

## Research Article

### Unrecognised Peacebuilders: The Role of Rural Women in Conflict Transformation in Uganda's Karamoja Sub-Region

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#### Abstract

Rural women play a vital yet often unacknowledged role in sustaining peace within conflict-affected regions. This study explores the contributions of rural women in Kaabong and Moroto districts of Uganda's Karamoja sub-region—a region characterized by protracted cattle raiding, drought, and structural marginalization. Using a convergent mixed-method design involving questionnaires, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with 73 participants, the study identifies the multiple peacebuilding functions women perform within households and communities. Findings reveal that 89.04% of respondents recognized women's positive influence in resolving local conflicts, and 79.5% acknowledged women's capacity to promote peace within families. Despite these achievements, women's efforts are constrained by patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, and limited access to resources. The study concludes that empowering rural women through education, leadership inclusion, and economic independence is essential for sustainable peace. Policy recommendations are made in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security.

**Keywords:** Rural women, peacebuilding, gender, Karamoja, Uganda, conflict transformation

#### Introduction

The inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes has gained international recognition since the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2000.

However, in many post-conflict contexts, women's contributions remain largely informal, under-acknowledged, and inadequately supported. In Uganda's Karamoja sub-region, rural women play a significant role in maintaining social cohesion, promoting reconciliation, and preventing cycles of revenge, yet their agency is overlooked by mainstream peacebuilding frameworks (Stites & Howe, 2019).

Karamoja region has been involved in inter and intra-communal conflicts, which were first reported between 1986 and 1989 (Stites & Howe, 2019a) attributed to British colonialism that left the region divided by boundaries that swallowed and turned the pastoralist society's land into game parks, game reserves, and protected forests. This caused the Karamojong community to feel suffocated in areas allocated to them, especially during periods of drought. As a result, the pastoralists forcibly entered neighbouring lands in search of water and vegetation for their animals. This was the genesis of conflict among the Karamojong (Muhereza, 2010). The history of the conflict in Karamoja only slightly highlights the impact on women who are responsible for the welfare of their households including sustaining livelihoods and providing basic needs for the families such as food and building homesteads or manyattas. Women in Karamoja are additionally considered a source of wealth through marriage which fetches heads of cattle that are a symbol of wealth for families (Watson et al., 2020). Engagements between the researcher and the communities of Karamoja indicates the untapped ability of these women to restore peace in the region through the simplest means. Several literature highlights women in similar conflict situations as peacebuilders. This paper examines the contributions of rural women to peacebuilding in Kaabong and Moroto districts. It situates their efforts within the broader framework of feminist peace theory and conflict transformation, emphasizing how informal, community-driven initiatives contribute to sustainable peace.

### **Women and Peacebuilding in Global and African Contexts**

Globally, feminist peace theorists argue that gender equality and peace are interdependent (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002; Cockburn, 2010). Women's perspectives, shaped by caregiving roles and social networks, often prioritize dialogue, reconciliation, and social justice (Aggestam & Eitrem Holmgren, 2022). In Africa, examples such as Leymah Gbowee's peace movement in Liberia and women's peace coalitions in Uganda demonstrate the transformative potential of grassroots women's activism (Mellows, 2017).

O'Reilly's (2015) study done in Iraq underscores the important role of women in the peace building trajectory because they are considered the anchors of peace as they are perceived to have motherly instincts that naturally crave peace in and around their communities. He also highlights that women are the key to sustainable, effective and legitimate peacebuilding initiatives. Women are generally resilient, with the ability and capacity to recover quickly from difficult situations. On the contrary, the world still elevates men as the solution to difficult situations; when a conflict stems in a community, the men will typically converge to find solutions to it. In a home, the family will naturally turn to the man for a direction to resolve the problem because they are good at solving problems related to perceived conscience and ability (E Largo-Wight et al., 2005, ) Growing trends in recent history show that women need to be involved at global negotiation tables and daily leadership at different levels, including in their households, places of business, worship, political offices, and more (O'Reilly, 2015).

