

POLICY BRIEF

THE USE OF GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES (GTAS) IN PASTORALIST SOCIETIES

What we know about what works and recommendations for a way forward

Ramona Ridolfi and Milcah Asamba

Key findings

Gender transformative approaches (GTAs) go beyond targeting women alone, addressing the root causes of gender inequality, including restrictive norms and undervaluing women's contributions. GTAs engage both men and women as agents of change.

SPARC researchers carried out a review of gender transformative approaches implemented for food and nutrition security outcomes. Key findings include:

- **Need for evaluation:** More rigorous assessments are required to measure GTAs' impact on food security. Gender norms that disadvantage women contribute to food insecurity, yet evidence shows that when women control resources, household nutrition improves. Closing the gender gap in agriculture could increase global production by 4% and reduce undernourishment by 17% (Cole and Acosta, 2023).
- **Application gaps:** GTAs are mainly applied in mixed farming but lack evidence in mobile and pastoralist communities.
- **Need for evidence:** More research is required to identify effective and scalable implementation strategies, particularly in rural areas.
- **Adaptation required:** GTAs must be tailored to pastoral communities, considering mobility, seasonal shifts and frequent shocks. Social dialogue, facilitated by community role models, can help challenge unequal norms.
- **Intersectional challenges:** Factors like ethnicity, age, disability and climate change amplify risks, requiring GTAs to address these for greater resilience and reduced violence, especially for women and youth.

Introduction

Pastoral and agro-pastoral societies in drylands continue to face the worsening effects of environmental, economic and social pressures. Extensive literature shows that multiple challenges impact their livelihoods, resilience and well-being, often more so than in other types of landscapes. Drylands are particularly affected by climate change resulting in persistent drought impacting pastoral communities' typical grazing patterns. This situation presents a challenge for women, who may be further exposed to gender-based violence as they are required to travel further away for homesteads, grazing areas, water points and markets.

Pastoralist communities are already disproportionately affected by marginalisation from mainstream societies and often situated in unstable contexts. Within these communities, women, in particular, are affected by pervasive and discriminatory gender norms and barriers that hinder their socioeconomic advancement. The socially conservative context of the many drylands communities combined with remoteness and tight-knit communities results in women having limited mobility, narrow social networks and low literacy levels. This leads to their inability to establish diversified livelihoods and access markets, financial services and skills training.

Gender inequality in the drylands remains pervasive (Nelson et al., 2015). Development and humanitarian interventions often focus on improving women's access to land rights and social protection. Globally and largely in development programmes, GTAs can play a crucial role in addressing gender inequalities, enhancing the agency of women and youth, and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Within the food security sector, GTAs are known to challenge traditional norms, enhancing women's visible participation in agriculture including livestock, and foster inclusive and resilient development.

SPARC researchers conducted a desk review of existing literature and approaches used by international development organisations (e.g. non-governmental organisations – NGOs, multilateral organisations). This was to capture examples of GTAs implemented within food security interventions that have had promising outcomes around the improved agency of women and youth. This desk review included analysing humanitarian and development organisations' approaches towards behaviour change and intervention monitoring implemented in the Horn of Africa.

