



# Socio-Cultural Factors and Their Impact on the Vulnerability of Girls to Early Marriage in Pastoralist Communities in Kenya

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## Abstract

Child marriage, a severe human rights violation affecting 23% of girls in Kenya's pastoralist communities denying girls education, health, and autonomy, perpetuating poverty and gender inequality [1]. Socio-cultural factors like patriarchal norms, bride price, beading, and religious beliefs drive this practice, yet their specific roles remain understudied [2]. Weak legal enforcement exacerbates the issue, necessitating urgent research to identify these perpetuating factors for targeted interventions [3]. This study investigates the socio-cultural factors contributing to the vulnerability of girls to early marriage in pastoralist communities across ten counties in Kenya (Turkana, Marsabit, Isiolo, Laikipia, Garissa, Samburu, Tana River, Kajiado, Narok, West Pokot), focusing on the Turkana, Borana, Rendille, Somali, Samburu, Pokot, Orma, and Maasai communities. The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and ethnographic observations to gather rich, contextual data. The data was thematically analyzed to uncover recurring patterns and themes. Preliminary findings highlight that socio-cultural norms strongly perpetuate early marriage. Community expectations often prioritize early marriage as a valued tradition, while practices like bride price reinforce the commodification of girls. Among certain communities, such as the Samburu, beading practices are closely tied to early marriage, alongside female genital mutilation and religious interpretations that justify the practice. Economic pressures and challenges in access to education further entrench girls' vulnerability, creating a complex interplay of cultural and economic factors. While child marriage rates are declining (from 34% to 23%), progress is uneven, with the highest rates in rural and Arid and Semi-arid land counties aggravated by economic hardship as the primary driver, followed by teenage pregnancy, educational barriers, female genital mutilation, and culture. Women's represen-

tation in politics is also insufficient, and maternal mortality and gender-based violence remain critical issues in these areas. Female genital mutilation prevalence is high in specific ethnic communities and strongly linked to child marriage. The study recommends engaging community leaders to challenge harmful norms, promote girls' education, and strengthen legal protections, and having community-based approaches that blend legal enforcement and cultural dialogue. Policies should integrate comprehensive sexuality education and economic empowerment initiatives to reduce dependence on practices like bride price, fostering sustainable change while respecting cultural contexts.

## Subject Areas

Culture

## Keywords

Child Marriage, Socio-Cultural Factors, Gender Norms, Pastoralist Communities, Kenya

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## 1. Introduction

Child marriage, a union involving at least one partner under 18, affects 650 million girls globally, with sub-Saharan Africa reporting a 35% prevalence rate [4]. In Kenya, the national rate is 23%, but pastoralist communities in Turkana (Turkana), Marsabit (Rendille), Isiolo (Somali, Turkana, Samburu, Rendille), Laikipia (Samburu, Pokot, Turkana), Garissa (Somali), Samburu (Samburu), Tana River (Orma), Kajiado (Maasai), Narok (Maasai), and West Pokot (Pokot) exhibit rates up to 23% [1]. These communities, reliant on nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralism, face economic and environmental pressures like droughts that amplify socio-cultural practices perpetuating child marriage [2]. These practices limit girls' education, health, and autonomy, entrenching gender inequality [5] [6]. Bride price, paid in livestock, commodifies girls, while patriarchal norms prioritize their roles as wives and mothers. Beading among Samburu normalizes early sexual relationships, increasing marriage vulnerability, and female genital mutilation, prevalent in most communities, marks girls as marriageable [2]. Religious beliefs, blending Islamic (e.g., Somali, Wardei) and traditional interpretations, often justify early marriage as protective [7]. Kenya has strong laws (Marriage Act 2014, Children Act 2022, Prohibition of female genital mutilation Act 2011), but enforcement of these laws is inconsistent in different remote areas, legal awareness is low in many communities, and cultural norms often override formal laws allowing customary practices to prevail [3] [8]. While global studies highlight poverty and gender inequality, localized analyses of these diverse communities are limited. This study examines socio-cultural drivers across these ten countries to identify factors perpetuating child marriage and inform culturally sensitive interventions and policies to reduce child marriage and promote gender equality.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