The African Union advocates for the vital role of women in peace building efforts. Women, historically are acknowledged for their contributions at the grassroots level because they bring unique perspectives and experiences crucial for conflict prevention and resolution. The 4th High-Level Africa Forum on Women, Peace, and Security exemplifies ongoing efforts to address the unmet need for gender inclusiveness, emphasizing innovative approaches and the urgent need for women's inclusion. The union is geared towards amplifying women's voices in peace building initiatives (AU, 2023).

Rural women make significant contributions to peace building and conflict-resolution efforts in their communities. Despite often facing marginalization and discrimination, these women actively contribute to promoting peace and stability (Meagher et al., 2021). Published studies show that women make a critical contribution to conflict resolution. Ajayi et al. (2014), argues that rural women have an understanding of community conflicts and are adept at finding peaceful solutions. Their involvement in resolving disputes can help prevent violence and build consensus within communities. The authors reported that conflict resolution among African societies provides the opportunity to build consensus within affected communities and promote conflict resolution. In the current era of cattle raids and rustling, there are tensions between and within communities of the Karamojong, Itesot, and Pokot. The Uganda Police Force records indicate that about 200 people have been killed as a result (The New Humanitarian, 2022).

According to a previous study in Gulu district, women in rural areas are involved in peace education, including teaching the values of peace, tolerance, and respect to children, fellow

adults, and leaders. By promoting dialogue and peace education, they inspire good, and peaceful behaviour, creating a platform for conflict resolution and prevention (Ojok, 2013b). By using their unique conflict resolution abilities and knowledge of local dynamics, rural women can bridge divides and foster understanding among conflicting communities. Rural women are involved in efforts geared towards the empowerment of other women in the Karamoja region who continuously face multiple challenges related to gender inequalities compounded by low access to resources. When women actively participate in such empowerment efforts, they gain esteem to challenge cultural and societal barriers.

This study draws from feminist theory and Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation model. Feminist theory critiques patriarchal power relations that marginalize women from formal peace processes and underscore the need to integrate gendered experiences into peace frameworks (Ferguson, 2017). Lederach's model identifies peacebuilding as a long-term process involving relationships, reconciliation, and structural change—elements that align closely with rural women's everyday peace practices.

### **Rural Women's Contributions in Uganda**

Research in post-conflict Northern Uganda reveals that women have been instrumental in mediation, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation of communities (Akumu, 2010; Angom, 2018). In Karamoja, rural women's initiatives, such as the Nakere Rural Women Activists (NARWOA), demonstrate the ability of community-based groups to influence disarmament and reintegration (Neiman, 2024). Despite these achievements, women continue to face systemic barriers including economic dependency, domestic violence, and exclusion from policy processes (Hopwood et al., 2018).

### **Challenges to Women's Participation**

Patriarchal norms, low literacy rates, and socioeconomic inequalities remain major impediments to women's involvement in peace-building (Domingo, 2015). Insecurity and gender-based violence further discourage women's engagement in community leadership. These challenges perpetuate gender asymmetry, where women's labor in sustaining peace is invisible yet indispensable (Murphy & Burke, 2015).

### **Materials and Methods**

The study employed a qualitative research approach to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences, challenges, and contributions of rural women in peacebuilding efforts. This

approach was particularly suited for studying rural women in Karamoja, where complex socio-cultural dynamics and gender relations influence women's participation in peacebuilding processes.

Data collection relied on methods that prioritized participants' voices and encourage open dialogue. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with rural women in Kotido and Moroto districts to capture collective perspectives, shared experiences, and community-level narratives.

