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# Who Moves, Who Stays, Who Is Left Behind?

## A GESI Lens on Pastoral Mobility

Evidence from key informant interviews on migration, displacement and protection through a gender equality and social inclusion lens across pastoral communities in Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and South Africa

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**ABOUT US**

CGIAR aims to address gaps in knowledge about climate change and food security for peace and security policies and operations through a unique multidisciplinary approach. Our main objective is to align evidence from the realms of climate, land, and food systems science with peacebuilding efforts already underway that address conflict through evidence-based environmental, political, and socio-economic solutions.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pastoral mobility has always been a livelihood strategy since time immemorial, not a crisis in itself. But across the East and Horn of Africa, key informant interviews for this study show that climate stress is changing the character of that mobility by stretching migration routes, forcing settlement in unfamiliar or contested territory, and pushing growing numbers of households into displacement rather than planned seasonal movement. Who experiences this shift, and how and why is not uniform. Mobility decisions are shaped by gender, age, disability, marital status and household position, producing sharply different risks for those who move, those who stay behind, and those who are displaced involuntarily.

This brief applies a gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) lens to pastoral mobility, arguing that migration, displacement and protection cannot be addressed as a single undifferentiated policy problem. Women who move face acute protection risks; women left behind absorb the full burden of household survival with reduced support; and women who are also disabled, widowed, elderly or from minority clans face compounding exclusion at every stage. Hence, policy responses that do not disaggregate by who moves, who stays and who is displaced will continue to miss the specific protection failures this evidence identifies.

# WHY THIS MATTERS

Mobility in pastoral systems has historically functioned as an adaptive strategy, as a way of following rainfall, pasture and water rather than a symptom of crisis. Recent academic work on the Horn of Africa describes this more precisely as a set of intersecting (im)mobilities: traditional pastoral movement, sedentarization, forced displacement, and voluntary labour or educational migration all occurring simultaneously within the same communities and often within the same households, shaped in different ways by drought and conflict.

This brief builds on evidence generated specifically for this study through key informant interviews with 20 pastoralist women-led, humanitarian, climate-resilience, policy and peacebuilding organizations across Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and South Africa. That evidence shows these different forms of mobility are not experienced equally. Respondents distinguished consistently between women and girls who migrate and who face acute exposure to GBV, exploitation and unsafe travel and women who are left behind, who absorb full household responsibility with fewer resources and reduced social support. Both groups face risks; the risks are simply different, and policy responses designed around one will not adequately protect the other as their gender alone does not make their experiences homogenous.

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## What the evidence shows

- Pastoral mobility is shifting from a planned livelihood strategy toward increasingly forced, unpredictable movement, including longer routes, rural-to-urban migration, IDP settlement and cross-border movement.
- Women and girls who migrate face disproportionate protection risks such as gender-based violence (GBV), exploitation, unsafe travel, and poor access to sanitation and reproductive health services.
- Women who are left behind assume full responsibility for household survival, often with reduced social and economic support.
- Displaced women frequently lose access to customary resource rights and social protection systems that would otherwise support them.
- Vulnerability compounds risks for widows, elderly women, women with disabilities, adolescent girls and minority-clan women face overlapping barriers at every stage of mobility.
- Somalia shows the most acute displacement and IDP settlement patterns; Kenya and Tanzania show more disruption to traditional grazing-route mobility specifically.



Photo Credit: CGIAR Climate Security

# SITUATING THE EVIDENCE: WHAT THE WIDER LITERATURE SHOWS

The findings on pastoral mobility align closely with recent academic and institutional analysis of climate-linked mobility in the Horn of Africa. Etzold's (2023) reflections on intersecting (im)mobilities in Kenya, drawing on fieldwork in Marsabit County, identify four distinct and simultaneously occurring forms of movement shaped by drought and conflict, notably pastoral mobility, sedentarization, forced displacement, and voluntary labour or educational mobility. This framework offers useful conceptual precision for this brief's core GESI argument, that "mobility" in pastoral contexts is not one phenomenon but several, each carrying a different risk profile for women depending on which form they experience.

Regional analysis from the Research and Evidence Facility on Migration in the Horn of Africa similarly finds that pastoral mobility, historically a voluntary and adaptive response to environmental variability, is increasingly characterized by longer forced movement and rising numbers of cross-border migrants and internally displaced persons, even as many national and regional policy responses continue to frame mobility primarily as a problem to be managed through sedentarization rather than a livelihood strategy to be protected (Research and Evidence Facility, 2022). This mirrors the finding that formal systems have not kept pace with the changing character of pastoral movement.

