



## Young men, poverty and aspirational masculinities in contemporary Nairobi, Kenya

Chimaroke O. Izugbara<sup>a</sup>  and Carlyne P. Egesa<sup>b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Washington, D.C., USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

Building on recent calls for more focus on street-level optimism about life and the world, we address the question of 'aspirational masculinities' among poor urban young men in Kenya. Our data and material come from ethnographic work with young men in two slum communities in the country's capital city, Nairobi. While acknowledging that, in their neighborhoods, 'proper' masculinity is constituted in traditional terms of marriage, hardiness, provisioning, breadwinning and self-reliance, youth in our study aspired to masculinities characterized by 'abler' breadwinnerhood, caring, positive emotions, relationality, and the rejection of violence. The masculinity aspirations of poor Nairobi youth are complex; fashioned at the crossroads of structural constraints and agentive projects for a good life, and simultaneously supportive and resistive of traditional hegemonic manliness ideals. These aspirations are limited by and reflect an objective condition of everyday and enduring inequality while also signifying a deep unmet yearning for positive social and livelihood changes.

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, academic discourse on masculinities has surged. Inspired by claims that normative masculinities were being eroded by incipient social conditions, critical social science has explored the range of socio-cultural currents driving transformations in men's behaviors and practices (Hearn 2004; Hearn and Morgan 2014). The bulk of these studies has approached men from the lens of 'dark masculinities research,' focusing on the negative outcomes that these harsh social currents have supposedly stirred among men as well as men's subjective experiences and responses, often described in terms of violence, depression, and desperation. One curious strand of the debate suggests that male violence and feelings of disempowerment and

**CONTACT** Chimaroke O. Izugbara  [coizugbara@gmail.com](mailto:coizugbara@gmail.com)  International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 1120 20th Street NW, Suite 500 N, Washington, D.C., USA

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emasculatation have been intensified by local and global women-privileging socio-economic policies and programs that have expanded opportunities for gender equality, women and girls' education, and jobs and higher incomes for women (Silberschmidt 2001, 2005).

Taken together, these studies advance the claim that shifting social conditions have 'de-masculinized' men and fostered feelings of disempowerment among them, and that majority of men's response to this situation take the form of practices and behaviours that do not only harm them, but also those around them, including children, women, and other men. Within this context, poor and economically disadvantaged men have been viewed as 'damaged and damage-doing' (Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2012; Lomas et al. 2013). Barely noticed during the period, however, is the small body of research addressing how men, caught in the web of these so-called disempowering social and economic changes, are also ambitious for change and envisioning themselves differently.

Inspired by the work of Appadurai (2003, 2004), we explore aspirations related to masculinity among poor urban male youth in Nairobi. Appadurai suggests that in the era of globalization, new disjunctures have emerged between location, imagination and identity. He argues that in many social locations throughout the world, a proliferation of imagined worlds and selves is occurring among ordinary people as they craft the scripts of possible worlds and new selves. While not suggesting that the social projects that emerge from these scripts are always liberating or even pleasant, they still constitute exercises in what Appadurai (2004) dubs 'the capacity to aspire'. Fischer's (2014) view is that aspirations find expression in people's quest for the 'good life', that is, life that has value and meaning for them, a point that Walker and Kavedžija (2016, 21) also make when they call for more focus on those things that give 'lives a sense of purpose or direction ... even in dire and hostile circumstances.'

This is the task of the current paper: to explore the masculinity aspirations of poor male youth in Nairobi and the role of memory and lived experiences in driving norms and imaginations of masculinity among them. Our focus is on the question of whether, how, and why young men and boys are imagining and forging masculinities differently from their fathers and the men around them. Specifically, we probe, amongst poor urban Kenyan male youth, some of the 'affective and imaginative spaces of opened aspiration' that Appadurai (2003, 2004) writes of and the social actions that can potentially follow in the process from 'aspirations for change to articulation of voice and social action'.

### **Marginality, men and masculinity**

The welter of research on masculinities among economically disadvantaged men has celebrated the simplistic narrative that marginality and poverty

damage their senses of selves and promote damage-doing among them (Lomas et al. 2012; Silberschmidt 2005, 2001). In contexts where masculinity is proven through economic self-sufficiency and capacity to provide, poverty and low-income may intensify men's feelings of exclusion from the dominant gender status and category of 'real' men (Cha and Thébaud 2009, Strier 2005, 2008; Barker 2005). In support of Baxandall (2004) and Crompton (1999), Strier et al. (2014) argue that low-income and financial instability challenge men's feelings of self-importance and economic self-sufficiency, which is usually performed by means of keeping a decent job.

