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GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF LAND CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT RECOVERY ALONG THE SONDU BORDER, KISUMU COUNTY, KENYA

[1*] **Anne Raychelle Myra**
myra.0731624@student.egerton.ac.ke

[2**] **Shadrack Cheplogoi**
shadrack.cheplogoi@egerton.ac.ke

[3***] **Lilian Chesikaw**
lchesikaw@egerton.ac.ke

[1, 3] *Institute of Gender and Development Studies, Egerton University, Kenya*
[2] *Department of Agriculture Education and Extension, Egerton University, Kenya*

Abstract: *Land resource conflicts rarely affect men and women in the same way, yet post-conflict peacebuilding along Kenya's contested county borders has tended to follow gender-neutral, security- and boundary-focused approaches. This article analyzes the gendered experiences of men and women in land resource post-conflict peacebuilding along the Sondu border in South East Nyakach, Kisumu County, Kenya. Guided by Feminist Political Ecology, the study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Structured questionnaires were administered to 110 household respondents (68 men, 42 women; 100% response rate) selected through stratified random sampling in East Kadiang'a, East Koguta and Ramogi, complemented by eight key informant interviews and four focus group discussions (32 participants). Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively in SPSS v29 and qualitative data thematically. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that men and women experience post-conflict recovery differently (90.9%; mean = 4.21), that conflict has reduced women's access to farming land (90.0%; mean = 4.09), and that women are more vulnerable to post-conflict economic hardship (87.3%; mean = 4.11). Some 78.2% agreed that men are more likely to take part in recovery decision making, while 80.9% perceived improved relations between men and women. Qualitative evidence showed that men bear greater exposure to physical violence and death, whereas women face sexual violence, insecurity at farms, water points and markets, widowhood and expanded caregiving. The stud y characterizes these findings as an asymmetric conflict experience: women absorb a disproportionate share of conflict's economic and land-access costs while remaining marginal to the decisions that allocate recovery resources, even as relational healing is perceived to be occurring. The article argues that gender-responsive land governance and peace agreements must explicitly address women's derivative land claims and decision-making exclusion.*

Keywords: *land conflict; post conflict peacebuilding; Feminist Political Ecology; women's land rights*

1. Introduction

Land is a livelihood asset, a source of social identity and a focus of territorial belonging, which is why access to and control over it is contested in many societies (Sändig, 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, competition over land is a recurrent driver of violence, and in East Africa it is often rooted in vague boundaries and disputed property rights inherited from colonial territorial divisions that cut across shared resource-use systems (Drew & Knutsson, 2025; Wekesa, 2023). In Kenya, land disputes concentrate where administrative boundaries

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overlap ethnic territories, where historical injustices remain unresolved, and where politics is organized along ethnic lines (Onguny & Gillies, 2019).

The Sondu border between Kisumu and Kericho counties, where Luo and Kipsigis communities live side by side, illustrates these dynamics. Unclear colonial-era boundaries, livestock theft, retaliatory attacks and disputes over farmland have produced repeated deaths, destruction of property and displacement (NCIC, 2023). Tensions were heightened after devolution created county governments in 2013 and made boundaries politically and economically valuable, and armed clashes in 2023 involved groups of young men contesting territorial control, grazing land and economic resources (ACLED, 2023). Local women reported that violence prevented them from trading in Sondu market, leaving families facing hunger and economic uncertainty (The Star, 2023).

Men and women are affected differently by such conflict. Women do much of the farming in rural Africa but often lack secure land rights and a voice in land leadership (FAO, 2023). Because women frequently access land through male relatives, conflict can compound existing inequalities, leading to loss of homes and livelihoods and to heightened exposure to violence (UN Women, 2022). Women nonetheless contribute to community mediation, dialogue and reconciliation, even though they remain underrepresented in formal peace processes, land governance and recovery programmes (UN Women, n.d.; Muia & Hadija, 2025). Peace talks that focus on political settlements and boundaries tend to overlook how land disputes affect men and women differently (Joireman & Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2023).

