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Women's gendered experiences of political instability: Kibera during the 2017 Kenyan elections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how residents of Kibera, an multi-ethnic informal settlement and opposition stronghold in Nairobi, Kenya, understood and negotiated political instability in the run up to, and during, the contested elections of 2017. Much of the scholarship on election violence has been gender-blind, ignoring the ways in which gender roles shape the experiences but also the nature of conflict. When women's experiences during conflict and war are considered, it is typically in relation to sexual violence. By contrast, our study examines women's gendered experiences of political instability across multiple dimensions, employing the structural framework of gender relations developed by Connell and Pearse (2014) that distinguishes power, production, emotional attachments, and symbolism. Data were produced from multi-method qualitative fieldwork undertaken shortly after the 2017 elections. We find that participants' experiences of deeply patriarchal structures, threats of sexual violence and the brutality of policing in Kibera coexisted with contestations of gendered power relations through mitigation strategies and some women's activism. Political instability moreover impacted women's labour and increased their already great obligations in terms of paid and unpaid work by generating additional responsibilities to cope with conflict and violence and to keep children safe. A dominant discourse of women as peacebuilders is shown to contribute to many women's senses of increased responsibility for peace itself during periods of political instability and serves to obscure their differences and that their gender roles might contribute to ethnic conflict. By examining how political instability in an informal settlement is experienced and negotiated across multiple dimensions of gender relations, this article contributes to the feminist literature on peace and conflict, and specifically to recent analyses of gender and electoral violence.

1. Introduction

On 8 August 2017, Kenyans went to the polls after months of hard-fought campaigns for election at local, parliamentary and presidential levels, the latter between National Super Alliance (NASA) candidate Raila Odinga and the incumbent Uhuru Kenyatta of the Jubilee Alliance. Because of 'illegalities and irregularities', the Supreme Court subsequently nullified the election result that had declared Kenyatta the winner, ordering a new election for 26 October 2017. Odinga withdrew his candidacy on the grounds of electoral reforms not having been implemented and Kenyatta was affirmed in November. While levels of ethnic violence were considerably less than in earlier periods of electoral violence in the country (Mutahi & Ruteere, 2019), and the elections were described by some observers as 'relatively peaceful',¹ 92 people

were killed, many more were seriously injured, and there was sexual violence. Serious human rights abuses mainly occurred in opposition strongholds and were frequently perpetrated by police and security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Kenyan National Commission for Human Rights, 2018; Mutahi & Ruteere, 2019).

Our research was designed to examine how residents of Kibera, a multi-ethnic informal settlement and opposition stronghold in Nairobi, experienced and negotiated heightened conflict in the run up to, and during, the contested elections of 2017. In this article, we particularly analyse the experiences of a diverse range of women of (in)security, conflict and violence in this period of political instability. We draw on fieldwork in Kibera shortly after the 2017 elections, involving a multi-method qualitative strategy, including photovoice, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Our findings contribute to feminist literature

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¹ See for example articles in *The Economist* (2017) and the *New Statesman* (2017).

on peace and conflict, and specifically to recent analyses of gender and electoral violence (see for example Bardall, Bjarnegård, & Piscopo, 2020; Bjarnegård, 2018; Krause, 2020; Schneider & Carroll, 2020).

Much of the scholarship on electoral violence has been gender-blind, ignoring the ways in which gender roles shape the experiences but also the nature of conflict (Kihato, 2015). As a result, analyses of election violence tend not to capture “the ‘feminine’ experience of violence that is not observable, because it is not visible to outsiders, not reported, or does not take place in public spaces, is not included” (Bjarnegård, 2018: 2). When women's experiences during conflict and war are considered, it is typically in relation to sexual violence. The recognition of the role of sexual violence in armed conflict is crucial, but critics have argued that it frames sexual violence in conflict as exceptional as compared to ‘ordinary’ sexual violence during peace time (Grewal, cited in Fiske, 2019, O'Rourke, 2015). The emphasis on sexual violence occurs at the expense of other harms women experience during violent conflict, such as physical violence, structural violence, domestic violence, displacement and violations of land rights (Fiske, 2019; Pankhurst, 2016). Feminist conflict scholars have thus not only consistently highlighted the continuum of violence from ‘exceptional’ political violence to the everyday and structural violence experienced by many women, but also continuities of gender-based violence from war time to so-called peace time (Boesten, 2017; Cockburn, 2004; Moser, 2001; Wibben, 2020). In the specific context of marginalised communities, gender, poverty and violence interact in dynamic and productive ways that are exacerbated during conflict (Fiske & Shackel, 2015).

To be clear, we do not limit our discussion to the experiences of women who were victims of sexual violence during the electoral period² but seek to examine how women experience periods of political instability in specifically gendered ways, and across multiple dimensions, with harms ranging from physical violence to psychological harms and impacts deriving from the gender structures of their environments. Gender structures how men and women perpetrate and experience political violence, ‘regardless of whether gender appears in the motive’ (Bardall et al., 2020: 918). Our particular focus on women's gendered experiences in this article does not imply that men's experiences are not gendered, nor that men are not victims of political and of sexual violence. We adopt a gender-relational approach, acknowledging the different roles and responsibilities men, women, boys and girls have in their communities and how intersecting inequalities are intertwined, but also that men and women relationally ‘co-create expectations of, and social spaces that allow for, violent behaviour’ (Myrntinen, Naujoks, & Schilling, 2015: 182) or for finding peaceful solutions (also see Hudson, 2016).

