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# **Resilient patriarchy: public authority and women's (in)security in Karamoja, Uganda**

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This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in 2011 and 2016 to explore the differing experiences of Karamojong women following the Government of Uganda's most recent disarmament programme. Besides being deprived of their guns, Karamojong communities have lost most of the cattle on which their livelihoods and way of life were centred. The study assesses whether or not women's experience of patriarchy has changed in these new circumstances, and, if so, how this impacts on their security and control of resources, or the absence of them. It maps, using information primarily supplied by women, public authorities from below, and evaluates if and how they respond to women's protection and survival needs, as well as if current development/humanitarian interventions are of sustainable benefit to Karamojong women. The paper concludes that apparent shifts in gender relations are probably superficial, contingent on continuing food aid, and that economic development and positive social change for women remain elusive.

**Keywords:** Karamoja, northern Uganda, patriarchy, public authority, women's security,

## **Introduction**

Karamoja is situated in northeast Uganda, and is home to about one million people from eight main population groups, the majority of which share a language and pastoralist culture. It is the poorest and least developed region of the country according to almost all measures; rainfall is irregular and a significant proportion of the population usually is food insecure at any one time. Between 2006 and 2011, the Government of Uganda engaged in a disarmament exercise to attempt to end a culture of cattle raiding that had become increasingly destructive since automatic weapons became generally available in the late 1970s, both inside and outside the borders of Karamoja (Carlson et al., 2012).

This paper reflects on the lived realities of Karamojong women and their experiences of insecurity, as they reported them to us. It explores changes over time in women's descriptions of their security situation and the public authorities that mediate it, as well as of gender norms, and it probes what these matters say about social change and development. It is based on fieldwork conducted in March and November 2011 and in August–September 2016, primarily with women; male community members and public authority representatives were involved in the earlier rounds. Research was carried out with both urban and rural communities of the Jie and Matheniko population groups, via focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews.<sup>1</sup>

The issue on which the discussion concentrates is the seemingly extraordinary shift in the narrative of many of the women who contributed to the study. In 2011, their stories centred on the unrelieved suffering of the whole community as a consequence of the disarmament campaign by the Ugandan government, leading to the loss of the cattle around which their culture and way of life revolved. In addition, women were experiencing more extreme patriarchal oppression than had been the norm in less troubled times. In 2016, by contrast, a majority of the younger women respondents reported vast improvements in their security. This was apparently in part because of changes in typical gender relations, giving the impression that a violent and domineering patriarchy had been superseded by a considerable degree of gender equality, and that these women now felt empowered. Such a fundamental alteration of society over a period of less than five years seemed incredible, especially as most older women, among others, reported small or no improvements in their security, and

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<sup>1</sup> In total, 18 individual interviews and 13 FGDs were conducted with 347 women, in some instances disaggregated by age in Kotido and Moroto Districts, two FGDs were conducted with 6 young and 12 older (Matheniko) men, and 6 FGDs were conducted with justice providers, including local council (LC) members and elders (89 men and 8 women). In addition, 31 key informant interviews were held with representatives of civil society and United Nations agencies, local government, and the justice law and order sector (JLOS) in Kotido and Moroto Districts. Locations were chosen to observe possible differences in rural, peri-urban, and urban communities, and between the two population groups. While the groups in Moroto town included a small number of people who identified as Soo/Tepeth, they seemed to have integrated into the majority Matheniko community, and the area was led by an elected LC rather than a customary group of elders. The fieldwork undertaken in 2011 was commissioned by War Child Canada and sought to examine women's security and access to justice. The fieldwork undertaken in 2016, and the writing of this paper, was supported by the Centre for Public Authority and International Development, an international consortium led by the London School of Economics and Political Science and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and the Justice and Security Research Programme, funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development.

given the continuing anger or despondency they felt as a result of the oppression and violence they suffered at the hands of their menfolk and communities.

## **Background**

The majority of the peoples of Karamoja are, or were until recently, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, utilising a dual settlement transhumant system. The environment is harsh and is predicted to become more so in the future owing to climate change (Mubiru, 2010; WFP, 2016).

Traditionally, agriculture has involved sorghum cultivation by women in the west of the region in years with adequate rainfall (Dancause, Akol, and Gray, 2010, Levine, 2010). Cattle keeping and cattle raiding are central to Karamojong culture. Gray (2000) describes historical raiding in terms of resilience: communities that lost their herds to disease or drought would be able to survive through restocking by raiding from groups less afflicted by the crisis. Raiding thus allowed for the redistribution of cattle, with an environmental bonus of dispersing overlarge herds. While some warriors were killed during raids, this was offset by the survival of communities that otherwise would have starved.

