

## SUSTAINING LIFE AMID GROWING UNCERTAINTIES: HAMER WOMENS' ENGAGEMENT IN LAND MANAGEMENT

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**ABSTRACT** The Omo Valley in southwestern part of Ethiopia has not seen modern human development infrastructures for decades and the Hamer women must endure all forms of marginalization as a result. Hamer women as women and vulnerable groups have continued to suffer from the uncertainties from the consequences of poor development interventions, impacts from the changing climate and rangeland degradation. The consequence of such uncertain processes in turn increased the frequency of droughts, made rainfall patterns irregular. The growing human and livestock population requiring more land for grazing and cultivation, mobility for this started to trigger more conflicts. Women, in response to changing weather conditions, gradually started strategic management of the rangelands for grazing, cultivation, and diversification of livelihoods as coping strategies. The purpose of this article is to examine Hamer women's role in land management in response to climate induced uncertainties. The data was collected using ethnographic techniques and analyzed qualitatively employing thematic analysis. It was found out that women engagement in land management was to diversify and maximize land use as an alternative to mobility. Apart from the generation of income from the sale of grasses, enclosures contributed to pastoral production systems despite claims that it fragmented communal rangelands.

**Key Words:** Climate change; Hamer women; Land management; Uncertainty; Ethiopia.

### INTRODUCTION

Women, through productive and reproductive roles make important contributions to the economy, well-being and perpetuation of society (Hirut, 1997; Samuel, 2013). Empowering women thus is expanding opportunities to ensure societal continuity. Livingstone & Ruhindi (2011) stated empowerment as the expansion of choice that enhances the capabilities and liberty to change women's lives. Most often, in pastoral and agro-pastoral societies, women are assumed to play insignificant roles because men are leading decision makers and this contributed to failure of development interventions (IIRR, 2004; Samuel, 2017).

According to Hirut (1997), socialization processes have shaped women into the role of subservient mothers and wives keeping them loaded with household tasks. In pastoral areas of a number of countries, not only the valuable contribution of pastoralist women but also the value of pastoralism and rangelands are greatly underestimated due to deliberate portrayal and misunderstanding of the system (FAO, 2016). This has led to marginal policy attention to pastoralism and continued inequality of pastoralist women.

In Ethiopia, national policy and development strategies since the Imperial regime have always pushed for sedentarization of pastoral and agro-pastoral communities disregarding the very nature of their livelihood, the multiple-complex networks of agency they sustain and the patterns of utilizing resources on the land. The Imperial Ethiopian government for instance, according to Dejene (1990), accorded due attention to large-scale modern farming and production of crops for export under its first two Five-Year Plans (1957–1962 and 1962–1967).

The past and present Ethiopian governments also share more or less similar policy towards pastoral development that tends to promote economic well-being and improved standard of living conditions of the rural people (Woldemeskel, 1989; Mengistu, 2005; Workneh, 2012; Gebre, 2009). Hence, modification of the existing traditional farming system with modern agricultural inputs, mechanization, rewarding ‘model farmers’ (tempted pastoralists to shift focus on crop cultivation) and designing river basin irrigation based settlement programs, leasing pastoral land for commercial food and non-food crop cultivation have become the state development agenda that internally motivated pastoralists’ engagement in land enclosure activities particularly by women. The contribution of these developments in terms of targeting women as primary economic beneficiaries, however, is insignificant as they lack the skills and knowledge that they should have had from attending schools.

In the past development programs in pastoral lowlands generally neglected to safeguard the needs and interests of politically marginalized groups and the socio-ecological systems in which they are based. The gap in failing to mainstream women issues in development particularly in pastoral areas has roots in poor institutional and policy reforms. Moreover, funding and flow of skills tend to ignore customary institutions often benefiting only formal government programs with little or no investment in building the capacity of the informal system (IIRR, 2004) and women. Particularly, policies addressing land tenure and social protection issues that matter most to pastoral societies are still not comprehensive enough to bring the required social transformation. When policies exist they lack proper implementation strategies often culminating to the disadvantage of women and other marginal groups.

