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Advancing Pastoralist Women's Economic Empowerment Through the Ushanga Kenya Initiative

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Abstract

Pastoralist women in Kenya have long faced systemic socio-economic marginalisation, limiting their access to financial resources, property ownership and inheritance, decision-making platforms, and participation in economic development. The Ushanga Kenya Initiative (UKI) seeks to address these challenges by commercialising beading, a traditional craft primarily practised by women in pastoralist communities, as a pathway to economic, social, and political empowerment. This article critically examines UKI's role in advancing gender equality and rural development, analysing its objectives, implementation strategies, achievements, and ongoing challenges. Drawing on desktop research and informal discussions with stakeholders involved in the program, the article highlights UKI's transformative impact on women's livelihoods, including enhanced economic independence, expanded job opportunities, and improved social standing within their communities. The findings underscore that empowering pastoralist women is essential for sustainable development and gender equity in Kenya and beyond. By documenting UKI's approach and outcomes, this article contributes to the gender and development literature, offering insights into effective empowerment strategies for marginalized women. Despite initial implementation challenges, the Ushanga Kenya Initiative emerges as a promising model for pastoralist women's empowerment. The article recommends sustained funding and strategic scaling to extend its impact across other pastoralist regions.

Key words: *economic, empowerment, Kenya, pastoralist, sustainable development, Ushanga, women.*

1.0 Introduction

Pastoralist communities in Kenya predominantly inhabit the arid and semi-arid rangelands, where livelihoods are largely sustained through semi-nomadic livestock herding (World Bank, 2019; Zachary, 2021). These pastoralist groups include the Maasai, Samburu, Boran, Rendile, Somali, Pokot, and Turkana. Despite their vital contributions to household and community welfare, women in these societies remain economically and socially marginalised (Mwaura, 2016; Ong'ayo, 2018). Livestock herding is traditionally a male-dominated activity, while women are responsible for domestic tasks such as milking, dairy processing, house construction, cooking, cleaning, and fetching water over long distances (Mwaura, 2016; Wambui & Njiru, 2022). This gendered division of labour, reinforced by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and cultural practices, severely limits women's access to productive resources, leadership roles, education, and participation in socio-economic activities (Adera & Kimani, 2020; UKI, 2023). Consequently, pastoralist women are excluded from decision-making processes related to financial management, reproductive health, resource allocation, and labour distribution. These constraints not only heighten their vulnerability to poverty, climate change, and economic shocks but also perpetuate entrenched cycles of gender inequality.

Although pastoralist women play a crucial role in the resilience and prosperity of their communities, they face significant barriers to economic empowerment (World Bank, 2022). One potential avenue for

income generation is beadwork which is a culturally significant craft traditionally practised by women. However, beadwork has historically yielded limited financial returns due to inadequate infrastructure, minimal commercialisation, and its primary valuation as a cultural rather than economic asset (Njonjo & Mwangi, 2020; Kariuki & Wanjiru, 2018; Amolo, 2019). Traditionally produced for personal or communal use, beadwork is often viewed as a supplementary activity rather than a viable enterprise. Limited access to formal markets and economic resources further constrains its potential, and while beads hold aesthetic and ceremonial value locally, their external market remains narrow (Pastoralist Women's Forum, 2021; UKI, 2023). This economic dependency on male counterparts reinforces women's disempowerment within pastoralist societies.

In response to these challenges, the Government of Kenya has launched various policies and programs aimed at enhancing the economic empowerment of pastoralist women (UKI, 2023). Among these is the *Ushanga* Kenya Initiative (UKI), (*Ushanga* is the Swahili word for beads) which seeks to transform traditional beadwork into a sustainable source of income. This article critically examines the *Ushanga* Kenya Initiative's strategies, outcomes, and challenges in promoting economic empowerment among pastoralist women. It also explores UKI's broader impact on gender equality in marginalised rural areas, drawing on secondary data and informal stakeholder consultations. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5, which advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, UKI presents a promising model for integrating entrepreneurship, culture, and economic development. In addition to addressing gaps in existing literature, this article offers recommendations to enhance the initiative's sustainability and scalability, thereby advancing the economic agency of pastoralist women in Kenya.

