

Experiences of young women in four districts of Karamoja, Uganda: 2018–2022

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Key messages:

- Women reported consistently lower wealth in comparison to their male counterparts and were more likely to report a decrease in relative economic status over the course of the study.
- Compared to young men, women engage in less-lucrative, lower-capital, more-volatile, and often riskier economic activities and have less time to dedicate to income generation due to heavy domestic burdens.
- Shifts in livelihood activities reported by households in the four districts align with changes in relative wealth as reported by individuals. Locations with a shift into male-dominated livestock production had a majority of individuals reporting improved relative wealth, and locations with shifts into female-dominated brewing and exploitation of bush products had a majority of individuals reporting declining wealth.
- Gender dynamics influence the changing livelihood systems and the nature of activities pursued by men and women. Although women's economic role within households has increased, their continued work in low-return activities and heavy domestic time burden means there is little impact on economic well-being. There is also a risk that increased economic roles of women may bring increased gender-based and intimate partner violence.

Introduction

This briefing paper investigates the experiences of young women over a four-year period in the Karamoja sub-region of northeastern Uganda. The paper discusses the respondents' relative wealth, livelihood activities, perceptions of food security, and aspirations. The paper examines the perceptions and experiences of this group, with a focus on shifts in relative wealth and livelihood activities and aspirations. This output is part of a multiyear mixed methods study conducted by Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University under the Apolou Activity,

which was led by Mercy Corps and funded by United States Agency for International Development/ Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/ BHA) in Karamoja. This briefing paper is one of three similar outputs, with the other two covering i) changes in wealth and equality at the community level and ii) individual perceptions of relative wealth, livelihoods, and aspirations. These briefing papers, the accompanying larger report, and all other publications from this partnership are available on the [research project homepage](#) on the Feinstein website.

The findings discussed in this briefing paper represent a selection of the results of the analysis from both the quantitative and qualitative results of the mixed methods study. The quantitative component collected data from a randomized cluster sample across 52 villages (10 households per village) within four districts in three time periods (October/November 2018, October/November 2019, and October 2021–January 2022) resulting in a sample size of 520, plus a margin for attrition. The four districts are Amudat, Kaabong, Kotido, and Moroto.¹ For the qualitative component, in 2018 we established a cohort of 96 young men and women in their late teens and early 20s in 24 villages in the four districts. We purposively selected the 24 villages from the full quantitative list of 52 villages to balance size, access to markets and infrastructure, and district. We returned each year over four years to the same locations and interviewed the same

respondents. The table below (Table 1) illustrates the numbers of respondents who were located and agreed to be interviewed by year. The male and female ratio of respondents was approximately 50:50 in each time period.

We used a variety of methods to understand wealth among the sample population. As part of the quantitative survey, we gathered household data over the three time periods on asset ownership, livestock ownership, and proportion of expenditure spent on food. Asset ownership is an indicator of wealth that is simply a summation of different assets that a household owns, primarily productive assets.² Livestock ownership is an appropriate measure of wealth among pastoral and agro-pastoral households and is measured in Tropical Livestock Units (TLUs).³ Proportion of expenditure spent on food is a common measure of poverty, with the

Table 1: Sample size by district, year, and type of data collection

District	Type of data collection	Time			
		2018	2019	2020	2021/22
Amudat	Quantitative	172	153	-	113
	Qualitative	24	19	20	19
Kaabong	Quantitative	120	112	-	100
	Qualitative	24	23	21	20
Kotido	Quantitative	139	132	-	117
	Qualitative	24	24	19	18
Moroto	Quantitative	90	91	-	77
	Qualitative	24	20	23	20
Total	Quantitative	521	488	-	407
	Qualitative	96	86	83	77

1 During the course of the study, Kaabong District was split into Kaabong and Karenga Districts, and the villages within the Feinstein sample fall in both of these areas. For consistency, we refer to the four original districts throughout our discussions of the data.

2 The question asks if households own at least one of the following assets in working condition: radio, mattress, solar panel, wheelbarrow, bicycle, motorbike, ox plow, *panga*, grinding mill, and cart. Thus, this measure ranges from 0 (none of these assets owned) to 10 (at least one of each of these assets owned).