Poor participation of Ethiopian women in decision making is also a result of the low status and discriminatory attitudes the society has to women (IIRR, 2009). Tradition and customary practices contributed to oppression of women (Hirut, 1997). This is further explained by the customary governance systems in pastoral areas that operate along patriarchal norms adding to further marginalization of women in decision making processes. Despite women’s reproductive, productive and community roles in the society, knowledge of their environment and livestock system, men still retain the power to make decisions. And like in many other pastoralist societies, men in Hamar too customarily hold power either hereditarily or through public election putting women out of the political space (Samuel et al., 2016). Over the past decade, the participation of Ethiopian women at regional and national government leadership positions, however, has shown a remarkable progress.

## CHALLENGES OF PASTORAL WOMEN

Women in deplorable situations of abject poverty remain little affected by development interventions that attempt to bring social and economic changes in society (Almaz, 1997). Climate induced and other anthropogenic processes are impacting livelihoods of millions of women worldwide. Women as vulnerable and marginalized groups are the first to suffer from the uncertainties carrying the huge task of caring their families. The consequence of such uncertain processes also negatively influenced the perpetuation of institutions that for long governed social-ecological systems interaction. In most pastoral areas in Ethiopia, for instance, traditional rangeland governance institutions whose customary codes of conduct saved the interest of multiple communal resources users for generations have weakened (Wassie, 2014), resulting in underutilization and loss of grazing land for invasive species such as *Prosopis juliflora*, leading to more migrations that put more burdens on women and their families.

Conflicts over resources and deteriorating peaceful co-existence relationships prevented negotiated access to resources in the commons thereby prompting tenure insecurity and increased competition (Flintan, 2011). This contributes to increasing vulnerability of women and the weak to food insecurity and asset shocks (IIRR, 2004). In Somali region of Ethiopia, for instance, land enclosures through land fragmentation blocked mobility routes, promoted sedentary settlement and made taking care of small livestock cumbersome to women (Sead, 2007). Such scenario has left pastoral women in misery as more conflicts translate into loss of their resources and productive partners leaving them to carry all the burden of taking care of their family alone. Conflicts and climate uncertainties coupled with the existing gaps in policy further continued to limit women's access to and use of resources.

The constitution grants legal recognition and rights to pastoralists and their constituencies to administer land and other natural resources in accordance with the Federal law as stipulated in article 52, sub-article 1d of the constitution (FDRE, 1995). This is also evident in the regional land administration proclamations, although pastoralism has continued to receive less state attention as a livelihood option (Morton, 2005; Abebe & Solomon, 2013: 189; Samuel, 2014).

The overriding agrarian bias failed to genuinely recognize existing customary land use forms (Abbink et al., 2014: 8) and regarded pastoral lands as inefficient and 'unused empty spaces' (Makki & Geisler, 2011: 3) open for huge capital investment. Such a discourse along with the influence of internal and external factors mentioned above has contributed to changes in land use in Ethiopia at different scales subsequently affecting women's tenure rights in pastoral areas context.

## OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this chapter is to bring forward the role and contribution of the Hamar pastoral and agro-pastoral women to improve the well-being of their

