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Pastoralist women's pathways to prosperity: collective solidarity, commoning and moral economy practices in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands

Eunice Wangari-Muneri and
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Introduction

Studies of African pastoralism have long sidelined women's experiences, practices and socio-economic contributions to everyday life (Onyima 2021). This is a situation that can trace its heritage back to early ethnographies undertaken in pastoralist contexts, which, while often making significant theoretical contributions to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, often did so through an overt emphasis on men's herding or political activities, thereby implying a certain idleness and passivity among pastoralist women (Hodgson 1995, 1999; Spencer 1998; Flintan 2008). In more recent years, research across varied disciplines has increasingly focused on women, but the picture that has emerged is, on the whole, a binary one, with women tending to come across either as victims of broader social structures and processes or as fully empowered agents.

Apusigah and Bamora (2021) have recently emphasised the dissatisfactory nature of this unnuanced picture. While victim narratives ignore women's strategies and forms of active resistance to various challenges, an over-emphasis on 'empowerment' dichotomises and romanticises

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women's struggles, resulting in incomplete and partial accounts (Cornwall 2003). Neither framing adequately captures the diversity of pastoralist women's lived realities, which vary by age, marital status, wealth, religion and political context. Treating women's experiences as universally representative risks flattening these differences and reproducing a monolithic image that obscures internal hierarchies and unequal access to power.

In this chapter, we seek to find a middle ground by examining the everyday spaces of negotiation through which pastoralist women navigate constraint, exert influence and define their own terms of participation amidst shifting dynamics of power, labour and care. We do so by investigating the work and collaborations of pastoralist women in three Kenyan contexts (Isiolo, Marsabit and Narok), exploring how they navigate economic life, contributing to the prosperity of their households and communities while defying their marginalisation and exclusion from formal governance bodies.

Drawing on the concepts of moral economy (Scott 1976; Mohamed 2022), commoning (Linebaugh 2008; Federici 2012; Fraser 2016) and on analytical insights from approaches to social networks (e.g. Bakker 2007), we examine how interactions between gendered labour, informal networks and infrastructures of care, sustain and give meaning to economic life. Our core argument is that women's economic activities, in our case study, are more than responses to structural inequalities; they constitute differentiated active sites of contestation and negotiation, through which women reshape prevailing gender orders and articulate their own visions of prosperity and the good life.

In centring women's economic agency and informal solidarities, this chapter's argument unfolds across three dimensions. First, we build on existing understandings of moral economies as living, adaptive systems of value that underpin pastoralist livelihoods, drawing attention to how they evolve in response to shifting economic and social realities, which are experienced unevenly across social and political positions. Second, we show how practices of commoning and reproductive labour express economic values rooted in care and interdependence, which persist from pastoralist moral worlds even as they are rearticulated within market contexts. Third, we highlight how informal women's economies can scale both horizontally and vertically, with implications for how we understand formality, development and political transformation. Broadly, we aim to contribute to conversations across feminist political economy, African economic anthropology and development studies, offering a grounded, non-totalising analysis of how varied forms of women's work sustain not

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only households but the moral and economic systems through which wider communities define their own pathways to prosperity.

In the following section, we review key literature relevant to our study before outlining the research contexts and methods used for data collection. We then present a series of three discrete case studies, from three areas: Marsabit, Isiolo and Narok, comparing perspectives and experiences across these sites to examine the collective practices of care, exchange and solidarity through which women sustain and reshape pastoralist livelihoods. We conclude by reflecting on the study's implications for feminist political economy and for policies concerned with pastoralist livelihoods and drylands development.

Background

Prosperity

The notion of prosperity has, in recent years, become the focus of significant critical reconsideration across diverse disciplinary fields, as scholars move beyond economistic framings to articulate more multidimensional and contextually grounded accounts of human flourishing (Cassiers 2015; Moore et al. 2023). In the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) of Kenya, where pastoralism is both a livelihood and a cultural identity, prosperity cannot, despite dominant approaches in the world of development, be reduced to herd size or income. It is best understood in dynamic, relational and political terms, as something that pertains not only to the economy but also to ecology, social cohesion, cultural vitality and the pursuit of dignity and mutual care across genders. In other words, prosperity is not a fixed condition but an immanent process, woven through the multiple domains of everyday life and continually reshaped as people navigate diverse and often radical processes of change.

Much recent literature on pastoralism has emphasised the limitations of thinking about value purely in terms of material accumulation, and more specifically, the need to understand forms of relational wealth. Semplici et al. (2024), for example, have characterised pastoralist wealth as something embedded in and contingent on social ties, status and a dynamic world of reciprocal obligation. In this context, livestock are ill understood merely as assets; they are avenues to alliances, the fulfilment of obligations and the attainment of prestige. Prosperity thus emerges not from the accumulation of fixed assets, but

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through freedom, the capacity to mobilise and the maintenance of social networks rooted in place and livelihood (Jameel Observatory 2024). Amidst all of this, mobility sustained through flexible collective tenure systems forms the lifeblood of pastoral life, through which social ties, livelihoods and landscapes are continually renewed (see Maru 2025).

