

# From abandonment to autonomy:

## Gendered strategies for coping with change, Isiolo County, Kenya

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# Research Questions

1. Can using and manipulating the structure of the household be a risk reduction and adaptation strategy?
2. What are the implications for women's agency and ability to negotiate intra- and inter-household relationships?
  1. How does this impact on their wellbeing and longer-term adaptive capacity?

# Conceptual Starting Points

1. Climatic factors intensify effects of development changes.
2. Centrality of the domestic domain as the fundamental unit of production and reproduction, including processes of adaptation (Meillasoux, 1981)
  - Unpack the nature and continuum of work
  - Livelihood diversification shaped by access to resources and opportunities available to men and women, yet switch gender-ascribed tasks and responsibilities (Jiggins, 1986)
3. Renegotiating the conjugal contract (Whitehead, 1981), as women's economic contributions to household provisioning rise:
  - Informalisation of marriage ties
  - Seeking economic partnerships
4. Rethinking the binary of male irresponsibility and female victimhood to explore everyday agency of both men and women

# Methodology

## Case study approach

- adopt an intersectional and historical perspective
- understand alternate constructions of 'truth'

Survey of 297 households across three rural settlements

FGDs – disaggregated by gender, generation and location (exploring experiences based on particular subject-position and social location)

In-depth interviews – 10 households per site, interviews with at least 2 people in each household – spouses, parents/children



# Climate Change and livelihoods

- Area has become dryer, shorter spells of rainfall, destructive winds:
- Herds reduced, crops died
- Life perceived to have become worse:
  - Rising costs of commodities including food and water
  - Diversification essential for survival, but opportunities precarious & risky
  - Decline in consumption and nutrition
  - Competition and conflict growing; declining social cohesion and support



# Mobility as a Coping Strategy

- Spatial movement + building and transforming social connections to their advantage
- Men's mobility followed a seasonal cycle in search of pasture and water:
  - Younger men are herders
  - Older men split time between settlement and herd – play a management function – also invest in other businesses
- With drought, move further away for longer periods of time.

*Men need women to care for them when away from their families. Regular movement with the herds allowed them to maintain second and third wives in locations they frequented. This is allowed by our religion (Older woman)*



# Women's enterprise

## Sources of capital and support

- Older women: often in polygynous relationships; have accepted little/no/occasional support from husband, hence have developed alternate forms of earning – often miraa trade.
- Younger women with young children: hard to cope without support from husbands, so depend on mothers, or natal kin for support
  - If businesses closer to home, earn less, but manage domestic duties alongside;
  - If earn more, work is riskier, often involving sexual services, with risk of HIV and other infections



*I knew I was infected with HIV when I was pregnant with my first child. My husband left me and I moved back to Isiolo. I sell miraa at night; my customers are mostly men, so when business is not good, I entertain them. I have to bring up my child (Sheena, 35, peri-urban site)*

# Marriage as an economic partnership

## Agency of Women: Negotiations, Compromises, Resistance

- Men own herds, have positions of authority
- Conjugal contract requires men to provide capital for women's business, and ensure reciprocity in production and reproduction
- Marriage central to men's success as pastoralists, expand social and kinship networks, to enable reproduction of herd & household
- Women receive some stock at the time of marriage, maintained by men
- Women may have little choice in selection of marriage partner in the first instance, but male dependence on marriage gives women agency
- Male inability to provide opens choice on whether to stay or seek divorce.
- Aspire to build their capacities through education & jobs





# Implications for Wellbeing and Adaptation

**With persistent drought, men unable to provide**

**- Younger men find it difficult to marry and maintain a relationship**

Women experimenting with:

- Different forms of marriage – polygamy, serial monogamy, living in different locations..
- Multiple activities, sometimes risky, to ensure survival and meet aspirations for children
- Set up new types of households with mothers and matrifocal kin
- Negative trade-offs (incomes vs health) can be alleviated by provisioning of support services and infrastructure – child care, clean drinking water, production credit etc.

**Policy to recognise that households not homogenous, bring diverse voices to the table, support & strengthen cooperative relationships**



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