The gender-based violence risks facing migrating and displaced women identified in this study are substantiated by a growing body of epidemiological evidence. A systematic review and meta-analysis of GBV among refugees and internally displaced women across Africa found that displaced women face elevated risk of violence both during flight and after arrival in camps, where protection mechanisms are frequently insufficient, with economic dependence on male companions or humanitarian aid identified as a significant contributing factor to ongoing vulnerability (Tadesse et al, 2024). A cross-sectional study of internally displaced women in Northwest Ethiopia found a one-year GBV prevalence of 37.9 percent, with young women aged 18 to 29 and those lacking social protection at significantly elevated risk (Workie at al., 2023).

Yet again, a separate mixed-methods study among internally displaced women in Central Ethiopia found that nearly one-third of women had experienced GBV, with almost 80 percent of incidents occurring within IDP camps themselves rather than during flight (Mitiku et al., 2025). All these findings bear direct relevance to this brief's recommendation that displacement responses must treat camp and settlement environments as protection priorities, not just transit risks.

The compounding effect of disability alongside gender and climate vulnerability, identified throughout this study, is corroborated by recent academic work specifically focused on Eastern Africa. A study of women with disabilities across the region found significant barriers to evacuation, access to early-warning systems, inclusive infrastructure and policy participation, while also documenting resilience through community support networks and adaptive household practices. The same study notes that national climate policies, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) rarely address the specific needs of women with disabilities at all.

This gap between documented need and policy attention is precisely the pattern this brief's intersectionality findings describe. Taken together, this literature confirms that our findings reflect well-established regional patterns: pastoral mobility is genuinely diversifying into distinct forms with different risk profiles; displaced women face substantial, quantifiable GBV risk that often peaks after arrival rather than only during flight; and disability-inclusive analysis remains largely absent from the climate and mobility policy frameworks that are supposed to protect the most vulnerable.



# KEY FINDINGS

Header Photo: Dr. Ondřej Havelka (cestovatel)

### 1. Mobility is diversifying, not disappearing

Respondents described a shift from planned seasonal mobility toward longer migration routes, rural-to-urban migration, movement into IDP settlements, and cross-border mobility. In Somalia, displacement and settlement in IDP sites were especially prominent; in Kenya and Tanzania, disruption of traditional grazing routes and longer-distance movement were more frequently emphasized. This diversification of mobility forms was reported by key informants across all four study countries, though the dominant form varies by national context.

This distinction is precisely what Etzold's (2023) intersecting (im)mobilities framework captures i.e. pastoral mobility, sedentarization, forced displacement and labour or educational migration are occurring simultaneously across Horn of Africa communities, each shaped differently by drought and conflict, rather than pastoral movement simply being replaced wholesale by displacement.

## 2. Who moves and who stays face different risks and both severe

Women and girls who migrate face disproportionate protection risks, including GBV, exploitation, unsafe travel, poor access to sanitation and reproductive health services, school dropout, early marriage and psychosocial stress. Women who remain behind, meanwhile, often assume full responsibility for household survival, frequently with reduced social and economic support as networks disperse.

> "Women are increasingly being left with no choice but to be de facto household heads and community caregivers." — FCCCI

The scale of the protection risk facing migrating and displaced women is substantiated by continental epidemiological data: a systematic review and meta-analysis found that displaced women across Africa face elevated GBV risk both during flight and after arrival in camps, compounded by economic dependence that increases vulnerability to exploitation (Tadesse et al, 2024).

## 3. Displacement disrupts customary resource rights and social protection

Displaced women frequently lose access to the customary resource rights and informal social-protection systems that would otherwise support them during crisis i.e. rights and systems that are, in many pastoral contexts, tied closely to physical presence within a specific community or territory. This loss compounds the material hardship of displacement itself.
The Research and Evidence Facility's regional analysis notes that policy responses to climate-linked mobility in the Horn of Africa have often prioritized sedentarization and alternative livelihoods over protecting the mobility - dependent rights and systems that pastoral communities, including women specifically, have historically relied on (Research and Evidence Facility, 2022). We find that this policy orientation deepens rather than reduces the vulnerability of displaced women.

