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## An Intersectional Analysis of Socio-Cultural Identities and Gender and Health Inequities Among Children and Youth in Street Situations in Western Kenya

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### Abstract

Research has uncovered substantial gender, social, and health disparities among children and youth in street situations (CYSS) in Eldoret, Kenya. From 2013-2014 we engaged CYSS aged 11-24 years in a qualitative study to explore the sexual language and practices used in the street subculture in Eldoret, Kenya. We engaged 65 CYSS in 25 in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions. This work uncovered stark gender inequities, which result in girls and young women in street situations experiencing profound levels of sexual and gender-based violence and harmful sexual and reproductive health outcomes. To comprehend the underlying drivers of these inequities and intervene appropriately and adequately, we sought to understand how CYSS's social identities intersect with systems of oppression and privilege to produce and maintain these inequities. We, therefore, sought to reanalyze the original data from this study using intersectionality as a theoretical framework to explore how systems of oppression in Kenya have shaped the street subculture, constructed CYSS's street and resistance social identities, and how these social identities and the street subculture intersect with macro-level structural factors to produce health and gender inequities. Our analysis identified three distinct social identities that are given to CYSS in Eldoret: Chokoraa (garbage pickers), Mshefa (hustlers), and Mboga ya jeshi (vegetables for soldiers). The findings showed how these identities and the street subculture intersect with the patriarchy, the political-economic context, and social-cultural forces in Kenya, resulting in hegemonic masculinity and detrimental gender roles and norms for young men and women. Our findings show that CYSS are a product of the oppressive systems that construct their circumstances and shape their social identities. CYSS urgently requires policies and programs that intervene at multiple levels to halt the harmful practices within the street subculture and associated with street involvement.

### Keywords

Intersectionality; street youth; Kenya; sexual health; gender; inequity; violence

## Introduction

Children and youth living and working on the streets have recently been termed '*children and youth in street situations*' by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. This terminology broadly encompasses children and youth for whom the streets play a central role in their everyday lives and social identities. They may spend a portion or majority of their time living and or working on the streets and have formed strong connections to public spaces (General Comment No. 21 (2017) on Children in Street Situations, 2017). '*Children and youth in street situations*' replaces previous terms, such as '*street child*', which may have been stigmatizing with negative connotations or been considered pejorative (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012; Panter-Brick, 2002).

In Kenya, children and youth in street situations (CYSS) are prevalent (Braitstein, 2019; Railway Children, 2015; Republic of Kenya Department of Children Services Mombasa, 2018; Save the Children, 2012). However, no national census or recurring counts have been conducted, and therefore, the number of CYSS across the country and in different cities at any given time is unknown. As in other low- and middle-income countries (Embleton, 2016), the phenomenon of CYSS in Kenya has been primarily attributed to poverty, family dysfunction, and abuse (Aptekar & Ciano-Federoff, 1999; Auerswald et al., 2012; Save the Children, 2012; Seidel et al., 2018; Sorber et al., 2014; Suda, 1997; Von Acker et al., 1999). More specifically, research has found that CYSS in Kenya also migrate to the street due to being orphaned or abandoned (Sorber et al., 2014; Suda, 1997), living in a household affected by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Goodman et al., 2016), and the dissolution of traditional kinship structures (Lugalla & Kibassa, 2002; Nyambedha et al., 2003; Suda, 1997). Finally, political instability resulting in post-election violence has contributed to the phenomenon of CYSS in this context (Save the Children, 2012). Rarely do CYSS report coming to the streets due to peer pressure, boredom, or due to delinquency (Save the Children, 2012; Sorber et al., 2014).

CYSS are frequently labeled by the public using derogatory terms, such as 'street urchin',

'garbage picker', and 'scavengers'. These labels affixed by the public give CYSS a stigmatized social identity (Gayapersad et al., 2020). Stigmatization results in CYSS experiencing structural and individual discrimination and influences their socio-economic position in society. This has a significant impact on their experiences of social and health inequities (Embleton et al., 2020; Gayapersad et al., 2020). However, research has identified that CYSS in Kenya have multiple social identities in the street subculture (Wachira et al., 2015), including 'resistance identities' to counteract and reject stigmatizing labels affixed by the public (Gayapersad et al., 2020). Despite identifying CYSS's street and resistance identities, research has not yet explored the social construction of CYSS's resistance and street identities, and how their multiple intersecting social identities interact with systems of oppression and privilege to produce and maintain gender and health inequities in the street subculture.

In 2013, our team conducted a qualitative study with CYSS aged 11-24 in Eldoret, Kenya, which sought to explore the language and terms used for sex, sexual practices and their function within the street subculture, and perceptions of sexually transmitted infections and HIV unique to the street subculture (Embleton et al., 2015, 2016; Wachira et al., 2015, 2016). This research uncovered harmful initiation practices unique to the street subculture, described the social hierarchies and leadership in the context of the streets, and identified different social identities ascribed to young women and men in street situations (Wachira et al., 2015). This work also found substantial gender inequities within the street subculture, resulting in girls and young women connected to the streets experiencing severe sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), as well as harmful sexual and reproductive health outcomes (Embleton et al., 2015, 2016; Wachira et al., 2015, 2016). These gender inequities may be a result of social-cultural and gender norms operating in the street subculture, and the social construction of hegemonic masculinities among oppressed young men in Kenya and other sub-Saharan African contexts (Gibbs et al., 2012, 2015; Izugbara, 2015). Our

initial analyses described these phenomena with a post-positivist lens using thematic analyses, which limited our ability to analyze the power structures both within the street subculture and in relation to the broader political-economic and socio-cultural context of Kenya. Furthermore, these analyses did not explore the social construction of street and resistance identities or the production of gender and health inequities. After reflecting on the limitations of our earlier analyses, it became apparent that undertaking an explicitly feminist analysis would further our understanding of the fundamental power differentials and gender and health disparities that exist for young people connected to the streets.