Poverty has been linked with several problematic behavioral outcomes in men (Lomas 2013). While more women than men suffer poverty globally, its impacts on men are no less deleterious. For instance, men in the poorest 5th of the population in the UK are almost three times more likely to have common mental disorders than men in the richest 5th of the population, while for women, the ratio is only two to one (Economic and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) 2011). Poor men are at elevated risks for suicide (Thornton n.d, Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2017), and constitute the bulk of all alcohol deaths (ONS, 2017). Explanations for these trends emphasize men's gendered propensity to 'internalize' distress as sadness, and to 'externalize' it through anger, aggression, crime, risk-taking, substance/alcohol use, over-work and suicide (Pollack 1998). These externalizing behaviors are linked to traditional masculine norms that promote restrictive emotionality, 'encourage action and discourage introspection' (Addis 2008, 159).

Sherman's (2005) study of the effects of economic strain and job loss on masculine identities in Golden Valley, California suggested that economic and labor market tensions constrained men's abilities to sustain functioning relationships with their wives and girlfriends. In Mexico, Zinn (1982) noted that machismo and hyper-masculinity among men result from their need to validate their manhood and perform themselves as men to their families and peers despite the humbling external world of manual work. Zinn theorized hyper-masculinity as a compensatory response by impoverished Mexican men who feel emasculated outside the house where they get both poor pay and little respect from their bosses, co-workers, and other people. She writes that the Mexican man is perpetually obsessed with the need to redeem his damaged sense of manhood.' By asserting himself as a man at home, he buffers himself emotionally against a humbling, de-masculinizing outside world. Gamlin and Hawkes (2018) add that in many of the marginalized areas of Mexico, global and regional historical and contemporary structures have shaped and constrained men's ability to achieve the hegemonic masculinity of neoliberal Mexico. Faced with impoverishment, extreme inequality and lack of access to dignified living to exercise their masculinity, Mexican men resort to interpersonal violence to achieve masculine respect. Using

ethnographic data from Maputo, Mozambique, Groes-Green (2009) suggested that massive unemployment and poverty among young men thrust them to seek to establish their authority in relation to women by means of bodily powers and capital, that is, abilities and physique of the male body, rather than by economic power and social status. Consequently, while Maputo's young men with economic means enact masculinities based on provisioning, their poorer counterparts offset for this inability through masculinities that are violent and hypersexual.

In post-apartheid South Africa, Jolly (2010) suggests that the most violent responses to change have come from severely marginalized men. For her, South African men's violent and extremist behaviors aim to validate them as men in a context where the socio-cultural artifacts to perform normative masculinity have become increasingly inaccessible to them. Silberschmidt's (2001) study of violent masculinities among the Kisii of Kenya also point to how patriarchal structures and stereotyped notions of gender conceal men's increasing feeling of disempowerment. For her, socioeconomic transformations have denied men the critical resources to legitimize a patriarchal ideology and blocked their access to traditionally acclaimed roles as heads of households and breadwinners. On the other hand, women's roles, contributions and responsibilities in the household have grown. In this context, multi-partnered relationships and sexually aggressive behaviors have become part of men's strategies for strengthening their identities and sense of masculinity (Silberschmidt 2001). Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Francis (2006) also suggest that poverty and declining economic fortunes have promoted a sense of inconsequence, desperation, and powerlessness among men in Kenya. They argue that the result has been a tendency for men to pander to overcompensating masculine behaviors and performances. In urban Kenya, economic adversity has been highlighted as both a major constraint to poor men's sense of their roles and a significant dynamic in their perceptions and performances of themselves as socially sanctioned 'proper' men. In economically impoverished communities in Nairobi, men strive for locally valued but out-of-reach masculine identities, particularly breadwinnerhood while also advancing new values and narratives that project some of their non-normative masculine actions as socially respectable (Izugbara 2015a).

Viewing men's relationship with poverty and marginality in terms of damage and damage-doing is, however, simplistic. It assumes that masculinity explains all the problems experienced by men (Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2012), draws straightforward links between poverty and particular masculine behaviors (Sloan, Gough, and Conner 2010), and ignores the 'growing body of literature on variations in the social construction of masculinities' (Addis 2008, p.1 59). Connell's (2005) magisterial point is that masculinities are configurations of practice that are largely realized in social action. Men,

therefore, are not just merely passive acceptors of masculine values in their contexts. They engage with masculine norms in different and dynamic ways. Men who, in one context, align themselves with hegemonic masculine norms, can, in another context, create the illusion that patriarchy has disappeared, and in yet another context, behave in ways that create some discursive distance between them and 'hegemonic' masculinity (Hennessy 1994).

