

The Weight of The Flock: Narratives of Young Men Who were Childhood Herders in Lesotho

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Abstract

Herding in Lesotho is associated with social isolation for extended periods, risk of assault by animal thieves, and risk of being attacked for suspected animal theft. Regardless, herding in Lesotho is mostly assigned to boys. The objective of this study was therefore to examine herding experiences of childhood herders in Thaba-Tseka, Lesotho. The study employed snowball sampling to recruit 14 childhood herders who were young adults (18–35-year-old) at the time of the study. Data reported in this article were collected through in-depth face-to-face narrative interviews exploring experiences of childhood herding and analyzed qualitatively. The findings revealed that, above everything, childhood herding was rife in Thaba-Tseka. For instance, the age range of first herding experience for most participants was 6 to 9-year-old, while the youngest reported age at which participants were deployed to cattle posts was 8-year-old. Further, herding was found to be strongly associated with school dropouts, with five participants not completing primary school and another five completing primary school only to pursue herding. Additionally, childhood herders worked with weather-inadequate attire, at unconducive cattle post dwellings, experienced food insufficiency, experienced sexual abuse, and had close encounters with death and dying. An asset-based intervention against childhood herding is therefore recommended for Lesotho and all countries experiencing labor-injustice against children. Thus, it is recommended that community policing forums should be trained in laws that protect children against all forms of child labor and charged with the responsibility to police and act against childhood herding.

Keywords: Childhood herders, community policing, herding, herding adversities, Lesotho

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this article, Basotho refers to all natives of Lesotho, while childhood herders are those who were/are engaged in herding during their childhood. Thaba-Tseka is one of the mountainous districts of Lesotho, characterized by big rivers and deep gorges along mountain faces (Maps of the World). Economic activity in the district is largely agrarian (United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) and Lesotho Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) [1–3]. Like much of Africa, therefore, animal farming is common in Thaba-Tseka, where it is also an indicator of wealth and social prominence [4–37]. It is hence prestigious for Basotho to either own herds or seek employment as herders, as this

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Received Date: March 12, 2026

Accepted Date: March 21, 2026

Published Date: March 23, 2026

Citation: Malefane Justice Matele, Sophia Thabane. The Weight of The Flock: Narratives of Young Men who were Childhood Herders in Lesotho. International Journal of Children. 2026; 3(1): 29–41.

sector is associated with power, authority, wealth, and contributes significantly to communities' and the country's economy [13, 25, 38–40]. Herding also serves as a way of livestock acquisition since some of those employed in herding are sometimes paid in livestock (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit – Lesotho (GIZ-Lesotho) [18]. In addition, it was found that childhood herders gained valuable knowledge and skills through herding [41–53]. For instance, they heuristically learnt to protect natural vegetation and water sources, to pre-empt and manage minor ailments in themselves and in animals in their care using indigenous plants [21, 54].

Nevertheless, Lesotho herders' remuneration lacks standardization, with remuneration often based on employers' goodwill [2]. Herding in Lesotho is largely associated with child labor involving boys exclusively [18, 21, 52, 40]. Moreover, herding is characterized by adversities such as social isolation and psychological assault in the form of exposure to bestiality and substance abuse, the risk of attacks by animal thieves, and the risk of being attacked for suspected animal theft [13, 18, 21, 30, 37, 38, 42, 47]. Livestock theft in Lesotho is rampant and exacerbated by the centrality of livestock to cultural rituals such as funerals, paying homage to ancestors, and *bohali* [1, 35, 11, 2]. Additionally, grazing lands are not conducive to children's physical well-being because of extreme temperatures in Lesotho, which range from 19°C/46°F to 23°C/73°F in Summer and 5°C/41°F to 14°C/57°F in Winter [18]. The temperatures are associated with snow, sand, hail, thunderstorms, and heavy rainfall [18].

