



## The impacts of climate change on girls' social and economic empowerment

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### Introduction

Climate change is driving recurrent drought in the Horn of Africa. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2023) reports that current conditions in southern and eastern parts of Ethiopia—which include the pastoralist regions of Afar and Somali—are dire. Rains have failed for five consecutive seasons; nearly 7 million animals have died since 2021, and 11 million people are estimated to be food insecure (ibid.). How these immediate impacts are rippling across the lives of adolescent girls is unknown. This brief draws on GAGE qualitative research undertaken in three districts in Afar and Somali regions in 2022 and 2023 to explore this question.

### Methodology

A participatory research approach was designed to explore the impacts of climate change on pastoralist girls' social and economic empowerment, including child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), and as a follow-up to [baseline mixed-methods research](#) conducted earlier in 2022 (Endale et al., 2022)<sup>1</sup>. Research locations included Semurobi woreda (administrative division) in the Afar region, and Goljano and Harshin woredas in the Somali region. The sample included 233 individuals in round 1 and 163 individuals in round 2 (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted, in individual and group formats, with younger adolescent girls and boys (10-14 years), older adolescent girls and boys (15-19 years) (some of whom were married), adolescents' parents (mothers and fathers), and key informants (KIs) at kebele (village), woreda (district) and regional levels.

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<sup>1</sup> The spring 2023 round of data collection took place only in Somali region, due to security concerns in Afar.

**Table 1: Study sample**

	Individual interviews			Group interviews						Total
	Older girls	Older boys	KIs	Older girls	Older boys	Younger girls	Younger boys	Mothers	Fathers	
Round 1	25	20	N/a	N/a	N/a	46	52	50	48	<b>241</b>
Round 2	N/a		22	30	60	18	12	23	22	<b>187</b>

## Findings

Research participants in both regions reported that recent drought has decimated household livelihoods due to high livestock mortality rates. Impacts on food security have been dire. A 21-year-old mother from Somali explained:

*There was no rain for two years and the drought was serious and we lost most of our animals... We had animals that died during the famine. Our 13 oxen and 4 cows died because of famine. We remain with one cow. All the community members have been affected by the drought and some lost all their animals.*

The mother of an adolescent from Afar elucidated: *'People live in poverty due to the death of cattle.'* Adolescents commonly reported eating only twice a day but added that they have been far better off than younger children, who are more vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition due to their age and size. A 13-year-old boy from Somali explained, *'Our parents can't afford food three times a day.'* Adults added that the government response has been limited and that they feel abandoned. A mother from Afar stated, *'For the past five years, the government didn't know us... the different assistance that were available are no longer provided to us.'*

Afar and Somali adolescents' access to education has also been seriously curtailed by recent drought. In some cases, this is because schools closed as teachers and students fled drought-affected areas—teachers to return to their own home communities and students and their families to search for better pastures. A 17-year-old girl from Somali explained:

*The school was closed during the drought. The school was closed for seven months when the drought became serious. Teachers left the area and there was no education. Most community members moved away to look for a water source during the drought.*

A 16-year-old boy from Afar made a similar observation:

*The Afar people are a pastoralist people and we must migrate to far places when there is drought here so we*

**People live in poverty due to the death of cattle.**

(A mother of an adolescent from Afar)

*will be forced to discontinue the education when we go there. Most of the students are dropouts from school because of that.*

Respondents added that even when schools did not close, girls' access to education was limited by heavy demands on their time. Nearly all respondents spoke of girls' responsibility for collecting water and how the drought has made this worse. A father from Afar observed that, *'Many children left school due to drought... They are girls who fetch water using the donkey's back and they travel two to three hours on foot to fetch water.'* Other respondents spoke of girls' responsibility for childcare, which has grown as mothers have been forced to spend more of their own time seeking food because of the drought. An 18-year-old young woman from Somali explained, *'The girls were staying at home and looking after children when the mothers were away to look for something to eat from other people.'*

**Many children left school due to drought... They are girls who fetch water using the donkey's back and they travel two to three hours on foot to fetch water.**

(A 16-year-old boy from Afar)

Climate change is also impacting pastoralist adolescents' engagement with paid work. Given the loss of livestock, and rampant food insecurity, an increasing number of girls and boys are migrating to take on wage labour to help support their families through the drought. In most cases, adolescents are migrating to urban areas within Ethiopia. A 15-year-old girl from Somali explained:

*We lost all our animals during the drought. We do not have money to buy food... Most young people migrate to town to look for income sources they were sending money to their family. Young men and women left the area to look for work. Girls become house [domestic] workers, men engage in available work and send money to their family. Some young people are migrating to other countries.*

This is particularly common for girls, who take on domestic work—almost always at the instigation of their parents and despite the known risks of international

migration. A grandfather from Afar reported of his granddaughter that, *'Her father wants her to go to Djibouti and bring more money for him... Parents will love to earn money from their children.'*

Despite initial concerns that climate change would increase girls' risk of child marriage—because households need to reduce the number of mouths they have to feed and because girls are out of school and thus seen as eligible for marriage—our recent research has found that, at least for now, drought is temporarily reducing girls' risk of child marriage. Explanations for this vary by region. In Afar, respondents have focused on how the drought and food insecurity have delayed girls' maturation. Specifically, they note that because girls are consuming less fatty milk, they are reaching menarche (onset of first menstruation) later. One mother explained that girls are now marrying later than they did in the past:

