

Gender: Crosscutting report

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Abstract

Across urban African contexts, diverse youth experience specific barriers to accessing livelihoods, which poses significant constraints to exercising their agency. This experience is a context for particular forms of violence, both directed towards, and perpetrated by, young people in gendered ways. Despite this, there are limited analyses of the gender dimensions of the youth–security nexus in African cities, and a lack of research on how intersecting systems of power shape gendered relations, experiences and outcomes. Narratives surrounding these issues have tended to present reductive binary understandings of the “vulnerability” of women to, and perpetration by male youth of, violence. This paper argues for the need to develop deeper and more nuanced accounts of the complex, gendered processes through which (in)security is made, experienced and resisted. We draw together existing but disparate analyses to synthesise existing knowledge on the gender, youth and (in)security nexus in African cities and to propose future directions for research. Drawing on data from exploratory research conducted in cities in the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC), we discuss these in the light of existing literature. We draw on ACRC’s political settlements framing to reveal the interconnectedness of youth, gender and insecurity with dynamic urban (in/formal) political processes that shape, and often constrain, opportunities for youth. We argue that using a youth-gender-(in)security lens, advanced by a lived experience methodology, can help to centre agency and counter harmful gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Gender, gendered vulnerabilities, youth, insecurity, security, violence, gendered power relations, African cities

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Introduction

There is increasing evidence that experiences of and responses to (in)security in African cities are deeply gendered, in that (in)security is conceptualised, enacted, depicted, experienced and resisted in ways that reflect the patterns and structures of wider gender power relations (Michalos, 2014). Violence, safety and security are of increasing concern in African cities, including conflict, gang violence, gender-based violence, crime and policing (Kimari, 2016; Jones and Kimari, 2019). Experiences of violence and perceptions of risk and (in)security across genders are mediated by intersecting positionalities in systems of power (such as age/generation, poverty, household structure, sexuality, migrant status/nativism, heteronormativity, disability/ableism, refugee/legal status/internally displaced people and Indigeneity) (Banerjee and Hwang, 2023; Oduro et al., 2012). We use the term “(in)security” to emphasise the ways that security and insecurity are not mutually exclusive; perspectives of security and insecurity are subjective and contested, with security for some meaning insecurity for others.

Existing research shows that a majority of urban youth experience specific and significant barriers to accessing employment, livelihoods and occupational opportunities (Ayele et al., 2017; Banks, 2016; Esson et al., 2021). This results in many feeling disenfranchised, that they lack a collective voice and that they are severely constrained in their abilities to exercise agency to pursue their strategic interests. This does not mean that young people lack agency. In fact, the depth of ingenuity that young people must invoke to get by, get ahead and transform city spaces is well documented (Jeffrey, 2012). Yet this creativity and dynamism must be contextualised against, and assessed within, the limiting nature of the cities’ social, economic and political landscapes and the impact that these have on urban youth’s psychosocial and economic development and, crucially, how this differs across groups (Banks, 2020).

Many urban youths experience particular forms of violence that manifest in different ways for different genders in specific contexts. Much of the research and wider discourse around, for example, youth violence and youth gangs are implicitly gendered, meaning that security discourses may focus overwhelmingly on young men under the banner of “youth”, even where not explicitly stating so, and often in contexts with large demographics of women and children (Jones and Kimari, 2019). This enables a situation where youth, and in particular associated concepts such as the “youth bulge” or “time bomb”, become synonymous with young African men (Okech, 2020). The concept of (in)security – and with it the term “youth” – is therefore implicitly masculinised (Sjoberg, 2010). Young women are often viewed as passive victims of conflict and violence, with detailed studies of young women and girls’ experiences and agency lacking (Dessie, 2024a; Oduro et al., 2012). Few studies focus on how unemployment and engagement in violence may be experienced differently by youth of different genders, and, in particular, there are limited accounts of the experiences and agency of young women and emerging femininities in urban African (in)security contexts, including their roles in the production of (in)security (Ismail and Olonisakin,

2021). In particular, the ways that gendered relations and experiences are shaped by young people's positioning in intersecting systems of power is rarely explored (Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015; McIlwaine, 2015; Meth, 2019).

Safety and (in)security are co-produced by networks of actors, including individuals and organisations. This includes women and people of marginalised genders even though their agency to do so is often particularly constrained and this labour may not be very visible as stereotypical "security" work. Individuals' differential agency in shaping (in)security will therefore be heavily influenced by gender norms and relations. Evidence suggests that urban environments are spaces where gender norms can be challenged (Evans, 2018). Building on this, we are interested in the ways that these processes reshape gender identity and relations. Masculinities and femininities affect and are affected by processes of safety and (in)security, particularly in the context of economic crisis and social change, but reductive narratives continue to dominate research in this area.

In light of these dominant narratives and silences, this paper draws from: a) a literature review on gender as a crosscutting theme across the domains of the African Cities Research Consortium's (ACRC's) work; b) the primary data collection and analysis carried out by the ACRC domain teams; and c) the work of the domain postdoctoral research fellows and cross-domain and sectoral discussions and exchanges. It uses this mix of materials to 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.

First, we provide a background on the ACRC and research approaches used. We give specific details of, and reflections on, the methodologies used to research and analyse gendered dimensions of the ACRC domains. We provide background on the political settlement lens and the ways in which this provides context for a cycle of gendered youth marginalisation and (in)security. Second, we introduce the cycle and our key concepts. Then we detail this cycle. We look first at the gendered process of marginalisation of urban youth, including economic, political and social marginalisation and gendered identities that are emerging from this dynamic context. Next, we focus on youth agency in the "making" of (in)securities, including young men's highly visible roles in (in)securities (Kimari, 2018) and the often invisible work of women in (in)security. Finally, we discuss the resulting gendered experiences of (in)security. We use case studies throughout to illustrate these complex processes. Findings are often context specific, but we have traced broader concepts and themes that have a wider cross-city resonance or generalisability. We outline the limitations of this working paper and reflect on ongoing challenges of doing gender work in the ACRC and beyond, before drawing conclusions.

Methodology

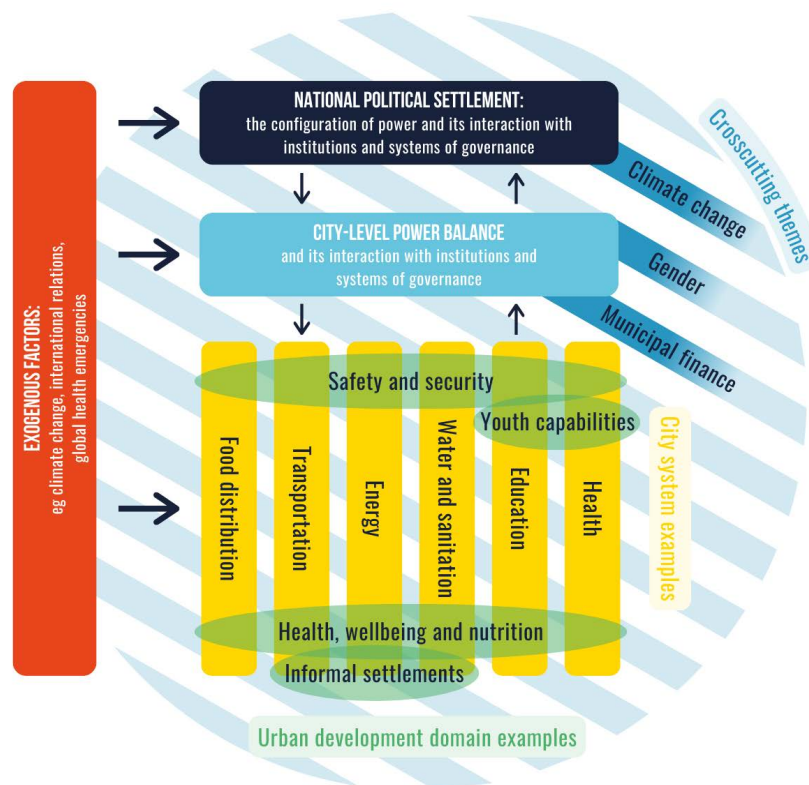
Background on ACRC and research approaches

The African Cities Research Consortium's (ACRC's) holistic framework for analysing urban development in Africa has three integrated components – politics, systems and development domains. The politics component uses “political settlements” theory to model how power is configured at the national and city levels, and then analyses how these configurations of power shape (and are shaped by) urban development processes in the given city. The systems component analyses the functioning of the key systems (composed of physical infrastructure and people organised in various ways) that sustain and/or improve urban life in the city. The domains component looks at some of the distinct fields of power, policy and practice that have formed around complex, intersystemic development challenges in the city, and analyses how the actors (political, bureaucratic, professional and popular) that are engaged in these fields collaborate and/or compete for authority.

The ACRC's theory of change offers an opportunity to examine the complex issues faced by urban dwellers, city planners and political actors through a conceptual prism that frames many of the challenges as systemic failures playing out in an inherently political landscape. This conceptual tool leans on four building blocks identified as preconditions for urban reform – those being mobilised citizens, formal and informal reform coalitions, elite commitment to reform, and enhancement of state capacity. Each of these contains an important social dimension that allows for intricate engagement with power and difference.

In the “Foundation” phase of ACRC (April 2021-April 2024), alongside city-level research on political settlements and city systems within each of the consortium's 12 cities, research was carried out from across a selection of eight different domains, including: structural transformation; neighbourhood and district economic development; land and connectivity; housing; informal settlements; health, wellbeing and nutrition; safety and security; and youth capability and development (Figure 1).

