Poverty and Masculine Violence: Ethnographic Notes from Kenyan Slums

INTRODUCTION

The intersections of violence and masculinity have been studied in a variety of social contexts (Bourgois 1996; Messerschmidt 2004; Mullins 2006). Missing in these studies, however, are grounded accounts of how a hazardous sense of threatened masculinity and notions of masculine dignity constructed around interpersonal violence become part of the everyday thinking of some men. Put differently, how does the belief that self-esteem, material worth, and possibilities for life improvement can only be realized through violence and ruthlessness become a key element of poor men's social and cultural outlook? Drawing from our fieldwork in the slums of Kenya, we link masculine violence to the dynamic association, which men make, between their private and shared marginalization and livelihood misfortunes and the everyday cruelty of others as well as the invasive belief that one has to both vigorously resist violence and deploy it in order to be safe. This disastrous sense of an inherently vicious world interacts dynamically with the lived reality of a constant state of emergency that interminably banishes men from dynamic access to public goods, to the realm of socioeconomic marginality, insecurity, and participation in drugs and other illicit economies that endorse aggression and brutality (Bourgois 1996; Groes-Green 2009; 2010). This paper is about the social production of violent slum men and the critical role of livelihoods in masculine violence as an everyday behavior deployed and suffered by poor slum men in Kenya. Our aim, simply put, is to interrogate masculine violence as an everyday behavior among poor urban Kenya men, explore the interaction of poverty and destructive urban masculinities, and outline the implications of findings for violence prevention work with poor men in sub-Saharan Africa.

Our arguments are based primarily on ethnographic and interview data from three years of research in Korogocho (Koch) and Viwandani (Viwa) slums in Nairobi, Kenya. During the period of our research, we lived in Nairobi and worked for an international research organization. We stayed on and off in the slums of Koch and Viwa, paid countless visits to them, attended functions and parties held there, and were regular faces at bars and pubs in the two locations. Data collection involved an assortment of qualitative techniques, namely; ethnographic observation, in-depth guided dialogues and individual interviews (in and out of the two slums) with several persons, which included men, women, children, missionaries, sex workers, government officials, members of the Kenyan police, leaders of social, economic, religious, and cultural groups in the slums, politicians, researchers, and business operators in the settlements. We also regularly visited and spent time in pubs located in the two slums and other places frequented by men, observing behavior, drinking, and chatting with them, attended several meetings involving men and boys in the two communities, and participated in community development activities, sanitation work, proposal writing, fundraising, and dispute settlement with the slum men's groups we worked with. Interviews were audiotaped and copious handwritten notes based on direct observations, informal discussions, and personal reflections were kept. We have meticulously anonymized the emerging data to shield the identity of our informants.

KOCH AND VIWA: THE TALE OF TWO SLUMS

Located roughly 11 km northeast of the Nairobi city center, Koch was founded in the 1960s by rural migrants to Nairobi. While the settlement initially started on undeveloped government-owned land, it has crept into private property, and almost half of it is currently on such land. Koch, which easily qualifies as one of Nairobi's largest slum neighborhoods, is located in an

area of roughly 1.5 square kilometers. It is home to about 200,000 people. In Swahili, Kenya's most widely spoken language, Korogocho means "disorder" or "compactly crowded," alluding to the high density and disorganized character of the neighborhood. Koch residents come from more than 30 Kenyan ethnic groups and live in shacks built in rows with an average of six dwelling units (rooms) per structure. The settlement is one of the most congested slums in Nairobi with over 250 dwelling units per hectare. The notorious Nairobi Refuse Dump borders Koch in the east and southeast.

Viwa, located seven kilometers from the Nairobi city center, enjoys close proximity to the city's self-styled industrial area. Established in the early 1970s on reserve land of the Nairobi city council, the settlement grew on the banks of Ngong River largely in response to the growing appetite of emerging industries for cheap, unskilled, and casual labor. Dwelling units in Viwa are made of iron sheets and tin or mud walls with roofing of iron sheets. As in Koch, they are built in rows with an average of six dwelling units (rooms) per structure. Ngong River, heavily polluted with industrial waste, borders Viwandani in the south, and to the north are industries of all sizes that thrive on the cheap manual labor of desperate unskilled Kenyans. Viwa is also diverse in terms of the ethnic and other social attributes of its residents.