Intersectionality, a theory conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and originating in Black North American feminist scholarship (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989), has emerged as a theoretical framework in public health research and practice to explore and understand complex social and health inequities (Bowleg, 2012; Dhamoon & Hankivsky, 2011; Larson et al., 2016). Bowleg (2012) outlines three core tenets of intersectionality relevant to public health: 1) the concept that social identities are multiple and intersecting (i.e., race, class, gender, nation, age, ability, and sexuality); 2) that marginalized and oppressed peoples are the focal point; and 3) that multiple social identities intersect with systems of power and privilege (i.e., colonialism, the Patriarchy (the men in power in society), racism, capitalism, poverty, and sexism) to produce inequities.

CYSS are a marginalized and oppressed group of people, with complex multiple and intersecting social identities, who experience substantial social and health inequities. Therefore, the use of an intersectional framework is particularly suitable. Secondary data analysis using an intersectional framework can further our understanding of the social construction of CYSS's street and resistance identities and how their multiple intersecting social identities intersect with systems of oppression to produce and maintain gender and health inequities in the street subculture. An intersectional analysis allows us to better understand the underlying drivers of the social and health disparities experienced by CYSS and may assist in identifying areas for intervention to reduce

inequities experienced by this population.

We therefore sought to reanalyze the original data from this qualitative study using an intersectional theoretical framework informed by feminist approaches to qualitative research and analysis. The objectives of our analysis were to a) explore how the macro-level structural factors in Kenya have shaped the street subculture and constructed CYSS's street and resistance identities; and b) deconstruct how these social identities and the street subculture intersect with macro-level structural factors to produce profound gender inequities, SGBV, and disparate sexual and reproductive health outcomes for girls and young women in street situations in Eldoret, Kenya.

## Materials and Methods

### Study Design

This is a secondary analysis of a qualitative study conducted from August 2013 to February 2014 using focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) to explore the sexual language and practices of CYSS in western Kenya. Recognizing the need for a deeper and more critical analysis of social and health inequities experienced by girls and young women in street situations, our research team formed a working group, and from 2014-2018 conducted a feminist analysis on this existing data using an intersectional theoretical framework (Bowleg, 2012; Dhamoon & Hankivsky, 2011; Larson et al., 2016).

### Research Team and Reflexivity

We chose to use an intersectional framework given that our research team has developed a long-standing participatory program of research with CYSS in this context and we are committed to social justice to improve the lives and circumstances of this population (Ayuku et al., 2003, 2004; Braitstein et al., 2019; Embleton et al., 2013; Embleton et al., 2015; Embleton et al., 2020; Kamanda et al., 2013). The cross-cultural, bi-national, multi-disciplinary research team who conducted this research comprised individuals from Kenya and Canada, two men and seven women, with expertise in public and population health, child and adult psychology,

epidemiology, and the social and behavioral sciences. Given the research team's on-going participatory and community-based research in this setting with CYSS, many participants were familiar with individuals on the research team, including the interviewers (JW & AK). It is likely that the well-established and trusting relationship between the research team and street community facilitated the ability to conduct this study, and discuss sensitive and complex topics, such as abortion and sexual and gender-based violence, openly with the research team without fear of any repercussions.

### Study Setting

The study occurred in Eldoret, Kenya, located in Uasin Gishu (UG) County. In 2010, UG County had approximately 894,179 individuals from 202,291 households, of whom 41.5% were aged 14 years or less. Approximately 51.3% of the UG County population lives below the Kenyan poverty line (Commission on Revenue Allocation, 2013). Eldoret town has a population of 289,389. It is home to Moi University (MU), Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital (MTRH), and the Academic Model Providing Access to Healthcare (AMPATH) program, which is a collaboration between MTRH, MU, and a consortium of universities from North America (Einterz et al., 2007).

The phenomenon of CYSS in Kenya emerged during colonialism with the development of new towns, rural-urban migration, and colonial policies (Ayuku et al., 2004; Lugalla & Kibassa, 2002). In Eldoret, CYSS were first reported in 1989 (Ayuku et al., 2004). Structural adjustment programs implemented in the mid-1980s exacerbated poverty for families, and resulted in a political shift to multi-party democracy in 1991, leading to civil conflict and fueling the number of children migrating to the streets (Lugalla & Kibassa, 2002). The number of CYSS in Eldoret grew during the 1991-1993 ethnic clashes. During this volatile period, ethnic violence, forced migration, and redistribution of illegally obtained land, left rural subsistence families destitute and displaced. As a result, families migrated into urban slum settlements, propelling children and youth into the streets in Eldoret (Ayuku et al., 2004). Similarly, the 2007 post-election violence contributed to a rise in the

number of CYSS (Save the Children, 2012). More recently, CYSS in Eldoret have reported that poverty, family conflict, neglect, abuse, and alcoholism in the home are the primary drivers of their street involvement (Sorber et al., 2014). In 2016, a point-in-time count documented 1419 individuals under the age of 29 years in street situations in Eldoret. Of those, 497 were less than 15 years of age, 653 were 15 to 24 years of age, and 269 were aged 25 to 29. Approximately 74% of individuals counted were young men (Braitstein et al., 2019). It is believed there are between 1000-3000 street-connected young people in and around Eldoret at any time and that this number varies with seasonal changes and migration patterns in this highly mobile population (Braitstein et al., 2019; Save the Children, 2012).

### Study Population

Eligible for enrolment in the original study were CYSS aged 11-24 years who had been on the street for  $\geq 3$  months. CYSS were defined as individuals who either a) were spending both days and nights on the streets and had limited-to-no parental/guardian contact, or b) were spending a portion or majority of their time on the street and had a parent/guardian/caregiver to whom they returned at night, or c) a combination of these situations at different times.

### Ethical Approval and Human Subjects Protection

Ethical approval was obtained from Moi University Institutional Research Ethics Board (IRB) as well as the Indiana University (IRB) and University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. Written consent was obtained from willing participants aged 18 years and older. Written assent was required for those aged 11-17 years, and the District Children's Officer functioned as the *de facto* guardian; they signed individual consent forms for willing participants under 18. Fingerprints were used for participants who were unable to sign or write their names. A counseling psychologist was present during all interview sessions for children aged 11-17 years to provide counseling in the event of psychological distress during the sessions.

