

# Border Conflicts and Socio-Cultural Roles of Women Among the Kuria East Community in Migori County, Kenya

Nyakeri Jerida Gati<sup>1</sup>, Lilian Chesikaw<sup>2</sup>, Shadrack Cheplogoi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postgraduate student at Egerton University, Kenya

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Gender Women and Development Studies, Egerton University, Kenya

<sup>3</sup>Department of Agricultural Education & Extension, Egerton University, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

Border conflicts fundamentally reshape women's socio-cultural roles in traditional communities, yet limited research examines these transformations in African agricultural settings. This study investigated how territorial disputes and resource conflicts affect women's socio-cultural roles among the Kuria East Community in Migori County, Kenya. The study employed Feminist Conflict Theory with a descriptive mixed-methods approach. The target population comprises 42,000 Kuria women aged 18+ in conflict-affected areas, with a sample size of 224 respondents. Data collection involved structured questionnaires administered to women participants, semi-structured interviews with key informants including community leaders and local administrators, and documentary review of relevant reports and records. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to role transformations. Findings reveal that border conflicts severely disrupted women's socio-cultural lives, with 67.8% experiencing affected family relationships and 59.9% reporting reduced ceremonial participation. The conflicts forced substantial changes in women's approach to children's education (59.9%) and altered cultural transmission practices (54.9%), threatening cultural preservation as women traditionally serve as key custodians of Kuria cultural practices. Despite significant disruptions, women gained minimal formal leadership roles (4.0%), revealing persistent gender hierarchies during crisis periods. The study concludes that border conflicts systematically erode women's traditional cultural authority while failing to create meaningful empowerment opportunities, resulting in increased burdens without corresponding gains in formal power. The research recommends developing comprehensive cultural preservation policies, reforming peace-building processes to include women's voices, and prioritizing community-based approaches that support women's roles as cultural custodians.

**Keywords:** Border conflicts, women's roles, socio-cultural transformation, Kuria community, cultural preservation, gender empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

Border conflicts, particularly manifesting through resource conflicts and territorial disputes, represent critical areas requiring scholarly attention due to their profound effects on women's socio-cultural roles in traditional societies. According to UN Women (2020), resource conflicts over water sources, grazing lands, and agricultural territories affect approximately 65% of women in conflict zones, forcing them to significantly modify their cultural practices and family relationships. Similarly, territorial disputes along community boundaries affect over 70% of women's socio-cultural responsibilities, with research from the Horn of Africa demonstrating that such conflicts disrupt women's traditional roles in cultural preservation and family cohesion (Tadesse *et al.*, 2020). These conflicts intersect directly with women's primary spheres of cultural and social responsibility in traditional agricultural communities, creating both challenges and unintended consequences for gender relations.

Globally, border conflicts have created paradoxical situations where women's expanding responsibilities in family protection and community survival remain inadequately supported despite their documented significance in maintaining social cohesion during crises. In South Asia, India-Pakistan border tensions have compelled over 75% of women to transition from traditional cultural custodians into primary family protectors, yet these expanded responsibilities come with significant costs including 65% higher risk of gender-based violence and 72% experiencing reduced access to cultural ceremonies essential for community identity (UNDP, 2021). Resource conflicts over water rights and territorial disputes along contested boundaries have directly catalyzed this cultural transformation while simultaneously destroying critical social infrastructure, with WHO (2022) reporting that 68% of women have experienced disrupted family relationships and 54% face forced separation from extended family networks during peak conflict periods.

In Kenya, border conflicts manifesting through resource conflicts and territorial disputes have fundamentally transformed women's socio-cultural roles while exposing critical gaps in cultural preservation and family support systems. According to UN Women Kenya (2021), 72% of women in border regions have been forced to develop alternative strategies for maintaining cultural practices due to resource conflicts, with the Economic Survey (2021) showing that 45% have experienced disrupted participation in traditional ceremonies and 38% report altered approaches to cultural transmission to younger generations. However, these adaptations come with significant negative consequences, as the Kenya Human Rights Commission (2022) documents that 63% of these women experience increased family tensions, 58% report lost opportunities for cultural education of children, and 71% face deteriorating relationships with extended family networks due to conflict-related stress and displacement.

In Kuria East Community, resource conflicts and territorial disputes present unique challenges that have profoundly affected women's traditional socio-cultural roles while creating severe social disruptions. According to the Migori County Integrated Development Plan (2022), disputed agricultural lands between Kipsigis, Maasai and Kuria communities have resulted in significant cultural disruption, affecting women's participation in traditional ceremonies, family gatherings, and intergenerational knowledge transmission since the 1970s. The National Gender and Equality Commission (2021) reports that 75% of women in the Gwitembe area have had their cultural activities disrupted by territorial disputes, compelling them to develop alternative approaches to maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity. Despite women's demonstrated resilience in adapting to these challenges, with 65% developing innovative cultural preservation strategies, their transformed socio-cultural roles lack systematic documentation and institutional support, highlighting the need for targeted research that can inform appropriate interventions to support women's cultural and social responsibilities in conflict-affected communities.