### Aspirational masculinity

Based on our work in two slums of Nairobi, Korogocho (Koch) and Viwandani (Viwa) in Nairobi, Kenya, we join the debate on futuristic masculinities by exploring young men's relationships and engagements with valued forms of masculinity in their communities. Specifically, we focus on 'aspirational masculinities', that is, visions and ambitions regarding masculinity among male youth in poor urban settlements of Nairobi.

Focus on imagined and future masculinities is increasingly common in critical studies of men and boys. Waling (2016) argued that the social pressures perpetuated by media representations regarding masculine identity inspire cultural consumption and create aspirational masculinity based on a hybrid of traditional and more progressive masculine identities. In Japan, where an increasing number of men work in the irregular labour market without recourse to the kinds of employment protection that full-time workers receive, Cook (2016) found that many men do not live their lives through the tropes of failure, but through aspirations related to future-oriented work—the work these men aspire to be doing. Searle's (2015) study of gay identity in the post-Thatcherite Britain also found that futuristic discourses under-pinned by emphasis on consumerism have been assimilated and promoted in ways that make gay young men to aspire to and pursue new gay identities constituted around consumption patterns and available to them through their access to a disposable income.

Like the Japanese men described by Cook, the everyday life of young unmarried men and boys we studied in the slums of Kenya is characterized by structural violence, hardship, uncertainty and lack. They associate their marginality, in part, to the failures of their own fathers as men and hope to change things for themselves by becoming different from their fathers. These men and boys' visions of a better future tended to be linked to the idea of becoming 'better men'. It is these dreams, these visions of manhood which they desire to embody in the future that we call aspirational masculinities.

Our study of masculine aspirations of youth in Kenya aligns with recent scholarly interest in generational change. A combination of colonial and postcolonial development processes has brought youth in the East Africa

into the ambit of the global economy (Eaton 2010; Reid 2010). Societies in the sub-region, as elsewhere in Africa, are faced with economic exclusion, unmediated commercialization, wrong-headed state policies and development interventions that have only exacerbated inequities and conflicts (Burgess and Burton 2010; Eaton 2010). These inequalities, it is presumed, have led poor young people to question the ways of their fathers and leaders and blame them for not adequately preparing them (young people) for these opportunities (Eaton 2010). This paper explores how these young people, questioning the ways of their fathers and dealing with inequality and lack of opportunities, are also imagining and aspiring to a future for themselves as men.

### Study contexts

Koch and Viwa are home to several men presumably subordinated in hierarchies of masculinity because of their poverty. Founded in the late 60s by rural migrants to Nairobi, Koch began on undeveloped government-owned land. However, it has since expanded, and almost half of it is now on privately owned land. Koch currently covers an area of roughly 1 km<sup>2</sup>, where more than 100,000 people live. A congested community, with over 250 dwelling units per hectare, Koch is 12 km from the Nairobi city center, and flanked in the east and southeast by the notorious Nairobi Refuse Dump. Viwa, on the other hand, is a mere 7 km from the Nairobi city center. Located close to Nairobi's self-styled industrial area, Viwa was founded in the 1970s by migrants on reserve land of the government. It has, however, also expanded relentlessly along the banks of the Ngong River. Currently, about 3 km in length and 1 km in width, the settlement is home to about 100,000 persons. The heavily contaminated Ngong River borders Viwa in the south, and to the north are industries of varying sizes that thrive mainly on cheap manual labor. Though the population of Koch and Viwa is socially heterogeneous, both settlements are characterized by severe poverty; visible lack of basic infrastructure, such as roads, sanitation, and clean and potable water; dearth of socioeconomic opportunities; excessive overcrowding; extreme deprivation; and enduring marginalization. Majority of people in the communities had little or no formal education, were school dropouts, and survive at the fringes of a ruthless economy as poorly paid casual laborers, poor informal and low-capacity retailers, sex workers, and petty criminals (African Population and Health Research Center 2009).

Few men and women in the slums have stable employment. In 2008, among Koch men aged 18 years and above, only 11% were in salaried employment and 10% in established trading. For Viwa, these figures stood at 20% for salaried men and 7% for men in established trading. Half of

the women in the two slums were not involved in any type of income-generating activities in 2008. Daily expenditure in a representative sample of households in both slums was less than a dollar in 2008 (African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) 2009). Only 28% of men and 19% of women in the two communities had up to secondary-level education in 2008. Health status is also generally poor in Koch and Viwa. For instance, in 2008, while Kenya's HIV prevalence stood at 7.4%, it averaged 11.5% in the two settlements (Kyobutungi, Ziraba, Ezeh, & Ye 2008). The two settlements also experience disproportionately high morbidity and mortality levels (APHRC 2009). The rampancy of crime and violence in Koch and Viwa is worsened by the substantial presence of gangs who use both settlements as hideouts and base. Evidence indicates the ubiquity, in these settlements, of norms of masculinity that value providerhood, violence, heterosexuality, and domination of women (Izugbara 2011, 2015b).