While the two slums are markedly different, they are comparable on many fronts. They are both characterized by a frightening and visibly ubiquitous poverty, desperation, and misery; a visible lack of basic infrastructure such as roads, sanitation, and clean and potable water; dearth of socioeconomic opportunities; excessive overcrowding; extreme deprivation; and enduring marginalization. In the popular imaginary of people in Nairobi, both slums symbolize an exceptionally wretched existence. Koch and Viwa residents are largely uneducated persons or primary school dropouts, ultimately forced to survive at the fringes of a ruthless economy as

poorly paid casual laborers, sex workers, criminals, beggars, miscreants, and alcoholics. Few men and women in the slums have steady jobs. In Koch, among men aged 18 years and above, only 11 percent were in salaried employment and 10 percent in established trading in 2008. In Viwa, these figures stood at 20 percent for salaried men and 7 percent for men in established trading. Half of the women in the two slums were also not involved in any type of income generating activities in the same year. Daily household expenditure in a representative sample of households in the slums stood at less than a dollar in 2008 (APHRC 2009). Only 28 percent of men and 19 percent of women in the two communities had up to secondary-level education in 2008. Health status is also generally poor. For instance, while Kenya's HIV prevalence stands at 7.4 percent, it averages 11.5 percent in the two settlements (Kyobutunji et al. 2008). Morbidity and mortality among residents of these settlements are, on the whole, extremely high (APHRC 2002).

Crime and violence are not only rife in Koch and Viwa, law enforcement is also highly limited, if existent. A common belief among residents of the two slums is that criminals in the communities operate with the active collusion of the Kenyan Police. Muggings, killings, shootings, rape, mob attacks, and many types of violent acts occur on a daily basis in both slums. These are not unconnected with the substantial presence, in the two settlements, of hoodlums and criminals who use the slums as their base or hideout. Due to the rampant activities of these criminals, Nairobi has earned the nickname "Nairobbery" among wary residents. Illegal firearms also circulate freely in Koch and Viwa as do drugs and alcohol, undoubtedly fuelling more criminality, insecurity, violence, and promoting a boom in organized crime groups. It is in the two communities described above that we explored everyday violence among poor men.

THE VIOLENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN KOCH AND VIWA

Life in Viwa and Koch is both evidently and inherently violent and difficult, "*Maisha ni magumu hapa*" (life is difficult here), many informants would tell us without being prompted. Both settlements are characterized by hungry and extremely deprived households; jobless men and women; homeless and vulnerable families; and children, women, and men without any forms of social support or access to social services. Over the past couple of years, we encountered families that could not send their children to school or that had children who suffered and died from physical abuse, malnutrition, and other avertable conditions. Hunger and starvation typify the lives of majority of slum residents, and sights of starving children and adults are common.

As in most contexts characterized by extreme poverty, Viwa and Koch are rife with drugs, guns, and violent deaths (Bourgois 1996). Residents would commonly wake up to find their neighbors murdered, robbed, or attacked. Maliza, a young Viwa thug and petty criminal that we befriended, was killed at an all-night party he attended with Strike, another informant. Five masked men stormed the party venue wielding dangerous weapons and demanding belts, phone sets, watches, wallets, and so on. In a bravado that was typical of Maliza and Strike, the duo reportedly tried to disarm the robbers. They were both stabbed, Strike in the face and Maliza in the stomach. Maliza died on the spot. Strike managed to reach a clinic outside Viwa and was hospitalized for days. When we visited Strike on his sick bed, he told us that he knew the identity of his assailants. "They will pay for attacking Strike!" he boasted. "If you allow such things go un-retaliated, they will do it to you again." Three weeks later, he called to say he has had his revenge and was vacating Viwa. When we asked him what he did, he laughed and said: "*Tazama runinga!*" meaning "Watch out for the big news!" That night, three young men were killed in two locations in Viwa; the right side of their faces was slashed just like Strike's was. It is over a

year now and we have not heard from Strike. We were recently informed that he now resides in Eldoret, in the Rift Valley area of Kenya. He still bears the grotesque scar on the right side of his face, a reminder of the ugly confrontation that night.

Slum residents of different genders and generations also regularly suffer sexual molestation. Otieno, one of our informants, once attended a night church service in Koch, during which a gang of men attacked the worshippers and raped the female worshippers. We also heard reports of men, women, and children who suffered sexual abuse in the hands of parents, friends, relatives, and guardians. Kamau, a gang leader whom we befriended in Viwa, told us that his 50-year-old father was raped and mortally wounded by four members of a rival gang. "They did it to humiliate me!" Kamau told us.

