

Oil discoveries in Turkana six years ago haven't delivered benefits for women

By [Kennedy Mkuu](#)

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[Turkana](#) is a vast dry, remote county, in northwest Kenya, home [to around](#) 1.5 million nomadic livestock herders. The discovery of [commercially viable](#) oil deposits six years ago brought with it great expectations of economic transformation of the historically under served area.



Flickr/TomAlbinson

The discovery of oil has indeed had major implications for communities in the area. But not all the changes have been positive.

We have been [conducting](#) research in [Turkana](#) over the past four years with the aim of understanding how the [extractive industry](#) affects communities and triggers conflict. We have done interviews and had group discussions with key decision makers, civil society groups and community members.

The research identified some key challenges. That women weren't properly represented in decisions made between the oil company and community. And that they were particularly vulnerable to problems brought about by displacement, due to the oil extraction. Also, the extractive industry has brought a migration of workers, transformed the local economy from livestock-based to cash-based and blocks access to traditional grazing lands.

This matters hugely for the welfare of all Turkana people, the fabric of Turkana society, and, ultimately, the security of the country.

Oil, change and insecurity

Some local people have benefited from the new opportunities. The oil company has brought a demand for manual labour, local raw materials and developed a small hospitality industry. It has also provided a few bursaries and classrooms. But many local people face economic exclusion, as well ongoing uncertainty over their land and livelihoods.

The industry is [set to](#) expand in the coming years with the construction of a total of 25 wellpads – areas cleared for a drilling rig – which will need pipelines, roads, rail and a central processing facility.

Despite this, the local community have no guarantee that they will benefit from the development of the oil sites. Current legal, policy and institutional frameworks are too weak to protect pastoralists and other indigenous rural communities from losing land to investment and development.

Turkana pastoralists have been showing their frustration by staging a number of demonstrations and have even put down some road blocks. There have been [at least](#) two large-scale demonstrations which resulted in the major destruction of property and disruption of the oil company's [operations](#).

Turkana are well armed [and there](#) is a significant threat that the unrest could escalate into banditry and violence. Earlier research [points to](#) the importance of relative deprivation mixed with extraction commodities in causing turmoil – a situation [already witnessed](#) in the notorious Niger Delta.

But the impact of the extractive industry is felt particularly acutely by women.

Tough time for women

A report by the United Nations [notes that](#)

“ women face disproportionate risks in their engagements with extractive industries operations including: harassment, gender-based violence, HIV, and extreme levels of violence in resource-based conflicts. ”

There is gender bias at all stages of project activities. Limited by illiteracy, workloads, resources and position, women are even less involved than men in the initial stages of impact assessment and consultation by companies. Men are the biggest beneficiaries when it comes to salaried jobs and are [usually more](#) likely to be the ones compensated for any disturbances.

Women also often lack the capacity to negotiate for better contractual deals and are sometimes [subjected to](#) sexual exploitation.

In Lokichar, Turkana, local women [have been](#) employed by the oil company as community liaison officers or traffic marshals, while others are in camp and catering services. But some of these women are staying in camps for several weeks without going home, putting a strain on families. Another challenge is that they're paid in cash which could lead to domestic conflict, given the patriarchal nature of the community.

Women have turned to other sources of income. With new roads and migrant workers, the sex industry is growing. In times of drought in particular, adolescent girls are [forced](#) to help their families in this way. This has led to an inevitable rise in HIV/AIDS cases in Turkana towns – like Lokichar and Lodwar, placing enormous burdens on poor families. And [in a](#) society which has polygamy, low condom use and high breastfeeding rates, HIV can easily spread to other family members.

Finally, if the tensions continue to rise, conflict and displacement will make it more challenging for women to run and provide food for their households.

Legal and policy considerations

In recent years, there have been [major improvements](#) to the legal and policy framework which deal with gender discrimination in Kenya. This includes the adoption of the 2010 Constitution [which focuses](#) on equality and protection from discrimination.

But there's a gap in the law – legislation relating to the extractive industry is not gender specific.

This is a problem for the country as a whole. Gender equity in every sphere is critical to sustainable development as no society can develop – economically, politically, or socially – when half of its population is marginalised. As the Turkana case highlights, there must be investment in women and ensure their access to information and participation in decision-making, if the social fabric is to be preserved.

Yunia Atieno, an advocate of the High Court of Kenya and employee of [Kituo Cha Sheria](#), contributed to the writing of this article

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kennedy Mkutu, *United States International University*

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