Gender:
Research summary

AFRICAN CITIES
**RESEARCH CONSORTIUM**

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Methods

This research draws from: a) a literature review on gender as a crosscutting theme across the ACRC's domains; b) the primary data collection and analysis carried out by the ACRC teams in the safety and security domain (in Bukavu, Freetown, Lagos, Maiduguri, Mogadishu and Nairobi); youth and capability development domain (in Addis Ababa, Freetown, Kampala, Maiduguri and Mogadishu); and health, wellbeing and nutrition domain (in Freetown, Lilongwe, Nairobi, Bukavu and Kampala); and c) the work of the domain postdoctoral research fellows and cross-domain and sectoral discussions and exchanges.

Context

Across urban African contexts, diverse youth experience specific barriers to accessing livelihoods. This constrains their agency and creates environments in which youth both perpetrate and experience particular forms of violence that vary by gender and other aspects of identity, including class, sexuality, ethnicity and migration/citizenship status. This research examines this gendered youth–security nexus in African cities.

Narratives surrounding youth (in)security can be reductive, limited by binary understandings of violence that describe male perpetrators and female victims. Developing strategies to improve the lives of young people and improve safety and security for all in cities requires a more nuanced understanding of how and why young people with different positionalities participate in and experience (in)security. There are limited analyses of this in the urban development literature. This research combines insights from the existing literature and the African Cities Research Consortium's (ACRC's) domain research into youth and capability development; safety and security; and health, wellbeing and nutrition. It analyses the complex, gendered processes through which (in)security is made, experienced and resisted by young people, and argues for more focused attention on this area.
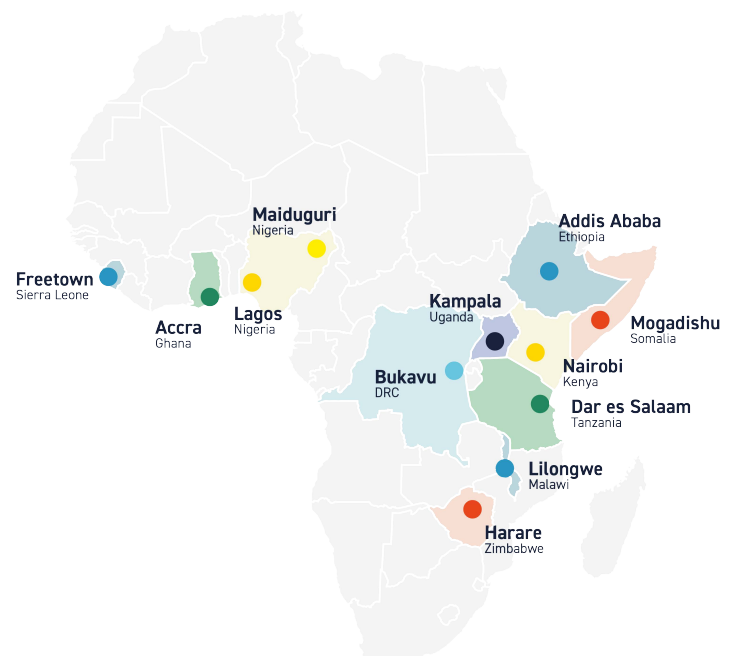
Key findings and implications

We outline three deeply interconnected dimensions of the gendered youth–(in)security nexus in African cities: 1) gendered marginalisation of urban youth; 2) the making of (in)securities; and 3) the gendered experiences of (in)security.

1. Gendered marginalisation of urban youth

Transitions into young adulthood are diverse and non-linear, mediated by age, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, education and the wider context of social, economic and political institutions and environment. Identity and social relationships are forming within this context, and these processes are gendered; relative access to decent livelihoods and economic opportunities are linked to gendered power inequalities and start early in the life-course. Poor economic growth, restricted educational opportunities and limited engagement in local governance and politics push young people into positions of ongoing precarity, unemployment and social marginalisation.

Emerging forms of masculinity respond to these specific conditions. Masculinities are often tied to financial stability and providing for family. Contexts of extreme financial precarity have resulted in particularly high numbers of young men exerting control over women, using violence and sex. This in turn can reproduce or deepen harmful power structures. In Freetown, for example, political disenfranchisement drives male youth to participate in "gangs" that both experience and perpetrate violence, particularly in informal settlements. These intersections between poverty, violence and disadvantages in accessing employment create challenges and insecurities for young men.

For women, unequal access to education and employment, and gendered roles in (in)security, create risks of adolescent pregnancy, with long-term consequences. Limited income-generating opportunities also result in some women entering sex work. The widespread taboo around women's involvement in formal or informal security work has discouraged women from taking up work in either. Furthermore, cultural and religious norms and beliefs pose significant barriers to young women's ability to contribute meaningfully to processes that shape their communities.