MEN, VIOLENCE, AND MISTRUST IN KOCH AND VIWA

While women and girls frequently instigate violence in Koch and Viwa, men and boys perpetrate the bulk of violent acts in the communities. They also suffer a large proportion of such violence. The violent acts that men perpetrated and suffered in the two slums varied remarkably. Men robbed, raped, fought, attacked, assaulted, beat up, killed, and molested others. Verbal abuse and attacks were also common among men. In Korogocho, we befriended a group of young men who gathered every evening to chew *khat* and smoke marijuana. One of their familiar pastimes was to insult passersby by making loud, unkind, cruel, and offensive remarks about their clothing and body parts. People who answered back were often manhandled by the group. Men also regularly killed themselves in the two settlements. While narratives surrounding male suicide in the two slums depicted it as a sign of weakness, many men we worked with also told us that they have contemplated suicide at some difficult moments. Of the 32 suicides we have recorded since 2007 in the two communities, 24 involved males. Swami and colleagues (2008) contend that doing

gender puts men at higher risk for suicidal behaviors compared to women. Men's high level of sensitivity to their poor socioeconomic and employment status easily give them a feeling of low self-esteem and failure, and ultimately to higher risks of contemplating and committing suicide.

Men were also frequent targets of masculine violence in Koch and Viwa. In the two communities, we found a pervasive belief that violence against other men was higher order violence. On many occasions, we encountered men who fought other men at the least provocation. To victimize men generally had more status than to victimize women. Confrontation with other males thus tended to be a major means for dramatizing and confirming masculinity. Men who did not instill fear in others reportedly exposed themselves to attacks. Bravo, an informant, told us: "If you beat up a woman here, it only makes her respect you. But if you beat up a fellow man, everybody fears you." He continued: "It is the same thing. When a woman beats a man here, the shame is unbearable, so it is better to be beaten by a fellow man." Like Bravo, many of the slum men we worked with expressed a real interest in maintaining male to male violence. It boosted their masculine credentials and restrained other men from attacking them. While men used violence to achieve a number of things, male-to-male aggression and violence can often be a status-seeking behavior (Bourgois 1996; Hearn 1998; Messerschmidt 2000; 2004; Mullins 2006).

A pervasive sense of the inevitability of victimization existed among the men we worked with: they regularly admitted feeling vulnerable. Narratives surrounding the pervasive threat and occurrence of violence did not merely refer to the violence of everyday life in the slums, but also to slum dwellers' broader existence in a violent social system. Otieno, whom we introduced earlier, told us that even if one escaped molestation in the slum, one would still be in danger as long as one was poor. Otieno clarified his point thus: "That one has not been attacked today does

not mean he will be safe tomorrow. We are often mistreated everywhere because we are poor. At work, a boss will deal with you; even *matatu* drivers and conductors mistreat you because they know you are poor . . . They know you have no say in Kenya." The sentiment that slum people cannot escape victimization coexisted with a conviction that the marginalization, the inherently violent and difficult life, and the livelihood misfortunes of slum dwellers were consequent upon the everyday violence and evilness of others. Taken together, the pervasive feeling of vulnerability and the conviction that others were responsible for and interested in slum dwellers' continued misery ultimately reinforced a general feeling of distrust among the men. Koch and Viwa men thus believed that to escape violence they had to both resist and deploy it.

Critical personal or lived experiences underpinned this tragic sense of mistrust. Most slum men that were interviewed had moving and authoritative stories about how their current livelihood misfortunes were caused by others. Matt was deliberately infected with HIV by his fiancée who knew she was positive. When he confided his status to his friend at work, the friend reported to the authorities. Consequently, Matt was sacked. In his own account, Hotboy told us how his father kicked him and his mother out of the house when he was only five. The man who remarried his mother also asked Hotboy to leave his house. Hotboy started living in the street when he was only seven and says he has only managed to survive by dint of luck and determination.

Contexts characterized by weak social support and networks and an immoderate struggle for access to limited opportunities trigger feelings of mistrust (Smith 2007). "Trust no one here," Busta told us. When asked if he really meant that nobody should be trusted, he said "I mean trust no one even your own brother in this community." Like Busta, other men we worked with considered violence to be a characteristic feature of the Kenyan society and cited different

experiences to buttress this point. One commonly cited experience related to how ranking people in the government who owned the slum residences have continually frustrated efforts to improve the lives of slum dwellers. These well-placed people also allegedly ensured that jobs are not there to enable people to get out of the slums. They also allegedly sponsored violent slum gangs, using them to harass and steal from the poor slum people. We also encountered men who said they were forced to move into the slums by local powerful politicians who took over their rural lands or other livelihood means.