In order to provide a nuanced analysis of women's experiences of political instability across multiple gender dimensions, we employ the structural framework of gender relations developed by Connell and Pearse (2014). This framework distinguishes four interrelated dimensions:

- power
- production
- cathexis
- symbolism

Power, as the first dimension of gender relations, includes direct, discursive and colonising power relations (Connell & Pearse, 2014). Direct power refers to intimate partner violence perpetrated by individual men, but also to direct state violence and state control of women. Discursive power describes the diffuse ways in which identities and practices around gender are produced, as has been highlighted by poststructuralist thinkers. Colonising power relations are not, as Connell

and Pearse (2014) note, captured by these first two approaches, and refer to the transformation of indigenous gender relations through colonising forces that have established an enduring gender/race hierarchy. The second dimension of the model includes production, consumption and gendered accumulation. This refers to tasks that are undertaken in certain societies by men and by women, both in relation to paid and to unpaid labour, and to the ways in which these patterns of gendered labour have become embedded in products and services, in occupations and in wage structures. Cathexis, the third dimension, examines the social structuring of emotional relations, attachments and commitments, including emotional relations in the workplace, relationships between partners and their children, and sexual relations and romantic attachments. Finally, symbolism refers to the meanings, understandings and cultural representations of gender.

There are many other ways in which gender structures and relations could be conceived. But, as the authors write, they provide ‘tools for thinking’ that acknowledge the multiple but interwoven dimensions in the structure of gender relations, which is how we have applied them to better understanding gendered experiences and harms of political instability. Our multi-method study contributes a qualitative analysis of gendered understandings and experiences of a period of political instability in an informal settlement to the literature on electoral violence.

The article now proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on gender, conflict and violence in Kibera, highlighting particularly that both “peace time” and “conflict time” produce particular challenges for women and men in marginalised communities. This is followed by an outline of study design. The empirical sections of the article discuss participants' experiences of safety and security during the election period in relation to Connell and Pearse's (2014) four dimensions of gender relations: power, production, emotional relations and symbolism. We find that, even though the elections were characterised as ‘relatively peaceful’, the women in this study experienced extreme senses of fear about their safety and that of their children. Some of them adopted active mitigation strategies to cope with this insecurity. We also show that political instability increased women's already great obligations in relation to paid and unpaid work by generating additional responsibilities to cope with conflict and violence and to effectively be responsible for keeping children safe. Finally, we argue that the dominant discourse of women as natural or as socialised peacebuilders contributes to many women's senses of responsibility for peace itself during periods of political instability while obscuring their differences and that their gender roles might contribute to ethnic conflict.

2. Gender, poverty and conflict in Kibera: continua of violence

Partly in response to apocalyptic visions of urban poverty and so-called slums (e.g. Davis, 2006), urban scholarship has highlighted the diversity, complexity, struggles, community activism, creativity, resilience, new spatial practices and entrepreneurship that characterise informal settlements (Ombati & Ombati, 2016; Thieme, 2013; Thorn, Thornton, & Helfgott, 2015). Nonetheless, Kibera residents face many challenges and everyday risks stemming from economic inequalities, poor environmental conditions, high levels of morbidity, mortality and unemployment and low levels of education, healthcare and essential public services and infrastructure. Given Kibera's diversity across its 13 villages, exposure to these challenges varies significantly, but young people and women face disproportionately high levels of poverty, unemployment rates, crime and insecure livelihoods (Onyango & Tostenen, 2015).

Peace time, as well as periods of political conflict or violence, produce particular challenges for poor women in informal settlements. Cities tend to provide better opportunities for women than rural areas for paid labour and a broader range of occupational choices (Chant & McIlwaine, 2015), which in turn are associated with greater independence and empowerment (Chant, 2013). Yet, women with lower incomes and ‘who reside in disadvantaged or marginalised urban

² Cf. Bjarnegård (2018) who discusses the limitations of gender and political violence research only collecting data with women victims.

communities are those who are usually most at risk of the worst excesses of socioeconomic and gender inequality' (Chant & McIlwaine, 2015: 2). Moreover, while women's work has diversified and intensified, they continue to perform most unpaid reproductive tasks and experience disparities in their responsibilities to cope with poverty (Chant, 2006). There is a high prevalence of gender-based violence in Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2015), and one study finds that it is more than twice as prevalent in Kibera as reported in the general population (Swart, 2012). Perpetrators of gender-based violence against women include intimate partners but also security personnel, armed groups, criminal gangs, and neighbours both in so-called "peace time" and during periods of political instability.

At the same time, the fact that women continue to struggle in poor and marginalised communities does not imply male privilege. The patriarchal dividend accrues to men as a group; an unemployed man in an informal settlement may draw no patriarchal dividend in an economic sense (Connell & Pearse, 2014). The continuity of patriarchal structures certainly obscures the increasing disempowerment of men in urban communities in Kenya, where the 'material base of male authority' (Silberschmidt, 2001: 657) has been weakened through mass unemployment and poverty, resulting in men's feelings of inadequacy and lack of social value (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo & Francis, 2006; Cahn, Aolain, & Fionnuala, 2010). Van Stapele (2015), in an ethnography of working gangs in Mathare, another poor neighbourhood in Nairobi, charts the anxieties experienced by young men in both seeking to live up to masculine ideals, such as that of being the provider, and feeling increasingly redundant. One consequence of such anxieties has been that male identity and self-esteem have become increasingly enacted through bodily powers, sexuality and violent masculine behaviours such as gang membership (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo & Francis, 2006; Izugbara, 2015; Van Stapele, 2015). Gender violence then results partly from the breakdown of traditional gender norms.