Nevertheless, women and men often define and experience prosperity differently in pastoralist contexts, with many studies pointing to a tendency for men to emphasise herd size and for women to think and talk more in terms of food security, access to water, healthcare and children's education (Flintan 2008; Kristjanson et al. 2010; Wangari-Muneri 2024). Such differences highlight the highly gendered nature of labour in pastoralist societies, and the ways this shapes imaginations of the future. Alongside gender, a broad array of other factors is important to consider, including age, marital status and perhaps ethnicity (Wangari-Muneri 2024).

Thus, as we think more carefully about pastoral prosperities, and about what they reveal of both past trajectories and future possibilities, it is important to recognise that these are never singular and rarely harmonious. Rather, prosperity always constitutes a contested and plural terrain, fragmented across diverse experiences, familiarities and knowledges even within relatively small groups. To frame it otherwise risks mirroring the totalising visions of progress that have long shaped development planning and practice, or at least envisaging the future in similarly restrictive terms (e.g. Escobar 2011). Calls from feminist scholars for a holistic approach are particularly important here, as a means of understanding and incorporating women's practices and relations not as peripheral but as integral to the production of value, care and continuity within pastoral worlds (Federici 2012).

Moral economy

Increasingly, the idea of moral economy has become key to understandings of how pastoralist societies in East Africa navigate uncertainty and risk, including both market volatility and social transformation. Rooted in foundational works by E.P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976), moral economy refers to culturally and socially embedded practices of redistribution and mutual support that mediate livelihoods under pressure. Johnson et al. (2023) recently defined moral economy as the set of social conventions and cultural norms that govern exchange, redistributing risk through reciprocal obligations, forced generosity and kin-based support. Far from 'precapitalist' remnants, the moral economy practices we explore in this chapter remain active and generative amidst

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contemporary pastoral systems, intersecting with, contesting and reshaping market logics.

More widely, moral economies have been examined by means of their expressions in the circulation of livestock and mutual aid during droughts and reciprocal obligations tied to age, kinship and clan membership (e.g. McPeak et al. 2012). In a general sense, such practices challenge orientations towards and metrics that are predicated on individualism, emphasising the collectivity of pastoralist livelihoods in times of crisis and abundance (Catley et al. 2013). Mohamed (2020) has explored moral economy practices in pastoral northern Kenya, focusing on the ethos of solidarity that prevails there, noting how during crises the deep-rooted idea that 'I exist because you exist' comes to be reinforced through the sharing of livestock and other resources.

Scoones et al. (2023) further emphasise that these redistributive systems are governed by logics of mutuality, care and solidarity, often anchored in horizontal social accountabilities and trust networks that contrast with the dynamics of the development sector. Such practices are not monolithic but are shaped by intersecting social hierarchies, including gender, class, ethnicity and age. Indeed, Mohamed and Nori (2025) highlight how moral economies operate through gendered and generational channels, such as the male-dominated transfer of livestock or the women-led *marro* (rotational savings and sharing schemes) discussed by Derbyshire and Hassan in their contribution to this volume, underscoring how trust and reciprocity are mobilised to buffer against price shocks and production decline. Here, as elsewhere, moral economy is a set of not only cultural practices but also political ones, mobilising norms, technologies, trust, care and institutions to assert agency in the face of exploitative market structures.

Building on this literature, this study conceives of moral economy as a dynamic, evolving collection of solidarities and redistributive practices. It offers new evidence to explore the gendered dynamics of socio-economic change across pastoralist contexts in Kenya, unravelling the morality of trade and its implication in an already ongoing and deeply rooted process of adaptation long shaped by pastoralist values and experiences.

Commoning

In unravelling this picture, an equally important concept is 'commoning', which broadly comprises the collective practices, relationships and social norms through which communities manage shared resources. Moving beyond the material resource of 'the commons', commoning highlights

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the dynamic, socially embedded processes through which access and use of resources are negotiated (see for example Linebaugh 2008; Bollier and Helfrich 2012) and new relations emerge (Nightingale 2019). In Kenya's drylands as in contexts elsewhere, commoning has historically underpinned the kinds of flexible and adaptive systems that sustain mobile livelihoods amidst variability.

It must be remembered that extensive grazing systems tend to rely on collective access not only to rangelands but also water points and other resources (Fratkin 1997; Homewood et al. 2009; Catley et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the institutions and arrangements that facilitate this are continually being reconfigured in response to ecological pressures, demographic shifts, land privatisation and changing governance regimes, reflecting the broader point that pastoralism itself is always in transition (Cullis and Watson 2005; Flintan 2012). In many contexts, the fragmentation of communal lands through individual titling, conservation efforts or environmental shocks and stressors has led to new, innovative approaches to commoning, through complex, messy and often hybrid arrangements (e.g. Robinson and Flintan 2022).