Nonetheless, the forecited challenges have thus far received scant attention in empirical literature, particularly insofar as they affect childhood herders, who make up the largest population of herders in Lesotho [18, 40]. Regardless, herding is an arduous undertaking, irrespective of the herders' age [26, 27]. Practice requires herders to be socially isolated from the rest of society because, as alluded to, their occupation demands that they be at grazing lands from morning to late afternoons or at cattle posts [2, 21, 37, 38]. Owing to the distances between villages and cattle posts as well as endemic poverty in Lesotho, food is typically scarce at the posts [37, 18]. Furthermore, Lesotho's challenging terrain and climate make it difficult to travel regularly between villages and cattle posts to replenish food stocks [21]. It may be added that scarce food supplies, disregard for harsh environmental factors, as well as exposure to harsh living and climatic conditions appear to be part of Basotho's practice of "hardening boys and young men" as cattle posts are uncomfortable and unsafe to live at [7, 37]. The livestock owners' tendency not to provide herders with weather- and occupation-appropriate clothing and/or dwellings at cattle posts, as reported by the African Psychosocial Support Institute (2023) [2] and Matele (2024) [21], also seemed to be a factor of the same philosophy.

Additionally, violence and bullying are rife at cattle posts, which might lead younger herders to become targets of sexual abuse by older ones in return for "protection" [17, 18, 23, 37, 49, 50]. This may be perpetuated by a widespread notion among Basotho herders that reporting herding matters is effeminate, aggravating childhood herders' vulnerability to various forms of abuse [29, 48, 55–60]. However, while boys and men are largely understood not to report sexual abuse, they are at as much risk of sexual abuse as girls and women [22, 36, 5, 10, 41]. For this reason, boys are ironically greater targets for child sexual abusers because of the social barriers against reporting imposed on them [18, 22, 23]. This trend has been found prevalent among young boys living with older herders at cattle posts who were warned against disclosing incidents that took place while herding, as that would be "unmanly" [18, 21, 23, 50]. Further, it is understood to be equally challenging for childhood herders to seek medical attention from health facilities, as that involves disclosing causes of their injuries to mostly female health professionals [14, 49, 61, 21, 57]. The objective of this article was therefore to examine herding experiences of childhood herders in Thaba-Tseka, Lesotho. Thaba-Tseka was selected as the study site because it holds minimal employment and educational opportunities outside of herding.

COMMUNITY POLICING AGAINST CHILDHOOD HERDING

Against the foregoing backdrop, there is a need for strengthened efforts to protect children from being recruited into herding. One of the efforts could be community policing since it is a system that utilizes available community resources to promote security and well-being [34, 28]. Community policing promotes active community-led security surveillance as well as liaison between the police and communities [34]. Other strengths of community policing are that communities police and support each other against criminal activity, and they can swiftly mobilize policing response and reinforcement when required [34]. When strongly organized, community policing membership can enhance members' social recognition in communities [28]. Moreover, community policing is better positioned to identify criminal hotspots and notice unusual occurrences in communities [34]. By using community members, community police are aware of the most vulnerable community members and the risks confronting them and can organize any relevant community members for targeted community policing programs [28].

For instance, in Lesotho, Hapazari (2023) [15] pointed out that the forums were operational in most communities of the country, especially remote ones. She further argued for the prospects of community policing forums to protect women and children at risk as well as those subjected to domestic violence [15]. Using Hapazari's (2023) [15] contentions, it is therefore argued that the forums can help initiate and implement policing programs against childhood herding. This hence calls for an asset-based approach, an approach which uses prevailing community resources for development [44].

This article is structured into five sections apart from this background. The second section reports the study's methodology, followed by participants' demographic information, findings, discussion of findings, and finally, conclusion and recommendations.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in five villages (Ha Sephooko, Thabana-Mahlanya, Majakaneng, Mohlakeng, and Phomolong) within Thaba-Tseka Urban between June and July 2024. This study received two-stage ethical clearance from the National University of Lesotho Institutional Review Board (NUL/SOC/2024/02) and the Lesotho Ministry of Health Research Ethics Board (REF: ID 185-2024/02) on the 28th of May 28, 2024, and 3rd June 3, 2024, respectively. Subsequently, gatekeeper permission was received from Help Lesotho, a non-profit organization in Lesotho that supports former childhood herders to rebuild their psychosocial lives, which may have been undermined by childhood herding. Permission was also obtained from all the chiefs whose jurisdiction the study was conducted.