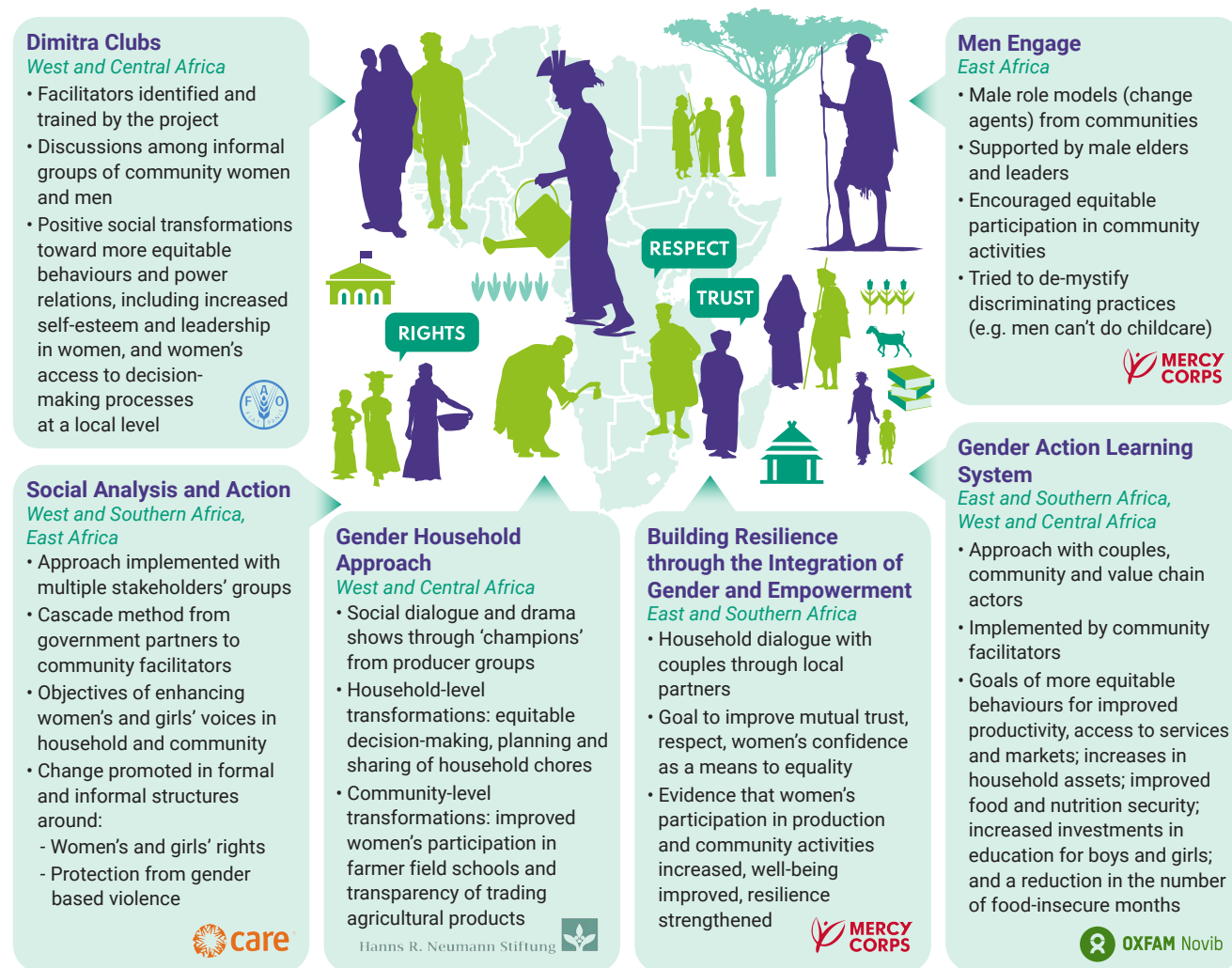
Researchers specifically sought out GTAs implemented with pastoralist communities or more broadly within livestock interventions. The desk review identified 15 different interventions implemented and documented in the last decade. It looked at guidance notes and discussion papers published by international research organisations based on learning and evidence from the implementation of the GTAs.

This exercise was conducted to identify best practice and potential evidence gaps related to implementation within pastoralist communities. A curated selection of six GTAs drawn from the 15 is shown in Figure 1. This desk review provides a foundation from which we can inform the future direction of GTA tools for use in pastoral communities in drylands of the Horn of Africa.



Samburu women returning from community meetings in Ngilai, Kenya
© E. Millstein/Mercy Corps 2022

FIGURE 1: CURATED SELECTION OF GTAS IMPLEMENTED IN DRYLANDS IN AFRICA ILLUSTRATING SOME KEY OUTCOMES



Source: Authors' own

GTAs in brief: insights into the concept, evolution and key elements

GTAs are described as 'going beyond addressing surface-level gender disparities to challenge and transform the underlying social norms, attitudes, power dynamics, and laws and policies that perpetuate inequality' (European Union, 2024). The development of GTAs has been driven by the need to move beyond the focus on women to challenge unequal gender norms and address structural change. Figure 2 shows how women are part of a set of institutions that have an influence on norms and behaviours (Wong et al., 2019).