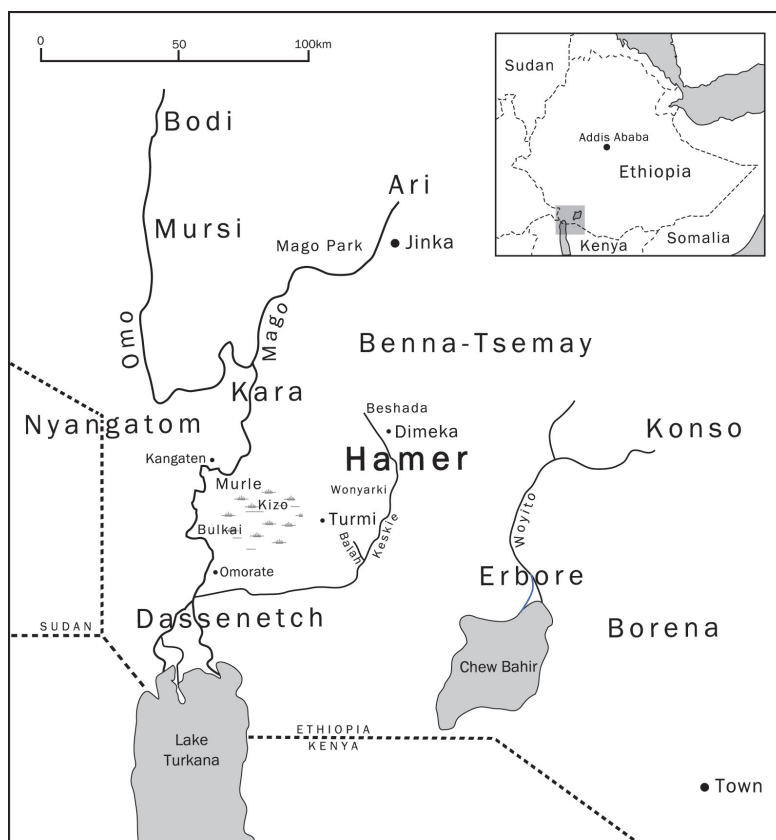
society. It also examines the challenges women face and the opportunities to empower them and thereby transform their society.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in Hamer Woreda, South Omo Zone in Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR). The Erbore, Beshada, and Kara reside along with the Hamer sharing borders with the Ari, Benna-Tsemai, Mursi, Dassenetch, and Nyangatom ethnic groups (Strecker, 1976; Samuel, 2017).

Fig. 3 in chapter 1 (page 6) and Fig. 1 below show map of the research area, which is located at  $5^{\circ}10'N$  and  $36^{\circ}40'E$  (Wikipedia, n.d.). According to the Central Statistical Agency (2008), the estimated population of the Hamer people is 59,160.



**Fig. 1.** Ethnic map of South Omo Zone.

Source: Modified "The Daasanach and their Neighboring Groups (Sagawa, 2009: 4)" by the author.

Farming, herding livestock, and beekeeping are basic livelihoods associated with the area's economy. According to elders claim, the Hamer ancestral territory is located between the *Keskie* and *Balah* rivers. These geographic conceptualizations of space define territorial jurisdiction and mark the site for observing rite of transition into manhood. Vegetation in the district is mainly acacia dominated bushes and shrubs with a bimodal rain that ranges from 250 to 800 mm to support sorghum and maize.

Rain in September, October and November is very important, for small ruminants such as goat and sheep, and its failure may induce mobility. Months from the end of January through April constitute wet farming season. Rainfall is generally irregular and unpredictable. Based on a data obtained from the National Meteorological Agency of Ethiopia (NMA, 2011), the maximum rainfall recorded during the past 15 years was below 250 mm. According to the Hamer Woreda Pastoral Development Office (HWPDO, 2005; 2010), the woreda has 8,865 hectares of arable land and 225,434 hectares of grazing land. The forest area accounts for 10,000 hectares that, when combined with area covered by bushes and shrubs, totals 250,939 hectares.

#### Data Collection

This study relied on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through ethnographic field research using a participant-observation approach, supported by interviews and focus group discussions, in different villages across the Woreda. Purposive and systematic sampling techniques were used to ensure participant representativeness and agro-ecological variations. In depth interviews were introduced to generate qualitative data.

#### SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN HAMER

The Hamer people live in the lower Omo Valley in southwestern part of Ethiopia. This part of the country has a very recent history of modern development interventions. Health, education and communication infrastructures still constrain human development efforts and in the aftermath women endure all forms of marginalization. Men holding onto customary leadership positions administer political and cultural aspect of life of the Hamer. Women who make up a considerable proportion of the Hamer population have little political participation despite bearing social responsibilities in a conservative polygamous, patriarchal and patrilocal society.