## **Problem Statement**

The persistent border conflicts in Migori County, particularly in areas near Gwitembe, Ang'ata Barkoi and Transmara where Kuria and Kipsigis communities interact, present a critical development challenge as they disproportionately affect women's socio-cultural roles, disrupting their traditional participation in cultural ceremonies, family relationships, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. These conflicts, manifesting through resource conflicts and territorial disputes, have fundamentally altered women's abilities to maintain cultural practices, participate in traditional ceremonies, and fulfil their roles as cultural custodians, exposing them to heightened social fragmentation and cultural erosion. While women occupy a central position in preserving Kuria cultural heritage and maintaining family cohesion during conflicts, existing research has focused primarily on general conflict effects, overlooking the specific mechanisms through which resource conflicts and territorial disputes transform women's socio-cultural responsibilities in Kuria East. Despite the critical nature of women's roles in cultural preservation and social stability during conflict situations, there remains limited comprehension of how border conflicts specifically affect their traditional ceremonial participation, family relationship management, cultural transmission activities, and overall social authority within the Kuria East community, necessitating targeted research to understand these socio-cultural transformations and inform appropriate support interventions.

## Research Objective

To assess the extent to which border conflicts affect socio-cultural roles of women among the Kuria East Community in Migori, Kenya

## Research Questions

To what extent does border conflicts affect socio-cultural roles of women among the Kuria East Community in Migori, Kenya?

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Feminist Conflict Theory, developed by Cynthia Enloe (1989) and advanced by Ann Tickner (1992). The theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing gender dynamics in conflict situations, arguing that conflicts have distinct gendered effects and that women's experiences during conflicts are fundamentally different from men's, yet equally crucial for understanding conflict dynamics. It emphasizes that traditional security studies have historically overlooked women's experiences, leading to incomplete understandings of how conflicts transform gender relations and social structures. The theory presents three key propositions relevant to this study: first, conflicts fundamentally alter gender power relations, often expanding women's responsibilities while simultaneously increasing their vulnerabilities; second, women are active agents rather than passive victims in conflict situations, developing sophisticated strategies to navigate and influence conflict dynamics; and third, the effect of conflicts extends beyond direct violence to affect social structures, economic systems, and cultural practices, creating both challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment.

Feminist Conflict Theory provides an ideal framework for analyzing how border conflicts transform women's socio-cultural roles in the Kuria East community, enabling examination of how territorial disputes and resource conflicts influence women's participation in cultural practices, affect their family relationships, and reshape their social positions within the community. The theory's emphasis on women's agency and strategic responses to conflict provides a valuable lens for examining how women develop alternative strategies for maintaining cultural practices and family cohesion during periods of border conflict, while its focus on the broader social effects of conflicts allows for understanding how these disruptions affect cultural transmission, ceremonial participation, and traditional support systems that women have historically managed within their communities.

## Empirical Literature

Border conflicts produce complex and contradictory effects on women's socio-cultural roles, simultaneously expanding certain opportunities while imposing severe costs. A comprehensive study on territorial disputes in Israeli-Palestinian border regions (2018-2020) by Aroussi (2021) revealed this duality through mixed-methods research involving 240 women and 35 in-depth interviews. While 78% of women assumed expanded leadership roles in community protection, these new responsibilities came with substantial negative consequences, 64% reported deteriorating mental health due to role overload, 58% experienced increased domestic violence as family tensions rose during conflicts, and 72% faced disrupted cultural transmission practices, undermining their traditional role as keepers of community heritage. This research is significant to the current study as it demonstrates the contradictory effects of conflict; however, it focused on communities with long-term international aid support, creating a gap in understanding how women in contexts like Kuria East community with minimal external assistance maintain socio-cultural roles during border conflicts. The current study builds upon these findings by examining how border conflicts specifically affect women's socio-cultural responsibilities in communities without established international support systems.

Similarly, contradictory patterns emerge in resource conflicts over mining territories in Myanmar border regions (2019-2021), where women experience both role expansion and severe disruption. Through a longitudinal study of 450 women in conflict zones using ethnographic methods and structured interviews, Loken and Matfess (2022) documented how 72% developed dual identities as both traditional caregivers and

community security coordinators. However, this transformation came at significant cost, 68% reported substantial trauma from witnessing violence, 74% experienced disrupted family relationships, and 65% faced increased vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence due to their expanded public roles. Although women gained new security responsibilities, they simultaneously lost traditional support systems that previously sustained their caregiving functions, creating unsustainable burdens. While their findings on adaptive security strategies are relevant to understanding similar dynamics in Kuria East, their research focused primarily on urban settings, limiting its applicability to the rural agricultural context where Kuria women maintain distinct socio-cultural practices and family relationships.

