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# Negotiations of Femininity in Times of Livelihood Vulnerabilities

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## Abstract

*Southwestern Kenya has faced multiple social and livelihood vulnerabilities ranging from dwindling farm yields, economic marginalisation and the decline of fish from Lake Victoria. Besides, family fragmentation increased due to high HIV/AIDS prevalence and high unemployment rate. Using the case of inhabitants of fishing villages along the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya, this article investigates how gender practices in conformity with norms of femininity shape women's access to resources and other livelihood means. The study draws on the theory of disciplining practice by Michel Foucault as a conceptual tool to understand the nuances of self-imposed and communal disciplining practices revealed in this context. Using focused ethnographic methods, the study revealed three concepts. 1) Acceptable cultural norms of femininity acts as a tool of power negotiations and advantageous positioning in pursuit of livelihoods. 2) Deviation from this ideal by women as they try to respond to the unstable livelihood situations around them lead to denigration, marginalisation and violence. 3) Pursuit and 'attainment' of acceptable femininity remains an open space for women's strategies of survival in a volatile livelihood setting. Ultimately, this study adds to already rich livelihoods research by drawing out the overlapping and mutually reinforcing effects of gender practices and livelihoods strategies in volatile places.*

**Keywords:** Femininity, livelihoods, instabilities, Homabay, Kenya, women

## Introduction

Southwestern Kenya has undergone considerable stress due to high levels of unemployment (Francis, 1998; Yamano and Jayne, 2004), environmental degradation leading to low farm outputs (Conelly, 1994; Luedeling, 2011), and reduced fish yields from Lake Victoria (Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989; Kateregga and Sterner, 2008; Medard, 2012; Opondo, 2011; Prince, 2006). Furthermore, high HIV/AIDS prevalence has also produced social and economic strain for the community (National Aids Control Council, 2016; Thirumurthy et al., 2008). Unemployment has had an effect of reducing remittances to rural areas, leaving them dependent on unreliable farm and lake resources. Additionally, increased interest and competition for natural resources, particularly the Lake Victoria fish stock, has been noted. A situation has developed that some have called a 'social tragedy' occasioned by low fish yields, despite an increasing number of people, including women, migrating to make a living in villages along the lake (Lwenya and Yongo, 2012; Medard, 2012, p.564). With this migration and new forms of settlements, fishing villages have emerged. The inhabitants of these fishing villages live and operate within intricate social and cultural contexts that shape their

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livelihood strategies.

The dwindling of lake resources has shaped gendered power relations in the fishing enterprise leading to transactional sex. This occurrence has become known as the 'sex-for-fish' phenomenon (Bene and Merten, 2008; Caldwell et al., 1989; Camlin et al., 2013; Fiorella et al., 2015; Mojola, 2010; Robinson and Yeh, 2011; Wingood and DiClemente, 2000). Besides these conditions of vulnerability, life in the fishing villages is characterised by poor family support, which is the breakdown of social entitlements, and high HIV/AIDS prevalence. These can usefully be viewed as deficits of social capital, something that other studies have associated with poverty and vulnerability (Cleaver, 2005; Kothari, 2002; Narayan, 2002). Kothari, for instance, argues that migration may sanction or help defeat arrangements that perpetuate chronic poverty (Kothari, 2002). According to Kothari, people who migrate from familial support are exposed to more risks.

On the other hand, not migrating also hinders the exploration of new livelihood opportunities. Migration to fishing villages, such as among women in southwestern Kenya, can therefore be understood as a way to find new livelihood possibilities. Also, that very migration dislocates them from family networks and exposes them to denigration in the fishing villages. It is easy to see why migration is considered a vital livelihood strategy in its own right (de Haan and Zoomers, 2006; Ellis, 2003).

Norms of femininity determine how women are viewed, how they have access to fish, and how they live in these fishing villages. Additionally, a range of markers of 'a complete woman' is used as a form of disciplining, marginalisation and also a tool of women's agency in this context. While the fishing villages provide refuge for women who migrate there to make a living, these villages turn to become centres of risk and uncertainty.

### **Norms of femininity and disciplining practices**

The valued and acceptable norm of femininity – in Dholuo, *dhako moromo* ('a complete woman') is used as a tool in power negotiations. Being *dhako moromo* covers a wide range of expectations, from reproductive obligations to motherhood, to residence arrangements, to marital status, and to the responsibility to provide for others materially. Deviation from the ideal of *dhako moromo* leaves women open to being labelled as useless, neglectful, *akili nyingi* (shrewd), and immoral. Also, it disciplines their behaviour and legitimises enduring violence and marginalisation.

I look at the norms of femininity by focusing precisely on ways in which women deviate from this norm and the disciplining practices that follow. I additionally discuss the various expectations that define *dhako moromo*, the privileges they accord as well as the disciplining of others who deviate.