### Sampling and Recruitment

Prior to recruitment, extensive street outreach and study sensitization occurred in locations where CYSS are known to live, work, and congregate around Eldoret town. A pre-existing relationship between the research team and the street community facilitated the identification of these locations and outreach in these settings. A highly experienced street outreach worker met with CYSS in these locations and provided information about the study to potential participants. CYSS were invited to voluntarily participate in the investigation. Prospective participants were invited to partake in the study from three settings in Eldoret: 1) a dedicated study clinic for children and youth at MTRH; 2) "bases/barracks" (primary locations in which CYSS congregate); 3) community-based organizations serving CYSS. Those who voluntarily came to the interview venue, which was a dedicated clinic for vulnerable children and youth, were recruited into the study after providing consent. In total, we recruited a sample of 65 CYSS aged 11-24 years to participate in age and gender stratified focus group discussions. IDI participants were purposively sampled from FGD sessions (Embleton et al., 2015, 2016; Wachira et al., 2015, 2016).

### Data Generation

We conducted a total of 25 IDIs and 5 FGDs, stratified by age and gender, into groups of boys 11-13 years, boys 14-17 years, young men 18-24 years, girls 14-17 years, and young women 18-24 years. All interviews were conducted in private rooms in a study clinic dedicated to vulnerable children and youth. This location provided a private, safe, and neutral environmental where CYSS could openly discuss their sexual and reproductive health practices. Two Kenyan investigators with graduate level training in public health, conducted FGD and IDI interviews in Swahili. Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. A trained research assistant was present in all sessions to take notes. Each FGD took an average of 1 to 1.5 hours. At the end of the FGD session, the study team invited willing participants to participate in IDIs. IDIs took an

average of 40 minutes. After the interviews, transport reimbursement of 100 KES (~USD=1.15) was provided. This amount was considered adequate and not enough to influence or coerce participation in the study.

A pre-tested interview guide was used for the FGDs and IDIs. The guide was modified for participants in early adolescence (11-13 years) to pose developmentally appropriate questions about sexual activities. The interview domains explored initiation on the streets, relationships, sexual practices, language used for sexual acts, reproductive health, sexually transmitted infections, sexual abuse and rape, and roles and responsibilities of leaders on the streets. For CYSS known as 'barracks leaders' on the streets, an additional set of questions further explored their role in the street subculture. Finally, socio-demographic information on age, gender, and educational level were collected from all participants. (Embleton, Wachira, et al., 2015, 2016; Wachira et al., 2015, 2016).

### Qualitative Data Analysis

We followed the six recursive steps laid out by Braun & Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis: data familiarization; generation of initial codes; search for themes; review of themes; definition/labelling of themes; and writing the research account. After first conducting an in-depth and line-by-line reading of our data, we held multiple collaborative analytic working group meetings (Troman & Jeffrey, 2007). During our collaborative analytic work, we discussed our reactions to the data and debated key concepts; over time, we generated a series of codes that we interpreted as key concepts in relation to CYSS's street and resistance identities and gender and health inequities in the street subculture. We developed a codebook in an iterative manner drawing on our existing knowledge and expertise in relation to CYSS in Eldoret, and searched for themes among codes. Our theoretical framing additionally pushed us to consider the following macro-level deductive structural factors in our analyses: sexism, political-economic context, and social-cultural forces (structuralized patriarchy, sexism, etc.). We defined political-economic context broadly to encompass the political and economic systems operating in Kenya (i.e., national and county

governments, capitalist structures, poverty, corruption, and local and international policies). Social-cultural forces here refer to beliefs, customs, norms, and practices within Kenya that affect citizens's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We developed the final codebook by repeatedly testing its coherence and comprehensiveness through test-coding transcripts. We then used this codebook to conduct a thematic analysis of the remaining dataset. All transcripts were individually coded by four authors (LE, AG, VBH, PS) using NVivo and compared for consistency. In several analytic meetings, a set of four coded focus group discussion transcripts were compared line-by-line for consistency. Authors discussed discrepancies and differences in coding, and consensus was reached on these codes. Notes and annotations were documented in analytic memos and used to spur discussion/debate in ongoing interpretive analytic meetings to define and refine themes, as well as in writing up the research results. Given the length of time, since the original research study occurred, participants did not provide feedback on the analysis and findings.

## Results

### Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Sixty-five CYSS participated in the study, the median age was 18 years (IQR: 14–20.5 years), and 31% were female. The majority had some primary education (78.5%), with 43% indicating they had reached upper-primary school (classes 5–8). A quarter of participants reported spending both days and nights on the streets, while half (51%) spent days on the streets and nights in a rented shelter with street peers. The remaining participants reported spending days on the street and returning home to a parent/guardian at night.

### Identities on the Street: Major Themes

Our analysis identified three distinct social identities assigned to CYSS in our context: *Chokoraa*, *Mshefa*, and *Mboga ya jeshi*. To summarize, we describe the social construction of each of these social identities through five major themes and elucidate how they are shaped by,

and intersect with, macro-level structural factors that permeate the street subculture. First, we describe the social construction of the *Chokoraa* identity, and how this stigmatized identity intersects with gender to produce substantial inequities in the street subculture. Second, our analysis situates the construction of the *Mshefa* identity in a manner that examines the street subculture and how it intersects with, and is shaped by, macro-level structural factors. Third, our analysis breaks down the *Mshefa* identity into its gendered components: *Male Mshefa*, *Female Mshefa*, and *'Mboga ya Jeshi'*. In each, we explore how these street and gender identities intersect with macro-level structural factors to produce gender inequities, including SGBV and negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes for girls and young women in these street situations.

### Chokoraa: An identity embedded in stigma and sociocultural discrimination

*Chokoraa*, the label used universally by the general public for CYSS in Kenya, was a fundamental identity experienced by CYSS. The term '*Chokoraa*' ('garbage picker') entered public parlance in the 1970s, reflecting the disheveled appearance of children and youth in the streets and their tendency to pick and eat food from public dustbins. The *Chokoraa* label is rejected by CYSS and is considered a derogatory term in the street community that is highly stigmatizing (Gayapersad et al., 2020). As explained by a barracks leader, the barracks have a reputation for being unclean and full of immoral people: "You know it [the barracks] is known for being a dirty place; the '*chokoraa*' are bad people."