Along the Ukraine-Russia border (2020-2022), women's socio-cultural roles underwent profound transformations that highlight both adaptation and loss. Using participatory action research with 350 women affected by territorial disputes, Björkdahl and Selimovic (2022) documented how traditional caregiving roles evolved into expanded community protection responsibilities, with 75% of women developing innovative childcare networks that doubled as security monitoring systems. Despite these adaptive innovations, women paid high personal costs, 62% reported disrupted cultural transmission to younger generations, 70% experienced increased domestic caregiving burdens as external support systems collapsed, and 67% faced diminished participation in traditional ceremonies and rituals that previously reinforced community identity. The conflict simultaneously expanded women's formal leadership roles while undermining their ability to maintain cultural practices essential to community cohesion. This research provides valuable methodological insights; however, it occurred in a context with significantly different socio-cultural structures than those found in Kuria East where women's roles are more rigidly defined by cultural practices. The current study builds on their participatory approaches but adapts them to understand the complex positive and negative effects of border conflicts on Kuria women's socio-cultural roles.

Resource conflicts in Ethiopian border areas (2018-2020) revealed profound transformations in women's socio-cultural roles that combined new opportunities with severe disruptions. Through a case study approach with 270 women affected by conflicts over farmland and water sources, Alemu (2020) documented this complex dynamic using participant observation and in-depth interviews. While 68% of women developed formalized roles in community security structures previously dominated by men, these expanded responsibilities occurred amid significant personal costs, 71% reported increased vulnerability to violence during mediation activities, 64% experienced disrupted family relationships due to their public roles, and 57% faced diminished ability to perform traditional caregiving functions as conflicts consumed their time and energy. Despite gaining public leadership positions, many women reported feeling overwhelmed by the dual burden of maintaining household welfare while taking on expanded community responsibilities without adequate support systems. These findings are directly relevant to understanding potential socio-cultural role changes for Kuria women; however, the Ethiopian context featured established government support systems that are absent in Kuria East, where women must develop different coping mechanisms to maintain socio-cultural functions during and after conflicts.

The contradictory effects of border conflicts on women's socio-cultural roles becomes particularly evident in territorial disputes over grazing lands and water resources in Somalia (2017-2019). Despite expanding women's decision-making authority, these conflicts simultaneously undermined their ability to maintain cultural practices and family cohesion. Through a mixed-methods study involving 300 women in conflict-affected regions, Tadesse *et al.* (2020) employed household surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, revealing that while 75% evolved from traditional domestic roles to becoming primary decision-makers in household resource management and community security, they simultaneously faced severe negative consequences. Approximately 68% reported diminished ability to participate in cultural ceremonies that previously reinforced community identity, 72% experienced disrupted family relationships as traditional support systems collapsed, and 65% faced increased vulnerability to gender-based violence as they navigated public spaces previously dominated by men. Though women gained new authority in resource management, they lost critical cultural spaces that previously provided personal fulfillment and social status. This study is relevant to the current research as it documents similar border conflict dynamics; however, it focused exclusively on pastoral communities, creating a significant gap in understanding how women in the



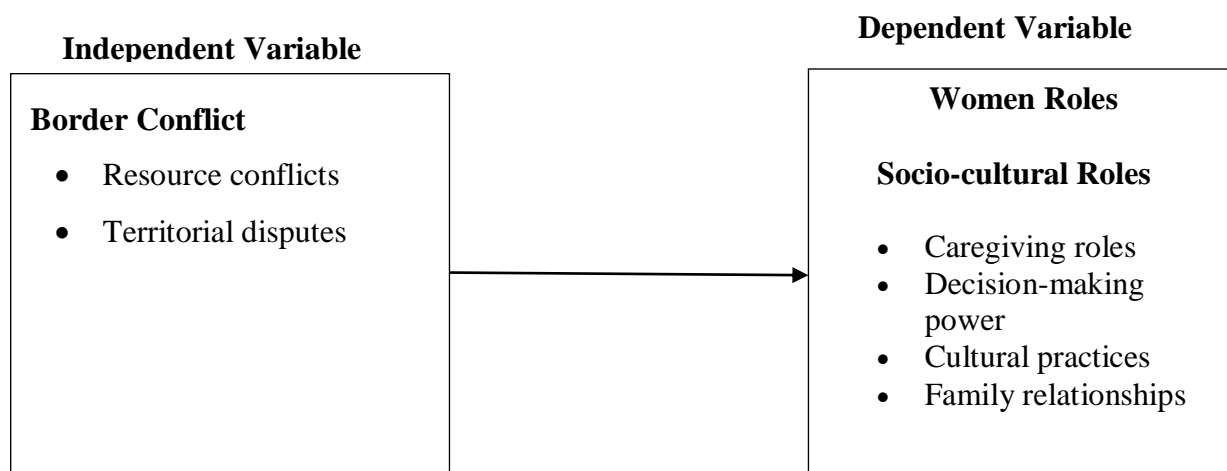
agricultural Kuria community maintain socio-cultural practices and family responsibilities when border conflicts disrupt traditional activities.

