



# Women's Experiences in the Context of Climatic Crisis: An African Theo-Eco-feminist Approach to food insecurity in Kenya

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## Abstract

Climate change is a pressing global issue that profoundly impacts our planet and its inhabitants. In response, the international community has recognized the urgency to address this challenge and has set forth the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for action. SDG 13 specifically focuses on climate action, emphasizing the need for climate mitigation and adaptation measures to combat climate change effectively. Food insecurity in Kenya as occasioned by climate change has particularly affected women in rural parts of Kenya specifically in Kitui County. To address this problem, the study sought to analyze the impact of climate change on food insecurity in Kitui County, with a particular focus on its effects on rural women, and to understand how women have contributed to curbing food insecurity, with a focus on their roles in agricultural production. This study adopted an African-Theo-Eco-feminist approach as an intersectional response to climate change, emphasizing women's critical role in environmental sustainability and community resilience. A comprehensive desktop review and qualitative in-depth interviews coupled with semi-structured and open-ended questions were used to examine how women have contributed to addressing food insecurity. Key findings reveal that climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities, disproportionately affecting women's access to resources and decision-making power in agricultural contexts. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on gender-responsive climate change adaptation, offering insights into the complex interplay in theological, ecological, and feminist perspectives in the Kenyan context. The findings have implications for policy development, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies that recognize and leverage women's unique knowledge and experiences.

**Keywords:** African Theo-Eco-feminist, climate crisis, food insecurity, gender equality, women's experience.

## Introduction

Climate change is a global crisis that affects many different aspects of human life, including food security, economic stability, and social structures. However, its impact is not felt equally across all levels of society. Women, especially in regions like Kenya, are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis due to the complex interaction of social, economic and environmental factors. This paper focuses on the experiences of women in the face of the climate crisis, with a specific emphasis on food insecurity in Kenya. This study adopts an African eco-feminist approach to examine the intricate interplay between gender dynamics, climate change impacts, and food production systems. It proposes gender-sensitive and ecologically sustainable strategies to mitigate food insecurity. The study employed a qualitative research approach, with a phenomenological research design utilizing in-depth interviews, and semi-structured and open-ended questions as the primary data collection method. This methodological choice aligns with the study's African eco-feminist framework,



facilitating a deep engagement with indigenous knowledge systems and enabling the privilege to local voices and experiences.

## **Background on Climate Change and Food Insecurity**

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, with far-reaching implications for food security, environmental sustainability, and social equity. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023 has warned about the severe risks of climate change to global food systems, affecting crop yields and food production worldwide. According to Botreau and Cohen, (2020:66-68) approximately 60% of chronically hungry people are women. Women produce 60-80% of food in developing countries but often face limited access to resources, hindering their ability to adapt to climate change. A comprehensive study by Ng'ang'a and Gichuki, (2022) found that climate change is likely to reduce crop yields by up to 30% in some regions by 2050, with sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia being particularly at risk.

This global trend is further complicated by regional and local variations in climate impacts and adaptive capacities. A comprehensive study by Ayub et al., (2023:2) found that climate-induced crop failures and water scarcity increase women's workload, with many spending up to 14 hours a day on unpaid care and domestic work in climate-stressed regions. Moreover, climate change-related disasters have been shown to have a more severe impact on women. Research by Abid and Abid (2021:1) indicates that women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die during climate-related disasters. This heightened vulnerability is often linked to societal norms that limit women's mobility, decision-making power, and access to information and resources.