Figure 1: ACRC's conceptual framework



Each city prioritised three to five domains within their city. Reports for each selected domain were written by city teams, and a cross-city report (drawing on these individual city reports) was written by each team of domain leads. In addition to these, ACRC identified three crosscutting themes – gender, finance and climate change – to be incorporated into analyses at each level. Recognising that experiences in any domain do not happen in siloes, and that there are strong interlinkages and connections within and between domains and across cities, there have been several cross-consortium opportunities for city, domain and crosscutting theme researchers to come together, including in Nairobi in 2022, Dar es Salaam in 2023 and Manchester in 2024. It was through these connections that we were particularly drawn to the close interconnections between youth and capability development domain research and safety and security domain research, and have come together to explore these more systematically in this paper. In doing so, we also brought in researchers from other domains where gender and (in)security had come out as central to their research findings at the city or domain level, including informal settlements and health, wellbeing and nutrition.

Methodologies for researching gender through ACRC domains

1. Literature review on gender as a crosscutting theme

This paper was informed by a broader literature review undertaken to understand the intersections of gender as a crosscutting theme across all ACRC domains. A series of searches were run up to July 2023, with search terms that covered: gender and intersectionality; urban African contexts, including the ACRC cities; and specific domain terms. Results were compiled and screened, and relevant articles were sorted into domain-specific topic areas. These were then used to create narrative summaries for each of the ACRC domains with regards to gender. These summaries (and particularly those for the safety and security; youth and capability development; and health, wellbeing and nutrition domains) were drawn from to understand existing knowledge and research gaps for the gendered youth-(in)security nexus in African cities.

2. Primary data collection in ACRC domains

As suggested above, this paper was inspired by interconnections between the safety and security and youth and capability development domains, with input from the health, wellbeing and nutrition domain. It is important to outline the methodologies employed by these domains, which differed somewhat, but which all offered flexibility to city research leads in their methodology and foci, in order to ensure that the research captured their most important priorities and the issues specific to their cities. Table 1 below highlights the cities in which research under these domains took place and the core methodologies that underpinned this research. Analytical focus in each domain was centred on understanding the complexities, contradictions, nuances and experiences of African urban residents in relation to the domain's theme. Research explored the city's political settlement and city systems that shaped the urban environment, but as "social" domains, the residents' experiences of these were prioritised equally across these methodologies.

Table 1: Cross-domain research: City locations and methods utilised in each domain

Domain	Cities	Methods
Safety and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bukavu • Freetown • Lagos • Maiduguri • Mogadishu • Nairobi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Security diaries¹ • Surveys • Media reports • Community consultations • Archival material • Focus groups • Ethnographic field notes
Youth and capability development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addis Ababa • Freetown • Kampala • Maiduguri • Mogadishu 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Semi-structured interviews • Focus group discussions
Health, wellbeing and nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freetown • Lilongwe • Nairobi • Bukavu • Kampala 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Key informant interviews • Focus group discussions • Meetings and workshops

Gender, a critical dimension of difference within all of these domains, was understood to be researchable through methodological approaches capable of examining difference, and appreciative of the significance of power relations and inequities in shaping lived experiences. Furthermore, gender in relation to intersectionality (race, ethnicity, religion, clan identity, age, disability and so on) was a critical site of inequity and difference, and also an analytical approach fundamental to research across all of these domains. Thus, in order to appreciate the complexities of gendered relations and their interconnections with youth and other axes of difference across safety and (in)security, data collection and analysis adopted a predominantly qualitative approach, to determine the subjective, complex, varying and contradictory processes and urban residents' experiences of (in)security. This is not to say that quantitative methods were not used; indeed, they served to complement detailed qualitative findings, and they facilitated broader scales of analysis, sometimes at neighbourhood or city scale. Overall, however, qualitative methods dominated.

¹ Security diaries are a method where participants write about their experiences or fears relating to security in diary format. In the Nairobi case, these were provided by a diverse (interethnic, multi-gender and sexual orientation, and intergenerational) group of participants living in various low-income neighbourhoods across the city, and over a period of three months. This approach was taken up to ensure emic understandings of what were actually considered to be security concerns in the contexts studied, as well as to grasp the local constellation of actors and actions, as narrated by the diary writer, that were employed as solutions or functioned as impediments to enhancing greater security for all.

3. ACRC domain postdoctoral research

In addition to domain-level projects, gendered insights were also strengthened by two specific postdoctoral projects exploring the gendered experiences of rural migrants in Addis Ababa (Dessie, 2024a, b, c) and the gendered experiences of, and responses to, (in)security in Maiduguri, Nigeria (Adzande, 2023a). In Addis Ababa, research identified shifts in livelihood strategies among youth, many of whom were forced to adapt to new degrees of economic insecurity in response to, and in the aftermath of, the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the cost-of-living crisis that has engulfed Ethiopia has amplified the strain on young people's assets and their ability to get by in the city. Research in Maiduguri focused on representation, visibility and diversity in informal policing and how the lack of diversity shapes interactions between residents in low-income communities and informal security providers.² The study further examined how the perception of youths (including males and females) by the informal security providers shaped the types of responses applied to deter misdemeanour. The findings revealed the differential experiences of crime by male and female youths and older men and women and the ways in which policing practices and punitive measures adopted by informal security providers disproportionately target male youths and, to a lesser extent, female youths.

Reflections on methodologies for gendered analyses in ACRC domains

Methodologies sensitive to unearthing gendered realities frequently draw on a lived experience approach, to overcome the historic neglect of subjugated voices and experiences from the analytical gaze. 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 interventions and trends, and importantly their responses to crime. Bottom-up approaches which privilege the experiences and the views of marginalised groups (whether they are low-income residents, women, excluded youth or the disabled), are better able to provide insights into how macro, national, regional and city-scale processes work to shape lives on the ground. These approaches are also able to capture the multiple practices implemented by residents to manage their lives, interventions which may be missed by top-down approaches seeking predetermined actions. This more inductive approach relinquishes the desire to predetermine categories of analysis, instead remaining open to learning from those on the ground, and taking their understandings of health, safety, and so on as fundamental. To achieve this, a more open-ended approach to data collection is used, through the development and analysis of interview questions, focus group schedules and security diaries.

² Informal security providers/networks are non-state security assemblages (or actors and institutions beyond the state) who engage in everyday security provisioning through crime control and the enforcement of social order, particularly in low-income urban neighbourhoods (Olaniyi, 2005; Tapscott, 2023).

Gendered analyses also require methodological flexibility, namely the ability to adapt planned methodological approaches or practices in view of changing realities on the ground, or to recognise the limitations of a particular method “in the moment”, and to revise and adapt tools in order to fully appreciate lived realities. Gender analyses must also appreciate complexity, as gendered identities are fluid and complex in themselves, as are the socioeconomic and political contexts within which they unfold. Simplistic binaries including victim/perpetrator or rich/poor work against more nuanced accounts of urban reality and the ways in which these are gendered. We argue here that methodological flexibility is fundamental to understanding this complexity. 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. Although most of the ACRC domains did not specifically set out to conduct research from a gendered perspective, or with gender as their dominant focus, those domains that were more socially focused adopted strategies which facilitated some gendered interrogation and learning.

Limitations of this paper

This paper seeks to focus predominantly on youth and gender as key axes of difference, but also recognises that other processes, especially poverty, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, all shape experiences of violence and insecurity in cities. The imbalance of data that has come out in ACRC on women’s agency and resistance mirrors the wider challenges of the voices of women and other marginalised genders being heard in research and policy narratives. ACRC work met some of these same challenges (including constraints to accessing women’s perspectives in research in specific contexts). These absent narratives can reinforce a discourse of a “lack of agency”, and part of the purpose of unpacking this in this working paper is to challenge and trouble this absence, in order to not add to it. We recognise that while women’s voices and resistance may be invisible in research and other narratives, they may well be more visible in other contexts, such as less-public spheres.

The ways in which young women and non-binary people enact agency to resist the gendered conditions and their impacts is not examined in as much detail here as the ways in which male youth do so, due primarily to lack of data (in part due to challenges discussed in Box 6). We are aware that this lack of data and findings can further render these processes invisible; hence our emphasis that they exist, despite limited data, and that opportunities should be found moving forward for future understanding of these processes. Future research that investigates the dynamic ways in which women and non-binary people resist marginalisation, (in)security and violence is needed to challenge problematic and binary discourses that label young men as violent and render young women’s agency invisible.

Background on political settlement context

Using political economy as a theoretical point of departure, the ACRC’s political settlements analysis examines the ways in which concentrations and distributions of

power among political elites produce conditions that determine how the systems that make up cities are navigated. In doing so, this analysis draws our attention to the institutional structures that govern urban orders. Leaning on a typology developed by the Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID) at The University of Manchester, the political settlements analysis adopted by the ACRC integrates components that characterise the groups among which power is distributed and the nature of this distribution or concentration.

This consists of a social foundation that can be either narrow or broad, and a power configuration that exists along an axis that separates dispersed settlements from concentrated ones (Kelsall et al., 2021). Addis Ababa and Bukavu are identified as cities with narrow-dispersed political settlements and characterised by institutions with narrow developmental scopes and concentrated power plays between ruling elites. In contrast, Nairobi, Freetown, Lagos, Maiduguri, Mogadishu and Kampala represent cities with political settlements described as broad-dispersed. This is characterised as arrangements in which institutional developmental scopes are wider and power distributions among elites are less concentrated. These classifications may aid in advancing an understanding of how and under what conditions political elites invest in mobilising efforts to mainstream gender-informed, gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive policy initiatives. They may also reveal the ways in which these initiatives are integrated – or fail to be integrated – into systemic change and transformation in cities.

Political settlement analysis often focuses on elite national-level politics, with little attention given to the everyday non-elite local politics and power relations that shape urban social processes and dynamics. Meanwhile, Auerbach's (2017) research in India shows how non-elite horizontal associations are able to make significant contributions to urban development processes by forging vertical links with city-level powerholders. Relatedly, Goodfellow's (2018) study in Kigali, Kampala and Addis Ababa found that in contexts where power was dispersed among "horizontal" powerful actors like traditional authorities and other local actors, informal institutions thrived and (in)directly subverted formal rules in the process of distributing urban benefits. These findings suggest that understanding how horizontal relationships shape urban dynamics and their outcomes is as important as focusing on vertical relationships that are operational at the city and national level.