A key ethical consideration for this study was respect for the norms, cultures, and cultural sites of all participants. Participants' shared experiences and hardships were also respectfully noted, and their emotional expressions were acknowledged [58]. This study adopted a qualitative research approach with a constructivist phenomenological design using narratives [33, 58]. The study population consisted of childhood herders residing in Thaba-Tseka at the time of the study.

The participants were selected through snowballing, a process that yielded 14 childhood herders within the age range of 18 to 35-year-old before reaching data saturation [6, 9]. The key inclusion criteria for the snowballing process were adult men who had been herders for at least 3 years before reaching 18-year-old [6, 9].

Within the selected study design, the reported data were collected using in-depth face-to-face narrative interviews lasting between 40 minutes and 1 h and 30 minutes [16, 31].

Through the interviews, participants narrated their childhood herding experiences in an unstructured manner, choosing the themes to focus on and the time to spend on each theme [16]. Narratives in research are guided and themed event recollections or experience sharing [16]. Thus, collecting qualitative data through narratives entails metaphorically taking participants back to settings of psychological significance and prompting them to relate their experiences and thoughts associated with those settings [16]. In the present study, narratives created an easy, relaxed platform for reconnecting with traumatic childhood experiences.

Such interviews were conducted sitting by kraals early in the mornings, while participants were milking and/or at grazing lands, walking with herds throughout the working day, or sitting on the ground while herding. This enabled participants to "walk down memory lane" in their natural settings.

Prior to collecting data, the first author, who is male, sought participants' written or verbal consent indicating that they understood the objective of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and that they were not expecting any form of reward for their participation [19]. Being male was a pertinent attribute for the first author in this study because herding is a male-only field in Lesotho [13, 37]. Thus, the mentioned author could enter all cultural sites in the study area, including male-only areas. For

instance, kraals and their surrounding spaces, as well as grazing lands, are male-only areas in Basotho culture. It was also anticipated that the all-male study population would be more comfortable narrating their favorable and adverse childhood experiences with the researcher.

The interviews were conducted in Sesotho, using a themed narrative interview guide and audio recording to optimize researcher-participant interaction [46, 56]. Audio recording further enabled the first author to note changes in participants' body language, making it easier to link the researcher's narratives to the associated emotions. Subsequently, the interview audio recordings were transcribed from Sesotho to English. The data were then analyzed through a six-staged thematic analysis framework comprising: (i) data familiarization, (ii) initial coding, (iii) theme identification, (iv) theme refinement, (v) theme definition and naming, and (vi) report compilation [55].

PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Most of the participants (10/14) were aged between 26 and 35 years, with the youngest participant aged 20 years while the oldest was 35-year-old. Most participants (8/14) were aged between 6 and 9 years at their first herding experience, while age at first deployment to cattle posts ranged between 8 and 22-year-old. A summary of the participants' age at first herding experience, age at first deployment to cattle posts, and age at the time of the study is shown in Figure 1. Eight of the participants were married, five were unmarried, while one was separated (Figure 1).

Educationally, one participant had never been to school, five participants had been to school but did not complete primary school, five had completed primary school only, one completed Secondary School only, and two completed high school.

FINDINGS

The following themes emerged from the data: weather-inadequate attire and cattle post uncondusive dwellings, insufficient food, childhood sexual abuse, close encounter with death, and dying experiences.

Weather-Inadequate Attire and Cattle Post Uncondusive Dwellings

31-year-old participant 1 narrated that animals were ushered to grazing lands regardless of weather conditions, despite herders' often worn-out clothing. In addition to the data reported below, participant 8 continued to explain that, despite the nature of their work, childhood herders had one blanket for use during the day and at night, all year long.