Turning now to periods of political instability or political violence, Kenya has regularly experienced electoral violence throughout the post-colonial era, involving gross violations of civil, political, social and economic human rights by state actors and interethnic violence on a mass scale. The most severe of these episodes occurred after the general election in December 2007. An estimated 1100 people were killed, 663,000 displaced or forcibly removed, and 40,000 became victims of sexual violence as a result of excessive police force against protestors as well as ethnic-based killings by supporters aligned to both the ruling and opposition parties (Lynch, 2009; Waki Commission, 2008). Factors that ignited this specific crisis included the state's gradual loss of its monopoly of legitimate force and parallel proliferation of violence, particularly given young unemployed populations that can be mobilised by politicians, the increase and personalisation of presidential power and deliberate weakening of other institutions, the ethnic clientelism of parties and feelings of historical marginalisation and injustices (Mueller, 2008; Waki Commission, 2008). Kibera was one of the areas most affected by the 2007 post-election violence: many people were killed, houses and businesses looted and burned and gender-based violence was extremely widespread, with ethnic rape a frequent occurrence (De Smedt, 2009; Kihato, 2015).³

Women are frequently targeted during periods of political conflict and violence, not merely because of their gender but because ethnicity is defined through gender relations. Kenyan women's ethnic affiliations have been more flexible than men's, as they can come to be defined in relation to those of their husbands or neighbours, which can expose them to violence or threats of violence (Lonsdale, 2008). Sexual violence is, for both security forces and ethnic gangs, a fundamental part of targeting a particular community (Robins, 2011), with ethnic rape, as

³ Precise figures on the extent of violence and damage are not readily available. De Smedt (2009) claims there were 60 killed in Kibera although this figure has not been collaborated elsewhere.

Kihato (2015: 22) puts it, 'a means of breaking down, feminizing, the other side.' While a far larger proportion of victims of postelection sexual violence have been female, forced circumcision and male castration were reported during the 2007 PEV, with men from uncircumcised ethnic groups, for example Luo, particularly targeted (Krause, 2020). Sexual violence against women and men demonstrates the 'battle of masculinities' (Kihato, 2015: 22) and the ways in which gender and ethnicity intersect during periods of conflict to produce a violent exclusionary politics.

3. Methodology

This study employed an interpretivist methodology, using a mixture of qualitative methods including in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and photovoice. Interpretivist approaches aim to produce understanding of the meanings of phenomena by drawing from social actors' own definitions, interpretations and everyday activities (Blakie, 2010). The present study involved a two-phase approach to the question of how residents of Kibera experienced and negotiated the 2017 elections as a period of political instability. Phase 1 (January and February 2018) commenced with a photovoice project involving 19 youth⁴ participants, nominated by three community based organisations authors 2 and 3 had worked with previously (Vertigans & Gibson, 2020). The photovoice method is a community-based participatory research approach that enables sensitivity and deep insights through greater collaboration between researchers and participants, inviting participants to take control of the research process and to focus on issues that are most important to them (Duffy, 2011). From its origins in a health-related project in a Chinese village established by Wang and Burris (1994), photovoice encourages participants to photograph images as a form of communicating their challenges. The selection of photographs is then followed by sessions to find common themes within the group. In our Kibera study, the participants were initially trained in the use and sensitivities of using camera phones for capturing issues. Participants were then asked to photograph images that were representative of their experiences during the election period. Six weeks later, four focus groups were held and participants explained why they had taken particular images. This information was then applied to shape subsequent semi-structured interviews. Thirty 1:1 interviews were held with seventeen female participants and thirteen men. Interviews lasted between 20 and 50 min.

In phase 2 (March 2018), author 1 conducted eleven additional in-depth interviews with women from Kibera that sought to examine in greater detail how they had experienced the period of electoral tensions. In line with Bjarnegård's (2018) argument that, in order to produce understanding of the gendered aspects of electoral violence respondents should not be limited to victims of such violence, we selected a diverse range of women that included community organisers, members of women's groups, and both those who had experienced direct physical violence during electoral periods and those who had not. Differences in terms of interviewees' positions in their communities, age, marital status, ethnicity and political identities all shape their experiences and negotiation of political instability. Interviewees ranged in age from early twenties to mid-sixties and included women from a range of different ethnic backgrounds (Luo, Luhya, Kikuyu, Kamba) and different villages in Kibera. Interview topics were informed by the data produced in Phase I and covered participants' experiences of safety and security in the electoral period; peace, conflict and resilience; understandings of past violence; and future needs and peace demands. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min. This article particularly centres on the data produced in phase II in order to advance understanding of women's experiences of a period of instability, but also draws from the data generated during focus group discussions and interviews in phase I.

⁴ In Kenya youth are considered to be aged between 18 and 35 years.

The analysis of interview and focus groups transcripts was informed by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), which is sensitive to subjective experiences narratives and interpretations of participants. We used qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) to manage the interview data and create codes and subsequent themes (such as 'violence' 'threats' 'safety', 'relative peace', 'relationships', 'understandings of place', 'gender roles', 'gender expectations', 'responsibility', 'timing', 'cyclicity', 'coping'), while returning to the full transcripts at all stages during the analysis and write up phases.

4. Gendered dimensions of political instability

It is important to note from the outset that there were huge differences in terms of perceptions of location and which villages were described as 'violent' or 'relatively peaceful'. Katkewera, Olympic and parts of Silanga were talked about as most affected, while other parts were considered to be 'more peaceful' or 'relatively peaceful' by some, particularly in the interviews and focus groups of phase I. Notwithstanding their home village however, all women in phase II spoke about the anxieties and worries they experienced during the long electoral period, reporting that they felt 'not safe' or 'very unsafe'. The experiences we discuss in the following sections, including ongoing threats and realities of police brutality and violence, food scarcity and psychological and emotional impacts, suggest that a framing of peacefulness might denote a very narrow definition of peace as lesser deaths than feared. It must be noted too that the contested nature of the 2017 elections, with its annulment and subsequent parallel inauguration, meant that such experiences of not being safe lasted for a long time, exacerbating the psychological and emotional impact of the instability.