*[before]... girls were grown up quickly and they have been growing fast physically and they even started menstruation at a young age. This is because there was adequate milk and food for girls to eat, which helped them to grow fast. Nevertheless, now, girls' physical growth and menstruation is being delayed due to the absence of adequate milk and food for children, since there are not many cattle... their cattle have died due to drought and epidemics. Girls nowadays grow slowly, and they even start menstruating after they turn 16 or 17. So girls nowadays get married after they turn 16 or 17.*

In Somali, narratives about the drought's impact on child marriage are quite distinct. Nearly all respondents agree that the primary reason why child marriage has become less common is that marriage requires festivities that have become unaffordable. A 17-year-old boy explained:

*Somalis typically only get married when they are prosperous, and there is sufficient rain to support farming, as well as an abundance of milk and livestock. Marriage is considered to be most suitable when there is greenery and water available.*

Somali respondents reported other reasons for declines in child marriage as well. Some referred to high rates of distress-migration, which has altered the shape of the marriage market. A key informant reported that, *'When young men migrated to towns, young girls that are in the kebele delayed getting married.'* Other respondents noted that girls are disinterested in marriage because they can see how hard their older married sisters are working in the face of the drought. An 18-year-old young man explained:

*Now no one talks of marrying... The girls would observe their older sisters who were married and struggling due to the drought. They questioned why they should get married when their sisters were facing such difficulties.*

**Mothers are also not circumcising their daughters. They are preoccupied with rescuing their livestock instead. There is no time for them to do circumcison**

(A key informant)

The research in Somali, where child marriages are increasingly adolescent-driven, may indicate that the longer-term impacts of climate change on child marriage are likely to be negative. A few respondents reported that among internally displaced persons, child marriage is increasing, largely because girls have lost access to education and see no other pathway to adulthood other than marriage. A key informant reported that:

*After the community moved to this settlement area, most girls are getting married early. They have no animals to take care of, they are not busy with housework and some of those girls are not in school. Girls started to get married after they moved here.*

Most respondents, however, focused on how recurrent drought is lowering expectations about the resources that boys and young men must accumulate before marriage, making adolescent-driven marriages easier and faster because they are less expensive for their families. An 18-year-old young man explained this in some detail:

*Marriage in our locality is one of two types. The first type of marriage is where the boy's parents send elders to the girl's parents to request their daughter for marriage. And the second type is, after the boy and the girl agreed to get married to each other, the boy will elope with the girl... The type of marriage in which the boy's parents send elders first to the girl's parents is costly, and the process needs huge resources like money and cattle, because the girl's parents ask for a huge amount of money... Most boys prefer to elope with a girl to their parents' or relatives' home first and then send elders to the girl's parents since this is less costly, as the girl's parents can't ask for a huge amount of money or much cattle as a dowry or bride gift, because the girl's parents do not have a say once their daughter has gone to the boy's parents' home.*

In Somali, the immediate impacts of drought on FGM mirror those on child marriage. Respondents reported that while FGM is a religious requirement, infibulation is a Somali requirement, and no girl can expect to reach middle-adolescence without having undergone this harmful practice. Even so, procedures have been delayed because mothers have been too busy meeting survival needs (see Presler-Marshall et al., 2024). A key informant explained that, *'Mothers are also not circumcising their daughters. They are preoccupied with rescuing their livestock instead. There is no time for them to do circumcison.'*

## Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

Our research suggests that climate change is having significant impacts on pastoralist girls (and boys). As household livelihoods have been devastated by drought, families have become more food insecure, children's access to education has largely evaporated, and they are at increasing risk of distress migration. Impacts on girls in terms of child marriage and FGM are more complicated. In the immediate aftermath of drought, these risks appear to have declined. However, there are indications that longer-term impacts may be negative, especially in Somali, given the way in which child marriages are now arranged, and also because the underlying discriminatory gender norms have not shifted. In order to mitigate the impacts of climate change on adolescent girls (and boys) living in Afar and Somali, our research suggests the following priority actions for policy and programming:

- **Social protection** needs to be stepped up to help households withstand climate change. In pastoralist areas, this should include not only emergency food and water for people and for livestock—so that households can recover more quickly once the rains return. The Ethiopian government's flagship Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) should also regularly update its beneficiary registers so that all vulnerable households are supported.
- Alongside emergency assistance, efforts should be directed at helping pastoralist households develop

new and **diverse livelihood strategies**. Depending on the context, this could include crop farming, so that households are better able to feed themselves and their livestock. Any such efforts would need to be informed by a gender lens so as not to exacerbate the challenges facing girls – for example, demands on their time collecting water and supporting the household with childcare.

- **Given that school enrolment can protect girls from child marriage**, adolescents' access to education must be protected during climate shocks. Programming might include schools providing students with water and food, setting up mobile schools that migrate alongside students, and providing living quarters for teachers linked to mobile schools. Efforts should be paired with awareness-raising campaigns that emphasise the importance of education for a future that is more resilient to climate change.
- Given that drought is leading to increased **distress migration**, adolescents and their parents need information about how migration can be undertaken safely—and when and how to get help if needed.
- It is important to capitalise on temporary drought-driven pauses in FGM and child marriage to work with adolescents, caregivers and broader communities to **address the underlying discriminatory gender norms** that perpetuate these harmful practices.

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