

Containment from Within.

Women Entrepreneurs' Strategies for Accessing Public Space and Securing Livelihoods in Nairobi during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The restrictions limiting social interaction and use of public space in Nairobi during the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately affected residents in poor urban communities, who are dependent on using streets, alleyways, and communal areas as extensions of their household spaces to secure livelihoods. This research focuses on how this situation has been handled by women entrepreneurs living in these communities, a group that literature suggests are among those most vulnerable. Kenyans are not unfamiliar with severe limitations and control. Restrictive and punitive measures have been regularly meted out by authorities in times of crisis. While we did find evidence of restrictions being highly detrimental to the livelihoods and incomes of the women, women were able to reorganise their income generation and expenditures in attempts to cope with the situation. They were, however, unable to come together to communally address grievances and challenges; they were barred from spaces of public, important platforms that aided group interests for the women pre-COVID-19 and allowed them to take part in placemaking. The women's abilities to cope were largely determined by the neighbourhoods they lived in, showing the need to understand and respond differently to the respective historical, social, and economic realities of these communities.

Keywords: women headed households, covid-19 restrictions, public space, livelihoods, women's organisations

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Introduction

With the onset of COVID-19 in Kenya, Nairobi quickly went into lockdown. Curfews, social distancing, bans on gatherings, and limitations on mobility were meant to stop the spread of the virus. But these limitations on social interaction and access to public space quickly became an inordinate burden on the urban poor. Most urban poor in Kenya work in the informal economy and are dependent on daily social interactions in public spaces in order to maintain their livelihoods (Kinyanjui, 2019). In the poor settlements and neighbourhoods of Nairobi, trade in the informal sector is estimated to make up a significant proportion of the economy (Corburn et al., 2017). To women entrepreneurs especially, this 'home market' in local public spaces is of vital importance (Kinyanjui, 2014). In the informal economy in Sub-Saharan Africa, the largest 'group' is women (Bonnet et al., 2019). Through interviews with women entrepreneurs in Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben, two poor neighbourhoods a few kilometres from the city centre, we found that the restrictions had not only severely affected their incomes, but also that bans on gathering and limited access to public spaces bereaved the women of the ability to organise and claim their place in their communities. The women thus attempted to find workarounds to regain both incomes and standing.

Leaning on a reading of public space as a workplace and democratic space, this research compares women entrepreneurs' responses to COVID-19 restrictions with historical research on women's place in Nairobi, their organisation and use of space, and the history of public control in Kenya. It examines the potentials and limitations of women entrepreneurs' organising during the pandemic and looks at the historical strategies the women employ in attempts to regain societal positions lost during the pandemic.

Uses and framing of public space

Families living in poor urban neighbourhoods in Nairobi have access to limited amenities in the rooms they rent. Their private spheres thus extend into public spaces. In Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben – the two neighbourhoods in this research – many daily chores like cooking, washing, and socialising are carried out outside. In such neighbourhoods, streets, alleyways, setbacks, washing facilities, roadsides, and marketplaces are all important spaces of interaction. Like all public spaces they are of social and political significance, and hold democratic potential (Madanipour, 2020, p. 7). But public space needs to be understood within the specific and prevailing social and cultural order in which they are situated (Brown, 2006, p. 20). In poor neighbourhoods, public spaces are also workplaces, and "a key element in the livelihoods of the urban poor" (Brown, 2006, p. 17), where produce, wares, and services are sold to passers-by. Hence, public spaces in Nairobi are not only spaces of social interaction or leisure. They are also important spaces of economy. This mix of use of public space is overlooked to privilege parks and sports grounds that are driven by western ideas of leisure and socialisation. (Myers, 2020, p. 152). To counter this, Roji (2020) suggests a reframing of public spaces as spaces of publics; shifting focus from physical to social contexts. In Nairobi, this concept would also need to be framed in relation to the historical and structural specificities of settlements. While settlements in Nairobi often are considered to have similar physical conditions and socio-economic makeups, spaces of public mean different things in Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben. Pumwani is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Nairobi, still imbued in Swahili culture, with social networks going back decades. Mukuru is a relatively new settlement, but because of its growth, also one of the largest and densest in Nairobi. A comparative study of Pumwani and Mukuru shows clear differences in socio-economic markers between the neighbourhoods, with Pumwani residents scoring better on e.g. education levels and average incomes, while also having

longer durations of residency (Ese et al., 2021). Based on previous research on the historical diversity of African neighbourhoods in colonial Nairobi (Ese and Ese 2020), we suggest in this study that the specific organisational structures of neighbourhoods greatly influence women's relation to and use of public space. Women in Pumwani have been central in forming networks and relations that make up the socio-economic backbone of their communities. This goes back some 100 years, not only built around the daily interactions and activities of its residents, but also governed by very specific historical institutions and is intrinsically connected to its streets as public spaces (Hake, 1977). In Mukuru, the same forms of socio-economic networks and relations are important, but with a much shorter history, governed by new forms of community organisation. These different forms of organisation can in both instances be seen as ways for the Government to control communities and their spatial developments; control mechanisms that were rendered more visible by COVID-19 containment efforts.