Scholars focusing on its gendered nature have documented some of the ways in which women engage in acts of everyday commoning, resisting various forms of marginalisation or negotiating shared access through informal networks, thereby reshaping the meaning and practices of commons (Archambault 2016; Flintan et al. 2019). Indeed, Archambault (2016) observed that Maasai families under privatisation pressures attempt to recreate the commons by relying on social networks for free access to resources. Women's social ties via kin, friends and religious associations and community-based strategies are important in this process and effectively restore grazing access. Thus, well-intentioned interventions that ignore women's informal systems of resource sharing and care may undermine the very networks that sustain their livelihoods (Cleaver 2000). Consequently, understanding the everyday practices and politics of commoning, especially from a gendered perspective, is crucial for comprehending how pastoralist women navigate change and rework the social and economic relationships that underpin their livelihoods.

Drawing on this body of scholarship, in this chapter we foreground social reproduction, exploring how forms of reproductive labour such as childcare gain traction and come to be re-established amidst capitalistic economies (cf. Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017). Of course, feminist analyses see social reproduction not as peripheral to development but as central to understanding how economies function and how gendered power operates within them. As Federici (2012) notes, reproductive

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commons arise when women refuse to individualise survival and instead produce collective infrastructures of care and subsistence. Women's commercial activities are thus not fully discernible through economic metrics alone, as they are generative grounds for transformation, where new gender contracts are being negotiated and enacted on a continual basis.

In Kenya, women's groups and *chamas* (informal savings and investment collectives) have emerged as critical forms of commoning that enable women to navigate gendered vulnerabilities and forms of structural marginalisation. These groups operate as localised, self-organised systems of mutual aid and resource pooling, offering a practical response to the exclusion of women from formal financial institutions and decision-making spaces (Kinyanjui 2012). Rooted in local knowledge and communal values, *chamas* serve not only as economic support networks but also as social platforms for empowerment and collective action (Wangui 2014). Through these associations, women create solidarities that challenge neoliberal and patriarchal frameworks, cultivating spaces of care, trust and resilience (Federici 2012; Mohamed 2023). Scholars have emphasised that such informal institutions are not merely coping mechanisms but constitute active resistance to gendered socio-economic exclusion, producing alternative economies and forms of governance that are often overlooked in mainstream development discourse (Cornwall 2003; Koster and Ballamingie 2020; Wangari-Muneri 2024). As a form of commoning, *chamas* exemplify how marginalised groups mobilise shared practices and resources to address everyday insecurities and assert greater autonomy in both public and private spheres.

Informal networks and gendered solidarity

Such practices and processes of navigating change are made possible through informal networks and gendered solidarities, which are based on kinship, neighbourhood ties, religious affiliations and friendship. As others have done, we envisage these networks as infrastructures of support, care and reciprocity, especially where formal institutions are weak or exclusionary (see Gómez Becerra and Wangari-Muneri 2021).

Such networks, however, do more than fill institutional gaps. More widely, scholars have highlighted their political dimensions, and their embeddedness in histories of marginalisation. Gómez Becerra and Wangari-Muneri (2021), for example, have demonstrated how various forms of care practices during the COVID-19 pandemic operated through informal solidarities among Maasai communities. Perhaps the most

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important point is that, here and elsewhere, critical networks hinge on gendered labour and various emotional investments that tend to be invisible in policy discourse.

In other contexts, women's informal networks centred on institutions such as rotating savings and credit associations, burial societies, mutual aid groups and neighbourhood care coalitions have been shown to offer vital forms of economic security and emotional support. Examples include the abovementioned *marro* in pastoral Kenya (Khalif and Oba 2018; Mohamed and Nori 2025) and *stokvels* in Southern Africa (Verhoef 2001), both of which institutions not only facilitate access to capital but also serve as sites of identity, solidarity and resistance to exclusion from formal financial systems.

In exploring such institutions, and the wider networks that take shape around and by means of them, many have challenged predilections for focusing on 'the formal', highlighting the critical importance of informal, everyday solidarities in social protection (Roy 2009; Federici 2012). We follow this line of enquiry, exploring evidence from our research sites in Kenya to examine how informal networks and gendered solidarities are critical to the navigation of contemporary markets and shifting economic landscapes. In doing so, we reflect on wider implications vis-à-vis prosperity, exploring the possibility for more nuanced, relational understandings of support and well-being.

The study areas

Our study took place in two broad areas: Marsabit and Isiolo in northern Kenya and Narok County in southern Kenya, with data collected among Borana and Maasai communities, respectively. Both areas comprise broadly pastoral economies, which are nevertheless heterogeneous, with livestock production being supplemented by a range of other economic activities, including small-scale trade, farming and employment in small centres. Within Marsabit and Isiolo Counties, the specific sites in which data were collected were Kinna, a small semi-urban pastoral town located between Meru and Maua municipalities, and Bori, a rural village in Moyale Sub-County, south of Marsabit County. Meanwhile, in Narok, the main research site was in Talek.

Across these two general areas, our research was conducted across three contrasting pastoralist settings: Kinna (Isiolo County), Bori (Marsabit County) and Talek (Narok County). Kinna, situated near Isiolo town, benefits from relatively good infrastructure, access to electricity and mobile networks, along with vibrant women-led milk cooperatives that connect pastoral producers to urban markets. Bori, by contrast, lies

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in a more remote and arid part of northern Kenya, where limited infrastructure, recurrent droughts and environmental pressures constrain livelihoods, though proximity to the Ethiopian border provides important cross-border market linkages.

