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Kenya: Women and girls' confronting climate change loss and damage

A country research brief





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Introduction

Between February and August 2022, ActionAid Federation Members (FMs) in Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Zambia led feminist research into the lived experiences and perspectives of women on the frontlines of the climate crisis in each country context.

Based on the foundational premise that climate justice requires gender justice, this research sought to provide evidence to demonstrate that it is crucial to use a southern-led climate justice approach and a gendered lens to build climate resilience and advance our thinking and evidence on climate adaptation and loss and damage.

The key objectives of this research were:

- To explore the importance of taking a gender-transformative and systemic approach to responding to climate change within the ActionAid Federation and wider sector, helping to advance progress on women's rights;
- To advance thinking on women-led adaptation innovations, as well as the limits to adaptation and how loss and damage is materialising;
- To create space for the voices and agendas of women leaders and women's rights and women-led organisations to inform global and country-specific climate policy and advocacy.

The findings of the research reiterate that urgent climate actions are needed to address the limits of adaptation and include specific interventions that address loss and damage from a women's human rights perspective. The broad policy recommendation is to ensure that all climate actions are at a minimum gender-responsive and ideally gender-transformative, and informed by women leaders' lived experiences and recommendations.

According to the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN). <https://gain-new.crc.nd.edu/country/kenya>
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What is Loss and Damage?

Loss(es) and damage(s) can result from slow onset or extreme weather events and affect both human and natural systems. Examples of slow onset events are sea-level rise, salinisation, ocean acidification and desertification. Extreme weather events include droughts, floods, cyclones, wildfires, heatwaves and storms. While some forms of loss and damage can be translated in economic terms - such as loss of income and physical assets - many losses and damages are non-economic. Non-economic losses and damages include loss of life, biodiversity, territory, cultural heritage, ecosystems, indigenous and local knowledge, and physical and mental health impacts. With the rise of every fraction of a degree of warming, these losses and damages are happening sooner, faster and more severely than expected, and the impacts are being felt more acutely by countries in the Global South. When capitalised, Loss and Damage refers to the political debate on losses and damages, which covers issues of responsibility and justice.

Context

Kenya is the 39th most vulnerable country to climate change globally and ranks 154th in terms of readiness. With a population of 52.6 million (2019) and a per-capita income of \$1,816.50, Kenya is considered a lower-middle income country. Despite reduction in poverty rates, about one-third of the country's population continue to live on less than \$1.90 a day.

Droughts and floods are the most common natural hazards in Kenya, most (70 percent) of which can be attributed to extreme climatic events. These extreme weather events have cost the country billions in agriculture, infrastructure, and loss of livelihoods. In the last century, droughts have affected the greatest number of people (52 million) while flooding has claimed the most lives (1,400). It is estimated that Kenya loses 8 percent of its GDP every five



years due to drought. Between 2008 and 2011, for instance, a prolonged period of drought that affected more than 3 million Kenyans, cost the country \$12.8 billion in losses and damages and a further \$1.7 billion in recovery.

Currently, Kenya is facing a situation of extreme drought following four consecutive failed rainy seasons, a climatic event not seen in at least 40 years. The October-December 2020, March-May 2021, October-December 2021 and March-May 2022 seasons were all marred by below-average rainfall, leaving large swathes of northern and eastern Kenya facing the most prolonged drought in recent history. The March-May 2022 rainy season was the driest on record in the last 70 years, leading the period 2020-2022 to surpass the devastating droughts in both 2010-2011 and 2016-2017 in terms of both duration and severity. Forecasts predict that the October-December 2022 rainy season is also likely to fail.

Kenyan people generally rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, with the sector accounting for 80 percent of total employment. Kenya is the world's biggest producer of black tea, for example, employing more than three million people. Climate-induced disasters that disrupt and decrease water supply thus pose a significant threat to the livelihoods of millions of Kenyans. Women, who primarily work in small farms, are disproportionately affected.