The intersection of the *Chokoraa* identity with gender resulted in substantial gendered impacts and inequities. Being *Chokoraa* and female, for example, had a variety of material effects in the lives of girls and women on the street, including heightened objectification and essentialization of their personhood in their bodies, reduced autonomy and decision-making, and inequities in livelihoods (the 'acceptable' forms of labour open to female CYSS). Participants recounted that girls and young women in street situations "don't know how to work...they must have sex to get money". As a barracks leader discussed, this included the need to shift one's identity from 'dirty' to 'clean' to engage in commercial sex

work with non-street connected individuals at night: *"The girl is also very dirty during the day but when it reaches night, she goes and cleans up then when she goes to [location known for commercial sex work]; she is just clean as the others."*

In one key manifestation of gender inequity generated in the analysis, CYSS in Eldoret spoke at length about how their identity as *Chokoraa* impacts their ability to both perpetrate and report crimes and injustices. The *Chokoraa* identity results in discrimination, harassment, and often oppressive sanctions by law enforcement for girls and young women in street situations, a key challenge that prevents women from reporting SGBV and pursuing legal justice in cases of rape. Participants reported that the police perceive rape as a normative part of the hardscrabble life of the barracks and living on the streets. In general, participants referred to police discrimination against girls and women living on the street, whereby police blame them and cite their poor choices for their problems, such as rape. Young men have a very different experience as one group of young men explained; they generally felt freely able to perpetrate SGBV in locations where CYSS congregate with impunity, without fear of legal repercussions:

**Respondent:** *If you are "Mshefa" [Chokoraa] and you go to the police [to report a rape], they just say that you know each other. You know streets are just considered as one thing.*

**Interviewer:** *So, if you go to the police, they say you know each other?*

**Respondent:** *If you rape a girl even if she is not from the base, when she goes to report, the first thing they will ask is "Where have you been raped"? And if it is Mangula [barracks location] they ask you if you know the person who has raped you, they also tell you that, that place is dangerous, why did you choose to pass through there, so it depends on where you have been raped.*

**Interviewer:** *So if you have been raped at the base?*

**Respondent:** *There is no problem; there is nothing they can do. You can't be caught. (Young men, FGD, 18-24 years)*

Reporting serious offenses like rape is not socially sanctioned in the barracks. Reporting on base members is considered traitorous, and there are serious repercussions for doing so, whereas

reporting on outsiders is permissible. As a result, in addition to not being taken seriously as a victim in the eyes of the law, girls and young women in street situations who have been raped by a peer are often unable to report the crime, fearing social repercussions or further violence in the street subculture. Even in circumstances when an outsider has committed SGBV, corruption in law enforcement both further discourages the reporting of SGBV, and shapes girls and women's pursuit of justice if they do report. As one young woman in this study pointed out in describing interactions with the police:

*"...yes, they [the police] help, but the problem is that those who do such things [i.e., the rapists] have money and even if a person from the streets reports them, they will still bribe their way out and the person who was raped just remains there helplessly" (young woman, IDI, 17).*

These findings demonstrate that the experience of the *Chokoraa* identity is gendered, and that this intersection can produce substantial inequities. The accounts above show how the male and female *Chokoraa* identities can intersect with Kenyan gender and social norms, the patriarchal postcolonial context, and political-economic factors, such as systemic corruption. Young male participants are able to escape persecution for SGBV due to the location of the incident and their identities as both *Chokoraa* and men, resulting in an ongoing cycle of violence in the barracks, while young women are unable to report crimes or seek justice.

As a result of being marginalized and stigmatized as *Chokoraa* by Kenyan society (Gayapersad et al., 2020), CYSS create a street subculture with its own social hierarchy, laws, and rules, and street and resistance identities. Through gendered initiation processes, they bestow upon members of their street community the identities of *Mshefa* and *Mboga ya jeshi*.

### **The street subculture and the construction of Mshefa identity**

CYSS in Eldoret form a distinct subculture, which operates through a system of 'barracks/bases', each having a specific name and location in town where CYSS congregate.

Within each barracks a social hierarchy exists. The social hierarchy in the street subculture is patriarchal; leadership is predominantly male and is either attained by force or democratically (Wachira et al., 2015). As a young woman aged 18 stated, 'there are no leaders who are girls.' The street subculture has specific laws and rules that are shaped by social-cultural values and norms of Kenyan society and enforced by male barracks leaders and other members of the street community. Laws and rules in the street subculture are enforced using violence and beatings, likening to the use of mob justice in Kenya, which has been attributed to deficiencies in the legal system (Helbling et al., 2015).

We previously described in detail the initiation processes that young men and women undergo to become a *Mshefa* in the street community and belong to a specific barrack (Wachira et al., 2015). *Mshefa* is a Swahili slang word that means a hustler (one who works hard to survive). It is a label and an identity with positive connotations used by CYSS to describe themselves and can be viewed as a "resistance identity" in response to the stigmatizing *Chokoraa* label affixed by society (Gayapersad et al., 2020). *Mshefa* can be a young man or a young woman; however, their gender leads to different expressions of the identity. Initiation rituals common to both young men and women include interrogation, smearing of black soot [on one's body], and payment of 'tax' (e.g., monetary tithes). Ritual practices unique to boys/young men include physical abuse, theft of personal possessions, volatile solvent use (i.e., glue-sniffing), being forced to eat garbage, and sodomy among the physically weaker boys. Initiation processes unique to girls/young women include being forced to 'become a wife or sexual partner', rape, and gang rape (Wachira, 2015). We contend that these differential street initiation processes are shaped by and intersect with macro-level structural factors, particularly the Patriarchy. The male dominated leadership in the street subculture ensures that initiation rituals for both young men and women are controlled and performed by young men, as described by one young woman participant:

*Interviewer:* When you came on the streets while you were still new how were you welcomed?

*Respondent:* [she laughs] Here when you are new, it is the boys who will welcome you not girls. The boys will chase away the girls not to come close to you then they will go with you and queue on you then you become a member of the base.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean they queue on you?

*Respondent:* A group of them will queue to have sex with you. (Young woman, IDI, 20)

The use of gang rape and physical violence is largely unquestioned and widely accepted among girls and young women as a normalized 'rite of passage', which must be endured to be accepted in the street subculture, as explained by one participant:

*Interviewer:* So, it means that I can allow my husband to do a 'combi' [gang rape] on another girl?

