

**Responsibility Without Authority: Moral Economies of Milk and Gendered Agency among
Maasai Pastoral Households in Narok, Kenya**

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Abstract

Milk is central to pastoral livelihoods and household provisioning among Maasai communities, yet women responsible for milking often exercise limited authority over milk management. Beyond its nutritional value, milk represents one of the few domains in which women can exercise control and access income. Despite the literature on gender dynamics in pastoral contexts, relatively limited attention has been paid to everyday negotiations through which women secure autonomy within patriarchal households. This study examines how Maasai women in Narok County navigate gendered expectations to manage and control milk. Drawing on focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews (IDIs) and participant observations, the study demonstrates that women's autonomy over milk is conditional and negotiated. Authority increases when women perform responsibilities that align with the best interests of the household and expectations of a "good wife". Women strategically enhance their bargaining position through participation in women's savings groups, visible investments in household welfare and occasional contributions to male-dominated livestock tasks. Some women employ discreet strategies, such as hidden livestock ownership, to secure personal economic safety. The findings reveal that women's agency emerges through strategies that work within patriarchal norms. These insights highlight the need for empowerment interventions that go beyond income and asset ownership and instead engage with the relational and moral economies that shape women's everyday negotiations for autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy, Patriarchal Bargaining, Gender relations, Women's empowerment, Household decision-making, Social norms, Livestock livelihoods

Mila (N.S.), Vol. 14(2026), pp.1-13, ISSN 1015-6178 ©2026 Institute of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies

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Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a central issue in development policy and research, especially within livelihoods in agrarian and pastoral settings. This is evident in the creation of gender-sensitive measurement tools like the Women's Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI) and Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), which evaluate decision-making authority, resource control, and agency within agricultural and livestock-based livelihood systems (Alkire *et al.* 2013; Galiè *et al.* 2019). While some studies frame women's agency primarily in terms of resistance to structural constraints, others argue that agency cannot be reduced to a binary of resistance versus submission. Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargaining highlights how women negotiate gendered constraints to enhance security within existing power structures. Rather than acts of defiance, these negotiations involve strategic compromises that minimize disadvantages or secure certain benefits (Kandiyoti 1988). Benstead (2020) further shows that patriarchal bargaining, while it restricts, also enables women to develop strategies for negotiating autonomy. Similarly, Nielsen (2019) demonstrates that women may gain authority by maintaining rather than challenging patriarchal norms.

These nuanced understandings are important in pastoral societies, where cultural norms shape access to livelihood resources. In livestock-keeping communities, men own livestock and hold decision-making authority, while women provide much of the labour that sustains herds and households (Galiè *et al.* 2017; Nagasha *et al.* 2024). Studies show that women's responsibilities in livestock production often coexist with limited access to livestock-based income and differentiated rights to livestock within households (Achandi *et al.* 2023; Rao 2019; Yurco 2018; Yurco 2024a).

Milk is an important site of negotiation and functions as food and a commodity. Evidence from pastoral contexts shows that women's responsibility for milk is tied to their control over its distribution, allocation, and use (Achandi *et al.* 2023; Nunow, 2010; Yurco, 2024a). However, women must consistently demonstrate responsibility and trustworthiness to sustain this control. Failing to do so can lead to sanctions or the withdrawal of husbands' autonomy. Milk management is, therefore, an indicator of responsibility, morality, and commitment to affinal home (Yurco 2018; Yurco 2024b). Losing control over milk would therefore mean weakening the bargaining position within marriage and limiting their capacity to earn an income.

Emerging literature further demonstrates that women's autonomy is often negotiated through relational expectations and moral obligations rather than formal ownership only. Studies from Tanzania and Uganda show that women's participation in milk management and access to livestock-related income are shaped by expectations of obedience, responsibility, and commitment to

household welfare (Achandi *et al.* 2023; Nagasha *et al.* 2024). Women's economic activities are considered acceptable when they visibly benefit the affinal household and reinforce ideals of being a “good wife”. Similarly, research in Kenya shows that women strengthen their bargaining positions through socially acceptable forms of cooperation, food provisioning, and collective support networks. At the same time, more covert economic strategies might attract suspicions (Kawarazuka *et al.* 2019). In other pastoral contexts, women also rely on discreet economic practices and kinship networks to protect themselves from marital and security and economic vulnerability (Rao *et al.* 2019). These studies suggest that women's agency is embedded within everyday negotiations shaped by local moral economies, trust, and gendered expectations.