In 2018, Kenya accounted for just 0.15 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and,

Horn of Africa Drought: Regional Humanitarian Overview and Call to Action, Revised 24 August 2022
Bhalla, N. (2021, May 10). As climate change threatens Kenyan tea, millions of workers seen at risk. Reuters / Emerging Markets. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-kenya-tea/as-climate-change-threatens-kenyan-tea-millions-of-workers-seen-at-risk-idUSKBN2CR1Q6>
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2022, April 1). Kenya (Africa). Climate Promise (UNDP). <https://climatepromise.undp.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/kenya>

despite this low contribution, the country set a relatively high GHG emission reduction target of 32 percent. Based on its second nationally-determined commitment (NDC), Kenya committed to domestically finance 13 percent of its target, while the remaining 87 percent still requires international support. The country also needs financing for investment and innovations to scale up readiness for climate change. Although adaptation components have been elaborated in the country's climate change plans, the government has only committed to mobilise funds domestically for 10 percent of its climate adaptation programs.

Isiolo county

Isiolo County is an arid and semi-arid region in northern Kenya experiencing frequent prolonged dry spells, with an annual rainfall ranging between 400 and 650mm. The county has a population of 268,002 (KNBS 2019) and its production is divided into the three main livelihood zones of pastoral (52%), agro-pastoral (33%) and casual and waged labour (15%). Within the pastoral livelihood zone, 50 percent of the population is semi-nomadic and 15 percent are fully nomadic. The agro-pastoralist communities predominantly reside in proximity of the main rivers, suffering from crop losses as a result of riverine flooding. Climate change impacts in Isiolo are visible from the recurrent cyclical droughts and floods, often causing crop failures and loss of livestock. Other impacts include extensive land degradation, biodiversity loss, deterioration of physical, chemical and biological soil properties and depletion of vegetation cover. Scarcity of natural resources, such as water, pasture and productive agricultural land, has led to resource based inter-ethnic conflicts in the region as people migrate to neighbouring communities for pasture.

Baringo county

Baringo County is in the Rift Valley region of Kenya, with a climate varying from humid



Photo: Kenyan women draw a body map in Kakili village to show the physical impacts of climate change on their lives.

highlands to arid lowlands and with some regions exhibiting characteristics between these two extremes. A large part of Baringo County is semi-arid with little rainfall. As many farmers depend on rain-fed agriculture for their livelihoods, erratic and unreliable rainfall jeopardises farmers' livelihoods and makes it difficult to implement agricultural practices such as land preparation, planting, and harvesting. Drought is ranked as the County's leading hazard exposure in terms of magnitude and spread. It is shaping the socioeconomic structure and livelihood system in Baringo. According to the Baringo County Disaster Risk Platform (CDRR), recent increases in the frequency of droughts have been linked to climate change trends, namely due to the unpredictability of the long rainy season.

Data collection

Feminist research approach

The research used ActionAid's Feminist Research Guidelines, which applied a participatory and intersectional approach to the data collection process as well as comprehensive ethical guidelines to guide the research. ActionAid FMs made deliberate efforts to narrow the gap between 'the researcher' and 'the researched' through the formation of a research team composed of ActionAid Kenya staff and the staff

of partner organisations. The Kenya research team undertook Key Informant Interviews (KIs) with five women leaders responding to the impacts of climate change in their communities and two Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) which incorporated body mapping and social mapping exercises.

Key Informant Interviews (KIs)

The Kenya research team conducted five in-depth interviews with the following women leaders:

1. A member of ActionAid International's global youth network, Activista, and community leader working to prevent domestic violence in Tangelbei, Baringo County, one of the regions in Kenya most vulnerable to climate change. Drought, extreme heat and flooding are some of the challenges brought by climate change in her community.
2. A vice-coordinator of Activista and community leader working closely with women to advocate for women's rights and empower youth in Burat ward, Isiolo County. She is an agro-pastoralist working on climate change adaptation and delivering youth guidance in schools.
3. A woman farmer specialising in home gardening in Burat Ward, Isiolo County.

