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Women's Land Rights and Tourism-Driven Land Governance in Maasailand: A Feminist Political Ecology Perspective

Tom Gesora Ondicho[1]

Abstract

This paper critically examines how shifts in land tenure and the expansion of tourism enterprises have reconfigured women's land rights in Maasailand, Kenya. Historically governed through communal and customary systems, Maasailand has undergone major transformations over the past five decades, from communal ownership to group ranches and, more recently, to individually titled private parcels. These changes have coincided with the growth of tourism and conservation projects that attract external investors and increase the commercial value of the land. Although such ventures offer new income opportunities, they have also contributed to land dispossession, reduced pastoral mobility, and deepened inequalities in land access. Women are disproportionately affected as their customary access to land, mediated through kinship and marriage, has been undermined by privatisation processes dominated by male titleholders and male-led committees, further eroding their ability to benefit from tourism revenues. Guided by feminist political ecology and African feminism, the study interrogates how gendered power relations, ecological change, and legal pluralism intersect to shape women's exclusion from land governance and tourism benefits. The key research questions are: How do land privatisation and tourism expansion in Maasailand affect women's land rights, access to resources, and participation in governance? What reforms can enhance women's representation, rights, and agency in pastoral land governance? Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative, ethnographic, multi-method approach, including case studies, semi-structured interviews, participatory mapping, and policy analysis. It foregrounds the lived experiences of Maasai women and highlights the structural barriers that constrain equitable land access. The findings reveal that tourism-driven land governance restructures authority and resource access in ways that systematically marginalise women, despite their central role in pastoral economies. The article concludes by recommending joint spousal land titling, inclusive governance structures, and community-led tourism models that promote fair benefit sharing, critical steps toward gender-responsive and sustainable land reform. While the study contributes to the government's commitment to gender equality, it is limited by its focus on two time periods without comparative analysis and by its narrow geographic scope, which reduces generalisability. Future research should adopt multi-site comparative approaches to assess regional variations, explore intersections of gender, class, and age, and evaluate the long-term impacts of gender-transformative governance on tourism and land tenure.

Key words: *Benefit sharing, conservation, feminist political ecology, gender inequality, governance, Kenya, Maasailand, pastoralism, tourism development, women's land rights*

[1] Department of Anthropology, Gender and African Studies, University of Nairobi | Email: tondicho@uonbi.ac.ke.

1.0 Introduction

Land is fundamental to Kenya's economic, social, and cultural development. As a key factor of production, restricted access undermines rights to food, water, and finance. Customary norms continue to privilege male inheritance, while gender-sensitive family laws advance slowly. Among the Maasai people, land is more than an economic resource; it is a cultural, social, and spiritual foundation of their pastoralist identity (Ole Kaunga, 2017). Maasailand has experienced extensive land dispossession, beginning with colonial expropriation for white settlers and continuing through post-independence land reforms driven mainly by tourism expansion and conservation initiatives that privatised land ownership. Consequently, land governance has remained a central concern in Maasailand (Ole Riamit & Kirigia, 2021; Ondicho, 2021).

Historically managed under communal tenure, Maasai rangelands have been reshaped by transitions to group ranches and individualised titles, weakening collective resource management and intensifying competition (Bedelian et al., 2024; Nkedianye et al., 2020). At the same time, Maasailand has become one of Kenya's most lucrative tourism frontiers. Conservancies, ecotourism ventures, land leases, and private investments, including lodges, hotels, and cultural manyattas, have commodified rangelands (Ondicho, 2021; Raycraft et al., 2025). These developments, compounded by human and wildlife pressures, are transforming livelihoods (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026).

Women are particularly disadvantaged. Their customary claims, traditionally mediated through marriage, lineage, and communal access, have been eroded by privatisation and patriarchal governance. Excluded from land registration, ownership, and tourism benefit-sharing (Mugambi, 2021), women's rights remain precarious despite constitutional guarantees. This dissonance between legal assurances and lived realities underscores the urgent need for inclusive, gender-responsive governance that links tourism-driven land use to equitable development.

Globally and regionally, debates on land tenure emphasise the importance of secure rights for marginalised groups as a foundation for poverty reduction, gender equality, and sustainable development (Magara et al., 2026; Ole Riamit & Kirigia, 2021). Kenya's land reform agenda reflects these commitments, anchored in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the National Land Policy (2009), and the Community Land Act (2016), and supported by the Matrimonial Property Act (2013) (Government of Kenya, 2010; 2009; 2016; 2013). Complementary frameworks such as the National Gender and Equality Policy (2011), the Spousal Consent Act (2012), and Vision 2023 (Government of Kenya, 2012, 2007) further affirm women's claims to land, aligning with international commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015) and the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2013).