Child marriage represents a profound human rights violation that severely undermines the well-being of girls across Kenya's pastoralist communities of Turkana, Marsabit, Isiolo, Laikipia, Garissa, Samburu, Tana River, Kajiado, Narok, and West Pokot counties. 23% of Kenyan women aged 20 - 24 was married before age 18 (down from 34% in 1994) and 4% of these girls were married before the age of 15 [1]. In rural Kenya, 20% of rural girls marry before 18 and the North Eastern Region (where this study was conducted) has 56% marrying before the age of 18 [1]. This practice strips girls of educational opportunities, exposes them to significant health risks including maternal mortality, obstetric fistula, and increased vulnerability to gender-based violence and perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality [9]. In communities such as the Turkana, Rendille, Somali, Samburu, Pokot, Orma, and Maasai, deeply entrenched socio-cultural factors drive this practice, often overriding girls' autonomy and consent. Patriarchal norms position girls primarily as wives and mothers, devaluing their educational and personal aspirations [10]. Bride price, a widespread practice involving livestock or other assets, commodifies girls, incentivizing families to marry daughters young to secure economic stability, particularly during droughts or economic hardship [2]. Beading is a culture where young girls are adorned with beads to signify romantic or sexual relationships with morans (warriors), normalizes early sexual activity and often leads to premature marriages, especially when pregnancies occur [11]. Female genital mutilation, practiced in most of these counties serves as a rite of passage that marks girls as marriageable, frequently as young as 9 - 15, further entrenching their vulnerability [12]. Religious beliefs, blending Islamic interpretations in Garissa, Isiolo, and Tana River with traditional practices across these communities, often frame early marriage as a protective or moral act to prevent premarital sex or uphold family honor [7]. These socio-cultural drivers are compounded by economic dependence on pastoralism and environmental stressors, such as recurrent droughts, which push families to use child marriage as a coping mechanism. Despite Kenya's robust legal frameworks, including the Children Act 2001 and Marriage Act 2014, which set the minimum marriage age at 18, enforcement in remote pastoralist regions remains weak. Traditional governance structures, led by elders and religious leaders, often prioritize customary practices over statutory laws, allowing child marriage to persist unchecked [3]. While global and regional studies identify broad drivers like poverty and gender inequality, there is a critical gap in localized, multi-county research that examines the specific socio-cultural mechanisms such as beading, female genital mutilation, and community-specific religious interpretations operating within these diverse pastoralist communities. This lack of in-depth, context-specific analysis hinders the development of targeted, culturally sensitive interventions to address child marriage in pastoralist communities effectively. This study was seeking to fill this gap by investigating the socio-cultural factors perpetuating child marriage across these ten counties, aiming to provide actionable insights to protect girls' rights and promote

gender equality.

### 3. Study Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- a) Identify the prevailing cultural beliefs and practices that contribute to early marriage among girls in pastoralist communities.
- b) Assess how traditional rites of passage and initiation ceremonies influence the timing of marriage for girls.
- c) Identify cultural norms and traditional practices that promote or justify early marriage among girls in pastoralist communities.
- d) Analyze the role of gender roles and expectations in shaping decisions around the timing and purpose of marriage for girls.

### 4. Literature Review

This study reviewed socio-cultural factors and their impact on the vulnerability of girls to early marriage in pastoralist communities in Kenya, highlighting the prevailing cultural beliefs and practices that contribute to early marriage among girls in pastoralist communities, traditional rites of passage and initiation ceremonies influence the timing of marriage for girls, cultural norms and traditional practices that promote or justify early marriage among girls, and the role of gender roles and expectations in shaping decisions around the timing and purpose of marriage for girls. This section covers the theoretical framework, empirical literature review, and ends by clearly showing the knowledge gap that exists as a result of the discussed studies and theories and clearly states how this research intends to bridge the knowledge gap.