While the ACRC city studies did not extensively engage with how differences in political settlements in African cities affected (in)security, youth or gender, it was evident that local politics and/or power relations significantly shaped the experiences of youths and the extent of gender mainstreaming³ in local governance (see Box 2 for an analysis of how informal traditional governance systems are highly exclusionary for women, particularly young women). For instance, in some cities where power is held largely by (older) men, particularly with traditional power bases rather than through democratic processes, it is more likely that access to power and social spaces for expression might

³ Gender mainstreaming refers to systematic approaches to integrating gender perspectives into research and policy (Hankivsky, 2005; Tolhurst et al., 2012).

be substantially limited in processes of both formal and customary governance. This is particularly the case for women (of all ages), but also to a lesser degree for young men. This has knock-on effects on how legal, institutional and governance structures manage social challenges like gender-based violence. In the analysis presented in this paper, we present aspects of political settlements that help elucidate the context for the gendered youth exclusions, participation in making and experiences of (in)security in case studies.

Introducing the cycle and key concepts

Figure 2: Cycle of gendered youth marginalisation and insecurity

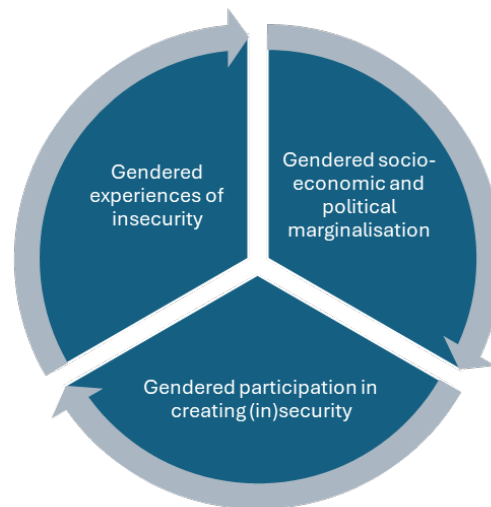


Figure 2 illustrates how the three key themes of our analysis are interconnected. First, gendered socioeconomic and political marginalisation refers to the process through which the political economy and social contexts of African cities often marginalise youth in ways that are gendered. By “gendered”, we mean that these processes are experienced differently by young women and men, and/or have differing implications for their life trajectories and that these differing experiences are shaped by the operation of gender power relations within markets and institutions (such as the family, schools and employers), including gender stereotyping, social norms, gender discrimination, and unequal divisions of labour and access to resources. Further, we understand these gender relations from an intersectional perspective; that is, gender intersects with other systems of power in shaping privilege and disadvantage. For example, social norms, resources and opportunities are likely to differ for young people of different genders in informal urban settlements and those living in richer neighbourhoods, or between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ youth. Second, in this context of economic and political marginalisation, young people may be drawn into various forms of “security work” to enable them to fulfil masculine social norms of economic stability and exercising power. Explorations of this “security work” are often “gender blind”, meaning that they are silent on the gender identities of different actors; the predominance of young men is often taken for granted and neither explicitly mentioned

nor explored, whilst the roles played by women are rarely explicated. However, women do play roles both in supporting male-dominated insecurity work (such as criminality) but also in producing security, particularly at community levels. Third, (in)security work often paradoxically creates relative safety and security for some and risks of experiencing violence for others; the particular risks of and vulnerabilities to violence are again experienced differentially by young women and men. Both direct experiences and fear of violence may in turn limit young women and men's economic and social opportunities, exacerbating their marginalisation.

We draw on Kabeer's 1999 definition of agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (1999: 438) utilising available resources (material, human and social) and the similar definition put forward by the ACRC youth and capability development domain report (Homonchuk et al., 2024: 17) as "an individual's capacity to assert themselves and act in their own interest in terms of attaining a life they find worth valuing". Kabeer further argues that agency includes multiple dimensions, including "the cognitive capacity for critical analysis, reflection and goal setting ... the practical capacity to act to achieve these goals [and] ... a subjective capability that reflects how women view themselves and their place in society" (Kabeer, 2018). Individuals may define goals in line with or add odds with prevailing gender norms and may be more (or less) constrained by their capacities and access to resources.

We draw on understandings of security outlined in the ACRC safety and security domain report (Adzande et al., 2024), which moves beyond the UN definition of human security as "freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity" (UNDP, 1994) to incorporate "security" in relation to health, food, safety, economic security and access to services (Kelsall et al., 2021). ACRC primary research focused on how urban residents perceive, experience and respond to (in)security and uses the concept of "everyday insecurity", which stresses that "insecurity must be conceived through the lives and bodies of those living amidst conflict in their everyday lives" (Berents, 2018: 23). In this paper, our use of the term "insecurity" incorporates interrelated experiences and perceptions of violence, conflict and crime. We further draw on the ACRC safety and security domain report (Adzande et al., 2024) in defining formal and informal security work and/or provision and highlighting the blurred lines between the two in specific contexts. In their research they argue that,

"all cities employed a range of state-sponsored formal security actors, including the police and military; and in most areas of African cities, a complex array of 'informal' security providers was evident ... [these] consist of a complex mix of groups ... precluding simple categorisations of 'informal providers' – they each have differing relations with the state, which in themselves are fluid, depending on local power struggles, political leadership and changing local resources" (Adzande et al., 2024: 30).

In Maiduguri for example, "informal" security providers and collaborators included a Community Security Committee linked to traditional rulers, vigilante groups, and a Civilian Joint Task force regulated by the Ministry of Justice.

1. Gendered marginalisation of urban youth

1.1. Economic, political and social marginalisation

Across urban African contexts, there is an increasing trend of limited livelihood opportunities for youth, combined with insufficient political representation (Banks, 2016; Weston et al., 2019; Ayele et al., 2017).⁴ In African cities, youth comprise a majority, often in a context of limited skills training that does not correspond to the needs of the local or international labour markets (African Development Bank Group, 2016: chapter 5). Educational opportunities have improved since previous generations but have not been matched with formal economic/occupational opportunities at scale and formal labour markets are often small relative to urban populations. Entrepreneurship is therefore a challenge in these contexts that comprise intense competition, oversaturated markets in which businesses are small, limited available capital, and customers with limited and fluctuating incomes (Homochuk et al., 2024).

A combination of poor economic growth, restricted educational and economic opportunities and limited opportunities for engagement in local governance and politics pushes young people into positions of ongoing precarity, unemployment and social marginalisation (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023; Chonka and TANA Copenhagen, 2023; Homochuk et al., 2024). These issues intersect with, and are accentuated by, conflict-related displacement. For example, in Lagos there is an influx of people displaced by the Boko Haram conflict in northeast Nigeria (Badiora, 2023) and in Mogadishu, large numbers of young people live in IDP (internally displaced people) camps (Chonka and TANA Copenhagen, 2023; Hassan, 2023). ACRC city reports showed diversity in the degree and nature of youth participation in campaigning and elections. Political elites often engage with youth during elections through campaigning strategies that take advantage of their difficult financial situations. Comprising a significant share of urban populations and therefore urban electorates, young urban residents are a potentially important urban political force. Due to their numbers, youth often have the power to shift election outcomes, and young people are increasingly aware of politicians' attempts to manipulate this and may respond with resistance (Homochuk et al., 2024). Recent research from Good Governance Africa (2023) found that South Africans below age 35 (the African Union definition of youth), were overall less likely to vote in the 2019 provincial and national elections than those over this age, but youth from lower socioeconomic conditions in South Africa were more likely to participate in voting, highlighting that age and socioeconomic status are factors affecting youth commitment to political activities. Pswarayi (2023) argues that in Zimbabwe, "young people view politics as a dirty game that is corrupt and scandal-ridden" (np), and that this translates to minimal political representation. Determinants of youth voting behaviour across African cities include access to political information and

⁴ Youth transitions often continue beyond a well-defined age bracket; research in the ACRC youth and capability development domain built upon extensive debates on defining "youth" to include participants from 15 to 30 years of age, and we keep this flexible definition (Homochuk et al., 2024; Sawyer et al., 2018; Hartinger-Saunders, 2008).

their perceptions of the electoral context and party system and fairness of elections (Resnick and Casale, 2014). There is a negative relationship between violence and voting among youth and there appears to be a shift in youth interest in some contexts from voting to protest (Mac-Ikemenjima, 2018).

These experiences are gendered. Relative access to decent livelihoods and economic opportunities are linked to gendered power inequalities (Mpofu, 2023) and start early in the life-course, manifesting as higher rates of school dropout and greater likelihood of inadequate education for young girls (Hassan, 2023; Buba, 2023; De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023). This has ramifications for employment, with young women more likely to be affected by unemployment and employment discrimination (Egessa et al., 2021). Gendered economic and social systems dictate the way young women enter and access the workforce and lead to disparities in roles and pay (Decker et al., 2022). Gendered role expectations and obligations at the household level present barriers to young women entering the formal workforce after completing education or vocational training (Kusi-Mensah, 2019) and young men are more likely to be formally employed than young women (Egessa et al., 2021). In Nairobi, the pandemic resulted in increased barriers to employment for young women over young men, potentially contributing to women's longer-term economic precarity (Williams et al., 2022). Through all this, young women also face regular sexual violence and harassment in (or on the way to) places of education and employment (Hassan, 2023).