A number of scholars argue that the acquisition of automatic weapons in the late 1970s represented a turning point, triggering a fundamental cultural change in Karamojong society (see, for example, Mirzeler and Young, 2000). In contrast, Knighton (2006) contends that warfare is intrinsic to the Karamojong way of life and that modern weaponry has been absorbed into the fabric of this culture. The gun began to replace the spear more than a century ago and has been the standard weapon for many decades. Death rates may have increased, yet the impacts of modern weaponry on cultural practices and relations have been small (Knighton, 2006). Gray et al. (2003) see the use of automatic weapons as culturally maladaptive and working against resilience in many ways. Given the notion that raiding with automatic weapons provoked the 2006 disarmament programme by obliging the government to take action to address the sheer scale of lawlessness, this seems unarguable.

The first attempt to disarm the Karamojans<sup>2</sup> was made in 1945, and since then there have been eight such exercises (Bevan, 2008). The latest of these began in 2006, and was, according to the government, concluded successfully by 2011 (Kazungu, 2011). The principle that disarmament would be voluntary rapidly disappeared: widespread human rights violations, including rape, summary executions, and torture by the army, were reported by 2007 (Stites et al., 2007). Nevertheless the Ugandan state appears to have achieved something close to a monopoly on firearm violence: if guns remain in private hands, they are well hidden. A consequence of disarmament, though, is that many, if not most, Karamojong communities lost the bulk of their herds to raiders who still had guns, sometimes from Kenya or South Sudan, or to disease in congested, static cattle camps (*kraals*) under government protection (Stites et al., 2016). The loss of herds is not new to the Karamojong, but the comprehensive loss of weapons, creating the inability to restock through raiding, is new, and perhaps is much more challenging to the continuity of Karamojong culture and sustainable livelihoods.

Whether the environmental challenges confronting the Karamojong increased substantially over the course of the twentieth century as a result of colonial and post-colonial policy is contested, but it is clear that until the recent loss of herds, growing cattle and human populations were restricted to a shrinking area of potential grazing land (Baker, 1977; Gartrell, 1985). In addition, there is evidence of increasingly unstable rainfall since the start of the twenty-first century (WFP, 2016).

Extremely limited efforts have been made to advance Karamojong development, in the sense of modernisation, under all governments since the arrival of the British around 1916. Often they have been misconceived, inspired by racist attitudes towards pastoralists, and reversed owing to persistent insecurity (Czuba, 2011). Karamoja is by far the poorest region of Uganda: 8 out of 10 households are situated in the lowest national wealth quintile. Furthermore, 58 per cent of women and girls and 45 per cent of men and boys have received no schooling at all, as compared to the national averages of 20 and 13 per cent, respectively. The list goes on, with Karamoja the outlier on most development indices (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Karamojans' refers to all of the peoples of the Karamoja region, including the Ethur, Ik, Pokot, and Soo/Tepeth, whereas 'Karamojong' refers more specifically to those groups that speak NgaKaramojong and related dialects, and, broadly speaking, share a culture: the Bokora, Dodoth, Jie, Matheniko, and Pian.

The manifestation of the Ugandan state in Karamoja is, and always has been, substantially different to that in the rest of the country. It became government policy in 1923 that ‘[t]he Karamojong should be left in peace to tend their herds in the manner in which they had been accustomed in the past, and that every facility should be afforded them for this purpose’ (Barber, 1962, p. 119). Later colonial efforts to commercialise Karamojan cattle keeping by limiting herds, improving stock, and providing veterinary services and markets failed to have long-term impacts, or at least beneficial ones (Baker, 1977). Post-colonial development has been left largely in the hands of external actors, but has failed to prevent approximately 50 per cent of the population from being moderately or severely food insecure (WFP, 2016). Food aid has been supplied to some or much of the population for most of the period since the 1960s, although it did not prevent a heavy death toll due to famine in 1980 (Umana-Aponte, 2011). The problem persists: 86 people reportedly died of hunger in one Karamojan district in the four months prior to January 2017 (Ojore, 2017).

There is a long history of ethnography of the Karamojong (Quam, 1999), and a number of substantial reports on and studies of Karamoja in the twenty-first century, particularly by the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University in the United States. Few authors, though, have focused on Karamojong women; exceptions include Gray’s (2000, 2010) important work on health and nutrition and Czuba’s (2012) work on the migration of women and children. The debate on social change in Karamoja is inclined to assess the matter from a male-centric perspective. This paper aims to evaluate how changes have affected gender relationships, and women’s experiences within patriarchy in particular.

### **Women in despair: findings from 2011**

As semi-nomadic pastoralists, Karamojong men and women have tended to live very different and frequently separate lives. Rural women mainly dwell in fairly static *manyattas*—fenced villages composed of around 10–50 households—whereas most of the men spend dry periods, which may last months or years, seeking grazing for their cattle and living in mobile *kraals*, returning to the *manyatta* only when there is adequate grazing nearby. This pattern has been largely broken by the loss of cattle and guns, although mobile grazing has been resumed by a few of those who have rebuilt small herds (Stites et al., 2016). Women and men typically are together now in the *manyatta* most of the time, one of a number of factors influencing gender dynamics.

