoting “old men”. Hence, Karamojong means “the tired old men who remained behind” (Okoboi, 2016, p. 64). The Karamojong lived together with the Iteso and other Nilo-Hamitic peoples as one group of pastoralists in southern Ethiopia, then moved to North-Eastern Uganda (Okoboi, 2016, p. 74). Other groups the Karamojong lived with, in the Horn of Africa are the Lango and Kumam of Uganda. The Teso was the last group to separate from the Karamojong.

When the migrating Nilo-Hamitic group reached what is now Karamoja, the young and agile people separated from the group of old people that couldn’t walk fast enough. The old men and women remained behind while the young men migrated with the main cattle stock of the migrants. This young group never went back to what was perceived as old and tired community. Instead, they founded what is now the Teso ethnic community of Uganda. Their attempt to go back and get their wives became futile. Meanwhile the elderly people who remained behind attempted in vain to secure their cattle from the young people. Unable to move farther and convinced that the land they found was suitable for cattle rearing, the elderly migrants settled and formed the Karamojong society (Interview with Mr. Olam in Namwongo, Kampala). To date, the Karamojong have great respect for elders who are thought to interact with God. Disobeying elders spells misfortune and doom for the young and women. “Elders bring prosperity and if you obey elders, you will have fortune” (Dyson-Hudson, 1963, p. 382). For women, the mentioned fortune includes chances of producing many children.

Respect for elders is on the wane today, partly due to the growth of gun culture in Karamoja. When in 1979 the Ugandan government of Idi Amin fell, defeated soldiers fled from Moroto barracks leaving behind a large cache of weapons. The Karamojong broke into the Moroto armory and armed. Since then, the Karamojong have been well armed, violent and confident of themselves. In the next section, we will illustrate how this history has impacted gender roles in Karamoja.

Gender roles in Karamoja

Gender roles can be described as the specific activities and codes of conduct deemed appropriate for men and women in a particular culture. They are malleable and, therefore, change as the needs of society change (Tino, 2017, p. 7). Traditionally, Karamojong men’s roles are hunting, rustling and grazing animals while women are in charge of building huts, farming, caring for children and doing all house chores (Musubika, 2017, p. 70; Ssenkaaba, 2015, p. 20).

Farming is a daunting task in Karamoja. There is only one rainy season and the Karamoja region experiences both drought and flooding (Sundal, 2010, p. 74). In years of rainfall which recently has been once every three years, Karamojong women engage in sorghum production (Gray, Sundal, Wiebusch, et al., 2003, p. 5; Hopwood, Portor, & Nangiro, 2018, p. 141). They

practice slash-and-burn agriculture (Mamdani, 1982, p. 67). The responsibility of feeding men, children and all members of the household rests with the Karamojong woman. Cattle, which the man raises and grazes, only provide milk and occasionally blood, which by all standards are inadequate for entire family to depend on.

Even when a Karamojong family migrates to an urban setting, the responsibility of feeding members of the household is still borne by the wife. This is one reason there are female Karamojong beggars on the streets of Kampala, Mbale, Jinja and other cities of Uganda. None of the Karamojong beggars are male. One Karamojong beggar had this to say:

It is my husband who encourages me to join fellow women to beg. He says to me that if I do not go begging, we will go hungry...otherwise I don't like it. There are so many problems on the street (Musubika, 2017, p. 70).

Karamojong men living in urban centers are known for drinking and working as security guards. Their income however is not for feeding the family. It's for drinking, betting, buying clothes, and so on, while the wife begs and takes care of the family diet (Interview with Mary in Namwongo, Kampala).

Karamoja has the highest level of adult illiteracy in Uganda (Muhereza, 2010, p. 61). It follows, therefore, that the Karamojong women who migrate to urban centers mostly cannot access adequate employment. They can only earn by begging while the men engage in low-paying jobs like security guards. This is the reason it has become very difficult to remove Karamojong beggars off Kampala streets. They survive on begging whenever out of Karamoja and it is done exclusively by women because Karamojong culture stipulates that feeding members of the household is the responsibility of the wife.