Amongst these challenging economic conditions, career trajectories are also shaped by gender stereotypes and power relations. Research in Ghana suggests that gendered socialisation of young men and women can influence career plans and trajectories; young women are often steered into careers in the domestic trades, which can limit the type of employment (informal over formal) that is open to them and restrict them to lower incomes, due to high competition in the informal sector (Kusi-Mensah, 2019). Women-owned enterprises have been particularly adversely affected by the pandemic, owing to their informality, as many of them lack legal and social protections (Kiraka, 2022). Some attempts to address the challenge through vocational training have further entrenched differential vulnerability to unemployment; in Maiduguri, skill development programmes for women and girls have focused on occupations traditionally associated with women's work, such as bead making, sewing and cap making, with the goods frequently sold to men, who then earn a higher profit (Buba, 2023). The case of Freetown illustrates how a complex relationship between gendered education and employment opportunities, and roles in making (in)security create increased risks of adolescent pregnancy, with potentially long-term consequences for young women and their children (see Box 1). While findings outlined below point to negative outcomes for young men as well, social norms attached to access, rights and safety give way to conditions that amplify the vulnerability of young women and girls, both in their attempts to pursue their education, as well as in the absence of these opportunities.

Box 1: Socioeconomic exclusions create vicious cycles of creating and experiencing (in)security for youth of all genders in Freetown

Youths aged 15-35 make up 46.6% of the total population of Freetown (Beresford Weekes and Bah, 2017). Unemployment and underemployment are high, especially among young adults. Access to quality education is limited, particularly in informal settlements, and literacy levels are lower for girls than boys. Costs of good quality education are prohibitive for people with low incomes, leading to earlier school dropouts; material deprivation and gender norms of early marriage intersect to particularly disincentivise investment in education for girls. This creates a vicious cycle, with less educated youth unable to secure steady livelihoods and consequently living in poverty. Youth with disabilities are particularly excluded from educational and occupational opportunities. Despite up to 60% of the electorate being young people, they have limited representation in decisionmaking in a political settlement dominated by older men. Youth feel invisible and are frustrated about their limited economic opportunities and social mobility. This has multiple impacts, which are gendered. One of these impacts is violence and insecurity. Whilst social and political violence has historical roots, disenfranchisement – particularly among male youth – drives participation in “gangs”, which are involved in criminal activities and receive political patronage. Gang members are both perpetrators and victims of violence, particularly in informal settlements. High rates of drug and alcohol use by young men and women both result from, and further contribute to, poverty, mental distress, despair and alienation. The majority of employed youths (most of whom are male) are drivers in the informal transport sector (motorbikes and tricycles), where they are vulnerable to road traffic accidents, with resulting deaths and disabilities. Intersections between poverty, violent masculinities and gendered disadvantages in accessing employment (including exclusion from finance) create particular challenges and insecurities for young women. Vocational training compounds gender stereotypes; for example, hairdressing skill development is promoted to young women. Sex work and transactional sex are among the limited income-generating opportunities for low-income young women, making them particularly vulnerable to adolescent pregnancies, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Limited sex education and lack of free contraception further increase risks of adolescent pregnancies. First pregnancy is experienced between the ages of 12 and 20 by 68% of girls. Pregnant adolescents often drop out of school, further limiting their future opportunities, and face challenges supporting their children alone. In 2016, 13% of teenage mothers in Sierra Leone had never been to school and 55% had dropped out of school and not returned since becoming pregnant (Street Child, 2016). This increases their own and their children’s health and wellbeing vulnerabilities (including risks of malnutrition and stunting for infants). Young women also face a high risk of female genital mutilation (FGM), which is often tacitly accepted or even encouraged by politicians, who, for example, may sponsor the practice in poorer families, in order to secure votes. Experiences of violence, including SGBV within and outside the home, are more likely in informal settlements and for women and children. The police are among the perpetrators of violence towards women and children, including sex workers and street traders. Trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation and slavery is also a significant problem. The police lack the human and financial resources to address SGBV.

Sources: Wurie et al., 2023; Hodges and Turay, 2023; Macarthy et al., 2024; Tacoli et al., 2024.

Most of the literature that discusses youth pregnancy focuses on individual-level factors, such as marriage, age at first sex, schooling status, living arrangements and timing of pregnancy experience (Beguy et al., 2011, 2013, 2014). But “pregnancy risk

needs to be understood within the specific context that adolescents reside [in] with particular attention to neighbourhood-level factors. [For example,] greater community violence and poor physical environment” (Brahmbhatt et al., 2014: S48). There is also a lack of financial and social support for pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers and their children, which further marginalises them economically and socially, with long-term impacts on both mothers and their children (APHRC et al., 2023; Hodges and Turay, 2023). These structural factors can pose barriers to developmental, social and economic transitions to adulthood (Laurenzi et al., 2023). In the context of multiple marginalisations, emerging gendered identities in the transition to adulthood intersect with opportunities and constraints created in the (in)security system of cities.

1.2. Emerging gendered identities

Transitions from youth to 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 (Fortune et al., 2015). Adolescence and young adulthood mark pivotal developmental junctures, during which educational and economic access can affect future opportunities and health and wellbeing, and identities and social networks are forming (Bevilacqua et al., 2022). The fact that experiences of economic precarity take place during the transition from youth to adulthood is, therefore, significant. Youth are particularly vulnerable to suffering from “isolation, marginalisation, discrimination, rootlessness, vulnerability to crime, violence and sexual victimisation” (Oduro et al., 2012: 288). Identity and social relationships are forming within a context of high levels of unemployment and few educational opportunities (Oduro et al., 2012). Banks (2020) highlights the damaging psychosocial effects of growing up in cities where social structures are being eroded, and role models are hard to find.

These processes of economic hardships, unemployment and political disenfranchisement affect young men in unique ways – in particular, by creating dissonance between what is possible and the social ideals and markers that they are expected to aspire to, such as secure salaried employment and status associated with adult masculine identity (Mains, 2011; Esson et al., 2021). For example, research in Ethiopia suggests that the concept of entrepreneurship is often depicted as a form of masculinity (Mehari and Belay, 2017). Emerging forms of masculinity respond to these specific conditions (Meth, 2009). Research in Korogocho in Nairobi found that gender identity for teenage boys is influenced by verbal messaging from parents and teachers, observing behaviours of older men in the community, and information received from mainstream and social media. Masculinity was tied to “financial stability, family life and responsibility, physical attributes, character and religion” (Maina et al., 2022). In contexts where a few gatekeepers control access to economic opportunities, and power over people and resources is influenced by patriarchal structures, gender norms and identities intersect with livelihoods and financial power to shape vulnerabilities to gender-based violence and HIV in dynamic and fluid ways (Ringwald et al., 2023). Equally, research in Dar es Salaam found that social networks are important

socialisation sites for young men and may influence the adoption of norms and behaviours (Mulawa et al., 2018). There is an ongoing need for further research to understand how gender norms evolve as young boys transition through adolescence to adulthood in urban informal settlements (Maina et al., 2020).

There is significant interest in the ways that masculinity is being shaped and enacted among young men in informal settlements (Maina et al., 2022; Meth, 2009). Masculinity is forming, for example, in response to and to protest the “precariousness of contemporary Ghanaian urbanism”, with secure employment scarce, and evidence of the “(re)calibration of gender relations on patriarchal terms” (Esson et al., 2021: 197). This involves young men who live in contexts of extreme urban poverty and limited economic opportunities exerting control over women using violence and sex in order to attempt to achieve the respect that they do not feel they have access to through employment or establishing a family (Closson et al., 2020). In Uganda, too, Banks and Sulaiman (2012) find that sexual behaviours are a dominant assertion of masculinity in a context in which traditional norms of manhood are difficult to meet. Inability to meet breadwinner expectations can lead to reinforcing masculinity through expressions of violence (Evans, 2016). Some research has found evidence of “negative agency” or “re-hierarchicalisation”, where gendered aspirations of masculinity are unattainable, in which young people are involved in reproducing or deepening harmful power structures, so that forms of dominant power and rollback of rights characterise youth action (Jeffrey, 2012; Evans, 2016; Esson et al., 2021). For instance, youth involved in informal security provision in Maiduguri have reportedly been violent towards male youth offenders, often inflicting grievous bodily harm and even causing the death of suspects and creating a general sense of fear of youths involved in informal security provision by members of urban communities in Maiduguri (Adzande, 2023a).

Ideas or “scripts” of wider masculinity and femininity have been found to be place-based, with different place-based norms competing in urban settings (see Muzanenhamo’s (2024) analysis of the construction of gender identities on the Zimbabwean/South African border). However, ideas about gender are dynamic and can be rapidly and constantly remade in urban settings (Evans, 2016). For example, ideas brought to Gaborone from rural contexts in Botswana have been found to prioritise conventional notions of a gendered public/private divide, but these compete with those existing in urban settings that prioritise female financial independence and leave masculinity ambiguously defined (Giddings and Hovorka, 2010). Gender norms and scripts are therefore constantly being contested.

Youth negotiate gender identities in diverse ways, by adopting a combination of conforming to, and challenging, conventional gender scripts (Giddings and Hovorka, 2010), including, for example, through language, social networks (Ojwang, 2017) and use of mobile phone technology as instruments for surveillance and relationships (Amankwaa et al., 2020). Arnot et al. (2014) found that secondary school children in Kenya display a “reflexive and challenging approach to the norms and responsibilities of citizenship”, including attention to voting rights, political corruption and their role in

leading community change (young men), “freedoms” and rights to choose within cultural traditions (young women). The authors found that gender plays a key role in their framing of themselves as citizens.

Box 2: Chronic conflict and traditional security mechanisms create gendered exclusions and vulnerabilities for youth in Maiduguri

With an estimated population of 209 million people, about 74% of Nigerians are between 0 and 35 years old. Available statistics suggest that youth unemployment rates rose from 7.2% in the second quarter of 2023 to 8.6% in the third quarter of that year (Trading Economics, 2023). Limited access to education and the prolonged violence and resulting forced displacement associated with the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents, in Borno State and Maiduguri in particular, have contributed to the growing economic precarity.