#### 4.1. Theoretical Review

This section sought to build a theoretical scaffolding around the complex and multifaceted issue of child marriage. This study is anchored in two theories of Social Norms Theory, and Gender and Power Theory which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the socio-cultural dynamics that perpetuate child marriage in pastoralist communities, including the Turkana, Borana, Rendille, Somali, Samburu, Pokot, Orma, and Maasai. These theories provide complementary perspectives, aiding in the understanding of the relationship between individual, community, and systemic dynamics. Utilizing these theoretical perspectives, the study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the fundamental causes and sustaining factors of child marriage in pastoralist communities.

##### 4.1.1. Social Norms Theory

This study is anchored in Social Norms Theory, as articulated by Greene and Stiefvater [13], which posits that individual behaviors are shaped by collective community expectations, beliefs, and social pressures, which are often reinforced through social sanctions or rewards. In the context of pastoralist communities,

these norms manifest as deeply ingrained expectations that prioritize early marriage as a means of upholding family honor, securing social alliances, or adhering to rigid gender roles. Such norms create a powerful social framework that influences family decisions, often overriding individual preferences or rights. For example, in these communities, social norms frequently dictate that girls marry shortly after puberty to align with cultural ideals of femininity and family status.

Girls who remain unmarried beyond this period may face stigma, social exclusion, or ridicule, placing significant pressure on families to conform to community expectations. This pressure is compounded by traditional governance structures, where elders and religious leaders hold substantial authority and actively reinforce norms that favor early marriage over girls' education or personal autonomy [14]. These leaders often serve as gatekeepers of cultural values, perpetuating practices like bride price, beading (particularly among the Samburu), and female genital mutilation, which are closely tied to early marriage.

Social Norms Theory highlights the role of peer influence and social sanctions in sustaining these practices. Families may conform to early marriage norms not only to gain social approval but also to avoid penalties such as ostracism or loss of community standing. The theory also distinguishes between descriptive norms (what people perceive others are doing) and injunctive norms (what people believe they ought to do), both of which are critical in pastoralist settings [15]. For instance, the widespread practice of early marriage creates a descriptive norm that signals it as a common and accepted behavior, while injunctive norms, reinforced by community leaders, frame it as a moral or cultural obligation.

By applying Social Norms Theory, this study examines how these collective expectations and sanctions drive girls' vulnerability to early marriage. It emphasizes the need to address not just individual behaviors but the broader social environment that sustains them. The theory guides the identification of intervention points, such as engaging community and religious leaders to challenge harmful norms, fostering dialogue to reshape perceptions of girls' roles, and promoting alternative norms that value education and autonomy. Interventions informed by this framework could include community-based programs that encourage collective shifts in attitudes, leveraging influential figures to model and promote new norms that prioritize girls' rights [16]. By addressing the interplay of social expectations, peer influence, and cultural sanctions, Social Norms Theory offers a pathway to disrupt the cycle of early marriage while respecting the cultural contexts of pastoralist communities.

#### **4.1.2. Gender and Power Theory**

The Gender and Power Theory, developed by Connell [17], provides a powerful lens for understanding and addressing the factors associated with child marriage. This theory highlights three key structures that sustain gender inequalities: the sexual division of labor, the sexual division of power, and the structure of cathexis [18]. These structures explain how societal norms, economic pressures, and power imbalances perpetuate harmful practices like child marriage, particularly in patri-

archal societies. In the context of child marriage, this theory sheds light on how girls are often relegated to roles defined by caregiving and reproduction, with little emphasis on their education or personal aspirations [19]. Families, driven by cultural norms and economic hardships, may prioritize early marriage as a means to secure social status or financial stability, underscoring the entrenched gender-based inequalities within these communities. The sexual division of labor, which prioritizes a girl's role as a wife and mother, reinforces the practice of child marriage by devaluing her potential for education and economic contribution [20]. Similarly, the sexual division of power positions men and elders as key decision-makers, often marginalizing the voices and rights of girls in family and community decisions. Furthermore, the structure of cathexis reflects how cultural and religious beliefs shape attitudes toward marriage, presenting it as a moral or social obligation [20]. By addressing these underlying power dynamics, interventions can focus on empowering girls through education, promoting alternative livelihoods for families, and engaging community and religious leaders to challenge harmful norms [21].