When we started our study in 2009, stories of violent men and boys were a frequent part of the narratives we collected. Our study initially focused on understanding how men in the slums of Nairobi negotiate and perform masculinity in a context fraught by poverty and lack. With time, our interest extended into how male youth in the two settlements were constituting their lives, men, masculinity and fatherhood, and imagining what they would, given their experience, do differently as men and fathers. Our data come from ethnographic work, multiple in-depth individual interviews, extensive life-stories and FGDs conducted between 2009 and 2014 in the two communities, and in 2017, in Koch specifically. In total, we spent roughly eleven months in the study sites. Individual interviews were conducted with forty-three (43) unmarried male youth and men aged 18 to 30. Six FGDs were conducted with men and boys in the above age groups in each of the two study communities. Each of the FGDs comprised an average of 6 men and boys. In-depth individual interviews were also conducted with community leaders in both study sites, women and girls, adult men, and state law enforcement agencies, including the police to understand the context of young men's lives in the study sites.

During the period of study, we attended many community events in the study sites, were regular faces in key social spaces including restaurants, pubs, funerals, religious and sporting events in both settings, and volunteered in several local organizations, including youth- and gender-focused and violence prevention projects. Active involvement in different events and activities in the slums facilitated our access to local gossips and structures and gave us firsthand insights into the day-to-day events, processes, and experiences in the slums.

The extent to which we succeed in the field was contingent on several factors, including the relationships we developed with informants,



gatekeepers and others. According to Vanderbeck (2005), the relationships between the researcher and the researched are always entangled within systems of social power based on gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability and other factors (see also Dowling 2005). In our study, one of the researchers was a man and the other, a woman. The male youth we studied were also often interested in what we thought about proper masculinity, whether their views were correct, and whether their expressions of manliness were proper. However, we positioned ourselves as learners who wanted to know and consistently reassured them that our study was not aimed to pass judgement on them. We made it clear that we do not make good judges of what constitutes appropriate practices of masculinity practices in every context. These efforts notwithstanding, we were still viewed as privileged people, a perception which was reinforced by our status as researchers and non-slum residents.

### The everyday lives of male youth in Koch and Viwa

Emerging ethnographic data offer a complex picture of the lives of young men and boys in poor urban Nairobi. On one hand, the youth face extreme hardship, poverty, violence, lack of opportunities, and insecurity. On the other, they were determined, tenacious, resilient, and desirous of fundamental changes in their lives. And several of them worked doggedly to achieve the life transformations they want.

Decent employment opportunities are rare in Kenya's informal settlements. To earn honest livelihoods, slum youth people must go into the city, nearby industrial estates or construction sites to find menial work. These opportunities are, however, also increasingly rare, and for survival, slum youth in Nairobi rely on economic strategies entangled in 'hustling', where the choices between entrepreneurship, opportunistic group crime and 'idling' define youth daily struggles (Thieme 2013, 2018). Fatuku exemplifies the challenges that face slum youth seeking honest livelihood in Nairobi. He works as tool-bearer and helper in a mechanic yard near Viwa. His routine involves running minor errands for mechanics, handing them tools, helping them remove nuts and bolts; washing up cars that have been fixed; and sweeping the mechanic yard. Sometimes, the mechanics have no work for Fatuku and he would go for days without income.

Among the sites where boys and young men in the slums frequented were community *job corners*, where slum residents would wait for people to hire them, often for menial jobs. Narratives suggested that boys and men could spend days in these corners without any luck with jobs. Youth linked the desperation and lack of opportunities among slum youth to high rates of substance use and criminality among them. Drugs and substances such as



marijuana, alcohol, and *khat* freely circulate in the slums. 'Here we have nothing much to do. You can look for job every day and find nothing. We go to the job corners and sometimes there is no luck, so we try to forget. You use the little money you have to buy *mira* or marijuana or cheap alcohol just to forget the hopelessness or you look for something illegal to do just to survive,' noted 28-year-old Barasa. Interview data suggested that the challenges associated with residence among male slum youth emerge early in their lives, often persisting with them for a long period of time. At very early ages, several youths in the study had started fending for themselves, doing dangerous and adult work, supporting their households, or maintaining independent existence. Some lost their parents and family support very early and many others lived in households and families that offered them little socio-economic support. Due to household and parental poverty, many of the youth in the settlements do not complete primary schooling or transition to secondary schools. Schools in the slums of Nairobi are also usually low quality and often leave pupils ill-prepared to advance their education (Oketch et al. 2010)

The young people we worked with considered their communities to be unsafe. They spoke frequently of violent robberies and other criminal activities in the communities. Local thugs frequently attack community members for money and other valuables. Male youth were regular targets of these violent attacks. Ken, 29, has been attacked and robbed several times in the community. He works as a shop attendant in a city restaurant and often closes late at work. To get home, he navigates through poorly lit alleys and dangerous spots where local thieves hide to waylay people. Once, when Ken resisted his attackers, he was stabbed in the hand. They stole his phone, money, belt, cap and shoes. Many of the youth had been also robbed and violently attacked by others in the community. To protect themselves, several youths often carried and kept daggers, clubs, and knives.