The women with whom we spoke in 2011 shared men's identification of disarmament and a lack of guns as causal to certain security threats that they faced, especially those external to their communities. Rape and exploitation by soldiers were said to be common. The risks of murder and rape by other pastoralist groups—'enemies'—were said to be high, since many women were forced to rely on firewood collection, taking them far into the bush, as a means of survival for themselves and their families.

The social problems confronted by women, though, were largely seen as structural: a near total lack of what might be loosely termed as justice and security systems or services, willing or able to protect their economic interests, or even their lives. However, gender relations, much formalised by custom, inevitably are mediated by particular relationships, by emotional attachments, and by the character of individuals. Even while the norms of patriarchy in Karamoja were presented as rigid, individuals' experiences of it varied widely; nonetheless, most of the study respondents in 2011 felt that their situation was becoming more difficult, and often intolerable. A young, unmarried woman is, by custom, the property<sup>3</sup> of her parents, who are entitled to choose her husband and force her to marry if she refuses. Brides frequently are very young relative to their husbands, who may already have other wives. Once 'married with cows', women are subject not just to their husband's authority but also to that of his family.

According to custom, women are 'married with cows', whereby the husband's family gives a large number of cattle to the girl's family as a bride price—one of the driving forces behind large-scale raiding. Following such a payment, a traditionally married woman is the property of her husband. A bride price and other customary payments with their often concomitant proprietorial aspects are well documented in other contexts (see, for example, Robertson and Berger, 1986; Bledsoe, 2005). Less attention usually is paid to the role that emotion may play in such exchanges. The study respondents suggested that this was indeed significant: while the principle of arranged marriage was universal, in practice women often were able to manipulate the courtship process to end up with the suitor of their choice. Interestingly, such

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<sup>3</sup> The adage '*nyepedorete ngiboro ayakaunor ngiboro*' can be translated as 'property cannot own property', and apparently is often used by those opposing ideas of women having property rights.

statements also were made by very old women who spoke of doing this in their youth, suggesting that this has long been the case.

Porter (2017) shows how marriage practices among neighbouring Acholi people can be tightly linked with social belonging, identity, and even social protection in ways that regularly are individually beneficial. In Karamoja, post disarmament, few families are in a position to pay any substantial bride price, and this inability has complex consequences. Carlson et al. (2012) note some of the social costs, but found, as did we, that to be ‘married *without* cows’ led to greater freedom for the women concerned, as they were not owned by their husbands, and hence could be accepted back into their parents’ homes more readily if they were abused. A young woman in her twenties who was not ‘married with cows’ said: ‘I think it’s good to marry without cows. You are tortured when you’re married with cows and they beat you because you are their property, but I have more freedom because I am not his property’ (interview, Nadunget, March 2011). Regarding protection from violent husbands, an elderly woman said (FGD, Singela, Moroto, November 2011):

For such cases even if you reported to the local councillor he would say it’s a family issue and if you reported to the police they also say it’s a family affair. . . . There is no help—that’s why women decide to go to far places from their husbands or even commit suicide.

Another young woman stated (interview, Nadunget, March 2011):

If he married you with cows and you went back home and explained to the people at home, then they will just say, ‘even if he kills you, there is nothing that we can do because there are no cows right now’. So they will just tell you to go back and bear it since there is nothing that they can do.

Control of property is a key issue around which the debate on women’s autonomy or oppression under pastoral patriarchy has revolved (see, for example, Talle, 1988; Kipuri, 1989). The study findings suggest considerable variation among families. Some described a still functioning tradition where women have control of chickens and the crops they produce, and are able to sell these on their own initiative to meet household needs and to pay school fees, for instance. Others indicated that this tradition was being eroded, with men asserting control over all household assets. Many of the women with whom we spoke reported that they had no effective control. As one middle-aged woman put it (FGD, Napumpum, November 2011):



In a case where a woman is married she can even own animals but a man has the authority to take and sell them, or even give them out or use them for marrying another wife, and a woman cannot say anything since she has no voice.

Some writers have questioned the extent of male hegemony in pastoralist societies; one of the arguments in this regard is that pastoralist women do not seem to be *subservient* in their attitudes and behaviour towards men (Holtzman, 2002; Krätli, 2006).<sup>4</sup> This was also our perception. Women make jokes at men's expense, and frequently are vociferously and publically critical of some male behaviour, both deviant and culturally orthodox. When permitted to be present, they speak openly at public meetings. And yet, perhaps counterintuitively, this apparently assertive behaviour does not translate into economic power or personal security. A number of men described women being beaten by their husbands or elders for being 'big headed'; however this was defined as women taking the initiative to sell things, including chickens and crops that customarily have been regarded as women's property, without the permission of their husbands.