Despite this, empirical evidence on how men and women *experience* post-conflict land recovery in the Sondu border context is limited. This article addresses that gap. Its objective is to analyze the gender experiences of men and women in land resource post-conflict peacebuilding in the Sondu border region, Kisumu County, Kenya. The guiding research question is: *What are the experiences of men and women regarding post-conflict peacebuilding in land resource management in the Sondu border region?*

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gendered security and economic experiences of land conflict

Gender-sensitive analysis shows that men and women inhabit different realities of security during and after border clashes, in contrast to conflict literature that centres on macro-structural drivers. Men's security role is frequently framed in territorial terms, involving physical defence of community boundaries, and exposes them to injury, death and arrest (ACLED, 2023). Women's security experience centres on personal and bodily safety, including heightened exposure to gender based violence that can persist into the post-conflict phase as a tool of intimidation or a by-product of social breakdown (UN Women, 2022). In such settings, routine reproductive tasks such as fetching water or gathering firewood can become dangerous.

Economic impacts also diverge. Men may lose capital assets such as livestock or permanent structures, while women, who are often responsible for daily household subsistence and small-scale trade, face immediate liquidity crises when markets close or kitchen gardens are destroyed (Ronzani et al., 2025). Displacement further disrupts gendered agricultural roles, and women's exclusion from formal land titles threatens food security and livelihoods (Maviza et al., 2025).

2.2 Derivative land rights, agency and post-conflict recovery

Women's land claims in much of East Africa are derivative, mediated through husbands or male kin rather than held independently, which leaves them vulnerable when male relatives die, flee or are detained (Djurfeldt, 2020; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Customary institutions may prioritize restoring male-held claims during post-conflict land recovery (Genicot & Hernandez-de-Benito, 2022), and restitution decisions may remain concentrated in male dominated customary and administrative bodies even where women are the main claimants (Mbazumutima, 2021). For widows, the end of conflict can therefore mark the start of a new legal and social struggle to secure livelihoods. Formal institutions also often treat men as the natural agents of negotiation and women as passive victims, rendering women's informal diplomacy invisible (Joireman & Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2023).

2.3 Feminist Political Ecology

The study draws on Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), which holds that natural resource access and environmental governance are shaped by gendered power relations, intersecting with class and ethnicity (Rocheleau et al., 1996). FPE predicts that land conflict has gender-differentiated impacts, exposing women to greater vulnerability because of limited ownership and restricted access to resources, and it stresses women's participation in land governance and peacebuilding as a condition for sustainable outcomes. This stands in some tension with more optimistic feminist accounts of women's empowerment in conflict (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992) and aligns more closely with Yadav's (2021) argument that women's post-conflict burdens often expand without a matching expansion of formal agency or authority.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study area

The study was conducted in the frontline sub-locations of East Kadiang'a, East Koguta and Ramogi in South East Nyakach, Nyakach Sub-County, Kisumu County, where Kisumu meets Kericho County. Sondu Market is the principal commercial and social hub linking communities on both sides of the border, and the lower Sondu Miriu River catchment supports irrigation, livestock watering and domestic use.

3.2 Design, sampling and participants

A convergent parallel mixed methods design was used (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The target population comprised 5,240 land resource users and officials aged 18 and above who had lived along the border for at least five years. A sample of 110 questionnaire respondents was determined using Yamane's formula (98 respondents plus a 10% allowance) and allocated proportionally across the three sub-locations (East Kadiang'a 40, East Koguta 40, Ramogi 30) through stratified random sampling. Respondents comprised 68 men (61.8%) and 42 women (38.2%); 53.6% were household heads and 25.5% were spouses. Eight key informants (area chiefs and assistant chiefs, land and gender officers, and peace committee members) were purposively selected, and 32 participants took part in four focus group discussions (women only, men only, mixed gender and peace committee).

3.3 Instruments, reliability and procedure

A structured questionnaire used five point Likert items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Gender Experiences scale recorded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 in a pilot of 15 respondents in Katito, Lower Nyakach, above the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Ethical approval was obtained from Egerton University

and a research permit from NACOSTI. Questionnaires and focus groups were administered in Dholuo; focus groups were held separately for men and women to limit power imbalances, and all sessions were audio-recorded with consent. The response rate was 100%.