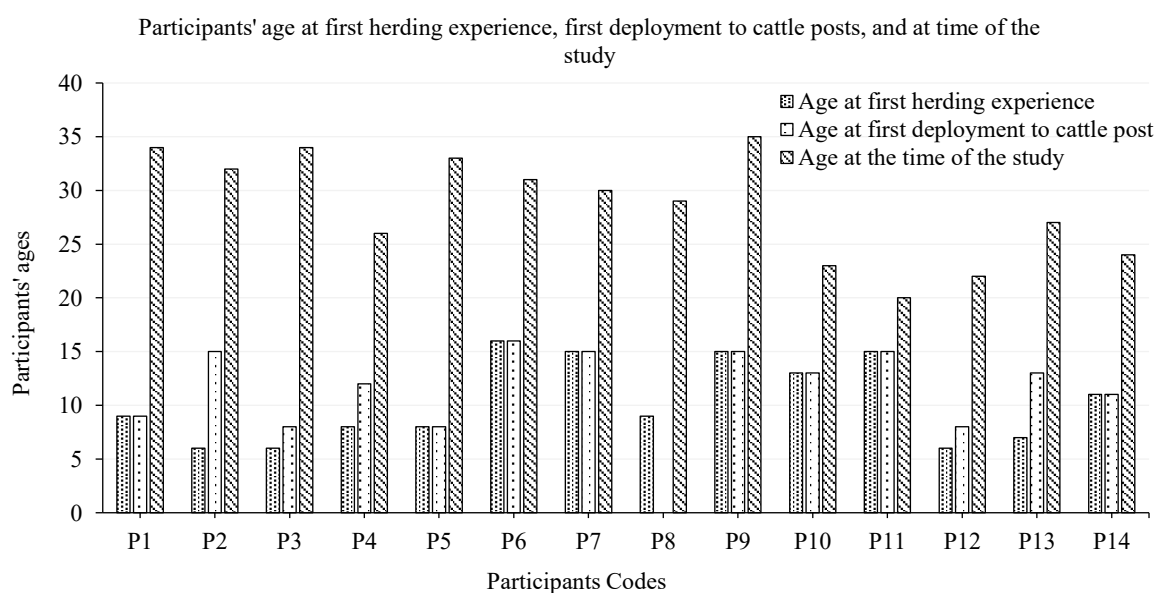


Figure 1. Participants' age at first herding experience, age at first deployment to cattle posts, and age at the time of the study.

Other participants added that cattle post dwellings did not necessarily offer comfort from the elements, as they did not have adequate clothing even inside the dwellings, especially if they had been caught in the rain. For clothing, the data revealed that the childhood herders wore short trousers or *leqapha* with either worn-out gumboots or no shoes at all. Moreover, the post dwellings were decrepit structures made of stones and roofed with thatch and had open doorways [3]. The participants stated:

“Whether it was hot or cold, we were supposed to usher the animals to the grazing land. You would find that on some days, one would not even be adequately dressed for the weather. We usually just put on our blankets on our bare skins and short trousers, then wear our worn-out gumboots and take the animals to the grazing lands. Wearing (the worn-out gumboots) was like walking on bare feet.” (Participant 1)

“If it rained while you were herding and you did not have a raincoat, you were on your own because there was nowhere to hide. You could not even seek shelter under the trees. You would be told to move away (from the trees) because you would be struck by lightning. It would rain on you; you would get wet, and the clothes would dry on you. You can imagine life!! You ended up living like those animals that you are taking care of at the cattle post.” (Participant 2)

“Firstly, I had to walk barefoot. On Christmas Day, (my employers) bought me shoes, and then again during the month when it was raining heavily. We did not have clothes suitable for the weather. We wore “leqapha” on our bottoms and blankets on our shoulders. If the blankets got wet (from the rain or snow), believe me, we would sleep without clothes because there would be nothing to sleep with. The cattle post (dwelling) itself is just a secular structure made of stones with big sticks and thatch on top of the circular brick wall. It has no windows, no door, just an uncovered opening on the wall for the entrance. We lived like animals. It was worse when it was cold or snowing”. (Participant 8)

As described in the background section above, the Basotho mainly use organic farming. Hence, animals must graze on grazing lands daily, although herders sometimes collect grass and crop by-products for animal feeding. However, the above data suggest that due to the herders’ inexperience, they may not have been wise enough to collect feed for animals under their care for use during rainy days.