Despite these progressive guarantees, tensions persist between constitutional and international provisions on gender equality and customary practices that discriminate against women in ownership and inheritance. Women remain underrepresented in land institutions, their rights under communal tenure undefined, and family land often disposed of without their consent. Few women hold registered titles, and limited financial resources restrict their entry into land markets.

Weak implementation has undermined communal ownership systems, accelerating fragmentation, privatisation, human–wildlife conflicts, and socio-generational tensions (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026). Tourism, promoted as a driver of rural development, has reduced grazing areas, restricted pastoral mobility, and privileged external stakeholders over local livelihoods (Nkedianye et al., 2020; Ondicho, 2022). Maasai women, like others in pastoralist communities, have historically lacked independent property rights, leaving them vulnerable to external and internal land grabbing. Entrenched customary norms, patriarchal structures, and weak enforcement perpetuate exclusion from ownership, control, and decision-making (Greiner, 2017; Ondicho, 2022).

The coexistence of statutory and customary land systems in Kenya complicates women's claims to land (Mathenge, 2025). Legal pluralism enables selective interpretations of reforms that reinforce patriarchal control and undermine the transformative intent of national frameworks (Akoth et al., 2025; Magara et al., 2026). This article uses feminist political ecology and African feminist perspectives to argue that Kenya's constitutional and policy reforms have not led to significant improvements in

women's land rights, particularly in pastoralist contexts. The research examines how tourism-driven land governance in Maasailand affects women's land rights, their participation in decision-making, and their access to economic benefits. It explores the intersections of gender, power, and resource control within rapidly changing pastoralist landscapes.

By highlighting the gap between Kenya's progressive land laws and the realities on the ground, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on gender justice, African land reform, and sustainable tourism. The article argues that while legal provisions are essential, they are insufficient without governance arrangements that dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures and actively integrate women into land and tourism decision-making processes. Ultimately, it proposes pathways toward more inclusive and gender-responsive land governance that ensures equitable access, participatory institutions, and fair distribution of benefits in tourism-affected pastoralist regions.

To situate the research within a critical gendered analysis of land and tourism governance, the study draws on conceptual frameworks that foreground women's experiences, agency, and structural constraints.

2.0 Research Methods

The methodological approach adopted in this study is guided by conceptual frameworks that illuminate how gender, power, and resource governance intersect within tourism-driven pastoralist landscapes.

2.1 Conceptual Frameworks

This study is grounded in two complementary conceptual frameworks: Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and African Feminism Perspectives. Together, they provide a critical lens for examining how gendered power relations shape access to land, participation in governance, and distribution of tourism benefits in Maasailand.

FPE investigates how gendered power dynamics affect access to land and natural resources, emphasising that environmental governance is rarely neutral. As Elmhirst (2018) and Sundberg (2017) argue, resource control is embedded within social and political structures that frequently privilege men over women. In Maasailand, the shift from communal to individualised land tenure has reinforced the authority of male household heads, thereby undermining women's customary land claims (Akoth et al., 2025; Musangi, 2017). This transition has unfolded alongside the expansion of tourism and conservation initiatives, such as wildlife conservancies, eco-lodges, and land leases that further complicate land governance (Mugambi, 2021; Mwangi, 2024). FPE illustrates how these changes disproportionately disadvantage women by restricting their access to resources, limiting their participation in decision-making, and narrowing their economic opportunities in tourism. As grazing lands are enclosed for conservation purposes, women's access to essential resources diminishes, ultimately undermining their livelihoods and social status. This perspective challenges assumptions that privatisation and tourism automatically foster development, demonstrating instead how they can exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities (Mwangi, 2024; Ondicho, 2022; Rogers & Halvorson, 2025).

Despite its strengths, Feminist Political Economy has faced criticism for its tendency to prioritise epistemological frameworks and theories originating in the Global North, often overlooking the cultural, historical, and socio-economic complexities of African contexts. This critique underscores a significant gap in the application of FPE principles: the rich cultural, historical, and socio-economic realities of African nations are insufficiently integrated into the discourse (Mezzadri et al., 2021). Consequently, this results in a limited understanding of the lived realities of African women and other marginalised groups in these regions. To address this gap, the study incorporates African feminist perspectives alongside FPE.

African feminist scholars including Oyewumi (1997), Nzegwu (2006), and Tamale (2020), emphasise the cultural specificity of gender relations, the fluidity of kinship systems, and the enduring effects of colonial and patriarchal structures on land governance. Unlike Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), which underscores the impact of gendered power relations in environmental contexts, African feminist perspectives insist on situating these relations within indigenous social structures, lineage systems, and postcolonial histories. This dual perspective enhances the study by placing tourism and

conservation policies within the context of both global political ecology debates and African feminist critiques of land governance.