Decisions are, therefore, made through informal and formal debates among elders (*donza*) at villages (*gurda*), Kebele (*tsinti*), or throughout the Hamer Woreda (*Hamer pe*) levels. Public gatherings are led by local spokesmen (*ayo*) at public meetings (*osh*). The Hamer adhere to local customs and customary leaders whose blessing during public gatherings (*barjoala*) for the farm fields and the pasture by the *gudli* (elders responsible for the fertility and well-being of the fields) and the *qogo* (elders responsible for the fertility of the pasture, herds and well-being

of the herdsmen) respectively. Men are the leaders of the customary ranks including the *bita*, who is the holder of the higher title in Hamer being responsible to ward off war and disease, and calls forth rain and fertility (Samuel et al., 2016).

Hamer women, however, play a significant role in the coordination, participation and proper execution of all socio-political processes involved in these public discourses. But women still are not allowed customarily to sit formally along with men to pass on decisions. In some instances they are allowed to observe as participants seldom forwarding their opinions upon request.

## GENDER, EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Incorporating gender issues in pastoral areas development programs is central to ensure fair and equitable distribution of resources. Gender relations impact resources use, management and conservation while differences are rooted in cultural and community perceptions of norms governing how men and women behave accordingly. Men always take public roles and the decision making authority over access and resource use leaving women with none (Flintan, 2007; Sead, 2007). More worse is challenges from policies that marginalize women from entitlements over resources (Larsen & Hassan, 2003). In Ethiopia, for instance, certification of communal rangelands is still an issue worth discussing along with addressing women rights to land.

Women's empowerment in pastoral areas has a lot to do with improved access to land and its entitlements, and access to quality education and services. But more important is change in the perception of men and women themselves to the role education plays in transforming society. In Hamer Woreda, it is common to see roadside boards that state how important is sending girls to school to positively impact change in society. Quite interestingly only very little proportion of both men and women could read and get the message. In order to bring meaningful change, education should, therefore, go beyond basic literacy and numeracy training (Livingstone & Ruhindi, 2011).

Despite little progress in sending girls to school there still is much left to go about. The Alternative Basic Education Centers, for instance, have still not succeeded in promoting girls to the few primary schools located in some villages and towns. A number of factors contributed to this. The most important factor is lack of awareness from parents on generally sending kids, particularly girls, to school as girls are tasked with different activities in and outside of the house. In some good experiences where parents sent their daughters to boarding schools, cases of rape, pregnancy cases and inappropriate sexual relations of girls with non-arranged partners in schools has negatively affected parents trust on the schools and in the system. This thereby resulted in a perception among the society that sending girls to school is adding to their misbehavior and promoting out of norm attitudes.

A woman who chairs income generation association in Turmi town spoken about division and mistrust among the illiterate and literate pastoralist women members of the association on issues related to financial and property management.

The illiterate women also have pressures from their husbands who are skeptical of their wives' power to influence decisions and at times force them to leave the group for fear that they will be ill advised to abandon their customary lives and flee their homes.

Women in rural Ethiopia still are disadvantaged from enjoying benefits as men despite attempts to ensure equality through affirmative action and empowerment initiatives (IIRR, 2009). However, affirmative action and women empowerment initiatives' contribution to existing gains in increased participation of women in education and politics should not be undermined.

Empowered women can demonstrate practical resourcefulness in many aspects of social development spheres. Conflict resolution and peace building initiatives indifferent parts of Ethiopia are testimony to this fact. The peace cloth (*koysha*) among Ari women in South Omo; the peace and empowerment stick (*sinke*) among Oromo women; the female honor stick (*siqqo*) and the women group (*yakka*) among Sidama women are few symbolical representations women calling for peace in their communities (IIRR, 2009). Hence, considered wise strategists, few women are consulted for their opinions by men decision makers even in affairs regarded as domains in men's ideological setting including conflict resolution.