Participant 13’s anxiety-inducing experiences were consistent with those of Participants 1, 2, and 8, revealing that cattle post dwellings were inconducive to children’s well-being.

“While at the cattle post, heavy rainfall put one’s life in danger. This would be due to leaking roofs, which are made up of sticks and grass, and blankets would get wet. You could find that we slept without clothes during the cold weather and those rainy seasons.”(Participant 13)

Thus, herders’ clothing was inadequate for the weather, and cattle post dwellings offered no protection from the weather. Moreover, the participants’ narratives implied that during their childhood herding days, they did not have a change of clothing for use in incidences of unfavorable weather. None of the participants mentioned a raincoat as part of their attire, even though they worked outdoors under all weather conditions.

Insufficient Food

Herding is a challenging and demanding practice that requires herders to be away from villages for extended periods in pursuit of fertile grazing lands [27, 42, 49]. Some grazing lands are located at considerable distances from villages to the extent that the herders and animals sometimes relocate semi-permanently to some of the grazing lands referred to as cattle posts [13, 54]. While at cattle posts, herd owners are expected to provide herders with sufficient food for the duration of their stay. However, some herd owners neglect this responsibility. Participants 8 and 12, who began herding as employee herders when they were aged 8- and 12-year-old, had this to say about childhood herding and food insufficiency:

“Sometimes you would find that you are not well-taken care of by the herd owner. (Employers) starve you!” (Participant 8)

“Ah! There is no eating, Ntate; we go to the grazing land early in the morning, around nine, only to return after sunset, when you will eat for the second time for that day. You live this kind of lifestyle even at the cattle post, going to the grazing lands early in the morning and returning late in the afternoon (for a meal).” (Participant 12)

Participant 4, who herded family animals and was later employed as a herder, took responsibility for missing morning meals, while participant 13 acknowledged that general food scarcity was the reason some herders went without food.

“Sometimes you find that you were unable to eat properly in the morning because you woke up late and left in a hurry, which is what made us go hungry. You should understand that if you were unable to eat in the morning, you would eat after sunset. You spend the whole day hungry and cannot do anything about it.” (Participant 4)

“At these times of drought, sometimes you would go to the grazing land early in the morning without eating. You will find that maybe wild carrots are still available to fight hunger, or you will find that you go hungry until later when you take the animals home.” (Participant 13)

Participants 8 and 12 further reported that they were denied gourmet food, such as bread, meat, and rice, by their childhood herding employers, and they were sometimes not served food at all and had to spend a day without eating.

“When (my employers) slaughtered an animal where I used to work, I would eat the meat from the animal’s lungs only, and I would not know where the rest of the meat went. I would never be served bread. Mine was to eat papa (hard porridge) and “moroho” (leafy vegetables) only. At other times just papa, or I would not be served food at all. You would find that his children were well fed. They would starve me even when I had seen the food; they would just choose to starve me.” (Participant 8)

“There was food we (childhood herders) did not eat (at our employers’ homes). They would prepare meat and serve it to the employer’s children only (while we (childhood herders)), would eat these wild vegetables from the fields and from the garden. Other foods such as rice, we would not eat them... they belong to other people. They would be eaten by the employers and their children. (Childhood herders) would only be served, papa. At other times, we (childhood herders) would go days without being served any food.” (Participant 12)

However, 24-year-old participant 14, who was introduced to herding when he was 11-year-old, reported being served adequate food, even though other participants complained of food insufficiency.

“Even though herding is challenging, I was given food where I was herding. They made sure that I ate before going to the grazing land and in the evenings. Upon return from the grazing land, they ensured that I received evening meals. (My employers) took very good care of me. You would believe I was their biological son.” (Participant 14)

It was encouraging to learn that some childhood herders were treated well by their employers and were happy with the meals they were served. However, it was concerning that some participants revealed that as employed childhood herders, they sometimes went without food for days.