Methodologically, this integrated framework informed the design of ethnographic interviews and focus groups conducted in Maasailand, ensuring that women's voices were foregrounded and that kinship, lineage dynamics, and customary norms were examined in depth alongside statutory reforms. Analytically, the research revealed that conservancy boards, lease agreements, and opaque tourism deals tend to favour male titleholders while marginalising widows, divorced women, and younger women. These patterns reflect perpetuating exclusions rooted in both patriarchal authority and colonial legacies. The findings indicate that although statutory reforms may seem progressive in principle, they do not ensure women's tenure rights or equitable access to tourism benefits when patriarchal governance remains intact. By integrating FPE with African feminist thought, this study emphasises the urgent need to dismantle entrenched inequalities within pastoralist and tourism-driven contexts.

2.2 Data Collection

This article is grounded in a wider ethnographic study conducted among Maasai communities in the Olgulului Ololarrashi and Kimana Tikondo group ranches, located adjacent to Amboseli National Park in Kajiado County, Kenya (Ondicho, 2010, 2022). The original fieldwork spanned a 12-month period, with intermittent breaks, from 2003 to 2005. Additional data were collected during shorter field visits of two weeks in 2024. and 2025, focusing on the evolving role and participation of the Maasai communities in tourism governance.

A convenience sampling strategy was employed, selecting participants based on their accessibility and willingness to engage. This approach ensured a rich diversity of voices and perspectives. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, indicating a comprehensive understanding of the topics under investigation. The primary data sources comprised ethnographic interviews with 80 participants, evenly divided between 40 men and 40 women, thereby providing a balanced gender perspective. The study also included eight focus group discussions, structured into four male-only and four female-only groups to foster open dialogue among participants. Furthermore, key informant interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including six local administrators, ten women leaders, and ten representatives from civil society organisations, providing additional insights into governance dynamics. All research sessions were conducted primarily in Swahili to facilitate authentic communication and engagement with participants.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Data was subjected to thematic coding and reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns. Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis served as the analytical framework, providing a flexible and reflexive analytical framework, following their six-phase process: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. This approach enabled systematic exploration of how tourism governance intersects with gendered land rights, ensuring that findings accurately reflected community experiences and perspectives.

Positionality and reflexivity were central to the research process. As an outsider affiliated with the University of Nairobi and supported by external sponsorship, my presence influenced access, trust, and interpretation. My gender and ethnic identity shaped insider/outsider dynamics (Ondicho, 2010). Reflexive practices, including notetaking, adapting interview questions, and acknowledging participant perceptions, were employed to mitigate bias and enhance reliability.

Ethical safeguards were prioritised throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality maintained, and sensitivity to local norms was observed, particularly in contexts where women's participation was constrained by patriarchal structures (Ondicho, 2010). These measures reinforced accountability and ensured the study's commitment to inclusive, respectful, and ethically sound research, while strengthening the credibility and reliability of the findings.

3.0 Background/Contextual Analysis

This section traces the historical processes such as colonial treaties, colonial treaties, land alienation, group ranching; explains structural transformations in Maasai land tenure; shows gendered impacts across time and sets up the problem that the study investigates.

3.1 Colonial Dispossession of Maasai Land and Gendered Impacts

The history of land ownership among the Maasai in Kenya reflects a long trajectory of dispossession, beginning during the colonial era and extending into the post-independence period. As a semi-nomadic pastoral community, the Maasai historically inhabited extensive regions of the Rift Valley, migrating periodically with their livestock in pursuit of water and grazing land. Before British intervention, land was communally managed, with access regulated by elders through age-set institutions and clan-based norms that emphasised shared use rather than individual ownership (Homewood, 1995; Raycraft et al., 2025). Women's land rights were mediated by men in their families, typically secured through marriage, which granted them significant usufruct rights and enabled them to take central roles in pastoral life (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026; Ondicho, 2021). Widows retained usufruct rights within their husband's lineage, holding land in trust for their sons until they were mature enough to inherit. In cases where there were no sons, the deceased husband's brother assumed control of the property. These customary arrangements underscored women's dependence on male relatives for land access, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion despite their vital contributions to household and community life.