The Gender and Power Theory was instrumental in this study in interrogating the structural inequalities that perpetuate child marriage in pastoralist communities. Connell's [17] theory, which outlines the sexual division of labor, sexual division of power, and structure of cathexis, helped in understanding the ways transient and economic dependencies influence experiences for these young girls living in marginalized communities [19]. This theory proves to be particularly useful for discussing the way in which power dynamics and the cultural expectations of these powerful forces help normalize the importance placed on child marriage, suggesting that the more important role of a girl lies in the domain of a wife and mother, rather than a student with economic ambitions of her own.

## **4.2. Empirical Review**

Empirical research consistently highlights socio-cultural factors as primary drivers of child marriage in pastoralist communities, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Community norms play a significant role in perpetuating early marriage, with studies showing that societal expectations often prioritize girls' roles as wives and mothers over their education or personal aspirations [12]. In rural Kenya, including counties like West Pokot, Turkana, Samburu and Marsabit, these norms are reinforced by peer pressure and stigma against unmarried girls, creating a social environment where early marriage is seen as a rite of passage [10]. Patriarchal gender roles further exacerbate this issue, positioning girls as subordinate to male authority and limiting their decision-making power [22]. Families often view marriage as a means of securing girls' futures within a patriarchal framework, where their value is tied to their roles in the household [11].

### **4.2.1. Cultural Beliefs and Practices Sustaining Early Marriage**

Qualitative studies reveal that deeply rooted cultural beliefs in pastoralist communities shape attitudes toward early marriage. Community expectations often pri-

oritize girls' roles as wives and mothers, overshadowing their educational or personal aspirations. In regions like West Pokot, Turkana, Samburu, and Marsabit, cultural narratives frame early marriage as a means of upholding family honor and strengthening community ties. For instance, families perceive marrying daughters young as a way to maintain social harmony, with unmarried girls often stigmatized as deviating from cultural ideals. Bride price practices, a cornerstone of pastoralist traditions, further entrench these beliefs. Families view bride price as a culturally significant exchange that affirms a girl's value, reinforcing the expectation of early marriage as a pathway to social and familial stability [2].

#### **4.2.2. Influence of Traditional Rites of Passage and Initiation Ceremonies**

Traditional rites of passage and initiation ceremonies significantly influence the timing of marriage for girls in pastoralist communities. Qualitative findings highlight that practices such as female genital mutilation or beading, particularly among the Samburu, mark a girl's transition to womanhood, signaling her readiness for marriage. Among the Maasai and Samburu, these ceremonies are deeply embedded in cultural identity, creating a societal expectation that marriage follows soon after initiation. Narratives from community members indicate that these rites are celebrated as milestones, reinforcing the perception of early marriage as a natural and culturally endorsed progression. Such practices often overshadow opportunities for girls to pursue education or delay marriage, as they are seen as fulfilling essential cultural roles [11].

#### **4.2.3. Cultural Norms and Traditional Practices Justifying Early Marriage**

Cultural norms in pastoralist communities provide strong justification for early marriage, driven by collective expectations and social pressures. Social Norms Theory underscores how community beliefs create a framework where families feel compelled to conform to avoid social sanctions, such as stigma or exclusion. In these settings, norms that emphasize family honor and moral purity drive families to marry girls early to prevent perceived social or moral violations, such as premarital relationships. Religious beliefs further reinforce these norms, with some Islamic and traditional interpretations framing early marriage as a protective act to preserve chastity or uphold family reputation. Among the Somali and Orma, for example, community and religious leaders emphasize early marriage as a moral and cultural duty, embedding it within the social fabric and making it difficult for families to challenge [7].

#### **4.2.4. Role of Gender Roles and Expectations in Shaping Marriage Decisions**

Patriarchal gender roles profoundly shape decisions around early marriage in pastoralist communities. Qualitative research reveals that girls are often positioned as subordinate to male authority, with their primary roles defined as wives and mothers. Community narratives emphasize that a girl's value lies in her domestic and reproductive contributions, limiting her agency in marriage decisions [14]. Traditional governance structures, led by male elders and community leaders, reinforce these gender expectations, prioritizing early marriage as a means to secure

a girl's future within a patriarchal framework [23].