She plants and grows vegetables such as tomatoes, sukuma wiki (collard greens), and maize. She used to be a pastoralist but, due to climate induced drought and flooding, she has had to shift from grazing livestock to less resource-intensive farming.

4. An agroecology trainer and Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) agent in Tangelbei, Baringo County. She owns a small farm and specialises in agroecological practices to adapt to and mitigate climate change impacts. She is a woman leader in her community, supporting young girls to become climate champions and representing Baringo County at COP26.
5. A woman leader from Baringo South, who is disabled and advocates for the rights of people with disabilities and women in her community. She is a climate migrant, who was displaced by extreme flooding.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The Kenya research team organised two FGDs of 3-4 hours, one with 20 women in Isiolo County and another with 17 women in Baringo County. Young women, women with disabilities, and women farmers and pastoralists participated in these discussions. The FGDs included body mapping and social mapping exercises, whereby the women mapped their experiences of climate change through drawing before sharing their collective drawings with each other and discussing the impacts.



Photo: Kenyan women draw a map of their community showing the impacts of climate change

Findings

Women's experience of loss and damage

Drought, food insecurity, and water shortage

The participants from both Isiolo and Baringo counties cited drought due to rainfall delays as a major setback during the planting period. Irregular rainfall affects the fertility of pastures, resulting in the drying of crops and farmlands. Consequently, women's agricultural means of livelihood and food security are put at risk. High temperatures are also causing water sources to dry up, resulting in a shortage of drinking water in the community.

"People have resorted to cutting trees along the rivers and as a result water catchments have been destroyed and there is no hope that it will regain its initial form. All these have made our lives as women harder as we become the centre of all the challenges." - A woman farmer from Isiolo County shared during an interview

Flooding and displacement

Extreme floods have also led to the destruction of properties such as houses, schools, and bridges. As a result, families have been displaced from their homes and are forced to find new places of dwelling. In such situations, children are often forced to drop out of school. In addition to being displaced from their homes, women have lost the resources required to run small businesses which makes it difficult for them to recover from the economic damages caused by flooding, while damage to roads and bridges also hinders their access to markets. One woman shared how recent floods have swept through the trading centre in Tangelbei in Baringo County, adversely affecting single mothers who trade in shops and hotels on market days. Most of these women usually borrow loans from their Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) to buy goods for sale, but when heavy rains swept away their possessions they were not able to repay the loans or settle their rental debts. Consequently, women are falling into a spiral of poverty.

"Our homes were swept away by floods and we lost both household items and business items."

This has increased [the] poverty rate since women remain with nothing and have to start up again.” - A woman living with disability from Baringo South, Kenya shared in an interview

Intercommunity migration and conflict

The consequences of losses and damages caused by drought and flooding have pushed people - mostly men - to migrate to nearby communities in search of new water points and grazing areas. Intercommunity migration has led to conflict as already scarce resources become overwhelmed, such as waterpoints drying up due to oversharing. When men who migrate fail to return to their communities, women are left with the sole burden of providing for families.

“Food, water and pasture shortage has forced farmers especially pastoralists to migrate from one place to another and that is why this area is prone to conflicts arising from the grazing areas.” - A woman from Baringo County, Kenya shared during a FGD

“Drought has also brought about divorce and separation as some men who migrate livestock to other areas never come back home, leaving women with the burden of providing all the needs of the family.” - A woman from Baringo County, Kenya shared during a FGD

“We have faced inter-community conflicts due to shortage of water and pasture for livestock. This has left women as widows since many men have lost lives while fighting for the limited water and pasture.” - A woman from Isiolo County, Kenya shared during a FGD



Heightened risk of gender-based violence

As resources become increasingly scarce and inter-community conflicts create unsafe

environments, women and girls are at heightened risk of gender-based violence, such as when they need to travel for long distances to fetch water.