The entry of British colonialists into Kenya precipitated a significant wave of land alienation affecting the Maasai through the Anglo-Maasai treaties of 1904 and 1911 (Galaty, 2013; Ondicho, 2022; Otieno et al., 2025). These agreements disrupted established indigenous tenure systems, resulting in the cession of prime grazing lands and essential dry-season refuges to settler agriculture and ranching (Raycraft et al., 2025). Consequently, the resulting dispossession adversely affected pastoral livelihoods and eroded the cultural fabric of Maasai society (Foster et al., 2026; Kituyi, 1990; Lindsay, 1987). By segregating settler farms from communal lands, the treaties relegated the Maasai to marginal reserves, effectively severing their access to vital grazing areas.

Furthermore, throughout both the colonial and post-colonial periods, Maasai land was further appropriated for the establishment of wildlife protected areas, including national parks and game reserves, and by local and national elites to facilitate the development of tourism infrastructure, agriculture, and cattle ranching (Foster et al., 2026; Ondicho, 2022). As a result, both colonial and post-independence governance frameworks have been predicated on concepts of economic productivity and ecological sustainability, further reconfiguring Maasai land tenure and utilisation while entrenching systemic inequalities and laying the groundwork for enduring conflicts over land rights and resource access. Recent scholarship indicates that colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary land issues, as the intersection of land alienation, privatization, tourism and conservation governance perpetuates inequities (Foster et al., 2026; Mugambi, 2022).

Colonial and post-colonial land policies have profoundly reshaped Maasai society, resulting in distinct gendered outcomes and entrenched inequalities. For men, the loss of prime grazing areas diminished herd management capacity, weakened authority, and disrupted traditional pastoral roles (Ole Kaunga, 2017). Women, who were once central to resource management, faced disproportionate marginalisation, being excluded from land registration, governance, and benefit-sharing. This vividly illustrates the enduring gendered impacts of dispossession. Their reliance on natural resources for firewood, water, and wild plants made them particularly vulnerable when wildlife-protected areas were established. These reserves prohibited herding, settlement, and resource collection, forcing women to travel greater distances for water and fuel, thereby increasing their workload (Atieno, 2025; Sari, 2023;). Lacking legal rights and political influence, women did not receive compensation for the loss of land and had limited access to new economic opportunities (Ondicho, 2022). Colonial authorities further promoted trophy hunting and tourism, sectors that largely excluded Maasai women from employment and income (Mugambi, 2021; Wangari, 2024). Even after independence, land remained communal, but women's access continued to be mediated through family roles rather than ownership (Mwangi, 2024).

Overall, colonial policies redefined gender roles, intensified household hardship, and entrenched long-lasting inequalities (Ondicho, 2022).

3.2 Communal Tenure and Group Ranching (1960s–1980s)

Group ranches in Maasailand were established in the late 1960s and 1970s as part of state-led tenure reforms aimed at modernising pastoralism, securing Maasai land rights after independence, and making communal rangelands more "legible" for government planning. Grounded in the Land Adjudication Act of 1968 and the Land (Group Representatives) Act, these reforms introduced a cooperative land tenure system in which families were jointly registered as landowners under freehold titles managed by elected committees of elders (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026; Otieno et al., 2025;). Supported by the World Bank and IMF, the reforms aligned with global development agendas and sought to enhance productivity, enforce ecological carrying capacities, and safeguard Maasai land from further alienation (Ndiritu et al., 2025; Ondicho, 2022). Designed as a compromise, group ranches provided formal recognition without immediate fragmentation, preserving rangelands for pastoral mobility while integrating them into state and donor development agendas. They also offered a framework for the provision of infrastructure, credit, and extension services. However, in practice, they reshaped pastoral governance by introducing new institutions and market forces that set the stage for subsequent subdivision and privatisation.

Studies show that the transition from indigenous tenure to group ranches, introduced under rapidly changing demographic and socio-economic conditions in Maasailand, produced outcomes far from their intended goals (Foster et al, 2026; Hassan et al., 2023; Ondicho, 2022). Although designed to secure tenure and improve pastoral livelihoods, group ranches became instruments of accumulation by dispossession, benefiting wealthy individuals and government technocrats while fuelling landlessness. In practice, they disrupted customary governance, facilitated elite capture, and excluded women from membership and decision-making. Women, central to pastoral resource management, were rarely registered as members and thus denied ownership rights, access to credit, and participation in benefit-sharing. This systematic exclusion entrenched gender inequalities, leaving women dependent on male relatives for land access and marginalising them from emerging tourism and conservation economies. Ultimately, group ranches reshaped Maasai land governance but reinforced patriarchal structures, laying the foundation for subdivision, privatisation, and intensified competition over land.