Childhood Sexual Abuse

This section contains distressing reports of childhood sexual abuse. A troubling theme of sexual abuse of childhood herders and related injuries was uncovered in the interviews. The abuse, which was perpetrated by older boys and girls, took place at cattle posts and in villages and was accompanied by threats of death. The participants stated:

"During school holidays I would visit (the herder employed by my family) at the cattle post, until schools re-opened. When this (abuse) started, (the employed herder) asked me about my sister who was back home. Sometimes (the employed herder) would ask me to rub his manhood until a substance came out (of manhood). One day (the employed herder) asked me to "face the other way," after which he would do the same. I tried refusing, but he started threatening me and showing signs of aggression. He told me he could kill me and leave me there and no one would ever know what happened to me. He also threatened that even if I tried to run back home, I would not make it because dogs from other cattle posts would attack me." (Participant 2)

"My anus would be in so much pain! There was this older boy who herded at the cattle post closest to mine even though it was still a considerable distance away. He threatened me and instructed me to "bend over." I refused, telling him that I would not face that way and that I am not a girl. Then he said he would kill me, and that is when I (relented), and he had his way with me. When I left that place, I felt like my anus was on fire; it was very painful (whistling). You will actually feel like you are bleeding. It took me an entire week walking awkwardly because it was very painful back there. I could not even eat because I felt nauseated; even now I still don't feel very well in my stomach, even going to the toilet to relieve hard matter is a struggle, (I suspect) the person has stretched me too much." (Participant 12)

Participant 2 added that the experience of being made to "face the other way" caused him to bleed from his anus and left him in pain for days. The participant further revealed that the incident caused him nightmares and that he feared for his life while at the cattle post with his assailant.

"You know this (the employed herder) did not stop even when he saw blood and heard my cries, even when I tried shouting for help; no one heard because our cattle post was a bit far from other cattle posts. Apart from that, he told me that if I told anyone, then he would make me disappear, and he said no one would believe my story. I spent four days without walking because of pain. I could not even poop. He prepared bitter concoctions for me, saying they would heal me faster. I still say if I were to run into him, I would tell him to kill me, or I would kill him. I still have nightmares of him doing those things to me. Even wanting to kill me. What made me angrier was I was not the one ill-treating him, but my father; now he was taking all this anger out on me (Tears forming in his eyes)!" (Participant 2)

Participant 3, who was 6-year-old when he was introduced to herding, reported sexual abuse by an older girl while he was herding near his village. Participant 4, who was 8-year-old when he was introduced to herding, mentioned that he was troubled by an incident of a fellow herder who was arrested for rape in their village.

"From around six or seven (years in age), since we were herding calves near the village, there was this older girl who used to call us over when we were at the grazing land; then she would teach us how sex is done, and then we would engage in it with her." (Participant 3)

"There was this person with whom we were herding at the cattle post in 2019. I heard he was later arrested for raping a woman. This made me wonder whether I had underestimated him, because (he seemed to be) afraid of girls. Then I recalled this one time he tried to force himself on me when I first arrived at the cattle post because he said I smelled of soap and females. Luckily, someone arrived at the scene and interrupted the incident. (That's how) I got away. Otherwise, he would have raped me that (profanity)." (Participant 4)

Thirty-year-old participant 7 questioned his maleness due to a traumatic childhood sexual abuse experience and only alluded to the experience, requesting not to elaborate.

"You just reminded me of a painful incident. Even though some of the things happened in the past, it is still very hard to talk about them even today. But there's no point in talking about it now. It is one thing that still hurts me very much because I still do not understand whether there is anything wrong with me, or why me? Was I that weak to allow another man to make me his prostitute?" (Participant 7)

The above reports highlight the risks to children associated with being unsupervised in villages and/or being at cattle posts. As indicated, cattle posts are located at considerable distances from villages and are sparsely arranged. Traveling from villages to posts is a perilous undertaking for children. Thus, childhood herders cannot easily escape back to the villages when confronted with danger. The participants' reports reflected the foregoing perils when recollecting their childhood sexual abuse experiences.

Moreover, none of the participants sought physiological or psychological assistance for their injuries. None mentioned seeking support from peers. Hence, it is plausible that the participants endured the injuries unsupported.