3.4 Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS v29.0 using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using deductive coding based on FPE and inductive coding for emergent themes. A Gender Analysis Matrix was used to examine differences in labour, time, resources and social status between men and women. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated by cross-referencing.

4. Results

4.1 Survey findings

Table 1 presents respondents' views on gender differentiated experiences of conflict and recovery. Agreement was high across all five items, and the average mean (4.06) was the highest of the three objective scales in the wider study.

Table 1: Gendered experiences of men and women in post-conflict peacebuilding (N = 110)

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
Land-related conflicts have negatively affected women's access to farming land	0.9	3.6	5.5	65.5	24.5	4.09	0.72
Men and women experience post-conflict recovery challenges differently	–	1.8	7.3	59.1	31.8	4.21	0.65
Women are more vulnerable to economic hardship after land-related conflicts than men	–	7.3	5.5	56.4	30.9	4.11	0.81
Men are more likely than women to participate in decision making during post-conflict recovery	0.9	15.5	5.5	42.7	35.5	3.96	1.06
Post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives have improved relationships between men and women	0.9	6.4	11.8	58.2	22.7	3.95	0.83
Average						**4.06**	**0.81**

Note. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree. The final column gives the standard deviation.

The item with the strongest endorsement was that men and women experience recovery challenges differently: 90.9% agreed or strongly agreed (mean = 4.21, SD = 0.65) and only 1.8% disagreed. Ninety percent agreed that land-related conflicts have reduced women's access to farming land (mean = 4.09, SD = 0.72), and 87.3% agreed that women are more vulnerable to post-conflict economic hardship (mean = 4.11, SD = 0.81).

Agreement that men are more likely to participate in recovery decision-making was 78.2% (mean = 3.96, SD = 1.06), though this item also had the greatest dispersion, with 16.4% disagreeing. Finally, 80.9% agreed that peacebuilding initiatives have improved relationships between men and women (mean = 3.95, SD = 0.83).

4.2 Qualitative findings

Interview and focus group data elaborated the mechanisms behind these patterns and clustered into four themes.

Men's exposure to violence and death. Informants consistently described men as the front line of land defense. One key informant stated:

"Land-related conflicts affect men and women differently because men are usually at the forefront of fighting to reclaim or protect land. As a result, most of those who lose their lives are men. Although less common, there are also cases where women and girls experience sexual assault during conflicts as a way of intimidating families and discouraging resistance." (KII-01)

The men only focus group likewise described men guarding farms and livestock under constant danger while still carrying the duty to provide for their families when access to land and income is disrupted (FGD-01, Men).

Widowhood, female headship and caregiving burdens. Male deaths left many women heading households with limited resources. A chief explained:

"After these conflicts, many women become heads of households because they lose their husbands. They are left with the responsibility of providing food for the family, caring for the children, and ensuring the overall welfare of the household despite having limited resources and income opportunities." (KII-05)

Another chief noted that survivors also suffer psychological trauma, while many women are widowed and forced to provide for and care for their children (KII-02).

Insecurity in everyday livelihood spaces. The women only focus group described risks at farms, water points and markets:

"Women face increased risks when accessing farms, water points, and markets because of fear of attacks and harassment. During conflicts, some women and girls are sexually assaulted as a way of retaliating against or intimidating men from the opposing community. When men are absent, injured, or killed, women are left with greater responsibilities of providing food, caring for children, and managing the household." (FGD-02, Women)

The mixed gender group reinforced this picture of different but interconnected insecurities, with men exposed to attack while defending community assets and women exposed to harassment while farming, collecting water and trading, and assuming greater caregiving duties during displacement and recovery (FGD-03).