While women who migrate to the fishing villages do so as a strategy to secure livelihoods when options in their home villages fail, they are faced with constraints attached to the continuing expectation of being a *dhako moromo*. Yet, by examining women who are negatively labelled, I show how they manage to create new spaces for participation in economic activities in the fishing villages. By analysing Luo women's norms of femininity both as a product of ordered social arrangements and as situational responses to prevailing vulnerabilities, I reveal the context in which livelihoods are secured and also the outcomes.

I use Foucault's notion of discipline to illustrate how the penalising effects of hegemonic norms of femininity operate. Foucault states that discipline is 'a system which suppresses, reinforces and multiplies asymmetry of power' (Foucault, 1977a: 223). In the norm of social settings, such as the fishing villages, discipline is exercised through regulating the behaviour of its people. According to Foucault, disciplining practices are not just about one group of people controlling another but are revealed in ordinary practices in which people discipline themselves or engage in 'self-surveillance' in ways that result in their subjugation (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1984). Conformity to and enforcement of cultural norms of femininity constitute a form of self-surveillance and a disciplining practice (Foucault, 1980).

Cultural norms of *dhako moromo* hierarchise women, often marginalising those who deviate and disciplining them. This disciplining is done not by coercion but through the socialisation so that conformity is seen as the right thing to do (Foucault, 1977b). Following Foucault's analysis of disciplining practices, Bartky (1997) argues that categorising people creates standards through which they are judged and disciplined. In Bartky's analysis, acceptable body sizes/shapes, postures, and types of clothes act as markers of suitability in specific contexts. Through habitual day-to-day self-regulation to conform, norms of femininity are created and maintained. Standards of conformity also define markers of deficiency. Due to this, standards of conformity become a source of agony to those who cannot achieve them. Also, labelling women in the fishing villages as either *dhako moromo* or as deviants from this acceptable femininity is a good example. To these women, the deficiencies produce marginalisation within the fishing business, and they sometimes lead to physical abuse and denigration, with an effect on access to livelihoods.

In settings where instabilities are multiple and mutually reinforcing, like the fishing villages, both women and men are faced with an acute inability to measure up to ascribed roles and obligations of femininity and masculinity. According to ideals of femininity among the Luo, women who migrate to live in the fishing villages are seen to defy mainstream norms and therefore are disciplined through negative labelling. This patriarchal practice has been noted elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, where women's mobility is controlled based on their perceived

sexual escapades (Porter, 2011). Among the Luo in the fishing villages, when women step into roles that are culturally construed as belonging to men, they are viewed as deviants. Men similarly contend with their limitations and failure to measure up to proper notions of masculinity due to their inability to exercise their normative roles.

Foucault's disciplining practices come to light as expressed in the chastisement of deviants and policing of women about acceptable femininity. Femininity, and how women negotiate their deviance from hegemonic norms – sheds light on how women navigate their difficulties in an unstable environment. A broader scholarship on gender practices features how women challenge power and thereby change perceptions of gendered cultural norms in their communities (Hodgson and McCurdy, 2001). These women deviate from the gender roles expected of them, and in so doing, they are censured (Eagly and Karau, 2002). They are branded as 'not proper' (Ogden, 1996), 'wayward' (Cornwall, 2001), 'bad' or 'wicked' (Musisi, 2001), 'deviant' (Clark, 2001), as 'vagabonds' (Coplan, 2001) and as 'dangerously independent' (McCurdy, 2001). By contrast, women who adhere to ascribed gendered practices are labelled as 'respectable' (Musisi, 2001), 'proper' (Ogden, 1996), 'admirable' (Fallers, 1973), and as 'good wives' (Dolan, 2001). These studies show how, when faced with various difficulties, women are pushed to adopt forms of behavior construed as deviant, which in turn leads to their disciplining through pejorative labels.

In this article, I examine four categories of women: the 'useless' women who fail to fulfil child-bearing obligations; the 'neglectful' women who migrate to fishing villages leaving their children in marital homes; the 'immoral' women who reside in the fishing villages away from their marital or natal homes; and the *akili nyingi* ('shrewd or excessively knowledgeable') women who disrupt power relations by partnering with fishermen younger than themselves. I discuss how disciplining practices operate through cases of deviation from *dhako moromo*.

## **Methodology**

This ethnographic study was carried out between November 2015 and August 2016 among the Luo people in five fishing villages along Lake Victoria, namely: Nyagina, Luanda Rombo, Litare, Kolunga and Sienga, which are all on Rusinga Island. An initial questionnaire was administered to 105 representatives of households within the fishing villages to capture social demographics, as shown in Table 1 below.