It has, indeed, been an uphill task to remove Karamojong women from Kampala City except during the Common Wealth Heads of Governments' Meeting (CHOGM) in 2007 when the authorities orchestrated a fear mongering strategy among them by spreading the rumor that "somebody called 'the Queen' will chop off the head of any beggar on the street of Kampala" (Sundal, 2010, p. 79). This meeting was held at a time when the influx of Karamojong had just started following the disarmament process there. When this rumor spread, Karamojong beggars hastily left the streets of Kampala and only returned when the "Queen" left Uganda.

Traditionally, Karamojong value their women mainly for the natural role they play in childbirth. Children of both sexes are important. Daughters are needed because they attract considerable wealth (cows) as a bride-price upon marriage. In the same way, boys are highly valued because as soon as they turn eight, they are deemed dependable cattle herdsman and cattle raiders upon becoming 14. Hence, among the Karamojong, childbirth is eagerly welcomed because children represent the future. Children are an insurance against loss of cattle. They earn cattle through bride prices or raids depending on their sex. But children also form a network of younger people to care for the elders (Graham & Davis-Floyd, 2021, p. 4). Hence, an important wife among the Karamojong is one who has produced children, and the more children, the higher her value in society (Interview with Dorah, not real name, in Mbale City, Eastern Uganda).

Traditionally, the Karamojong live in gated homesteads called *Manyatta*. A *manyatta* houses many families and is built for the security of its members. The task of building the *manyatta* and thatching each of the houses in it are borne by women. Karamojong men don't know how to build a hut because culturally it's not their responsibility. Nobody can alter or question the

traditional household roles and responsibilities because they were determined by the elders a long time ago (Tino, 2017, p. 41).

While the Karamojong woman is caught in a web of responsibilities as mentioned above, the man has one role and that is to secure cattle. In modern times, it means acquiring modern rifles. Men have power over women because they are the owners of weapons (Mkutu, 2008, p. 238). In fact, a Karamojong man without a gun is considered not to be a man at all (Knighton, 2006, p. 281). This explains why as soon as the government of Uganda undertook the disarmament of Karamojong warriors, many of them had to migrate to the urban centers including Kampala City. Small arms trafficking has been able, however, to supply Karamojong warriors with weapons. There is much gun trafficking in Karamoja from South Sudan, Ethiopia and from Somalia mainly via the Turkana region (Muhereza, 2010, p. 62).

Karamojong informal education replicates their traditional gender roles, with boys taught how to be effective raiders and herders while girls learn how to look after the home and family (Powell, 2010, p. 23). This indigenous education of the Karamojong takes the form of natural life experiences with the learners being actively involved in what they learn. Young boys of fourteen to eighteen years take part in grazing and raiding of animals to learn from parents and elder brothers while young girls are always involved in thatching huts, gardening, cooking food and caring for infants and the elderly. Karamojong informal education has thereby been able to perpetuate traditional gender roles including cattle rustling. Although cattle rustling is the most important occupation of a Karamojong man, it is done to secure women, as analyzed in the next section.

Women and Cattle Rustling

To a Karamojong family, cattle represent wealth, both economically and symbolically (Ssenkaaba, 2015, p. 1). Cattle keeping and cattle raiding are, therefore, central to Karamojong culture:

Cattle's importance as a central feature of the Karamojong culture influences every facet of life...The number of animals owned represents a family's wealth and every effort is made to increase the size of the herd, by whatever means. This pursuit of wealth results in frequent cattle raiding among tribal groups that undermine social stability in the region (Graham & Davis-Floyd, 2021, p. 4).

Since 1979 when the Karamojong looted Moroto arsenal (Knighton, 2006, p. 271), armed cattle raiding has exacted a mounting toll on the human population in terms of mortality and morbidity. This, in turn, greatly impaired the capacity of the Karamojong to ensure the health and survival of their children (Gray, Sundal, Wiebusch, et al., 2003, p. 3).