Bono Belanta in Hamer Woreda is such a woman. She is praised by many for her deeds particularly leading and organizing women initiatives while conducting her daily routines in life. Bono was once elected member of the SNNPR parliament representing her community and serving as a voice for marginalized women pastoralists in South Omo. This wise woman received different awards from the civil society organizations as well as the late Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi. She shared her awards to the women working with her.

It should, however, also be noted that in parts of the country where access to education is a challenge, failing to empower women has its cost which is explained by women fueling conflicts.

## DAILY LIFE, REPRESENTATION, AND PLACE OF WOMEN IN HAMER

Despite the huge burden Hamer women have at home and in their farm fields, and the knowledge and experience they possess, the customary system does not recognize their leadership wisdom. Women in Hamer are great cultivators, herders and keepers of their families. They engage in all sorts of activities to keep their family and community well fed and happy. Every woman often wakes up before dawn to fetch water and make tea that is made of coffee sheath (locally called *shoforo*), prepares breakfast and feeds her family. Once men and small girls leave with the herds, she cleans up the kraal and the homestead. She then goes to the wild to collect firewood and small leaves and branches for small and weak livestock. In market days she goes out to sell some products and buy goods, and in non market days spends the day in the farm with her children and some herds. While in farm, she ploughs the land, takes care of the kids, does hair dressing and does the cooking that she brings home for dinner. Once the men are back



with the herd from grazing, she continues with cleaning, preparing tea and serving dinner. At times where social gatherings are held, the women bear additional responsibilities accordingly.

The Hamar consider their women as sources of wealth and happiness. When a woman gives birth to a girl, they say a *shoshe* (guest) is born while they say *edi* (man) when a boy is born. This symbolic meaning is attached to women because they only temporarily stay with their families in their village up until they move to their husbands' village. Before they marry, girls enjoy their childhood with their siblings and friends in their village. Once married they start to live with the daily task of taking care of their community. Often, they marry and give birth at young age and the decision to the choice of partner is left for their parents to decide. During casual conversations among unmarried girls it is common to see them teasing each other by mentioning the place of their fiancé's village.

Hamar women since this stage onwards involve in many activities and social rituals including getting whipped during cattle leaping rituals in a show off of their love to the boy transiting into manhood. Hamar women are victims of harmful practices including the forced abandonment of their children whose teething starts in the upper gum (*mingi* children). It is widely believed that *mingi* children bring bad omen to the society and the environment. Hence, they are not allowed to live. Some elderly men informants are unhappy about government and civil society interventions that denounced the abandonment of *mingi* children and promoted their protection to have caused recurrent rain failure and conflicts over grazing between neighboring communities. Quite often such children are either adopted by non-Hamar settlers or recently raised in orphanage centers with high probability of attending formal schools and getting political administrative posts to the dismay of conservative elders.

The growth of towns and the flourishing of the tourism sectors is contributing to the improvement in the lives of Hamar men and women through income generated directly from observing rituals and visits as well as sale of handicrafts and photograph business benefiting women. The tourist inflow is also attracting the influx of others bringing in commercial sex work business that directly and indirectly is threatening lives of Hamar women through increased HIV infections.

## LAND MANAGEMENT AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Predominantly being pastoralists, the Hamar for centuries utilized rangeland resources rotationally. But the frequency of droughts induced by decades of irregular rainfall patterns, growing human and livestock population required more grazing land. Due to the volume of work women have at home, leaving their family is less likely (Flintan, 2007). This gradually led to the development and management of land for grazing, crop production, and income generation purposes at the individual, dyadic, and communal levels in the form of land enclosures. In most cases women are leaders in farming engagement. In their response to changing climatic conditions, the Hamar women devised coping strategies by enclosing land.