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local civil society organisations have worked for some years now to inculcate the concepts of the rights of women and children—as noted in some of the FGDs during highly polarised and vitriolic debates.<sup>5</sup> The impact of awareness of women's rights did not appear to have reduced insecurity and injustice for women in 2011; rather, it seemed to have made them more conscious of how difficult their lives were—as one woman put it: 'now we know we are hurting'. There are high rates of prostitution and suicide, as well as outmigration to cities where many Karamojong women survive by begging, and where Karamojong boys and girls make up a high proportion of street children (Sundal, 2010; Czuba, 2012).

Women did not have high expectations of what enjoyment of their rights would entail. As one young woman imagined (FGD, Nadunget, November 2011):

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<sup>4</sup> An exception is Kipuri and Ridgewell (2008): they note formalised subservience in Maasai women's demeanour to men.

<sup>5</sup> Officials with the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in 2011 funding a range of activities promoting women and children's rights, frequently in the form of sensitisation programmes attached to livelihoods support or food distribution.

I have a right because if I have sold something and I have used the money for providing food for the children and the man asks for it I will tell him that I have used for buying food, then he will not say anything. That means I too have that right of making that decision on my own because it's for the benefit of our children.

Frequently it was said that women wanted to be able to lend household items to friends and neighbours without having to seek the permission of their husbands. Lending goods is an important means of building social capital and cementing relations with family, friends, and neighbours (Maranz, 2001). One can see why a patriarchal society seeks to retain control by men of this function, inhibiting the ability of women to establish or strengthen their own networks. In an exogamous society, women are isolated in terms of kinship—the men in a *manyatta* usually will all be related, whereas wives will have been brought in from other families. This structural isolation is deeply embedded, not only in cultural norms but also in women's access to justice and security as delivered by public authorities.

The following section seeks to map public authority and to analyse how it is exercised in relation to women, as experienced by women themselves, their menfolk, and representatives of those public authorities.

### **Public authority in Karamoja**

Notions of 'public authority from below' explore people's actual experience of authority, achieving voluntary compliance and legitimacy through the provision of public goods, particularly justice and security (Hoffmann and Kirk, 2013). It is a lens that is especially relevant in Karamoja, owing to the general absence of state provision of public goods. Karamoja's institutions typically are 'twilight' ones (Lund, 2006): they are messy, contested, and frequently function in ways other than advertised.

Formal justice, law, and order sector (JLOS) systems in Karamoja are largely inactive, suffering from enormous supply and demand problems. According to the District Chairman of Kotido, Callistus Adome Lokwii, '[l]egal services have just arrived in this community' (group interview with district officials, Kotido, November 2011). There are, at least in theory, junior magistrates in each of Karamoja's seven districts, but these are unable to hear the most serious of cases, including those involving defilement, murder, and rape. These must be tried

by a single peripatetic chief magistrate. No defence lawyers at all were based in the region in 2011.

As for demand, most of the study informants, including some JLOS actors, viewed the courts as invariably corrupt. In addition, formal justice principles do not resonate with Karamojong culture regarding what constitutes an offence, or the nature of culpable parties, who are traditionally conceived of as the families and/or age sets<sup>6</sup> of individual perpetrators.

We noted a dissonance with respect to women's imagined and actual behaviour in seeking help after a crime (c.f. Porter, 2015). During FGDs in both Jie and Matheniko communities, women discussed reporting hypothetical cases to the police, such as if in-laws drove a widow off her land following the death of her husband. When asked if this ever happened, though, no one was able to think of an instance, and there was general agreement that it would be a waste of time even to try.

To a degree, the police are feared and may function as a deterrent. Interestingly, some respondents in 2011 believed that incidences of rape of Karamojong women by members of the army had declined since police numbers had been increased. Sometimes police officers have forced errant husbands to contribute to school fees. However, they are not respected: it was reported in all FGDs that no matter how serious the crime, even if it involved murder or the rape of a child, the police would release the suspect if a payment was received.

Yet, even if the police and judiciary were motivated to perform their official roles, they might still struggle to do so. According to police and court personnel, complainants and witnesses, if they are willing to come forward at all, are threatened and sometimes killed by the family of the accused. If this hurdle is overcome, parties are likely to object to the slowness of the procedure, lack confidence in the integrity of the process and the actors, and have cultural and practical objections to giving evidence publically on matters that should be confidential to particular communities or families, in particular the size and location of a party's cattle herds, or their lack of guns, which would make them vulnerable to raiding.

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<sup>6</sup> Age sets in Karamojong society are groupings of men (and of women) of the same generation, each with a particular role and status, including elders and warriors, and are critical to understanding many aspects of life and the social order (Dyson-Hudson, 1963).

The state has been represented in Karamoja primarily by Uganda's armies since the start of the colonial period around 1915, often brutally so, with the disarmament exercise initiated in 2006 perhaps the most destructive case in point. A group of eight young Matheniko men, ranging in age from teens to late twenties, agreed that '[t]here is nobody among us who has never been caned or beaten by the army' (FGD, Nadunget, March 2011). An aim of emasculation was crudely manifested at the height of the disarmament programme: twisting testicles between two sticks, as well as castration, were reported to be common ways in which the army would extract information on the location of hidden firearms, sometimes causing death (women's FGD, Nadunget, March 2011; see also Stites and Akabwai, 2009).