There is a perception that persistent unemployment “traps youth in youthhood” because it is a barrier to young men paying a bride price or supporting a family. This challenge to young men fulfilling anticipated gender roles leads to potential for backlash and influences (in)security. A male youth focus group participant in Maiduguri reported that: “Being a male youth in Maiduguri is extremely difficult. To demonstrate your value, you must take care of your needs and assist your siblings. Society will view you as a nuisance if you cannot do this, due to unemployment”. Likewise, a female focus group participant reported: “The job market is highly competitive; many young people are unemployed, which explains why so many young people who should be married are unmarried. No woman desires to marry an unemployed man” (FGD, educated female youth, Jere) (Buba, 2023).

(In)security, in turn, exacerbates youth unemployment in Maiduguri. Youths who were previously farming in peripheral areas of Maiduguri are currently unable to go to their farms for fear of kidnappings or attacks from the Boko Haram insurgents (FGD with male adults, August 2022). While some residents have attributed the high levels of youth un/underemployment to “outright laziness”, which they claim has emerged from the growing culture of dependence on humanitarian assistance (food and money) distributed by local and international non-governmental organisations, others have identified the lack of job opportunities, inadequate finances to fund start-ups and the lack of appropriate skill sets as the reasons for high unemployment rates in Maiduguri (interview with residents of Maiduguri). The characterisation of youths as “lazy” and dependent on handouts is a language that was also used by the former president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, at an international event in London in 2018. Such descriptors are often used by the political class to diminish the agency of youths and as a cover-up for the failures of government to create youth employment opportunities or facilitate the development of a conducive economic environment where youths can thrive and explore their potential for wealth creation. During interviews with some informal security providers who are predominantly male youths, they pushed back on the use of labels such as “lazy” and “dependent” – pointing to the work of security provisioning by youths as evidence of how they are actively engaged in meaningful community activities. The youths further argued that the activities of insurgents over the last ten years had crippled economic activities in and around Maiduguri; and the government’s slow response towards rebuilding the economy had affected residents’ ability to access livelihood opportunities. In the meantime, local transportation using tricycles and the informal security groups are the viable means through which a significant proportion of male youths in Maiduguri get stipends for their daily needs, while female youths are disproportionately affected by un/underemployment in the city.

Relatedly, residents of Maiduguri associate high incidences of crime and social disorder to high levels of youth unemployment. It was reported that incidents of theft of mobile phones and car batteries as well as sex work had increased in low-income communities and coincided with the years of unrest in Maiduguri. Here, we see how levels of youth unemployment in cities intersect with (in)security.

Traditional chiefs in Maiduguri are powerful actors in the security governance landscape. Formal and informal security providers must work with them to effectively discharge their duties and achieve significant security outcomes. These chiefs, in collaboration with community security committees and informal security providers, determine what constitutes inappropriate behaviour within their communities and formulate rules for “unacceptable” behaviour. These “rules”, which one of the traditional chiefs claimed were approved by the governor of Borno State, are enforced by the informal security providers. Traditional chiefs in different communities select members of security committees which are predominantly men. A traditional ruler explained their selection process, demonstrating how sexist assumptions about appropriate roles for women and men precluded considering inclusion of women and younger men, meaning that their voices and experiences are not reflected in committee deliberations and activities:

“We selected the elders (a term for elderly men) – first we considered age, then secondly, we considered the capability of the person and their experience, [their] capability in terms of educational qualification and the person’s background. At this stage we did not involve women because of one or two reasons. This community security committee was formed to see how we can tackle the issue of security in the area, [so] we did not consider including women in the committee. We did not start with them (women) because this is the starting point – so, we thought it wise to use only men” (interview with traditional ruler, Maiduguri, August 2022).

Unequal power relations are also reflected in the treatment of incidences of gender-based violence, where the male perpetrators are often shielded from the humiliation of public exposure. Traditional rulers, working with informal security providers, often suggest marrying off victims of gender-based violence (in most cases, as reported in interviews, these victims are underaged girls) to the male offenders, as a way of avoiding the “shame and stigma” associated with rape.

Across Africa, young urban women are “beginning to envision a future similar to young men with regards to education and financial autonomy, and women’s participation in the labour force is becoming more socially acceptable” (Evans, 2016.; Muñoz Boudet et al., 2012). In African cities, where women constitute the majority of the informal economy labour force, claims to social and economic empowerment have allowed women to transform their asset bases and build new ways of living, working and being, despite the myriad challenges they face in the process (Kinyanjui, 2014; Nzeadibe and Adama, 2015; Oberhauser and Yeboah, 2011). However, unlike the increased interest in emerging masculinities, there is a significant and notable gap in research into dynamic femininities and female gender identity among urban African youth (see Jewkes and Morrell (2012) for an example in a rural context). It is rare for research to move beyond a focus on vulnerabilities, gender-based violence and maternal health. Jaji (2015) finds that femininity among refugee women in Nairobi is fluid, partly a response to socioeconomic context, and can be a resource in some contexts (for

another example that explores youth femininities and agency, see Muzanenhamo, 2024).

Part of the study in Maiduguri identified an entrenched masculinity in informal policing, manifesting in the absence of roles that are assigned to women in policing, which is considered to be a “man’s work” (interviews with informal security providers in Maiduguri, 2022; also see Silvestri, 2017). Male dominance and suppression of the agency of women is also noticeable in reports that women who are interested in joining informal security providers first have to seek and obtain permission from their husbands or brothers. The widespread taboo around women’s involvement in formal or informal security work has discouraged women from taking up work in either. Here, it is clear that cultural and religious norms and beliefs pose significant barriers to women’s ability to contribute meaningfully to mainstream social processes that shape their communities.

2. Making (in)securities

2.1. Young men’s roles in (in)securities

Across African cities, there are examples of youth resistance to perceived injustices and resourcefulness leading to creative and entrepreneurial responses to these challenges (Abdullah, 2002; Thieme, 2010). Youth organisations are important across urban African contexts as instruments for change, employment creation and fighting extreme poverty while providing a voice for youth to participate in politics (Wurie et al., 2023). However, studies have found that economic marginalisation of youth can also be linked to complex manifestations of violence (Oduro et al., 2012; Evans, 2016, Ismail and Olonisakin, 2021). Various forms of “security work” (including militia, organised crime, protection of urban elites, and political agitation) can provide livelihood opportunities in a context of scarcity and high un/underemployment, and governance structures (or influential networks) that they can get involved in, in a context in which they are overwhelmingly excluded from formal governance structures and processes. This can thus potentially facilitate the transition to adult social roles and provide a sense of power and belonging, particularly for disenfranchised young men (Adzande, 2023b).

Young men have exercised their agency to self-organise into security-related groups. In Maiduguri, the government has recently created a “youth empowerment scheme” to formally engage youths previously in self-organised informal security groups as security officers and road traffic managers. The youths on this government scheme are paid monthly stipends and they collaborate with formal security agencies like the military and police in counterinsurgency and crime control (interview with a Civilian Joint Task Force commander). In creating this empowerment scheme, the government is transforming what was once unpaid work for the youths into a stipend-earning opportunity for youths in the area. While some respondents in Maiduguri argued that the selection process into this scheme is fraught with bias and based on a youth’s connection to people in power, this is one example across the cities covered by ACRC

research where we find relatively clear procedures for interaction, constructive working relationships and understanding between youths and the state. Here, it is evident that states have the capacity to support youths to channel their social energies and agency to meaningful ventures that can contribute to societal development.

In contrast, youths in Freetown experiencing disconnection from the state (lack of opportunities for political participation, limited employment opportunities, and low trust in state institutions such as the judicial system, intersecting with a lack of family support systems) have established local coffee booths (“Ataya Bases”), youth groups and gangs. These groups provide both economic and social opportunities for young men and also create a role for them in society. In this way, “the youth have started to re-engineer their social space in order to accommodate interaction with their peers, with the space filling the void provided by the absence of the state in the lives of its youth” (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023: 66). Here, interviewees reported that youth groups provide protection, while also influencing conflicts over land in which people rely on the youth to exert claims. In Mogadishu, disillusionment with the police has led neighbourhood communities to create and fund nightly patrols of informal security guards (largely staffed by young men), who will provide security for those who can pay for it but excluding those who cannot and other groups such as internally displaced people. In Bukavu, young people (particularly young men) play a key role in safety initiatives, including night patrols and working alongside the police. To compensate for their labour, they collect contributions from households for the purchase of “coffee and sugar for the watchers”. However, the collection of these funds can be quite significant, resulting in major disputes within groups of patrollers (Kaganda Mulume-Oderhwa et al., 2023).

It is important to note that these groups mainly comprise young men, and as such are highly gendered spaces (in that they are encoded with ideas of gender and are influenced by, and reinforce, power imbalances and practices) with subsequent gendered exclusions (Andrews 2016). However, although the (in)security work being carried out by these young men is highly visible (in that it is the subject of prominent narratives about young men and about (in)security), the gendered nature of this work, and the processes through which it excludes women, is less so. That is, the masculine assumptions (gender norms around young men being the ones to engage in this work), the limitations placed on women by sociocultural norms and the threat of violence that pose a barrier to women entering these spaces, are not necessarily openly discussed because they are so normalised. In Maiduguri for instance, perceptions of women engaged in security jobs and the fear that they will be labelled as “women of easy virtue” and stigmatised has discouraged some women from joining both formal and informal security providers (FGD with women in Maiduguri).