4.1. Gender relations as power

Connell and Pearse (2014) describe this first dimension of their framework as pertaining to direct power relations – as is for instance evident in disproportionate incidents of intimate partner violence and in state control over and violence against women – but also to discursive power and, most sweepingly, to colonising power. Within the narratives of women in this study, their experiences of deeply patriarchal structures and of the brutality of policing in Kibera coexisted with contestations of such gender power relations and some women's activism in the run up to and during the electoral period.

Colonialism and colonial violence have enduringly shaped gender relations in Kenya, strengthening patriarchal domination and formalising it in law and practice (Mbote and Mubuu 2007, cited in Barnett, Maticka-Tyndale, & Kenya, 2016). It was only with the 2010 Constitution (itself the outcome of a mandate for a constitutional referendum in the peace accord following the 2007 electoral violence) that gender inequality was tackled and gender rights, for example in relation to land, property and children, were enshrined. Nonetheless, women's social and economic status continues to be largely defined by customary norms and rules (Kamau, 2014; FIDA 2013, cited in Barnett et al., 2016).

A relative absence of inter-ethnic violence in Kibera during the 2017 elections can be partly attributed to a huge police presence and excessive use of force – teargassing, beatings and the use of live ammunition have been widely regarded as disproportionate to the relatively limited protest (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Mutahi & Ruteere, 2019). While a heavy police presence might have been reassuring to some who could potentially become targets of violent opposition supporters, all women we interviewed talked about the negative impact of the presence of security forces, and particularly the frequent teargassing, on their lives and senses of security. One interviewee, a woman in her twenties, said: 'you know we fear police in our community because the way they come in, they don't come in as people, they come to kill, because they are sent

to kill, and we are not there to be killed.'⁵

State violence in Kenya carries an ethnic component, given that opposition strongholds are traditionally Luo communities and, in the 2017 elections, supported Raila Odinga, while the President and Vice President were part of a coalition of Kikuyu and Kalenjin political interests. Kenya's tribalism (Lonsdale, 1992) – the use of ethnic identity in political competition with other groups – originated in British colonial rule and has been exacerbated by post-colonial politics of patronage, which link the distribution of resources to ethnicity (Mueller, 2008). One of the drivers of continued electoral violence is the politicization of ethnicity in the run up to elections, with national politicians tapping into feelings of historical marginalisation and injustice and mobilising young unemployed populations to gain power (Waki Commission, 2008).

One respondent, with responsibilities for children and grandchildren staying in her home, told us: 'The Kenya police, or administrative police, they were lying on one side, the Jubilee side, and when they came here in Kibera they knew that Kibera is a NASA zone or Raila zone. So, they just pour tear gas on children, on women, and we were really affected by that.'⁶ The presence of state security forces was considered as dangerous because of their use of 'excessive force'⁷ and 'live bullets'.⁸ But there were also fears associated with the police as perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violations.

As noted earlier, gender-based violence is prevalent and in fact normalised in Kibera, even during so-called "peace time". However, previous episodes of electoral violence have involved sexual violence on a mass scale. In the 2017 elections, most documented cases of sexual and gender-based violence were perpetrated by security services (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Kenyan National Commission for Human Rights, 2018). Civil society organisation, the Kenyan National Commission for Human Rights (2018), documented 201 cases of sexual and gender-based violence, 96 % of which involved female victims, but acknowledges that this number is not conclusive and that there are barriers to survivors coming forward. Over half of these victims came from urban informal settlements and from the lowest income economic bracket, earning less than a dollar a day (ibid.).

While none of the women we interviewed said they had been directly affected by sexual violence during the electoral period, the threat of rape was very much present in their narratives: 'I was fearing some people to come to my house and rape me with all my girls.'⁹ The exact phrase "outside was not safe" was used in more than half of the interviews during phase 2, and these fears impacted women's mobility and access to resources: 'you can't even go outside because the policemen are outside there. If you go outside, they can even rape you.'¹⁰ This sense of having to avoid outside is also significant because of the gendered impact of the scarcity of essential services on women's vulnerability in informal settlements. For example, the lack of adequate sanitation means that long distances may have to be travelled to toilets and washing facilities. Most of the participants said that they knew someone who had been raped but who did not officially report the violation because of the stigma that continues to be associated with experiencing sexual violence: 'because she does not want to be discriminated by the villagers, she just rather stays quiet.'¹¹ Interviews with staff of human rights and women's organisations undertaken by the authors similarly indicated the difficulties in survivors coming forward. The stigma surrounding the reporting of sexual violence in Kibera is exacerbated by a culture of impunity and a lack of knowledge of, and trust in, the law and justice system (Amnesty International, 2010). However, women might also not come forward

⁵ Interview with Participant 5, 7 March 2018.

⁶ Interview with Participant 7, 8 March 2018.

⁷ Interview with Participant 16, 6 February 2018.

⁸ Interview with Participant 2, 5 March 2018.

⁹ Interview with Participant 6, 7 March 2018.

¹⁰ Interview with Participant 1, 4 March 2018.