### **Study Area and Population**

The study was conducted in two districts, Moroto and Kaabong in the Karamoja region. Karamoja is a large community located in Northeastern Uganda with semi-arid savanna vegetation, mountains, and bushes or shrubs covering 27,200 square kilometres of semi-arid savannah, bush and mountains (Nakalembe et al., 2017). The study population included rural women in Karamoja from the age of 18, defined as women who reside within rural areas in the Karamoja region of Uganda, who have little or no exposure to urban living and live mostly in manyattas (the traditional Karamojong homestead). Women with little or no education whose life is mostly lived according to the traditional and cultural norms of the Karamojong people. The research engaged these women who do not have the platforms to have their voices elevated on their potential to contribute towards peace in the region. The women shared their experiences when undertaking activities and drives for peace building and this helped the researcher to understand the details of their efforts and challenges.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

A total of 73 participants (57 females and 16 males) were engaged through structured questionnaires, five focus group discussions, and 10 key informant interviews. Participants were selected purposely to include women's leaders, elders, and district officials involved in peace initiatives.

### **Data Analysis**

Responses from the study participants were summarized, coded, grouped, and checked for errors and omissions. Data were transcribed and subjected to thematic, content, and descriptive analysis as previously reported (Braun et al., 2006). For qualitative data analysis, Nvivo was used to support the coding process.

## **Results**

### **Women's Contributions to Peacebuilding**

The findings support women's active involvement in peace building efforts within the Karamoja region. The survey results reveal a positive trend in the active involvement of women in resolving community conflicts, with 89.04% of respondents acknowledging that women make key contributions to conflict resolution within their communities. This finding resonates with the situation in the Horn of Africa where women's contribution to peace building is appreciated yet under-valued (Odary et al., 2020).

The findings from the focus group discussions, confirm that rural women have an understanding of community conflicts and are adept at finding peaceful solutions (Ajayi et al., 2014) as participants revealed a relatively good awareness of the active involvement of women in peace building efforts at different levels.

One of the men stated, “Women are supposed to be together with men and that's where peace begins from, hmmm...sometimes in public gatherings a woman can give an opinion that may yield better results, that's why these days they involve women to share ideas in public gatherings” (FGD, Kaabong 2023).

This is an indication that communities have started recognizing women as having brilliant ideas that can contribute to positive change and peace in the communities if they are given a platform. Another participant reinforced this by saying,

“Even in government they need women to be represented; for example, when they elect a man for a position, they put a woman as a vice and in all that their ideas are the same- for development” (FGD, Moroto 2023).

These findings align with the feminist theory, which emphasizes women's agency and the importance of including women in decision-making processes, particularly on issues that directly affect them. Within patriarchal structures, women are often disproportionately impacted by decisions made in male-dominated environment. Responses are in line with the feminist theory which focuses on women's agency. Women's agency advocates for the inclusion of women in

decision making when it comes to issues that affect them. In the patriarchal structures, women are often impacted disproportionately by decisions that are made in male dominated spaces, highlighting the need for more inclusive approaches that empower women to participate in shaping outcomes that affect lives.

The study showed that 74% of the respondents believed that women are genuinely appreciated in the community while familial influence was evident, as 79.50% of respondents affirmed women's capacity to influence family members for peace building. This finding confirms Dr. Akinwumi Adesina's address about women being key agents of positive change (ADB, 2023).

Focus group discussions and key interviews reflected a good understanding of women's active participation. Participants highlighted the collaborative nature of peace building, noting that women can offer valuable opinions in public gatherings. There was a growing recognition of women's participation in broader peace talks beyond their immediate communities.

The study findings indicate that women's contributions in peace building were acknowledged. The responses mainly focused on traditional gender roles and women's representation in government positions. In terms of familial influence, the majority of respondents (79.50%) affirmed that women have the capability to influence their male family

members such as husbands, sons and sons-in-law for peace building demonstrating that women are key influencers within the family units. Participants recognized the importance of women working closely with men in the pursuit of peace, emphasizing the collaborative nature of building a peaceful community. The acknowledgement that women can contribute to peace building even at the smallest unit, which is the family. One of the men said, "According to me, women are highly important in planning. For instance, a man even in a home cannot plan on family matters alone unless a woman is there"<sup>1</sup>.