Despite the growing literature on gender dynamics within pastoral systems, limited research examines how Maasai women negotiate autonomy through milk management within household moral economies. Existing studies often focus on access to livestock, the organization of milking units, and intra-household labour divisions (Mutambo *et al.* 2025; Ogolla *et al.* 2022; Sanginga *et al.* 2013; Yurco 2018; Yurco 2024a). Fewer explore the everyday relational strategies women use to maintain authority over milk. Moreover, much of the literature conceptualizes women's agency through domains such as asset ownership or market participation, overlooking the subtler forms of negotiation embedded in household moral economies.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how Maasai women in Narok County navigate patriarchal expectations through milk use and management. It situates women's everyday negotiations within broader patterns of gendered power, showing how autonomy emerges through the tactful navigation of household moral economies. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of patriarchal bargaining offers a useful lens for understanding these negotiations not as acts of resistance or submission, but as ongoing strategies through which women optimize their well-being within patriarchal structures.

Methods

Study design, area and population

This study employed an ethnographic approach to gain in-depth insights into livestock management, household dynamics, and gendered access to livestock-based resources. It was conducted in the Narok South sub-county in Narok County, situated in the Great Rift Valley in southern Kenya, and bordering the Republic of Tanzania. Specifically, the study was conducted in two wards in the sub-county, namely Naroosura Maji-Moto and Olololung'a wards. In these contexts, men own the cattle; they allocate small groups of cattle to specific women for caretaking and milking, referred to as a milking unit (MU) (Yurco 2024a). In polygynous households, a man may manage several MUs, yet each woman is responsible for only one. As a result, women within

the same household may have unequal access to livestock resources, depending on the responsibilities and cattle allocated within their units (Yurco 2024a).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants occupying varying marital and household positions relevant to milk management and livestock decision-making. This approach was appropriate, as the study sought to examine negotiated authority within specific relational contexts, including monogamous and polygynous households, widows, and separated women.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methods of data collection included participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and informal conversations. Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) of between 8-10 participants and twenty in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with men and women across diverse age groups and marital statuses. Data saturation guided the adequacy of purposive samples (Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013). These methods were triangulated to ensure the validity of the findings by drawing on multiple perspectives and data sources.

Six trained data collectors, fluent in Swahili and Maasai languages, were involved in the data collection. The interviews were conducted in Maasai or Swahili, depending on the participants' preferred language. All interviews were audio recorded, with handwritten notes used as a backup. Additionally, field notes were used to record detailed descriptions of activities, events, interactions, and settings

The recorded audio files were transcribed and translated into English by research assistants fluent in local languages and English. The transcripts were reviewed by cross-referencing them with interview notes to ensure accuracy and consistency. The data were entered into QSR NVivo version 12.5.0 (NVivo qualitative data analysis software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 12, 2018) for the development of codes. This allowed the researchers to manage the data, organize ideas, define themes, and draw conclusions iteratively and collaboratively (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009; Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013).

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) and the National Council of Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), with clearances referenced as KEMRI/RD/22 and NACOSTI/P/23/23342, respectively. Permission was also sought from local administrative and community authorities. Before participation, the purpose and procedures of the research were explained to the participants in their preferred language, and written informed consent was obtained.

Findings

Demographic characteristics

Most women in the study had no formal education (55%) or had completed only primary schooling (35%), with a small proportion reaching secondary school (10%). Men without formal education (40%) still formed a significant proportion, followed by those with primary (25%), secondary (25%) and tertiary (10%) levels. Most of the men were married, while among women, 15% were widowed.