2.0 Theoretical Underpinning

This article employs a feminist political economy (FPE) lens to examine the impact of the *Ushanga* Kenya Initiative (UKI) on the empowerment of pastoralist women. FPE is an interdisciplinary framework that interrogates the intersections of gender, power, and economic systems. It challenges conventional economic theories by foregrounding the role of gender relations and their entwinement with economic and political structures. Central to FPE is the recognition that economic systems and power dynamics are often gendered, with women being frequently marginalised in formal economic spheres while simultaneously bearing the burden of both productive and reproductive labour within their communities.

The *Ushanga* Kenya Initiative is deeply informed by feminist political economy principles, particularly its emphasis on gender equity, economic justice, and empowerment. By valuing women's unpaid labour, confronting gendered power hierarchies, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and advocating for the economic inclusion of pastoralist women, UKI contributes to a gender-sensitive and community-driven transformation of local economies. In doing so, it advances the broader FPE paradigm by responding to the specific needs of marginalised women and fostering more inclusive and equitable economic systems.

The *Ushanga Kenya Initiative* seeks to uplift women both economically and socially by providing a platform to showcase beadwork, a craft embedded in Kenya's cultural heritage. The feminist political economy (FPE) perspective offers a critical lens through which to understand the initiative's complexities and impacts. It is particularly relevant for evaluating the lived experiences of pastoralist women, as it highlights the interplay between economic marginalisation and patriarchal social structures. FPE critiques classical economic models that often undervalue or ignore women's contributions, especially within informal sectors. It underscores the importance of recognising women's labour, particularly in domestic and artisanal domains, as foundational to economic development.

By centring the work of women artisans, UKI addresses this historical oversight, affirming the value of traditional economic activities that are frequently excluded from mainstream economic discourse. The initiative tackles gendered economic inequities by engaging directly with women in marginalised communities. Bead-making, like many forms of artisanal labour, has long been dominated by women; yet these women are often excluded from formal economic systems and denied access to the full value of their work. UKI responds by expanding market access, providing training, and facilitating financial inclusion. These efforts enhance women's agency over their economic futures and challenge patriarchal norms that restrict their participation in formal economies.

Moreover, UKI promotes financial independence while raising awareness of the systemic barriers that hinder women's access to economic opportunities. This approach acknowledges the intersectional

nature of women's oppression where gender, ethnicity, and rural-urban divides converge to constrain their economic empowerment. By centring pastoralist women, UKI works to close these gaps and foster a more inclusive economy.

Through the FPE lens, UKI's contributions are clear: it recognizes and elevates women's labour, confronts gendered economic disparities, and advances economic justice. By prioritising the empowerment of pastoralist women, the initiative not only generates tangible economic benefits but also drives broader gender equality and social transformation.

3.0 Background of the Ushanga Kenya Initiative

The *Ushanga Kenya Initiative* (UKI) is a government-led program aimed at economically empowering pastoralist women by commercialising their traditional beadwork, a craft that has historically yielded modest economic returns for women and their communities (UKI, 2023). Launched in 2017, UKI emerged in response to the urgent need for sustainable livelihood alternatives in pastoralist regions, which face persistent challenges including climatic variability, land degradation, and over-reliance on livestock. Pastoralist women, often excluded from land ownership and formal employment, have long relied on beadwork and other artisanal crafts as vital sources of income (Amolo, 2019; Ong'ayo, 2018).

Despite its cultural significance, the beadwork industry has traditionally been undervalued and constrained by limited market access, low earnings, and exploitative working conditions. Much of the economic benefit has been captured by brokers and intermediaries who purchase beads at low prices and resell them, often to tourists, at significantly higher prices, without credit or brand recognition to the original producers. *Ushanga* Kenya seeks to disrupt this dynamic by equipping pastoralist women with the tools, resources, and platforms needed to commercialise their craft. The initiative promotes economic empowerment through job creation, product development, income diversification, and capacity-building in business management, financial literacy, and marketing. It also supports the scaling of operations to reach broader markets.

