

Maasai women struggle to survive amid forced evictions in conservation area

**Bobby Bascomb**

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- In 2022, the government of Tanzania began relocating Indigenous Maasai pastoralists from their ancestral home inside and near Ngorongoro Conservation Area.
- Locals say they've been forcibly evicted from their land and denied access to grazing areas for livestock and basic social services including health care, education and the right to vote.
- Maasai women have been profoundly affected, some turning to prostitution to survive once communities

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In 2022, the government of Tanzania began forcibly evicting thousands of Indigenous Maasai from 1,500 square kilometers, nearly 600 square miles, of their ancestral land to make way for elite tourism in the renowned Ngorongoro Conservation Area. A large group of Maasai recently [blocked](#) the road leading to Ngorongoro, protesting the evictions and denial of government services including health care, education and the right to vote. After the protests, the president of Tanzania ordered social services be restored, though local residents told Mongabay they still haven't been.

For many Maasai women, some of whom have turned to prostitution to survive, the damage may be irreversible.

"Hundreds of families were pushed into extreme poverty as the government confiscated and sold their livestock in public markets," a local aid worker told Mongabay. A local woman told Mongabay that the communal grazing land used by the Maasai was taken by the government, so any cows that remained grew too skinny to produce milk, a staple food for the Indigenous group and a product they sell to buy other foods.

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including daily arrests, especially for those of us who advocate for human rights. This situation seriously threatens our lives,” a local woman told Mongabay in an email.

In [July 2022](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) analyzed satellite images of the area, revealing that 90 homesteads and animal enclosures within the demarcated area had been burned to the ground.



Ngorongoro Conservation Area. Image by Bobby Bascomb

The government established a new community for people evicted from Ngorongoro at Msomera, near the coast, roughly 400 kilometers (250 miles) southeast. Nearly [10,000 people](#) and 40,000 livestock have moved to Msomera and other communities selected by the government. An [HRW](#) summary from July 2024 reports that only the head of household, generally understood to be a man, can register a family for relocation. So, very often women are excluded from the decision-making process. Furthermore, the government didn't seek the free, prior and informed consent of Maasai residents before creating the relocation plan for upward of 100,000 people, the summary notes.

Local sources say some men moved to neighboring countries to find work as guards, but many people, particularly women, refused to move to an entirely different land.

“Their ancestors have been buried on that particular land,” a local leader told Mongabay in a phone call. “Traditionally you are not allowed to leave your ancestors behind. The Maasai believe that if you bury someone in the land, their spirit will remain and you have a responsibility to your family to take care of them and protect the same land.”

A local woman, who asked to be called Nadutari, told Mongabay that when the evictions began, her husband left her and their six children behind to go to a neighboring country. Speaking through a translator, Nadutari said she alone has been responsible for her family since then. But with no land, livestock, family support or social services, she has resorted to begging for food in the community of Karatu, just outside the conservation area. She said she has no place to sleep in Karatu and often must sleep outside, which has sometimes resulted in being beaten by men who are drunk.

Another woman who requested Mongabay identify her as Sinyati also traveled to Karatu. Sinyati has a 2-year-old daughter she couldn't leave behind, so she brought her on the journey. Sinyati, speaking through a translator, said she finds some work fetching water and firewood or washing laundry. On a good day, she earns roughly 5,000 shillings (\$1.80) that she uses to buy food for her children. On a bad day, she earns nothing.

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that while she works to save money for food and the gate fee, she relies on help from other women inside Ngorongoro to help her children. When she returns to Ngorongoro, she said, she helps the children of her friends with the food she brings.

To support their children, some women have turned to prostitution as a last resort.

“They begged wherever they could, and in some cases, resorted to transactional sex, trading sexual favors for something to send back to their children,” a local aid worker told Mongabay. “These women often had nowhere to sleep, so they would sleep on the porches of other people’s homes at night. If a man offered to pay for a night’s lodging, they would agree to sleep with him in exchange for shelter. The next day, they would continue begging to avoid their children going hungry.”

“They sleep with men who give them maize and then they get HIV from them,” another woman added. A local doctor confirmed to Mongabay that she’s observed HIV infections increase in Ngorongoro since the forced evictions began.

All the women Mongabay spoke with corroborated that they’ve seen a surge in prostitution since the government revoked social services and began a program of forced evictions from Ngorongoro.

This desperation and resulting prostitution are rare in Maasai culture, another woman said. Traditionally, Maasai families support each other in times of need, she added. “I can go around any house in our boma and I feel like I am in my mom’s house. Anyone can treat me the way my mom treats me. I feel like every mom around the boma is my mom.”