In northern Kenya, Ndungu (2020) examined gender role transformations during territorial disputes and cattle raiding conflicts between 2017-2019. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design with 180 women from Pokot and Turkana communities, the research combined household surveys with narrative interviews, finding that 65% of women expanded their caregiving roles to include community protection activities, with 42% establishing informal early warning systems. This study is directly relevant to understanding women's adaptive strategies; however, it was conducted in pastoralist communities with different socio-cultural structures than the more sedentary agricultural communities in Kuria East, where women's cultural practices and family responsibilities follow distinct patterns. The current study builds upon Ndungu's methodological approach while focusing specifically on how border conflicts affect Kuria women's socio-cultural roles and what post-conflict coping mechanisms they employ to restore cultural practices and family relationships.

Chege (2022) investigated decision-making power shifts during resource conflicts over grazing lands and water points among Maasai and Samburu communities between 2019-2021. Using participatory rural appraisal techniques with 210 women across 14 conflict-affected settlements, the research documented women's reduced formal decision-making authority during active conflicts but increased informal influence through shadow leadership structures, with 58% reporting strategic adaptation of traditional gender roles to maintain household security. These findings are significant for understanding similar dynamics in Kuria East; however, Chege's research focused on semi-nomadic communities where decision-making structures differ from those in the agricultural Kuria community, where women's socio-cultural roles are more directly tied to land-based practices and settled community structures. The current study extends this work by examining how border conflicts affect women's traditional socio-cultural responsibilities in Kuria East, while documenting the specific coping mechanisms they develop to maintain cultural practices and family relationships when territorial disputes and resource conflicts disrupt normal community functioning.

## Conceptual Framework

The framework illustrates how border conflicts (resource conflicts and territorial disputes) directly affect women's socio-cultural roles in the Kuria East Community.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework demonstrates the direct relationship between border conflicts and women's socio-cultural roles. The framework shows how resource conflicts and territorial disputes systematically disrupt women's traditional participation in cultural ceremonies, family relationship management, cultural transmission activities, and decision-making processes. The model emphasizes that these conflicts create fundamental transformations in women's social authority and cultural responsibilities, challenging their traditional roles as cultural custodians and family coordinators.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design with a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach to examine how border conflicts influence women's socio-cultural roles in the Kuria East Community. The sequential explanatory design involved collecting quantitative data first through structured questionnaires administered to 202 women respondents, followed by qualitative data collection through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to explain and elaborate on the quantitative findings.

### Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Kuria East constituency, Migori County, which experiences recurring border conflicts due to territorial disputes with neighboring communities, particularly around the Gwitembe area. The target population comprised approximately 42,000 women aged 18 and above residing in conflict-affected areas across all five administrative wards. Using Yamane's (1967) formula with a 95% confidence level and 7% margin of error, the sample size was calculated as 224 respondents, distributed proportionally across the five wards using stratified random sampling.

### Data Collection

Data collection involved structured questionnaires administered face-to-face in Kikuria language to 202 women (90.2% response rate), semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants including community leaders and local administrators, five focus group discussions (one per ward) with 5 participants each, and documentary analysis of county reports, peace committee minutes, and conflict records. The reliability of instruments was confirmed through pilot testing in Kuria West constituency, achieving Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.727 to 0.908.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 29.0 employing descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while qualitative data was analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to women's socio-cultural experiences during border conflicts.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The study achieved a response rate of 90.2% (202 out of 224 questionnaires), significantly exceeding the recommended minimum of 60% for academic research. This high response rate was facilitated by the researcher's fluency in the local Kikuria language, face-to-face administration of questionnaires, and strong community engagement through local leaders and women's groups.

### Demographic Statistics

The study participants were predominantly women in their productive years, with over half (58.5%) aged between 26-45 years. The majority of respondents were married (63.4%), though a notably high proportion were widowed (21.8%), significantly above the national average and suggesting conflict-related losses. Educational attainment was moderate, with 31.7% having completed primary education and 28.7% secondary education, while 20.8% had no formal education. Agriculture dominated as the primary occupation (76.2%), consistent with the rural agricultural setting. The majority of respondents (76.3%) had dependents, with substantial caregiving responsibilities. Geographic distribution was balanced across the five wards, and 56.4% had lived in their current location for over 15 years, indicating established community ties and deep local knowledge of conflict evolution.