3.3 Subdivision and Individualisation (1980s–Present)

By the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, rising concerns over land rights became prominent, primarily due to widespread mismanagement of group ranches (GRs) by elected committees, elite capture, and corruption. Committee leaders frequently allocated prime land to outsiders and enabled wealthier individuals to exploit communal resources (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026; Ondicho, 2022). In response, Maasai communities increasingly advocated for the subdivision of group ranches into individually titled holdings. Although subdivision was legally supported by the Land Adjudication Act of 1968 and the Group Representatives Act, and was intended to safeguard land from further dispossession, allocation committees often favoured elites and their associates. The most fertile plots were granted to influential individuals, while poorer community members were relegated to marginal land.

The issuance of title deeds further entrenched men's authority as recognised landowners and decision-makers. Women, excluded from the registration processes and lacking independent legal claims, remained dependent on their husbands or male relatives for land access (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026). As a result, this process reinforced gender inequalities, undermined collective grazing systems, and eroded social cohesion. Recent scholarship indicates that individual land tenure has exacerbated socio-economic disparities, depriving women of their customary usufruct rights and privileging male household heads and elites (Greiner & Alvarez, 2021; Mugambi, 2022). The governance of group ranches, which were entrusted to elected committees, suffered from mismanagement, elite capture, and corruption. While the goal was to modernise pastoralism and protect land, the outcomes, instead, perpetuated inequality, reinforced patriarchal structures, and facilitated subdivision, privatisation, and heightened competition for resources.

Legal loopholes within the land governance and regulatory framework have enabled influential individuals, particularly male elites and committee leaders, to manipulate land registration processes and privatise highly valuable parcels of land. Rather than safeguarding communal tenure, these gaps have facilitated the transfer of prime grazing areas into private ownership, with numerous parcels sold to outsiders or leased to commercial entities, including agribusinesses and tourism operators (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026; Ondicho, 2022). These developments significantly undermined the viability of pastoralism by fragmenting traditional grazing lands, restricting access to water and pasture, and disrupting the seasonal mobility patterns that are essential for effective livestock management. Within the community, powerful local elites and affluent individuals have registered land titles in their names, thereby consolidating their control over valuable resources and extensive tracts of land, while poorer herders, young people, and women often find themselves landless or relegated to marginal plots with limited productive potential. This widening disparity not only exacerbates the socioeconomic divide but also leaves many individuals without the means to secure their livelihoods and build a sustainable future (Otieno et al., 2025). The titling of communal lands has further reinforced patriarchal structures, intensified social and gender inequalities and limited women's ability to sustain their livelihoods. This marginalisation of women not only has economic consequences but also diminishes community resilience by eroding traditional cooperative land management, which increases the vulnerability of pastoral households to poverty and environmental shocks.

The transformation to individualised tenure intensified gender marginalisation by solidifying patriarchal authority and restricting women's agency in land governance. Younger women and other vulnerable groups were frequently excluded from the allocation of subdivided titled land, while widows often received only marginal plots, perpetuating generational inequalities (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026; Ondicho, 2022). Men, recognised as formal landowners, held exclusive authority over land and resources and frequently subdivided or sold plots without women's consent. As a result, many women became landless, faced economic insecurity, and struggled to access credit and development opportunities.

Tourism and conservation initiatives further exacerbated these exclusions. The expansion of wildlife conservancies and tourism ventures commodified Maasai culture, transforming women's traditions and poverty into a "cultural spectacle" while denying them meaningful participation in governance or benefit-sharing. Scholars argue that, rather than securing land rights, tenure reforms and tourism-driven governance intensified women's exclusion from ownership and decision-making, eroding systems of reciprocity and weakening household resilience (Mugambi, 2021; Ondicho, 2022). Ultimately, these reforms, framed as modernising or protective, produced differentiated, gendered impacts that reinforced patriarchal control, deepened poverty and entrenched structural inequality.

4.0 Tourism, Conservation, and Land Governance

Tourism and wildlife conservation have emerged as predominant land uses in Maasailand, generating new pressures on traditional pastoral livelihoods and altering access to land and resources. Significant portions of communal grazing land have been transformed into conservancies, national parks, and tourism enterprises (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026; Bedelian et al., 2024). Although these initiatives attract investment and generate revenue, they simultaneously restrict pastoral mobility and diminish access to essential resources such as grazing corridors and water sources.

From the standpoint of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), these transformations are intricately linked to gendered power dynamics (Elmhirst, 2018). Women, who rely on communal lands and water resources for household sustenance, face restricted access, longer journeys for water and firewood, and increased labour burdens. Moreover, they are frequently marginalised in the decision-making processes related to conservation and tourism projects, resulting in minimal benefits from revenue or employment opportunities (Wangari, 2024; Rogers & Halvorson, 2025). This situation is further elucidated by the African Feminism perspective, which underscores how these exclusions intersect with entrenched patriarchal structures, lineage systems, and cultural norms, often marginalising widows, divorced women, and youth who are frequently overlooked in land lease negotiations and benefit-sharing frameworks (Akoth et al., 2025; Oyewumi, 1997; Tamale, 2020).