Across Africa, however, young women have been transforming their asset bases and building new ways of living, working and being, despite the myriad challenges they face in the process. Through both conforming to, and challenging, conventional gender scripts, young women are contesting existing gender norms in multiple ways. Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in research on femininities and female gender identity among urban African youth. It is rare for research to move beyond a focus on vulnerabilities, gender-based violence and maternal health.

2. The making of (in)securities

In the face of economic marginalisation and exclusion from formal governance, diverse forms of "security work" can provide particular livelihood opportunities for young men. In some cases, this involves work as formal state-organised security providers. In others, young men actively organise to fill the void created by the absence of state security services. These groups often provide protection and influence conflicts over land. Participation in all forms of security work exposes young men to violence and further perpetuates stereotypes of male youth that are often mobilised in exclusionary discourses. These include harmful narratives about young men as "radical" or "criminal" and the threat of the "youth bulge". Such narratives also reinforce the binary framing of gender and the lack of attention to the realities and agency of young women in these spaces.

Young men's dominance in this "production" of security poses risks of harm to them but also contributes to further marginalisation and vulnerability for young women. The sociocultural norms and the threat of violence that pose barriers to women entering these spaces are normalised and rarely questioned. For example, in Mogadishu, informal traditional governance systems run by clan elders typically exclude women and young people from their institutions and processes. Women in the city face heightened risks of crime and violence and are encouraged to take measures to avoid certain areas at specific times, to conceal valuables or cover their bodies. Single women living in informal settlements or displaced people's camps are thought to be particularly affected, in contexts where non-state actors provide protection and basic services to internally displaced people in exchange for money.

Despite this, women contribute to (in)security in complex ways. While women and women's groups are largely excluded from visible security work, they often engage in less visible work to keep themselves and their communities safe in an everyday sense. In Nairobi, women engage in diverse approaches to enhance both personal and community protection, including organisation of professional associations for informal workers, groups that document police injustices and the provision of peer support. These practices of solidarity that emerge to provide safety in the face of inadequate security provision and lack of safe spaces are often taken for granted or "invisibilised" by dominant framings of (in)security. As such, they are incorporated into social reproduction efforts and are not recognised as security interventions. This framing both fuels, and stems from, the limited research into the ways that femininities and female gender identity are affected, and in turn affect, processes of safety and security.

3. The gendered experiences of (in)security

The impacts of violence are also gendered, and emerging forms of masculinity may be expressed as gender-based violence. Formal and informal security forces are regularly accused of sexual and gender-based violence. Threats of violence from these and other actors have significant impacts on the mobility of city residents, particularly at night, in ways that differ by gender and other social positionalities. For example, interviews and "security diaries" kept by residents of various neighbourhoods across Nairobi revealed that insecurity was a major concern, particularly for gender non-binary and queer Kenyans. Urban adolescent girls and young women who have been forcibly displaced are at particular risk of violence and poly-victimisation.

These three themes – gendered marginalisation, the making of (in)securities and the gendered experience of (in)security – are interconnected. The political economy and social contexts of African cities often marginalise youth in ways that are experienced differently by young women and men. Young people may subsequently be drawn into co-producing various forms of (in)security to enable them to fulfil gendered social norms. In the case of young women, this includes roles that are not visible as "security work" but which may contribute to both security and insecurity at community level. This paradoxically creates security for some and insecurity for others, further influencing agency in different ways for young people with different genders and social positionalities.

Reflections on methodologies for gendered analyses in ACRC domains

Research on crime and violence often risks presenting broadbrush interpretations, which offer little insight into the complexities on the ground, and how different groups of people experience and respond to processes and events. Bottom-up approaches that privilege the experiences and the views of marginalised groups are better able to provide insights into how macro, national, regional and city-scale processes work to shape lives on the ground. Gendered analyses require a more inductive and open-ended approach to data collection, along with methodological flexibility and an appreciation of complexity, as gendered identities are fluid and complex in themselves, as are the socioeconomic and political contexts within which they unfold. Relying on broadscale statistical data risks overlooking the fine-grained realities that unfold, shaped by geographic variation, political settlements, cultural realities and their intersection with other axes of difference.

About this summary

This is a summary of a Working Paper, written by the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) gender crosscutting theme team: Katy Davis, Patience Adzande, Nicola Banks, Elizabeth Dessie, Olha Homonchuk, Wangui Kimari, Paula Meth, Sia Morenike Tengbe, Patience Mudimu-Matsangaise, Charity Mwangi, Teurai Anna Nyamangara, Martha Sibanda, Sally Theobald and Rachel Tolhurst.

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Photo information (by order of appearance): 1. Young people walking down a street in Addis Ababa - Sohadiszno / iStock; 2. Boda boda riders in Kampala - Imani Bahati / Unsplash.

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