Families and communities view marriage as a way to align girls with societal roles, sidelining their aspirations for education or independence. This dynamic perpetuates gender inequality, as girls are socialized to prioritize family obligations over personal ambitions [12].

### **4.3. Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates the relationship between socio-cultural factors and girls' vulnerability to early marriage. Socio-cultural factors, including community norms, patriarchal gender roles, bride price practices, and religious beliefs, serve as independent variables that drive the dependent variable: vulnerability to early marriage. These factors create a social and cultural environment where girls face pressure to marry early, leading to outcomes such as limited access to education, reduced autonomy, and increased gender inequality.

## **5. Research Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative exploratory and inductive approach to understand the socio-cultural factors and their impact on the vulnerability of girls to early marriage in pastoralist communities in Kenya across ten counties of Turkana, Marsabit, Isiolo, Laikipia, Garissa, Samburu, Tana River, Kajiado, Narok, and West Pokot. Data were collected through focus group discussions with community members and in-key informant interviews with local leaders. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. This non-probability sampling technique allowed the researcher to deliberately select focus group discussion and key informant participants who possess rich, context-specific knowledge, such as adolescent girls who have experienced early marriage, parents, community elders, and local leaders. These participants were considered most likely to provide in-depth insights into the socio-cultural dynamics, traditional practices, and gendered norms influencing early marriage. The method was appropriate given the study's qualitative, exploratory design, which prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalizability. Moreover, purposive sampling facilitated access to information-rich cases that are essential for unpacking complex social realities within the target population.

### **5.1. Data Collection**

The data were collected from semi-structured focus group discussion and key informant interview guides to understand the local realities, barriers, relevance, and perspectives from the community and community leaders on their understanding, experience, leadership positions, and interaction with the issue under study. The targeted participants for focus group discussion included women between the age of 18 and 49 who were married before they were 18 years, adolescent girls, and parents (Mothers and Fathers of adolescent girls). Key informant interview par-

ticipants were purposefully selected from religious leaders, school heads, health workers, and local government representatives. Ethnographic observations from the transect walk helped in identifying key persons in the community, such as elders or religious leaders, who may have an interest in the study. Seventy-five (75) focus group discussions were conducted, eight in each of five counties and seven in each of the remaining five counties (6 - 12 participants per group) across the ten counties, involving unmarried adolescent girls (aged 9 - 17), married adolescent girls, mothers and fathers of adolescent girls, and women who were married before 18. Seventy-five (75) key informant interviews were conducted, eight in each of five counties and seven in each of the remaining five counties with community leaders (religious leaders, educators, chiefs, health care workers) provided insights into institutional roles. The semi-structured guides explored perceptions of socio-cultural factors. The discussions took place in Kiswahili, English, Turkana, Rendille, Somali, Samburu, Pokot, Orma, or Maasai based on the participants' preference and were held in safe, private, and familiar community venues to minimize social desirability and interviewer bias. All interviews and focus group discussions were administered by local research assistants fluent in local languages, and had received training in qualitative methodologies. Daily debriefing sessions were conducted on a daily basis to review the themes emerging from the data, refine interviewing strategies as appropriate, and record the point at which data saturation was achieved.

## **5.2. Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis approach was used to analyze all the qualitative data to categorize patterns and common elements pertinent to the study. Qualitative data from 75 focus group discussions and 75 key informant interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and thematically analyzed using NVivo, guided by Social Norms and Gender and Power Theories. Initial codes were systematically mapped onto relevant constructs from Social Norms Theory such as empirical expectations, normative expectations, sanctions, and reference groups, and the Gender and Power Theory such as gender roles, access to resources, and authority structures. This theoretical mapping allowed for a deeper interpretation of the data by linking participant narratives to underlying social mechanisms that sustain timing and vulnerability of early marriage. By aligning emergent themes with these frameworks, the analysis captured both individual perceptions and broader structural influences shaping socio-cultural and gendered practices in pastoralist communities. To enhance analytical rigor and ensure inter-coder reliability, five data analysts were contracted who conducted manual coding independently after which analysis. Any issues or discrepancies in interpretations were discussed and resolved through consensus. Themes from the study included community expectations, gender roles, bride price, beading, and religious beliefs.