Ecotourism, typically presented as participatory and sustainable, often perpetuates existing inequalities by favouring male elites and external investors, while commodifying women's traditions and poverty into a "cultural spectacle" (Atieno, 2025; Ondicho, 2022;). These dynamics erode customary governance structures, such as elders' councils, and weaken household resilience by undermining reciprocity, a foundational principle of mutual support and cooperation that historically unified Maasai communities (Nkedianye et al., 2020; Rogers & Halvorson, 2025). Insights from FPE and African Feminism collectively demonstrate how tenure reforms and tourism-oriented conservation mechanisms reinforce structural inequalities, solidify patriarchal authority, and marginalise women's agency (Magara et al., 2026).

These processes severely limit women's potential for meaningful participation in governance and economic activities, rendering them economically vulnerable and socially marginalised. FPE stresses that environmental governance is significantly influenced by power relations that favour men, while African Feminism emphasises the cultural specificity of gendered exclusions and the continued effects of colonial legacies that impede women's rights (Nzegwu, 2006; Rogers & Halvorson, 2025). Consequently, women frequently find themselves excluded from land allocation, lease negotiations, and benefit-sharing arrangements, while their cultural expressions are commodified for tourism purposes.

Addressing these complex challenges requires implementing inclusive, gender-responsive governance frameworks that prioritise women's rights and perspectives in sustainable development. Such frameworks must dismantle barriers to participation and acknowledge women's pivotal roles in resource management and household resilience. By centring women's agency, governance systems can move toward equitable and sustainable futures, transcending exclusionary practices and fostering a more integrated approach to resource stewardship and community well-being.

4.1 Rise of Conservancies and Tourism Leases

The group ranches surrounding Amboseli National Reserve, which was once designated a national park, play a crucial role in promoting community-based tourism through various conservancy initiatives. Among the most notable are the Olgulului-Ololarashi and Kimana Tikondo ranches, which have established partnerships with conservation organisations (Akoth et al., 2025; Bedelian et al., 2024). These collaborations, while aimed at securing more space for wildlife, empower group ranch committees to lease their land to tourism operators, generating income that helps communities maintain their land rights and diversify livelihoods.

However, the distribution of benefits from these arrangements is significantly uneven. Men, often recognised as the official landowners, exert considerable control over financial payments and strategic decisions, effectively sidelining women who lack land ownership rights (Magara et al., 2026). Consequently, women find themselves marginalised from both leadership positions and income-generating opportunities. Their participation is further hindered by factors such as limited access to education, restricted mobility, and the overwhelming burden of domestic responsibilities (Wangari, 2024), all of which substantially impede their ability to seek employment in the tourism sector.

The introduction of new land-use regulations, such as grazing bans during peak tourist seasons, have disrupted the pastoralist practices that have sustained Maasai families for generations. During periods of drought, these restrictions intensify households struggles to secure adequate pasture, placing an unfair burden on women, who often must travel longer distances to obtain water, firewood, and fodder while also managing small livestock (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026). Widows and youth face additional disadvantages, frequently excluded from lease negotiations and benefit-sharing arrangements, leading to economic insecurity and social marginalisation (Ondicho, 2022).

Although some conservancies have begun supporting women- and youth-led tourism initiatives and including women in governance processes, progress remains inconsistent and slow (Atieno, 2025). Without focused, gender-responsive governance measures, conservancy initiatives risk perpetuating patriarchal structures and intensifying inequalities rather than advancing equity. Sustainable development requires governance frameworks that prioritise women's rights, dismantle barriers to participation, and acknowledge their vital roles in resource management and household resilience, ensuring that the benefits of conservation reach all community members.

4.2 New Governance Institutions

Group ranches and community conservancies have introduced new governance structures, such as boards, land trusts, and joint management committees, to manage tourism and conservation. While these bodies are often presented as inclusive, they frequently reflect and reinforce existing gender hierarchies (Mugambi, 2021; Ondicho, 2022). Leadership positions are typically dominated by older male landowners, while external investors and conservation managers, often with little accountability to local communities, hold significant influence (Bedelian et al., 2024). This concentration of power sidelines women, whose voices are largely absent from decisions about land use, tourism revenue, and resource management. For Maasai women, this exclusion is particularly damaging. Despite their essential roles in households management, natural resources stewardship, and sustaining community life, they are systematically denied land rights and leadership opportunities. Deep-rooted cultural norms, limited access to education, and heavy domestic responsibilities further restrict their ability to participate in conservancy governance or benefit from tourism-related income (Wangari, 2024). As a result, conservancies risk reproducing gender inequalities rather than challenging them.