A traditional Maasai home near Ngorongoro Conservation Area. Image by Bobby Bascomb

But the evictions fractured much of the community’s social structure, she said, with women and children suffering the consequences. “This is our first time to see Maasai children who are street children,” she added.

Children have also suffered as government health services, including vaccinations, have been shut down, to further push the Maasai into leaving Ngorongoro.

“This year we lost many children. Many children died because of measles,” said the doctor, who has been working independently with support from local NGOs in the absence of government-run health care.

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elevated levels of maternal death, but in the two years since the evictions began, doctors have seen maternal deaths rise even further.

"After cutting all social services, it was leading to an increase of maternal death because the Ngorongoro conservation is a remote area," the doctor said.

Young girls are particularly vulnerable as the social fabric has frayed. "For the girls who were cut off from educational sponsorship by NCA, many ended up roaming in large towns, and some became street children or got involved in the sex trade because they could no longer meet their basic needs at home," the doctor added.

Tanzania has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world; roughly one in three girls is married before her 18th birthday. Official statistics for the Maasai near Ngorongoro are hard to come by. However, the women Mongabay spoke with said they've seen more child marriages of girls since the evictions began, indicating a desperate move by parents to make a bit of money from the bride price and have one less child to feed at home.

Like maternal death, child marriages were an issue for the Maasai well before the recent evictions, but those actions made an existing problem much worse, the women say.

Local aid and volunteer medical workers are trying to fill the gap left behind when the government suspended social services.

"Our desire is to assist all hospitals, particularly by purchasing medicines, medical equipment, and food as part of our efforts to combat maternal and child mortality," the local doctor said. "However, due to a lack of funds, it is difficult to reach and meet their needs.

"My hopes are very low regarding the government, as they have severely oppressed my community," the doctor added. "But I believe that if we continue to raise our voices about the plight we are facing in the Ngorongoro, we will find human rights defenders from all over the world."

Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan ordered services restored following the protests, but local sources told Mongabay that this hasn't happened yet and the situation remains the same as before the protests.

Mongabay contacted the Tanzanian embassy in the U.S., the Human Rights and Good Governance Commission, and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements Development. However, no one from the government responded to repeated requests for a comment. This story will be updated if they respond.

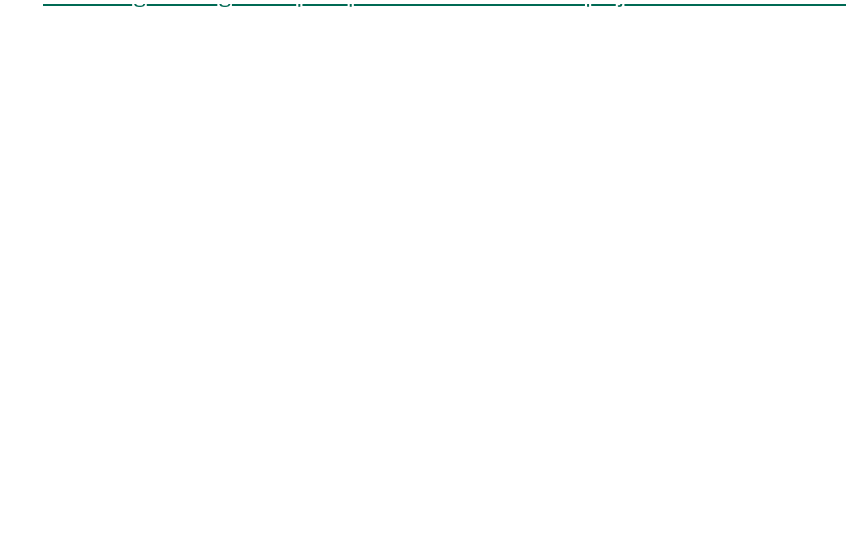
The government has defended the planned relocation in the past, saying the Maasai community in Ngorongoro and its livestock have grown too large for the conservation area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to support. "What is more important between letting people continue to put our world heritage in danger or supporting the preservation of the heritage and those [Maasai] people relocated to a better place?" President Samia said in a [2022 speech](#), according to a report from the Chanzo Initiative.

The Ngorongoro evictions aren't an isolated case. In April 2024, the World Bank suspended payments for Tanzania's [Resilient Natural Resources Management for Tourism and Growth \(REGROW\)](#) project, following serious abuse allegations. The World Bank's Inspection Panel found credible claims that government rangers in and around Ruaha National Park were responsible for extrajudicial killings, the disappearance of community members, sexual assaults and the seizure of cattle from pastoralists. Local people also said the government has threatened to forcibly resettle more than 21,000 people living near Ruaha National Park.

Banner image: A group of Maasai women, image by FluffyCreature via [Flickr \(CC BY 2.0\)](#).

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