INVESTING IN VIOLENCE: INVESTING IN SURVIVAL

Koch and Viwa men tend not to engage in violence for the fun of it or to satisfy certain emotional obsessions writ large. Rather, they invested in violence as a survival imperative (Bourgois 1995, 1996; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Collier 1998). Judging by the data gathered, violence enabled the men to, among other things, maintain status. Men's investments in violence varied. Some men perpetrated violence against others in order to survive, and others survived by permitting violence to be perpetrated against them. In the two slums, men owned and walked about with dangerous weapons, including guns and daggers; were members of violent gangs; and deployed random violence. We stayed in households that kept bows and arrows, machetes, clubs, and other dangerous objects to be used when the occasion warranted.

Narratives unambiguously invoked poor livelihoods to explain violence and victimization. Informants regularly admitted to have stolen, robbed, hurt, and mugged others because of poverty. Ordinarily, as many of them told us, they would not do these. But they have needs and little resources for meeting them. In addition to their expressed need to maintain masculine status, many of the men had responsibilities as fathers, breadwinners, and providers. These men often had no dependable and legitimate means of livelihoods. It was thus particularly

difficult for them to meet their responsibilities or the many other requirements of a masculine status. Crime offered the only feasible survival strategy for several of these men. "Look at me," General, a 29-year-old man, told us, "I am a young man and can work but I can't find work. And you know I can't live by begging. I am a man! That's why sometimes we misbehave, to survive." Lack of access to economic resources can potentially challenge men's sense of masculinity. Messerschmidt (1997; 2004) notes that men who lack power derived from income, social and political achievements, or material wealth may exert a masculinity that could easily result in violent behavior, and that marginalized males adjust to their economic incapacity by engaging in and hoping to do well at rivalry for personal supremacy with others of their own class.

Some men survived the slums by acquiescing to violence. Cliff's shop was broken into and looted several times. He was also beaten up and robbed several times. It all stopped when he assented to the demands of a gang that offered to protect him for a fee. Membership in violent gangs is a particularly critical livelihood strategy for many slum men. In Koch and Viwa, gangs offer protection to both individuals and businesses, often at a cost. They also regularly organize raids and robberies in and outside the slums. To be accepted into a gang is to have access to what the gang generates from its criminal activities. However, the process of joining gangs was often very violent. Men seeking membership in these gangs undergo very demeaning and violent initiation rituals, such as being tortured, gang raped, beaten, or having particular parts of their bodies cruelly marked or pierced. Others are forced to use hard and dangerous drugs. These mortifying ordeals and violent rituals toughened men and made them more violent. One man told us how he was flogged with barbed wire and made to keep his hand over a flame for several minutes as part of the rituals of gang initiation. He noted: "after the initiation I had no value for anybody. I went through a lot." Another informant had a friend who joined a very lucrative

violent gang which initiated its new members by gang-raping their (the new members') girlfriends, sisters, or wives. He said: "After Jimmy (the initiate) went through the ritual and allowed the mother of his two children to be raped, he lost his mind. He became a killer . . . so wicked to everybody. . . . The police eventually killed him in a shootout . . ."

Slum men generally believed that to avoid being victimized, one must demonstrate one's cruelty to others. Bull, an informant, noted, "You know you have to fight here or you will be killed and humiliated by others. Even women will "sit on you" here if you don't act." Evidently, men in the two slums considered violence to be a major masculine resource. Being violent protected men against violence, and also set them apart amongst fellow men. Slum men considered themselves men enough, and also felt they were considered so by others, if they were able to hurt others and prevent people from hurting them. This belief has a particular resonance. Excelling in violent situations confirms men as masculine (Cavender 1999; Messerschmidt 2004). Further, confrontations with other men are often "contests of honour" through which men seek validation (Polk 1994; 1999). Connell and colleagues (2005), among others, suggest that the willingness to fight in any given situation can be a measure of male self-worth, especially when traditional outlets of masculinity are unavailable. The men we worked with not only endeavored to defend themselves but also often violently attacked others to discourage attacks on themselves. "Life here is very hard, so you have to be hard or people will take you for a ride. When people see that you are soft, they will use you until you die," Timoo told us.