Officially, justice and security in Karamoja are delivered at the local level by elected village (LC-I), parish (LC-II), and sub-county (LC-III) councils, which were (until 2013) authorised under Ugandan law to convene courts to adjudicate on minor crimes and civil disputes, set bylaws, and hand down punishments in the form of fines and community service. LCs came into being during the 'Bush War' of 1982–86 that brought President Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) to power. In those areas of the country that were sympathetic to the NRM, the LCs were rapidly accepted after their roll out in all parts of the country. In areas more hostile to Museveni's government, they were seen as an imposed organ of the ruling party and took much longer to become embedded (Branch, 2010; Porter, 2017). Nevertheless, they offer a potentially legitimate version of local democracy: LCs are drawn from the community, they are elected by popular vote, and they are largely free to follow local custom in the justice that they dispense, yet they are required to have women and youth representatives.

Although LCs are present and active in most of Uganda, local councils in Karamoja were found to be functioning less consistently in 2011. LC-I and -II councils have not been elected in any part of the country since 2002, their mandates expired in 2006, and their remit to hold court was suspended in 2013 following opposition challenges to their legitimacy. However, this did not appear to be a public issue outside of Karamoja in 2011; certainly it had not hindered their functioning in other parts of the north (Hopwood, 2015). In other areas of Uganda, the LCs were kept up to strength, and council members who quit or died were replaced. In Karamoja, by contrast, some councils had become effectively defunct, and while there was usually an LC presence, either an LC-I or an LC-II, their functionality often was substantially depleted. A constant feature of LC justice processes, except in one urban area in

which there was no elders' court as such, was that they were subordinate to the justice of elders.

A male LC councillor stated that a local council leader is 'like an elder and they promote peace and harmony in the area. In most cases when I am defeated I normally consult with the elders' court to intervene if the dispute is to be solved' (FGD, Nadunget, November 2011). The power differential can be expressed more symbolically (male LC councillor, FGD, Nadunget, November 2011):

What makes the elders different is, in a situation when an animal is killed, he eats a different part. Here he will not have the same share as the LC-I. Like the thigh and all good parts of the animal belong to the elders and when it comes to us LCs we eat intestines, testicles of the animal and others, but not the really good parts. That is what makes us different.<sup>7</sup>

LCs stated that people often prefer to bring their cases to them in the first instance, because they are more accessible than the elders and cost much less. They are obliged, though, to refer serious cases to the police, and clearly have been taught to see this as a strict rule. The elders, however, appear to have no such restriction and sometimes decide to take charge. One male LC-II councillor said (FGD, Nadunget, November 2011):

There was a time a lady was going to Moroto town and some men asked why she was following them and she said it was because she needed to use the same route, and they quarrelled and they beat and raped her. They were all from this community. They were fined. The elders' court took charge of that matter so we were not involved. The woman called a meeting and the elders fined the men. They beat them also and they had to kill a bull. She was given [medical] treatment from the contribution of the fined men. The elders didn't give anything to the victim beyond that.

Few descriptions of the elders' courts presented them as proactively working for the good of their communities. Generally they were described as being concerned with receiving payment through the extraction of fines. One male LC-II councillor said (FGD, Nadunget, November 2011):

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<sup>7</sup> See also Lokuruka (2006) who describes the association of meat and status among the Turkana.

Because of the issues of punishing the criminals by paying and bringing booze and animals for the elders, they'd rather come to us because the procedures are followed in a nice way. The elders want to benefit themselves, so people see when they bring cases to us they don't have to do that.

While penalties for certain offences are governed by a principle of compensation (in addition to the elders' remuneration), this does not appear to apply to women (beyond the provision of medical treatment where relevant), although their fathers or husbands will be compensated in cases of adultery or rape. Yet, however unsatisfactory the behaviour of the elders reported above, it is at least a response, and hence contrasts with what people expect of the formal JLOS. A female LC-II councillor remarked (FGD, Nadunget, November 2011):

Earlier this year a visitor came and ate and drank and when he went out he raped a girl of around 14 or 15 years old. The LC-II [chair] got the man and took him to the police and the girl was on the way to give evidence, but by the time they reached the next day the police had already released the man. So the police are not very good.

Customary justice among Karamojong-speaking peoples, delivered by the elders, is highly structured with defined roles, procedures, and penalties. The 'court', the *ekokwa*, involves a meeting of the male elders of a suitable jurisdiction—perhaps a single *manyatta* for a local issue, but potentially from a larger area depending on the scope and magnitude of the case. Any member of the community may call on the elders to sit, but he or she will have to pay for this by providing local beer and in many cases slaughtering a bull for the members of the *ekokwa*, although this cost may be assigned to a guilty party (Muhereza, Ossiya, and Ovonji-Odida, 2008, p. xvi).