Meanwhile, Talek, which lies within the Maasai Mara ecosystem, faces distinct pressures associated with conservation and climate variability and change (Naess et al. 2025). Land leasing for conservation has led to grazing restrictions and curtailed mobility, prompting extensive gendered livelihood diversification. Women are increasingly engaged in non-land-based activities as they were systematically dispossessed in the process of leasing land for conservation process (Wangari-Muneri 2024). Beyond gender differences, other axes of differentiation are equally consequential. Age, wealth and marital status have been identified as crucial social markers shaping women's access to land, livestock, credit, social networks and decision-making power (Wangari-Muneri 2024). Economically poorer women often navigate far more constrained options than wealthier married women, underscoring how social networks are unevenly distributed rather than uniformly shared among 'Maasai women'.

Together, these sites capture the diversity of pastoralist experience in contemporary Kenya, shaped by uneven access to infrastructure, markets and resources, as well as by differing ecological and political constraints.

Methods

This study draws on long-term mixed methods qualitative research and has also been informed by a scoping study on understanding resilience, which was undertaken by one of the authors in 2023 and a 'photo-voice' project with camel-milk producers in northern Kenya (See Jameel Observatory 2024). However, the study is also situated within wider ethnographic, historical and political ecology research undertaken by both authors across the respective sites, all of which provides important grounds for analysis and interpretation (e.g. Mohamed 2022; Wangari-Muneri 2024).

Study participants included men, women and young people across all sites. The data were collected through a combination of focus group discussions, semi-structured and key informant interviews, life history narratives, participant observation and historical event mapping (see Table 7.1). Alongside these methods, we also used photo-voice and network-mapping exercises to gain a richer understanding of embodied experience and the social relations through which women navigate uncertainty and

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livelihood change. In the following section, we draw together some of the different experiences of women that were explored during this research, presenting three examples of some of the different ways women navigate markets amidst shifting conditions.

Women's agency, collective solidarity and care

Halima

Halima is a young Borana woman living in Kinna, who has been involved in milk vending for the past 10 years. We interviewed her there in February 2020. She explained that she began this work by getting milk from Rage, a Somali herd owner, and a trader living in Kinna. Rage collects milk from producers and supplies it to the women in town, including, at first, Halima, thus brokering between Halima and milk producers. He charges roughly 300 Kenyan shillings (just over US $2) for every 5 litres of milk, and Halima sells a cup for roughly 20 shillings (a litre is approximately 4 cups). Unhappy with the small profit margins that come from depending on brokers like Rage, Halima recently decided to join with other women, and hired the services of a motorcycle rider called Boru to transport milk directly to her, paying 100 shillings for every 10 litres of milk. When he comes, Boru also brings a list of food rations, medicines and other needs from the milk producers. In return,

Table 7.1 Breakdown of methods used in the research.

Methods	Number	Place
Focus-group discussion	11	Kinna, Bori and Mara
Key informant interviews	27	Kinna, Bori, Isiolo, Marsabit, Moyale, Nairobi, Mara and Narok
Stakeholder interviews	34	Nairobi, Marsabit, Isiolo and Narok
In-depth interviews	37	Kinna, Bori, Talek and Narok
Life-history narratives	4	Narok
Photo-voice	3	Isiolo
Event mapping	14	Isiolo and Marsabit
Network mapping	6	Kinna and Bori

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Halima and her group use the money they make from selling milk to purchase many of the items requested by the producers. One outstanding practice that emerged from this relationship is that Halima and her group pay the milk producers at the end of every month and not immediately. Therefore, they get ample time to trade and utilise the immediate milk money for other urgent needs.

Halima also trades with Ibrahim Hajii, who provides cow milk from his herd in Kinna. In every good season, Ibrahim supplies milk to Halima and her wider group members. However, Halima recalled how during a recent dry spell – when Ibrahim's herd was producing very limited milk – she and her colleagues sourced milk from a supplier in a dairy farm in Meru (roughly 80 kilometres away). Motorcycle transporters connected Halima and her six other group members to a female supplier operating in Meru and Maua towns (the latter being slightly closer). The transport cost 80 shillings for every 5-litre jerrycan of milk, while the milk itself in such a jerrycan cost 380 shillings, bringing the total for every 5 litres to 460 shillings. Realising the high cost, Halima and the team decided to hire the services of a car driver, who provides transport to people along the route three times a week. The driver, Roba, charges 25 shillings per 5 litres of milk, thus bringing the group's total cost down to 405 shillings.

Halima uses proceeds from her trade for a variety of daily needs, including the payment of loans, school fees and medicines or veterinary services for her goats. She has also enrolled in her group's saving club, the members of which each contribute 500 shillings every 2 weeks, especially during good seasons when the milk supply is sufficient. Her trade allows for careful financial planning – she sells milk both to daily customers and through monthly subscriptions. Importantly, when she is unwell, or occupied with other responsibilities, her fellow group members collect and sell milk on her behalf. Their collective presence also attracts periodic visits from public health officers, who provide advice on milk safety and hygiene practices. A web of relationships, which is expanded and strengthened via the presence of a nuclear closeknit group, allows Halima to manage a market that has highly variable dynamics, while also providing her with greater flexibility in planning and decision-making than would otherwise be possible.