3 Using Tropical Livestock Units (TLUs) allows for weighting to differentiate between larger and more expensive animals (i.e., cattle or camel) and smaller ruminants and poultry. The TLU index can distinguish between a household with 10 heads of cattle and one with 10 chickens, which otherwise would have appeared as equal, with each having “10 animals.” To convert individual livestock ownership into TLUs, we used the following standard conversion factors according to the relative value of animals: cattle = 0.7, sheep = 0.1, goats = 0.1, pigs = 0.2, chicken = 0.01. Harvest Choice, “Tropical Livestock Units (TLU, 2005)” (International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC and University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN, 2015).

greater the annual expenditure portion spent on food, the greater the household's level of poverty.⁴

The qualitative component included two measures of economic status, both of which we used only in the final (fourth) round of data collection. The first was a question on relative personal wealth measured using a simple triangle diagram divided into five sections. Calling the triangle "a mountain" that represented economic status within the community, we asked each youth respondent to indicate where they felt they had been on this mountain four years earlier (when the study began) and where they were today. We then discussed why any changes had occurred.⁵ The second measure was a participatory exercise conducted with mixed-gender focus groups in the qualitative study sites. Using the same triangle diagram, we asked focus group respondents to distribute 50 small stones across the five levels to indicate household wealth distribution approximately 10 years ago ("after the height of disarmament had passed") and then to repeat this exercise on a new triangle to show relative wealth within the community today. Using these diagrams, we then had a conversation on changes in equality over time, different characteristics of wealth, and factors that might cause households to move up or down in terms of wealth. We also used the distribution of the stones to create a rough approximation of absolute wealth across the two time periods.⁶

This briefing paper intentionally prioritizes the experiences of women while also recognizing the

important needs and obstacles facing young men. We have opted to focus on women because the aggregated data (as evidenced in the other two briefing papers and the larger report) paints a different picture than that which emerges when we delve more deeply into the experiences of young women in the sub-region.

Women have consistently lower wealth than male counterparts

Female respondents were consistently worse off than their male counterparts in this study across the different types of data collection. The three rounds of quantitative surveys with households showed that having a male household head was consistently associated with better wealth outcomes regarding poverty, livestock ownership, and asset ownership ($p < 0.05$). However, the *older* the male household head, the lower the asset wealth ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, if a household switched from having a female to a male household head over the course of the study, then the household's asset wealth increased ($p < 0.05$). These relationships between male household head and wealth were consistent across all districts.

The relative wealth exercise conducted as part of the fourth round of qualitative interviews also showed sharp gendered differences in changes in wealth over the course of the study, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Changes in relative wealth as reported by male and female youth respondents, all districts⁷

	Wealth increased	Wealth decreased	No change in wealth
Male youth (n = 37)	46%	49%	5%
Female youth (n = 39)	23%	51%	26%

4 To construct this variable, we summed the household's weekly expenditures (food purchases, water, alcohol, mobile credit, charcoal, soap, public transportation), monthly expenditure (utilities, fuel, batteries, loans, rent, agricultural inputs, minor health costs), and yearly expenditures (education, large appliances, small appliances, household furnishing, clothing, large health costs, funeral costs, marriage costs). We then multiplied weekly expenditure on food by 52 and divided this number by the total annual expenditure to get a very rough estimate of what proportion of total expenditure goes to food.

5 Our rough calculation of absolute wealth entailed assigning each stone in a quintile a relative weight, i.e., all stones in the lowest category were assigned a value of one, all stones in the highest category we assigned a value of five, etc. Using these values, we summed all the stones in a given quintile and across the "mountain" to show overall changes in absolute wealth.

6 These impressions of wealth are based entirely on subjective individual perceptions, and we did not seek to validate these perceptions through other means or measures. We also did not push respondents to qualify the characteristics of their wealth, although a number did provide details on what wealth meant to them.

7 This exercise was not done with all respondents, hence we present data here on the 76 respondents who participated in this exercise.