Limiting access to public space in Kenya

Kenyan governments, both colonial and post-colonial, have a history of politically motivated containments, affecting people's access to public spaces. Curfews have mainly been implemented due to political unrest, as was the case after the coup attempt in 1982 (Hornsby, p. 379), and to control the public in Kisumu in the aftermath of the 2007 election (Gettleman, 2007). However, no place in the country has been more affected by state-sanctioned curfews, lockdowns, and policing than northern Kenya (Halakhe and Kochore, 2020). Currently, curfews have been reintroduced in areas attacked by Al Shabab in Lamu, Mandera, Garissa, and Tana (Praxides and Gari, 2020). The legacy of curfews springs out of the colonial control measures that made lives increasingly difficult for Nairobi's citizens towards the end of the colonial era (Ese and Ese, 2020). Recent decades show an increasing use of restrictions, brutality, and abuse, particularly against people working in the informal economy, with police violence escalating after the multiparty state was implemented in 1992. NGOs reports and news coverage document how police round ups, beatings, shootings, forced evictions, harassment, and fees or fines are common (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Restrictive measures, meant to hinder the spread of COVID-19, were ushered in at an early stage in the pandemic in Kenya. Hotels and restaurants were ordered to close their businesses, curfew was in effect from 8pm to 4am and later adjusted from 10pm to 4am, masks and one metre social distancing were required, and social gatherings were initially banned. Public transport buses and matatus (minibuses) were forced to halve their number of passengers. Sources highlight how the upholding of restrictions entailed police brutality. Several deaths and beatings were reported (Namu and Riley, 2020), as was people having to pay bribes to get home from work (Kiruga, 2020). COVID-19 and a fear of authorities turned Nairobi into a "city on edge, as its 4.4 million residents try to avoid getting infected from coronavirus during the day, during the dusk-to-dawn curfew, they try to avoid police brutality." (Kiruga, 2020).

The restrictions on social behaviour from the Government, coupled with the realities of living in poor urban neighbourhoods, led to untenable situations for many. In Gikomba market traders reported that it was impossible to maintain social distancing (Apollo and Njau, 2020), which was also the case elsewhere in densely populated settlements in the eastern parts of the city. While physical contacts decreased by around 60% in informal settlements in the early stages of the pandemic, people in the poorest socio-economic groups had more physical contacts than people in wealthier segments (Qaife et al, 2020). Negative economic effects were reported – especially among the urban poor. In markets,

an import ban crippled informal traders in need of goods, while customers were few (Apollo and Njau, 2020). Statistics from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) suggest that the pandemic hurt women in the informal economy more than men (KNBS, 2020). Such statistics are backed by others who conclude that poor women-led households are more likely to suffer adversely from the socio-economic losses incurred as a result of curbing measures (SPAU, 2020; Pinchoff, 2021).

Women entrepreneurs

For the purpose of this research, it is useful to understand how women use public space for their livelihoods. “Women constitute an important constituency of the urban population and the majority are in the informal economy,” states Kinyanjui: “One cannot speak of the informal economy in Africa without thinking about women. Urban markets in Nairobi, Lagos and Accra are dominated by women” (2014, p. 1). In sub-Saharan Africa, in 2016, over 95% of women workers and 89% of men workers were employed in the informal sector (Bonnet et al., 2019, p. 11). While women comprised 20% of Nairobi’s population in 1948, this was closer to 50% in 2009 (Kinyanjui, 2014, p. 43). Women dominate food vending, but also work in other trades, selling mitumba (second-hand) clothes and shoes, brewing beer, running dukas (kiosks), and hairdressing. Since many women are the only breadwinners in households with several dependents, women traders are less mobile and choose to have their business closer to home to do housework and look after children. The latter is important due to the lack of security in many slum areas (Agevi and Mbatha, 2011, pp. 33-46). Running a small business closer to home can create stronger relations with customers and may entail reduced levels of harassment by local authorities, as compared to vending in town (Mitullah, 2010). Women are also less likely to access jobs, and on average have a lower education (Gulyani et al, 2006, p. 21). But in contrast to male headed households, “female-headed households appear to have devised coping strategies that are helping them offset some of the liabilities associated with poor access to jobs and education” (2006, p. 22). Compared to male-headed households, women-headed households have lower expenditures, they are less likely to be sending remittances, they have a higher proportion of adult females in the household, they are more likely to be operating a household micro-enterprise, and less likely to have family members who are unemployed. Women headed households also have, on average, longer durations of stay in their neighbourhoods, negatively correlated with poverty. They also have a higher percentage of home ownership (pp. 21-21).

To understand why women headed households seem to have devised such coping strategies, we need to look at the history of marginalisation of women in Nairobi. While men were sought by colonial (and post-colonial) employers, women had to actively carve out a place for themselves in urban society. Women have undergone formidable struggles in the search for space and opportunity in Nairobi. Long-term strategizing became important to claiming their place. (Bujra, 1975; White, 1990; Ngesa, 1996; Robertson, 1997).