This scenario resonates with the Somali community in the Mandera Triangle and the communities in Northern Nigeria, where women secretly convene to strategize on how best to persuade men to withdraw from planned conflicts. Similarly, the Karamojong women, Somali and Nigerian women approach the men privately, often in the night when they are away from the influence of their peers. These intimate conversations encourage the men to reflect on the devastating impact of conflict on their families, often leading to a change of heart (Odary et al.,

2020). This subtle yet vital contribution plays a crucial role in maintaining peace within these communities and demonstrates the need for women in peace processes.

Findings from women indicated a growing recognition of their contribution towards peace talks beyond their immediate communities, indicating a growing appreciation of their perspectives in broader peace building initiatives. A respondent added,

“Women are being engaged in peace talks for example if there is a peace meeting in Kotido, women from Kaabong will also be invited to attend those meetings and give their views about it” (FGD, Kaabong).

In Karamoja, women are seen, not only as agents of peace within their communities but also in neighbouring regions. This suggests that women across the region face similar security challenges and share a common desire for peace, driving them to seek solutions from women whose peace building efforts have inspired them. Hudson (2021, pp. 29) highlights the importance of Ubuntu Feminism and feminist care ethics in peace building, emphasizing the inclusion of women, men, boys and girls in conflict resolution processes. She stresses the importance of ensuring that all voices are heard during peace building efforts, marking a positive shift towards involving women in decision making. This shift is reflected in the increasing presence of women in public forums, government positions and cultural forums, signalling a growing recognition of their critical role in fostering peace and development in Karamoja and beyond.

### **Women in peace building in Karamoja.**

| <b>Characteristic</b>                                          | <b>Count</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Women Solving Community Conflicts                              |              |                   |
| Yes                                                            | 65           | 89.04             |
| No                                                             | 8            | 10.96             |
| Whether women can influence family members for peace building. |              |                   |
| Yes                                                            |              |                   |
| No                                                             | 58           | 79.5              |

|                                                      |    |       |
|------------------------------------------------------|----|-------|
|                                                      |    |       |
|                                                      | 15 | 20.5  |
| Women are appreciated in the community.              |    |       |
|                                                      |    |       |
| Yes                                                  | 54 | 74    |
|                                                      |    |       |
| No                                                   | 19 | 26    |
| Leaders recognize women's efforts.                   |    |       |
|                                                      |    |       |
| Yes                                                  | 58 | 79.5  |
|                                                      |    |       |
| No                                                   | 15 | 20.5  |
| Cultural leaders guide women in conflict resolution. |    |       |
|                                                      |    |       |
| Yes                                                  | 44 | 60.27 |
|                                                      |    |       |
| No                                                   | 29 | 39.73 |
| Laws and Policies supporting women's efforts.        |    |       |
|                                                      |    |       |
| Yes                                                  | 40 | 54.8  |
|                                                      |    |       |
| No                                                   | 33 | 45.2  |

Table 1: Results on women in peace building in Karamoja, Field data, 2023

Table 1 answers the three study objectives and research questions one and three. On the various aspects of women's involvement in peace building and conflict resolution within the community, majority of respondents (89.04%) affirmed that women actively participated in solving conflicts in communities, while a small portion (10.96%) disagreed. A significant majority, 79.50% also believe that women can influence family members in peace building efforts, with only 20.50% expressing doubt about women's influence within their families.

In terms of community recognition, 74% of the respondents stated that women are appreciated for their contributions, whereas 26% felt that women's efforts are not acknowledged. Similarly, 79.50% of the respondents believed that leaders recognize women's contributions to peace building, while 20.50% disagreed. Cultural leadership plays a moderate role, with 60.27% affirming that cultural leaders guide women in conflict resolution, and 39.73% stating otherwise.

When it comes to laws and policies, the data shows a near-even split, with 54.80% agreeing that supportive measures are in place to back women's peace building efforts, while 45.20% believe there is lack of such policies or support. This suggests that while women's roles in peace building are largely recognized and valued, there are still challenges related to policy support and guidance from cultural leadership.