Rainfall over the past decade was insufficient in amount and irregular in pattern to sustain livestock production, cultivate sorghum and support grass growth (Samuel, 2014: 102). But, some people (particularly in the highlands) continued their individual and joint efforts to enclose land and save grass for their cattle while maintaining their tradition of sorghum cultivation. Although the Hamar are predominantly pastoralists, cultivating sorghum in enclosures has been an important aspect of their production system. It was mainly taken care of by women (Samuel, 2013: 123–124). In this regard, the role of land enclosures particularly in availing forage during the harsh, conflict prone dry seasons is unquestionable.

In the 1990s the grazing areas experienced failure to support the growth of useful grasses. This triggered frequent drought induced mobility to grazing plains, conservation parks such as Mago National Park and agro-pastoral areas within and outside of the Woreda (Samuel, 2014; 2015). Farm enclosures in Ari and Benna agro-pastoral neighborhoods were full of grasses and provided feed for livestock staying in the village. This observation was noted with care. Such movements and the subsequent observations taught the Hamar farming related skills and techniques like oxen ploughing and fattening in farm enclosures (Samuel, 2013: 122, 126).

The sorghum farms gradually started to accommodate grass production and focus on the use of enclosures attracted the attention of many in the district. Since 1970s, people gradually started setting aside space in their farms for grass production and let their livestock graze freely. They alternatively used the space in the farm by rotating crop and grass at least once in 3 to 4 years to get good harvest from the land. These lessons were gained through observation from their movements, experience sharing visits to Borena, along with governmental and NGO continued efforts on rehabilitation of degraded lands. Thus, enclosures development expanded to accommodate different types and purposes that were both often cooperative and at times conflicting.

The motive behind enclosures development in Hamar district had never been to cut mobility for grazing. By creating spaces of socialization (particularly for women), enhancing local drought coping mechanisms, and financially provisioning households mainly through the sale of grasses enclosures supplemented the subsistence pastoral production system. Even following the expansion of oxen plough farming and subsequent increase in the coverage of land under crop cultivation, mobile pastoralism remains the dominant livelihood form in the Woreda.

The challenge in the current trend of enclosures expansion, however, seems to affect sustenance of shifting cultivation. With a growing human and livestock population, urbanization and policy pressure to settle the Hamar, land fragmentation, loss of biodiversity and conflicts for grazing have become prevalent. A need for land to grow grass and food crops is fueling conflicts and tempted people to demand their fair share of the communal land already enclosed for use by some. There is a tendency of transforming the pre-existing communal land use into a different fragmented property right regime. This can be seen through the development of individual, joint and communal enclosures and the most transiting portion land is land around villages and riverbeds.

## TYPES AND DESCRIPTION OF ENCLOSURES

Individual enclosures were predominantly left for grass production. Compared to the remaining two types, they were characterized by less degree of encroachment by any other people. Better management in the highlands was attributed by availability of labor, closeness of the location of herd camps and distance from the homestead. A household with large family size had an advantage of dividing the labor between enclosures near their settlements and herd camps without difficulty. Observations indicated that more people (agro-pastoralists) in highland part of the Woreda acquired individual enclosures than households in the lowlands. Shortage of available labor, long distance between settlements and herd camps, and poor soil conditions were limiting factors in the dry lowlands. The holder of this enclosure, however, had an exclusive right to use and transfer it to someone else.

Establishment and management of joint enclosures often involve two separate households or individuals related in different forms having shared common interests. Partnership may be arranged between in-laws, bond friends and among first, second and third wives. References known locally as *maale* demarcate separate holdings. A big tree or a stone serves this function. Land in joint enclosures is used rotationally for growing grasses and crops. The primary function of joint enclosures is the production of agricultural crops mainly sorghum. People rotate spaces for grass and crops every 2 to 3 years in lowlands for reasons of harvesting better yield. In the highlands, period of rotation may extend by a year or more mainly due to better soil and water conditions to support crop cultivation.