Africa stands out as one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change-induced food insecurity. The African Union's Agenda 2063 recognizes climate change as a significant threat to the continent's development aspirations, including the goal of achieving food security for all Africans (*African Union*, 2021). Recent research by Adekunle et al., (2021:88-89) highlights how climate change is intensifying existing challenges in African agriculture, such as land degradation, water scarcity, and pest outbreaks. A study by Andati et al., (2022:6-8), across several African countries found that women farmers are more likely to experience crop failures due to their limited access to climate-resilient seeds, modern farming technologies, and extension services which reduce women's adaptive capacity to climate shocks, perpetuating cycles of poverty and food insecurity.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (2021:20), East Africa, including Kenya, has experienced a more significant warming trend compared to the global average. Additionally, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change IPCC (2021) reports that rainfall patterns in East Africa, particularly in Kenya, are becoming increasingly unpredictable, with delayed start and early end of the rainy season and extended periods of dry weather. Additionally, Huho and Mugalavai, (2010:1), demonstrated how erratic rainfall patterns and prolonged droughts have disrupted traditional farming calendars, leading to crop failures and increased food prices in local markets. The impacts of climate change on women are specific, reflecting local socio-economic conditions and cultural norms, leading to increased food insecurity. Women, primarily responsible for household food security, face pressure to secure alternative food sources and income. Climate change in Kenya has been linked to increased incidences of gender-based violence. During drought-induced resource scarcity, women and girls face a higher risk of sexual exploitation and domestic violence as they travel longer distances to collect water and firewood.

Current approaches to climate change adaptation and food security in Africa frequently rely on Western scientific models and technological solutions, which may not fully capture the



complexities of local socio-cultural contexts or the gendered dimensions of food systems. This disconnect can lead to ineffective or unsustainable interventions that fail to leverage the rich traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual practices of African communities, particularly women. Drawing from Mercy Oduyoye's (2001) influential work, African women hold a unique and powerful position at the intersection of land stewardship and spiritual wisdom. This understanding moves beyond traditional Western academic frameworks to centre indigenous African epistemologies, which have long been overlooked in scholarly discussions.

### **The Intersection of Gender, Climate, and Food Security**

The intricate relationship between gender, climate change, and food security reflects a profound divergence from the divine mandate outlined in Genesis 1:28-29, where God entrusts humanity with stewardship of the Earth and promises abundant provision:

God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and every living creature that moves on the ground.' Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree with fruit and seed in it. They will be yours for food.'

This biblical foundation of environmental care and food security stands in stark contrast to the current reality, where climate change disrupts this intended harmony, disproportionately affecting women. This intersection has strained both ecological systems and social structures, creating a crisis that demands an integrated response that honours the original calling of stewardship while addressing the gendered impacts of climate-induced food insecurity. Additionally, the gendered facets of food insecurity present a marked departure from the biblical portrayal of a virtuous woman, as depicted in Proverbs 31:16-17:

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings, she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks."

This scriptural representation envisions women empowered to make agricultural decisions and significantly contribute to household food security. Nevertheless, the present global reality reveals a multifaceted array of challenges that disproportionately impact women in agriculture and food systems. Mercy Oduyoye (2001) asserts that African women's theology originates from the lament of women labouring in fields to sustain their families. FAO, (2023) reports that globally, women make up 43% of the agricultural workforce but control less than 20% of the land. This contrasts with the biblical depiction of women independently owning and cultivating land. Climate change may push up to 130 million people into poverty by 2030, with women in agrarian economies bearing a disproportionate burden. Njuki et al., (2022) emphasize the limited decision-making power of women in agricultural households, which has implications for food security and health outcomes. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) states that iron-deficiency anaemia affects over 30% of pregnant women globally, increasing maternal mortality by 20% and is linked to household food allocation practices. Awiti, (2022: 4) highlighted a gender gap in climate change adaptation strategies, with men adopting mechanized adaptations and women relying on traditional methods. This disparity contradicts the proactive woman described in Proverbs 31.

These global trends underscore the interconnected nature of gender, agriculture, and food security, highlighting a reality that is far from the biblical vision of a woman who "sets about her work vigorously." They stress the need for comprehensive, gender-sensitive approaches to agricultural development and food security interventions to bridge the gap between scriptural ideals and current realities. The framework of the African Theo-Eco-feminist approach offers a valuable perspective for understanding and addressing these complex, gendered experiences of food insecurity, potentially guiding us towards a future where women



in agriculture can more fully embody the empowered, productive ideal woman presented in Proverbs 31.