Conditional Autonomy in Milk Management

Women reported that ensuring a proper distribution of milk between households' needs and herd growth was a strong negotiating tool, which they used to enhance their bargaining power and thus increase their influence over decision-making power in milk management. As one woman explained:

Selling milk is seen as a minor decision that is mostly given to women; you will never hear of a man fighting with his wife because of milk. The only reason a man would quarrel over milk is if the wives do not pay attention to the calves. If the man inspects and sees that the calves are not well-fed, he will not allow the wife to control how the milk is used (Female, IDI 8).

This view was echoed by men, emphasizing their oversight role in protecting the herd and its reproduction as follows:

If my wife does not ensure that the calves have suckled enough, I will redistribute the milking units to the one who is more responsible. How else will she expect to have more milking units if she does not take care of the calves? (Male IDI 4).

This illustrates that women's control of milk is not fixed but is constantly negotiated within the household, often based on how well the livestock are cared for.

Economic Agency within Patriarchal Boundaries

While the amount of income earned from the sale of surplus milk was small, it still played a crucial role, as women were the primary handlers of this income. This autonomy was, however, limited and dependent upon how women were perceived to act in the household's best interest. Men did not pay a lot of attention to the money women earned from the sale of milk. However, any

deviation from what is considered “acceptable” ways to spend this income resulted in the men reclaiming decision-making over milk. As one man explained:

The issue arises when your wife goes to her family side with the benefits from the sale of milk, rather than supporting her present matrimonial home. If I do not intervene, this becomes a problem (Male IDI 2).

In a situation where you see her buy clothes for your children, buy a cupboard, and many things for the home, you do not need to question. But if she does not do any of those things, then I will allow the calf to breastfeed all the time, and the business of selling milk will end (Male FGD 3).

The above revelations illustrate the norm of women's economic responsibilities, which expect them to remain committed to their affinal, as opposed to their natal homes. When women use earnings from milk to support their parents or siblings, they are considered to be undermining the patrilocal system manifest in pastoralist marriages. Consequently, the freedom women appeared to have was limited by these expectations, thereby upholding the boundaries of patriarchal bargaining.

Collective Strategies within Patriarchal Constraints

Even within patriarchal expectations that women prioritize household welfare and demonstrate responsibility, women still exercised power over milk income by investing in local women's groups. These groups, locally known as *merry-go-rounds*, gave women a crucial platform to increase their economic agency beyond the conventional constraints imposed by patriarchal norms. In these groups, women pooled sums of money and divided the total among themselves. This financial practice enabled women to save enough money to make larger purchases, such as water tanks, household furniture, and school-related expenses that would otherwise be unaffordable for them due to their limited income. Although milk income was seen by men as irregular or insignificant, women strategically set aside a portion of this income and invested a substantial amount of money in their homes when it was their turn to get the pooled funds. They used the funds to buy chickens, which they would control and make decisions about, including selling eggs or poultry. They also used them to remodel their houses or purchase household items that improve their family's well-being.

With the last money I got from our local merry-go-round, I was able to buy some chickens from the market. I plan to continue buying chicken so that I can do business, such as selling eggs, as you can never rely on the sale of milk alone for income (Female IDI 6).

Whenever I get my weekly income, I make sure that I save some in our women's merry-go-round. I have plans to buy a big water tank for my home once I have saved enough money (Female FGD 2).

Men did not prevent women's participation in these groups, provided that their actions were within the limits of domestic expectations. One respondent pointed out:

We leave women to join these women's groups and have their savings. Through these saving groups, she has been able to buy personal things like the water tank, seats for the house, cooking utensils, and clothes for the children. So, I encourage her to continue saving because I see where the money goes (Male IDI 10).

Further, women also reported supporting their spouses by contributing little funds to tasks traditionally managed by men, such as purchasing medicines for livestock.

Occasionally, after I have sold milk, I buy salt lick or some other medicines for the cattle (Male IDI 7).

Although men do not often request this, women use this as a strategy to foster goodwill with their husbands for enhancing their autonomy in milk management.

Covert Agency in Livestock Ownership

In some households, other tactics are employed to exert greater control over the income from milk sales. While women's merry-go-rounds are generally accepted by men as appropriate spaces for managing and saving income from milk, these groups have become strategic places for women to achieve a higher degree of economic independence, enabling women to own cattle collectively or individually. Through these groups, women can purchase cattle and keep them in different locations, which enables them to have assets under their direct control and outside their husbands' oversight.