		Per cent
<b>Gender</b>	Female 66	
	Male 39	
<b>Age of respondents</b>	20-30	38
	31-40	45
	41-50	13
	51-70	4
<b>Origin of respondent</b>	Within the county	57
	Outside the county	43
<b>Current/relationship/union status</b>	Monogamous – one union	49
	Polygamous – multiple unions	17
	Single (never been married, separated, divorced, widowed)	21
	Widowed and in levirate union	13
<b>Household size</b>	0-4	35
	5-8	52
	9-15	13
<b>Level of education</b>	Primary	84
	Secondary	16

*Table 1: Population Characteristics*

Out of the 105, 32 were purposively selected participants for interviewing and regular observation throughout the research. The characteristics presented by the cases of respondents referred to in this article were used to create a typology of femininity (*dhako moromo*) as analysed by the researcher. The typology was based

on key themes used to define women's status and roles: marriage rules, reproductive obligations, motherhood, domesticity, residence, family livelihoods, age, and decision making, as outlined below.

## Findings

### *Characteristics of Dhako Moromo*

The phrase *dhako moromo* is a catch-all for the various norms, expectations and obligations of the complete woman, according to Luo customs. These are outlined in Table 2 below, along with the ways deviation is depicted:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Characteristics of <i>dhako moromo</i></b>	<b>Features of deviation from <i>dhako moromo</i></b>	<b>Labels</b>
<b>Marriage rules</b>	A married woman	Unmarried, separated from husband, widowed woman	'Immoral woman'
<b>Reproductive obligations</b>	A woman who has children in marriage and one who has both male and female children	Childlessness and especially sonlessness	'Useless woman'
<b>Motherhood</b>	A woman who cares for her children at the marital home while her husband travels or works outside the home	A woman who leaves children in the marital home for an extended period of time while she works elsewhere	'Neglectful woman'
<b>Domesticity</b>	A woman who stays in her marital home, taking care of household chores or	A woman who leaves her household responsibilities to others	'Neglectful woman'

	productive activities around the home		
<b>Residence</b>	A woman who lives at home in the marital location in her own homestead	A woman who migrates from her marital home to live in fishing villages	'Immoral woman'
<b>Family livelihood</b>	A woman who participates in providing for the family by working at close proximity to her home	A woman who migrates, and lives in a fishing village to provide for her family	'Immoral woman'
<b>Age difference in marriage-like unions</b>	A woman who enters into a relationship with a man who is older.	A woman who enters into a marriage-like relationship with a younger man	' <i>Akili nyingi</i> '
<b>Decision making on man's earnings</b>	A woman who does not question her partner on his earnings or take control of them	A woman who makes decisions on her partner's earnings	' <i>Akili nyingi</i> '

Table 2: Dhako moromo attributes and the labels that describe deviant behaviour

As illustrated above, the four categories: useless, immoral, neglectful, and *akili nyingi* are derived from themes in the first column. Although the themes of analysis are 8, they share overlapping characteristics that form the four categories of women. A detailed discussion of each is offered throughout the article.

#### *Deviation from a Dhako Moromo: 'Useless' Women*

'They see me as *bila faida* (useless) with no profit; they feel I just spoil my husband's property.' These were the words of Makano, a 62-year-old woman who had failed to meet the obligation of bearing children. The Swahili phrase *bila faida* was used interchangeably with 'useless' during the interviews concerning how childless women felt about themselves and how others regarded them. According to Luo



family customs, marriage is preceded by payment of bride wealth, which sanctions the marriage and transfers the woman's reproductive and productive potentials between clans (Cole and Thomas, 2009; Reynar, 2000). Childbearing constitutes the essence of a Luo marriage. Bearing children enhances the status of fathers and confers the status of motherhood to a woman (See also Friedman and Todd, 1994:534; Hutchinson, 1980).

A woman's childless state is met with shame and a sense of failure, which may necessitate interventive polygamy (Nwoye, 2007; Zeitzen, 2008). Interventive polygamy refers to marrying more than one wife to solve the deficiencies of the existing wife/wives, such as childlessness. This was the case with Makano, whose husband Tinipa had to marry another wife when she failed to have children. Makano herself had been married as a second wife to intervene because her husband's first wife had three consecutive stillbirths. Tinipa married a third wife, who bore him children whom Makano helped to raise as they lived in a rented house together. 'I loved her children as my own, hoping that they would recognise me as a mother. I used my money to support my husband to educate them,' she stated, expressing her attempt to invest in her stepchildren. At the time of research, Makano fear of deprivation was evident, as one of her stepchildren who had previously sent her remittances had stopped doing so. Her husband, who was now elderly and sickly, lived in his third wife's house and in a convenient arrangement, as her children supported the living expenses of the whole family apart from those of Makano.

Besides the irregular support and uncertain provision, Makano also faced ridicule from her co-wives and other family members. Her remark, 'They see me as *useless*, with no profit, they feel I just spoil my husband's property,' underlined the derision she encountered. Edna, a 54-year-old, and Aumakanyi, 51-years-old voiced similar sentiments, both childlessness.