“When women are outside looking for water and leaving their young ones at home (girls), this is where rapists take advantage as there is no one around to look after the young girls. This also happens to women who go looking for water from [a] distance with no security.” - A woman farmer from Isiolo County, Kenya shared in an interview

Increased burden of women’s work

Shortage of water as a result of acute drought means women have to travel longer distances to fetch water. One woman shared that women often have to walk miles at night to fetch water in open wells dug along the river as they are busy early in the morning preparing their children for school. Overwhelmed with housework, childcare, and income-generating activities, women are left with little time to participate in community development projects.

“We are really overworked and have no time for projects and development. Think of a woman waking up early in the morning, to do milking, preparing breakfast, taking children to school, doing all house chores, then walking far distance to look for clean water for domestic use or firewood, you come back late home, start preparing dinner, sleep late, then the following day routine is the same. Where do you get time to try a business or other sources of income? We really don’t get time for ourselves and developments.” - A woman Pastoralist from Baringo County, Kenya shared during an interview

School drop-outs, early marriage, and pregnancy

Due to poverty, resettlement, and the destruction of infrastructures such as roads and bridges, children are forced to drop out of school. In particular, young girls’ education is discontinued as they are either married off for families to claim dowry or because of patriarchal societal norms that prioritise the education of boys over girls. As a result of this,

participants expressed concern about the rise in early marriages and pregnancies.

“Early school drop-out leads to lack of basic education forcing young girls into marriages. Traditional beliefs and practices perceive girls as wives and mothers. Men fear educated women.” - A community leader fighting against domestic violence in Pokot community, share in an interview

Women-led efforts to address loss and damage

Women’s collective organising

The women from Isiolo County spoke of how they have formed committees to protect riverways against human destruction. Members of the committee regularly monitor down streams to make sure that there are no destructive activities taking place.

“Women have formed committees to protect rivers against human destruction. We did this after realising that there is a drop in river discharge compared to the previous years. The women who double up as the committee members are the custodians in charge of inspecting down streams to make sure that there is no destruction taking place.” - A woman farmer from Isiolo County, Kenya shared in an interview



In addition to this, the Isiolo Women’s Movement Network has provided forums for women to access information and take collective actions to address community issues. The network works as a watchdog to government projects to follow up implementation as well as identifying gender-responsive projects to be implemented. These include the establishment of daycare schools for young children, creation of market

structures in the community, and fencing of spring sites to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed.

Isiolo Voice of Women is another movement which advocates for women’s rights by pushing against retrogressive practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early and forced marriages of girls, and gender-based violence. Women use this platform to write petitions to the county offices to voice their needs. Women have also been participating in self-managed group banking via Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), which offer saving schemes, grants, and loans for women to access education and invest and grow their small businesses such as crop farming, buy livestock, and poultry keeping.

“We have women forums done almost regularly where women converge and share their experiences on climate change, provide counselling and encourage each other on various ways of adapting to the impacts of climate change. These forums have also helped women in reporting their issues to county offices.” - A woman community leader fighting against domestic violence in Pokot community shared in an interview

Women adapting to climate change impacts

Within their households, women have embraced kitchen gardens to address food shortages and malnutrition. For example, women are drying and salting vegetables as a method of preserving them for future use when drought strikes. Women have also taken up agroforestry to combat the effects of deforestation, and are shifting toward bee keeping and planting drought-resistant crops and trees over cattle rearing which requires a lot of grass.

One of the women community leaders in Isiolo County mentioned that they are working collectively to develop an early warning system by monitoring news about weather changes on social media platforms. The women leaders are developing a weather station to update the community of signs of drought and provide advice on how to cope, such as to sell their cows and buy camels instead or inform them on which crops are drought resistant and grow

fast.

Solidarity and support from women's rights organisations

Several organisations are working with women to address women's rights issues in their communities. For instance, participants cited ActionAid's support in the formation of Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) as an effective intervention. Along with the Tangulbei Women's Network and the Kirira Child Welfare Organization, ActionAid also supported the community to advocate for women's rights and justice through their programming on anti-FGM, reduction of early marriages, ending sexual and gender-based violence, and promotion of girl child education.