UKI is implemented through cooperatives formed by groups of pastoralist women who engage in beadwork as a commercial enterprise. There are approximately three hundred registered *Ushanga* cooperatives across Kenya, with membership ranging from 10 to 50 women per group, depending on the size of the respective community. Based on an average of thirty members per cooperative, an estimated 9,000 pastoralist women are actively involved in the initiative. Each cooperative is governed by an elected leadership team comprising a chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and committee members responsible for overseeing financial, administrative, and operational affairs.

These *Ushanga* cooperatives often collaborate with governmental bodies and non-governmental organisations to access training, resources, and financial support. Partners provide skill development in bead-making, business management, and marketing, as well as grants or low-interest loans to stimulate growth. They also facilitate market access through fairs, exhibitions, and digital platforms, enhance product visibility, advocate for policy reforms that benefit women artisans, and supply essential materials, tools, and production facilities.

Formed as collectives of pastoralist women artisans, *Ushanga* cooperatives foster shared learning, resource pooling, and expanded market reach. They play a pivotal role in driving economic growth and social transformation within pastoralist communities. By integrating traditional skills with modern business strategies, the cooperatives empower women to manage their enterprises and compete in broader marketplaces. They also enable access to raw materials and financial support to scale up production, ensuring that the resulting products are both culturally resonant and commercially viable (Njonjo & Mwangi, 2020). A core operational goal of the *Ushanga* cooperatives is to connect women artisans to larger markets, domestic and international, thereby amplifying their visibility, income, and influence.

3.1 What is Empowerment?

Empowerment is a broad term with no universally agreed-upon definition. Some people use the term '*empowerment'* as a political concept that involves a collective struggle against oppressive social relations. Other people use it to describe the consciousness of individuals and the power to express and act on one's desires. These differences stem from the many different origins and uses of the term. Cattaneo and Goodman (2014) define empowerment as a process of change allowing people to transform their lives,

make decisions, and achieve their goals. They underline that empowerment entails the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and confidence, allowing individuals to decide on issues that affect them. This definition is further elaborated to convey empowerment as a process that necessitates,

> *" ..... a person who lacks the power to set a personally meaningful goal-oriented toward increasing power, take action, and make progress toward that goal, drawing on his/her evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, skills, and community resources and supports, and observes and reflects on the impact of his or her actions"* (Cattaneo and Goodman, 2014:6).

Recent literature demonstrates that women's empowerment necessitates societal transformation. According to Swain and Wallentin (2009) *"truly empowering activities are those that reflect the change that women have effectively made to improve the quality of their lives by resisting the gender-based traditions and norms that reinforce gender inequality"*. For pastoralist women, this definition implies that if they feel disempowered by their life situations, they would be empowered if they pursued beadwork and crafts as a commercial venture. Women's economic empowerment (WEE) in this context is gained when women work together to build successful business ventures, and the revenue generated is used to enhance their welfare and that of their families as well as further the development of their communities. Furthermore, WEE is obtained when women from low-income backgrounds actively engage in income-generating ventures, receive education and training, and earn enough income to support themselves and their families. Economic empowerment is realised when women possess equal rights, access to resources, decision-making power, and opportunities to participate in all spheres of life as equal partners with men (Kabeer, 2005). The *Ushanga Kenya Initiative* has significantly and promptly enhanced the economic empowerment of pastoralist women. This business model provides a distinctive possibility for pastoralist women to engage in the cash economy and achieve empowerment.

3.2 Contributions to Women's Empowerment

Before the *Ushanga Kenya Initiative*, pastoralist women gained token benefits from producing and selling beads and crafts, with the lion's share of the benefits appropriated by intermediaries.