For many of the men, the best way to survive in the slum context was not only to avoid being the butt of other people's actions or to be at the receiving end of other people's aggression but to also use violence on others. Joney believed that the best way to survive in Koch was to make people aware of one's ruthlessness. "This will make them fear you and you will get

whatever you want." Joney told us that until he started being tough to his wife at home, she was regularly rude and disrespectful to him. But things changed the day he beat her and tied her up till morning. Before untying her, he made her swear not to disrespect him again and she has complied. We also learnt from Bolo, another informant, that he earned his respect by being violent. He grew up on the street of Koch and was daily molested by other boys. This stopped when he stabbed a boy who wanted to steal from him. Word immediately spread that Bolo walked about with a knife. People became terrified of him and so was his reputation as a tough person established.

On the other hand, Simon is the butt of everybody's brutality in his neighborhood. He self-identifies as a born-again Christian and believes he does not have to hurt people or seek revenge. He is frequently disrespected by other men. A neighbor once beat Simon's seven-year-old son for accidently pulling his shirt down from the drying line. When Simon asked the man to refund what he spent treating the child, the man slapped him. In another incident, gang members came to Simon demanding protection money. When he did not give them any, they carried away his stove. Simon's wife has even threatened to leave him, saying he cannot defend his family. There was also Ben, who said that he lost his respect in the community when he was beaten up by a man who owed him money. Ben told us: "I wanted to go back and kill this man, everybody expected me to do it. But I did not. It really haunts me; people here now think that I am not a strong man because I did not deal with the man. But I am waiting . . . I will do it, so that nobody here will want to take me for granted again. That's what happens here."

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFORMING KENYAN SLUM MEN
Violence among men has important social, political, economic, and developmental implications. Engaging men in the fight against the lifestyles that hurt or kill them and the people around them

can advance the agenda of social change (Izugbara 2010). However, current violence prevention work with men in Africa has neglected the place of livelihoods in men's social practices and behavior. In Kenya, currently, there is a boom in interventions and efforts to support violence prevention among men. NGOs, big business, foundations, successive governments, and religious organizations in Kenya continue to commit funds and other resources to these efforts. In the bulk of these programs, the focus has been to support "men to confront unequal gendered power relations, transform harmful masculinities into positive ones, and put an end to violence perpetrated by men" (MEGEN n.d.). These goals have been pursued largely through community education, advocacy, and campaigning. Despite years of implementing these interventions as well as the large financial investments they have attracted, results have generally been very far from impressive. If anything, there has been growing evidence of men's continued involvement in violent behavior as constantly demonstrated by daily media reports about men's sadistic activities in Kenya's slums. Taken together, there is still scant evidence that the large amounts of resources that have gone into transforming men in Kenya have had any expected impact (Lawoko et al. 2007). Success stories from organizations such as Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN) Kenya (n.d.) and Uplifting Men and Youth in Africa (UMAY Africa, n.d.) pale before reports of the growing involvement of poor men in heinous crimes and the profound injustices inflicted, which hurt them and others. These interventions have also continued to shift attention from the "harder" economic issues that drive men into violent lives.

The evidence we generated suggests that livelihoods are key to understanding violence among Kenyan slum men. Lack of opportunities and poor livelihoods have created the most sinister forms of poverty in a context where manliness is associated with the capacity to provide and fend for families and households. The men we studied generally linked their violent

behaviors to poverty. They stole from, robbed, hurt, and mugged others as a survival imperative. The dearth of economic opportunities has made these men particularly unable to accomplish their responsibilities and meet the demands of manliness. Understanding and addressing violent and self-destructive masculinities among poor men in Africa requires serious attention to the victimizing implications of poverty in the face of the unremitting construction of manliness in terms of power and the ability to provide for and defend ones' family. A logical complement to supporting poor men to shun violence, become true allies in the global struggle for gender equity, and contribute to peace-building and harmonious existence is the provision of improved livelihood opportunities to them.

Inattention to poor men's need for jobs and improved livelihoods is one of the painful limitations of current programmatic work with men all over Africa. The apparent lack of thought, by existing interventions, to the daily structures and livelihood issues that shape the lives of millions of men has the potential to thwart the vital transformations that the present initiatives are cultivating. Segal (1990, 309) states:

> State policy and expansions and contractions of welfare, as well as patterns of paid employment for men and women affect the possibilities for change in men. The competitive, individualistic nature of modern life … exacerbates the gulf between what is seen as the feminine world of love and caring and the masculine world... As some… have always known, the difficulty of changing men is, in part, the difficulty of changing political and economic structures.

Two decades later, as Barker et al. (2010) note, the individualistic, cutthroat, lopsided world of limited opportunities has created an army of poor frustrated men in the slums

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