### **Women's Agro-Based Livelihoods in Kitui County**

Women in Kitui County are extensively involved in various aspects of agricultural production. Their participation spans the entire agricultural value chain, from land preparation to post-harvest activities. According to Phiri (1996:156), "African women are not just passive recipients of culture but active participants in food production and environmental conservation which is evident in women's roles as primary cultivators, seed savers, and knowledge holders of traditional farming practices. Notably, Onyalo (2019:4-6), argues that women in rural Kenya often work up to 16 hours a day in agricultural activities, while also managing household chores and caregiving responsibilities limiting their participation in education and economic activities. This time constraint reinforces existing patterns of marginalization and financial exclusion. This observation is particularly significant in understanding the complex dynamics of gender and agricultural labour in the region.

On the same note, substantial evidence indicates that crop farming constitutes the cornerstone of women's economic participation. Of particular significance is the cultivation of diverse crop portfolios, encompassing both staple cereals (maize, sorghum, and millet) and protein-rich legumes beans and cowpeas. In this context, Liru, (2014) and Phiri et al., (2022) notes that "women are often responsible for cultivating food crops for household consumption, while men tend to focus on cash crops." This gendered division of agricultural labour merits careful consideration, as it fundamentally shapes household food security outcomes. According to Kilonzo (2022:5-8), women possess valuable traditional knowledge regarding tree species that can enhance soil fertility, provide livestock fodder, and generate additional income through forest products. This dual engagement in livestock rearing and agroforestry not only contributes to household economic stability but also advances environmental conservation efforts and climate change mitigation strategies. Moreover, the environmental advantages of agroforestry, particularly enhanced water retention and reduced soil erosion, strengthen the resilience of agricultural livelihoods in the context of climate change. As Oduyoye (2001:29) aptly observes, "The story of African women is intertwined with the story of the land." This fundamental connection underscores the critical importance of developing policies and interventions that acknowledge and support women's pivotal role in agriculture and natural resource management within Kitui County. Such recognition is essential for sustaining and enhancing these vital contributions to household food security and economic stability.

### **Impacts of Climate Change on Women's Livelihoods**

Research shows that climate change has a greater impact on women due to existing social, economic, and cultural inequalities (Awiti, 2022:3-6) . This analysis highlights several critical impacts. Firstly, economic vulnerability is a significant challenge because women have limited access to essential resources such as land, credit, and technology. Their primary responsibility for food production and household management makes them especially susceptible to climate-induced disruptions, like droughts, floods, and erratic weather patterns, which can greatly affect food security and household income.(Onwutuebe, 2019:3-4). Health implications are also important, with climate change posing distinct challenges to women's reproductive health and increasing heat-related illnesses due to elevated temperatures and extreme weather events (p. 4). Additionally, the degradation of water quality and availability introduces additional health risks, particularly affecting maternal health outcomes. The erosion of social and cultural structures under climate stress significantly affects women's status and well-being for they bear the primary responsibility for maintaining social cohesion in increasingly precarious conditions, which disrupts their ability to adapt.(Awiti, 2022) This amplifies gender inequities and highlights the urgent need for adaptation strategies that address women's



resource challenges and support their roles in community resilience. A concerning issue is the lack of decision-making power for women in climate-related policy and environmental management (p.7-10). This underrepresentation often results in interventions that neglect their specific needs, perpetuating gender inequalities and hindering effective climate action. Additionally, women face heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges like depression and anxiety, especially in communities impacted by climate-related disasters (Chersich et al., 2018:8). These psychological effects compound the significant challenges of livelihood losses and displacement.