*Respondent:* Yes, because the same was done to me. It hardens her. I will accept it because I want her to feel what I felt. (Young woman, FGD, 14-17)

Only after a girl or young woman is raped does she become an *Mshefa*, as stated by one young man aged 17: 'The new girl will become a *Mshefa* after being raped.' In some instances, a male *Mshefa* with social and economic power on the streets will choose to take a new girl of his liking to become his 'wife' and express his manhood through the provision of protection from other young men. This is an informal marriage and arrangement where young people use the names 'wife' and 'husband', with no religious or legally binding ties. The new girl has little to no choice in becoming the man's wife, given that the alternative is being initiated through gang rape. Becoming one man's wife may offer temporary security from gang rape, but results in young women being objectified and 'owned' by young men, where the man exerts extreme control and power over her actions and her body. The young women taken as a 'wife' are expected to take on domestic duties and be submissive, demonstrating the intersection of the Patriarchy and social-cultural forces in the street subculture. As discussed by one group of young men, men's power and social hierarchy in the street subculture allows them to control the initiation process, take a wife, and leave girls and young



women subservient (and often pregnant) with reduced agency, and subject to SGBV:

**Respondent:** *If you are a girl and you come to town, those big boys, they take you in well and then they take you as their wife.*

**Respondent:** *He brings you things but after a while after he sees you are wasted, he abandons you, beats you up and chases you away.*

**Respondent:** *One with a house is the one who will welcome her.*

**Respondent:** *Does her like his wife, but after he is done with her, he abandons her.*

**Interviewer:** *What do you mean by saying he does her like his wife?*

**Respondent:** *It is like he has married her. Like his wife - cooking for him, washing his clothes, giving her security, keeping things for her.*

**Respondent:** *But at times when new girls come, they are forced, to sleep with the big boys. They come like this, if you are new, they make a queue for you. [Amid laughter], ten boys make a queue... (Young men, FGD, 14-17)*

Our interpretations around the initiation process endured by young women in street situations suggest that this ritual seeks to control women's bodies, limit women's agency, and ensure women are subordinate to men in the street subculture, mirroring Kenya's patriarchal social system. In contrast, the male initiation process, seeks to condition young men to take on a hegemonic masculine identity as *Mshefa*. The male initiation processes reinforce male dominance, power, and control.

### **The Male Mshefa: Hustlers and the construction of hegemonic masculinity on the streets**

Young men's social identity as *Mshefa* is largely conveyed through their ability to demonstrate their capacity to provide and to sustain their livelihood through working in the informal economy. The male *Mshefa* identity intersects with the Kenyan capitalist economy, which necessitates hustling to survive on a daily basis for those of lowest socio-economic status, and patriarchal social norms that link a man's worth with the ability to provide for his family (Izugbara, 2015). Many young men in street situations engage in honest labour that is often

exploitive (Sorber et al., 2014). However, in some instances, the inability of young men in street situations to earn within the informal economy results in control and commodification of young women's bodies for their own survival. As stated by young women:

**Interviewer:** *Do your men allow you to engage in prostitution?*

**Respondent:** *They are the ones who sell us.*

**Respondent:** *They take money from the men and order us to follow the men. (Young woman, FGD, 14-17 years)*

This example demonstrates how the male *Mshefa* identity intersects with macro-level structural factors, including the patriarchy, political-economic context, and social-cultural norms that dictate that a man's worth is tied to the ability to provide, earn an income, and work (Izugbara, 2015). The desire to meet these expectations in the street subculture results in young men commodifying and exploiting girls and young women in street situations, thereby impacting their sexual and reproductive health.

Participants explained that when young men are able to provide food, money, shelter, or other material items to girls and young women in street situations, it is explicit that sex is expected in exchange for provisioning. Sex is a currency within the street economy. When young women refuse the tacit social contract to sex, young men can resort to SGBV. As explained by one group of young men, they feel that they are 'owed' for provisioning:

**Respondent:** *There are girls who just want to eat your money, but they don't want to give you the other side [sex], so when they come and you have money, you just use that opportunity to catch her, that way if the leaders know they won't have a problem with that. So, when they see you with a girl, they just know these girls always eat your money.*

**Interviewer:** *So, when you rape a girl who always eats your money, the barracks leaders won't have a problem?*

**Respondent:** *They will just tell her to pay the debt. When they see you catching that girl, they know you have been walking with that girl and that she has been eating your money, it is going to*

*be like a song, "pay the debt, and pay the debt".*  
(Young men, FGD, 18-24 years)

The act of provisioning and a desire to achieve traditional male roles of husband and father is common among young men in street situations. Attempting to embody traditional male roles of husband and head of the household, young men in street situations aggressively exert control over women's bodies and sexual decision-making in relationships. As one group of girls debated, a woman's body may become a man's property in a relationship, and he may control sexual practices, including condom use:

**Respondent:** *But there are men who don't like condoms so if he doesn't wear his, you wear yours. Such men usually have infections, and he will think you don't have protection, yet you have it.*

**Respondent:** *If I am a man, I will inspect her with a torch to see if she is wearing a condom.*

**Respondent:** *I don't think a girl can let a man just inspect her like that.*

**Respondent:** *I can. It is his property.*  
(Young women, FGD, 14-17).

In relation to marriage, many young men in street situations expressed a desire for fatherhood. However, young women imply this may be to fulfill his ego or sense of manhood in relation to fertility. As a group of young women discussed, once they have a child to fulfill their partner's demand, young men quickly abandon them and their responsibilities as husband and father:

**Interviewer:** *Your husbands in the streets, do they want you to get children?*

**Respondent:** *They want children.*

**Interviewer:** *Why do they want you to get children?*

**Respondent:** *So that they are praised.*

**Respondent:** *They be praised but they don't feed.*

**Respondent:** *If you don't get pregnant, they beat you, they even shame you, and everyone calls you "bonoko" [barren]. So, you are just forced to give birth for him. When you have stayed for like one month, he beats you and you are chased away.*

(Young women, FGD, 18-24)

The male *Mshefa* identity and masculinity in the street subculture is also conveyed through

hypersexuality and multiple sexual partnerships. Young men in street situations believe having multiple partners is a sign of strength and manhood: *'Like me I used to be very tough. I could sleep with like five girls'* (Young man, IDI, 20). It is rare for a young man to have only one girl, and his ability to attract multiple women demonstrates his sexual desirability and thereby masculinity in the street subculture. As a group of young men aged 18-24 explain, they justify their hypersexuality and behaviours, such as rape as a result of their uncontrollable sexual desire and male biology: *'When you get too much heat, like us men, we get aroused; we call that "nyege". So, we go and talk to a girl or take her by force and have sex.'* This leaves young women vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and unwanted pregnancy.