¹¹ Interview with Participant 2, 5 March 2018.

because perpetrators were often part of the police forces and sexual violence during the elections was used as 'a tactic [...] to subdue opposing voices' (Kenyan National Commission for Human Rights, 2018: 23).

Interviewees adopted mitigation strategies that enabled them to deal with the insecurities of the electoral period and that kept them safe. In the run up to the elections, some of the participants in both phases of the study had been actively involved in peacebuilding activities. The detailed discussion of such activities goes beyond the scope of this article, although we will return to their relevance in relation to the symbolic dimension of gender relations below. Some moved 'up country' for the electoral period, others sent their children to stay with relatives: 'maybe my children would be killed or damaged anyhow, so that's why I moved them, then I remained here with my husband.'¹² Perhaps most commonly, 'not going out' was an essential survival strategy that many women felt they needed to adopt: 'the election was announced at 9 pm. So, just from there we were in the house and we heard people throwing stones and shouting that the elections had been stolen again, and they can't agree. So, we had to stay in the house for one week.'¹³ At the same time, we were told that houses too were not safe, 'because the bullets normally pass through the iron sheets because the houses are made of mud and iron sheets.'¹⁴ Teargas also entered the houses. So effectively there was no "safe place" for the women we interviewed.

4.2. Production

This second dimension of gender relations includes production, consumption and gendered accumulation (Connell & Pearse, 2014). In relation to our research, this dimension was affected by political instability both in relation to women's paid employment and to household production. Kibera, like other poor urban neighbourhoods in Kenya, is characterised by a segregation of work spaces (Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018). Women often perform all domestic labour in the home and are additionally either earning an income through work in the informal economy or as domestic workers in wealthier neighbourhoods. Men typically work in construction or industrial sites, in the informal economy, or remain unemployed, but are unlikely to contribute to caregiving responsibilities. Despite relative advantages over rural women in terms of occupational choice, women in Kibera experience a gendered division of labour that forces them to 'juggle their childcare responsibilities with casual jobs, with little support from their husbands' (Mwiti & Goulding, 2018: 877), as well as experiencing inequitable access to financial resources and political decision-making processes. This gendered division of work moreover produces differential time burdens and uneven access to public spaces (Chant, 2013; Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018), as also already discussed earlier in relation to accessing sanitation.

Turning first to income generating activities, the women in our research predominantly worked in the informal economy, selling vegetables, fish or grains from roadside stalls. With economic and social changes resulting in male unemployment and weakening traditional breadwinner masculinities, men's contributions to production were often talked about in very negative terms. In women's narratives, men often appeared as irrelevant at best; phrases such as 'useless', 'like a cabbage' or 'just drinking' were common across interviews. Drawing on traditional understandings of men's responsibilities as providers, which they were usually unable to fulfil, men were described as lazy: 'you know these days in Kenya men are idlers'.¹⁵ Contrary to this perception, Van Stapele (2016: 309) argues in relation to Mathare:

most of the young men I worked with can hardly be described as idle; they woke up early to look for work (long-term arrangements) or hustling (short-term activities), and would often not return home before nine in the evening, thus spending a total of 18 hours out on the street to make themselves available whenever opportunities arose.

More generally, young poor men in Nairobi's informal settlements experience a range of anxieties, discriminations and threats, not least the normalisation of police brutality and unlawful killings (ibid.). Scholarship on masculinities in informal settlements demonstrates how new masculine identities are constituted around such experiences of marginalisation and poverty, redefining but essentially maintaining the idealised masculine identity of the provider (Izugbara, 2015; Silberschmidt, 2004; Van Stapele, 2015; Van Stapele, 2016). Contemporary understandings of the male provider are partly shaped by colonial economic structures, such as the colonial British hut tax (Van Stapele, 2021). Our interview data show that the ideal-typical 'imaginary of the provider' (Van Stapele, 2016: 306), despite largely fictional, was reproduced by both men and women.

Crucially though, many participants across both research phases regarded "idleness" as one of the main drivers of electoral violence. This assumed relationship between joblessness and electoral violence stems from the reality that politicians were paying poor young men to travel to particular areas to 'cleanse' the neighbourhoods of people from other ethnic groups, both during the 2017 elections and in earlier periods of electoral violence. One community organiser explained:

The problem we are facing in Kenya, youths do not have jobs and they want to eat, they want to survive, they want to pay rent and they are just there without jobs. So, when they find someone who can give them 200 shillings, or 500 shillings, go and do something. They just go fight, because they need that 200 shillings.¹⁶

As will become apparent in the remainder of this paper, there is a widespread perception in Kenya of young men as dangerous and commonly seen as causing political violence as well as a range of other social problems (Van Stapele, 2015, Van Stapele, 2016).

While the 2017 elections were reported to have resulted in far less material damage than earlier periods of political instability, the damage that did occur often affected women's income generating ability in very immediate ways. Two of the 11 respondents in Phase II had their stalls burned as a result of fighting between Kikuyu and Luo youth gangs, associated with government coalition and opposition supporters respectively. Another stall holder in Shilanga was attacked by 'a group of youth' after the second election and 'was left with nothing'.¹⁷ All others suffered economically due to their restricted mobility and public spaces not being safe, as already discussed, and due the overall impact of the political crisis on the ability to access food and other essential goods and services.

Turning next to women's responsibilities in relation to domestic and emotional labour, opportunities to participate in the (informal) labour market and gain financial and decision-making autonomy have gone together with continuing sole responsibility for domestic chores, (such as collecting water) and caring work (such as raising children). What Chant (2006) has described as the "feminisation of responsibility and obligation" describes well most of our participants' senses of gender disparity in terms of paid and unpaid work and their greater responsibilities for coping with significant challenges, such as poverty.