With the little I have been able to save, I have managed to buy a few goats and sheep, but I have placed them in my brother's herd so that my husband does not know that I own any livestock. If he did, he would claim ownership (Female FGD 4).

Another woman stated:

Even when a woman buys cattle, sheep, or goats, once they enter your husband's compound, they are considered his. So, you must be very wise. Most of us keep those livestock in faraway places. That way, when there is a problem, we have something that we know is ours (Female FGD 1).

While men are aware of these covert strategies used by some women to gain autonomy over livestock-related decisions, such women were viewed as untrustworthy. One man explained:

When your wife buys livestock and puts them in another place, it is like she is hiding something. Such a wife cannot be trusted (Male FGD 2).

The act of concealing livestock undermined the male head, who usually dominated the household economy. It showed rebellion and deceit that undermined the partnership between the couple. One respondent said:

If she is keeping it in another place, you must ask why. A good wife does not keep secrets like that (Male FGD 4).

While women got some level of economic autonomy, their husbands regarded them as “rebellious” or challenging the established order. Conversely, women who complied with social norms were regarded as trustworthy and reinforced their position as “good women” in the community. The alignment to societal norms enhanced women’s position within the household, often shaping their level of engagement over resources such as milk. Trustworthiness from a man’s perspective was also a critical factor that extended a woman’s influence in other major decisions.

Her character is the one that determines how involved she will be in decision-making. When she has a good character, she can make major decisions, and as a husband, you will agree with her. When her character is not good, you will not allow her to get involved in making decisions such as the selling of livestock. (Male IDI 5).

When a woman is respectful and responsible, there is no problem in discussing matters concerning our herds. But when she behaves in a way that is not acceptable, then as a man, you must take control (Male IDI 2).

Locally recognized ideas of being a “good wife” or “good woman” shaped the ideals of what a woman should be. Most pastoral women tried to be the ideal wives as a means of strengthening their access to milk. These ideals governed behaviour and had an impact on how much autonomy women had in the home.

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that women's decision-making authority over milk is conditional and constantly negotiated. Although women manage daily milking and distribution, their autonomy is dependent on fulfilling gendered responsibilities, including ensuring that calves are adequately fed. In most pastoral communities, women's responsibility is often the allocation of milk for household consumption and selling the surplus, whereas men's priority is herd growth (Nunow 2010). Pastoral women must therefore balance household food security with herd growth (Nunow 2010). When women show responsibility, they are given authority in determining household milk use. Yet this authority can be withdrawn if their actions do not align with men's expectations. These patterns are consistent with other studies where pastoral women's authority over milking is substantial but embedded within patriarchal and polygynous structures that continually mediate their power (Yurco 2018; Yurco 2024a). Our results illustrate that Maasai women reinforce the trust required to maintain control over milk by carefully fulfilling expected responsibilities, ensuring calves are adequately fed, allocating milk in ways that prioritize herd growth and household consumption, and using milk income for visible household improvements. By demonstrating competence and commitment to their affinal homes, women strengthen their moral legitimacy and sustain their bargaining position. These patterns have been observed among Mijikenda women in coastal Kenya, where food provisioning and daily domestic responsibilities become subtle sites of negotiation that enable women to strengthen their social standing and cultivate long-term support (Kawarazuka *et al.* 2019). Similarly, a study in Uganda revealed that decision-making regarding income from milk sales was a man's responsibility, and women faced challenges in accessing milk for value addition. Women's ability to access milk was dependent on the husband's mood, perception of obedience, and showing respect to his relatives (Nagasha *et al.* 2024). These studies show that women's adherence to gendered expectations is not just compliance but a strategic deployment of relational power.