Karamojong men stay away from their wives for as long as half a year raiding or grazing cattle far away from home (Gourlay, 1970, p. 114, Graham & Davis-Floyd, 2021, p. 4). Raids happen within Karamoja as well as outside the region, to neighboring non-Karamojong communities like the Acholi, Lango, Kuman, Teso and Sabiny and the border regions in Western Kenya and Southern South Sudan (Knighton, 2006, p. 272). So involved are the Karamojong and so prevalent is the practice that young men who don't take part in cattle rustling are called *aberu* meaning "women" and shunned by potential brides (Muhereza, 2010, p. 69).

Although there are many motivating factors for raids and counter-raids in Karamoja, it is women that are generally seen as the instigators of such violent behavior. Supposedly, they apply pressure on men to prove their manliness by raiding. The inability of most men to meet this expectation is seen as a source of “psycho-social problems” which can manifest themselves in domestic violence and substance abuse (Powell, 2010, p. 23). Karamojong women compose songs to praise their husbands after a successful raid. Women also compose songs to despise their husbands seen to contemptibly lack courage for cattle raids. Thus:

If a husband does not go for raids while his age-mates go and bring raided animals frequently, the woman nags the man continuously to provoke him to go for a raid. The woman may sing songs, indirectly telling the man he was a coward like a woman (Mkutu, 2008, p. 242).

Cattle raids and counter raids led to the Karamojong being given the title of a “warrior race”. They are, as such, seen as a security threat to the whole country. Braveness and masculinity in this region are proven by the number of successful raids one has participated in and how fierce the battles were. It’s for this reason that Karamojong women prefer men who raid (Knighton 2006:280). Be that as it may, overall this perceived warrior tradition of the Karamojong is thought to have contributed to neglect and underdevelopment in their region (Ssenkaaba, 2015, p. 1).

From another view, cattle raids forge unity among the *Karachuna* (Young male warriors) who depend on each other for the planning and execution of each raid whether outside Karamoja or within (Lorelle, 2010, p. 483). In case of casualties, the property of the fallen warrior such as his gun, stool and stolen cattle is returned to his father or brother. The widow is simply told that “We got scattered on our way back and your husband took a longer route. He will return later”. The widow will only know that her husband is dead when preparation for widow inheritance begins (Interview with a Yolanda, Karamojong widow in Kabong). But even when she learns that her husband is dead, she will not leave the marital home because the bride price ties her to the family and clan of her late husband as seen in the proceeding section.

Bride Price in Karamoja

Generally, the bride price system is a common practice in much of rural Africa. Over 70 percent of the Karamojong live in rural areas (UIA, 2016, p. 1). According to Karamojong custom, women are “married with cows”, whereby the husband’s family gives a large number of cattle to the girl’s family as a bride price. Since settling in Uganda, bride price has been the greatest driving force behind large-scale raiding by the Karamojon. Following such a payment, a traditionally married woman is the property of her husband, family and clan. A bride price and other customary payments to secure a wife are well documented in Karamoja’s oral tradition (Group interview with Karamojong widows in Nakapiripirit).

Additionally, polygamy is common among the Karamojong (Lorelle, 2010, p. 488). First, it’s a show of masculinity as one can prove how manly he is, relative to others, by the number of wives he has. But having many wives is also a show of wealth. Today, the Bride price in Karamoja consists of 100 to 150 heads of cattle (Lorelle, 2010, p. 488) and only a rich man can afford this. Whereas in many parts of Uganda, highly educated girls are feared because of their high bride price, it’s the reverse in Karamoja. Here, educated girls fetch a much lower bride price than uneducated girls, which has the effect of their enrolment dropping off during primary school (Powell, 2010, p. 23). The fact that 60 percent of Karamojong women are unable to read

and write (UNPF, 2018) is attributable to this factor. Among the Karamojong, educated girls are thought to more easily disobey their husbands and fathers-in-law and hence, few men want to marry them. Parents fear sending their children to school because they will earn a smaller bride price.