In Nairobi, poor slum youth are frequently blamed for the insecurity and crime that have won the city the nickname, *Nairobi*. City gossip and media reports frequently caution visitors and residents to avoid areas outside the city center and to watch out for suspicious-looking young men. They also regularly offer gory details of crimes reportedly committed by young people, often described as residents of slums of Nairobi. When Oswald Banda, a Zambian diplomat, was murdered in Nairobi, most Kenyan media outlets reported it, offering grisly details of the crime and strongly implicating Korogocho residents. IOL News (2004) emphasized that, 'Masked gunmen killed a Zambian diplomat working in the Kenyan capital and tied his five-year-old son to his corpse.... Banda was assassinated, and his body and vehicle were left at the scene in the city's Korogocho slum'.

Efforts to rid Nairobi of criminal youth regularly take the form of police raids, arrests, detention, and extra-judicial execution of poor young men in the city. When arrested, these youths must bribe their way out or spend time in police detention. Stories of slum male youth killed in cold blood by the police circulated frequently in our study sites. One notorious police officer, Corporal Ahmed Rashid, had pledged to rid Nairobi of gangsters and criminals. Reportedly relying on anonymous Facebook pages created for reporting suspected gang members and criminals in Nairobi, Rashid and his colleagues tracked down and killed their victims. For instance, on March 31, 2017, Rashid tracked two young men down to the Eastleigh area of Nairobi and executed them in broad day light. Hussein ((n.d)) suggests that since 2014, several dozens of poor young slum males, suspected of criminal activities, have been slain by Rashid and his colleagues. For law enforcement officers and the media in Nairobi, urban poor male youth are largely responsible for insecurity in the city. They also deserved a ruthless state and police response. When we discussed media reports on slums and crime with law enforcement agents in Nairobi, they generally accepted them to be apt. Many of the young slum men we worked with had also been arrested by the police, released only after they paid bribes. They also knew peers and names of community youth who have been killed while in police custody.

Police raids on youth are common in Nairobi's slum settlements. Youth arrested during such raids could be maimed, tortured, or shot to death while in custody. Sakka's brother died after he was arrested and tortured by police officers who raided Koch. About ten armed police officers had stormed Koch one evening claiming to be looking for criminals behind a heist in the city. They claimed they had intelligence that the robbers lived and were hiding in Koch. They rounded up and took away all the young men they could find, about 25 of them. At the police station, they beat and tortured them until some of them confessed to the crime. Sakka's brother was beaten and sustained severe wounds on his head, face, and body. He insisted on his innocence and was released four days later. He arrived home ill, starving, bleeding, and unable to stand. He was taken to a local clinic but died a week later.

The poor livelihood and security conditions in the slums have not condemned the youth to fatalism and hopelessness. Instead, adversity seemed to motivate actions for positive change among them. Youth in the study told us repeatedly that they wanted a better life, to move out of the slums, and to do better than their parents. In all the data we collected, youth aspiration for improved socio-economic conditions was vivid and strong. They spoke about their struggles to make a decent living, their efforts not be like their fathers, and their plans to have a better future for themselves and their children. In what typifies a common sentiment of youth in study, Jonah told

us that most of the young men in the slums think that their parents did not do enough to take advantage of opportunities during their time. The fathers' failures were held responsible for their own poor preparation and lack of skills and education to benefit fully from the opportunities in the country. 'Most young men here blame their parents. Maybe, they were not serious and did not think big about the future. They settled for a low life when their mates worked hard ... They ended up poor and brought us into this mess. But we are not giving up. We are working to change things for ourselves. We don't want our children to suffer like us. We want to be different men ... we want to do things differently as men'. In sum, slum male youth recognized their marginalization and poverty but expressed hope, demonstrated agency, and conceived of a future different from the one they had previously believed to be available to them.