Large variations in relative wealth change exist by district (see the accompanying briefing paper on this topic for more details). Starting with improvements in wealth status, in Amudat District, 74% of all respondents reported an improvement in relative wealth. Separated out by gender, we find that 90% of men reported improvements by wealth versus 55% of women. Moroto also saw a majority (57%) of respondents report improved wealth, with 88% of men reporting improved wealth and 30% of women doing so.

Men and women reported decreases in status at similar overall levels (49% of men and 51% of women), but there were again large differences between districts. In Kotido, for instance, 90% of men reported decreased wealth status, compared to only 40% of women. In Kaabong the numbers were more even, with 88% of men reporting decreased wealth compared to 80% of women. Numbers in Moroto and Amudat were better for men than women, with 33% of women reporting decreased wealth in Amudat compared to only 10% of men, and 40% of women compared to 10% of men reporting decreased wealth status in Moroto. The qualitative interviews shed light on some of the factors behind these gendered differences in changes in relative wealth. These are discussed in the next section.

Focus group discussions with community members in the fourth round of data collection included information on the common characteristics of households in different wealth groups. The research team queried the gender roles within households at the top and bottom of the community ladder. Participants reported that women in wealthier households worked less than those in poorer households and would at times hire other women to assist with domestic work. These wealthier households were mostly headed by men, and the role of the women was to support their husbands' economic endeavors, such as working in his shop or collecting rent from his properties. In contrast, participants explained that women from poor households performed extra work to support their families.

Factors influencing wealth differences by gender

The data indicate a number of factors that may influence the gendered differences in wealth described in the above section. These include: males overall being engaged in more-lucrative livelihood activities than females; males having more time to dedicate to income-generating activities; women being more likely to partake in seasonal, volatile, and risky livelihood activities with minimal returns; and women experiencing a decrease in relative economic status upon marriage. This section discusses these factors in more depth.

First, male respondents who reported improvements in their relative wealth were, by and large, engaged in more-lucrative livelihood activities than female respondents, including those females who reported improved wealth. These more-lucrative activities included livestock production, livestock trade, and *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) driving. Women, on the other hand, were mainly engaged in less-lucrative livelihood activities, including collection and sale of bush products, engagement in casual daily labor (*leje leje*), and brewing and sale of traditional beer. Even when women do increase their wealth, they are not doing the same activities as men. In the case of Amudat, where the greatest wealth was reported, more than half of males reported becoming involved in the *boda boda* business over the past few years. In contrast, females in Amudat who reported improvements in wealth were most often involved in crop cultivation and poultry rearing. Male respondents usually reinvested any profits into their businesses, thereby allowing further expansion. Female respondents were much more likely to dedicate any profits to purchasing food for the household. In addition, when livelihood activities are undertaken at the household level, males are more likely to make the decisions about these activities and to control the resulting income. For example, a woman in Kaabong who was saving money to invest in small ruminants explained: "When I get the money, I will have to inform my husband. I cannot use the money without him knowing. I have to use

the money after getting his permission to do so. If he refuses me to buy the goat, I will just have to accept what he has said.”⁸ This limited involvement in decision making and control may contribute to women reporting fewer wealth gains than men.

In the case of decreased wealth, males were hit worse than women in Kotido and Kaabong Districts, which both experienced high rates of livestock loss due to the resumption of insecurity in the form of cattle raiding in recent years. The loss of livestock and growing inequality in household animal ownership has left many men without the means to fulfill their traditional role as providers (with the possible exception of males in Amudat). In many instances, women fill this gap by increasing their economic contribution to their households.⁹ Despite these shifts, the livelihood opportunities available to women have generally low returns, which means that women must dedicate more time to income-generating activities and their households often struggle economically. In addition, poor harvests across much of the region in 2021 likely undermined both male and female livelihoods, leading to further asset losses at the household level and worsened impressions of individual relative wealth. Looking at the gendered data by district, decreases are proportionately greater for women in Amudat and Moroto, most likely because men were better able to maintain economically lucrative livelihoods in these locations.