To promote equity and effectiveness, governance must adopt a gender-transformative approach that transcends mere representation; it should aim to dismantle structural barriers, shift cultural norms and stereotypes, and address the underlying causes of inequality (Atieno, 2025). Such strategies would empower women's agency, recognise their valuable knowledge and contributions, and facilitate genuinely inclusive and sustainable development that benefits all community members.

4.3 Restriction of Pastoral Mobility

Wildlife conservancies and tourism sites, such as cultural manyattas (traditional villages), frequently impose restrictions on grazing access, particularly during peak tourist seasons when visitor inflow is highest (Bedelian et al., 2024). These limitations significantly disrupt pastoral mobility, which is a vital aspect of Maasai livelihoods and cultural identity. The impact of these restrictions is felt acutely by women, who play critical roles as primary caregivers and managers of daily herd care within their communities (Wangari, 2024). Women rely heavily on livestock for both sustenance and income generation. When access to essential resources such as pastures and water sources is curtailed, they are forced to undertake longer journeys to reach markets and other essential livelihood services, increasing their already substantial workload (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026). These extended travels not only take a toll on their physical well-being but also reduce the time they have available for household responsibilities and community engagement. This additional burden can exacerbate existing inequalities, as these women are often already stretched thin by multiple duties. Despite being most affected by land-use decisions, women are seldom consulted or included in discussions about grazing restrictions or tourism planning (Akoth et al., 2025). Their voices are largely absent from the planning processes that dictate how land is used and allocated.

Women's limited rights to land ownership, constrained mobility, and lack of access to crucial information further alienate them from being active participants in tourism negotiations and related decision-making processes (Magara et al., 2026). During drought periods restricted grazing access can lead to dramatic increases in livestock mortality and heightened food insecurity (Ondicho, 2022). This results in added stress and hardship for women, who are often solely responsible for managing household food security (Atieno, 2025). The absence of gender-sensitive land use planning and governance risks exacerbating existing inequalities within pastoral communities. It is, therefore, crucial to recognise and empower women within pastoral systems, as their involvement and insights are essential to promoting equitable and sustainable management of conservancies. By fostering inclusive governance that prioritises women's rights and participation, we can work towards a more just and resilient future for all members of these communities.

5.0 Gendered Impacts on Women’s Land Rights

The expansion of tourism and land privatisation in the Amboseli region has fundamentally altered land relationships, frequently marginalising Maasai women from ownership, governance, and equitable benefit-sharing. The transition from communal land tenure to individual titles, predominantly registered

in men's names, has undermined women's customary claims and silenced their voices in land-use decision-making processes (Hassan et al., 2023; Sari, 2023). As land transforms into a commodity, lease payments deriving from conservancies and community-based tourism ventures, such as cultural manyattas, primarily accrue to men, particularly male titleholders and committee members. This dynamic results in women being systematically excluded from direct financial benefits, despite their crucial roles in sustaining pastoral livelihoods and household welfare (IUCN, 2025; Ondicho, 2022).

The exclusion of women is exacerbated by structural barriers, including limited educational opportunities, restricted mobility, and overwhelming domestic responsibilities, which hinder their access to employment in tourism, leadership positions, and decision-making arenas (Ndiritu et al., 2025). Vulnerable groups, such as widows, divorced, and unmarried women, face intensified risks of dispossession, lacking both land titles and male advocates, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability (Musangi, 2017). Although women are increasingly mobilising through land rights organisations, cooperatives, and community dialogues to advocate for equitable governance, entrenched inequalities remain pervasive. This context illustrates how tourism and conservation initiatives, often portrayed as participatory and sustainable, can perpetuate patriarchal dominance. To achieve inclusive and sustainable development, it is imperative to implement gender-transformative governance, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, and to recognise women's essential contributions to the socio-economic fabric (Otieno et al., 2025).

