

# Water and Women in East Africa

by Annabelle Waitutu



*Veronica Nzoki has been a resident of Endui in the Mwingi District in Eastern Kenya for almost 50 years. She could still remember how the water flowed throughout the year, enabling them to grow food that will help them survive the dry spells. But this is no longer possible today.*

**In Rough Times.** Veronica Nzoki has been used with the dry spells in Mwingi but not those that they had in more recent times. They could hardly survive.

Photo by the author.

**Rains** have become erratic that the rivers are dry most of the time, resulting in higher chances for crop failure.

As she recounted the impact of the recent drought that lasted for three years, “Crops have failed for the last two seasons and our livestock have been starving to death. For the first time, Kiiya Dam which was constructed by the colonial government more than 50 years ago, has dried up completely in 2009. This has never happened here before.”

Women like her were certainly not spared especially as water collection has become a full-time job. This has prevented them from engaging in other activities and tapping other opportunities. As she described a typical day, “We leave at six o’clock in the morning to the nearest spring. We find a long queue. By the time we draw water and get back home,

it is well past mid-day. This leaves us with no energy for other activities. For those of us with small businesses, we have to close them down or leave them unattended in order to fetch water for our households and businesses.”

Although mothers are delegating tasks, more and more children especially girls are becoming involved. But they are also losing the opportunities to study. Income levels have also fallen that it has also become difficult to send children to school. Although some animals have survived, they could not be sold as they have lost significant amount of body mass.

Indeed one of the most widespread and potentially devastating impacts of climate change in East Africa will be changes in the frequency, intensity and predictability of precipitation. It has been suggested that

**Withdrawing White.** Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak has been one of the better indicators of the drastic changes in the environment and consequently, in the lives of people who have been dependent on the mountain. In seven years, from 1993 to 2000, its snow cap has reduced by 80 per cent.

Source: NASA. (18 December 2002). "Melting Snows of Kilimanjaro." URL: [http://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/stories/kilimanjaro\\_20021216/index.html](http://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/stories/kilimanjaro_20021216/index.html)

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

East Africa will experience warmer temperatures, with a five to 20 per cent increased rainfall from December to February and five to 10 per cent decrease rainfall from June to August by 2050 (Hulme et al., 2001; IPCC, 2001). Not only are these changes not uniform throughout the year, they will likely compound other unpredictable events. It may be likely that such increased precipitation will happen through few but massive storms during the wet season. Thus, aggravating problems on erosion and water management issues. It is also expected that there will be less precipitation in East Africa during the already dry season, causing more frequent and severe droughts and hastening desertification in the region (WWF).

