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Pastoralist commons and contestations: Enclosure of Pokot land as a gendered project of accumulation

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Abstract

Recent processes of enclosure in the pastoralist region of West Pokot in Kenya are transforming land use and gendered socio-economic relations. Although scholarship on enclosure in pastoralist societies is well established, its gendered implications are often sidelined or oversimplified. This contribution argues that enclosure operates as both a material and a social process, reconfiguring gender identities, deepening women's structural dependency, and producing new arenas for contestation. As part of my MSc, I conducted three months of ethnographic fieldwork in West Pokot, involving participant observation and 65 semi-structured interviews. My analysis examines how enclosure, primitive accumulation, and the confinement of women to the domestic sphere are reproduced through gendered norms, ideals, and performativity and 'the myth of the patriarchal pastoralist'. At the same time, it demonstrates how women are challenging these emerging dynamics by creating new commons. Focusing on the double burden of income generation and care work, as well as the new forms of dependency arising from the enclosure of land, social relations, and women's bodies, I challenge the widespread policy assumption that women's economic empowerment leads to gender equality in a linear way. Economic participation alone is insufficient; for women to be truly emancipated, they must also be free from conjugal dependency. I conclude that emerging practices based on commons, such as autonomous women's savings groups and fundraisers – termed 'money commoning' – tackle enclosure, primitive accumulation, and confinement at their roots, constituting a more promising step towards emancipation. Thus, the study illuminates locally rooted alternatives to dominant rural development paradigms. Specifically, the findings contribute to debates on the politics and governance of rural development by showing how women negotiate, resist and reconfigure interventions that seeks to reshape pastoralist livelihoods.

Keywords: Commoning, commons, enclosure, gender, pastoralism, primitive accumulation

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