### Youth and valued masculinities in the slums of Nairobi

The young men we worked with were aware that traditional patriarchal masculinity practices – breadwinnerhood, heterosexuality, dominance of women – were celebrated masculinity traits in the slums. They noted that in the slums, real men were perceived as those who provided for their families, were heterosexual, and controlled their wives and girlfriends. Men lacking reputation as 'real men' in the community reportedly risked contemptuous treatment and were often described as women and children. Presumably, these men had failed in their socially ascribed roles. They lacked respectability in the community's eye. Young people's awareness of the local construction of proper in terms of breadwinners and providers emerged in different ways. In both FGDs and IDIs, male youth repeatedly emphasized that: 'Here, the belief is that a man is someone who has a family and provides well for them.' 'People here generally view real men as those able to cater and provide adequately for his family.' According to the youth we worked with, a foremost reason men lost respectability in the community was usually their inability to adequately provide for their households.

Responding youth knew that and spoke about how men unable to provide for their families or who were provided for by women were common targets of degrading banter and, sometimes, violence in the slums. Our ethnographic data indicated the permeation, of everyday social life in Koch and Viwa, of the discursive practice of equating proper manliness with breadwinnerhood and its tenacious pursuit. In both communities, we observed religious services and secular meetings during which prayers were offered to God to support men endure life hardships and not give up in the face of hardship. Community events were also characterized by exhortations to men to not relent from working hard for their families despite pervasive

challenges. Sisko, a Koch tough guy and wheeler dealer, exemplified the popular appeal of breadwinner manliness and its place in the hierarchy of slum manliness. He had the habit of buying drinks for men who accepted for him to address them as a *wanawake* (woman) or *mtoto* (child). Sisko noted: 'We are all live here, but we are not equal. I feed my family and take care of my wife and girlfriend... But when men beg me for drinks, they need to know we are not equal, they are just like women and kids ....'

Youth in our study have heard from parents and other community members that to be 'real' men, they must work hard, provide for their families, and not be pushovers. 'You cannot be a man by sitting down and doing nothing. Men must work and bring home food for their families', Sangana said his father regularly tells him. Men who did not work, could not feed their families or depended on their wives or others for survival were considered boys or not men. Youth were aware of men in their communities who brag about how well they provide for their families. They had also seen men disrespected for not being able to provide to achieve providerhood and breadwinnerhood.

Indicating their awareness of the pressures on men to perform themselves as breadwinners in a context where resources for achieving honest providerhood were inaccessible or unavailable, youth acknowledged an expectation among men in the slums was to be resolute, tough, and shrewd. 'They say here that only real men live in the slums because it is not easy to survive here. They say this because one must be really smart and strong to live here and provide effectively for their families,' young men regularly noted. Previous research shows that the pressure on men to perform themselves as capable providers in Nairobi's poor communities has inspired a redefinition of slum residence as macho and proper masculinity in terms of capacity to navigate the city's unforgiving and harsh economic conditions. In Nairobi's slums, real men are those who find ways to continue provisioning amid pervasive lack and poverty (Izugbara 2015a)

Youth were aware that 'proper men' in the slums were expected to inspire fear and respect among others, assert themselves, and not show a lot of emotion. They also frequently expressed awareness that proper masculinity in the slums was also associated with heterosexuality and procreation. 'Here, the community does not see you as a man if you are not married or have children', noted Ken, 29 years. Ken says he is often disrespected by men in the community because he was unmarried. During a community meeting, he was asked to shut up as he was not qualified to speak on critical issues affecting the community. He says: 'We were invited to the meeting by the chief to discuss insecurity and the need for men to be more security conscious and report criminals to him. When I wanted to speak, two men shouted me down, they said, 'this meeting is for men. We are the ones

affected by the insecurity that you young boys cause in this community. Our wives and children cannot go about freely. How does this affect you, Ken? Do you have a wife?' One the other hand, Abuya 27, said he was not respected by fellow boys until he began to date a girl.

According to the young men we studied, homosexual men were not acknowledged as proper men in the slums. They occupied a very low social status and were not considered real men in the communities. Young people had also witnessed the mistreatment and abuse of gay persons in their community. However, over 60% of the young men we interviewed in the IDIs did not express negative attitudes toward homosexual men. Participants in one of the FGDs agreed that 'There are men and boys who have sex with each other here. That's how they want to live. We really don't care much about them. That's their life. Sometimes, people attack them, especially their parents and relatives. But our problem here is not how people live their private lives. Our problem is how to have a future, to change our conditions and improve our life.' Dave told us about his elder brother who was sexually attracted to other men and faced serious repercussions in the hands of his father. Unhappy with his son's sexual orientation, the man regularly locked him up, denied him food, and beat him. Ultimately, he was chased out of the house and moved on to live in another slum in Nairobi. Dave said loved his brother and was not happy with the treatment he received. He loathes his father for mistreating his brother. He rarely sees his brother these days and often wonders how he is doing. Dave now has what he calls 'a soft heart for gay men' and would like to change the way people that treat them.