## Effect of Border Conflicts on Women's Socio-Cultural Roles

The research objective aimed to assess the extent to which border conflicts affect socio-cultural roles of women among the Kuria East Community. This objective examined how ongoing territorial disputes and resource conflicts have disrupted or transformed women's traditional participation in cultural practices, family relationships, decision-making processes, and community leadership. Understanding these effects is crucial for comprehending how conflict situations reshape gender roles and social structures within the community. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements describing various ways border conflicts have affected their socio-cultural responsibilities and participation. The responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The effects of border conflicts on women's socio-cultural roles are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Effect of Border Conflicts on Women's Socio-Cultural Roles

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev
Border conflicts have reduced my ability to participate in traditional ceremonies	8.9% (18)	12.4% (25)	18.8% (38)	39.1% (79)	20.8% (42)	3.51	1.18
I have taken on new leadership roles in community peace-building initiatives	45.0% (91)	28.7% (58)	16.3% (33)	7.9% (16)	2.0% (4)	1.93	1.05
Conflicts have changed how I make decisions about children's education	6.4% (13)	11.9% (24)	21.8% (44)	42.1% (85)	17.8% (36)	3.53	1.12
My role in conflict mediation has expanded beyond family to community	38.1% (77)	31.2% (63)	19.8% (40)	8.9% (18)	2.0% (4)	2.06	1.06
Border conflicts have affected my relationships with extended family members	5.9% (12)	9.4% (19)	16.8% (34)	45.0% (91)	22.8% (46)	3.70	1.10
I now participate more actively in community security decisions	41.6% (84)	29.2% (59)	18.3% (37)	8.9% (18)	2.0% (4)	2.01	1.07
The conflicts have changed how I teach cultural values	7.4% (15)	13.9% (28)	23.8% (48)	37.1% (75)	17.8% (36)	<b>3.44</b>	<b>1.15</b>
<b>Average</b>						<b>2.88</b>	<b>1.10</b>

The findings reveal that border conflicts have fundamentally disrupted women's socio-cultural lives, creating a pattern of cultural erosion and family strain while failing to generate meaningful empowerment opportunities in formal leadership roles. Border conflicts have had their most severe effect on family relationships (mean=3.70), with the majority of respondents (67.8%) reporting that conflicts have affected their relationships with extended family members. This represents the highest mean score among all measured variables, indicating that family cohesion, traditionally a cornerstone of Kuria social structure, has been severely compromised. These findings mirror Bendavid *et al.* (2021) global analysis documenting how armed conflicts systematically destroy family support networks, though the Kuria East context shows even more severe disruption than reported in their multi-country study. The disruption extends beyond immediate family

units to broader kinship networks that traditionally provided social support, economic cooperation, and cultural continuity.

A significant majority of women (59.9%) reported that border conflicts have reduced their ability to participate in traditional ceremonies (mean=3.51). This finding indicates a serious threat to cultural preservation, as women traditionally serve as key custodians of Kuria cultural practices. This contradicts Björkdahl and Selimovic's (2022) findings in Ukraine-Russia border regions where women maintained cultural transmission despite conflicts, suggesting that territorial disputes in agricultural communities may create more severe cultural disruption than conflicts in more urbanized settings. Additionally, 54.9% of respondents indicated that conflicts have changed how they teach cultural values to younger generations (mean=3.44). This dual effect reduced ceremonial participation and altered cultural transmission suggests that border conflicts are undermining the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge that women have historically facilitated, supporting Tadesse *et al.* (2020) documentation of similar cultural breakdown in Somali communities, though the Kuria context shows more systematic erosion.

The conflicts have forced substantial changes in women's approach to children's education (mean=3.53), with 59.9% reporting altered decision-making in this area. This finding corroborates with Aroussi's (2021) research in Israeli-Palestinian border areas where security concerns similarly overrode educational priorities, though the Kuria women show less adaptive capacity in developing alternative educational strategies. This suggests that security concerns and conflict-related disruptions have overridden traditional educational priorities, forcing mothers to make difficult choices between their children's safety and educational advancement. Such changes represent a significant departure from normal family planning and child-rearing practices, supporting UNESCO's (2023) global documentation of how armed conflicts systematically disrupt educational decision-making patterns in households, with mothers bearing disproportionate responsibility for managing these impossible choices, and aligning with Bendavid *et al.*'s (2021) findings that conflict-affected women face intensified trade-offs between immediate family safety and long-term child development outcomes, fundamentally altering traditional maternal roles and educational investment strategies.