## **5.3. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were fully

informed about the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was secured from adults, with parental consent and assent for minors (aged 9 - 17). Married girls under 18 were treated as emancipated minors. Ethical approvals were obtained from NACOSTI, St Paul's University Ethics Review Board, and the office of county secretaries across the ten counties. Data were anonymized, stored securely, and reported in aggregate. A referral protocol was established to connect participants disclosing abuse or harm to local child protection services and nearest health facilities, the use community champions also mitigated stigma. To foster transparency, the study committed to sharing findings with the community through accessible formats, such as community forums and translated summaries, respecting cultural norms and promoting local advocacy.

## 6. Findings and Discussions

### 6.1. Introduction

The findings, drawn from 75 focus group discussions, 75 key informant interviews, and ethnographic observations across ten counties, reveal socio-cultural drivers of child marriage among Turkana, Rendille, Somali, Samburu, Pokot, Orma, and Maasai communities (See [Table 1](#)).

**Table 1.** Participant's demographics.

Description	KII Respondents		FGD Respondents		Cumulative	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>						
Female	25	40	610	90	635	84.3
Male	50	60	68	10	118	15.7
<b>Age</b>						
Under 18	-	-	304	45	304	40.4
18 - 24	6	8	114	17	120	15.9
25 - 34	26	35	127	19	153	20.3
35 - 49	43	57	111	16	154	20.5
50 and above	-	-	22	3	22	2.9
<b>Level of Education</b>						
No education	8	11	509	75	517	67.6
Primary	14	19	98	14.5	112	13.0
Secondary	20	27	64	9.4	84	8.5
Diploma	17	23	6	1	23	0.8
Degree	16	21	1	0.1	17	0.1

a. Source: Field Survey 2025 (*KII Key Informant Interview, FGD Focus Group Discussion*).

The study involved 75 key informant interviews and 678 focus group discussion participants across pastoralist communities in ten Kenyan counties. Among key informant interview respondents, 60% were male, and 40% were female, reflecting the prominence of male elders and leaders in community decision-making roles. The age distribution of key informant interview participants included 8% aged 18 - 24, 35% aged 25 - 34, and 57% aged 35 - 49, indicating that most key informants were adults with significant community influence. Education levels among key informant interview respondents varied: 11% had no formal education, 19% had primary education, 27% had secondary education, 23% held a diploma, and 21% had a degree, suggesting a relatively educated group of informants, likely including community leaders and professionals. In contrast, focus group discussion participants were predominantly female (90%), aligning with the study's focus on girls' experiences with early marriage. Age distribution showed 45% were under 18, 17% aged 18 - 24, 19% aged 25 - 34, 16% aged 35 - 49, and 3% aged 50 and above, capturing a broad range of perspectives from young girls to older women. Education levels among focus group discussion participants were notably lower: 75% had no formal education, 14.5% had primary education, 9.4% had secondary education, and only 1% and 0.1% held diplomas or degrees, respectively. This reflects the limited access to education among girls and women in pastoralist communities, a key factor in their vulnerability to early marriage.

## 6.2. Findings

The qualitative findings are organized according to the study's objectives, drawing on narratives from focus group discussions and key informant interviews to highlight the socio-cultural factors driving early marriage. The demographic profile of participants, particularly the high proportion of uneducated female focus group discussion participants and the influence of older male key informant interview respondents, underscores the gendered and hierarchical dynamics shaping these findings.

## 6.3. Prevailing Cultural Beliefs and Practices Sustaining Early Marriage

Participants across counties emphasized cultural beliefs that prioritize family honor as a key driver of early marriage. One focus group discussion participant noted, "*Some families marry off their daughter to preserve honor, a girl married as a virgin brings honor to the family and many parents fear that if their girls stay longer the Moran's will interfere with this*" (focus group discussion—Female Adult Group), reflecting how community expectations pressure families to conform. Bride price, a common practice among Turkana, Pokot, Maasai, Borana, and other communities, was frequently described as a cultural mechanism that commodifies girls: "*Bride price shows respect between families and is well negotiated by elders or the bride's father*" (key informant interview—Community Elder). Among the Samburu, beading practices were highlighted as a unique cultural