Historically, women coming to Nairobi played an important part in providing food to the city’s residents. But women who migrated to Nairobi were often defined as sex workers and repatriated to their rural communities (Robertson, 1997). Through colonial laws, police harassment, arrests and bribes, women were prohibited from taking part in urban developments. “Women’s movement in the city was controlled on the grounds of morality and colonial labor policies that preferred men over women” says Kinyanjui (2014, p. 63). In 1935 hawking was totally forbidden in Central Nairobi (Ngesa, 1996, p. 90). The city proper was thus off-limits to women traders who were criminalised as a result. Instead, women increasingly focused on the settlements in which they lived, surrounding the city centre. In

the 1930s and 1940s over 40% of house owners were women in the two legal African settlements of Pangani and Pumwani (Carter, 1934, p. 1129; Bujra, 1975, p. 130). Both trade and sex work were the foundations for this structural change in women's positions (White, 1990). A study from 1972-74 shows how women in Mathare (another large slum area in Nairobi) strategically created alliances and possibilities for themselves within the settlements "without the mediation and control of males". They were "participating in political activity and forming solidarity groups," in addition to trading in smaller quantities and in cheaper goods than their male counterparts – a strategy well suited for residents in the settlements (Nelson, 1978, pp. 386, 393).

Organisational structures in Nairobi's settlements

Social movements and organisations have, since the 1940s, been important to women's position in urban society in Kenya. These organisations were established in response to opposition between men and women's trading interests, rural-urban distinctions, or preconceptions of women's role in society. (Kinyanjui, 2019, pp. 33-34; White, 1990, p. 191; Ese and Ese, 2020, p. 123-124). Local welfare organisations recruited women for social gatherings, while also playing a political role during strikes and demonstrations from the early 1920s to the 1950s (Ese and Ese, 2020). Women in Nairobi also participated in Mau Mau¹ as gun runners, organisers, and freedom fighters (Itote, 1967). After independence, the authorities plied close relations to the wananchi (the public) through a grassroots movement called harambee (pulling together). Kenyatta adopted the concept for nation building purposes, encouraging communities to work together to raise funds for schools, health- or welfare centres (Moga, 1984; K'olale, 1992; Hornsby, 2012, p. 138). Harambee has been closely associated with ideas of mutual assistance, social responsibility, and communal self-reliance (K'olale, 1992, p. 96), and is built around women lead traditions of organising social relations in pre-colonial and colonial times (Moga, 1984; Kinyanjui, 2019). The vyama (plural for chama) of today functions in similar ways. Although built around concepts of economic self-help, the vyama are central to community building in settlements. In addition to vyama structures, other institutions have been important to women. In Pumwani, St. John's Community Centre and the Riyadhha Mosque have built their relationships with the area's women over decades. Together with the Chief's Camp², they control much of the community today (Ese and Ese, 2020). As Pumwani was established by Muslims, the Mosque and Muslim organisations have been cornerstones in the community, be it socially, religiously, or economically. St. John's established itself in Pumwani in the 1950s and became a significant institution for the growing Christian population in Pumwani. St John's has developed economic and educational support systems for residents, focusing particularly on girls and women. The Chief's Camp has amongst others been integral to the spatial development of Pumwani, in essence governing the use of streetscapes, and providing allowances for physical extensions to landlords and licences to traders (Ese, 2014). Home to around 25,000 residents³, Pumwani is one of Nairobi's oldest and poorest neighbourhoods. Established as the first official African settlement in 1922, northeast of the city centre, its mud and wattle housing have formal roots. It is surrounded by several unplanned settlements, but also some of the first planned African middle-class

¹ A war over land rights waged by Kikuyu, Meru, and Embu fighters against British authorities (1952-1960).

² The lowest level of public administration in the Kenyan system.

³ Population numbers in Nairobi are contentious. We have used the Kenya 2019 Census + 30%, derived from the average between two in-depth Kibera population counts (Desgroppes and Taupin, 2011; Marras et al, 2008). Using different methods, one concluded that the population in Kibera was 20% higher than the Kenya 2009 Census, the other 40%.

neighbourhoods. Adjacent to Pumwani is Gikomba (1972), the biggest market in the city. Pumwani has several permanent shops with a variety of commercial activities along the streets. The houses are privately owned, half of which are absentee landlords, with most residents renting rooms. Pumwani's history is part of its residents' collective memory where women have played a central role in the development of the community as landlords, sex workers, and traders. Bujra (1973) and White (1991) show how women were not repressed in such roles, but held positions of influence, passing down property ownership to daughters and other women up until today. Women's connection to power and their use of public space is thus more established in Pumwani than in newer settlements such as Mukuru kwa Reuben.

Mukuru kwa Reuben is a part of the Mukuru area. Mukuru as a whole has around 185,000 residents⁴, and is one of the largest and fastest growing areas in Nairobi, primarily made up of informally built structures. Established in the post-independence era, it is also much newer than Pumwani. In the 1980s, the government allocated some of the land in Mukuru to private owners for light industry, but as it remained largely undeveloped, illegally built housing was erected. The area is bisected by the Railways, Ngong River, several major roads, and surrounded by industries. This makes access to services difficult. A large number of NGOs and faith-based institutions have invested in schools, clinics, and community centres, but housing is temporary and of very poor quality. As in most slums, electricity, clean water and toilet facilities are scarce. The area lacks green spaces, playgrounds, and spaces for economic activities such as markets. Most of the commercial activity in Mukuru (worth Ksh 7 billion) takes place along the area's roads and lanes (Corburn et al., 2017; Makau et al., 2020). In 2017 Mukuru was declared a Special Planning Area (SPA), allowing for upgrading strategies. The SPA is one of the largest informal settlement upgrading processes in the city. It is a participatory process involving Nairobi County Government and over 40 organisations with representation from Mukuru residents, such as the advocacy movement Muungano wa Wanavijiji (1996) supported by larger international NGOs (Marano, 2022). Through the SPA, the Government has built up and tested alternative ways of running the Mukuru neighbourhoods through government channels and grassroot organisations.