Second, men generally have more time to dedicate to income-generating activities than women, who spend a much greater portion of their time engaged in unpaid domestic and reproductive duties. Several female respondents who reported decreased or static relative wealth discussed their heavy domestic and reproductive duties, often with limited support from their male partners. A young woman in Amudat explained how her business ventures had changed with a recent pregnancy: “Before I conceived my current child, I sold sugarcane at the market. After I conceived,

the business collapsed completely. I was always sickly during my pregnancy, and I used most of the capital to feed the family.” The example of using business capital to support families through difficult periods was a common refrain among female respondents.

As bridewealth in cattle becomes more difficult to pay (due to loss of livestock and impoverishment among many households), young women remain with their natal families for extended periods after having children. They often take on all or most of the economic burden of providing for their children while also assisting parents and family members. One young woman in Kaabong was living at her natal home and caring for her younger siblings after the death of her mother. She was also providing for her own child and moving between her home and her husband’s home to farm, mend fences, and help with domestic tasks. On top of these tasks, she was mining for gold twice a week, selling salt, and brewing. She explained that these added activities were necessary because she was “now married with a child, which means more responsibility ... I should always have money to buy medicines [for the child] instead of investing the money or using it on myself.”¹¹ A number of female respondents explained that if they can’t find work, their children simply go without food.

Third, women are often engaged in seasonal, volatile, and risky livelihood activities with minimal returns. The resumption of insecurity in the sub-region has increased risk for many of the regular activities undertaken by women, including cultivation of crops and collection of bush products. Women within the study sample reported cutting back on diverse activities in response to insecurity. A woman in Moroto described the risks that had caused her to shift from burning charcoal to brewing and making *mandazis* (fried dough): “I stopped burning charcoal due to insecurity. I can no longer walk far in the bush due to fear of being killed or raped by the raiders.”¹²

8 Interview with female respondent, Lobalangit Sub-County, Kaabong, November 2021.

9 E. Stites and D. Akabwai, “Changing roles, shifting risks: Livelihood impacts of disarmament in Karamoja, Uganda” (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, 2009); E. Stites and D. Akabwai, “We are now reduced to women: Impacts of forced disarmament in Karamoja, Uganda,” *Nomadic Peoples* 14, no. 2 (2010): 24–43.

10 Interview with female respondent, Loroo Sub-County, Amudat, January 2022.

11 Interview with female respondent, Lotim Sub-County, Kaabong, November 2021.

12 Interview with female respondent, Nadunget Sub-County, Moroto, November 2021.

Both brewing and making *mandazis* have low profit margins and require a steady flow of inputs, with prices that fluctuate based on global markets. The ubiquitous firewood trade is heavily dominated by women, has minimal returns, and is high risk. It is also extremely damaging to the natural resource base. While men and women engage in many of the same economic activities, gender norms mean that women are usually in the least-well-paid jobs, such as ferrying water on construction sites, panning for gold in streams (as opposed to digging for it), and selling charcoal by the side of roads instead of transporting it into towns.

Lastly, several female respondents explained that they had been living in their natal household at the start of the study, and therefore their economic status was a reflection of the status of their father. Many reported a reduction in economic status once they left their father's home to move in with their husbands or in-laws. Males do not leave their family homestead upon marriage and thus do not experience a drop in relative wealth for this reason, but—for those able to pay bridewealth—they may experience a pronounced drop in wealth upon paying bridewealth to the family of their bride. However, some of the male youth in the sample married reported *feeling* wealthier because of the boost in status that being married or having children in Karamoja bestows on men. Couples who are not able to officially marry often reside separately, with the woman staying at her natal homestead.¹³ In such instances, the man does not benefit from the boost in status associated with marriage. While the woman remains with her natal family and may continue to benefit from the higher wealth status of her father, a number of female respondents lamented the economic burden they felt they (and their children) were placing on their parents. As a result, some felt poorer, even while living with their natal kin.