Taditi

Taditi is a 58-year-old female herder who lives on the outskirts of Bori village, in Moyale, in the southern part of Marsabit County, where we interviewed her in February 2023. She is a mother of six and is married to Qampicha, who manages herds of cattle and goats. When Taditi got

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married, she received two cows from her brother and two from her father. She helped manage the calves from these and other animals, milking them and teaching her children aspects of herd management. She lost all her livestock during a series of bad droughts, but recovered others through redistribution from family, in-laws and friends. Many years ago, Taditi joined an informal women's group, which consisted of women from her wider area. This group, of which she is still a member, provides a platform for sharing herding labour, milk marketing and caring for calves and has been in operation since 1998. It works on a quota basis, consisting of five bundled groups along adjacent houses within the same cluster of homesteads.

The sale of milk has become a critical source of income for the women in Taditi's group, who come from five neighbouring houses. For many years they engaged in this business in a collaborative manner, originally collecting three litres of milk from each household, making a total of fifteen litres, to bring to market. Group members would take this milk to the Moyale market on a rotational basis, allowing other members to rest for four days. During the rainy season, when milk production would peak, the rotation would reduce to two days, with two group members taking milk to the market on each rotation. This is a journey of about eighty kilometres, along the Bori-Somare escarpment, and would take roughly four hours. Pregnant group members would typically be exempted from making these journeys from around seven months of pregnancy until their child was three months old, allowing time for childbirth, recovery and early childcare.

In the market, the group sell milk by the cup, at 35 shillings per cup. Once all the milk is sold on any given day, group members save a percentage of their income at a shop in Moyale town run by a trusted friend, using the remaining profits to purchase essential goods such as books, flour, sugar, medicines and tobacco. During a group discussion, one of the group members noted that 'we saved the money with Halakhe [the shop keeper] because, if we come home with it, we may end up misusing it, instead we save for our children's school, paying the herders and other needs'. Taditi and her colleagues noted that they tend to save between 200 and 500 shillings on each day of trade, with their capacity to save increasing markedly during the rainy season.

In the market, the group's milk is received by intermediary traders, called *Nagade*, who are based at the Moyale terminal market. Taditi's intermediary trader is called Asha, and she helps to facilitate the regular deposit of some of Taditi's profits with the shopkeeper Halakhe; this is a personal arrangement, based on trust, that has been in place for 18 years.

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Asha also often purchases food items for Taditi using profits from the sale of her milk, based on lists given to her along with the milk at the beginning of the day.

The logistics of this arrangement have changed substantially in recent years, in line with increasing access to motorcycle and vehicle transport and mobile money transfers. Indeed, nowadays there are at least two cars in Bori, which travel to Moyale town in shifts. Capitalising on the efficiency of this transport link, Taditi and her group members have begun sending their milk to market in cars, paying 20 shillings for every 3 litres of milk. In the rainy season, when milk production is at its peak, each member will send about 15 litres of milk to market, paying 100 shillings for the transport. On each these car trips, one member of the group accompanies all the milk to Moyale, hands it over to the respective *Nagade*, and brings back all the essential goods required by the group. During our interview, Taditi noted that with the ease of transport systems, membership of her group has increased to 10 members, with each member now contributing 30 shillings on market days to pay for the bus fare and lunch of the person accompanying the milk.

Taditi and her fellow group members have also recently joined a formal group called 'Abrasa', which was first initiated by an NGO project. The members of this larger group contribute 100 shillings a month to a rotational savings programme. The Abrasa group comprises over 70 members and the money it raises is partly used to fund social events, including *waqlal* (a name-giving ceremony) and weddings, but is also drawn on by members to cover some of the costs of secondary education fees for their children. In our interview, Taditi reflected on shifting household dynamics, noting that the responsibility for daily sustenance increasingly falls on women. She observed that many men, faced with shrinking herds and few alternative income opportunities, have become less involved in meeting household needs, while women rely on expanding networks of exchange and support to sustain their families. Nevertheless, a recent increase in the regularity and severity of droughts has negatively impacted milk supply, leaving many households with little or no income.

Naisura, Soila and Sein

Among many Maasai communities, formal education is increasingly viewed as a strategy to diversify livelihoods, especially in the face of environmental change and land use shifts towards conservation. Many have explored this trend, arguing that education has, in many instances, served to expand opportunities amidst increasingly heterogeneous pastoral

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economies, often complementing pastoralism in new ways, or serving as a means for reinvesting in it (e.g. Archambault 2017, 2024; Omolo and Mafongoya, 2019; Walker et al. 2022). During fieldwork in the Mara, this was a narrative that was shared widely by research participants across different social class, gender and age groups. However, it quickly became clear that women across social differences were particularly active agents in promoting education. Indeed, headteachers often noted that women are more likely to attend school meetings, pay school fees, advocate for girls' enrolment and retention after pregnancy and take on additional domestic labour to support their children's schooling. Some, it was explained, even relocate closer to schools to reduce commuting time, despite the added burden to their daily responsibilities.