*If you have no child, you are seen as a fool. I do not have any child and people ridicule me. They insult me but what do I do? (Edna, 54)*

*People do not see me as a human. They don't respect me as they see me as useless. (Aumakanyi, 51).*

Observations of Aumakanyi revealed scars that had been inflicted by her husband due to her childless status. She had married her husband as a second wife at the age of 17, which she remembered as blissful. 'I was the favourite one and he ate in my house all the time', she remarked. Aumakanyi described her present life as '*hivi tu*' (just like this) while gesturing with open hands to express the emptiness she felt. She could not hold back her tears when she explained how she got the scars. Sobbing, she revealed having considered suicide to end the misery. Due to her status of childlessness, she did not belong to any women's group, a forum where

women talk about her experiences and possibly receive some social support. The women's groups, according to her, would only add to ridicule as she explained, 'people don't see me as a human. They don't respect me as they see me as useless.'

Furthermore, Aumakanyi's state of childlessness, unlike that of Makano, was followed by derision and physical abuse from her husband:

*I have no child. I am just useless. My husband has told me to go away saying that I am useless but where can I go? My parents are dead. Where can I go? He says to me all the time, hey, daughter of Simbo, just leave (Aumakanyi, 51).*

Aumakanyi had refused to heed his scornful demands to go back to her natal home, choosing to endure the physical abuse to which he subjected her. Like Makano, Aumakanyi invested in her relationship with her stepchildren, in the hope of mobilising their support. However, she decried that although they were now all grown up, they did not reciprocate her investment as she had hoped. Her husband's neglect exacerbated her situation since he had left her in the fishing village and gone to live with another woman. 'If I had a child my husband would not have left me,' she lamented.

Stories of women like Aumakanyi and Makano demonstrate how child-bearing, as a value constitutive of *dhako moromo*, deepens women's vulnerabilities. Their status of childlessness is used to legitimise physical abuse and marginalisation. Childless women's attempts to harness social capital and ensure their future security are uncertain: caring for a co-wife's children may not lead to the successful cultivation of relationships or reciprocal obligations. Their inability to bear children limits their capacity to negotiate in relationships leading to fear of deprivation, regret, a sense of being let down, and even ideations of suicide. Both Aumakanyi and Makano developed strategies of supporting their stepchildren, a self-disciplining act through compliance.

The social effects of childlessness have been observed in other studies: loss of respect, a sense of failure in the face of obligations of child-bearing, mockery, and isolation from social groups (Van Balen and Bos, 2009; Okonofua et al., 1997; Hollos and Larsen, 2008). Like the case of my study, these women are faced with marital instability, even separation, and neglect. Although they have already attained the valued status of marriage, the other significant value of child-bearing threatens this. In unstable settings, childlessness has implications for social status as well as for livelihoods and negotiations for survival. Other research has shown that childless women who are relatively well to do – either more educated or with resources to sustain their livelihoods – are less stigmatised than poor women (Donkor and Sandall, 2007). The problems of women who deviate from this value of femininity in my research context are, therefore, far-reaching – socially and economically, because of the prevailing vulnerable environment.

Isolation from social support such as women's groups where women offer each other social support in different life situations and events exacerbate the agony of childless women. These groups act as investment and savings groups from which women can really care for each other (Mbugua-Muriithi, 1997). Women like Aumakanyi miss out on essential issues such as health, business, and credit (Mwenzia, 2004). Other research in Kenya has drawn attention to how women's self-help groups help as 'a risk-sharing strategy of the poor' (Fafchamps and Ferrara, 2012: 707). Fafchamps' and Ferrara's study, which was carried out in one of Nairobi's informal settlements, found that self-help groups indeed provide mutual support among members (ibid). Other women in the fishing villages, such as Aumakanyi's neighbours, who were members of self-help groups, had benefitted from the pooling of money together.

The actions of women like Makano and Aumakanyi to invest themselves in caring for other women's children can be seen as self-disciplining practices according to Foucault's theory. In pursuit of acceptability, women create their disciplining strategies to harness reciprocity and to position themselves in a good light, so their deficiencies are minimised. Yet, they also act within collective norms in which others use ridicule or violence as a form of discipline. The privileges that come with motherhood in this setting, and the marginalisation that results from deviation, produce pervasive patterns of unequal power relations.

### *Women who 'Neglect' Children*

Besides the central place of child-bearing in defining a *dhako moromo*, childcare is also invoked as part of the femininity. A woman who takes care of her children within the confines of her marital home is considered a better mother than the one who goes to work, leaving her children at home for extended periods or migrates with children to the fishing villages. Such women are labelled as 'neglectful', and as lacking the qualities of a *dhako moromo*. Labelling women as 'neglectful' in a context where motherhood is highly valued, but where material deprivations drive women away from their marital homes, presents a dilemma. In a region where mortality from HIV/AIDS and livelihood vulnerabilities are commonplace, men cannot be effective providers, and women's contributions to their families have become especially important. Due to this, the migration of women has increased: they leave their marital homes away to the fishing villages to eke a living.