Consequently, eighty-six percent of children in Karamoja have never been to school and are either not working or are in precarious employment compared to only five percent in Kampala (UBOS, 2017). There exist cases of violence against girls who attend school. They are seen as defiant of their parents, elders and the overall Karamojong tradition. Many school-going girls are therefore victims of courtship rape and forced marriage. Rape is a capital offence in Uganda but in Karamoja, courtship rape is tolerated (interview with Piyan in Nakapiripirit). When a man identifies a girl, he approaches her politely and proposes love. If the girl agrees, the relationship typically leads to marriage but in case of rejection, many men will attempt rape, even organizing a group of boys to help them overpower the girl and rape her. Once raped, the young girl has no choice but to marry the rapist. Matters are further complicated by the preference of men to only marry virgin girls. A known rape victim will not be taken as a wife by another Karamojong man. Yet, an unmarried woman in Karamoja is seen as a misfit in society. Even some children will abuse unmarried women and call them names (Mkutu, 2008, p. 243).

There is no doubt, though, that the local leaders such as the Local Council officials, elders, the army and even police are aware of the harmful practice of courtship rape but no attempt has been made to punish the perpetrators. The silence of local leaders over this socially sanctioned practice equals complicity. Instead of condemning such men, they are seen and praised as strong physically, because they can subdue women easily and economically due to their ability to pay the bride price after first raping a young woman. Overall, there is little concern about the rights of a Karamojong girl of when and how to marry and have sex.

Furthermore, Powell (2010, p. 23) points out the prevalence of widow inheritance among the Karamojong. If a married man dies, relatives will force his brother, even against his will, to ‘inherit’ the widow (Mkutu, 2008, p. 248). “The person who inherits takes away your entire husband's property. If you cry they beat you, torture you, you have to surrender everything or die, there is no negotiation”, said a woman to Mkutu (2008, p. 248). Widows cannot turn down this practice because culture dictates that once married, women are subject not just to their husband’s authority but also to that of his family (Hopwood, Portor, & Nangiro, 2018, p. 144). Generally, marriage in Karamoja is seen in terms of clans rather than individuals, so children and wives belong to the clan (Mkutu, 2008).

There also exists the phenomenon of “half-marriage” among the Karamoja. This happens when a man starts the process of marriage but does not complete it. He may be allowed to live with the woman but unless he pays the agreed bride price, the wife and her children will be property of the woman’s clan. Women often tell the man to whom they are half married “why are you still sitting here? Go for raids and marry me” (Mkutu, 2008, p. 242). During marriage ceremonies, the bride’s father anoints the groom’s face and chest with a sacred clay called *emunyem*, blesses his daughter and tells the couple “go and multiply” (Knighton, 2006, p. 140). This identifies child birth, and not love, as the most important reason for marriage. If the bride does not produce children, the man will send her back to the parents and demand half of the bridal price back.

Although the government of Uganda has outlawed female circumcision (clitoridectomy), among the Karamojong, another common practice, it has proven very hard to eradicate because of the issue of the bride price and the love for cattle. Among other serious physical and psychological health implications, clitoridectomy is believed to reduce libido and thereby also any possible promiscuity. For the man, the only thing that counts is that he is aware of staying far away from his wife either due to raiding or grazing cattle. “No one can give you their cows if your daughter is not circumcised” (Muhereza, 2010, p. 59). Symbolically and literally, female genital mutilation and bride price portray Karamojong women as subordinate individuals existing on the margins of an already marginal system (Powell, 2010, p. 23).