3.3 Direct Financial Gains

One of the most significant economic benefits of the *Ushanga Kenya Initiative* (UKI) is the direct financial gain it offers participating women. The UKI cooperatives have disrupted this exploitative model by linking women directly to local and external markets, enabling them to sell their products without intermediaries. This shift has resulted in a more stable income stream, with anecdotal evidence indicating that women earn, on average, 30% more after joining the initiative (UKI, 2023). The increased earnings have strengthened women's financial security and improved household welfare. Where most pastoralist women previously relied on their husbands for basic needs, women now use their income to support their families, covering essentials such as food, healthcare, and education. This financial autonomy marks a critical step in breaking the cycle of poverty and fostering long-term economic resilience for women, their families, and their communities.

3.4 Employment and Self-Employment Opportunities

Beyond direct sales, UKI has expanded employment opportunities across the beadwork value chain, including production, marketing, and distribution. Most participating women have limited formal education, which restricts access to conventional employment. However, beadwork offers a low-barrier entry point into self-employment, with flexible hours that accommodate domestic responsibilities. By enabling women to earn income from home, UKI provides a meaningful form of empowerment, especially in contexts where women face greater obstacles than men in accessing external job markets. These opportunities not only reduce unemployment and poverty but also enhance women's economic agency and decision-making power.

3.5 Ripple Effects on the Wider Community

Importantly, UKI's economic impact extends to women and community members not directly involved in the cooperatives. As active members dedicate their time to beadwork, they rely on others to supply food, services, and even livestock, creating a ripple effect of income generation across the community. This indirect empowerment is evident in the emergence of women's savings groups, such as 'merry-go-rounds,' which help members pool resources to purchase raw materials and equipment. These groups have enabled women to assume broader family and public roles, increasing their capacities and reducing vulnerabilities.

3.6 Entrepreneurial Skills and Capacity Building

UKI has also facilitated the development of vital entrepreneurial skills among pastoralist women, including business management, financial literacy, marketing, and production techniques. These competencies are essential for sustaining enterprises and navigating the marketplace with confidence. Women report increased self-assurance in managing finances and making strategic business decisions—key indicators of economic independence and empowerment.

3.7 Shifting Social Norms and Decision-Making Power

As women gain economic power, their social standing within households and communities has also improved. Many now receive greater respect from their husbands and peers and participate more actively in decision-making processes. This shift challenges entrenched gender norms that have historically excluded women's voices. The collective empowerment fostered by UKI has helped women confront systemic barriers such as poverty and marginalization. With increased income, women are investing in their children's education and health, further breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation.

3.8 Community Development and Cultural Preservation

The benefits of the Ushanga business extend beyond individual households to entire pastoralist communities. Revenue from cooperatives is often reinvested in communal infrastructure, such as building schools, healthcare facilities, and water supply systems, enhancing overall quality of life. Additionally, UKI supports cultural preservation and environmental stewardship through initiatives like wildlife conservation and cultural education for youth. Beadwork, a traditional craft practised by women across Kenyan pastoralist communities, is now being passed down to younger generations, ensuring its continuity and cultural significance.

Through targeted capacity-building programs, UKI continues to strengthen women's skills and leadership. Participants have acquired essential knowledge in business operations and financial literacy, enabling them to thrive economically and contribute meaningfully to community development. Many have taken on leadership roles, advocating for their rights and shaping decisions that affect their lives and futures.

4.0 Challenges

Despite the significant contributions of the Ushanga Kenya Initiative (UKI) to pastoralist women's empowerment, several barriers hinder full participation and benefit.

4.1 Limited Experience and Resource Constraints

Many women lack experience in running beadwork as a commercial enterprise and face limited access to resources, education, and training. Gender-based violence, discrimination, and cultural stereotypes further compound these challenges. Because most pastoralist communities reside in sparsely populated, remote areas within arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), considerable effort is directed toward awareness creation and mobilisation. However, this often comes at the expense of investing in essential infrastructure, such as roads, bead-making tools, personal protective equipment (PPE), and skill development resources needed to support sustainable production and market access.