During the electoral period, women's roles involved increased and often sole responsibilities for house, family and subsistence. This account of a single mother to four children illustrates issues around gendered production and consumption very well:

¹² Interview with Participant 5, 7 March 2018.

¹³ Interview with Participant 14, 31 January 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with Participant 1, 4 March 2018.

¹⁵ Variations of this phrase were used in the large majority of our interviews with women.

¹⁶ Interview with Participant 13, 2 February 2018.

¹⁷ Interview with Participant 7, 8 March 2018.

You were supposed to stay in the house; even at daytime, going out was a little bit tricky because, first, the policemen were not choosing who to beat. They were beating everybody including children. So the best place for you to stay was just in your house. Even if it's death, let it just find you in the house but not outside. So this time, the thing that women did was to pack foods; they didn't wait for last minute like the other election. So one week to the election, everybody had lots of food stuffs because they imagined what happened last time was going to happen this time. That is what helped most of the women. So going out was not that necessary unless you wanted to go to the toilet, because we do not have toilets in the house, it is outside.¹⁸

In this narrative, the interviewee outlines the active strategies women were forced to adopt in preparation for violence. Her mention of 'the other election' references the 2007/2008 violence, when road-blocks meant that no food supplies could make it into Kibera and residents were unable to leave, while shops remained closed or, later, sold foodstuffs at hugely increased prices (Kihato, 2015). Given these experiences in earlier periods of instability, stocking up on supplies for themselves and their children featured prominently in many of conversations we had, especially with older women. Several women reported not having left their homes for a whole week after the August electoral announcement – 'if you don't have supplies, it was too bad for you.'¹⁹ Several interviewees suggested that a main reason for lesser direct violence was that 'people knew how to prepare themselves'²⁰ and that they were 'psychologically and emotionally' prepared (P3). Chant's (2006) feminisation of responsibility and obligation, for most of the women in this study, thus extends to responsibility for coping with political instability and conflict, too.

There were other material consequences of the instability. One of the main facilities destroyed in the informal settlement was a community clinic in Silanga, one of the villages. The burning of the clinic was frequently referred to in interviews and depicted in participants' photographs. Being associated with the President's wife, it was considered a valid target by (male) opposition supporters, but not by the supporters of the opposition who used the facility. One participant explained: 'you don't have kids, you don't normally bring your kids to hospital, you don't know how this clinic has really helped women in this community. Women were literally crying because they know what that meant in their lives.'²¹ As such, it might be seen as a symbol of how even limited material damage particularly affected women, who, with their children, were the main users and beneficiaries of this clinic.

4.3. Cathexis

This dimension is concerned with the social structuring of emotional relations and attachments. In relation to our data, the gendered nature of emotional relations was apparent in the ways women were undertaking emotional labour during times of crisis and how they understood that labour. Following on from the above arguments around the gendered responsibility to care for children, during election times as well as peace times women effectively become responsible for keeping children safe. This responsibility shaped the experiences of electoral tensions for the women we interviewed in specific ways. The suffering of children was reflected on in detail in all narratives, for example in relation to the police throwing teargas. One interviewee, a mother of three children ranging in age from 2 years to 13 years, described the multiple complex impacts as follows:

It's difficult because you know I have children in the house and with bullets outside, there is no transportation, and there is no shop that is open for you to buy food. You are in the house with the kids, teargas is being thrown in the house, and you cannot go out because you are scared of the bullets. You are just in there. Now you can imagine if you have small kids with that teargas. It's kind of tricky because there is nowhere you can go. No hospital, no transport, nothing. You are just in the house [...] They [the police] can even kill your kid. So it was very hectic to women. We are the only ones who care for our kids.²²

In practical terms, the composition of many families as female headed means there is no other parent to undertake this kind of labour. About half of the participants in Phase II were single mothers and talked about 'the only male that can help you [being] your neighbour. What if that male neighbour is out fighting? So you remain alone there in a big plot.'²³

However, this sense that 'we are the only ones who care for our kids'²⁴ pervaded all the interviews with women we conducted, irrespective of their marital status, age, geographical location within Kibera or ethnic or political identity. When asked whether fathers did not also share the responsibilities to keep children safe, participants often responded by highlighting the absence of men in the domestic sphere and discussing the "burden" of women in times of violence:

The woman is the one who carries the burden of her home, the woman is being traumatized because she is thinking about the husband, what will happen to him? Secondly this woman is in charge of the children sometimes the children in the morning there was no violence but by the time they come back there is violence, so you find in most cases women are more affected because they were thinking about how is my kid how is my husband how is my brother there out is he being involved in bad activities or how is he, women carry a lot of burdens.²⁵

In this extract, the anxiety and material work of protecting dependents and possessions, but also of worrying about (male) loved ones appears to be a task solely undertaken by females. Our argument here is of course not that men do not care about keeping their family members safe. However, within gendered relations and masculinity narratives in Kibera, this kind of concern is primarily permissible to be expressed in relation to fighting, as an expression of protecting the family (Kihato, 2015). What is more, the inability to keep dependents safe might further reinforce the notion of men as "useless".

It is important to note that a gender construction of men as aggressive and violent can often be amplified by women, who can play a significant role in encouraging men to perform hegemonic masculinities. For instance, previous literature on gender norms during conflict in Kibera (Kihato, 2015) and elsewhere (Pankhurst, 2016) documents that it is common for women to publicly shame men who are reluctant to fight – although we did not hear women explicitly express such ideas in our study.