But all developments in Mukuru are not designed to provide for its residents. At the hands of private and government interests, large-scale infrastructure projects aimed at serving the city and its industry threatens Mukuru's housing and residents. Despite residents' focus on protesting these development projects, it has resulted in forced evictions and demolitions. With its long-cemented structures of leases, temporary housing, and cultural hegemony, Pumwani does not face the same spectre of transitions and modernisation.

Methods and data

This research utilises an explorative approach that relies on both qualitative primary data and secondary data pertaining to women and containment in poor urban neighbourhoods. Our data stems from in-depth interviews with single mother traders in Nairobi in November and December 2020. Candidates for interviews were selected with the purpose of gaining information-rich (Patton, 2002) data related to previous research described above, while also fitting our own research questions pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to know how COVID-19 restrictions were affecting women living in poor neighbourhoods, who were dependent on self-generated (informal) income activities (or were employed by others in the same situation), and were sole breadwinners in households

⁴ Ibid.

with several dependents. The candidates were chosen because they share traits and life situations that render them among those thought of as society's "most vulnerable" in line with statistical research with opposing conclusions by Gulyani et al (2006), SPAU (2020), and Pinchoff (2021). The candidates also fit descriptions of low-income women entrepreneurs in Nairobi-specific research by e.g. Kinyanjui (2014, 2019) and Mitullah (2010) who used public space close to home for income generating activities (Brown, 2006). As our questions related to feelings regarding government containment strategies and effects on livelihoods, qualitative, in-depth interviews were considered a sound approach to collecting data. A total of 12 participants were interviewed. As Nairobi's poor neighbourhoods are varied, we were also interested in whether the neighbourhoods the women lived in made any difference, e.g. housing conditions, spatial layouts, or social structures. We therefore compared the responses of six women living in Mukuru with six women living in Pumwani. We attempted to represent a cross section of age groups. Five of the women were in their 20s, three in their 30s, two in their 40s, and two in their 60s. The women interviewed worked in a variety of trades, all within the informal sector, either as self-employed, employed by others, or as self-employed with employees. They worked with the sale of food, hairdressing, second hand clothing, construction materials, and as artists. One lived elsewhere but worked in Pumwani. Most interviewees from Pumwani operated from fixed locations (e.g. Gikomba Market, stalls in neighbourhood, or from home), while most interviewees in Mukuru were street vendors in the neighbourhoods where they lived. Participants living in Mukuru were contacted by one author, while participants from Pumwani were contacted by another. Both authors live in Nairobi and are fluent in Swahili. The authors utilized a common set of guiding questions for the interviews. Most of the interviews were carried out in Swahili, while some were a mix of Swahili and English. All the interview responses were transcribed into English. We also carried out spatial observations, noting the state of public spaces where the interviewees were conducting business. Out of ethical considerations, the interviewees were first briefed on the purpose of the study and their consent to participate obtained before conducting the interview. Their real identities were anonymised and pseudonyms assigned to them for reference purposes. The verbatim raw interview responses were not uploaded onto any shareable database for data security reasons. With the ongoing pandemic, the interviews were conducted in strict adherence with health guidelines including to keep social distance, wear masks and use hand sanitisation.

The data is presented and analysed in light of the earlier raised questions and the established theoretical framework. The data is collated to establish the coping trends in response to the Pandemic containment and organised in different themes for both presentation and analysis including: COVID-19 and work, assistance, ability to adapt, ability to participate locally, feelings about restrictions and authorities. A comparative analysis is also undertaken for Pumwani and Mukuru in order to establish the correlation between coping mechanisms and the social, physical and governance contexts.

Results

Table I provides an overview of basic comparable data. Interviewees coded "P" are from Pumwani while interviewees coded "M" are from Mukuru. In addition to highlighting their education, family, and work status, the table also briefly lists the type of assistance they receive, and their ability to organise. These issues are covered in depth in the results and analysis sections, where interviewee numbers are also continually referenced.

Table I. Overview of basic comparable data.

No	Age	Education	Relationship status	Depend-ents	Work status	Type of work	Work location	Assisted by	Ability to organise
P1	28	College	Single mother	2	Self employed	Second hand timber	Stall in market	Family, other traders, community	None currently
P2	35	Secondary	Single provider (spouse in rural)	3	Self employed	Hair salon/ barber shop	Shop	Savings group, renegotiated tax payment	Belongs to several women's groups
P3	60	Secondary	Married	3+1	Self employed	Makes food	From house	Self-help group, family, Mosque	Involved St. John's programs
P4	32	Secondary	Single mother	3	Self employed	Serves food	Kibanda in market	Savings group, Chief	Involved in community issues and protests
P5	64	College	Single mother	4+2	Self employed	Makes food	From house	Self-help group, family, St. John's	Belongs to self-help and savings groups. Member Nyumba Kumi
P6	46	Secondary	Single mother	6	Employer	Fishmonger	Stall in market	SACCO	Member Kenya Union Workers, involved in protests
M7	28	Secondary	Married	1	Employer	Hair salon	Shop	Other traders, NGO	Participates in meetings about settlement development
M8	25	Secondary	Single mother	1	Self employed	Mitumba clothing	Hawks in street	Other traders, NGO	Chama, protests against demolition
M9	27	Secondary	Single mother	1	Employee	Graphics on matatus	-	Brother	None
M10	26	Secondary	Single mother	3	Self employed	Serves food (porridge)	Hawks in street	Negotiated rent	Protests
M11	43	Secondary	Single mother	1+2	Self employed	Sells tomatoes	Stall (hawks)	Chama	Neighbours