### **Impact of Women in Peace processes**

In exploring the perceived impact of rural women in peace maintenance, the statistical data revealed that 74% of the respondents said that women are truly appreciated in the community with regards to peace building due to the impact they have created. The men demonstrated a recognition of the valuable role that women played in fostering a peaceful environment in Karamoja. There was agreement during the focus group discussions that it is important to organize public gatherings such as "shrines" (traditionally men-only gatherings to discuss pertinent issues concerning their communities) for peace talks which demonstrated an understanding of the effectiveness of collective efforts in achieving peace.

One of the participants said "You see even now in public gatherings such as shrines, women have been allowed to present their opinions which may lead to development and conflict resolution. That is why women these days are allowed in such kind of men's gathering unlike those days where they were exempted"<sup>1</sup>.

Women took a proactive role in addressing the issue of guns, voluntarily initiating the process of surrendering their husbands' firearms to the government. It was revealed that, "Women started voluntarily taking their husbands' guns to the government. Women played a great part in taking guns back. When the guns would be taken, the men would be released. And when you would talk to these men, especially the reformed warriors' group under Mercy Corps, they would say, "We have been staying in the bush and our children have now grown and yet we would now have more children. Instead, government is hunting for us, the enemy in the bush is hunting for us, we have grown thin!" So they decided to voluntarily hand over their guns and now they are home and happy. In our sub-county, about 34 guns were returned".

This finding illustrates the vital role women play in community-led initiatives, emphasizing their role in promoting peace, security, and family reunification within the community. The researcher

did not find any literature about women from other pastoralist societies handing over weapons used by the men in conflict. This could imply that this situation is unique to the Karamojong community. It is important to note though, that women in Karamoja and other pastoral communities have unique ways of supporting the peace building process as discussed in this chapter.

Participants illustrated the increasing involvement of women in peace building. One of the participants mentioned “Through involving women in peace border meetings, electing them in leadership positions and including them in radio talk shows, they have been given platforms to contribute to peace building” 4.

The findings illustrate the significant and active involvement of women in peace building activities within the Karamoja region. Through impactful initiatives such as radio talk shows, drama performances, and music, women have emerged as influential agents of change, utilizing these platforms to express their perspectives, share experiences, and advocate for peace. One of the respondents<sup>6</sup> said,

“Women have gone as far as sensitizing their own families; sons and husbands on the benefits of peace and the disadvantages of insecurity at the family level to the bigger community. Hmmm... radio talk shows, drama, music. We have seen the Karacunas/perpetrators change their hearts and mindset after listening carefully to the messages being passed.”

Despite acknowledging the importance of women in peace building, they face multifaceted challenges in actively contributing to peace building. Cultural practices, deeply rooted in the community, have historically suppressed women's voices, limiting their presence in public gatherings and hindering their ability to express opinions. When asked about whether participants felt women had been given an opportunity to participate in peace building, one of the participants said, “Yes, though on a very small scale and mostly for women in urban centers. The greater rural masses do not participate in any way”<sup>2</sup>. Several scholars affirm that women remain marginalized in many societies, a situation that contradicts the objectives of UNSCR 1325 and the Women, peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, both of which advocate for women’s participation in peace processes, including rural and elite women (African Union, 2023). Despite two decades of efforts, there remains a global struggle to fully recognize and integrate women into spaces traditionally dominated by men due to entrenched patriarchal systems. The researcher

identifies the need for further study to determine whether women continue to face significant marginalization or if there are, in fact, undocumented cases where women are gaining platforms to voice their concerns and have their issues addressed.

