

Climate change is putting girls at increased risk of child marriage

In Kenya, prolonged droughts fueled by climate change are causing financial hardship for families, with some resorting to child marriage as a coping mechanism.

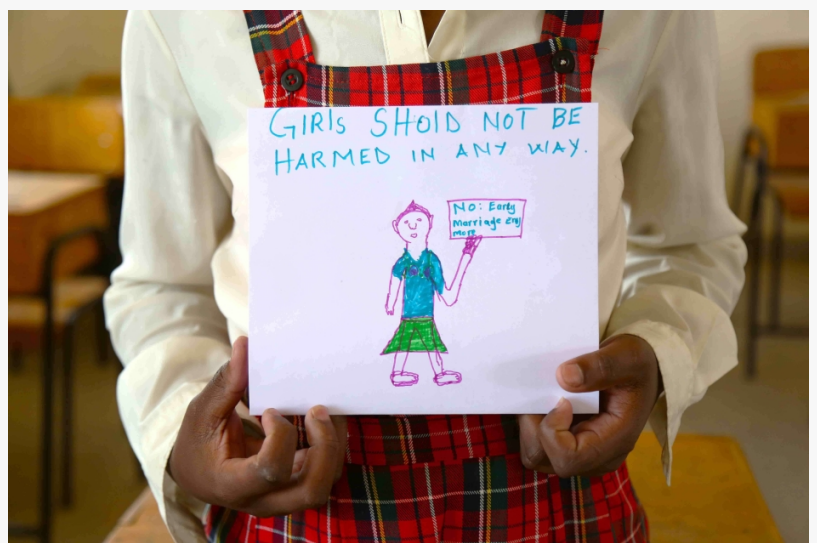
NAIROBI, KENYA, December 31, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In Kajiado County, a drought-stricken region along Kenya's border with Tanzania, many people are dependent on livestock herding and farming, and erratic rains have left families struggling to survive.

Especially at risk are adolescent girls, who are subjected to a complex interplay between financial hardship, gender discrimination, and harmful practices that, together, are driving an escalation in child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).

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Samuel Nkitoria, Hope Beyond Foundation



Prolonged droughts in Kenya are putting girls at greater risk of child marriage

Over four million people in the Horn of Africa have been left in need of humanitarian assistance due to food insecurity, according to a 2023 study published by the [World Weather Attribution](#) that details how five consecutive seasons of rainfall below normal levels in the region resulted in decreased availability of surface water, widespread harvest failure, deteriorating pasture conditions, and livestock loss.

The nineteen scientists who contributed to the report found that the devastating combination of low rainfall and heatwaves was made 100 times more likely due to climate change caused by human-induced global warming, and

they warned that drought conditions were “likely to continue.”

The repercussions of these prolonged droughts in Kajiado have been catastrophic. News coverage in June 2023 reported how over one million cattle, goats, and sheep had died of hunger, with 400,000 households on the brink of starvation and dependent on food aid for survival.

Samuel Nkitoria is a Program Officer at [Hope Beyond Foundation](#), a Kenyan NGO that promotes the rights of women and girls in Kajiado County through education, advocacy, and rescuing those affected by sexual and gender-based violence. Samuel told international women's rights organization [Equality Now](#) how the daily challenge of accessing water and other essential resources is putting girls at greater risk of human rights violations.

HOW HAVE FAMILIES, AND IN PARTICULAR GIRLS, BEEN AFFECTED BY PROLONGED DROUGHTS IN KAJIADO COUNTY?

Families in Kajiado County face severe consequences from prolonged drought, such as many cattle dying due to limited access to water and animal pasture. This exacerbates poverty, affecting the ability of families to meet basic needs.

When it comes to such difficult circumstances, families halt the education of their children, especially girls. In extreme conditions, families reset back to prioritize immediate survival over education.

Unfortunately, girls may be withdrawn from school to help with domestic responsibilities or contribute to family income. Extreme weather can lead to economic hardship, prompting families to marry their daughters off at a young age as a coping mechanism. Poverty is a great motivator of early marriage, and in dire circumstances, families may see it as a way to reduce economic burden.

In the past few years, and especially just before the rains this year, it is estimated that over 80% of cattle died. In a bid to recoup livestock lost during drought, some families have married off their daughters in exchange for cattle and to earn money.

Some girls have dropped out of school due to hunger, especially from schools in the most interior and remote locations where food programs are not available. At home, they may be exposed to increased health risks and heightened vulnerability to harmful practices as they get sent long distances in search of water and pasture for cattle.

Climate change can also indirectly contribute to FGM. Culturally, education for the girl child in the Maasai community was never a priority, and this has perpetuated the ideology of early marriage after a girl is cut. Drought results in economic hardships, and families opt to cut their girls so that they can be ready for marriage.

Cutters carry out FGM as a way of earning an income in the wake of the hardships brought about by climate change. Some of these cutters will influence parents to cut their girls at a fee ranging from Ksh. 500 upwards (approximately \$3.25 USD/ £2.60 GBP), while citing that the girl will be ready for marriage. This triggers some families to capitalize because they are looking for a way to survive.

WHAT IS HOPE BEYOND DOING TO HELP GIRLS?

Education for girls has come about through a lot of advocacy and awareness creation. Although there has been positive change, there is still quite a large number of people in the community who believe once a girl gets to a certain age or has reached a certain class in school, they are 'ripe' for marriage.

The girl has to drop out of school, get cut [undergo FGM], and then get married. This is a retrogressive culture that we are continually advocating against, and we are slowly making progress.

Practices such as FGM and child marriage are largely cultural, and eliminating them is not easy. There is a need for continuous community dialogues to change people's mindsets.

We are actively addressing these challenges through awareness campaigns and educational programs. We are working to empower girls, educating communities on the dangers of FGM and the importance of girls accessing education. We are also educating them about the impacts of climate change and advocating for sustainable practices to foster resilience.

Hope Beyond has embarked on empowerment training with different women's groups. We provide a business perspective and teach them about diversifying to meet current market trends. Some women we have worked with have diversified to beadwork as a business to ensure that even in the wake of climatic changes, they still can earn an income to sustain their families, hence keeping girls safe.

Hope Beyond also runs a rescue centre and school, which have been instrumental in providing a safe space for girls who have been rescued after the fact or are at risk of undergoing harmful practices.

In addition, we have a very strong partnership with the relevant government agencies and the administration officers in the community. This has helped us have our ears on the ground and offer quick responses to help girls in danger.

WHAT MESSAGE HAVE YOU GOT FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ABOUT THE URGENT NEED TO TAKE ACTION TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE?

Hope Beyond Foundation urges the international community to recognize the urgent link

between climate change, gender-based vulnerabilities, and harmful practices. We stress the need for collaborative efforts to implement sustainable solutions, support vulnerable communities, and promote policies addressing both climate change and the associated socio-cultural challenges.

It is also very important to ensure resources trickle down to grassroots organizations that are directly impacting the community through different initiatives. They are the people on the ground and they know and understand what works and what doesn't in the community. Immediate and direct action is crucial to protect the rights and well-being of girls in the face of climate-induced hardships.

By Tara Carey, Global Head of Media at Equality Now

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