4.4. Symbolism

This final dimension is concerned with the meanings, understandings, discourses and cultural representations of gender. The previous sections have already implicitly touched on how what it means to be a man or a woman in Kibera shapes experiences of political instability. Here, we will explore in greater detail one particular

¹⁸ Interview with Participant 3, 5 March 2018.

¹⁹ Interview with Participant 14, 31 January 2018.

²⁰ Interview with Participant 9, 10 March 2018.

²¹ Interview with Participant 3, 5 March 2018.

²² Interview with Participant 1, 4 March 2018.

²³ Interview with Participant 2, 5 March 2018.

²⁴ Interview with Participant 1, 4 March 2018, as quoted in the previous paragraph.

²⁵ Interview with Participant 6, 7 March 2018.

dominant construction, that of womanhood as associated with peacefulness and peacebuilding. The feminist peace and conflict literature has long criticised the binary equation of women with victimhood and peacefulness, and of men with agency and violence (Charlesworth, 2008; Enloe, 1998; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). However, women are active participants in the gender relations that characterise their lives (Connell & Pearse, 2014). The women we interviewed generally portrayed themselves as potential – or actual – peacebuilders. There were only two exceptions: a younger Kikuyu woman who spoke about ‘causing trouble’ in an earlier period of political instability; and another who participated in the looting of a shop during the PEV of 2007/08.

Reported peacebuilding activities in Kibera in the run up to the 2017 elections included participation in (and in some cases organisation of) interethnic dialogues, workshops and forums, training and capacity-building, sports, arts, competitions and tournaments, door-to-door peace education, work programmes, early warning and road shows. Between August and November 2017, at various crises points between and after the two votes, some participants were moreover actively involved in early warning and rapid response activities. Some participated in peace vigils in Olympic, where women and children formed circles and lit candles. Interviewees spoke about the value of seminars, forums and workshops in bringing together people from different villages and from political and ethnic backgrounds. As discussed earlier, ‘idleness’ often featured as a driver of violence in women’s narratives. The various peacebuilding activities women described were framed as beneficial because they “kept people busy” and targeted “the youth”.²⁶ Much local peace work ahead of the 2017 elections focused on this population of male youth through various peacebuilding strategies, as the following extract explains:

the best thing was, make them busy, organize seminars, organize workshops, get them into some activities which they can do just for them to pass their time and forget about destruction, because you know the devils mind is the devils workshop and the other time [during the PEV of 07/08] they were doing that because they were totally idle and they were being paid to harass people by the big politicians.²⁷

Peace messaging and a generalised discourse about violent masculinities thus constructed male youth as the only participants in electoral violence.

In opposition to this framing of young males as violent, women were frequently characterised, and described themselves, as inherently peaceful. For instance, in phase I, a (male) community leader explained that the decision to involve women in delivering peace messages has been taken because:

women they are majority [...] because most men go out to work. So we realized that [...] whenever they stand in a forum and they are talking to make a point ... always theirs is sought of, it goes home better than we men because they have the number and then they are like “when a woman is talking at least something is happening we need to listen”. So these women basically we were using them to cool down the temper.²⁸

This extract illustrates the framing of women’s peacefulness as both essential (‘cooling tempers’) and socialised (they are available since men are at work). Earlier sections highlighted that this latter conception represents a gendered expectation of provider masculinities rather than the reality in Kibera. Yet, most women’s narratives echoed such gender expectations.

Motherhood, and its associated responsibilities in relation to

emotional labour, was particularly frequently invoked as a shared identity that would allow women of different ethnic or political affiliations to dialogue and promote peace together. One interviewee in her forties, who was very active in community organising, explained, ‘if there are difficulties with the other tribe, we take like two mothers from this tribe and two from the other side, they go take it to the other tribes, we come together because we are different, men like using weapons but us we like using polite language.’²⁹ This dichotomous contrasting of weapons, as representation of masculinity, with politeness, as representation of femininity, speaks to the ways in which gender meanings are invoked during political instability. Moreover, a notion of shared motherhood, while clearly a strategy that was effective in involving women of different backgrounds in peacebuilding activities, is also an internalisation of traditional gender roles, where women’s contributions are predominantly made in the private sphere:

We have the group of mothers who have the businesses along the roads, so we gather once in a week and talk. You know these are our boys so we have to talk to them, teach them how we can overcome this problem.³⁰

A mother can call the boy and slowly she can change that boy to be a good person.³¹

A range of peace and conflict scholars have argued that the assumption of women’s essentially caring nature as the basis of their peacefulness – most starkly exemplified in the symbolism of motherhood – curtails gender equality by reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and limiting their political agency (Brewer 2010; Charlesworth, 2008). Others have claimed that one way in which women in violence-affected areas exercise peacebuilding agency is through consciously adopting typical gender constructions as part of their effective and empowering ‘weapons and ‘knowledges’ (Mueller-Hirth, 2018: 172), and, specifically in relation to mothering, that its distinctive ways of thinking and social practices provide an alternative to male global politics (Ruddick, 1989).

There are several problems with the symbolism of innate feminine peacefulness documented in this section. Firstly, it disregards differences between women, such as their different positioning in their communities, age, marital status, and how their ethnic and political identities shape their experiences and negotiation of political instability. Secondly, it neglects that women’s traditional gender roles might contribute to ethnic conflict, for example when talking about past violence to children or when they use ethnic stereotypes (Lynch, 2018). There is also evidence from the 2007 elections that women in Kibera actively participated in the conflict, whether as ‘spies’ that identified ‘enemy homes’ or by killing (Kihato, 2015). As noted earlier, the women we spoke to as part of our study largely did not openly characterise themselves as participating or being complicit in violent behaviour. There was only very occasional use of derogative language or ethnic stereotypes in the interviews and focus groups. Where negative sentiments of ‘the other’ featured, they were typically framed within narratives of evolution from hate to healing and forgiveness. However, it is important to contrast these data from interviews with informal conversations the authors have had in the course of other research projects in Nairobi, the Rift Valley and Western Kenya, when interlocutors have sometimes discussed different ethnic groups in stereotypical and negative ways (Mueller-Hirth 2019, Vertigans & Gibson, 2020).