Our findings further show that women's control of income from the sale of milk was also conditional. Although women managed the proceeds from surplus milk sales, their autonomy was permitted only when they spent it on their affinal home. Visible expenditures that contributed to household welfare were seen as legitimate, while financial support to natal kin was interpreted as disloyal. Women, therefore, had to spend this income in ways that were considered acceptable by their spouses. Similar patterns are documented among Chagga women in Tanzania, where autonomy in milk marketing and the capacity to use or keep income were tolerated only when spending catered to domestic and marital obligations (Achandi *et al.* 2023). These parallels highlight how women's financial agency is conditional on being respectable and fulfilling gendered expectations.

Women also strengthened their legitimacy through transparent participation in merry-go-rounds, a form of collective savings that men approved of because contributions translated into visible household improvements. Contributing responsibilities considered masculine, such as the purchase of livestock drugs, also enhanced women's reputation as cooperative and trustworthy. Through this act, women gained the social permission necessary to sustain autonomy in milk management. Similar patterns are documented among the Chagga in northern Tanzania. Achandi *et al.* (2023) show that women's participation in daily enterprises is regulated by expectations of being a good wife. While women are encouraged to engage in milk production, their mobility and entrepreneurial autonomy depend on the husband's preferences, with compliance reinforced through subtle sanctions. Women, therefore, expand their influence by maintaining domestic duties, involving husbands in major decisions, and framing income-generating activities as aligned with household well-being. These strategies resonate with those observed among the Maasai women whose pursuit of autonomy operates within the boundaries of respectability and marital harmony. These parallels illustrate that women's financial decisions are key to building relational legitimacy. Autonomy is strengthened not through the accumulation of income alone but also through the moral acceptability of how the income is used.

While sanctioned forms of autonomy are relational and transparent, some women also employ discreet strategies to guard against uncertainty. Covert acquisition of livestock placed under the care of brothers or trusted kin provides women with security that is inaccessible to husbands. Covert livestock ownership triggered moral sanctions, as men perceived secrecy as a violation of trust and an attack on household authority, echoing findings from Tanzania, where women who appear economically independent risk derogatory labels, accusations of infidelity, or social punishment (Achandi *et al.* 2023). The label of a good wife thus becomes a powerful disciplinary framework shaping behaviour. Women who complied with gender norms were described as trustworthy and were granted greater involvement in household decisions, while those who acted independently were portrayed as rebellious (Achandi *et al.* 2023; Nagasha *et al.* 2024).

As Benstead (2020) notes, patriarchal bargaining, while restrictive, also creates relational spaces in which women develop strategies to negotiate autonomy. In this study, covert practices, however, are not framed as resistance but as protective tactics that acknowledge the fragility of marital relations. These findings align with Rao's (2019) observation in Isiolo, where women's covert economic manoeuvres, reliance on kinship networks, or temporary mobility help them manage marital instability. Kwarazuka *et al.* (2019) similarly described how women in coastal Kenya

cultivate support through strategic food provisioning, navigating gendered expectations without openly challenging them. Covert strategies, therefore, reveal the limits of socially sanctioned autonomy and underscore women's efforts to mitigate structural vulnerability within patriarchal systems.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women's autonomy over milk in Maasai pastoral households is embedded in relational expectations, moral economies, and gendered responsibilities. The findings highlight that while women exercise significant day-to-day responsibility for milk, their autonomy remains conditional, contingent on demonstrating responsibility and alignment with patriarchal expectations. This reveals that agency is not binary, empowered versus disempowered, rather negotiated through everyday acts that balance household needs, marital expectations and personal security.

These findings demonstrate that policy approaches that assume women will benefit from economic empowerment simply from having more income or access to markets often overlook intrahousehold moral economies, and thus risk unintentionally undermining subtle, culturally embedded strategies that women rely on to maintain access to milk. Without understanding these relational dynamics, empowerment programs may inadvertently compromise women's existing bargaining positions. Ultimately, the study shows that improving women's well-being requires interventions to work with rather than disrupt the moral economies through which women navigate patriarchal systems. Programmes aiming to enhance women's benefits from livestock must therefore be grounded in local gender norms, negotiated household dynamics, and culturally meaningful forms of agency that women already practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Maasai pastoral community from Narok County, who made this study a success. The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This work was funded, in whole or in part, by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Resilience and Food Security under agreement No.7200AA20CA00022 as part of the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Animal Health.

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