Shifts in livelihood activities and wealth

The analysis of the quantitative survey data allowed us to compare livelihood activities pursued by households and the parallel shifts in wealth (as measured by livestock ownership, asset ownership, and proportion of expenditure on food). In the first survey round in 2018, 72% of total households reported own cultivation as their primary source of either income or food. That proportion fell over time, with only 50% reporting cultivation as their primary source of income or food in the final survey round in 2021/22. The primary activity that the household shifted into when they moved away from cultivation varies by district, with important gendered implications. In Amudat, the shift out of cultivation is mostly into livestock production and trade, while in Kaabong, Kotido, and Moroto the shift out of cultivation is into brewing, casual daily labor, and collection and sale of bush products. Focus group respondents reported that engaging heavily in these three activities is a common indicator of poverty. The survey data are at the household level, which means that we don't have details on who *within* the household is engaged in these activities. However, from the qualitative data and previous research in Karamoja we know that men control livestock production and trade and that women are the primary actors engaged in brewing and exploitation of bush products. Both men and women engage regularly in casual day labor. The most lucrative of these activities is livestock production and trade, and the prevalence of this activity in Amudat is confirmed by the qualitative data on relative wealth, whereby 74% of individual respondents reported an improvement in their economic status in Amudat. However, the improvement in wealth was not the same across males and females, with 90% of males reporting an improvement in wealth compared to 55% of female respondents. The distinction by gender shows the heavy male engagement in the

13 For more discussion on the role and process of marriage for respondents in the qualitative cohort, see T. Atim, M. Seaman, and E. Stites, "Navigating and negotiating livelihoods and the transition to adulthood in Karamoja, Uganda" (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, 2022); and T. Atim, E. Dykstra-McCarthy, R. Krystalli, and E. Stites, "Briefing paper: Life events and markers for young people in Karamoja, Uganda" (Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, Boston, MA, 2021).

livestock economy but also indicates women are benefitting, either from livestock profits or from an increase in related or parallel activities. By comparison, all but one qualitative respondent in the combined study populations of Kotido and Kaabong reported either a decrease in individual wealth (83% and 70% for Kotido and Kaabong respectively) or no change in wealth status (17% and 25% respectively). These decreases in relative wealth and accompanying shifts in livelihood activities indicate a movement *towards* poverty-related livelihoods (brewing, bush products, day labor) *and* towards those activities dominated by women.

In Moroto, in the qualitative data we do find that 30% of women reported that their wealth increased. Brewing, or some of the other poverty-related livelihoods in Moroto, may translate to better food security outcomes for women. In the survey data, brewing was associated with fewer months of food insecurity compared to cultivation. Our sample in Moroto, compared to the other districts, is the only one that did not show worsening food insecurity, with a non-significant reduction both in the number of months that a household was food insecure (specifically in the harvest period) and in use of short-term coping strategies. Although further investigation is required, this finding implies that, despite its association with poverty at the household level, brewing allows women to boost food security at the household level, at least in Moroto.

As mentioned earlier, female respondents often discussed their limited ability to engage in more-productive economic activities due to heavy domestic workloads and limited support from male partners. The opposite also appears to be true: the data from this and previous rounds of data¹⁴ show that females who are successful often have explicit support from males. This support may be financial, in-kind, or emotional, whereby male partners assist with business capital and domestic chores or encourage women to pursue their endeavors. For example, a young widow who remarried reported that her second husband was very supportive and that he gave her money to assist with cultivation

and that he helped her open up more land, thereby enabling a larger harvest.¹⁵ A woman in Moroto reported that her economic status had decreased in 2020 when her first husband left her with the children, but that her “household’s living situation has [since] generally increased because my new husband is so supportive.”¹⁶ When women have the support of a male counterpart, in this case a husband, their lives and livelihoods are likely to get better, or they are able to do much more than they would on their own.

The role of gender dynamics

Cultural norms and practices shape and inform gender dynamics, which play out regarding expectations, divisions of labor, and social and economic roles and hierarchies. Although this briefing paper focuses primarily on the experiences of women in Karamoja, the experiences and roles of women cannot be understood in isolation from those of men. This is especially true in a culture in which marriage and procreation are central to both male and female identity and social status. As mentioned above, men in Karamoja have traditionally played the role of protectors, providers, and primary decision makers within households, and hold disproportionate control over resources. Shifts in livelihood systems away from livestock in some areas and for some households mean that women are playing a much greater economic role at the household level, with at times complex implications on gender dynamics. These shifts and resulting complexities are evident in the narrative of a young woman in Amudat:

Whenever I ask my husband to help me support the family, he says he cannot because he has no job. I simply accepted the situation, and all the family relies on me. I do what I can to help the family ... Even though I do everything to support our household, [the fact that I am the only one making income] is a secret between me and my husband; no one knows it. Sometimes I give him money to keep in his pocket and pretend to

14 Atim et al., “Navigating and negotiating livelihoods.”

15 Interview, young woman, Lotim Sub-County, Kaabong District, December 2021.

16 Interview, young woman, Tapac Sub-county, Moroto District, October 2021.

ask from him for it even though it is mine. Here [among the] Pokot, if people got to know that I am the one supporting my husband, they would despise him and laugh at him. No one knows about it, not even my mother-in-law ... It reached a time when my husband felt guilty; he would even refuse food saying he does not provide for it. He even started drinking and he says how can a woman provide for the family when I am here?¹⁷

This woman went on to say that she felt overwhelmed by the burden of her responsibilities, but that she had no option but to continue working as hard as she was to support her children. Her labor—like most of the women in this study—was in marginal, poorly paid, and often risky activities.

Similar to findings from elsewhere in Uganda, these characteristics make it very difficult for households to move out of a situation characterized by poverty, volatility, and livelihood uncertainty.¹⁸ At the personal level, while the woman quoted above reported trying to keep the extent of her economic activities a secret to protect her husband's pride and social status, many other women are very visibly engaged in providing for their families. For some, this may lead to increased social standing and voice within their communities. However, it also has the potential for backlash in the form of increased gender-based and intimate partner violence, especially in a society in which women already report extremely high levels of domestic abuse.¹⁹ Additional research would be needed to understand the extent of this relationship.

Conclusions and implications

A wide range of internal and external factors influence the lives and livelihoods of women and their families in Karamoja. Over the past decade, the sub-region has seen marked improvements in security, growth in economic investment and opportunities, and the rejuvenation of many different livelihoods. However, the resumption of insecurity beginning in 2019 disrupted many of these positive trajectories and left many households with greatly diminished livestock herds. This decrease in holdings has strained pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihood systems, and women have had to increase their economic activities in an effort to fill resulting gaps. However, gender dynamics and roles largely dictate the activities that women are able to do, meaning that many bear an extremely heavy labor burden with minimal returns. As a result, women in the sample generally reported decreased economic status compared to men, and female-headed households generally fared worse across all indicators of wealth.

At present, insecurity in Karamoja continues to undermine trade, markets, mobility, and daily activities. Three years of below-average harvests and continuing drought in 2022²⁰ in eastern Africa serves to further erode resilience and livelihood systems across the sub-region. Providing for families in these conditions continues to fall primarily upon women. Based on this reality and the findings detailed in this and accompanying publications, it is important for programs and policies to bolster women's livelihood skills without increasing the time burden, such as through regular trainings in business management and expansion of sustainable access to financial services. At present women are primarily supporting their families through low-return activities such as brewing and exploitation of natural resources. Women welcome opportunities to move into more-lucrative activities but lack adequate training and start-up capital. Income-generation training programs implemented by external actors often lack adequate assessments of market saturation and fail

17 Interview, Loroo Sub-county, Amudat District. January 13, Jan 2022.

18 A. Marshak, D. Mazurana, J. H. Opiyo, R. Gordon, and T. Atim, "Tracking change in livelihoods, service delivery, and governance: Evidence from a 2013–2015 panel survey in Uganda" (Working Paper 59, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, London, 2017).

19 E. Stites and K. Howe, "From the border to the bedroom: Changing conflict dynamics in Karamoja, Uganda," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 57, no. 1 (March 2019): 137–159.

20 Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), "Atypical food insecurity worsens nationwide as prices rise during poor production year" (FEWSNET, July 2022), <https://fewsn.net/east-africa/uganda>.

to provide adequate training or access to start-up capital: these shortfalls would need to be addressed in future programs. However, the main barriers to successful and sustainable advances for women in the region are gender dynamics and insecurity. Addressing these systemic issues will take sustained commitment from national and international actors, extensive local participation, and the establishment of vocal role models and representatives able to put forward the best interests of the sub-region and its people.

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