The male *Mshefa* is also oppressed by political-economic contextual factors, including local policies and law enforcement that impact CYSS, particularly young males. Young men in street situations are frequently persecuted by municipal guards and law enforcement officers and placed in juvenile detention or jail (Embleton, 2020; Sorber et al., 2014). This impacts their ability to hustle in the informal economy and maintain relationships where they are expected to provide economic and material provisions. Young women change partners as a result, leaving young men further disenfranchised: *"For me, it is not these boys who undermine me, it is the government. Whenever I get a wife and I get arrested, when I come back, I find her with another man. So, I find it hard."* (Young man, FGD, 18-24 years)

The male *Mshefa* identity expressed through hegemonic masculinity is a product of interlocking systems of oppression, namely the Patriarchy, sexism, political-economic context, and social-cultural forces. Young men in street situations are conditioned through the initiation process to express the *Mshefa* identity and their masculinity through power, control, dominance, and aggression in the street subculture, and are wholly unable to meet traditional Kenyan social-cultural expectations of masculinity as a result of being street-involved. Therefore, young men unable to live up to societal and cultural expectations of manhood express their masculinity through behaviours resulting in gender inequities, SGBV, and harmful sexual and

reproductive health practices. Girls and young women's reliance on boys and young men for security, economic, and material provisioning may be the result of the intersection of their identity as a female *Mshefa* with similar macro-level structural factors, which we will now explore.

### **Female Mshefa: Motherhood, subservience, and surviving on the streets**

Young women's *Mshefa* identity is intimately tied to traditional expressions of womanhood in Kenya and is constructed by and intersects with social-cultural forces, the Patriarchy, and the political-economic context that is reflected in the street subculture. Similar to what is expected of women in Kenya traditionally (Neitzert, 1994), young women in street situations are encouraged to meet the social expectations of marriage, pregnancy, and childbearing, and are expected to perform the bulk of domestic labour. Young women in the street subculture are expected to maintain fidelity, and remain home to perform domestic duties, while being subservient and sexually responsible to men, in exchange for men's economic and material provisioning. Failure to conform to these expectations as a young woman and *Mshefa* results in SGBV; as one young man explained, when he did not find his girlfriend at home, he sent others to rape her:

*"You can get for example a girl who you have been staying together and providing for her and one day you just come to the house and find she is not in the house she has gone. You will now have to look for her then call people to rape her."*  
(Young man, IDI, 19)

As we previously described, pregnancy and childbearing are extremely important to young women in street situations and are linked with their survival and personal fulfillment (Wachira, 2015). The identity of motherhood is revered and considered a marker of successful womanhood in the streets. It is also a clear marker of fertility – relevant as a protective mechanism on the street to counter the negativity and physical abuse socioculturally associated with being barren in Kenya:

*Interviewer: Is there anything good about getting pregnant?*

*Respondent: Yes. You become proud to be a mother.*

*Respondent: You are proud someone calls you mother. No one will call you barren even if the child dies. (Young woman, FGD, 14-17)*

Given the negative impacts associated with being perceived as barren, pregnancy (while admired) may be another example of how patriarchal street subculture seeks to control women's bodies and women's worth. Young women *Mshefa* are required to prove their worth as women by demonstrating their fertility and bearing children. When a young woman *Mshefa* conceives and receives the additional social identity of 'mother', it is associated with the possibility of respect on the streets and may result in temporary protection from SGBV as a group of women account:

*Interviewer: And is getting pregnant a good thing in the streets?*

*Respondent: Eeh [affirmation]*

*Respondent: There is its goodness.*

*Respondent: There are others who respect you.*

*Interviewer: Who respects you?*

*Respondent: Others see that they won't touch me when I am with the child, the child will cry, and they won't touch me the way they would when the child was not there. But if I have the baby and the baby cries, he will feel pity for me. If I am hungry and I have a baby he will give me food. (Young women, FGD, 18-24)*

Female agency is significantly limited in the patriarchal street subculture, and reproductive health is one domain in which young women may have a degree of agency. Girls and young women in street situations may attempt to exercise their agency through secretly using family planning and procuring abortions in cases of unwanted pregnancy:

*Interviewer: What do people do to prevent pregnancy?*

*Respondent: A girl needs to be careful because the boys can just cheat that they have put on a condom then they tear them, and you will end up pregnant. So, in most cases they use family planning drugs.*

**Interviewer:** What do they do when they get pregnant unwillingly?

**Respondent:** They abort. They just go to the same doctor for the drugs that clears the stomach, once you take the drugs, it will lead to abortion. Some girls will let the pregnancy grow and then when it reaches around 7 months, the fetus moves down and they start pricking the fetus with a needle through their vagina and labour pains begin, then they end up having a still birth (Young woman, IDI, 15)

However, abortion is considered unacceptable and against the laws and rules of the street. Abortion is restricted in Kenya (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2010; Izugbara et al., 2017) and public attitudes and beliefs associated with abortion are negative, leaving it stigmatized (Izugbara et al., 2017). When a young woman in the street subculture seeks or has an abortion, she is subject to physical violence as a result of her actions. For example, as one group of men reported:

**Interviewer:** What do you do when she aborts?

**Respondent:** You take her to jail, or you beat her. We beat her because when we take her there, they will just release her, and she will come back, and she continues to abort and abort. (Young men, FGD, 18-24 years).

This demonstrates how young women's reproductive health decisions intersect with macro-level structural factors in the street subculture. Kenya's restrictive abortion laws and negative public attitudes towards abortion (Izugbara et al., 2017), as well as sexism and the patriarchy, oppress girls and young women seeking safe abortions, and the street subculture ensures young women are punished for doing so. While young women recognize that having an abortion in the context of the street subculture is not acceptable and will result in SGBV, having an abortion is one area in which young women in street situations have control of their bodies and express their agency. In a multiplicative manner, the street subculture and macro-level structural factors intersect to construct reproductive health inequities for young women and girls in street situations in relation to pregnancy and abortion.