Thirdly, and just as importantly, there is an issue around responsibility for peace that emerges from the symbolism of peacefulness. The arguments made above demonstrate that the women we interviewed felt they had obligations to perform roles in the community in

²⁶ These phrases were used very commonly across interviews in both phases.

²⁷ Interview with Participant 1, 4 March 2018.

²⁸ Interview with Participant 20, 15 February 2018.

²⁹ Interview with Participant 8, 9 March 2018.

³⁰ Interview with Participant 10, 10 March 2018.

³¹ Interview with Participant 7, 8 March 2018.

relation to calming tensions, mediating potential disputes or even preventing violence – to ‘make peace in the area we live.’³² An older woman and community leader explicitly reflected on the notion of responsibility: ‘It’s my responsibility to talk with those men and I always talk to them. Staying together as community, we have to bring peace.’³³ Cheeseman et al. (2014: 11) observe, in relation to the 2013 elections, that a peace discourse became pervasive which managed to reduce the prevalence of violent conflict, but ‘helped to curtail the range of activities that were deemed to be politically legitimate’, such as peaceful protest by ordinary residents or journalistic outputs that were critical of the shortcomings of the elections. This peace discourse legitimised some repressive measures, but, importantly, it also set up all citizens as actively responsible for peace (and conversely, as to be blamed for past violence in 2007/08). Such an individualisation of responsibility, argues Lynch (2018), resonated with dominant ideas such as individual salvation as emphasised by Pentecostal churches. In the context of conflicts that are driven by longstanding, deep-rooted and structural issues, there has been an emphasis on personal responsibility by all Kenyans to maintain peace (Lynch, Cheeseman, & Willis, 2019).

Analysing Kibera women's narratives about the 2017 elections, we conclude that this individualised responsibility for peace is also gendered. If the ‘good citizen’ (Cheeseman et al., 2014) is one that attends civic education events and goes home after casting their vote, rather than protesting (for example at electoral irregularities), then the good female citizen is one who talks to her sons about being peaceful, who initiates inter-ethnic dialogues with other mothers, and whose positionality as mother and carer overrides her other identities. The peacebuilding roles attributed in this way reinforce gendered expectations and dynamics in Kibera. These understandings are additionally problematic given that political tensions and violence are driven by structural socio-economic processes and given the structural constraints on political activity in Kibera and the dominance of state security forces during the elections.

5. Conclusion

This article contributes a qualitative analysis of women's gendered experiences of political instability in an informal settlement to the literature on electoral violence. We particularly examined a diverse range of women's narratives of (in)security, conflict and violence in relation to the contested and drawn-out elections of 2017. Kibera is a multi-ethnic informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. As an opposition stronghold, it was one of the areas most affected by the 2007 post-election violence and was also considered a ‘hotspot’ for electoral violence during the 2017 elections. While this prediction was not fully realized, in large part due to the massive state security presence as well as to diverse community peacebuilding activities, our fieldwork highlights the multiple effects – physical, emotional, economical, psychological, social – the prolonged political stability had on Kibera residents.

While the specific scholarship on election violence has tended to be gender-blind, even the peace and conflict literature often focuses on women's experiences of sexual violence only. However, there are continua of harms across multiple dimensions and between so-called “conflict time” and “peace times”, which are exacerbated for women (and men) in living in contexts of informality. In order to understand such multiple harms, and guided by a gender-relational approach, we employed Connell and Pearse's (2014) theoretical framework of four intertwined dimensions of gender relations. Utilising this framework has demonstrated that political instability shaped the multiple ways in which the structures of patriarchy affect women in Kibera. The election period resulted in women experiencing (and contesting, through peace work) gender power relations, as evidenced by extreme senses of fear,

threats of sexual violence and the fact that there was no “safe place” for them. Production and reproduction were affected by political instability, by decreasing women's income generating abilities and increasing their responsibilities in relation to domestic and emotional labour. The reproduction of stereotypical gender images of men as either violence-prone “idlers” or “protectors” was particularly notable in women's and men's narratives of political instability.

We have argued that the dominant construction of women as peacebuilders has consequences. It glosses over differences between women, disregards how women's traditional gender roles might contribute to increasing ethnic conflict, and, perhaps most importantly, renders women responsible for communal peace. Contributing to arguments in the literature around responsibility for peace in Kenya and elsewhere becoming individualised, we argue that the individualisation of peace is also gendered: a “good” female citizen talks to her sons about being peaceful, initiates inter-ethnic dialogues with other mothers and cares for children and home. At the same time, the feminisation of responsibility and obligation that has been described by Sylvia Chant (2006) then includes responsibility for coping with political instability and conflict, too. The discourse of women as peacebuilders obscures that political tensions and violence are driven by political forces and socio-economic roots but also reinforces unequal gender relations. Our article contributes to the scholarship on both gendered and electoral violence by charting how periods of political instability are experienced and negotiated by women across multiple dimensions of gender relations, from state power to labour, household (re)production and culture and symbolism.

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³² Interview with Participant 5, 7 March 2018.

³³ Interview with Participant 9, 10 March 2018.

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