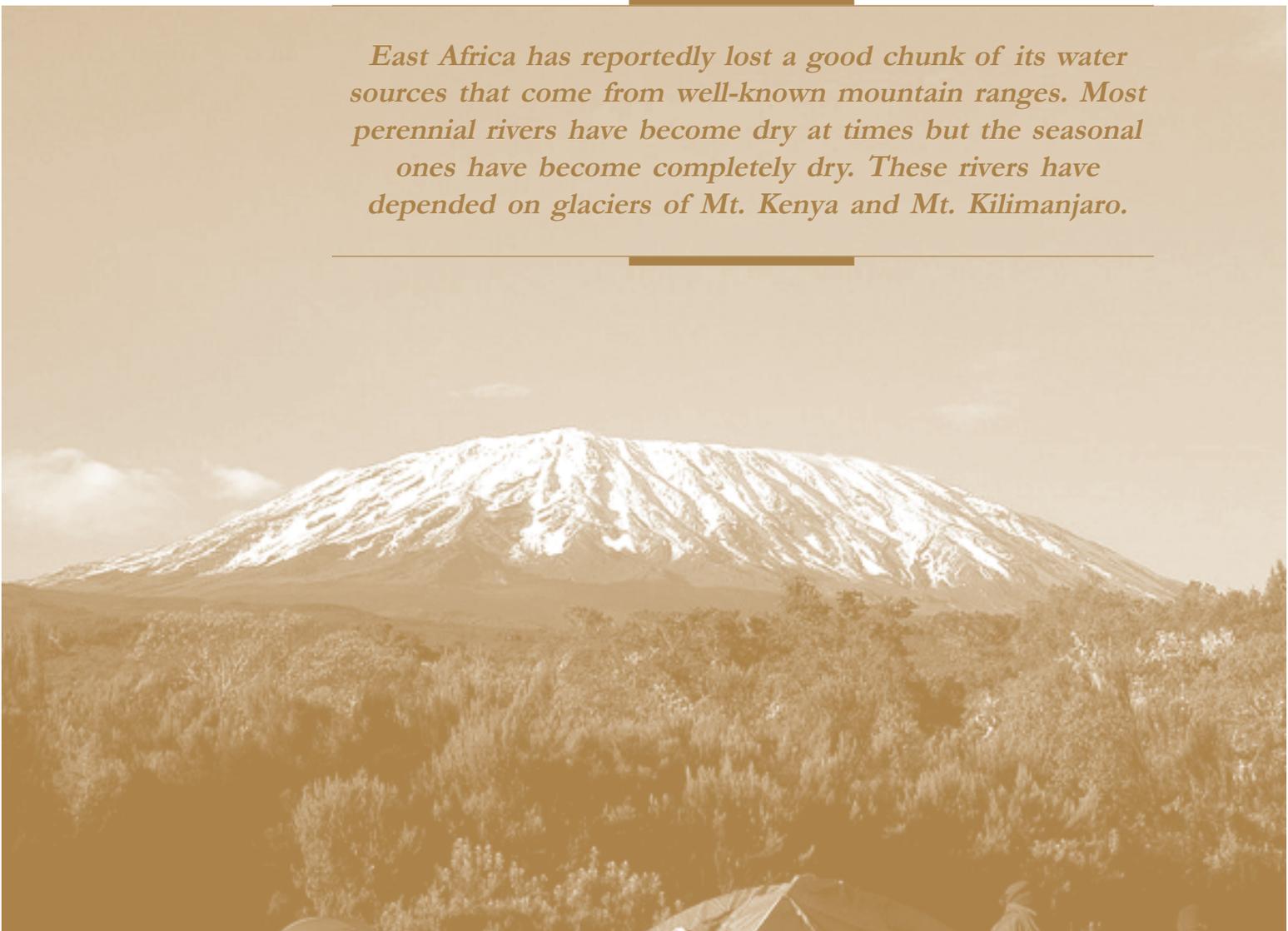
East Africa has reportedly lost a good chunk of its water sources that come from well-known mountain ranges. Most perennial rivers have become dry at times but the seasonal ones have become completely dry. These rivers have depended on glaciers of Mt. Kenya and Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Mt. Kenya is the main water catchment area for two large rivers in Kenya; the Tana, the Kenya's largest river and the Ewaso Ng'iro North. This ecosystem is responsible for the water needs of over two million people. Meanwhile the water from Tanzania's Mt. Kilimanjaro flows through the Panagani river.

These river systems in turn feed into the communities' agricultural activities, that constitute 40 per cent of the region's gross

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domestic product (GDP) and provides a living for 80 per cent of East Africans (IFPRI, 2004). Most local communities entirely depend on rains in farming and pastoralism.

Similarly the loss of wetlands has posed new challenges on food security. When I was growing up, my grandmother always asked me to accompany her to nearby springs where she used to plant arrow roots. She would send me back home with a basket full of arrowroots. Today, as I look at the place where my grandmother always sourced her water and arrowroots, I cannot help but feel the devastation. My grandmother is already gone, but so are the springs.

Is this sustainable development? From where will the future generations then draw much needed resources? How do we guarantee women's equality if all the resources that enable them to survive are totally depleted?