Land access, dependency and exclusion from decisions. A land officer reported that women have limited access to land for farming and experience psychological trauma, with widows and female headed households especially vulnerable (KII-03). The County Gender Officer observed:

"The major challenges facing women after land conflicts include limited land ownership, economic dependency, increased caregiving responsibilities, and exclusion from decision-making processes. These

conflicts deepen the gender inequalities that already exist within the community, making recovery much more difficult for women." (KII-08)

The peace committee focus group added that women's participation in decision making has improved compared with earlier years, particularly through women's groups and community forums, but that formal authority over land and natural resource governance remains concentrated among men, leaving a gap between consultative involvement and actual influence over final decisions (FGD-04).

5. Discussion

The near consensus that conflict is experienced differently by men and women provides quantitative support for the central FPE proposition that resource conflict is not gender neutral (Rocheleau et al., 1996). The qualitative accounts show that the difference takes two main forms: men's greater exposure to lethal violence while defending land, and women's greater exposure to sexual violence, everyday insecurity, widowhood and expanded provisioning duties. These patterns match the literature on gendered security and economic impacts (ACLED, 2023; Ronzani et al., 2025; UN Women, 2022).

The finding that 90% of respondents agreed that conflict has reduced women's access to farming land is consistent with evidence that insecure, derivative land rights leave women disproportionately vulnerable to losing land during and after conflict (Djurfeldt, 2020), and with evidence that customary institutions tend to prioritize restoring male-held claims (Genicot & Hernandez-de-Benito, 2022). The widowhood and female headship accounts show the mechanism clearly: when male relatives through whom women hold land claims are killed, displaced or detained, women's access becomes precarious just as their provisioning responsibilities increase. The elevated economic vulnerability reported by 87.3% of respondents reflects both this precarious tenure and the caregiving burden, and echoes the displacement and food security dynamics described by Maviza et al. (2025).

The survey also shows that men are perceived as more likely to participate in recovery decision making (78.2%), and key informants and the peace committee focus group confirmed that formal authority over land remains male-dominated. This mirrors Mbazumutima's (2021) finding in Burundi that restitution decisions stayed concentrated in male-dominated bodies even where women were the primary claimants. Women bear substantial practical responsibility for recovery without a commensurate share of decision-making power.

The finding that 80.9% of respondents perceive improved relations between men and women is notable given this structural disadvantage. The relatively low dispersion suggests peacebuilding efforts are credited with genuine gains in inter-gender cohesion. This is consistent with evidence that even modest inclusion of women in peace processes can yield disproportionate benefits for household- and community level relational repair without transforming formal governance (IGAD, 2025). Together, the results describe an *asymmetric conflict experience*: women absorb the economic and land-access costs of conflict while remaining marginal to decisions on recovery resources, even as relational healing is perceived to occur. This supports Yadav's (2021) cautious position, and qualifies optimistic empowerment narratives (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992).

5.1 Limitations

The sample was modest (N = 110) and male-skewed (61.8%), which is common in household surveys in patriarchal rural settings where men are more often designated to respond on land matters (Kilic et al., 2020). Attitudinal Likert items measure perceptions rather than documented losses, and results were analyzed descriptively; gender disaggregated comparisons of responses were not reported here. The study also reflects

perspectives from one border and, with a Dholuo speaking researcher, may underrepresent Kipsigis community experiences.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Along the Sondu border, post-conflict recovery is experienced through gender. Men carry a heavier burden of physical violence and loss of life, while women carry heavier burdens of land-access loss, economic hardship, sexual and everyday insecurity, widowhood and caregiving, and they remain largely outside the decisions that determine recovery. Perceived improvements in relations between men and women suggest that informal, relational gains have outpaced institutional gains in equitable authority.

Several implications follow. First, peace agreements and land recovery processes should explicitly address women's land security, including protection of widows' tenure and defined timelines for restoring women's land access. Second, peace committees and land dispute bodies should track women's substantive influence over final decisions, not merely their presence. Third, recovery programmes should respond to women's economic vulnerability through livelihood support, skills training and psychosocial services, and should also recognize men's exposure to violence and trauma. Future research should compare the Luo and Kipsigis communities, analyze responses by gender, and evaluate specific gender-responsive interventions.

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