Close Encounter with Death and Dying Experiences

The participants reported that the herding environment exposed them to life-threatening encounters such as being snow-trapped, witnessing cattle post dwellings catching fire, and witnessing the death of people and animals from lightning.

"Hai!! Honestly. Especially the issue of lightning! I am afraid of lightning and thunder ntate! (Laughing) I become so miserable when it strikes. It gets even worse during the summer season; it becomes very scary at the herding post. One time while we were herding the animals with this other guy that I know, it rained, and he was struck by lightning and died immediately." (Participant 4)

"There were three of us. Lightning struck for the first time, then it suddenly hit close to us. While we were expecting something to happen, we realized that nothing had happened to the animals (on the first strike of lightning) or us. Lightning struck for the second time, this time closer to the animals, and we then realized that it had struck one of the animals to death. We just saw a light amongst the animals with some smoke, then the animal fell to the ground." (Participant 14)

"I was almost struck by lightning and even fainted, (laughing)...When I regained consciousness, I was told that I was almost struck by lightning. I could only remember seeing something like ash coming towards me, and then I tried to run away; then it hit right close to me. They said I collapsed when it struck. The cattle post is not a playing ground at all." (Participant 8)

Just as threatening, participants 1 and 3, who were deployed to cattle posts when they were aged 9 and 8 years, respectively, revealed that they almost lost their lives as they got trapped by the snow at the cattle posts, and they made the following statements:

"Among many other things, Ntate, I was mostly troubled by heavy snowfall because we would find ourselves trapped at the cattle posts; a person would even end up dying in there, especially when no one came to check on you. I remember; I even got admitted to the hospital because the snow had blocked my path and I had to sleep right there (along the way). Unfortunately, the snow entered my gumboots and turned into ice in the morning. When I finally managed to walk and got to my cattle post dwelling in the morning, I lit a fire to with the aim of warm my feet, I got burnt without even feeling it, I was only made aware of the situation by my colleague when he arrived and said to me "'hey man, do you realize that you are getting burnt?'. At that time, I was already burnt and I got hospitalized for approximately 3 months, at Paray Hospital.'" (Participant 1)

"I do remember that this snow tragedy occurred at the end of May. I remember this because the flour was about to run out. Therefore, I would have to walk such a long distance to get to (name of village) since I lived in this village. However, the snow began to fall the evening before the day that we were to leave for the village. When we woke up in the morning, the entire cattle post dwelling was covered in snow, and the roofing was close to caving in. Sheep died. We were rescued by helicopter, given warm clothes and socks (as well as) food. (Thereafter), another helicopter with Lesotho Defense Force Soldiers arrived, and we were taken back to our (respective) villages." (Participant 3)

Apart from the above-reported life-threatening adversities, it was found that the structure of the cattle post dwelling also posed danger to herders, as revealed by Participant 12, who was 22-year-old at the time of the study.

“There is no rest at all at the cattle post; running after the livestock the entire day is not a child’s play; it is tiring. I remember this one evening, I was exhausted from running after the sheep, so I just lit a fire to warm the dwelling, and in no time, I dozed off without even eating. I cannot even tell what really happened afterwards. What I recall is that I woke up choking on smoke; that is when I realized that the entire roofing of the(cattle post) dwelling was in flames. I had to crawl to get out. I am telling you my brother, it was really bad (shaking his head).” (Participant 12)

DISCUSSION

Herding in Lesotho involves ushering animals to natural grazing lands and water sources daily and spending the entire grazing day with the animals (around 7:00 am to 4:00 pm) at the grazing lands. This applies whether animals are in villages or cattle posts. The most concerning finding from this study, therefore, was the age at which herders not only started herding but also the age at which they were deployed to cattle posts. For instance, most participants reported that they started herding from 6 to 8-year-old, while 8/14 participants were first deployed to cattle posts before they reached 15-year-old. As explained, cattle posts are generally unsafe for people regardless of their age, as the posts are situated far from villages and are arranged at wide distances apart. Up to two herders typically man each cattle post. This is despite serving as watch houses for considerable wealth in livestock. Consequently, livestock theft, which entails aggression and risk to herders’ lives, is rife at cattle posts [2]. It may also be concluded that the knowledge that cattle posts are manned by few people, often children, emboldens livestock thieves to target cattle posts. Herding was also associated with a high school dropout rate in this study, with only 2/14 participants completing high school.