### **African Theo Eco-Feminist Approach to Food Insecurity in Kenya.**

The African Theo-Eco-Feminist approach integrates African theology, ecology, and feminism, emphasizing the spiritual connection between women and nature for environmental and social restoration (Kaunda, 2016:3). It challenges patriarchal and colonial narratives that marginalize women's ecological insight. According to Owusu (2021:55-57), African Theo-Eco-Feminism centralizes the belief that the earth is a sacred entity and posits that women have a unique spiritual bond with the land. In line with this, women in Kitui demonstrate remarkable resilience through adaptive strategies that blend spiritual and practical approaches. This theoretical framework suggests that addressing food insecurity requires interventions that recognize and support women's multifaceted roles as spiritual, ecological, and economic agents. Owusu (2021:47-48) argues that this framework challenges prevailing patriarchal and colonial narratives while aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals' vision of environmental stewardship. Significantly, it reframes African women not as passive victims of climate-induced food insecurity, but as active, spiritually empowered agents whose traditional ecological knowledge and practices offer vital solutions for contemporary climate challenges. This culturally rooted approach provides a unique lens for understanding and addressing current environmental challenges, particularly in the Kenyan context, where women's traditional roles and rituals serve as profound resources for building resilience in the face of climatic crises.

### **A Case Study of Kitui County, Kenya**

Mwikali, (pseudonym) a resilient 45-year-old mother of four, lives in a parched rural village in Kitui County, Kenya. For generations, her family has eked out a living from their small farm, but the increasingly erratic rainfall brought on by climate change has made it nearly impossible to grow enough food. "When I was a girl, the rains would come at the same time every year - we knew exactly when to plant our maize, beans, and cowpeas," Mwikali recalls. "But now, the seasons are all mixed up. Last year, I lost my entire crop to the drought. I had to watch helplessly as the seedlings withered in the scorching sun. It was the worst feeling, not being able to feed my children."

Mwikali is not alone in her struggle. Across Kitui, women like her have had to adapt to the changing climate, turning to foraging in the semi-arid shrublands for wild spinach, called "Muveke," and small, thorny "Matululu" fruits to supplement their meager harvests. Seeking strength in numbers, Mwikali and her neighbours formed a women's collective group called "Aka Aimi." Together, they pooled their limited resources, shared drought-resistant seeds, and learned new farming techniques like drip irrigation from a local NGO. "For a while, Aka Aimi was our lifeline," Mwikali says. "We were able to grow kale, tomatoes, and other vegetables, even when the rains failed. We could feed our families and even sell the surplus at the market. We finally felt like we had some control over our lives again."

However, the group's momentum proved difficult to sustain. As funding from the NGO dried up and government support failed to materialize. Eventually, we found ourselves struggling to maintain the irrigation systems and purchase essential supplies. Without the resources to keep their communal plots productive, the members of Aka Aimi slowly drifted away, returning to





their efforts to eke out a living from their parched lands. "It was heartbreaking to see the group fall apart," Mwikali laments, her eyes filled with sorrow. "We had been so hopeful, but the poverty and lack of support in our community was just too much to overcome. Now, I'm back to foraging in the bush and praying that the rains will come." "If only we had more support and recognition for the work we do," Mwikali says, her voice laced with determination, with the right resources and a seat at the table, I know we can build a better future for our families and our community.

Mwikali's story exemplifies the delicate balance between human needs and natural systems, as described in Psalm 104:14-15: *"He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts."* This passage underscores the divine provision through nature, which is now threatened by climate change, directly affecting women's ability to provide for their families. Kitui County, located in eastern Kenya, offers a striking example of women's experiences with food insecurity. According to (Bukachi et al., 2021), "Kitui, being 90% arid or semi-arid, is one of Kenya's most climate-vulnerable regions, with women bearing the brunt of its recurrent food crises". The region's climate, characterized by high rainfall variability, prolonged droughts, and high temperatures, contrasts sharply with the abundant provision described in Psalm 104:14-15. The warming climate is affecting the length of the growing season, seed germination, grain filling, and food security, challenging the divine order in which God "makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate." Milelu et al. (2017) reported that "Kitui women, traditionally cultivating maize and beans, are shifting to drought-resistant crops like sorghum, millet, and cowpeas. However, male-controlled markets often undervalue these 'women's crops'" (p.2). This shift in cultivation practices represents women's efforts to adapt to a changing environment that no longer reliably provides "bread that sustains their hearts."