Women who migrate from marital homes become labelled as 'neglectful' women. The archival records obtained from chief's offices and beach management offices provided data for investigating this category of women. It is here that accusations against women who allegedly neglect children are registered. The reports and letters from these archives were aimed at compelling women to return to their marital homes to care for children whom they were accused of neglecting. However, examining them closer revealed that most of the cases resulted from

conflicts between husbands and wives. Invoking childcare appeared as a proxy for reconciling an estranged wife to her husband. Consider these examples:

*My wife is in Luanda Rombo and has refused to come home. I think she has an affair with a certain driver with whom she came and took the child away. One day I met my child crying while coming from school. (Ogotu)*

*The bearer of this letter is William. He is in search of his wife and we are requesting your office to accord him any assistance which will enable him to come back with the wife home. She left behind two sons. (Awandu)*

*Ouma's wife run away with an eight years old child to Litare fishing village. This office is kindly requesting for any assistance that could be given to the father to get back his child. (Sirawi)*

According to these cases, three characteristics define *dhako moromo*, against which a woman's deviation is captured. The first is that of a wife living in another place of residence other than her marital home: 'My wife is in Luanda Rombo [a fishing village] and has refused to come home [marital residence]' and '...enable him to come back with the wife home.' Deviation from that norm becomes a legitimising factor in compelling women who live in the fishing villages to return to their families. The second refers to a woman's estrangement from her husband and accusations of alleged affairs. 'He is in search of his wife' and 'I think she has an affair...' corroborates this observation. The third refers to a child. Statements such as 'she came and took the child away', 'one day I met my child crying' and 'she left behind two sons' are intended to appeal to a woman's obligations of childcare as a way of disciplining the 'neglectful' woman and also provoking sympathy for children who are allegedly abandoned. This reference to neglect is aimed not only to draw women back to their childcare roles in the confines of their marital homes but also to reconcile them with their husbands in cases of estrangement. Raising their deficiencies as mothers in an environment where the value of a woman is attached to child-bearing and family obligations provides an effective tool of discipline.

Yet, during interviews with female fish traders who had left their children in marital homes, I noticed that they seemed to justify their being in the fishing village on the basis of fending for their children's needs. Well aware of how they may be viewed as 'neglectful' mothers, they would take the first opportunity to explain how their stay in the fishing villages was attached to being mothers. 'I do this for my children' one of the women said. Those who had children in the fishing villages equally spoke about their plans for returning home. However, their attempts to vindicate themselves from scorn at their 'neglect' are unsuccessful. These women continue to push boundaries of *dhako moromo* by remaining 'neglectful' mothers. Such a notion reflects being separated from their children or living with them away

from the marital home, while still fulfilling their role of providing as good mothers. Expectations of being a proper mother, I discovered, are largely enforced by fellow women, especially mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. This was the case for Asena, a 44-year-old fish trader who was living with her children in the fishing village.

*As a mother and wife I would visit my marital home often. My husband was sickly and I cared for him and the children at the fishing village but my sisters-in-law did not like this. They told me to bring back the children home. I did not want to. So one day they took away my fishing equipment to force me. That is when I decided to leave that family. (Asena, 44)*

Asena was well aware of the responsibilities of being a good mother and wife, yet being in the fishing village despite its unacceptability was a reality she had to contend with. Her words – ‘as a mother and wife, I would visit marital home often’ – illustrated the obligation she had and also marked her sense of womanhood that she wanted to be acknowledged by her relatives. This was her self-disciplining practice to remain as one who exhibited the characteristic of *dhako moromo*. Her dilemma, however, was clear: defying the norms of marital residence while conforming to the role of mother and wife in the fishing village.

Forms of controlling a practice in reference to territoriality and legitimacy of living in a place have been illustrated in other research. Territoriality refers to how people claim ownership of a place at the exclusion of others by asserting their legitimacy and defending that ownership for the purposes of control (Sack, 1983). Lang and Sakdapolrak study of place-making after election violence in Kenya demonstrated that territoriality could be a significant tool of control (Lang and Sakdapolrak, 2015). They noted how violence in a place ends up controlling social reorganisation leading to segregation of those considered illegitimate in terms of ethnicity or political opinions. In other places, such control can be used to reinforce racial segregation in the acquisition of housing (Bolt, 2013; Gordon, 1977). For instance, Bolt's (2013) case study of a farmworker compound on the South African-Zimbabwe border illustrates how a place shapes people's life experiences and survival based on their identity.

Similarly, the fishing villages understudy can be understood as a gendered territory that uses femininity norms to control women who live there. The ‘neglectful’ women characterise people who are excluded from fishing village ‘territory’ through social sanctioning by others who claim legitimacy. Their marital homes are positioned as ‘their’ territory, where femininity as good mothers and good wives are culturally attached.