Punishments frequently are specific and mainly entail fines of cattle or corporal punishment. The recognised penalty for adultery was regularly described to us by JLOS and community respondents as 60 cows (also noted by Knighton, 2007). A girl who defies her parents with regard to the husband that they have chosen for her, or a woman who quarrels with a co-wife, may be tied for hours or days to a termite mound to be tortured by biting ants. One young woman recounted (FGD, Panyangara, November 2011):

I have my cousin sister in Napumpum who had a misunderstanding with her co-wife, and their husband went to the elders to solicit for help; and the elders handled the case, and my cousin became a culprit and was punished. She was made to remove all her clothes and they told her to sit on black ants—the anthill. The ants worked on her including her private parts and when she tried to get up they beat her

telling her to leave the ants biting her private parts since those are the ones itching her and that's why she is disturbing the other wife. She suffered serious wounds on her private parts caused by the bites of ants and we are now just treating her at home here.

Beatings figure in many cases, from light and symbolic to lethal. We were not told of specific contemporary instances of capital punishment being handed down by elders' courts, but there were intimations that this was not unknown. There is no appeal against a decision of the elders. Their justice, however conscious people are of the inwardness of their individual motives, is believed to be divinely inspired, and they will curse anyone who defies it (Knighton, 2005, p. 132).

What emerged in all of the women's groups was that elders do not offer adequate protection to the women of their communities. This is illustrated in the following account by a middle-aged woman, who is the 'women's leader' in her *manyatta* (interview, Nadunget, March 2011):

Sometimes we use the elders but most of the time you have to spend money to buy local brew to maintain them in their meeting, so if you don't have money there is no reason to enter into debt to involve the elders in your problem. For one example, my neighbour used to send his kids to pick food from my home so I would always find something missing, and one day I discovered that it was his kids. And then I cried about it but I did not mention his name. But the next day he sent them again and I complained, so the next night he came with a knife and tried to kill me . . . he came to where I was sleeping but I screamed and people caught him. So the next day we had to have the elders sit. They cautioned him that it was not a good thing to steal food, and then try to kill someone like me even when it was my own food that his children were picking. After the meeting, five days later, he sent his children to steal food again so I called the elders again and told them that he had repeated it, so then again he came and tried to stab me at night so I left that night and slept at my friend's place. . . . Then I began only staying on my own during the day and at night I would sleep in friends' houses. The same man beat some old man from a village and the old man went to report to the police, but the man had somehow gone to the police and convinced them that it was the old man who was wrong so they ended up arresting the old man that had been beaten, instead of helping him and arresting the real culprit. The arrest of the old man cost him two cows because he had to pay [the police] to be let free and then pay the man who beat him. Now the man is afraid that the old man's sons will take revenge so he moved to Moroto and now my life is much safer.

There was no suggestion that the violent neighbour had a particularly influential status in the community: this sad story is typical of what we were told about the lack of protection that

women can expect from traditional authorities and that both men and women can expect from the police.

It is apparent that the Ugandan state, rigorous though it has been in its attempts to monopolise firearm violence, does not exercise a monopoly on judicial violence in Karamoja. Elders' justice is not recognised by the state, and violence committed in the name of elders' courts is not secretive; yet, we came across no instance of where elders had been challenged or sanctioned by the state for overstepping their authority. In contrast, local councillors were very conscious of the limits of their authority. They had a difficult and dangerous role: as one pointed out, '[y]ou find that the LC chairman suffers because the people accuse him of reporting them to the police, and the police also blame him for hiding members of his village who have guns' (male LC councillor, FGD, Kotido town, November 2011). Jones (2009), writing about the neighbouring Teso sub-region, saw the state as wilfully absent in rural Uganda. Tapscott (2017) instead sees the Ugandan state (as observed in Acholiland) as a looming presence in citizens' perceptions, often absent in practice, but aware of what is going on and able to intervene when its interests are threatened; from what we were told, this resonates in Karamoja.

The marginalisation of LCs in Karamoja is significant in understanding public authority there. While formal JLOS services may carry little weight, the state, as represented by a local elite affiliated to the ruling party and by the army, is feared by the population at large. It appeared to us that the judicial and protection activities of the LCs were to a degree monitored and constrained by higher authorities, whereas those of elders were not. In addition, elders exercised a degree of control over a body able to enforce their decisions, the warriors, whereas the LCs lacked the ability to enforce their decisions, although one urban council in an area with no elders' court was able to mobilise 'the youth' to arrest and punish wrongdoers (LC FGD, Singela, Moroto, March 2011). LCs were the only settings observed where women had an official voice, thanks to obligatory representation. It is probably not a voice, though, that established interests, economic and political, are keen to hear.