In addition to watching over livestock, childhood herders are tasked with caring for and protecting themselves from the elements of nature. This entailed building and maintaining cattle post dwellings, preparing meals, gathering enough firewood for cold and rainy seasons, and even protecting themselves and their livestock from life-threatening weather. Considering the ages at which participants were deployed to cattle posts, however, it was unlikely that most of them would have had the intellectual capacity to think ahead or plan against the harsh weather. For instance, being caught in the rain and/or storms could have been avoided by gathering and storing vegetation for animal feed at the cattle posts so that herders did not have to go to grazing lands on rainy days. Second, while participants did not mention attempts to assist animals after lightning incidents, the likelihood of attempting to assist such animals remained prevalent, considering their ages and inexperience. Divergent from the study’s findings, however, the fore-described risks ought to have precluded children from being engaged as herders in any capacity.

Despite the inherent risks of herding, coupled with the herders’ age, participants revealed that they were neither provided with weather-adequate clothing nor sufficient food. The trend of providing herders with insufficient food in Lesotho, to the extent of going days without serving them any food, at villages and cattle posts is well documented [7, 21, 37]. In addition, it was unclear why some herders’ clothing was limited to light blankets with worn-out or no shoes at all in the Lesotho mountain weather that was described above [18]. However, to the best of our knowledge, these trends have not received legislative or regulatory attention in Lesotho.

Unsupervised children’s risk of sexual abuse is well-known [5, 10, 48]. The risk of unsupervised children as young as 6-year-old working on grazing lands or at cattle posts can therefore not be overstated. While troubling, it was unsurprising therefore that this study’s participants widely reported distressing incidents of sexual abuse during their childhood herding years. As pointed out, none of the participants mentioned reporting the abuse to adults or anyone for either protection or support. Hence,

the abuse was likely perpetuated by a culture of non-reporting among African boys [14, 17, 23]. It may further be hypothesized that Basotho's constructions of masculinity, which emphasize stoicism, aggression, violence, and secrecy, play a significant role in perpetuating sexual violence between younger and older herders [5, 14, 18, 23, 41, 49, 50]. Against that backdrop, it was pertinent that one of the participants (P2) questioned their maleness, referring to his sexual abuse incidents as "becoming a prostitute". The relationship between childhood herding and psychological concerns such as gender dysphoria and masochism is yet to be empirically tested in Lesotho.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hence, the weight of the flock, or that of Thaba-Tseka's economy, was found to be imposed on boys from childhood. The most concerning finding in this study was the age at which children were not only introduced to herding, but at which they were deployed to cattle posts. The study revealed that herding is an arduous activity associated with ecological risks, limited food, and rampant child abuse. There were no reports of consequences associated with abuse for the reported abusers. Much herding takes place away from adult supervision and/or guidance. Therefore, herding should not be a place for children. Community policing forums are therefore strategically placed to notice incidents of childhood herding and related abuses. Hence, it is recommended that community policing forums in Thaba-Tseka be trained on matters of child labor and charged with the responsibility to police and act against childhood herding in line with the relevant Legal Framework. Such training should also emphasize the necessity for all children to undergo birth registration and for the police to monitor compliance. As discussed, community police are aware of prevalent community practices and trends and would hence be in a strong position to swiftly act against those that undermine members' well-being. With appropriate training, community police can be sensitized to incorporate child-sensitive programming.

As shown, community policing forums cannot operate in isolation. Therefore, the forums' efforts against childhood herding should be complemented by other existing community authorities, such as primary school teachers, social auxiliary workers, community nurses, adult herders, and local chiefs. Thus, an asset-based community development approach should be implemented to rally all relevant and capable people at the community level to act against childhood herding. The foregoing recommendations apply to all areas in the developing world beleaguered by child labor.

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