### 4. GBV risk peaks in displacement settings, not only in transit

While protection concerns during migration itself i.e. unsafe travel, exploitation en route / in transit is well recognized, the evidence base indicates that risk does not end on arrival. For instance, a mixed-methods study of internally displaced women in Central Ethiopia found that nearly 80 percent of GBV incidents occurred within IDP camps themselves, primarily perpetrated by intimate partners and family members, rather than during flight ((Mitiku et al, 2025).

Elsewhere, a separate cross-sectional study in Northwest Ethiopia found a one-year GBV prevalence of 37.9 percent among internally displaced women, with young women and those lacking social protection at significantly elevated risk Workie et al, 2023).
These findings have direct implications for how displacement responses are designed, specifically that camp and settlement environments require sustained, structural protection programming, not only transit-phase interventions focused on the journey itself.

### 5. Vulnerability compounds across intersecting identities

Widows, divorced women, adolescent girls, elderly women, women with disabilities, displaced women and minority clan women experience overlapping barriers that are not simply additive but compounding, as each additional axis of exclusion narrows access to assets, services, mobility and protection further. Disability-focused respondents specifically highlighted that infrastructure, communication and programme design frequently fail to accommodate women with disabilities during both migration and displacement.

Again, this is strongly corroborated by recent academic research focused specifically on women with disabilities in Eastern Africa's climate context, which documents significant barriers to evacuation, early-warning access and policy participation, alongside a near-total absence of disability specific provisions in national climate adaptation policy frameworks (Nyasimi et al, 2026). The same body of literature notes that data on displaced persons with disabilities is rarely disaggregated by gender, making it difficult for humanitarian actors to even identify the scale of the compounded risk this population faces (UN-DESA, 2016).



# THE CORE POLICY ARGUMENT

Header Photo: CGIAR Climate Security

The evidence in this brief supports a central argument, notably that pastoral mobility policy cannot treat migration, displacement and staying-behind as a single undifferentiated category and cannot treat pastoralist women as a single undifferentiated group within that category.

Distinct forms of mobility carry distinct risks, noting protection risks in transit, resource and support loss for those left behind, camp-based GBV risk for the displaced, and compounding exclusion for women with disabilities, elderly, widowed or from minority clans.

Significant to note is that policy and programming that responds to ‘pastoral mobility’ as one problem, or to "pastoralist women" as one population, will systematically miss the specific protection failures this evidence identifies at each stage.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are derived directly from the key informant interview findings presented in this brief and are further supported by the regional and global literature reviewed above. They translate this brief's core argument, that mobility, displacement and staying-behind require distinct protection responses, not a single generic mobility policy into specific institutional actions, naming the mechanism, the responsible actors, and existing standards to adopt.

### 1. Disaggregated Mobility Policy

- Disaggregate mobility policy by movement type - design distinct protection and support responses for planned pastoral mobility, forced displacement, sedentarization and labour or educational migration, rather than a single generic mobility policy, following the analytical distinctions established in the regional academic literature (Etzold, 2023).

- Support women who stay behind, not only those who move - recognize and resource the household and community burden absorbed by women who remain in place as mobile household members migrate, including support for social networks that disperse during displacement.

### 2. Protection Programming Beyond Transit

- Resource GBV prevention specifically for camp and settlement environments - ensure GBV prevention and response services are funded and staffed for post-arrival settings specifically, given documented evidence that a substantial share of GBV incidents against displaced women occur after arrival rather than during flight.

- Apply established GBV coordination standards from the point of settlement - implement the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Minimum Standards for GBV prevention and response from the earliest stage of camp or settlement establishment, rather than treating GBV programming as a later addition to shelter and food response.

### 3. Preserving Rights Through Displacement

- Protect customary resource rights through displacement - develop mechanisms that preserve or restore displaced women's access to customary resource rights and social-protection systems, rather than treating these as automatically forfeited upon displacement.

### 4. Disability-Disaggregated Data and Inclusion

- Adopt the Washington Group Short Set as the standard disaggregation tool - require humanitarian and displacement data systems operating in pastoral areas to use the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning i.e. the tool already standardized by WFP and endorsed jointly by UNICEF, WHO and UNDP for disability data disaggregation to close the current data gap that prevents accurate identification of compounded vulnerability.

- Integrate disability inclusion into climate and mobility policy directly - ensure National Adaptation Plans, Nationally Determined Contributions and displacement-response frameworks explicitly address the needs of women with disabilities, closing a gap the literature identifies.

### 5. Intersectional Protection Design

- Build intersectional protection protocols - design protection services that explicitly account for intersecting / compounding vulnerabilities e.g. widowhood, disability, age, minority-clan status, rather than using single-axis gender programming alone.