Despite the significant disruptions caused by border conflicts, women have not gained meaningful roles in formal conflict resolution or community leadership. The vast majority (73.7%) disagreed with having taken on new leadership roles in community peace-building initiatives (mean=1.93), while 70.8% denied increased participation in community security decisions (mean=2.01). These findings directly contradict Aroussi's (2021) research where 78% of women assumed expanded leadership roles during conflicts, and challenge Loken and Matfess's (2022) documentation of women developing "dual identities" as caregivers and security coordinators in Myanmar border regions. This stark contrast suggests that agricultural communities may face more restrictive gender hierarchies during conflicts than urban or semi-urban contexts, revealing that traditional gender hierarchies persist even during crisis periods.

Women's traditional roles in family-level conflict resolution have not expanded to community-level mediation (mean=2.06), with 69.3% disagreeing that their mediation roles have extended beyond family settings. This finding contrasts sharply with Tadesse *et al.* (2020) documentation of women's continued conflict mediation authority in Somali communities and Ndungu's (2020) findings in northern Kenya where women maintained informal influence during conflicts. This indicates that while women may maintain some influence in domestic dispute resolution, they remain excluded from formal community-level peace processes where their insights and mediation skills could be valuable.

The overall mean score (mean=2.88) across all socio-cultural measures indicates that border conflicts have generally constrained rather than enhanced women's socio-cultural roles. This pattern contradicts the optimistic assumptions in Feminist Conflict Theory (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992) that conflicts create transformative opportunities for women's empowerment, instead supporting emerging critical scholarship that questions linear empowerment narratives in conflict literature. The findings demonstrate that border conflicts have created a destructive cycle where women lose their traditional sources of social authority and cultural influence without gaining access to new forms of formal power or leadership opportunities.



To gain deeper insights into the specific ways border conflicts have affected women's cultural and family activities, respondents were asked to identify from a list of possible effects those they had personally experienced. This question allowed for multiple responses to capture the nature of conflict effects on women's socio-cultural roles. The findings provide concrete examples of how theoretical disruptions manifest in women's daily lives and responsibilities. The specific effects of border conflicts on women's cultural and family activities are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** How Border Conflicts Have Affected Women's Cultural and Family Activities

Effects of Border Conflicts	Frequency	Percent of Cases
Increased my responsibility for family protection	142	70.3%
Disrupted family gatherings and relationships	128	63.4%
Limited my participation in important community ceremonies	115	56.9%
Reduced my ability to maintain cultural practices	98	48.5%
Changed how I teach cultural values to children	87	43.1%
Forced me to take on new community leadership roles	14	6.9%
No significant effect	12	5.9%

Border conflicts have fundamentally altered women's family and cultural responsibilities, with the majority experiencing increased burdens rather than expanded opportunities. The most significant effect was increased responsibility for family protection (70.3%), indicating women's adaptation to insecurity by taking on protective roles traditionally held by men. This finding aligns with Loken and Matfess's (2022) documentation of women developing security coordination roles in Myanmar border regions, though the Kuria context shows these responsibilities remained confined to family rather than community levels. However, this contradicts Björkdahl and Selimovic's (2022) findings in Ukraine-Russia border areas where women's protective roles evolved into formalized community security positions, suggesting that rural agricultural settings may limit women's ability to transform crisis responsibilities into formal authority.

Social cohesion suffered considerably, as conflicts disrupted family gatherings and relationships (63.4%) and limited participation in community ceremonies (56.9%), undermining traditional support networks and cultural continuity. These findings support Bendavid *et al.* (2021) global analysis of how armed conflicts systematically destroy social networks, though the Kuria East context shows particularly severe ceremonial disruption compared to their multi-country study. This pattern contrasts with Tadesse *et al.* (2020) research in Somali communities where women maintained some ceremonial authority despite conflicts, indicating that territorial disputes may create more comprehensive cultural breakdown than resource conflicts alone.

Nearly half (48.5%) reported reduced ability to maintain cultural practices, while 43.1% changed their approach to teaching cultural values, suggesting adaptive strategies to preserve culture under constrained circumstances. This finding contradicts Aroussi's (2021) research in Israeli-Palestinian border areas where women developed innovative cultural preservation methods, and challenges Alemu's (2020) documentation of women's continued cultural authority in Ethiopian border communities. The Kuria East context suggests that agricultural communities may face more severe constraints on cultural adaptation than urban or pastoralist societies, where mobility and established support networks provide greater flexibility for cultural innovation.

Only 6.9% were forced into new community leadership roles, confirming that conflicts primarily imposed additional domestic responsibilities rather than creating formal empowerment opportunities. This finding directly contradicts the assumptions in Feminist Conflict Theory (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992) that conflicts

automatically create leadership opportunities for women, and challenges Hossain and McSherry's (2021) findings in Bangladesh-India border regions where crisis situations generated more formal female leadership roles. The stark contrast with Mengesha and Berhe's (2021) documentation of women's expanded decision-making authority in Ethiopia-Eritrea border areas suggests that the nature of territorial disputes and community structures significantly influences whether conflicts create empowerment opportunities or simply impose additional burdens on women.