To add even more complexity to the mix, of recent there have been media reports about child trafficking of especially Karamojong girls (Sundal, 2010, p. 72). Continuing disarmament drives of Karamojong warriors by the Government of Uganda has made it difficult for the Karamojong to acquire animals through raids. This means that girls can no longer fetch as much wealth as they used to through marriage, but parents still see their daughters as sources of revenue. To this effect, many parents send their girls to beg, or work as maids to send money home regularly. Often though, this practice might lead to their human rights being violated, but it also exposes girls to the risk of sexual abuse, enslavement by rich men and prostitution (UNPF, 2018). The precariousness of Karamojong girls’ lives therefore continues, and this includes also women’s roles as widows as seen in the next section.

Widowhood in Karamoja

While cattle raiding with automatic rifles may have augmented the Karamojong’s collective wealth and ensured their cultural survival as pastoralists, it has, at the same time, given rise to thousands of widows and orphans in the region (Gray, Sundal, & Wiebusch, et al., 2003, p. 3). Karamoja has the highest total fertility rate in Uganda (UNPF 2018:2). Women within the reproductive age of 15 to 49 years give birth to an average of 8 children per woman (UNPF, 2018, p. 3). It is therefore ironic that the Karamojong have the lowest male to female ratio in Uganda (Knighton, 2006, p. 281). The reason is that Karamojong people lose disproportionately more men than other Ugandan communities and cattle raiding is the number one cause of male mortality in this region. Since women don’t take part in cattle raids, Karamoja has the highest number of widows of any region in Uganda.

The plight of inherited Karamojong widows was addressed by many of our interlocutors in Karamoja, Mbale and Kampala cities. No one expects a man who was forced by his father or clan mates to inherit a widow to cater adequately for her needs. Inheritance is not out of love, but a cultural dictate meant to prevent men from other clans or tribes from ‘taking over’ the widow. Sometimes co-wives insult the inherited widows telling them, “You killed your husband, now you have come to kill mine” (Mkutu, 2008, p. 248). There exists belief that a woman who has lost many husbands has a “hot chest” so whoever takes her may also die. In some cases, the married wives of a man may gang up against an inherited woman and beat her when the husband is out grazing cattle or raiding (Interview with a Karamojong widow in Namwongo, Kampala).

Matters are not any better for those widows who have not been inherited. Most of them live in poverty since wealth in Karamoja is acquired and owned by men. Karamoja is the least socially and economically developed region of Uganda with 61% of its 1.2 million living in poverty (UNPF, 2018). Widows don’t own cattle, so they miss out on everything from milk to finances accrued from cattle. As has been observed:

Increasingly unequal access to the herds within the Karamojong population severely constrained the ability of the most vulnerable segment of the population—women and young children—to buffer themselves from abrupt fluctuations in environmental quality (Gray, Sundal, & Wiebusch, et al., 2003, p. 3).

Cattle are a source of pride for the Karamojong, so without any cattle to their name, widows are the most financially depressed individuals in the culture.

There are many un-inherited Karamojong widows. Normally, inheritance takes place within age-sets. The person inheriting does not only have to be a close relative of the deceased husband or clan mate, but he also has to belong to the age-set of the late husband. So strong is the age-set system in Karamoja that adjacent sets are considered related as father to son (Dyson-Hudson, 1963, p. 58). Courtship, even courtship rape planning and execution, is done within age-sets. Inter-age-set inheritance is therefore discouraged. Hence some widows remain un-inherited due to lack of matching age-set members of the late husband's age-set. In one case, a widow had this to say:

Last year my husband had gone for a raid in Acholi and he was killed there. The brother then inherited me. Later, the Jie went to raid the Turkana from Morulem grazing areas. There were two casualties in the raid, my husband being one of them. His gun was not recovered. They were only two brothers in the family and only my mother in law is left. I am not ready to be inherited by another man again. I might get someone who will take me for granted (Mkutu, 2008, p. 237).