Conformity to valued femininity presented opportunities for survival while also defying some norms. Women who are disdainfully called *akili nyingi* illustrate this.

### *Akili Nyingi Women*

*You don't know where these women come from, they just pose as unattached girls. These women look for a fisherman who works hard and who can bring money to her. When the man goes fishing, they sell and make money but when the business grows she turns against him and chases him away, remaining with all the money (Enry).*

These were the words of Enry, one of the fishermen in Kolunga fishing village, describing women who are commonly referred to as *akili nyingi* women. *Akili nyingi* is a Kiswahili phrase meaning 'to be shrewd' or one who 'knows too much.' The phrase is used to refer to women who enter into marriage-like relationships with younger hardworking fishers.

One *akili nyingi* woman, Mugafi, a 44-year-old female fish trader, lived with Yoma, a 33-year-old fisherman in an arrangement that was unusual due to their age difference. Yoma had another wife and children who lived in his ancestral home, and Mugafi had migrated to the fishing village after being widowed. She had begun her business in the fishing village as a cook for the fishermen and later she became a small trader. Living with Yoma, she explained, had made her life easier since she could easily access fish for her business and was also guaranteed daily sustenance. Mugafi described how Yoma's life had changed since they met: 'I offered him a house to live and helped him quit alcohol. He even keeps clean clothes and takes care of his children.' Aware that people viewed her as *akili nyingi*, she painted their relationship in a positive light. She drew attention to the domestic ideal of *dhako moromo* by talking about her domestic responsibilities, but also downplayed the fact that their living arrangement was considered far from acceptable.

Women labelled as *akili nyingi* are defined by their age and their authority in relation to younger male partners. One of Mugafi's neighbours, a fisherman, remarked:

*Sometimes a fisherman gets older women. This is not good for fishermen because these women are akili nyingi. They ask the fishermen many questions like how much money you have, how much did you use and how much do you have left. If you refuse to answer these questions, they leave you.*

Another fisherman had said, 'You see a woman renting a house and yet she does not do much work, but she just exploits the man.' A female trader who was Mugafi's close neighbour also said, 'These women make their young male partners abandon their wives and children.'

Noaz, also a fisherman, narrated a story of an *akili nyingi* woman:

*The problem with these women [is that] when they rent their own house, they can chase the man away anytime and pick another one. First, these women come pretending to be young girls and go for younger hardworking men who they can easily control. Sometimes akili nyingi women will stay in a fishing village for some time and then after amazing wealth, they separate from their partner and take away all the household belongings.*

As one of Mugafi's female neighbours stated, 'akili nyingi women take men like hostages, requiring them to make money for them and, since they are older, the men comply with all their demands.'

Although other women and men shun these women, they live as they do to conform to existing norms such as those of offering domestic services to their partners. However, their choice of partners and the unusual arrangement of an older woman living with a younger man threaten existing power norms, thereby attracting this scorn. For instance, they can ask for a day's wages from their younger male partners, which would not be possible in typical relationships.

The chastisement of women by men and by other women is similar to Barnes' observation regarding colonial Zimbabwe. Women's decency and respectability were associated with marital residence, rendering women who migrated to the urban centres as immoral deviants while those who remained in the rural marital homes were respected (Barnes, 1999). Yet urban women tried to build what they considered a good life, thereby defining new configurations of femininity. They lived out a commitment to respectability through hard work and responsibility, even though their behaviour necessarily diverged from rural norms. They were seen as prostitutes, their independence was condemned, and they were subjected to physical – even sexual – abuse. Barnes argues that women were not denigrated simply because of migration to the city, but because this affected the gendered control of resources. In colonial Zimbabwe, black urbanites were assumed to be men working for white employers, while black women were relegated to rural areas. Women's desires to live and work in cities, and the measures they took to do so, challenged colonial and patriarchal views of gender, residence and livelihood. However, despite the indifference directed to them, they managed to carve out spaces for economic and political participation (ibid). Similarly, *akili nyingi* women manage, despite denigration, to challenge some notions of patriarchy while at the same time living in the very patriarchal norms they are socialised.

On the other hand, women who defy the norms of marital residence by migrating to the fishing villages remain under the disciplining attention not only of those who remain in the other Luo villages but also of fellow migrants. However, they continue to perform accepted roles. Since all migrants commit to the norms of femininity in which they are socialised, they engage in disciplining themselves and each other despite their dislocated statuses, in a manner familiar from

Foucauldian approaches. Bartky (1997) argues that disciplining power is everywhere and exercised by everyone. People thus, in a sense, yield themselves voluntarily. This is evident in the efforts of *akili nyingi* to conform to acceptable feminine attributes of domesticity. They display some *dhako moromo* by offering the domestic services or ‘comforts of home’ to men (White, 1993). This creates a base where fishermen can have meals, sleep, and access personal care.