These practices resonate with the recognition of divine provision in Psalms, as women seek spiritual strength in the face of environmental challenges. The scarcity of water, a resource central to the Psalm's imagery of God's provision, has become a critical issue. Moreover, Bukachi et al. (2021), emphasize that "During droughts, Kitui women and girls walk up to 8 hours daily for water. This not only causes physical strain but also increases their vulnerability to sexual violence" (p.3-4). This reality contrasts with the Psalm's vision of abundance, where water flows freely to nourish the earth.

Mwikali's account of crop failures, reliance on wild plants, and the importance of community support underscores the stark disparity between the current reality and the Psalm's portrayal of abundance. The African Theo-Eco-feminist approach recognizes the deep spiritual connection women have with the land, echoing the Psalm's celebration of God's provision through nature. It emphasizes traditional ecological knowledge, women's leadership in environmental stewardship, and holistic approaches addressing practical and spiritual dimensions of food security. As climate change challenges the divine order described in Psalm 104:10-15, women in Kitui County highlight the urgent need for interventions that support their resilience, honour their spiritual connection to the land, and work towards restoring the balance between human needs and natural systems. The evidence substantially demonstrates how climate change impacts are profoundly gendered, with women bearing disproportionate burdens in securing food and maintaining household resilience in the face of environmental degradation. A compelling eco-feminist analysis reveals how women's intimate knowledge of local ecosystems, as reflected in Psalm 104:14-15's recognition of nature's sacred provision, offers crucial insights for addressing food insecurity. This indigenous wisdom, often marginalized in conventional development approaches, emerges as a vital foundation for building climate-resilient food systems.

Furthermore, the findings convincingly demonstrate that effective solutions must necessarily emerge from the collective experiences and leadership of women in affected communities



which calls for a paradigm shift that recognizes women not merely as victims of climate change and food insecurity, but as powerful agents of transformation. Their daily interactions with local ecosystems, combined with traditional agricultural knowledge, position them uniquely to develop sustainable adaptation strategies.

By centring on women's leadership and traditional ecological knowledge, an eco-feminist initiative could empower the Kitui women to revive and strengthen their collective efforts. This would involve securing long-term funding and technical assistance to sustain the irrigation systems and other climate-smart agricultural practices. Crucially, it would also mean elevating women's voices in decision-making processes at the community and government levels, ensuring their needs and solutions are prioritized. Moreover, an eco-feminist framework would recognize the women's role as custodians of the land and natural resources and support their efforts to preserve biodiversity and ecosystem health.

This holistic approach, grounded in gender equity and environmental sustainability, could help the women of Kitui break the cycle of poverty and adapt to the changing climate with resilience and self-determination. In conclusion, this analysis strongly suggests that addressing food insecurity in Kitui County requires a fundamental reorientation toward eco-feminist principles that centre women's knowledge, validate their experiences, and recognize their crucial role in maintaining the delicate balance between human needs and natural systems. Such an approach not only addresses immediate food security challenges but also contributes to building more resilient and equitable communities in the face of ongoing environmental change. Women in Kitui demonstrate remarkable resilience through adaptive strategies that blend spiritual and practical approaches.

## Conclusion

The case of Kitui County serves as a valuable model for addressing food insecurity in the face of climate change. The leadership of women in utilizing traditional environmental knowledge, fostering community-based initiatives, and adopting sustainable practices demonstrates their pivotal role in achieving food security. Through recognizing and supporting these efforts, a more just and holistic approach to tackling food insecurity can be achieved. This resonates with the transformative vision of the Theo-Eco-feminist approach, which centres marginalized voices and challenges traditional paradigms to promote social justice and environmental well-being. Furthermore, the exploration through the lens of African Theo-Eco-feminists presents a landscape that is both challenging and hopeful. The most compelling evidence of this theory's impact is its tangible empowerment of Kenyan women. African Theo-Eco-feminism has evolved from an academic concept to a lived philosophy, enabling women to reclaim their roles. The language in the text maintains a delicate balance between scholarly rigour and moral urgency. This balance is especially clear in the call to action. The texts end with a poignant image of a woman in the field, reminding us that behind every data point is a life, a story, and wisdom that could guide us through this crisis.

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