Naisura (45), Soila (42) and Sein (39) are three Maasai women who today operate the largest private primary school in their region; we interviewed them in November 2019 and January 2020. The women first met in a women's group, a space of solidarity and resource pooling where members practise 'table banking', a localised informal credit system through which participants contribute and borrow funds on a rotational basis. In 2015, the trio, all tertiary level educated, were young mothers juggling waged labour and childcare: Naisura worked as a secretary at a nearby resort, Soila as a tailor and Sein had just been employed as an early childhood teacher. Like many working mothers in the country, they had hired nannies to help with childcare, but the reality of this arrangement was often precarious. Nannies would leave abruptly, children would fall ill, and there were moments of clear neglect. The tension between the demands of waged labour and the expectations of caregiving was palpable.

When school holidays came in April 2005, Sein volunteered to watch over all seven of their toddlers at her home, temporarily relieving Naisura and Soila, who continued with their jobs. The arrangement was informal but deeply significant. As the holidays ended, the old question returned: who would care for their children once Sein returned to work? The women decided on a simple yet profound solution: Sein would remain at home to care for their children, and in exchange, each woman would pay 3,000 shillings on a monthly basis (an equivalent amount to what they had previously paid nannies). This moment marked the informal birth of a child daycare business, which would form the foundation of what would eventually evolve into a full-fledged school.

Before long, other women in the area began bringing their children as well, drawn by the flexibility and trust embedded in the arrangement. Some paid daily rates, others monthly, and many

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contributed in-kind by helping to care for the children on some days when cash was short. As the number of children grew, the three women rented an extra space away from Sein's home, in the local shopping centre, eventually hiring two caregivers to help Sein. What had begun as a stop-gap solution to a shared problem was now becoming a more structured enterprise.

By 2010, with the children reaching school-going age, the women expanded the initiative by opening a private primary school. For Sein, this was a welcome return to formal teaching. They secured initial capital through individual loans from their women's group and built their first class on rented land. They began modestly, with ten pupils and one teacher, and added a new class each year by reinvesting annual income. At the time of the fieldwork behind this chapter, the school had grown to house 450 pupils and employed 24 teachers and 7 support staff. Naisura and Soila transitioned from formal employment to serve as the operations and finance managers, while Sein remained the head of teaching. Their partnership is marked not only by a clear division of labour but also by enduring trust, shaped through years of shared caregiving, mutual financial risk and a shared vision.

The road to legitimacy and acceptance, however, was not without friction. While their daycare was largely welcomed, the opening of the primary school, and more so, the purchase of the land on which it stood in 2012, provoked scepticism and, in some cases, resistance. Some members of the community viewed their ambition with suspicion, feeling that they were pushing beyond what was expected or acceptable of women in the Maasai community. Their expansion into land ownership and formal education provision marked a shift in the local gendered economy of authority.

With loans from a local bank, the women not only purchased the land but also constructed dormitories, particularly for girls in upper primary classes. These boarding facilities have become safe, enabling spaces where girls can study without the distraction of household chores and the risk of early withdrawal from school due to social pressures. The school's impressive performance has since earned the trust of the wider community, and enrolment has steadily increased. The women's ability to access loans, secure relevant information and structure these enterprises in more formal ways can be attributed to their educational background and social class.

Although the women have not yet ventured into establishing a secondary school, they continue to support the educational trajectory of their students by sourcing scholarships for top-performing children from

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low-income families. Indeed, during our fieldwork, they were focused on renovating older classroom structures, an effort that reflects both their growth and their commitment to sustaining quality education.

What is particularly striking about their enterprise is how it remains entangled with the networks and logics from which it emerged. The school sources food, milk, water and cleaning supplies from other members of the women's group, maintaining flexible, term-aligned payment schedules that respond to the cyclical nature of school fee collection. They also continue to lease event equipment from the group during school functions, ensuring that capital continues circulating within the community and reinforcing the collective ownership of the women's group's benefits.

Beyond the school, the women run a bookshop and a school uniform shop, supplying both their students and others in the region. By sourcing directly from Nairobi-based distributors, they cut out intermediaries, reduce costs for families and generate stable income. These auxiliary businesses also reduce parents' need to travel to larger towns like Narok, reinforcing the school as a hub not only of learning but of community life.

Discussion

All the cases outlined above are examples of how women in pastoralist societies in Kenya are actively reshaping the contours of economic life through collective labour, informal financial systems and care-based entrepreneurship. At the same time, these examples should not be read as a monolithic portrait of 'the pastoralist woman'. As we have emphasised throughout this chapter, women's experiences differ across social and economic realities that cause differentiated capacities for manoeuvre. The cases, nevertheless, broadly demonstrate the vitality and importance of diverse webs of relationships, grounded in trust, that facilitate access to markets, resources and livelihood options. Such relationships crosscut different experience bases and locations, but in their entanglement around nuclear collectives of women, they become grounds through which everyday practices of care, trust and solidarity come to critically shape development and resilience. In facilitating this entanglement, and capitalising on it to navigate a complex terrain of challenges and possibilities, these women not only sustain households and communities back home but also challenge normative gendered constraints, carving out

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spaces of autonomy and influence within a rapidly transforming socio-economic landscape. In this section, we explore some of the key implications from the cases, considering how they might inform understandings of economic change, prosperity and the future.