Alongside contributing to urban security efforts, young people, including those working in crime-prevention patrols, can also play roles that drive urban insecurity. In Maiduguri, members of formal and informal security institutions were reportedly involved in robberies, assault and rapes – in some cases, acting independently while at

other times, collaboratively to perpetrate crime. In Freetown, “gangs [diverse, organised, formal or informal groupings of youth that engage in criminal activity (Hassan, 2023)] have become one of the important social alternatives for young people, where the youth find a sense of recognition and a world of their own making” (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023). An analysis of gang membership indicates that young men are dominant and, while the gender of interviewees is not always explicit in ACRC research reports, they describe the tendency for male youth to engage in this form of activity and the language used to describe these spaces – for example: “godfathers”, “area boys” is highly gendered (Adzande, Meth and Commins, 2024). Gang members interviewed in Freetown reported that they dropped out of school because they felt that the education offered insufficient skills and provided them with few prospects to ensure a future livelihood (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023). In Mogadishu, such lack of education and economic opportunities for young men in low-income neighbourhoods is thought to be a primary driver of male youth gang activity (Somali Public Agenda, 2022). In focus group discussions in Kampala, community leaders highlighted that youth are often financially responsible for children, siblings and parents, and may turn to engagement in violent and non-violent crime as a means to do so (Muwanga et al., 2023). In Somalia, limited economic opportunities intersect with fragility and conflict to restrict economic opportunities for youth, and there is a trend of unemployed young men joining al-Shabaab and other extremist groups (Hassan, 2023). This participation exposes young men to violence, including police violence and further perpetuates stereotypes of violent, male youth that are mobilised in exclusionary discourses (Kimari 2018). In Mogadishu, police operations have targeted armed youth gangs known locally as *ciyaaal weero* and attempted to round up suspected youth gang members and confiscate weapons (Chonka and TANA Copenhagen, 2023).

In some contexts, there appears to be encouragement of violent youth gangs in the absence of a strong state regulatory framework for non-state actors (Badiora, 2023; Kaganda Mulume-Oderhwa et al., 2023). Research in Freetown found that politicians contribute to youth violence both passively (through failing systems such as education, economic opportunities and social protection) and actively (through, for example, the sponsoring of gangs for political benefits) (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023). These processes can drive, and be driven by, harmful narratives about youth and particularly young men such as “radical” or “criminal” youth and the threat of the “youth bulge” (Kimari et al., 2020). It is important to note that the notion of youth is often implicitly gendered as male, and much research and literature characterises young African men as either “emasculated dependents who risk never attaining social adulthood; lawbreakers disrupting the social order; or participants in acts of violence and warfare” (Esson et al., 2021: 194). Perceptions of young males as “wild and stubborn” are both shaped by, and in turn shape, the ways that young men are policed by state institutions and (in)formal security providers (Adzande, 2023b). This also focuses attention on young men, reinforcing the binary framing of gender among youth (including rigid and distinct norms for young men and women, as well as making invisible other gender identities) and the lack of analytic lens on young women in these spaces.

Box 3: Clan politics and internal displacement shape gendered youth exclusion and insecurity in Mogadishu

In 1991, the collapse of the state in Mogadishu created a political vacuum, and in 2000 the Arta Reconciliation Conference in Djibouti, led by Somali civil society, decided on a process to begin state reconstruction. The 4.5 clan powersharing system (whereby political power is shared based on clan membership) continues to be used at the regional and city levels, based on the clans and subclans historically residing in the regions. Since 2012, Somalia has been holding indirect elections, whereby traditional clan leaders nominate the members of parliament's lower house, and this gives political power to traditional clan leaders as important political gatekeepers. However, this results in young people being absent from important political decisionmaking. In particular, informal traditional governance systems, which are run by clan elders, typically exclude women and young people from their institutions and processes. This leaves little room for young people to participate in the social, economic and political dimensions of Mogadishu's growth and governance, particularly for young women, who are not considered full members of their clans when they marry across clan lines.

Clannism poses a barrier for young people to obtain employment. The national youth unemployment rate is estimated to be approximately 67% for young people aged 14 to 29 and young women suffer higher unemployment than the national average. Women from minority clans also experience high levels of sexual and gender-based violence as they lack the protection of clan members and elders. For example, In Mogadishu, 100 rape cases (26 of which involved children) were documented by a local NGO in a span of three months in 2018 (Hujale, 2018; Hassan, 2023). Attempts to resolve such cases through marriage can further entrench power relations and violence experienced by young women.

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 vulnerable. A young woman who lives in the district and works there for an international NGO described her understanding of this problem in detail:

"I do assessments on girls' education and barriers, including access to school safely ... It is not only young girls. Women, especially those who live in corrugated iron houses, face a significant threat of rape and physical assault ... Vulnerable houses are broken into so easily. And there are no men with them. They are widows or single mothers. Perpetrators are men, and they are only afraid of other men. Those poor women are constantly harmed because they live alone with their children in a loosely locked house" (Chonka and TANA Copenhagen, 2023; Hassan, 2023).

The state is also absent in terms of providing services or security for internally displaced people (IDPs), who are predominantly women and who generally come from politically weaker clans and lack leverage with local authorities. Therefore, non-state actors, referred to as "gatekeepers", provide protection and basic services to IDPs in exchange for rents in either cash or kind. This practice has led to the emergence of a political economy of displacement, where these powerful groups of gatekeepers or camp managers act as "humanitarian entrepreneurs" – exploiting the IDPs and exacerbating their vulnerabilities. These gatekeepers are either well-connected Mogadishu residents or former IDPs who have experienced a change in status and/or fortune. They control access to IDP settlements and are the de facto intermediaries between IDPs and local authorities, including for land and services (which are usually provided by NGOs, but with intermediaries frequently involved). The patron–client

relations mean that displaced persons have little or no political agency within their host communities and have inadequate access to non-state judicial mechanisms. The extremely limited resources of most camp dwellers also limit their contribution and access to various kinds of informal security arrangements.

(Sources: Chonka and TANA Copenhagen, 2023; Hassan, 2023).

2.2. Making visible the work of women in (in)security

Research into the gender dimensions of these issues have tended to focus on the “vulnerability” of women to violence and the relationship between masculinities and perpetration of violence (Jones and Kimari, 2019). However, women contribute to violence and insecurity in complex ways as fighters, by providing support and as peace agents (Ilesanmi, 2021). There is limited research into the ways that femininities and female gender identity are affected, and in turn affect, processes of safety and security. In the context of Freetown, researchers noted that women (compared with young men in particular) had a relatively low sense of agency, tied to their exclusion from discussions about security, but also because gendered security issues (such as sexual violence) are not given the attention they deserve (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023). Yet, this also reflects the fact that many standard research methods do not necessarily in themselves overcome power dynamics and dominant narratives to access perspectives that are marginalised in society in a more general sense, including women’s agency. Additionally, there is a need to look beyond this focus on vulnerability to understand the ways in which safety and security are co-produced by networks of actors, including individuals and organisations. This includes women’s organisations negotiating and pushing back against policing violence in the informal sector and the gendered ways in which communities are adapting to and negotiating climate-related risks (Ajibade et al., 2013). Women and women’s groups are engaged in ongoing work (often invisible and downplayed in current conceptualisations of safety and security) to keep themselves and their communities safe. This includes the enactment of “everyday” security apparatus and “everyday peace” through care and community work (Maina et al., 2022; Mac Ginty, 2014). It also includes their pushing back against gender-based violence in multiple contexts, including in the home, street and workplace. Among women, practices of solidarity that emerge to provide safety in the face of inadequate security provision and lack of safe spaces include hosting female victims of intimate partner violence in their homes or collectively raising funds to construct infrastructure providing security (Glück and Kimari, 2023) (see Box 4). These social networks often provide the first line of defence for many women and gender non-binary people, and intersect with support provided by friends, elders and families. Yet they are often taken for granted or “invisibilised” when using dominant lenses to consider security, as they do not conform to dominant narratives of (in)security actors and instead represent “everyday” forms of security provision (Box 4 and Glück and Kimari, 2023). Thus, there is a need to move beyond viewing women as victims of conflict and violence, to seeing them as agents in these processes.

Box 4: The invisible work of women and other networks of security actors in Nairobi

Women in Nairobi play a central role in shaping the city in diverse ways. Though there is both oral history and formal academic scholarship – such as that by Nelson (1978), White (1990) and Robertson (1997) – that critically foregrounds the pioneer economic, sociocultural and ecological repertoires of African women in this city. From these and other narratives, we are left to piece together the labours women take up to keep themselves and their families safe and secure.

Yet, closer attention to a panoply of historical narratives about Nairobi allows one to register the constellation of interventions women have taken up to enhance both personal and community protection.

In this regard, when faced with threats of deportation to rural areas or actual instances of police detention in the early years of colonial Nairobi, when African women were not allowed to live in this city, they organised through professional associations, such as sex workers (as but one example), would come together to assist a peer to acquire both real and fake work passes for those who needed to remain in Nairobi, live together in the “twilight city”, collect the required monies to bail out a peer, and other diverse efforts.

During the emergency period declared in the face of potent African struggles for independence, scholars such as Anderson (2005) highlight the insurgent role of women, which included taking up arms, organising protests, delivering food to Mau Mau fighters, creating songs to mock coloniser forces, and even spitting on those who sought to arrest them.

How these women and their female descendants then morphed into the perpetual victims of violence that a proliferating register of postcolonial policy and academic archives document is uncertain, but certainly unfortunate. Undoubtedly, across Nairobi and in its informalised margins, where the majority of women live, these actors take up a diversity of labours to protect their households and communities. Since much of these efforts are incorporated into social reproduction efforts, they can be invisible and normalised as the care work that is expected of women.

In the settlement of Mathare in the East of Nairobi, women share security information when conducting chores such as fetching water, talk to youth who may be their relatives or neighbours to caution them against actions that are seen as anti-community or anti-social, and advocate for the installation of infrastructure (such as security lights in markets or public spaces) that will make residents feel safer. These are but a few examples of the multiscalar work women undertake to make their communities secure. And while they constitute the foundation for, often, primary household and community safety nets, these actions are often not recognised as security interventions in a context where security is habitually seen to index men who patrol, whether private security or police, or those in what are often dubbed “vigilante groups” in “slums”.