tradition that increases marriage vulnerability: “*Morans place beads on a girl while still a baby, the girl is expected to conform to this and she’s held accountable for her action going forward*” (focus group discussion—Female Adult Group), marking her for early relationships. In the Samburu culture, beading is a traditional practice where a Moran (young warrior) gifts decorative beads to a young girl (usually between 9 - 15 years) as a symbol of a romantic or sexual relationship. The beads are worn around her neck and indicate she is sexually “claimed” by the Moran. “*The Moran’s are feared in these communities and no one seem to challenge what they do*” (key informant interview—Women leader). These beliefs, deeply embedded in pastoralist traditions, were particularly resonant among older male key informant interview respondents and uneducated female focus group discussion participants, who often accepted them as cultural norms.

#### 6.4. Influence of Traditional Rites of Passage and Initiation Ceremonies

Traditional rites of passage, such as female genital mutilation and initiation ceremonies, were consistently identified as precursors to early marriage. National female genital mutilation rate in Kenya is approximately 21% (down from 32% in 2003) and the prevalence among Somali, Samburu, Kisii, and Maasai communities is between 78% - 94% [4]. Approximately 36% of female genital mutilation survivors also undergo child marriage. In Marsabit (Borana, Gabra, Rendille), Kajiado (Maasai), and West Pokot (Pokot), participants described female genital mutilation as a ritual that prepares girls for marriage: “*We only allow girls to get married after they have been prepared for it, female genital mutilation and beads prepare the girls for marriage*” (focus group discussion—Mixed Adult Group). Similarly, Samburu’s moranism, Maasai age-set ceremonies, and Pokot initiations were noted as cultural milestones that mark girls as marriageable, often shortly after puberty. These findings were particularly pronounced among younger focus group discussion participants (under 18), who described personal experiences of being initiated and subsequently pressured into marriage, reflecting the limited agency of girls in these communities. Such acts normalize early sexual relationships, increases vulnerability to child marriage and violates rights and autonomy.

#### 6.5. Cultural Norms and Traditional Practices Justifying Early Marriage

Community norms strongly justify early marriage, with participants highlighting the lack of girls’ consent in marriage decisions: “*Parents make marriage decisions when and who the girl gets married to, girls have no consent*” (focus group discussion—Mixed Adult Group). Another participant said “*we do not consent because its cultural norms that girls are given out by parents especially father and his elderly brothers*” (focus group discussion—Women Under 18). Polygamy, prevalent in Tana River (Orma), Isiolo, and Garissa, was described as encouraging early marriage to fulfill household responsibilities: Polygamy in these communi-

ties encourages child marriage, “*In many of our communities, polygamy is encouraged and this encourages child marriage of young girls so that she can go and take responsibility of the household and give that family children*” (focus group discussion—Women Under 18). Stigma against unmarried girls was a recurring theme, particularly among female focus group discussion participants, who noted social pressures to conform to these norms. These findings align with the demographic profile, as the predominance of uneducated female participants underscores their vulnerability to norms that prioritize early marriage over personal aspirations.

### 6.6. Gender Roles and Expectations Shaping Marriage Decisions

Patriarchal gender roles emerged as a central driver of early marriage, with girls cast primarily as wives and mothers. Participants noted, “*Girls’ role is to bear children and take care of the family; boys hold the family name*” (focus group discussion—Women Under 18), reflecting how gender expectations limit girls’ agency. Male key informant interview respondents, particularly older community leaders, often reinforced these roles, stating, “*Girls are less valuable than boys*” (key informant interview—Male). However, signs of resistance were evident, particularly among younger, more educated focus group discussion participants in Kajiado, Narok, and Samburu, who noted, “*Modern education and use of social media has started changing these attitudes within the community*” (focus group discussion—Female Adult Group). This resistance was less common among uneducated participants, highlighting education’s role in challenging traditional gender norms.