Over the past 15 years, there has been growing interest in designing GTAs to overcome the limitations of gender integration practices, such as targeting only women, collecting and analysing gender-specific data, using gender-sensitive language. Known areas of limitation in gender integration practices include (Lwamba et al., 2022):

1. Framing gender analysis as a 'gap' analysis that ignores underlying factors to persisting inequalities.
2. Focusing on mere differences between women and men, while ignoring multiple aspects of intersectionality.
3. Concentrating exclusively on women's empowerment without considering their relations within the local institutions and the need for transforming gender roles and relations.

To overcome limitations of standard gender integration practices, development organisations, multilateral agencies and the private sector are designing GTAs, based on participatory learning methods and implemented at the household, community and institutional levels, over an extended period of time, generally 12–24 months. See Figure 3 for critical steps that when applied during intervention design will support approaches that help overcome persistent implementation challenges.

FIGURE 2: CORE DIMENSIONS OF GTAs THAT ADDRESS WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP WITHIN LEVELS OF INSTITUTIONS



Source: Authors' own

A core principle in facilitating GTAs is that gender transformative change must come from within the communities and societies where this change occurs and cannot be imposed from the outside.

FAO et al. (2023)

Persistent challenges implementing GTAs with pastoralist communities in drylands

Challenging discriminatory gender norms and facilitating social change remain difficult conversations.

Social dialogue as an applied method of fostering gender transformation, at both the household and community level, brings to the surface the complexities and resistance faced in trying to shift deeply rooted norms that limit women's empowerment. Having discussions about, for example, gender norms around land ownership, sharing the load of domestic chores and preventing gender-based violence (GBV) becomes even more difficult in dryland situations of fragility and crisis.

Additionally, structural barriers and traditional gender roles that hinder women's access to resources and opportunities to seek their individual socioeconomic advancement often result in their limited participation in project activities.

Identifying staff and field agents that can effectively promote and facilitate GTAs remains a constraint.

Project staff often have their own bias from being familiar with the local context and may find it difficult to change practices that are seen as belonging to a specific culture or tradition which is their own.

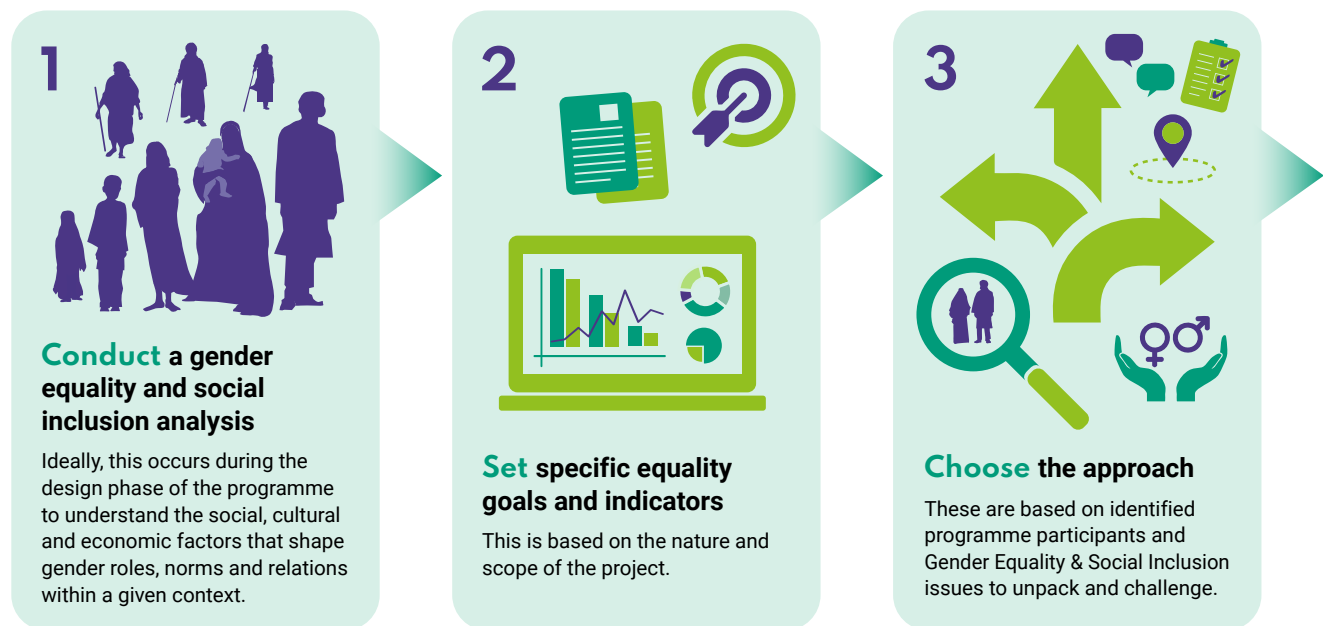
Similarly, local change agents might be reluctant to address norms out of fear of being seen as different or experiencing backlash. Staff and field agents therefore frequently facilitate conversations where they transfer knowledge around gender-related topics as opposed to encouraging the participants to lead discussions and foster their own bottom-up change.