### **Shifting landscape: women's security and public authority**

We followed up our earlier work in August and September 2016, revisiting three of the communities that we had met in 2011. In Kotido and Moroto peri-urban areas, and in rural Moroto District, respondents, all women, were asked what had changed over the intervening



four years. The response was remarkable. The essential narrative in 2011 could be characterised as follows: ‘a lack of guns had led to no cattle had led to hunger, which in turn fuels conflict and violence in households and communities’. In 2016, the main problem, as depicted by the women with whom we talked, had become the weather: some were still hungry because the sun had burnt all of the crops they had planted for several successive years.

A clear majority of younger women asserted that gender relations had been revolutionised, but this was disputed by some younger and most older women. A group composed largely of widows said that, although they had no husbands, their unmarried sons still beat them if there was insufficient food. However, one young woman said (FGD, Nadunget, August 2016):

Our men’s attitude towards allowing us to share property with them is because of the sensitisation from the government and other stakeholders who preach equal rights and opportunities for everyone. We have NGOs who come here to teach us about this and the people are beginning to realise that what they had been doing was not right. The other is disarmament—firearms used to make the men so proud and they would intimidate women with their weapons but we are now the same, they are like us. We thank the government for disarming the Karamojong men.

Another young woman said: ‘men have been reduced to women, no more animals to be proud of, no guns to scare and terrorise others. That’s why their behaviour towards women has greatly changed’ (FGD, Singila, Moroto August 2016). This contrasts with the generally held view of women in 2011 that idleness and drunkenness owing to the loss of cattle and emasculation through the loss of guns had caused men to become *more* violent in the home and *more* assertive over household property. Howe, Stites, and Akabwai (2015) contrast Gray’s (2000) argument that resource scarcity and shocks increase conflict between and within communities with Lind’s (2015) claim that they boost cooperation. The study findings from 2011 would seem to support Gray, whereas the accounts of young women above echo Lind.

Another way of understanding these reports of an improbably rapid shift in patriarchal attitudes and behaviour can be found perhaps in Walker (2012), who has described the very local politics of Thai peasant communities that position themselves as ideal aid recipients. Walker (2012) presents this as the search for eligibility, whereby groups try to discern and manifest the characteristics that will make them attractive to governments and donors. How

and why this might be occurring in Karamoja is perhaps connected to successive harvest failures in much of the region. Food aid had been largely withdrawn in 2011, with a view to motivating the population to invest more effort and labour in agriculture (WFP, 2010). This programming, supposedly to make the population food secure, coincided with the government's interest in ending pastoralism, certainly mobile pastoralism, by attempting to force the population to become farmers (IRIN, 2014). In 2016, with around one-half of the population experiencing food insecurity and some degree of malnutrition, food aid had been gradually reintroduced (WFP, 2016). In 2011, members of Jie and Matheniko communities stated that the men were largely idle and that the women collected firewood, broke stones in quarries, and brewed and traded in local alcohol. These activities, along with charcoal burning, rather than farming, remained the main sources of income for most people in 2016. In 2011, however, women were exposed to dangers posed by raiders and the army, which were much reduced in 2016, representing a very substantial improvement for many people: some can conduct their meagre and insufficient livelihoods in relative safety, while others are no longer hungry owing to food aid. Arguably, though, this does not really represent sustainable development.

As for public authorities in 2016, little was said about the elders beyond a brief reference to them as arbiters of family disputes. The LCs were only mentioned in the context of idealised 'referral pathways' in cases of domestic conflict. Respondents were largely positive about their relations with UPDF (Uganda People's Defence Force) soldiers, who now lived with them in peace, helped to recover stolen animals, and married local women rather than raping or exploiting them. Some young women even expressed gratitude to the army and the government for disarming their men. The most influential public authorities, however, appeared to be the international NGOs distributing food aid.

Many respondents made reference to the provision of food aid to pregnant women and lactating mothers, who are indeed the targets of the World Food Programme's most recent intervention in Karamoja (WFP, 2016). Yet, some women reported problematic side-effects, including an increase in child marriages and a decrease in family planning. One middle-aged woman said (FGD, Kotido town, August 2016):

[The] provision of food to pregnant and lactating mothers has led to early marriage and poor birth control. This is because young girls marry at a tender age in order to give birth and be included in these

projects, women produce continuously without minding about child spacing and this has led to increased malnutrition because of poor care and management of these children.

It was also suggested that those women in receipt of food aid now wield considerable power: older women beg for food from young women, and men allow women to go to meetings with NGOs, a necessary move to ensure their eligibility for assistance. For the same reason, men appear to have moderated their beatings of their wives and children. This conformed as well to what was said in 2011, when almost all of the study respondents associated domestic violence with hunger: '[i]n the past there were not many challenges. When there was peace and plenty of food there was no conflict in households. There was less beating of women because children had enough to eat' (elderly woman, FGD, Nadunget, March 2011).