Moral economy and reciprocal exchange

Across all three study contexts, it is clear that economic activity is structured not merely by market imperatives but also by shared ethical norms, trust and relational obligations (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976; Mohamed and Nori 2025). Whether it is milk sales or childcare provision, women draw on reciprocity, trust and care as key organising principles for their economic activities. In this regard, their arrangements, in a straightforward sense, resist narrow economistic logics of prosperity, foregrounding instead the social and moral dimensions of economic life that feminist scholars have long argued are obscured by market centred frameworks. As with the livestock marketers in Roba's chapter, processes of socio-economic change in our study areas have been actively negotiated and co-opted, not experienced passively. In contexts that are perhaps often imagined to be governed primarily by individual accumulation (markets), these women have re-established collective systems of reciprocity, mutual support and shared risk, sustaining social value through relational rather than purely competitive practices. To put this another way, all three cases emphasise what Tronto (2018) and Federici (2012) term a politics of care: an ethic of interdependence wherein economic activities are inseparable from social reproduction.

Beyond this broad framing, the examples reflect several different forms and scales of moral economy. The Isiolo case, for example, features a moral economy mediated by brokerage and intercommunal trade networks. Halima's work hinges on her relationship with Rage, whose role as a broker reflects interdependencies between producers and sellers across spatial divides. The system of deferred payments and trust-based obligations is a mixture of informal finance and caregiving logic, embedded in cross-household and cross-community solidarity. The Marsabit case, on the other hand, reveals a more kinship-rooted moral economy. Taditi reconstituted her herd through family redistribution, exemplifying how pastoralist wealth in the form of livestock circulates through kin networks after ecological shocks. Labour-sharing and income-pooling within her women's group further illustrate intra-community cooperation. In working to support individuals during important life-course events, such as birth and child rearing, the system of

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which Taditi is a part works as a medium through which economic roles, and economic transformation more broadly, is continuously negotiated within gendered temporalities.

The women from Narok, on the other hand, work amidst a moral economy grounded in urban and peri-urban informal caregiving networks. Here, Sein's daycare operates not through kin or market ties but through neighbourhood-level relational labour. The innovation lies in the non-commodified nature of early childcare, where in-kind contributions and flexible terms reflect the precarious realities of women's informal labour. Unlike Isiolo and Marsabit, where milk and livestock are central currencies, Narok centres time, care and social access as alternative currencies.

A key implication that arises from these combined cases is that they all, in different ways, complicate the binaries that often structure understandings of economic change in rural Africa (i.e. formal/informal, economic/social). The cases show that moral economies cannot be fully apprehended in black and white terms; they find expression across diverse contexts and processes of ongoing change, serving both as grounds for the re-establishment of pre-existing practices and approaches and for the realisation of completely new ambitions. To put this more simply, they are both engines of change and anchors of continuity in an ever-evolving moral and material landscape (see Mohamed 2022). We return to these points in our conclusion.

Infrastructures of commoning and reproductive labour

Many of the socio-economic practices we have explored in these cases can be understood as dynamic processes of commoning. These practices, much like feminist critiques of economic life that challenge the individualising logics of capitalism, subvert dominant narratives of entrepreneurship, ownership and value. Across all sites, commoning extends beyond the management of physical resources such as milk or buildings to encompass the collective organisation of time, labour, responsibility and social risk, a logic that privileges equity and relational well-being over immediate profitability.

In all three cases, women do not engage in economic activity as isolated actors but as participants in communal infrastructures built through shared risk. Halima and her group in Isiolo collaboratively hire transport, coordinate milk supply chains and assume one another's roles in times of illness. In Marsabit, the Abrasa women's milk pooling and joint logistics reflect a similar ethic, further institutionalised as the group

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formalises without sacrificing its relational core. In Narok, what begins as informal childcare among working mothers evolves into a formal school, characterised by cooperative governance and local resource sourcing that preserves the moral and material foundations of commoning.

What binds these forms of commoning is their foundation in social reproduction, the ongoing, often invisible work of sustaining life, households and communities (Federici 2012). Women's groups in these cases not only enable market participation but also ensure continuity of care and well-being within their communities. When Halima is ill or when a group member gives birth, others step in, reconfiguring labour through empathetic obligation rather than contractual enforcement. The Narok daycare turned school emerged as a collective response to the everyday reproductive work crisis. The flexible payment modalities in all the cases highlight the non-monetary dimensions of social reproduction (Katz 2001; Bakker 2007; Gómez Becerra and Wangari-Muneri, 2021). Collectively, these cases speak to broader debates in social reproduction theory, which situate reproductive labour – care work, child rearing and the everyday sustenance of households and communities – as foundational to the continuity of both economic systems and social relations (see Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017).