Tourism zoning and conservation regulations have further restricted access to grazing areas and curtailed other livelihood activities, thereby adversely affecting pastoral productivity and household resilience in regions such as Amboseli (Hassan et al., 2023; Otieno et al., 2025). These restrictions disproportionately burden women, who predominantly manage small livestock, collect water, and gather firewood (IUCN, 2025). When critical grazing corridors and access routes to essential services, such as hospitals, markets, schools, and churches, are obstructed, women must traverse longer distances to secure these resources. This increases their workload and reduces time available for childcare, rest, and community engagement (Ondicho, 2022; Wagura et al., 2025). By weakening traditional communal resource management systems, tourism and conservation policies inadvertently exacerbate gender inequalities, leaving women excluded from governance structures and benefit-sharing arrangements, despite their vital contributions to pastoral economies (MMWCA, 2024; Sari, 2023). To ensure that tourism contributes to inclusive development, it is essential to recognise women's rights in land governance, provide equitable access to revenue, and promote gender-responsive participation in decision-making.

In response to their exclusion from land ownership, governance, and tourism benefits in pastoralist areas like Amboseli, Maasai women are increasingly organising and asserting their rights. They have established land rights groups that advocate for equitable governance through workshops and community dialogues (Musangi, 2017). Others are forming cooperatives to collectively purchase land, thereby enhancing their legal recognition and amplifying their voices in local development initiatives (Ondicho, 2022). Women are also leveraging legal frameworks to contest inequitable land titling practices and promote gender equality in land rights (Sari, 2023). Supported by civil society and legal advocates, they are actively challenging patriarchal systems that obstruct their access to land and economic opportunities (Hassan et al., 2023).

Many women are now at the forefront of community conservancies, influencing decision-making, managing tourism enterprises, and advocating for equitable benefit-sharing. Beyond conservancies, they are diversifying their economic participation through initiatives such as curio businesses and programs like Ushanga Kenya, which support beadwork production and marketing (IUCN, 2025; Ondicho, 2024). These economic ventures not only generate income but also enhance visibility, transitioning women from marginalised beneficiaries to active stakeholders in the tourism and land governance. Despite these gains, structural inequalities remain significant, particularly for widows and unmarried women, highlighting the critical need for sustained gender-responsive governance to ensure equitable participation and benefit-sharing in tourism and land management (Otieno et al., 2025; MMWCA, 2024).

6.0 Policy and Practice Recommendations

Promoting gender equity within community conservancies and tourism governance necessitates a deliberate, phased strategy that incorporates legal safeguards, institutional reforms, and cultural transformation.

Short term (1 to 5 years): County governments and the Ministry of Lands should prioritise joint and individual land titling during adjudication and subdivision processes, in accordance with the Community Land Act (2016) and Kenya's Constitution (2010) (Akoth et al., 2025). Securing women's land rights will strengthen their participation in benefit-sharing initiatives. Concurrently, conservancy boards must be mandated to include 30–40% women's representation, monitored by the Kenya Wildlife Service and the Ministry of Tourism, to ensure leadership accurately reflects community diversity (Ondicho, 2022).

Medium-term actions (5 to 10 years): Focus on establishing gender-responsive benefit-sharing systems, including direct payments to women via mobile money platforms (Magara et al., 2026). This approach reduces dependency and ensures equitable access to tourism income. Additional measures include capacity-building programmes for women in leadership, financial literacy, and tourism enterprise management.

Long term (10+ years): Strengthen pastoral cooperatives and promote group-based ownership models, supported by NGOs and regional organisations such as the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association (Bedelian et al., 2024). These models enhance women's negotiating power and secure their long-term participation in land governance. Across all phases, continuous engagement with customary leaders and elders through structured dialogue is essential to challenge discriminatory norms and foster inclusive governance (Abreek-Zubiedat et al., 2026).

Collectively, these initiatives align with Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG5, ensuring that Maasai women transition from being marginal beneficiaries to becoming active stakeholders in conservation and development efforts (Atieno, 2025).

7.0 Conclusion

Tourism-driven land governance in Maasailand has exacerbated inequalities rooted in colonial and post-independence reforms that favoured male ownership and centralised authority. Although tourism presents economic and conservation opportunities, it frequently reinforces patriarchal systems by directing lease payments and decision-making power to male landowners and external actors. This dynamic marginalises women from land ownership, leadership roles, and tourism revenues, despite their critical contributions to pastoralism and resource management.

The commodification of land through conservancies has further diminished women's customary access to communal grazing areas, particularly where titling and benefit-sharing mechanisms neglect their rights. Widows, divorced women, and unmarried women face greater risk of dispossession and insecurity. Addressing these injustices requires gender-transformative reforms that secure women's land rights, ensure representation in governance, and establish equitable benefit-sharing systems.

This study is limited by its focus on just two time periods without a broader comparative analysis, raising questions about the additional value of this temporal framing. Its narrow geographic scope restricts generalisability. Future research should, therefore, adopt multi-site comparative approaches to capture regional variations, examine intersections of gender, class, and age, and assess the long-term impacts of gender-transformative governance on tourism and land tenure.

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