### 6.7. Role of Elders and Religious Beliefs

Elders and religious leaders play a significant role in reinforcing norms that sustain early marriage: “*A girl married young honors her father*” (Focus group discussion—Mixed Adult Group). However, some leaders, particularly in Tana River and Isiolo, were described as advocating for change: “*Religious leaders rescue girls from marriages, offer them safe spaces to stay and education scholarships*” (Focus group discussion—Women Under 18). Religious beliefs presented a complex picture, with some Islamic and traditional interpretations promoting gender equality “*Religious values teach gender equality*” (Focus group discussion—Under-18 Group) while others justified early marriage: “*Some churches say girls are born for motherhood, to give birth and take care of family*” (Focus group discussion—Women Under 18). These contrasting views were particularly evident among female Focus group discussion participants, who highlighted the tension between traditional and progressive influences.

### 6.8. Discussion

The findings align with Social Norms Theory, which posits that collective community expectations and social pressures shape individual behaviors [13]. The qualitative narratives reveal how patriarchal norms, bride price, beading, female

genital mutilation, and religious beliefs create a social environment that commodifies girls and prioritizes early marriage. The demographic profile, particularly the high proportion of uneducated female focus group discussion participants, underscores their vulnerability to these norms, while the influence of older male key informant interview respondents reflects the patriarchal authority structures that sustain them. Resistance from educated youth, especially in Kajiado, Narok, and Samburu, suggests that education can disrupt harmful norms, aligning with findings from [2] that highlight the role of education and Non-Governmental Organizations interventions in fostering change. The multi-county perspective addresses a gap in localized analyses of pastoralist communities, providing nuanced insights into their unique cultural practices.

### **6.9. Limitations of the Study**

The study's broad multi-county scope may limit its applicability to specific communities, as cultural practices vary. Cultural taboos may have led to underreporting, particularly among younger female participants who fear social repercussions. The qualitative design, while rich in context, limits insights into long-term trends or causal relationships. The potential influence of social desirability bias, may have influenced participants' responses on culturally sensitive issue which might have led to underreporting of harmful practices or overly positive portrayals of community efforts. Additionally, while great care was taken to ensure accurate interpretation, the translation of interviews and focus group discussions from local dialects to English posed risks of meaning distortion or loss of nuance.

## **7. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **7.1. Conclusions**

The findings confirm that socio-cultural factors, such as cultural beliefs, traditional rites, community norms, patriarchal gender roles, bride price, beading, female genital mutilation, and religious interpretations, drive early marriage across rural Turkana, Rendille, Somali, Samburu, Pokot, Orma, and Maasai communities, restricting girls' education and autonomy. The demographic profile highlights the vulnerability of uneducated girls and the influence of male-dominated leadership structures. However, emerging resistance among educated youth and progressive leaders offers hope for norm and social behaviour change, necessitating culturally sensitive interventions. While child marriage rates are declining (from 34% to 23%), progress is uneven, with the highest rates in pastoralist communities aggravated by economic hardship as the primary driver, followed by teenage pregnancy, educational barriers, female genital mutilation, and culture. Female genital mutilation prevalence is 15% higher in these pastoralist communities and strongly linked to child marriage, maternal mortality and gender-based violence remain critical issues in these areas. Successful intervention should place girls at the center, amplifying their voices and aspirations. Having girls' clubs, peer networks, and mentorship will help build confidence and resilience. Long-term change hap-

pens when girls are seen as rights holders, not just recipients of charity.

## 7.2. Recommendations

**Community Dialogues:** Engage elders and religious leaders in dialogues to challenge norms that justify early marriage. By reinterpreting cultural and religious practices to prioritize girls' education, leaders can drive change while respecting pastoralist traditions.

**Education Initiatives:** Integrate comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula to empower girls with knowledge of their rights and the consequences of early marriage, building on the resistance observed among educated youth.

**Policy Advocacy:** Strengthen enforcement of anti-child marriage laws through community-based awareness campaigns, leveraging the influence of elders to promote accountability.

**Cultural Sensitivity:** Develop interventions that respect pastoralist traditions while promoting gender equality, such as involving elders in advocacy to legitimize efforts to delay marriage.

**Support for Resistance:** Amplify youth-led initiatives through media campaigns and community programs, particularly targeting uneducated girls, to challenge harmful norms and promote girls' rights.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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