As well as greater physical security, many younger women claimed that there had been improvements in education and healthcare, as well as in the expansion of agriculture. In mixed age and older women's groups, though, the situation was presented quite differently. On security generating freedom of movement, a middle-aged woman noted that, following the failure of recent harvests, 'men and women have resorted to charcoal burning, which has led to environmental degeneration. Before when guns were still available within the community it was not easy for them to go to the bush, but now they have the liberty to move in any place to burn charcoal' (FGD, Kotido town, August 2016). Another middle-aged woman said: 'it's still the same, nowadays men only respect us when we have money to provide for the family. Immediately you lack resources they will turn against you' (FGD, Kotido town, August 2016).

### **Implications for intervention**

The international community continues to launch 'development' interventions in conjunction with more obviously 'humanitarian' missions in Karamoja. Building 'resilience' is a popular idea to justify aid programmes these days, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Resiliency through Wealth, Agriculture, and Nutrition in Karamoja project. It is worth remembering, though, that very similar interventions have a history dating back to the final years of the British Empire (Gartrell, 1985). Inclusion of the word 'resilience' in the title is unlikely to alter the record of failure, considering that life in Karamoja now is as, or perhaps even more, bleakly externally dependent as at any point in the past 60 years.

Aid prescriptions frequently emerge under scrutiny as magical thinking. An example is the World Food Programme's Karamoja Productive Assets Programme of 2010: food aid was suddenly withdrawn from the majority of the population who had been receiving it in the expectation that viable alternative livelihoods would be somehow created instantly (WFP, 2010; Jones, 2011). This is true not only of expectations for agriculture, but also for security. Repeatedly, reports look forward to the strengthening of the police and the judiciary and their replacement of the army as the vehicles for state security provision (see, for example, Muhereza, Ossiya, and Ovonji-Odida, 2008; Carlson et al., 2012; Howe, Stites, and Akabwai, 2015). Yet, in 1999, these institutions were widely recognised as being substantially criminalised, and there is every indication that this has become worse, if not near total, in lower levels of the formal justice system in subsequent years (Flanary and Watt, 1999; Inspectorate of Government, 2008; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Under these circumstances, other approaches must be found to developing public authority in the interests of justice and the security of women and men.

This analysis of public authorities in Karamoja suggests that the only embedded institutions in which women's constitutional and human rights are recognised to any degree are the LCs. The representation of women on local councils seems to be the most concrete symbol of their social inclusion. However, their influence seems to have been undermined by other public authorities—it is possible that these factors are part of the reason why. The role of the LCs has been insufficiently discussed in academic literature or in policy debates across Uganda, certainly in Karamoja, and this needs to change.

The current presence of international NGOs is seemingly empowering women through their control of the food supply. But is this instead a case of food aid enabling them to conform to gendered expectations of providing food for their husbands and thus keeping violence at bay?

## **Conclusion**

Following interviews with Karamojong women, Gray et al. (2003, p. 11) wrote that '[t]he central motifs of these recollections and of the local calendar itself are famine, sickness, and death, linked by running themes of violence and flight'. The period 2006–11 seems to figure as one such time of catastrophe: the Karamojong were experiencing the crushing defeat of their way of life; they were hungry and saw no possibility of recovery; and the

foundation of their resilience, men's guns, had been taken away. Women were attacked on all fronts, by the army, by raiders, by their own angry husbands and sons, and by hunger. By 2016, there was not a crisis in the same sense: there was some food and less violence, certainly by external forces, and to a degree within their households and communities.

The substantial reduction in raiding, and an apparently effectively revised role for the army, as well as the presence of international NGOs, has affected women's security. International NGOs, as food aid distributors and health providers, attempting simultaneously to impart awareness of human and women's rights, may have some sway over domestic control of resources, but more clearly influence the narratives that communities adopt in seeking eligibility for aid.

Reported improvements in the situation of women are, seemingly, contingent on continuing food aid. No viable livelihoods appear to have been generated in the years between 2011 and 2016, except perhaps environmentally unsustainable charcoal burning, while development policy continues to focus on farming, non-viable as a secure livelihood owing to Karamoja's environment. It seems likely that the withdrawal of food aid would lead to famine and to the return of an extreme version of women's subjugation and social exclusion. In 2016, the only public authorities in which women are represented and that are embedded and accountable, LCs, remained marginalised. The JLOS was as weak and criminally oriented as it was in 2011, and as irrelevant to public security. It seems likely that a withdrawal of the UPDF would lead to rapid rearmament and the resumption of raiding.<sup>8</sup>

By engaging with Karamojong women we learnt of the fragility and contingency of the improvements in their situation, which amount to reduced exposure to violence for some. Far from revealing a weakening of patriarchy—of Karamojong men's control of assets and freedom to exercise systemic violence against women—the study findings suggest that it remains fiercely resilient, while food aid remains essential to the survival of the population, as it often was in the time of cattle and guns.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, some sections of the police are indistinguishable from the army (Hopwood, 2013). The arguments here refer to the permanently deployed civilian police.

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