## ABOUT THIS SERIES

This brief is the fourth in a five-part CGIAR- OPPD -SAWONET policy brief series drawing on key informant interviews with pastoralist women-led, humanitarian, climate-resilience and peacebuilding organizations across Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and South Africa. It builds on the flagship brief's overarching findings (Brief 1), the adaptation-leadership evidence in Brief 2, and the rangeland governance and peacebuilding findings in Brief 3 and precedes the companion brief on aligning education systems with pastoral mobility.

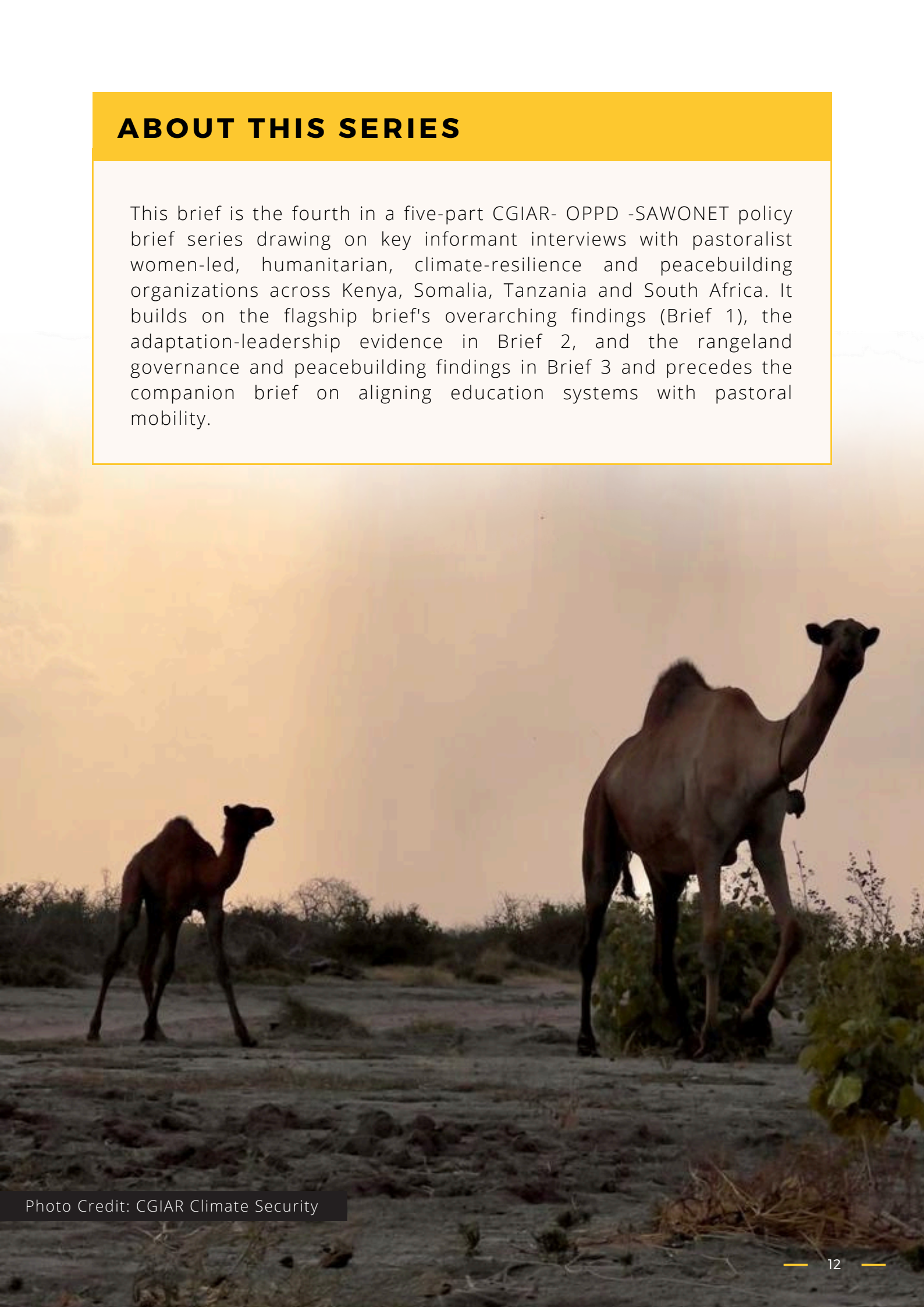


Photo Credit: CGIAR Climate Security

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