Like young men, young women in street situations work informally to survive, yet they do

so primarily through engaging in transactional sex and commodification of their bodies (Embleton et al., 2015, 2016). Young women Mshefa's engagement in transactional sex can be understood within the context of numerous macro-level structural factors, including sexism, the patriarchy, and the political-economic context. Sex is rarely engaged in by young women for pleasure – as one young woman aged 19 reported; she didn't see any other reason that women would sleep with men – 'just for money'. Our analyses generated sub-themes around two forms of transactional sex: transactional sex with agency and transactional sex for survival.

Transactional sex with agency occurs when young women exchange sex for money or other items; however, it is done so explicitly with female agency and control over the circumstances. As a group of young women explains, their vagina is a market that may allow them to independently provide for themselves and their children:

**Respondent:** This is a market madam; you get money to educate your kids.

**Interviewer:** So, you say our private parts were made for sex, and then you also say it is a supermarket and it educates babies.

**Respondent:** And school fees too.

**Interviewer:** So, what do you mean by all that?

**Respondent:** We have sex to get paid.

**Interviewer:** You have sex and get paid?

**Respondent:** Eeh, no free sex. (Young women, FGD, 18-24)

However, engaging in transactional sex with agency is not without consequences, and young women in street situations may endure physical violence at the hands of their street-connected boyfriends as a result:

**Interviewer:** So, if you have a man you can still go and sleep with other men?

**Respondent:** Eeh, our men have no money. They are broke. They have nothing. I'd rather get beaten in the morning but have some money with me. (Young women, FGD, 18-24)

In contrast, transactional sex for survival occurs when young women exchange sex for security, shelter, food, drugs, money, or other items, with very little agency, knowing that their

refusal will likely result in SGBV. This type of transactional sex is also the result of young women's *Mshefa* identity intersecting with the Patriarchy, sexism, and the capitalist economy within the street subculture. This results in young women's bodies being controlled by men and their sexual subservience in exchange for men's economic and material provisioning, as explained by one young woman: "You find someone buys for you glue (to sniff) worth twenty shillings. And he tells you that you follow him because he has used his money on you, you must pay. So, you just have to sleep with him." (Young woman, IDI, 19)

This form of transactional sex for survival and reduction of young women to their bodies, vaginas, and sexual objects is the expression of the *Mboga ya Jeshi* identity within the street subculture.

#### **'Mboga ya jeshi': vegetables for the street soldiers**

While the *Mshefa* identity is accepted and proudly embraced by both young men and women in the street community, girls and young women in street situations have an additional identity constructed and imposed upon them by young men during their initiation process: *Mboga ya jeshi*. *Mboga ya jeshi* literally translates to 'vegetable for the soldiers' and implies that young women and girls in the street subculture are sexual objects to be used and consumed by any street male (the soldier). One participant of a focus group explains: "It is when a girl like me at the base, I have very many boyfriends, but I have one whom I love, but 'mboga ya jeshi' is when you belong to everybody." (Young women, FGD, 14-17)

Young women receive the *Mboga ya jeshi* identity after undergoing gang rape during the initiation process (Wachira et al., 2015). This identity, imposed by young male *Mshefa* on young women, seeks to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and control women. Unpacking the meaning of *Mboga ya jeshi* (vegetables for soldiers) helps to explore this identity and its intersections with systems of oppression. Soldiers (*jeshi*) represent masculinity, power, and dominance, and soldiers are known to employ violence to enact control over societies and assert and maintain power. The male *Mshefa* is the street soldier who establishes power, dominance, and

control in the street subculture using SGBV. Vegetables (*mboga*) are commodities to be grown, consumed, and sold: this characterization typifies young women as objects that are controlled and consumed or used as commodities to be sold and traded in the market. This objectification can result in extreme forms of SGBV. In this context, young women in street situations are sexual objects to be used by any 'street soldier'. The identity is normalized among young women as something that must be endured on the streets, as described by one young woman:

*Interviewer:* So, they view girls as vegetables?

*Respondent:* Yes. If I have a boyfriend then he finds me with another man from the street, it will not be that serious because they say "mboga ya jeshi ni mboga ya jeshi". It means that 'barracks vegetables' can be shared by members of the barracks. So, they accept their girlfriends to have sex with other members of the base because the girl is a 'barracks vegetable'. (Young woman, IDI, 20)

Our analysis further suggested that the *Mboga ya jeshi* identity is fluid. At times when a man decides to take a girl or young woman on the streets for (informal) marriage, she may temporarily no longer be considered *Mboga ya jeshi*, but instead belongs to one man, as explained by young women:

*Respondent:* But it will come a time when you will have one lover who will protect you from others. You become his property.

*Respondent:* You no longer are 'Mboga ya jeshi' (Young women, FGD, 14-17)

However, this temporary protection can easily shift at the hands of male power and control. As men control relationship and sexual decision-making in the street subculture, a man can decide to end a relationship or subject a young woman to SGBV, thus returning her to the identity of *Mboga ya jeshi*.

In summary, the identity of *Mboga ya Jeshi* imposed upon girls and young women in street situations ensures that they are sexually subservient to boys and men, used as commodities or objects within the street subculture, and results in extreme forms of SGBV. Furthermore, the imposed identity seeks

to control their bodies by using sex in exchange for provisions while promoting hegemonic masculinity - the identity that ensures that women are subordinate to men in the street subculture, as in the perceived dominant culture.