Hence, there is less human and livestock encroachment particularly in farming seasons that runs through *sor* to *halet* (February to July). Joint enclosures promote mixed management practices and social cooperation through creating ways for women to interact at cooking and drinking spaces inside. Therefore, joint does not only refer to the number of people involved but also the mixed management practice (crop cultivation and grass production). It was common to observe beehives hanging on trees inside joint enclosures which were owned by a third person.

In the highland areas of the Woreda and few places in the lowlands, people practiced controlled grazing inside joint enclosures following harvest while free grazing is dominant in the lowlands. Hence, joint enclosures can be regarded as best protected type of enclosures here as compared to individual and communal types regardless of location. This can be attributed to the cultivation of crops, mainly sorghum, which is a staple crop that also carried ritual functions in the local custom. The benefits of enclosures were different based on the purpose of establishment and their type. In the dry lowland kebeles of the Woreda for example, people often established joint enclosures alongside rivers. Enclosing land near water points is to make use of the multiple advantages of the location. By doing so, such households benefit from the alluvial deposits the river flood carries in cultivation. Moisture stress intolerant crops like maize can be grown easily. Some people also fenced plots of land near water wells and diverted the flow to their farm enclosures through hand dug ditches and planted fruit trees like papaya, banana and also the Moringa tree.

Communal enclosures involved partnerships between households of one or a number of villages and thereby promoted social cooperation and interaction. In 2009 to 2010, a few of such enclosures used to be established at reasonably accessible location from involved villages. These days, communal enclosures can be found in every village in the Woreda. More communal enclosures existed in the lowland kebeles than in the highlands which is attributed to increased provision of support from the Productive Safety-Net Program (government led) and high NGO activity in arid lowland kebeles and securing feed being a necessity for lowlanders who lack alternatives to dry season grazing around homesteads.

However, in the lowlands, communal enclosures were found to be encroached easily than other forms of enclosure in the highlands. Susceptibility to encroachment was also dependent on the origin of the initiative during establishment and its location. Therefore, a distinction can be made between communal enclosures whose establishment is motivated by a request from households in a certain village or that proposed and supported by development partners of government and non-government origin.

The innovative Hamer women not only have shown an increasing productive engagement in land management activities to conserve their degraded land. They also are proactive decision makers by advising and mobilizing their men and the community to plan on the incorporation of economic alternatives that benefits their community through revolving fund schemes. This includes hay making and selling of wet grasses to local users and out in the market. The money generated is accessed by members on revolving basis to be used as a loan to start small businesses and buy services.

## CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

In the absence a customary system that recognizes the leadership role of women and denies the space for them to sit and engage in dialogue, farm fields remain exclusive meeting spaces for women to deliberate on a number of social issues signifying the making of local political space for women to discuss and share their opinions. Existing social support networks are adapting to and co-evolving with newly introduced schemes of communal resource use masterminded by women.

Resource use interest groups, largely being women, are involved in income generation schemes that gradually have potential impacts in improving livelihoods and reshaping authorities over customarily men-dominated rangeland management that guides access to the resources and control over decision making processes. Hence, advisory, supervision and coordination roles of elders are now formally counter-supported by emerging women enclosure management committee members that play important role in maintaining controlled and regulated access to have caused land fragmentation or destroyed the interconnectedness of socio-ecological systems in Hamer.

There is no adequate evidence to conclude that the emergence of women in the management committees would imply that women will emerge out as leaders

to appear in public discussion discourses substituting men. However, it can be said that the productive engagement of women in Hamer has proven to show women-inspired local land use and management interventions working to benefit society. This is evident under uncertain socio-ecological contexts and in situations where marginalization of women is still understood little and largely left unaddressed. Given the positive contributions women make to pastoral societies such as in Hamer and beyond, further investment in women empowerment initiatives is not only limited to recognition of their contribution. It has paramount importance in bringing more gains to solve pressing challenges societies face at local and national levels.

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