## Discussion

These results show the effectiveness of women's efforts in influencing positive behavioural change through the use of different communication channels. In a similar scenario in Senegal, the Tostan Initiative empowered women to speak up against harmful traditions that oppressed them, especially FGM. This was done through media. The empowerment and eloquence with which the women spoke angered the cultural leaders, who demanded that they be given airtime to reprimand the women. In a twist of events, the women asked the Imam, who was pushing for the media campaign against women, to speak with his female family members about their sentiments on FGM before addressing a whole nation (Fintan, 2008). Media is a powerful tool of for behavioural and societal change with traditional media being most preferred in rural communities (Chapke, R et al., 2003), and should therefore be considered as a medium to carry the voice of women in their drive to attain peace in their communities.

The findings affirm that rural women in Karamoja are central actors in conflict transformation. Their contributions extend beyond domestic caregiving to active leadership in reconciliation and peace education. This aligns with feminist perspectives that reframe women as agents of social change rather than passive victims (Adisa, 2019).

However, the persistence of gender inequality reflects a gap between normative frameworks such as UNSCR 1325 and Uganda's Gender Policy and implementation at the grassroots. Women's informal peace efforts remain unsupported by institutional mechanisms, mirroring global critiques of tokenistic inclusion (Manchanda, 2005).

Empowering women as peacebuilders requires bridging formal and informal structures. Education enhances agency, while economic independence enables sustained participation in governance. Moreover, cultural reorientation is necessary to challenge patriarchal narratives that exclude women from public leadership.

## **Recommendations**

The survey results showed that 29.70% of the participants advocated for women's empowerment as the most common suggestion. Women need to be economically empowered because a woman who makes a financial contribution towards community discussions is more respected than one that is totally dependent on her husband.

19.80% of the participants recommended that more women are directly involved in peace building efforts. This involvement includes women's active engagement in decision-making processes by encouraging their leadership roles at various levels. The researcher believes that while women are being involved, their male counterparts should not be left behind as they are crucial for any change geared towards women. Men must be involved in efforts to empower women as they are considered superior to women. If they understand and appreciate the essence of women involvement in peace building, they will join the support group for women to achieve this.

Furthermore, participants suggested solutions around food security and peace, with recommendations to address hunger through relief food and leaders advocating for justice against theft. The researcher believes that relief is not a sustainable solution and instead recommends enhancing the production of cultural products such as beads, stools and sticks, and building women's capacity in value addition to dairy products and hides & skins. They can also show the Karamojong community how to maximize their one rainy season for good yields.

The call for altering traditional bride price practices to reduce economic pressures aligns with recommendations to work with all stakeholders especially the cultural leaders towards eliminating harmful cultural norms and practices such as forced and early marriages, lack of education for the girl child, domestic violence and restricted contribution of women to important community dialogues and discussions.

## **Conclusions.**

The current study has explored women's contributions to peace building in the Karamoja region and reveals the active involvement of women in conflict resolution through, influence over male family members, awareness creation through music, dance and drama and peace talks as the major spaces through which women's efforts are channelled. The findings showed that women

are supported by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), District Local Governments (DLGs) and cultural/religious leaders at a small scale to build their skills in peace building. The women's confidence is slowly being built to be able to speak up about peace in their communities. The rural women of Karamoja have also formed empowerment groups that are essential in building women's confidence to support the cause of peace.

Among the key challenges to their efforts included a lack of women empowerment to confidently speak up about issues related to conflict resolution and peace building. It also highlighted a major challenge of harmful cultural norms and practices such as women not being allowed to speak in public gatherings, early marriages, discrimination in education of the girl child, and poverty and hunger that cause women to pressure the men in their households to get involved in conflict situations.

Finally, the results of this study pointed out practical measures by policymakers to support approaches that are geared towards empowering women, challenging societal norms, and fostering collective efforts for sustainable peace. The study participants went ahead to make practical recommendations that could enhance women's contribution towards peace building. By recognizing the pivotal role of women and addressing the challenges they encounter, policymakers and communities will support women by contributing to the overall well-being and harmony of the Karamoja community.

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## Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests, but acknowledge that the corresponding author was the academic supervisor of the author and is at this stage proving mentorship in publishing.

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