There are further challenges in pastoralist contexts. For example, pastoralist communities may have more strongly discriminatory norms against women and girls' access to resources, such as strict control of livestock and wealth by men, since livestock symbolises not just economic but also social status.

Women's roles are often confined to labour-intensive unpaid tasks, while men dominate public decision-making. The nomadic lifestyle exacerbates women's lack of access to education and healthcare. Services are often unavailable in remote areas, and it is therefore unlikely that programmes can leverage women as role models or champions for their communities. Resistance from male community leaders can also hinder efforts to promote transformative behaviours.

The mobility of these dryland communities further complicates sustained engagement by development organisations and local government and the implementation of consistent programmes. This is an important consideration in the application of GTAs which typically require multiple contact points spread over several months or years. Implementing a GTA within dryland communities might require more creative thinking around its delivery or having more frequent sessions over short periods.

FIGURE 3: SOME CRITICAL STEPS IN THE DESIGN OF GTAS



Source: Authors' own

Conclusion

Within dryland communities, intersectional factors combine with the severe impacts of climate change to significantly amplify the barriers marginalised individuals face in accessing markets, resources and basic needs. These factors include ethnicity, age, gender and disability. In these hotspots for conflict and already fragile communities, such factors are further exacerbated by issues of displacement, marginalisation and vulnerability to violence.

The compounded effects of all these dynamics creates a pressing need for GTAs used by development organisations across programmes to be carefully tailored to the unique realities of pastoralist communities. Such approaches must address intersectional challenges, foster inclusive participation and promote meaningful dialogue. This is to mitigate violence, reduce risks and empower marginalised groups, particularly women, to drive sustainable change.

Despite the need and opportunity, there remains limited empirical evidence on which strategies are most effective and scalable. GTAs reviewed through this study are implemented with rural communities engaged in agricultural production including livestock. There are examples of programmes integrating tools to conduct gender-sensitive and climate-resilience value chain analysis in an effort to eliminate barriers for women accessing markets (FAO, 2011).

There are also instances of agencies developing integrated guidance for gender equality and social

inclusion (GESI) in market labour assessments to design more inclusive market systems programmes for the most marginalised (e.g. GIZ and Prospera Consulting (2020); Elder and Smith (2010); Mercy Corps (2024)). Evidence around application of GTAs specific to mobile pastoralist communities is limited.

Policy recommendations

There is a need for more rigorous evaluation and evidence-based research to assess the effectiveness of utilising GTAs in development interventions in pastoralist communities in drylands. There is growing recognition of the importance of adopting approaches that enhance women's agency and participation in agriculture, including livestock production, in order to build more equitable and resilient households.

Pastoralist communities present a unique opportunity to contextualise GTA models that could be further adapted to similar contexts. Pastoralist communities maintain mobility with some or all of the household migrating seasonally or for years at time. GTA models must respond to changes in decision-making dynamics. Examples of the kinds of adaptations needed include having more frequent touch points on social dialogue over a shorter period, use of mobile communications or identifying champions along key migration corridors to enable opportunities for social dialogue to continue.