Though much of this safety and security work is invisible, since it is sutured to social reproduction labours, it also contributes to more visible protection efforts in this region. Here, women-led groups, such as the Mothers of Victims and Survivors Network, formed in 2017 to mobilise family members of victims of police violence, are playing an important and conspicuous role in demanding an end to police impunity. From documenting police injustices, to attending court cases for each other's family members, to cooking together, members of this association are seeking to enhance safety and security for their households and Mathare, both in the

present and in the long term. These efforts have cascading effects into diverse spheres of their lives, including, importantly, providing psychosocial support to ease the traumas many of them have lived. What's more, it is important to emphasise that these more visible safety and security actions emerge from and are bolstered by the ongoing invisible infrastructure of protection that women across the history of this city have been co-creating. In an urban and national context where women remain the majority, it is highly probable that the symbiosis between women's invisible and visible safety and security labours will continue, amplifying their role in protection in and of the city, even as policy and scholarship orthodoxies may still prevent the substantive recognition of these efforts.

3. Gendered experiences of (in)security

The impacts of these specific expressions of violence by economically marginalised young men are also gendered and emerging forms of masculinity may be expressed as gender-based violence (Evans, 2016). Women participating in focus group discussions in Freetown frequently indicated that sexual and gender-based violence is a major challenge in their communities, and gender norms that constrain reporting create a culture of silence across contexts that protects perpetrators (De Bruijne and Bangura, 2023). In Maiduguri, sexual and gender-based violence is perpetrated by formal and informal security forces, but there is a lack of detailed research evidence on this issue, as stigma associated with rape and sexual violence discourages the reporting of cases (Madueke, 2023). Rape of minors (male and female) by older males (including members of informal security groups) is common in some low-income communities in Maiduguri. However, the majority of the cases reported to and handled by the traditional rulers and the informal security providers involved female victims.

Threats of violence in general have significant impacts on the mobility of city residents and business operating hours, and particularly at night (Chonka and TANA Copenhagen, 2023), with a disproportionate impact on women's mobility. Research in Lagos revealed that young women are disproportionately dropping out of night routines and limiting their commutes, which is intensifying their social isolation (Badiora, 2023). In Bukavu, the Violence Against Women Survey (Dang-Vu and Jeannic, 2011) found that 60% of women are worried about walking alone in their own neighbourhood after dark (Kaganda Mulume-Oderhwa et al., 2023). The absence of secure public transit and infrastructure, such as street lighting and public toilets, was found to expose people to risks of gender-based violence in both Lagos and Nairobi (Badiora, 2023); and in Nairobi, harassment by transport actors seems to be especially rife for women and gender non-binary people (Glück and Kimari, 2023).

The experiences of (in)security and the perceived threat of violence differ, based on positionality. Interviews and "security diaries" kept by residents of various neighbourhoods across Nairobi revealed that gendered insecurity was a major concern, particularly for gender non-binary and queer Kenyans, with a particular focus of sexual harassment and threats by police and community members (Glück and Kimari, 2023). The report identified that:

“in many of Nairobi’s informal settlements and/or poorer neighbourhoods, police violence is a regular part of social life, threading injustice through the fabric of everyday experiences. This ranges from light harassment by officers (eg gendered harassment of women or gender non-binary people by male police officers)” (Glück and Kimari, 2023: 16)

to the loss of life, with the extrajudicial killings of significant numbers of young men across the city. Urban adolescent girls and young women who have been forcibly displaced are at particular risk of violence and polyvictimisation (exposure to multiple forms of violence).

Levels of safety in public spaces determine women’s ability to participate in public life and meet their basic financial needs. A growing body of research has found that community-level lower socioeconomic status is associated with increased risk of sexual harassment, including during adolescence. This is in part due to women’s limited access to education and other services and the fact that they are more likely to engage in sex work in economically deprived contexts (Muluneh et al., 2020). Fundamentally, however, in contexts where youth experience extreme socioeconomic marginalisation, the gender-based violence “microsystems of school, community, street and family” are manifestations of the “macrosystems of poverty, government policies, power relations and structural violence” that they experience (Oduro et al., 2012: 275).

Risk of violence associated with school enrolment suggests that initiatives to keep adolescent girls in school may not protect them from sexual harassment (Bevilacqua et al., 2022). Where and how women work is also central to their vulnerability. Women’s self-employment often makes up the larger share of labour in the informal sector (Kusi-Mensah, 2019), and young women working in the informal sector face unique exposure to violence as well as other challenges to their health and wellbeing (see Wiego, 2018). Women working in the informal sector are exposed to specific forms of policing, evictions and harassment (Wiego, 2018), and the physical environments pose gendered challenges to safety and security, such as inadequate toilets and sanitation in locations of work, and lack of safe transport (Meth and Buthelezi, 2017). Research in Dar es Salaam markets found that women pay significantly more for their daily use of market toilets than they pay market tax. They also must navigate childcare while at work, sub-standard water and sanitation facilities and associated health risks, and sexual harassment from customers, co-workers and those in positions of authority (Mpofu et al., 2022). In Bukavu, harassment of informal vendors by police is common and mainly targets women, increasing mistrust between women working in the informal sector and the police (Kaganda Mulume-Oderhwa et al., 2023, Hodges and Turay, 2023).

Box 5: Young women sex workers’ experiences of insecurity in Maiduguri, Freetown and Addis Ababa

The challenges that youth face in mobilising their assets and achieving positive labour market outcomes differ between the sexes, partly due to the gendered nature of the informal economy in cities. With women representing the largest demographic that relies on the informal sector,

being young represents another social indicator that creates additional layers of disenfranchisement across urban spaces. This applies to young women who are native to the city, as well as migrants, and is often compounded by the existence of economic spheres that are out of reach for them, commonly due to a lack of social connections. Additionally, since young women generally lack the social capital necessary to establish and maintain resilient work-based networks, many are forced into parts of the informal economy that they would otherwise not engage in, such as sex work. For young women unable to earn a decent living through the street trade, often as a consequence of limited access to the financial capital and social networks that facilitate entry into street-based sales work, sex work can become a means to an end.

Research conducted in Maiduguri identified sex work as a means of survival for many young women and girls in the city. This was identified to be a result of a labour market unable to create employment opportunities for young women with little formal education, further marginalising those with additional social vulnerabilities associated with their status as urban dwellers. This included internally displaced women and girls, who were identified as particularly vulnerable to becoming part of the commercial sex trade in the context of the social, political and economic insecurity created by the insurgency, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, due to the religious and cultural beliefs in Maiduguri about sex work, traditional rulers strongly supported raids by informal security providers on brothels to deter it. Similarly, young females are policed in ways that limit their social interactions with men and their mobility after certain hours of the day.

Research conducted in Freetown found young women resort to sex work under circumstances characterised by similar conditions of insecurity and precarity. With many describing experiences of harassment and abuse, the spaces women sex workers occupied exposed them to mistreatment from clients as well as the authorities. Part of the mistreatment women engaged in sex work experienced was also a consequence of a lack of a social and political framework that would protect women, namely by creating mechanisms through which women could report the crimes committed against them and be heard. This was also linked to the stigma attached to sex work as a form of income generation.

Experiences of harassment and discrimination as a consequence of the social stigma attached to sex work do not, however, exclusively produce disempowering outcomes at the personal and collective level. Research conducted in Addis Ababa highlighted perceptible similarities between the contexts and conditions that inform women's integration and continued engagement in sex work in Freetown and Maiduguri. Motivations behind sex work were found to be part of a broader strategy centred around women's adjustments to urban life, their adapted livelihood trajectories and future aspirations. For rural migrant women engaged in streetwalking in the Ethiopian capital, as well as women who described transactional sexual relationships as part of their broader livelihood strategies, sex work represented a stepping stone towards economic transformation. This was manifest in women's collective mobilisation in the form of savings associations, established primarily for the purpose of paying off debt and meeting the rising costs of daily needs, but also for the purpose of saving for the costs of financing transnational migratory plans, namely for migration to the Gulf States, which was identified as the pathway towards transforming the lives of women themselves, their children and their families of origin (Dessie, 2024b; 2024c).

Findings from Maiduguri, Freetown and Addis Ababa demonstrate the inability of labour markets to create adequate employment opportunities for women to earn a living, which, in some

instances, underpins young women's entry into sex work and/or transactional sexual relationships, which may be a means of survival but may also represent a strategy for economic empowerment. These findings underscore women sex workers' social and economic marginalisation in African cities, by drawing attention to the insecurity this marginalisation produces, the ways in which women adapt their livelihood strategies to the vulnerabilities they experience through harassment and violence, while also highlighting the ways in which urban spaces create potential opportunities for women's economic empowerment specifically within spaces governed by patriarchal norms around gender, sexuality, place and belonging.

Discussion

This paper has outlined three deeply interconnected dimensions of the gendered youth-(in)security nexus in African cities: the processes through which youth experience, resist and remake (in)security. The processes discussed both enable and facilitate particular forms of agency, as youth are reclaiming agency in their involvement in security work, and in particular contributing to emerging forms of masculinity, which are “embedded, scalar, relational, and temporally situated” (Besnier et al., 2018: 872). But this may also be hindering the agency of youth, and particularly young women, to carry out their daily lives. This makes clear the fact that youth are experiencing, making and resisting (in)security in complex ways and often simultaneously, and that experiences of violence and perceptions of risk across genders are mediated by intersecting positionalities in systems of power (Crenshaw, 1989). These include age/generation, poverty, household structure, sexuality, migrant status/nativism, heteronormativity and disability/ableism (Bhagat, 2018; Sikweyiya et al., 2022; Khuzwayo, 2023; Muluneh et al., 2020; Tucker, 2023).

Therefore, in understanding these processes, there is a need to recognise both the constraints to diverse youth agency, as well as the powerful role of youth in reclaiming their agency (Esson, 2020). For example, youth of all genders *experience* the political, social and economic processes and conditions in which they are marginalised and disenfranchised, including gendered forms of political and police violence and insecurity and the gendered forms of violence perpetrated by youth, including by security actors. Their experience of the spatial dimensions of the city is also impacted through mobility and access (resulting from processes of policing and the fear of violence) in gendered ways, including perceptions of risk that cause women and marginalised genders to limit movements in urban/public space, and policing that criminalises young men when they move beyond the boundaries of informal settlements.