The quantitative findings were corroborated by key informant interviews and focus group discussions, which revealed the profound ways border conflicts had disrupted the social and cultural fabric of Kuria women's lives. A local administrator from Gwitembe provided vivid details about how conflicts had affected traditional celebrations that were central to women's cultural roles:

"The border conflicts have put on hold various socio-cultural activities that have in turn affected women's participation. For instance, in Kuria culture 'embutura' which means the celebration of dowry payment that involves officially releasing the woman to the family that is marrying is held with high regards. The dowry in terms of cows is brought to the girl's family and a cow is slaughtered and people celebrate overnight. This event is very significant to women - it's a sign of respect to women who chant, cook, dance, ululate, ensure all the guests are well taken care of. But that has been significantly affected because the event no longer takes place; everything is done in haste because the attackers have had a tendency of attacking us during such ceremonies." (KII-04, July 11, 2025)

Another local administrator from Ntimaru West described how even basic cultural practices had been compromised:

"We are unable to conduct weddings, only small celebrations to officiate weddings, symbolize the taking away of the brides. Women have reduced participation in cultural practices due to fear of their safety, for instance the issue of 'ubhugheni' traditional visitation by Kuria women, that is highly valued, is something that has had to be put on hold." (KII-05, July 12, 2025)

Focus group participants across wards confirmed these disruptions. In Nyabasi East, participants lamented that "we can no longer gather for traditional ceremonies because we fear attacks. Even when we try to have small celebrations, people are always looking over their shoulders and rushing to finish quickly." (FGD-03, July 12, 2025) Participants in Ntimaru East explained that "the traditional dances and songs that women perform during ceremonies are being forgotten because we cannot practice them together anymore. The younger women are not learning these important cultural practices." (FGD-05, July 16, 2025)

The severe effect on family relationships revealed in the survey data was dramatically illustrated by accounts from the field. A local administrator from Gwitembe described the devastating human cost:

The effect has been adverse in the family and community relationship in the sense that families have been broken, husbands have been killed in the conflict, women left widowed, children have been killed. Like for instance last year a class 8 index 1 KCPE candidate in Gwitembe primary was shot dead in class. Similarly, a CBC pupil was shot dead while at their farm while carrying out a school project, this is even after he had pleaded with attackers not to kill him. A young child was also recently shot. Various families and communities have lost their lands, families have been separated, the community is broken, nothing communal can take place, people have lost their loved ones." (KII-04, July 11, 2025)

A women community leader from Ntimaru West confirmed the widespread nature of family disruption:

"Yes, family and community relationships have been affected in the sense some ties have been broken, relations have been left without loved ones. The old have been left without children, women without husbands, mothers without children." (KII-01, July 9, 2025)

Focus group discussions revealed the emotional toll of these losses. Participants in Gwitembe shared that "many of us are now taking care of orphaned children whose parents were killed in the conflict. We have lost our own

family members and now we must care for others who have no one left." (FGD-01, July 10, 2025) In Nyabasi West, participants described how "extended family relationships have been broken because families are scattered. Some relatives have fled to other areas and we cannot visit each other because of the danger." (FGD-02, July 11, 2025)

Despite the severity of the conflicts, interview data confirmed that few women had gained formal leadership roles. A local administrator from Gwitembe explained the constraints:

"No, we have not seen any women leadership emerge due to these conflicts. I think it's because this is mostly a physical conflict and we are always on the run and there seems to be no platform to give women an audience. We have young widowed women who are wounded/hurt and lack the strength to voice or lead the fight against the conflict, and plus past advocacy from women have failed. Also, in our culture women are mostly subordinates." (KII-04, July 11, 2025)

However, some limited leadership had emerged in specific contexts. A women community leader from Ntimaru West noted:

"In Ntimaru West, we have seen the emergence of prominent women like Betty Samburu who has been vocal in the fight against conflict. This is because during the conflict at hand, women have been the ones that have been affected most with both the elderly and the young widowed left with no alternative sources of income." (KII-01, July 9, 2025)

Another local administrator mentioned religious leadership as one area where women had found voice:

"Religious leadership has emerged over time, women have been meeting to pray against the war. Some women have gained leadership positions like chiefs, village elders and so on." (KII-06, July 13, 2025)

Focus group participants in Gokeharaka/Getambwega noted that "some women have tried to speak up in community meetings about peace, but often they are not taken seriously by the men. The traditional leaders still prefer to listen to male voices when it comes to decisions about the conflict." (FGD-01, July 10, 2025) However, participants in Ntimaru West acknowledged that "there are a few women who have become more vocal, especially those who have lost their husbands and have to speak for their families now." (FGD-04, July 15, 2025)

The conflicts had forced women to take on new responsibilities, particularly in household management and family protection. A local administrator from Gwitembe explained:

"A lot has changed in the sense that women have to ensure the survival of their young family while the men are in the field protecting the community against the attackers. Therefore, it is in order to say that women have taken charge of households, even in the shortest time that they can access their homes." (KII-04, July 11, 2025)

A women's group representative from Nyabasi East described how women had to unite for survival:

"Women have decided to unite as a way of looking for a solution towards settlement of the conflict. It has brought about disintegration among families affecting the ability of the involved families to make decisions." (KII-08, July 14, 2025)

Focus group discussions revealed the complexity of these new responsibilities. Participants in Ntimaru East explained that "when our husbands go to guard the borders, we become the heads of households. We must make decisions about everything - what the children eat, whether they go to school, how to protect the family if there is an attack." (FGD-05, July 16, 2025) In Nyabasi East, participants shared that "some of us have never made these kinds of decisions before, but we have no choice. We must learn quickly how to manage everything alone while also worrying about whether our husbands will come back alive." (FGD-03, July 12, 2025) These qualitative insights revealed that while the quantitative data showed general patterns of disruption and constraint, the lived reality for Kuria women involved profound trauma, loss, and forced adaptation to

circumstances that had fundamentally altered their social and cultural roles within the community. This finding mirrors with Bendavid *et al.* (2021) global documentation of how armed conflicts create deep psychological wounds that extend far beyond immediate physical violence, though the Kuria context reveals particularly severe cultural disruption compared to their multi-country analysis.

The profound trauma documented among Kuria women supports WHO's (2022) research on conflict-related mental health effects, which found that women in conflict zones experience disproportionate psychological distress, yet the systematic cultural erosion identified in this study suggests that agricultural communities may face more comprehensive identity threats than recognized in existing literature. However, these findings contrast with Aroussi's (2021) research in Israeli-Palestinian contexts where women developed innovative cultural preservation strategies despite trauma, and challenge Tadesse *et al.* (2020) documentation of cultural resilience among Somali women during conflicts, suggesting that the nature of territorial disputes in agricultural settings may create more devastating cultural breakdown than resource conflicts in pastoralist societies. The forced adaptation documented here contradicts the empowerment narratives found in much conflict and gender literature, instead revealing what this study identifies as "adaptive incapacity" where the severity of disruption exceeds women's ability to develop meaningful alternatives within existing constraints, aligning with Bendavid *et al.* (2021) global analysis documenting how certain conflict contexts overwhelm traditional coping mechanisms, while contrasting with Lotwel *et al.* (2021) findings in Turkana where women maintained some adaptive capacity despite severe constraints, challenging optimistic assumptions about women's inherent resilience during crisis periods.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Border conflicts fundamentally disrupted women's socio-cultural lives, creating widespread cultural erosion and family strain while failing to generate meaningful empowerment opportunities in formal leadership roles. The conflicts had their most severe effect on family relationships, with the majority of women reporting significant effects on their relationships with extended family members, indicating that family cohesion, traditionally a cornerstone of Kuria social structure, had been severely compromised. Women experienced reduced ability to participate in traditional ceremonies and altered approaches to teaching cultural values to younger generations, threatening cultural preservation as women traditionally serve as key custodians of Kuria cultural practices. The conflicts forced substantial changes in women's decision-making regarding children's education, with security concerns overriding traditional educational priorities and forcing mothers to choose between children's safety and educational advancement. Despite these significant disruptions, women did not gain meaningful roles in formal conflict resolution or community leadership, with the vast majority reporting no new leadership roles in peace-building initiatives or increased participation in community security decisions, revealing that traditional gender hierarchies persisted even during crisis periods and excluding women from formal community-level peace processes where their mediation skills could have been valuable.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings on socio-cultural effects demonstrate that border conflicts severely disrupted family relationships, reduced women's participation in traditional ceremonies, and compromised their ability to transmit cultural values to younger generations, while simultaneously denying them access to formal leadership and peace-building roles. These findings reveal what this study identifies as "selective disempowerment," where women retain certain traditional responsibilities while losing decision-making authority, indicating that border conflicts can strengthen patriarchal structures rather than create transformative opportunities for gender equality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that Migori County Government develop Border Conflict Women's Protection Policies targeting young widows through existing community health networks and County Peace Committees. Peace-building processes should mandate women's participation by requiring 40% female representation in County Peace Committees and establishing Women's Peace Circles with formal mediation authority at the ward level. Development practitioners should work with local women's groups to establish Women's Cultural Heritage



Centers in each ward, supported by the Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage, to provide safe spaces for traditional ceremonies and cultural transmission activities. School committees should integrate Kuria cultural education into formal curricula with women elders serving as compensated cultural instructors through the Constituency Development Fund. Implementation should occur gradually with funding mobilized through the Women Enterprise Fund and Peace Building and Conflict Management Fund, focusing on building upon women's existing cultural preservation capacities rather than imposing external models.

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