### **Aspirational masculinities of Nairobi's poor young men**

Young people frequently endorse and espouse gender inequitable norms learned from adults (Barker and Ricardo 2006, Sideris 2004). However, they also often challenge them. Our study showed widespread perception among slum male youth that the masculinity practices of their fathers and men in their communities were deficient. Generally using their fathers as references, the youth aspired to be 'better' men, 'nobler' protectors and 'worthier' providers for their families, more loving and caring men, less competitive, accommodating of other men, more involved in their children's lives, and non-violent in their engagement with wives, family members, and others. They expressed a strong aspiration for masculinities that embody values of unrivaled providerhood, care, and positive emotion; recognized that the changes they wanted in their livelihood situations, communities, relationships, and family lives would come if they became 'better' men; and blamed the deficiencies of men for their community's inability to make progress.

Responding youth articulated a complex narrative of the relationship between virtuous masculinity and improved social and other outcomes for themselves and their communities. Their narratives united traditional and new values of masculinity to marshal novel narratives that emphasized care for oneself and others, interdependence, relationality, and the rejection of violence and domination and its associated traits (Elliott 2016). Evidence of positive self-reevaluations of gender roles has been noted among young people in Africa. Msibi (2012), among others, suggests that it is among young men and women in very trying contexts in Africa that some of the most progressive reconstructions of gender are emerging.

In contrast to narratives that constitute slum residence as a marker of true masculinity, youth aspired for a masculinity hinged around non-slum residence. The slums were reportedly unhealthy, violent and deficient in opportunities for steady income, quality education, children's development, and the prosperity of households. Youth said that slums exposed them to danger, sexual risks, gang violence and other vices. Being able to move out of the slums was an aspiration that male youth linked to respectable manliness. They anticipated it for the sake of their families and children. 'Although people here often say that only real men live in the slums or that men who live in the slums are the real men, we want to move out of the slums if we can', young men in one Viwa FGD told us. Slum residence was reported as a choice borne out of lack. Youth aspired to be men defined by more decent and fashionable residence. Relocation to a non-slum community would affirm them as real men.

Youth aspirations to be 'better' providers and breadwinners also dominated the narratives we gathered. Reportedly, men in the slums were not effective providers and breadwinners. They embodied a deficient masculinity. Growing up, many of the youth had experienced severe deprivation. They wanted to be 'better' providers, often constituted in terms of the capacity to ensure that their families and children enjoyed the things that they, themselves, missed out of: access to quality housing, nutrition, health care, schooling, and basic amenities like water and sanitation. Jonah did not finish his primary education because his father could not afford it. He grew up in a resource-insecure household. Sometimes, he went for months without basic school supplies. At other times, he stayed away from school to do household chores. He became a driver's assistant at a very early age. In the longer narrative, Jonah told us he was quite brilliant in school and wanted to be a lawyer. However, his career dream had died. He now wants to change things for his own children and is saving to buy his own bus. 'Real men ensure that their children are better prepared than them. I want them to enjoy the things I missed as a child', Jonah asserted. Similar sentiments were expressed

by Ken and Mugai who grew up with fathers they said could not provide effectively for them. They both could not attend secondary school because their families were poor. Both currently make a living selling scavenged metal materials and aspire to become 'better' men, framed largely in terms having higher incomes and capacity to offer more, materially, to their households than their own fathers did.

Youth awareness that, in the slums, masculinity was associated with emotional distance with family members notwithstanding, they aspired to be men known for intimacy, emotional closeness, and stronger connection with their families. Appealing to globally circulating media images of caring masculinities, youth in our study expressed a future desire to be more intimate and considerate fathers and husbands, defined in terms of greater involvement in household work, play with children, and positive and public romantic emotions towards wives. Youth narratives suggested that deference to women, egalitarian romance-based relationships with wives, and strong parental connectedness with children were not signs of masculine weakness. 'Here, once men put some food on the table their job is done. But we want to be different. I only saw my father in the morning when he went out to look for work. He came back when we were sleeping. Sometimes, if you talk in his presence, he will flog and hit you. I want to show more love to my kids as a father and play with them when I have kids,' Matinda told us.