Nevertheless, while enacting the key social value of domesticity, *akili nyingi* women also defy other norms. They do not manage to convince others, including their neighbours, that they conform to notions of proper femininity. Indeed, the fishermen who live with them are seen as ‘hostages’, painting *akili nyingi* women’s domestic efforts in a negative light. Their commitment to the norms of *dhako moromo* is ultimately unsuccessful. One important reason for this is that these women are seen as threats to the power structures in the fishing villages where men are viewed as gatekeepers of the means of livelihood.

Also, unlike in other relationships where men have control over their wages, *akili nyingi* women manage to control the young fishermen’s income to their advantage. Therefore, denigrating such women who manage to alter this arrangement is a way for men to discipline them, and a means of de-legitimising their positions. Disciplining women through mockery and scorn is a familiar way to ensure their survival strategies (See also Hodgson and McCurdy, 2001). The *akili nyingi* illuminate women’s commitment to practices of acceptable femininity while, at the same time, being in arrangements that are regarded as unacceptable. By doing this, they manage to destabilise the gendered norms that are taken for granted and utilise them to their advantage, even as their efforts underline their uneven success and their marginalisation.

In contrast to the *akili nyingi* are women in Gilbert’s study of beauty pageants in Nigeria. Within the prevailing norms of femininity, women in the beauty pageants conform squarely to hegemonic norms. Their desires to remain within what is publicly valued – being charitable, prayerful, and elegant – have disciplining effects (Gilbert, 2015). However, what *akili nyingi* women show is the complex tension between conformity and deviation as they create spaces for survival in a starkly difficult setting. Women in fishing villages illustrate attempts to conform to norms while also doing what is necessary to survive. Yet all female migrants in the fishing villages experience this dilemma more generally. They are viewed as ‘immoral’ simply under living there, although they do so to be good mothers and wives.



### *'Immoral' Women*

*These women are stubborn, you cannot deal with them without shouting. These women have left their homes and husbands where they come from, you cannot know clearly who they are and where they come from. They are a problem.*

These were words of Jom, a beach management official referring to female fish traders. From his statement, women migrants defy two crucial *dhako moromo* qualities, by leaving their homes and their husbands. These underlie Jom's view of them as 'stubborn', which justifies 'shouting' at them. The chief who represents the administrative leadership that oversees the fishing villages also believed that the fishing villages hide immoral women: 'These women are immoral and have many problems.'

Women who live in the fishing villages generally attract mistrust, as the story of Asena illustrates. Asena had to forgo her role as a properly married woman and mother by leaving her husband because his family had forced her to migrate from a fishing village to live in the marital home. Although Asena attempted to perform her role properly by visiting her marital home regularly, this was not sufficient. She decided to leave her marriage when her fishing equipment was taken away to compel her to move. Asena finally got into another marriage-like arrangement in a neighbouring fishing village, where her attempts to maintain acceptability revealed her dilemma:

*I could not live alone and decided to marry. Then I met this Jaseme [man from Seme] who was a fisherman. We had to make a deal, and I told him I did not want jokers but someone who is serious to marry.*

This relationship provided an opportunity for Asena to recreate a family again and to be in an acceptable status of being married. However, meeting Jaseme in the fishing village and living there with him was an arrangement of which Jaseme's family also did not approve. According to Asena, 'they wanted me to go to live in the marital home to prove I am a good woman but my work is here in the fishing village.' At the time of the interview, Asena had two children with Jaseme, but their marriage had not been properly endorsed by payment of bride wealth because of this mistrust. Asena's choice of residence in the fishing village was necessitated by the need to fend for her children, but it disqualified her from what she also valued. So even if she performed being a *dhako moromo* by living with Jaseme as man and wife, she was well aware of her mistrusted status.

The conflict between conformity and deviation from norms of proper womanhood in this place is also well illustrated in what women say about their relationships and what they do. Nusco, a fish trader from Kolunga fishing village, complained on most occasions when we met about her partner, who was an alcoholic and who did not provide enough money for her food. 'I slept hungry

again,' she would tell me. One day, I asked what she was doing about her husband's alleged neglect, and what followed was a lecture on how a woman should behave. 'As a woman, you should not question your husband, but you just pray. Watch silently because if you ask he may get upset and this may bring other problems. I do not ask him.' Nusco's words, which seemingly described proper womanhood, were contradicted by her actions a few weeks later when I witnessed her having a scuffle with her partner in the open field in Litare fishing village. That morning, I had been processing fish in Litare with Eta, a female fish trader when we heard a commotion followed by a brawl. Two men and a woman were roughing up another man on the ground. The woman happened to be Nusco, and the man on the ground was her partner. On this morning, Nusco, who also frequented the local brewers, appeared sober while her partner, who had now been overpowered by the other two men, was evidently drunk. The two men held him down while Nusco searched his pockets for money. As soon as Nusco got some money from her partner's pockets, she hurriedly left with the two men in tow.