No	Age	Education	Relationship status	Depend-ents	Work status	Type of work	Work location	Assisted by	Ability to organise
P1	28	College	Single mother	2	Self employed	Second hand timber	Stall in market	Family, other traders, community	None currently
						and onions	during pandemic)		
M12	32	Secondary	Single mother	2	Self employed	Mitumba clothing	Hawks in street	None	Belongs to grassroots org for road upgrading

COVID-19 and work

All the women had been adversely affected by COVID-19 and restrictions. Several of the interviewees experienced a 50 per cent reduction of income (P1, P4, P5, P6, M7, M10, M12). Others had their incomes cut by two-thirds or had incomes that were “very low” (P2, P3, M8, M11). One had been laid off because of closures (M9). The low incomes were directly related to restrictions: there were limitations on using public spaces, meaning that the women could not operate the way they did prior to the pandemic. There were restrictions on the way they operated their stalls as well as restrictions on business hours. There were disruptions in provision of goods, and there were fewer people using public spaces, and therefore fewer potential clients. Some of the women believed their business was low because their line of work, e.g. hairdressing, or sale of clothes were not considered essential by customers during the crisis (P2, M7, M8, M12).

The added difficulties of the pandemic resulted in varied views on future prospects among the women. Some were weary and had given up their plans. “Everyone is fighting for survival,” said one interviewee (M10). With increased competition she had “lost hope in advancing the business.” Some of the interviewees mentioned that they knew people who had left the city for rural areas (M10, M11). Others were more entrenched, stating that they would persevere: “The business started going down. But I don’t stop,” said one who sold food for a living, taking care of three children and an ailing husband (P3). Even though she lost most of her income, she was hopeful she would get through: “I solve the challenges on my own,” she said, pointing out that “right now, everyone has their own issues”.

Several of the women pointed out that they had taken precautionary measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19, such as providing hand sanitising, demanding mask wearing, or limiting the number of clients (P4, P6, M7, M10, M12). One interviewee (M12), who dealt in *mitumba* clothing, provided information that clothes did not transmit COVID-19. Another, a fishmonger in Gikomba market (P6), kept water and soap outside her stall. Clients were not allowed to come close without a face mask. “For us who deal with food we have to be very careful,” she said.

Assistance and ability to adapt

As a result of restrictions, a few of the women had diversified their business (P1, P4, M9). “I added selling fruit” said one interviewee (P1). She sold second hand timber for construction, but both supply and demand were cut due to restrictions. “If I depend on the timber business then I will have to pack my things and go back to the village,” she

concluded. Others changed tactics of doing business, e.g. by walking longer routes to sell produce, laying off employees, or extending hours, sleeping nights in the workplace, and changing production times (e.g. food preparation) to better fit within the limits of curfew. Some interviewees had to raise prices to compensate for increased expenses on delivery of goods (M8, M12), while others decided to absorb the increase by lowering profit margins (P5, P6). Others again provide credit or instalment payments, running the risk of customers defaulting (P5, P6, M10, M11).

Several of the women also took measures to renegotiate their tax payments with local authorities, postponed housing rents, froze outstanding debts, or took up new loans with a lower interest from their *chama* (P4, P6, M7, M10, M12). For some this proved a reprieve. Some were also supported by relatives or grown children (P1, P3, P5, M9), and yet others (P1, P4, P5, M7, M8, M10) received support from authorities, NGOs, or faith-based institutions (St. John's or Riyadhha Mosque in Pumwani). Others were not as fortunate. One interviewee downscaled her *mitumba* clothing business once the pandemic hit, but with mounting expenses she was afraid she no longer could support her two children (M12). She developed ulcers and was diagnosed with high blood pressure as a result of the strain. Another interviewee was laid off, kicked out of her rented room, and was unable to secure enough food for herself and her child (M9).