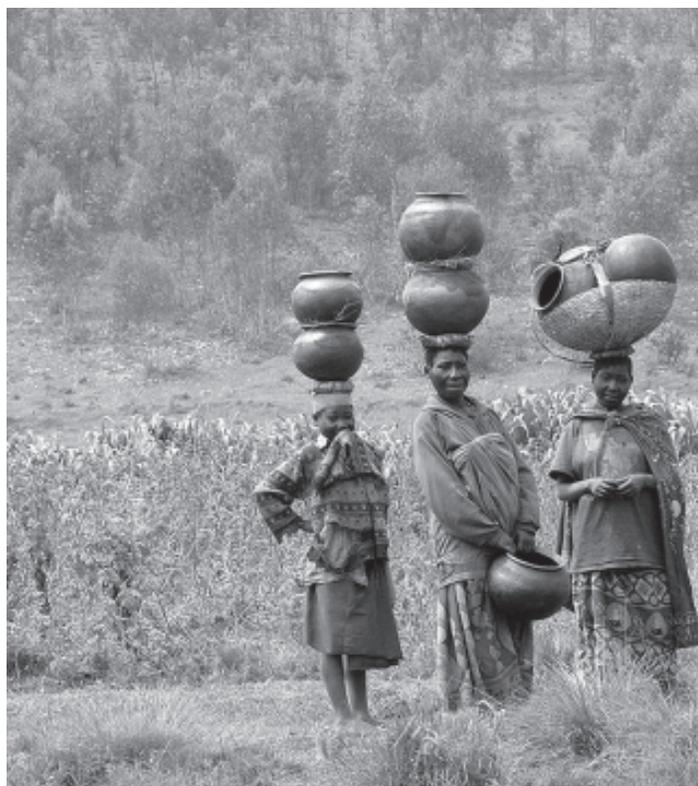
The level of risk in relation to climate change is never entirely determined by nature but is also contingent on economic, cultural, and social relations (Hannan, 2002).

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When environmental stress and climate change happen, women and men are affected differently because of traditional, socially based roles and responsibilities. Their life skills are likewise different, resulting to the variation of self-rescue, adaptation and mitigation strategies and opportunities (Neumayer and Plümperw, 2007). Women and men are also different in terms of their vulnerabilities.



Women and men have their own roles in managing the environment. In East Africa, women remain predominantly responsible for food production, water and firewood collection. As the latter are areas that are immediately affected by climate change, women are deemed more sensitive to the changes in the seasons that affect water quantity and accessibility, among others.

In a climate change adaptation workshop held for the Endui Water Resources Users Association (Endui-WRUA) on October 2009, the participants acknowledged that women are bearing disproportionately the burden of the increased water stress. Being responsible for water collection for the household, they have to walk for at least six hours a day to fetch water from the only surviving water spring named Omwathi, a distance ranging between six to 10 kilometers, depending on which village one is coming from. In addition, they have to queue for about an hour before they can draw water.

But this is not the only responsibility that women have in the household. They have to find and prepare food and ensure good hygiene practices. With erratic rainfall and diminished surface water, growing food has

become a nightmare while hygiene has been compromised.

Without guaranteed access to water, women are less likely to be able to cope with climate change impacts. Their situation is made worse by the fact that women are also poorer than men. For example, in the semi-arid district of Mwingi, drought is no longer new. What has changed though is its intensity that has diminished the capacity of people, especially women to adjust.

Too much or too little water undermines the efforts towards gender equality goals. Women and girls are hardest hit by poor water and sanitation conditions. Likewise, inadequate access to water has several implications on women's advancement.

A research being conducted by the Institute of Environment and Water in Kenya and Uganda, indicates that extreme weather conditions such as flooding has major implications on sustainability of sanitation facilities. In Karagita, a slum based in Naivasha, Kenya, residents noted that when there are floods, the latrines get clogged that some even collapse. This denies women the opportunity to use latrines and results in compromised dignity as privacy is very crucial for women's security and confidence.

Too much or too little water also breeds diseases. Even though they are not afflicted, women and girls usually tend to the sick, further squeezing medical bills within an already meagre budget. This also means non-attendance in school.

Too much or too little water denies women and girls the opportunities to advance themselves. It forces them to spend all their time to reproductive activities that have never been visible. It robs them of the chance to participate in decision-making where they could air their grievances and contribute their knowledge.

Because of their familiarity with the environment where they live and its seasons, women are in a better position to design and implement mitigation and adaptation efforts. They have already done coping mechanisms in their own small ways and these have worked.

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Today, Veronica, who is chairperson of the Endui Water Resource Users Association (Endui-WRUA), along with other women demand the government to bring water closer their homes and enhance water catchment areas in Endui in order to secure their water supply. "We should have boreholes sunk at strategic points in Endui to reduce the distance that women have to walk for water," she asserted. ■



**Life Around Water.**  
Batwa women carry traditional pots in the village of Kiganda in Muramvya in Burundi.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.