### Discussion

Using an intersectional feminist lens, this analysis attempts to deconstruct the complexities of young women's experiences of SGBV and their disparate sexual and reproductive health outcomes in the street subculture in Eldoret, Kenya. Our findings suggest that the identities of *Chokoraa*, *Mshefa*, and *Mboga ya jeshi* are socially constructed and intersect with macro-level structural factors to produce and reinforce substantial health and social inequities. At the core of our analysis, we demonstrate the strong role of the dominant patriarchal system and how this broader political-economic and social-cultural context shapes the street subculture and supports hegemonic masculinity and harmful gender norms. As a result, girls and young women in street situations experience SGBV, substantial gender inequities, and harmful sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

For boys and young men in street situations, our analysis demonstrates how the *Mshefa* identity is socially constructed in the context of systems of oppression in Kenya, where young men on the street are targeted by law enforcement, economically marginalized, highly impoverished, and unable to meet traditional social-cultural masculine norms that link a man's worth with the ability to provide for his family (Izugbara, 2015). Much has been written about traditional masculinity in sub-Saharan Africa and the inability of young men to meet traditional masculine expectations given poverty and economic marginalization (Gibbs et al., 2012, 2015; Izugbara, 2015). In Kenya and other sub-Saharan African contexts, it has been hypothesized that young men who are unable to secure traditional masculinity construct violent and hypersexual masculinities as a result of feeling powerless and emasculated. Oppressed young men thereby assert their masculinity and regain their power and social position through SGBV and multiple sexual partnerships (Gibbs et al., 2015; Izugbara, 2015; Silberschmidt, 2001). Our findings point to a similar construction of

hegemonic masculinity within the street subculture with the expression of the *Mshefa* identity among young men in street situations.

Young men in our analysis reported engaging in multiple sexual partnerships as a source of pride (hypersexuality), and spoke at length about their use of SGBV to control girls and women on the street, which we interpret as acts to assert masculinity as a disempowered group, in order to regain power and a dominant social position over women within the patriarchal culture. Often coming from impoverished circumstances (Embleton, Lee, et al., 2016; Sorber et al., 2014), boys and young men in street situations face the insurmountable task of trying to embody traditional masculine expectations of being the breadwinner and provider (Izugbara, 2015). With very little education or vocational skills (Sorber et al., 2014), and the stigma associated with being *Chokoraa* (Gayapersad et al., 2020), finding decent work within the economy where unemployment (pre-COVID-19) among young people is 26.2% for persons aged 15-24 (World Bank, 2018), is largely unattainable. Young men in street situations are therefore unable to meet societal expectations of what it means to be a 'man'. In light of this, our analysis suggests the male *Mshefa* identity and street subculture provides an alternative masculinity that allows young men to enact social and economic power and control through violent and hypersexual practices that impact girls and young women in street situations.

Our analysis points to the need for interventions to address structural and social determinants of health inequities for CYSS. The intersection of the political-economic context with the street subculture and the *Mshefa* and *Mboga ya Jeshi* identities, results in a reliance on transactional and survival sex and adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes for girls and young women, and limited opportunities for all CYSS to engage in safe, secure, and economically viable livelihoods. Both young men and women in street situations urgently require programmes, policies, and support to engage in productive and sustainable livelihoods that do not result in detrimental health outcomes. For young women, it is clear that programmes that build self-efficacy and training that develops valuable skills and avenues for income generation that do not rely on

transactional and commercial sex are urgently needed.

In addition to finding viable routes for young people in street situations to engage in the economy, dialogue about alternative masculinities and femininities for young people in Kenya, and what it means to be a man and woman need to take root in society. Structural and social interventions aimed at preventing SGBV, shifting gender norms, and improving gender equity, need to include both men and boys and women and girls and target issues from the macro-structural level to the micro-individual level (Dworkin et al., 2013; Gibbs et al., 2017; Jewkes et al., 2015). Within the street subculture, there is a need to open dialogue and create different initiation processes that do not use SGBV or result in the objectification of young women and girls as *Mboga ya jeshi*. Shifting unsafe rites of passage for young women have been taken up in many communities in Kenya, in order to shift gender norms, relinquish social control of young women's bodies, and discontinue harmful practices (Hughes, 2018).

Our analysis found that girls and young women in street situations had very little agency as *Mboga ya Jeshi* or *Mshefa*. The expressions of girls and young women's social identities on the street were heavily shaped by the Patriarchy, whereby girls and young women in street situations take on a subservient, subordinate, and objectified identity as *Mboga ya Jeshi*. While our findings point to girls and young women exercising some degree of agency around their sexual and reproductive health (e.g., transactional sex with agency and procuring unsafe abortions), there is a need to augment their agency, particularly in relation to making choices around who to have a relationship with, when to have sex, and the use of condoms and other contraceptive methods. The normalization of SGBV, unsafe abortions, and other high-risk sexual practices described in our analysis, make it abundantly clear that CYSS, especially girls and young women in street situations, require access to appropriate sexual and reproductive health services and other healthcare, where providers are cognizant of and sensitive to the complexities of their lives on the streets.

Finally, the inability of girls and young women in street situations to report crimes, including rape, within the legal system due to

their stigmatized street identity of *Chokoraa*, requires immediate attention. Law enforcement's normalization of rape and sexual violence between *Chokoraa* is similar to the experiences of other young women in sub-Saharan Africa, including attribution of blame to the victim and absolving the perpetrator of responsibility (Singleton et al., 2018). In Kenya, this may not be exclusively experienced by girls and young women in street situations, as other young women in Kenya report an unresponsive legal system and challenges with reporting their cases to law enforcement (Wangamati et al., 2016). All of this points to an urgent need for reform and training within the police system.

Our research is not without limitations. This study was limited to a specific context in Eldoret, Kenya, and may not reflect other cities, or the experiences of young people in street situations across the country or region. Our data collection did not account for participants' ethnic background or sexual orientation, yet these social identities may also be a factor in shaping children and youths' experiences on the streets. Finally, this is a secondary data analysis of data collected in 2013-2014. The study was not designed to comprehend children and youths' social identities and gender inequities and, therefore, may not have fully captured issues related to systems of oppression and street and resistance identities. It is possible that these identities have shifted in the intervening seven years since the data were collected, and caution is warranted in generalizing from the findings.

## Conclusion

CYSS are a product of the oppressive systems that construct their circumstances and shape their identities. In response, CYSS take on unique street and resistance identities that intersect with systems of oppression, multiplying social and health inequities. Gender inequities within the street subculture and young women's experiences of SGBV and disparate sexual and reproductive health outcomes, appear to be the result of systems of oppression and intersecting identities. Given this, policies and programs that intervene at multiple levels to halt the detrimental practices within the street subculture, and the harms associated with street involvement, are urgently required.

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0814

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