Ability to participate locally

While some mentioned that neighbours were helpful in times of crisis, others listed their fellow traders as a group on which they depended (P1, P6, M8). Most mentioned that they were involved in *vyama* or SACCOS⁵, but that convening and planning has been seriously hampered by restrictions (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, M7, M8, M11, M12). Digital workarounds were insufficient. "In church, there is Skype and WhatsApp that we use to meet online," explained one interviewee (M9): "but for the *chama* we have to meet because the available technology options are not adequate." The lack of contact points was a problem beyond the *chama*, she indicated: "I don't feel like I have all the information right now. Before the onset of COVID-19, I was up to date with what was going on. I cannot afford to go online and access information updates." Many of the interviewees were actively involved in community work before the pandemic, or participated in Chief's *Barazas* (public meetings) in order to secure water provision, standing up against police brutality, petitioning for better garbage collection, or improving schooling opportunities for children. A few of the women (P3, P5) belong to faith-based institutions doing outreach work in Pumwani, or were committee members in *Nyamba Kumi*⁶, unions (P5), or *Kazi Mtaani*⁷ (P6). Most mentioned being cut off from such activities during the pandemic (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, M7, M8, M10, M12). "I have previously attended community meetings to talk about security and children's rights, but this was before Corona," said one interviewee (P4). "Most women have been empowered," said another (P2): "We participate in many activities in the community. (...) But now, because of Corona there are no activities." This was echoed by yet another woman (P3): "I have been so much involved [in community issues], but when Corona came it stopped." It was not just restrictions on meetings that kept the women from organising. Fear of reprisals also weighed heavily. "I would say there is a general fear

⁵ Savings and Credit Cooperatives.

⁶ A model of community policing. Neighbourhoods are organised in groups of 10 households. The initiative is designed for citizens to know their neighbours, their activities, and report anything suspicious, especially crime and terrorism.

⁷ A work program initiated by the government during the pandemic.

to organise and participate in protest because of the likely confrontation with the police,” said an interviewee living in Mukuru (M12).

Many of the women had a history of participating in public demonstrations (P4, P5, P6, M8), rallying against what they considered to be unjust treatment of their communities. Two (M9, M10) had participated in protests regarding unjust treatment during the pandemic, but felt, similarly to others (M8, M11), that their protests did not matter much: “Programs are usually planned from outside. When community grievances are voiced, they aren’t sufficiently addressed,” said one woman (M11). Another (M10) felt the leadership in the community was corrupt and was critical of the handling of assistance. Still, her daily troubles concerned her more: Clients defaulting on credit, aggressive drunks, landlords demanding rent, competition among vendors, and fewer customers.

Feelings about restrictions

While the restrictions imposed were clearly detrimental to the women’s livelihoods, most of them felt that restrictions were necessary (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, M7, M8, M10, M12). “If people are not serious [about restrictions] Corona may not go away. It is important to follow guidelines,” concluded one (P5). Even though most agreed to restrictions being necessary, compliance sometimes seemed to be out of fear. “I follow restrictions. I don’t have a choice,” said an interviewee who travelled to work and claimed she risked being beaten by police if she was not home before curfew (P2): “It’s running battles,” she complained, indicating that she may be critical of police actions. Another woman (P1) concurred: “The police help in curbing crime but use excessive force. They kill small boys”. Others had different opinions: “Police are more friendly now and don’t arrest people aimlessly. But they will beat them up for not complying with restrictions,” said a woman in Pumwani (P1). “There is no harassment by police without cause,” comments an interviewee (M7), indicative of a shared sentiment among several women: *Others* living in the settlements were the ones who did not follow guidelines. An interviewee (P6) with a stall in Pumwani said that: “Government should be strict with restrictions and not compromise. They should put harsh penalties for those who get caught.” She maintained that she complied with government guidelines and restrictions and was afraid of losing her business licence if people got infected at her stall.

Others claimed that the police were not present in the communities. “I haven’t seen anyone coming to enforce,” said one woman from Mukuru (M8). “People have been left to take responsibility.” Indeed, many of the women we interviewed were taking responsibility, either through being present in the neighbourhood watching their own and others’ children, or through formal positions.

Feelings about authorities

Despite finding restrictions necessary and being positive to enforcement, the women’s views varied considerably regarding the authorities who implemented restrictions, and the local authorities overseeing developments in the communities. Several of the women, most in Mukuru, saw connections between their precarious situation, their limited possibilities to do something about it, and the actions of people in power (P2, P6, M8, M9, M11, M12). The women considered these people to be directly contributing to their adverse situation. Other women, most in Pumwani, were also in a precarious situation with limited recovery options (P1, P3, P4, P5, M7, M10). But while they agreed that authorities sometimes were corrupt, they were much more positive to, and supportive of, authorities. Some said they had little choice though, living at the mercy of those in power. Because one of the entrepreneurs (P1) did not have a proper licence to operate her business, she needed to

bribe County government representatives each week. “To avoid getting our business ruined we just comply,” she said. Another woman agreed (P4): “For us we have to follow what the government says”. Several others implied that their businesses were non-licensed.

One interviewee felt that assistance in Mukuru has been fraught with favouritism (M8). Others (P2, P5, M11) also suggested that bribes or networks could be important to getting handouts, getting selected for work programs, or getting away with not complying with restrictions.

Some felt that the authorities did not care about the added challenges COVID-19 brought to poor neighbourhoods. “The [County government] doesn't want to know if there is Corona or not. When they come you have to pay taxes,” said one interviewee (P2). While some were angry about this, others seemed to have resigned: “If it's something that doesn't affect me directly, then I don't bother. I just let the Government be Government,”

lamented one woman (M9), who felt the restrictions were illogical and only hurt the poor. Another concurred (M11): “Students lost a year, and people [living here] can't congregate. But politicians hold rallies,” she points out. The same is echoed by yet another woman (P6), who felt there was a disconnect between restrictions on people and business in the settlements and politicians who held rallies.