It is evident that while women try to attain the ideals of femininity and to teach others about them, this is not the same as the actual struggle of maintaining appearances. However, the same performance of femininity provides them with some fulfilment, even when they are well aware that on other occasions, they have to deviate blatantly. These women have already migrated as a way of freeing themselves from deprivations and arrangements which disadvantaged them in their marital homes. For them, to migrate is to risk being labelled as immoral, even as they attempt to attain the values of *dhako moromo* by entering into other relationships or by offering domestic services to men. Their new domestic and sexual relationships represent open defiance, but they are paradoxically also attempting to embody *dhako moromo* in order to survive in unstable conditions. By migrating to the fishing villages, they attempt to better their lives while risking derision, which in turn justifies abuse towards them. By using derogatory terms, men are able to maintain some control and counter challenges to their authority, as the case of *akili nyingi* women illustrates.

Women's marital independence and their resistance to marital obligations are the most common bases of their condemnation as improper or 'wicked' (Hodgson and McCurdy, 2001). Moreover, writing on 'Wicked Women and Respectable Ladies' in Zambia, Parpart (2001) shows that labelling women as 'wicked' has a double significance because it marks deviance as well as describing what 'respectability' demands. This is certainly the case in my study, as the female fish traders are called 'immoral' about values of *dhako moromo*-ness. However, this is not straightforward. The *akili nyingi* women live out a version of being *dhako moromo* by offering domestic services, and they do so not just as a way to derive material advantage, but also only as a way to conduct life as they know it. Women

who are collectively regarded as immoral or as *akili nyingi* choose to enter marriage-like arrangements. By doing so, their deviance is minimised, granting them space to benefit from such relationships.

### **Conclusion, Relevance and Suggestions for Further Research.**

In a context where the community has experienced social and economic fragmentation, work in the fishing villages provides a means of making ends meet. Women see their migration into fishing villages as a form of refuge to escape deprivation. However, in these villages, expectations of being a *dhako moromo* still follow them, and they conform to these norms as a means of survival and enact values that are important to them. They are labelled as useless if they happen to be childless, leading to physical abuse and deprivation. Others are regarded as neglectful mothers and immoral for defying residence rules when they migrate to earn a living away from marital homes. These labels legitimise marginalisation and violence against them. To cope in this setting, some women, especially those labelled as *akili nyingi*, commit themselves to a version of what is considered acceptable to survive but defy the norms of such relationships with younger men than themselves. The tension between deviance and conformity is revealed, showing how women, well aware of the need to defy and also to conform, navigate their situation in this place. Conformity and deviance both act as strategies through which women access resources, enact values and attain positions that offer some advantage. Even though deviation adds to their vulnerabilities, especially through denigration and violence, at other times, it is the only means of deriving gain in a challenging environment.

Following Foucault's theory of disciplining practices, the femininity norms among women in fishing villages illustrate how the categorisation of women as complete or incomplete defines value judgement and consequent disciplining practices (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1984). This is a demonstration of how hegemonic norms of femininity operate. In Foucault's analysis, regulation of behaviour through self-imposed means or by other members of society bolsters power inequalities. The pursuits of 'completeness' and conformity to acceptable norms by women, therefore, act as self-surveillance.

This ethnographic study of gender practices in conditions of livelihood instability is relevant in several significant areas: Firstly, this study brings new data and consequent additional analytical lens to understand gender practices and their implications on people's agency. The tensions brought about by conformity and deviation from acceptable norms of femininity provide an understanding of the complexities of agency in times of instability. Secondly, social-cultural values embodied in acceptable femininity are important in humanitarian and development planning and evaluation. Initiating strategies to intervene in contexts of livelihood instability require an understanding of what the people value and their

options of agency so that these can be addressed or strengthened. For instance, development agents need to identify levels of vulnerability based on group characteristics revealed through categories of femininity in specific contexts.

Furthermore, this study has revealed some root drivers of gender-based violence that victims and the community may view as justifiable. Interventions against gender-based violence would find these findings useful in designing systemic interventions that address the social-cultural space and not merely the outward manifestations of behaviour. Thirdly, this study provides useful data for policy formulation to protect vulnerable persons and enforcement of regulations against their marginalisation and violation. The study showed some of the often-hidden ostracism that has potential for a mental and emotional breakdown. The goal 5 of the United Nations Strategic Development Goals (SDGs) roots for gender equality and one of its core targets is to 'end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere' (United Nations, 2015, p. 8). To achieve this target, an understanding of drivers and forms of discrimination should be brought to the fore. This study has endeavoured to use a specific case of women's agency in times of livelihood instability that represent many other women in similar circumstances.

Further research focusing on other social instability besides livelihood instability would provide a broader understanding of how people negotiate their identities in those circumstances. For instance, research on the instabilities brought about by displacement, and refugee crisis, disease outbreak such as COVID-19 pandemic, and civil conflicts would offer more insights into gender practices and their implications in these conditions.

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