Significantly, by formalising care work into a paid service in Narok, the women not only created income-generating opportunities for themselves and others but also redistributed reproductive labour in a way that enabled broader female participation in the informal and formal economies. The school's operational model, which embeds it in a broader network, continues to reflect principles of commoning. The strategic intervention of offering boarding to girls reflects a broader gendered politics of care, where women not only respond to their own needs but actively reshape the social structures around them (Tronto 2018; Federici 2012). It also illuminates a deeper understanding of how the burdens of home life (i.e. cooking, fetching water, caregiving) disproportionately affect female students and limit their educational attainment in pastoralist and agrarian contexts (Kabeer 2017).

Weaving informal networks and gendered solidarity as feminist economic praxis

Across the three cases, informal networks operate as critical infrastructures that sustain livelihoods, facilitate social reproduction and build resilience in the face of market and environmental uncertainty. In Isiolo, Halima's integration into a diverse network of milk suppliers,

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transporters and health officials illustrates how women establish cross-sectoral ties to maintain a consistent income despite seasonal and climatic volatility. This mirrors Marsabit's relational economy, where Taditi's long-term partnership with intermediaries, such as Asha, reflects the durability of trust-based exchange in the absence of formal contracts or institutional protections.

These everyday economic arrangements reflect what Hart (1973) first termed the informal economy, albeit through a gendered lens that foregrounds care, collaboration and social obligation. They challenge assumptions that informal economies are unstructured or survivalist. Instead, they embody what Meagher (2010: 59) calls 'networks of accumulation', where resource flows, skills and values circulate through personalised, but robust, systems of reciprocity and redistribution.

In all three sites, rotating savings groups (e.g. Isiolo's table banking, Marsabit's group contributions and Narok's pooled funds) play a central role not only in enabling economic participation but in reinforcing social cohesion and accountability. These financial forms are simultaneously material and symbolic, creating spaces where gendered solidarity is performed, negotiated and reproduced (Cornwall 2007; Kabeer 2017). In Isiolo and Marsabit, informal networks remain embedded in day-to-day routines, with economic activity centring on milk trade and care-based labour exchanges. Both cases illustrate highly relational and labour-intensive economies, where the flow of goods is tightly coupled with the circulation of trust, moral obligation and embodied care work. The use of motorised transport (e.g. the shift to Probox vans) and informal savings mechanisms (such as depositing income with trusted shopkeepers) reflects a process of technological and infrastructural adaptation, where material and social systems co-evolve.

Narok, by contrast, presents a scaling up of informal solidarities into formalised institutions. What begins as ad hoc childcare among working women evolves into a registered school, one that maintains its informal ethos of redistribution and community ownership even as it engages with state regulations and formal education systems. This transition illustrates how informal networks can generate institutional permanence and public goods, without abandoning their feminist foundations. The Narok school is both an infrastructure of care and a political intervention in the Maasai gender order, as it disrupts norms around property, education and women's visibility in public life. Unlike the other two cases, Narok illustrates how gendered informal networks can scale not only horizontally (through mutual aid) but vertically (towards political transformation).

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Conclusions

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which pastoralist women across Kenya pursue prosperity in ways that are deeply embedded in moral economies, commoning practices and collective solidarities. These women's economic and social lives encapsulate alternative, often overlooked pathways to prosperity that are grounded not purely in individual accumulation or formal employment but in shared labour, trust-based exchanges and, above all, gendered practices of care and reciprocity.

Studying their livelihood strategies, it is clear that organised women's groups, and the wider networks these groups galvanise and sustain, are not only the bedrock of household resilience but are also powerful vehicles used to navigate and reshape local economies, bending them towards the collective desires of women. Connectedly, we would suggest that the entrepreneurial efforts we have explored in this chapter invite a broader understanding of agency among women in pastoralist groups. They add further evidence to a growing critique of implicit characterisations of rural African women, and particularly pastoralist women, as economically passive, highlighting some of the active ways in which structural constraints around gender, land and capital are being challenged (cf. Pollard et al. 2015).

The chapter charts a middle path between the two essentialised portrayals of pastoralist women that tend to emerge (i.e. those critiqued by Apusigah and Bamora 2021). It illustrates how women actively participate in and shape economic transformation, while simultaneously confronting, contesting and attempting to counter structural inequalities. They emerge neither as passive victims nor as perfectly empowered victors.

As we look beyond universalising metrics towards understandings of pastoral prosperity rooted in local values and aspirations, these insights warn against monolithic characterisations. Pastoral prosperity is, we would suggest, always contested ground, where divergent, competing visions are pursued in parallel, even as they share social and moral worlds. Women in pastoralist contexts across northern Kenya work at the frontlines of change, carving out new futures for themselves and their communities. They do so by drawing on pre-existing practices and values, thereby bending markets to their needs. However, they also often do so with a view to navigating entrenched inequality from within their own societies, collaborating in an ethics of care to pursue futures within futures.

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