Others felt that the Chief's representatives were on their side. One interviewee (P3) claimed that “the Chief and his administration are always there when you need them.” During the pandemic, she said, the Chief's office donated food: “[They] went door to door and were able to identify the needy.” Still, with different levels of government in the Kenyan system, those that were positive to the Chief's representatives could be critical of County government, and vice versa. “I live well with (...) government representatives,” said a woman in Mukuru (M10), while being critical of local handling of projects and assistance. A woman from Pumwani (P3) held an opposing view: “The Chief is on our side. They may be corrupt, but at least they follow up on issues. But for the [County government], we can blame them.”

Analysis

The interviewees were a heterogeneous group. They represent a cross section of the socio-economic aspirations – and limitations – of entrepreneurial women living in poor settlements in Nairobi. All the women we interviewed had spent considerable time and resources trying to remodel their business to adapt to the crisis. They all provided clear analyses of their situations, and the state of the community during the pandemic. While the virus was something new, the responses of the women indicated that adaptive thinking was something they were all accustomed to. Research by White (1990), Ngesa (1996), Robertson (1997), Mitullah (2010), and Kinyanjui (2014) shows the necessity of adaptive strategies among women and women headed households who have often operated on the margins of society. Ngesa, Mitullah, and Kinyanjui also point out that women are *locally* based, and wholly dependent on public spaces in or near their communities to maintain livelihoods. While media focus has been on curbing measures affecting trade in the city centre and the larger markets (e.g. Namu and Riley, 2020; Kiruga, 2020; Apollo and Njau, 2020), our interviews suggest that in order to better cater for the needs of women headed households in poor communities, focus needs to shift towards the use of and access to *their* local public spaces, taking into account the heterogeneity of both women and places. Our research highlights the convergence between livelihoods and public space as noted by e.g. Brown (2006) and Roji (2020). Restrictions on the use of, and access to public spaces hindered the women we interviewed from carrying out their trade, while limiting the

number of customers. This interaction is central to the dynamics and development of public spaces in communities like Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben. By limiting these encounters, and with the women being barred from using public spaces for congregating and organising, we are witnessing a deterioration of what Madanipour (2020) refers to as the social and political importance of public space, and its democratic potential. Self-help groups like *vyama* or SACCOs, as well as trade organisation meetings, were important community platforms for the women, allowing them to discuss common grievances and plan futures. The use of public spaces for *barazas* or protests were equally important to some of the women to take part in place making. Barring people from partaking in physical platforms may have been necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19, but the effects were socio-economically alarming, decentring the women's access to what Roji (2020) refers to as spaces of public. The restrictions effectively turned the women we interviewed in Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben away from the daily production of space, important to the development of such neighbourhoods. They were relegated from being actors in their communities to becoming inward looking, focusing on their immediate challenges, hygiene measures, household spaces and shared courtyards.

While all the women saw the connections between restrictions and their own precarious situation, the majority were in favour of curbing measures. As breadwinners in households with children, they were caught in an impossible balancing act between maintaining an income and protecting themselves and their children. Most of the women also scolded others for not following regulations. In part, this might be explained by an understandable fear of the virus itself. But it also points to something deeper. Country government authorities, the Chief's camp, landlords, NGOs, faith-based institutions, and the *nyumba kumi* initiative are all actively controlling the settlements where the women live. Women were either members of such entities, or dependent on their support or favour. Bound in a non-reciprocal relationship with authorities, some felt forced to keep on their good terms, while others saw themselves as part of a system of control, consisting of a range of actors, citing moral obligations as reasons for upholding restrictive measures. Thus, the women themselves became active participants in a control system as watchful neighbours and good citizens. Being poor and female in Nairobi leaves the women with few arenas of power. Showcasing moral superiority during the pandemic allowed them to partially bypass restrictive traditions, allowing for a certain degree of assertion and position in their local communities. Such approaches among women in Nairobi are well-documented by Robertson (1997) and White (1990). This counter common perceptions of communities like Pumwani and Mukuru developing in an uncontrolled fashion, and corroborates findings by e.g. Nelson (1973), Ese (2014), and Mukeku (2014) indicating that so-called informal settlements in Nairobi are thoroughly regulated by multiple control structures.

Keeping on good terms with authorities, playing to win the favour of those in power, or simply letting things slide so as not to be seen as a part of the problem, are documented historical long-term strategies to get through difficulties and crises, especially in women headed households in Nairobi (White, 1990; Bujra, 1975; Robertson, 1997). Many of the interviewees operated their trade without the proper licences. They were at the mercy of authorities, paying bribes to get by. Research by Mitullah (2003) indicates that women traders often find licences too expensive, the process too difficult, or are afraid of harassment in the process. Those who voiced criticisms of authorities were careful not to chide the system itself, but rather vented their frustration with individuals in middle management directly responsible for the fate of their business, e.g. the representative collecting bribes, signing off on licences, etc. These women had invested considerably in

physical structures (most of them in Pumwani) like stalls or salons, and in equipment, and were afraid of losing their investments.