Such adaptations can be applied to other groups or contexts where heads of household migrate, such as seasonal workforces, economic migrants, fisherfolk and so on.

GTAs are increasingly seen as an evolving, long-term process for transforming social norms. They require careful tailoring to the local context. When there are numerous evaluations or research of GTA use in similar

contexts, implementers and funding organisations will draw conclusions or similarities on what works, how and why.

Without a diverse or at least emerging evidence-base, i.e. from use in pastoralist communities, each new intervention is slower to start up and experiences more course corrections or reapproaches, effectively lengthening timelines for impact.

Acknowledgements

This policy brief is published through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which is supported by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Jeeyon Kim (Director of Research, Food Security at Mercy Corps) and Julie Koehler (Head of Gender at SEBI-Livestock, University of Edinburgh) for their valuable peer review of this work. They also extend appreciation to Carmen Jaquez (Director Evidence & Learning Resilient Dryland Production Systems at Mercy Corps) for providing the final sign-off, ensuring the quality and accuracy of this publication.

Special thanks to the SPARC communications team, including Julie Grady Thomas, as well as Rebecca Owens, Steven Dickie and Nina Behrman for their efforts in copyediting, designing and proofreading the work.

About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

How to cite: Ridolfi, R. and Asamba, M. (2025) 'The use of gender transformative approaches (GTAs) in pastoralist societies: what we know about what works and recommendations for a way forward'. Policy brief. London: SPARC (<https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/gender-transformative-approaches-pastoralist-societies>).

References

- Cole, Steven M., Acosta, Mariola (2023) 'Measuring gender transformative change in the context of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture'. Presentation. Presented at the CGIAR GENDER Conference 'From Research to Impact: Towards just and resilient agri-food systems', New Delhi, India, 9-12 October 2023. International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (<https://hdl.handle.net/10568/136978>).
- Elder, S. and Smith, A. (2010) *Women in labour markets: measuring progress and identifying challenges*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office.
- European Union (2024) 'Gender-Transformative Approaches: From Theory to Impact'. A concept note prepared by the EU Member States' gender experts' working group on gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) (https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/gender-transformative-approaches-concept-note_en).
- Food and Agriculture Organization (2011) *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011: Women in Agriculture - Closing the Gender Gap for Development*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (www.fao.org/3/i2050e/i2050e00.htm).
- FAO, IFAD, WFP CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform (2023) *Guidelines for measuring gender transformative change in the context of food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture*. Rome, FAO, IFAD, WFP and CGIAR (doi.org/10.4060/cc7940en).
- GIZ and Prospera Consulting (2020) *Compendium of tools for labour market assessment*. NASWA Workforce Technology. Brussels, Belgium: VET Toolbox Coordination Hub.
- Lwamba, E., Shisler, S., Riddlehoover, W., et al. (2022) 'Strengthening women's empowerment and gender equality in fragile contexts towards peaceful and inclusive societies: A systematic review and meta-analysis'. *Campbell Syst Rev.* 2022 Mar 8;18(1): e1214. (doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1214) PMID: 36913184; PMCID: PMC8904729.
- Mercy Corps (2024) 'Guide to Integrating GESI Analysis into the MSD4E Program Process'. Mercy Corps.
- Nelson, V., Forsythe, L. and Morton, J. (2015) 'Empowering dryland women: capturing opportunities in land rights, governance and resilience'. A synthesis of thematic papers from the series *Women's empowerment in the dryland*. 12pp. Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich, Chatham, UK [Online] (www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/nairobi_gc_red/Dryland-women-Synthesis.pdf).
- Wong, F., Vos, A., Pyburn, R. and Newton, J. (2019) 'Implementing Gender Transformative Approaches in Agriculture: A Discussion Paper for the European Commission. CGIAR Collaborative Platform for Gender Research' [Online] (www.kit.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Gender-Transformative-Approaches-in-Agriculture_Platform-Discussion-Paper-final-1.pdf).

Funded by



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.