4.2 Oversupply and Market Saturation

An oversupply of Ushanga cooperatives has led to excessive competition, with too much supply chasing limited demand. This saturation has driven down prices, reduced profit margins, and destabilized cooperative market shares. The intense competition forces artisans to prioritise quantity over quality,

diminishing the local appeal and perceived value of their products. Consequently, cooperatives become reliant on external markets, which introduce logistical challenges, shipping costs, and limited access. Oversupply also restricts opportunities for product diversification, productivity enhancement, and long-term growth (Ong'ayo, 2018; Njonjo & Mwangi, 2020), ultimately undermining the economic empowerment of pastoralist women.

4.3 Inadequate Infrastructure

Infrastructure deficits significantly impede the operations of Ushanga cooperatives. Many Ushanga cooperatives are located in isolated rural areas with poor road networks, limited transportation networks, and inadequate water and sanitation systems. These constraints raise production costs and reduce sales. Additionally, the lack of workspace, storage, and manufacturing facilities affects both the quality and volume of beadwork. Power and water shortages limit the use of productivity-enhancing tools, while the absence of local training centres stifles skill development. Poor internet connectivity further restricts marketing efforts and digital engagement, narrowing market reach and visibility.

4.4 Inequitable Benefit Sharing

Benefit-sharing within Ushanga cooperatives remains a critical concern. Income from sales is often distributed unequally, especially when men or external leaders dominate decision-making. A lack of transparency and accountability in financial management fosters distrust and discourages active participation. Women frequently have limited influence over pricing, production strategies, and profit allocation. Many cooperatives collaborate with non-governmental organizations or other external stakeholders who exert greater influence on issues such as marketing and sales. External stakeholders, such as NGOs, may claim a significant portion of revenues, reducing the financial benefits for women artisans. Without adequate financial literacy, pastoralist women struggle to advocate for equitable benefit-sharing or understand their rights within cooperative structures. If women do not receive fair returns on their labour and resources, they may disengage from cooperative activities, threatening sustainability and economic progress.

4.5 Cultural and Social Norms

Traditional gender roles in pastoralist communities often restrict women's involvement in income-generating activities such as the UKI. Domestic responsibilities and childcare obligations limit their participation in economic and leadership roles. In some cooperatives, men occupy decision-making positions, sidelining women's priorities and aspirations. This dynamic extends to households, where men may appropriate earnings from their wives' beadwork, reinforcing gender inequality. Limited access to formal education and vocational training further hampers women's ability to manage businesses, market products, and expand their skills. These constraints deepen economic vulnerability and dependence on male counterparts, undermining the transformative potential of the Ushanga Kenya Initiative.

5.0 Conclusion

The Ushanga Kenya Initiative exemplifies a transformative paradigm for women's economic empowerment within pastoralist communities. By integrating traditional beadwork skills with contemporary business techniques, Ushanga cooperatives enable women to generate sustainable livelihoods, challenge gender norms, and contribute to community development. These cooperatives foster financial autonomy, promote collective empowerment, and create supportive, women-only environments where pastoralist women can build networks and address shared challenges.

Despite the considerable progress made, various hurdles—such as limited access to financial resources, educational opportunities, and persistent cultural and environmental barriers—continue to impede full participation. Overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that centres women's needs and rights, while reinforcing their capacity to lead and thrive.

6.0 Future Prospects

The Ushanga Kenya Initiative holds immense potential to further transform the lives of pastoralist women. Continued investment and support from government entities, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders will be essential to scale and sustain its impact. Key areas for growth include:

i. **Improving access to finance:** Ensuring women can secure capital to expand their enterprises.

ii. **Strengthening market linkages:** Connecting cooperatives to broader, more lucrative markets.

iii. **Providing ongoing education and training:** Enhancing business acumen, design innovation, and leadership skills.

By fostering skills, improving livelihoods, and elevating social status, the Ushanga Initiative contributes meaningfully to gender equality and sustainable development in pastoralist regions. With strategic support and inclusive policies, it can continue to empower women, amplify their voices in decision-making, and reshape the socio-economic landscape of their communities.

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