The Isiolo County Village Agent Network, along with other feminist organisations, are working to increase leadership positions for women and advocate for girl child education. At the national level, a participant spoke of a feminist women's rights organisation called CREAM which champions women's rights and social justice, by bringing women together to collectively advocate for women's leadership. Another organisation, the bunge le mwanachi, was credited for amplifying the voices of women and advocating for women-led projects in government.

In relation to women's participation in environmental efforts, the Pastoralist Women's Health and Education Network has been educating women on the various ways of adapting to climate change. Organisations such as CHESVI and NASIB Youth Group are supporting women by providing alternative means of livelihood such as planting crops resistant to drought. Additionally, farmers'

cooperatives are giving grants to women's groups, and organisations including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), ACTED Kenya and ActionAid have donated seeds, seedlings, nursery trees, and fertilisers, to women in rural communities.

These initiatives have resulted in greater awareness and information sharing among women, with participants reporting that they are now better informed about adaptation and mitigation strategies due to various trainings and seminars. More women are taking up leadership roles in their communities, from joining committees at the local village level to being elected at higher political positions. However, some of the participants still note that a number of men continue to disregard women's strategies for climate change mitigation.

Barriers to women's leadership

Lack of access to resources

The participants cited several barriers to their active participation in responding to the impacts of climate change in their communities. First, they lack financial independence and the right to property. Patriarchal traditions prevent women from owning property as everything they acquire is listed as their husbands' property. In addition, women lack financial resources to carry out income-generating endeavours.

"Women are barred from owning property. When a woman purchases something important, it becomes the property of the husband. Every gain from a woman is an advantage to man." - A woman from Baringo County, Kenya shared during a FGD

Lack of leadership opportunities

There is also a lack of leadership opportunities for women, and participants reported that women's voices are not acknowledged during forums addressing the impacts of climate change. A considerable lack of women in leadership positions in governing structures was also noted by participants. Several women cited fear of expression, embarrassment, and discouragement as some of the reasons why they do not speak of their concerns. Entrenched



patriarchy encourages the community to educate boys over girls resulting in high illiteracy rates among women, and limiting their access to opportunities later in life. Participants mentioned the prioritisation of girls' education as a barrier to accessing relevant information about climate change, its impacts, and ways to adapt.

"Women are also suffering from the fate of cultural setbacks. Male chauvinism and dominance over women is still rooted in this community and thus women have less voice in making decisions of any kind." - A woman community leader fighting against domestic violence in Pokot community shared in an interview

Key lessons and recommendations

The research illustrates the multidimensional lived realities of women in Kenya on the frontlines of the climate crisis and how loss and damage is materialising as the limits to adaptation are reached, in turn violating women's fundamental human rights. The vulnerability to risk of marginalised communities in Kenya is shaped by the Global North's colonial legacies of resource extraction and labour exploitation in the Global South. Actions to address loss and damage must therefore prioritise those on the frontlines of the climate crisis, such as climate-vulnerable communities in Kenya who

are already reaching their limits to adaptation. Adaptation and mitigation measures alone are not sufficient. A response to loss and damage to redress structural inequalities and guarantee the fundamental human rights of those at risk of marginalisation in the Global South is urgently needed. In this context, it is important to take a gender-transformative and systems-wide approach to tackling the climate crisis. Governments and policymakers must prioritise creating space for the voices and agendas of women leaders and groups on the frontlines of the climate crisis to inform climate policy and advocacy at the local, national, and international level.

Recommendations for policymakers

- Commit specific funding for further research into the impact of climate change losses and damages on women and girls;
- Involve women in climate change financing decisions to ensure outputs reflect women's specific concerns and experiences;
- Increase access to funding for women to carry out climate change responses, for example by providing low interest loans to women farmers and creating a deliberate mechanism that encourages women to apply for funds;
- Remove bottlenecks in accessing funds and ensure appropriate channels of distribution;
- Provide training in writing proposals for funding opportunities and income-generating projects;
- Increase information sharing, training and capacity building to support women's leadership;
- Strengthen links between local policy makers and women's collectives and the national government;
- Increase the number of women in leadership positions and incentivise women to apply for leadership roles.

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