Young men also anticipated lives as non-violent men, who take fewer risks with their lives, care more for themselves, and were more accepting of other men. They were aware of expectations in the slums for men to be care-free, violent and domineering. However, they described these behaviors as dangerous and old-fashioned, with potential to hurt both men and their communities. They aspired to be men who cared not just for themselves but also for others. Their narratives suggested that men in the slums openly humiliated each other, particularly targeting weaker men. In what exemplified aspirations to be more caring and reverent men, many responding youth affirmed a desire to be known as men who protect vulnerable people, including fellow men. Linking this to his personal experience, Dave, whose homosexual brother was evicted by their father, told us that he had learned that respect for everybody's gender and sexual orientation was key to a peaceful community. When we asked Dave what he would do differently if his son was gay, he said 'There are many homosexual men in Kenya who are respectable, responsible and educated. I will sit him down and explain that I want him to change, but if he cannot, I will respect his decision and see how to support him to stay focused and become educated. I don't want to be the father who chased his son away like me father did.'



## Conclusion

Young people have an important signature on the future of gender as it continues to unfold. Understanding aspirations related to gender among youth is key to a more equitable world. Coussée et al. (2009) suggest that youth work has traditionally focused on supporting young people to understand and assert agency in disrupting the gender norms that limit them.

This study addressed the masculinity aspirations of youth in the slums of Nairobi. While the masculinity aspirations of male youth do not radically challenge existing hegemonic structures or values related to masculinity in the slums of Nairobi, they still tell interesting stories. According to Appadurai the 'capacity to aspire', is not evenly distributed among groups. Despite the challenges of these male youth, they aspired to do things differently as men. Further, while the capacity to aspire depends on existing capabilities and practices, slum youth still aspired in the face of limited education and skills. Their aspirations referenced the dire conditions under which they live, local stories of people who, despite adversity, have made it out of the slums, and globalized images of 'better men'. The youth we studied may not possess the requisite resources and access to key skills to enable them to realize a good life, but they are not fatalistic and do not view themselves as lacking a good future. They are only constrained. Aspiration is a cultural capacity situated in the norms and presumptions of what constitutes a good life and of what is possible (Appadurai 2004). In our study, young people's perception that they and their families will be excluded from a good life and remain condemned to the same situations of their fathers and majority of men in their communities if they do not follow different gender routes, appeared to be a major driver of their masculinity aspirations. They clearly articulated a complex narrative of the relationship between virtuous masculinity and improved social and other outcomes for themselves and their communities.

Noteworthy, however, is that several of the young people we studied did not have a clear roadmap for attaining their desired masculinities. Appadurai (2004, 2005) argues that key to realizable aspirations is a roadmap by which they can feasibly be achieved. While many of them expected to go back to school, establish businesses, and find decent work, they do not have the capacity to realize these aspirations, which involves having requisite 'opportunities to link material goods, and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options' (Appadurai 2004, 68). Many of the youth did not have good education, lacked skills, and were poorly connected. Several also used drugs and belonged to criminal gangs, exposing them to negative outcomes.

From our study, gendered aspirations are an important aspect of the lives of young men. Young men experience pressures to live up to certain standards of masculinity in their communities. While there is the strong influence

of existing norms of masculinity on young men's aspirations about gender, youth are also agentic and search for opportunities to be different. The same context of hardship and marginality that threatens to condemn them to traditional norms of masculinity also appears to act as a motivation for them to resist those norms. Interestingly, the masculinity aspiration of the male youth we studied were both simultaneously supportive and resistive of traditional hegemonic manliness ideals. They aspired to be different from their fathers, to be more caring and non-violent men. However, to a large extent, they also betrayed their keenness for traditional and normative masculine identities built around breadwinnerhood, hardiness, provisioning and self-reliance. Powerful gender expectations stood on their way to achieving any real discursive distance from traditional masculinity.

Youth capacity to see through the limitations of current masculinity practices is not a popular theme in studies of marginalized young men. Even less focused in recent research are youth aspirations related to gender. The evidence we have offered in this paper shows that male youth are actively engaging gender practices and seeking for ways to tackle what they perceive as limitations inherent in them. They are conscious of popular narratives and constructions regarding gender but do not merely focus on aligning with or embodying them *in toto*. They draw on the important resource of personal lived experiences as well as local and global trends and developments to imagine new ways of living that will tackle the limitations they see in extant gender regimes. Poor male youth's aspirations for change suggest that new positive visions of manliness are still possible even among those often perceived to be at elevated risk of embodying and performing hurtful masculine practices.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

**Chimaraoke O. Izugbara** currently directs the Global Health, Youth and Development research portfolio at the International Center for Research on Women. He holds PhDs in Health Anthropology and in Social Work and Development from the University of

Gothenburg, Sweden. His research focuses the intersections of gender, sexuality, health, development and poverty.

**Carolyne P. Egesa** holds a master's degree from the University of Southampton, UK and is currently a PhD candidate in Medical Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands. Her research addresses gender, gender-based violence, and masculinities in urban African contexts.

## ORCID

Chimaraoke O. Izugbara  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4908-1131>

Carolyne P. Egesa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6622-1613>

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