# Through the Debris and Dryness in Liberia

By Rosemary Olive Mbone Enie

*Adapting to climate change has already become a necessity for most women belonging to the most vulnerable countries and most vulnerable groups. Worse, it has compounded already difficult challenges that often leave their marks on the bodies of women.*

**Strengthened by Struggles.** Mama Jenneh Sambola is one of the most respected members in Matamo, organising women in advocating for and accessing safe drinking water for their households.

Photo by the author.

**Access** to clean and safe water and adequate sanitation are some of the critical challenges that face Mama Jenneh and other poor communities across Africa. Liberian women are among those first and worst hit by climate change, especially as the country has yet to fully recover from the long civil wars and even though they are not responsible for all the environmental stress.

Mama Jenneh Sambola is a farmer from Than Mafa Village of the Matamo Community, Tewor District, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia. At 65, she heads the Sambola household after the death of her husband over seven years ago. She has seven children most of which have left home but she has several grandchildren under her care.

She is also the president of the community's women's group.

Mama Jenneh grows cassava, pepper, bitter balls, and rice from her farm. She is also a traditional midwife although she has never attended school. Like her, other people in the community also grow rice, cassava, eddos, yams and sweet potatoes. Both men and women are involved in farming but the bulk of the food is produced by the women.

The village has a population of over 2,000 people but it only has one hand pump. This forces women to walk some 12 to 15 miles just to fetch water for drinking, sanitation and other household chores. The two major rivers are the Matamo and the Mafa which runs

*Like many, Mama Jenneh has yet to recover from the civil wars...Basic infrastructures like schools and services like water were destroyed, making it difficult for Mama Jenneh and the other members of her community to resettle. Deadly diseases are still prevalent.*

across the Tewor District area. Schools are also quite far. The Liberian civil wars affected the community school. Even as the Than Burphy Elementary School was set up in 1994, it remains closed due to the lack of resources. The children also need to walk for ten to 15 miles just to attend junior high school. Like many, Mama Jenneh has yet to recover from the civil wars.

When these were raging, people had to flee to and live as refugees in the capital city of Monrovia or other neighbouring countries in West Africa such as Ghana. Basic infrastructures like schools and services like water were destroyed, making it difficult for Mama Jenneh and the other members of her community to resettle.

Deadly diseases are still prevalent. Measles which killed Mama Jenneh's first two daughters in the late 1960s, remain common, along with malaria, cholera and typhoid fever, claiming the lives of thousands in Africa yearly. Liberia also has a shortage of doctors, from 250 in 1989, this number has dwindled to 50, serving 3.5 million people. Communities are still grappling with the needs for markets, schools and clinics.

The Society for Women Empowerment Education and Training (SWEET) Africa Foundation is working closely with Mama Jenneh and the Matamo community in

ensuring their access to clean and safe water and adequate sanitation. In May 2009, it held the very first community dialogue in Than Mafa village with representatives of 26 towns and villages. This occasion allowed people to articulate their needs.

Later SWEET Africa Foundation set up a community-based development agency that it called Matamo Community Development Agency (MACODA). The aim of MACODA is to provide a platform for people centered development, enabling their community to claim ownership for sustainable development of the area. MACODA is currently undertaking a Community Water Project, with the ultimate goal of enabling the community access water services. Moreover

Maima Fahnbullah, Vice-President of MACODA and I are set to implement the Global Women Water Initiative (GGWI) of the Women Earth Alliance, an organisation based in the United States. GGWI is a series of training that will be held in Ghana in 2010, with the aim of enabling women to actively participate in the Community Water Project

This water project is envisioned to be a platform for women to be active, positive and powerful agents of change within the Matamo community. ■

*A Geologist by profession, **Rosemary Olive Mbone Enie** is the President of the Society for Women Empowerment Education and Training (SWEET) Africa Foundation. She also the Gender Ambassador for the Gender and Water Alliance (GWA), Coordinator for the Women Environment and Climate Action Network (WECAN), International Advisory Board Member of the Women Earth Alliance (WEA). She is a member of the steering committees of Gender and Disaster Network (GDN) and Gender and Climate Change (Gender CC)-Women for Climate Justice. She is also the topical curator of the Global Water Sustainability Forum (GWSF) of the World Pulsewire.*