They also *resist* these processes in multiple ways. This includes coming together in various gendered formulations to resist conditions of economic precarity and state/police violence, including self-organising into male-dominated security-related groups. In this sense, they participate in making formal and informal (in)security, including that facilitated by state actors (militia, organised crime and political agitation), but also create youth groups that push back against violence at a local level. The gender dimensions of this, and the impact on the masculinity and male identity for

youth involved, is often obscured or not made explicit in efforts to understand these phenomena. Women's labour (although often rendered less visible) is an important contribution to this, both through women working as fighters and informants, but also as peace agents and through contributing to community security creation. This resistance manifests as a combination of conforming to, and challenging, conventional gender scripts.

All these processes can *remake* or *reinforce* existing social norms and structures, including processes of direct and structural violence, and also remake and constrain agency. Through this resistance, young women and men with differing social positions are remaking livelihood opportunities for themselves and reclaiming agency through entrepreneurial processes. This can include through sex work (see Box 5). Through this resistance, gender identities, norms and relations are also being remade, including emerging forms of masculinity that both challenge and reinforce (such as retaliatory patriarchy) gender norms and limits to agency. For example, "patriarchal backlash" describes "reactive or proactive projects of patriarchal restoration" (Edström et al., 2024). Youth engagement in (in)security processes also contributes to creating the threat of violence that can constrain others' agency, particularly young women.

Therefore, youth at once resist the harmful contexts and processes that make up their own experiences and which limit their agency through (re)making new forms of agency, including new forms of masculinity and femininity, and new forms of security and insecurity. In turn, these new gendered identities and practices shape their own and others' experiences; they may provide security for some and simultaneously create insecurity for others, with knock-on effects of constraining their agency; this is particularly the case for young women, who may experience new and emerging forms of violence. Women and gender non-binary people, who experience complex intersecting forms of violence and agency, also resist and respond in emerging ways that may be invisible to dominant lenses of gender and violence/vulnerability, and that can challenge or reinforce conditions that lead to violence. This highlights how centring gendered agency (and identifying where agency is constrained) at the youth-(in)security nexus is conceptually and practically valuable to understand its complexity as a process that is simultaneously experiencing, resisting and remaking (in)security in urban African contexts.

Findings presented in this paper illustrate the ways in which the politics of insecurity and the politicisation of the "youth question" produce outcomes which can, at times, further marginalise young urban dwellers through an absence of targeted policy initiatives and systems-centred transformation that is gender-blind. These acts of resistance can be interpreted as responses to an absent state as a provider of services and security mechanisms, particularly at the neighbourhood level, where governance mechanisms are inadequate, leaving young women and men further disenfranchised and disenfranchised, and vulnerable to various forms of violence. This disconnect can also serve as a manifestation of limited elite commitment to advancing youth-focused, gender-sensitive agendas, which would require a realignment of state agency capacity

to citizen-centred politics. Our analysis points to the need for further research around the potential of gender-equitable and inclusive collective mobilisation for pushing for urban reform through coalition building. Although, for the most part, women leading community movements were not specifically targeted by research conducted in the focus cities, findings underscore the centrality of women's agency in grassroots mobilisation, which, as this paper shows, is pivotal in both identifying the challenges they face, and in facilitating the multisectoral engagement required for the design of gender-sensitive responses to the challenges urban dwellers in African cities face. As highlighted by Mitlin (2023), coalitions hold the potential of enhancing the legitimacy of claims made by low-income urban dwellers, particularly in relation to establishing a presence in the political arena at the local and municipal level. Coalition building needs to be sensitive to and explicitly pursue gender-equitable participation of young people that strengthens their agency and opportunities.

While research that focuses on themes of (in)security and young men in urban African contexts does tend to acknowledge (to varying degrees) the interconnected acts of making, experiencing and resisting (in)security that youth are engaged in, research and wider narratives of young women and (in)security tend to focus primarily on their experience of insecurity and violence, rendering more invisible their roles in making and resisting (in)security. Furthermore, much research on youth, (in)security and violence in urban African contexts, including within ACRC, is not explicit about the fact that the term "youth" is being applied primarily to young men, which further makes invisible young women and their agency and emphasises the need to unpack the narratives and assumptions surrounding these themes (Jones and Kimari, 2018).

There is a need for gender-responsive approaches that are contextually informed in relation to education and youth employment initiatives, particularly during pandemics and crises such as Covid-19 (Jones et al., 2021). There is growing understanding that interventions that provide social and emotional experiential learning opportunities during the developmental window of very young adolescence can be effective in transforming gender norms, beliefs and behaviours, through involving peers, caregivers and community members (Cherewick et al., 2021). Smartphones and social media may also offer potential platforms for engagement in such interventions (Kharono et al., 2022). There is space for strategic collaboration with actors, such as women's organisations and informal worker associations, which can help influence the policy environment for safe, formalised and decent jobs, but this may or may not be inclusive of young and otherwise marginalised women, so specific efforts may be needed here (Mpofu et al., 2022). Intersectional approaches that focus on creatively addressing the gendered dimensions of violence in ways that are inclusive and incorporate consideration of masculinities are needed. For example, there is a need to understand the potential risks that run alongside female economic empowerment (Muthengi et al., 2016). In higher education, gender-responsive teaching approaches in universities can have positive impacts on participation and interaction for students of all genders, including addressing discrimination and violence in the university (Skovgaard and Chapin, 2021).

Efforts by senior leadership can also legitimise and uphold gender equality and awareness. This can be through legal mechanisms, through the discourses adopted and values modelled by politicians, and through meaningful funding of courts. These are all fundamental to shaping young people's experiences and the ways in which urban spaces can “work” for young people. However, there is limited evidence emerging of this happening in ACRC research reports, suggesting that young urban residents are left trying to eke their way to safety, security and progress in contexts where there are few social, economic or political support structures to facilitate them in doing so.

Box 6: Reflections on, and challenges of, doing feminist research in ACRC

Intersectional feminist research challenges the structural power inequities at all levels within societies (Crenshaw, 1989; Davies et al., 2019), and a key aspect of this includes exploring the experiences and agency of marginalised groups. This is challenging because it often requires engaging with deeprooted structural power relations, and because these power relations also play out in the dynamics of the research process. Here we highlight two key challenges in carrying out feminist analysis in the youth-gender-(in)security lens. The first relates to the wider approaches and lenses used in research more broadly and the ways in which gender continues to be relatively marginalised as an analytic lens in research generally. There is a need for an intersectional gender lens to be incorporated into all domains and aspects of research, from the conceptualisation to research design and considerations in analysis. Spaces and processes that are significantly “male” (such as certain occupations and security providers) are often not analysed with relation to patriarchy and masculinities.

The second challenge relates to the specific and tangible barriers faced by city researchers, to doing research that analyses and addresses gender. This includes issues such as the context-specific development of research questions and sensitivity in considerations of whom to interview and how (for example, who refers interviewees and how, who is included and/or excluded because of their gender identity (LGBTQ+), what spaces are interviews carried out in and the ways in which discussions are led). This also represents the challenge of privileging marginalised perspectives and not further contributing to the silencing of those perspectives through processes of power and dominance in research. Both of these challenges are not just about gender but also about power more broadly, and both are also relevant to power acting at multiple scales, including both community level and the gendered power structures of the political settlement aspects of ACRC.

Future research on gender, insecurity and youth should design methodologies explicitly centred on a recognition of the significance of intersectionality in shaping fluid power relations and lived experiences. Approaches should ensure a conscious inclusion of marginalised voices and experiences, through critical reflection on tools of data collection, noting who or what might be excluded through the adoption of particular strategies. Consideration of the gendered make-up of research teams is also essential to ensure researchers' own identities do not lead to the exclusion of particular groups of people. Gender-sensitive methodologies might start with a desire to incorporate the views of specific marginalised groups of women explicitly, given their historic neglect, but should broaden to include all genders, particularly those most invisibilised by powerful rhetoric. Explorations with men should also seek to take a critical perspective on the contributions of patriarchy, including masculinities, to social dynamics. Analytical strategies should remain alert to the processes by which interpretations are drawn, who is doing the

interpreting, the framing and the reporting, and what power inequities are being recast through these processes. Given the power relations embedded in these contexts, there is also a need for research approaches that are ethically informed and which safeguard against risks to participants and researchers. This includes reflective practice and critical thinking about power, judgement, positionality and structural violence to identify dynamic safeguarding risks (Aktar et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Youth experience specific and significant barriers to agency in urban African contexts, including accessing employment, livelihoods and occupational opportunities. This is a context for gendered forms of violence directed towards and perpetrated by young people. We use the term “(in)security” to emphasise the dynamic meanings of “security” and “insecurity” as subjective, contested and not mutually exclusive terms. Young people use creative and dynamic approaches to resist and remake (in)security, ranging from building social networks to the use of violence. It is important to understand that these processes are deeply gendered, in that they are both influenced by, and in turn influence, the dynamic gender norms in African urban contexts. Therefore, women, men and those of different genders will have different degrees of agency over, will participate in different ways in, and will have different experiences of, these processes. In this report, we have drawn from research carried out across ACRC domains to 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. We focus on youth agency in the “making” of (in)securities, highlighting young men’s highly visible roles in (in)securities and “security work” as well as the significant (though often invisible) work of women in (in)security. We argue for the need to develop deeper and more nuanced understandings of the complex, gendered processes through which (in)security is experienced, resisted and remade. We argue that using a youth-gender-(in)security lens, advanced by a lived experience methodology, can help to centre agency and counter harmful gender stereotypes. Future research should explore how the experiences of young women and youth agency differ across cities, whether there are differences across contexts in women’s ability to organise and resist marginalisation, and whether there are broader social environments or processes (for example trust building and resistance enabling) that support equitable forms of agency across genders. And as a priority, further research must also engage with, amplify and uplift the ongoing work of African feminists and women’s organising at the gender–youth–(in)security nexus.

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