A typical diet of the Karamojong is sorghum porridge, milk and blood. Animal blood in milk is the preserve of men (Mamdani, 1962, p. 72). Denied milk and finances from cattle, the widow in Karamoja has to depend entirely on sorghum as her food. She cannot afford meat because hunting is the domain of men. In Karamoja, only old and infirm cattle are slaughtered for food (Graham & Davis-Floyd, 2021, p. 3). So, the meat supply of Karamoja is mainly from hunting which is done by men.

When a woman is not inherited, she not only lacks food supplies including milk, meat and income, but she also runs the risk of frequent sexual and physical abuse by men (Stites, 2020, p. 39). The risks of murder and rape by other warrior groups are also high among Karamojong widows. The first reason for this is that women in this region are forced to rely on firewood collection as a means of survival for themselves and their families (Hopwood, Portor, & Nangiro, 2018, p. 143). Firewood is the major source of fuel for cooking and warming the huts. The need for firewood takes women far into the bush where they may meet other warriors who rape, beat or murder the vulnerable women. But rape may also take place at home since the widows don't own guns and lack protection which is normally provided by men.

Gender-based violence is also common in Karamoja and widows suffer at the hands of their male family members including their sons and fathers-in-law. The most common factor for gender-based violence is the cultural practice of women being required to provide food for the family including old fathers and mothers-in-law (UNPF, 2018, p. 4). Men publicly humiliate and even divorce wives that fail to provide food to their parents. Here one particular case:

I had a problem with my wife because she was not serving my parents with food yet they are the ones that got for me the cattle for marrying her. I decided to call a meeting

with the elders of our clan and they decided that I should divorce her (Lorelle, 2010, p. 495).

There exist numerous other cases where husbands and sons are reported to have beaten women on account of failing in their responsibilities of providing food and water yet the harsh climatic conditions in Karamoja make it very hard to acquire vegetables, firewood and water. Widows who don't provide for their in-laws are beaten or chased away from the *manyatta*. To make matters worse, the *ameto* or traditional court where disputes are settled are also male-dominated so women have limited chances of a fair hearing.

Many Karamojong women who are widowed, abandoned and mistreated find their way to urban centers where many then live in squalid conditions. Thousands of Karamojong women and children moved to Uganda's cities after the initial disarmament process undertaken by the Government of Uganda (Sundal, 2010, p. 72). Towns in Karamoja like Kotido, Abim and Moroto have witnessed unprecedented growth in recent years due to the influx of women (Stites, 2020, p. 32).

Conclusion

The Karamojong society is male dominated and women, especially widows, bear the lifelong brunt of male chauvinism until today. The *Akiriket* or sacred assembly that decides everything for everybody in Karamoja is for male elders of the respective clan only. The *karachuna*-young warriors on whom the Karamojong society depend for protection and wealth (by raiding) is exclusively for male youths. Likewise, the judges at the *ameto*-the court process of bringing wrongdoers for punishment are all males. Women have no forum and no voice in Karamoja. They are heard through their husbands meaning that widows are never heard at all.

The power of the Karamojong man is derived from the bride price of more than one hundred heads of cattle that he pays to acquire a wife. But men also own guns and when they lack AK 47 assault rifles, they locally manufacture the *amatida* Karamojong guns which are used for raids, and rapes. Men spend months away from home raiding and grazing cattle while women remain at the *manyatta*-the traditional semi-permanent habitat of the Karamojong, consisting of huts and granaries. Forced by harsh ecological conditions and cultural norms to travel far away from their *manyatta* in search of water, firewood and vegetables, Karamojong women and widows continue to run the risk of being exposed to warriors from rival clans and other ethnic groups that may rape, kill or maim them.

In order to avert the perilous conditions of women, children and widows discussed in this article, the Government of Uganda, development partners and Karamojong leaders should undertake deliberate steps to end transhumant culture of the people and their dependency on livestock. New forms of livelihood should be introduced including crop farming and the service industry. This also means changing the land tenure system to introduce paddocking and private land ownership to replace the current communal system that encourages nomadism.

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