Although women-headed households in these communities are often reduced to one category in analysis that highlights vulnerabilities (KNBS, 2020; SPAU, 2020; Pinchoff, 2021), this research shows how such households cope very differently with crises. While all interviewees experienced increased difficulties as a result of the pandemic and lockdown measures, some had, in line with Gulyani et al's (2006) findings, devised coping strategies and demonstrated a flexibility that enabled them to absorb setbacks better than others. Others were less able.

To this, geographic location mattered. There were persistent and large differences between how the women in Pumwani and Mukuru coped. These two communities have different histories and organisation with implications for women's ability to organise, use public space, and connect to power. This is in line with Bergby et al's (2021) comparative research in Pumwani and Mukuru. The women in Pumwani were better connected, had larger networks, and more fallback options than those in Mukuru. They worked in more permanent forms (fixed location stalls instead of street vending), were better equipped to diversify their business, and had on average invested more in their livelihoods. While there has been a tendency of treating poor neighbourhoods in Nairobi as homogeneous, our results show that they are varied. Sources that empirically analyse such neighbourhoods (e.g. Bujra, 1973; Nelson, 1976; Smith, 2019) come to the same conclusion.

Our interviews show an important distinction between *external* and *internal* economic support in the two communities. In Mukuru the women were more dependent on economic aid from the outside. In Pumwani the women garnered economic support through self-organised savings groups. The tenacity of these group structures can be attributed to Pumwani's community identity, and women's historical role in society. The legacy of Kenyatta and Harambee still persists. As does the memory of the political activism of women's groups in the 1960s and 1970s. The historically prominent Mosque, St. John's, and Chief structures were in charge of programs and initiatives that the women we interviewed partook in or depended on. It is therefore not surprising that the Pumwani interviewees to a large degree accepted these institutions and their governing of crisis. Many Pumwani interviewees see themselves and their fellow women entrepreneurs as pillars in the community, and also as patriots; an integral part of Kenya's history of independence

In Mukuru the women lacked internal, self-generated savings structures and distrusted the prominent power structures in the area. They were sceptical of SPA intervention which they believed did not work for them. And they were more vocal on criticism of the government. This can be attributed to the pressures exerted on Mukuru through development projects. While Pumwani has retained a rare position as an island of "non-development" in Nairobi, Mukuru has seen developments happen through the SPA that greatly impacts social, cultural, and economic ways of life for residents. Women in Pumwani partook in protests related to local issues within the community, while in Mukuru the struggle for public space was more intense. It is the uncertainty of the consequences of these developments, including demolition and related changes, that the women we interviewed in Mukuru were facing. They were sceptical to these projects and claimed that participatory processes were check-box exercises, the plans predetermined by those in power.

Conclusion

Women entrepreneurs in poor settlements in Nairobi have been hit hard by the compounded crisis of COVID-19 and restrictive measures. They have been partially barred from using public spaces in their local communities; spaces that are vital to their livelihoods but also important to their democratic rights to develop their own communities as arenas of empowerment and placemaking. With this as a backdrop our research points to two things. One is that the women we interviewed were able to adapt to crisis, but that there were tangible differences between the two neighbourhoods, where the women living in Pumwani were better equipped at getting through the crisis than the women living in Mukuru kwa Reuben. The second finding is that the women were generally positive to government restrictions. But again, there were differences between Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben interviewees as to their trust of, and attitudes towards, government. The women in Mukuru kwa Reuben were more openly critical of government and those in power.

The historical development of Pumwani has laid the grounds for more conservational institutional structures and stronger community identity that not only provided the women with social security, but also economic security through savings groups that the interviewees in Mukuru kwa Reuben were lacking. While the savings groups and other women-initiated support networks in Pumwani were geared towards personal livelihoods or specific group interests, the groups the women in Mukuru kwa Reuben took part in were more SPA oriented. This provides for two very different ways of – and motivations for – engaging with public space in the two neighbourhoods.

Access to public space was curtailed in both areas as a response to the pandemic. In an area like Pumwani, with its conservative and conservational power structures, women with their community spirit and social networks seems to get through the crisis with less repercussions than in an area like Mukuru kwa Reuben with its newer history, more experimental power structures, culture for protest, and more immediate consequences from infrastructure developments.

However, the conservative power structures of Pumwani may also undermine the women, disallowing them from exploring opportunities and futures outside of the mould that they found themselves bound to. In Mukuru, The SPA is an experiment in societal development of importance to Kenyan society. It may provide important lessons in future governance and management of public space. But it seems less geared towards helping the women through times of crisis. Sentiments among interviewees in Mukuru kwa Reuben indicate that it needs to be more considerate and contextualised. The authorities and grassroots organisations may yet have an opportunity to instil real community engagement and progressive change if tenable connections are made between women's livelihoods, social networks, and public space.

We have pointed to several important distinguishing features between Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben that influence the women's situations, the handling of crisis, and the development and use of public space. These differences are not only important to note in relation to this crisis and the women in question. The research also provides empirical support to discourse promoting the heterogeneity of urban poverty and urban poor neighbourhoods. While it may be useful to think of socio-economic and demographic generalisations such as "urban poor women" in statistical studies at a regional scale, this research ultimately shows that when discussing locational issues such as access to and use of public space by women, it is imperative that we be contextual and specific. The differences between places like Pumwani and Mukuru kwa Reuben, and the implications of these differences mean that the urban poor, their livelihoods, and their neighbourhoods

need to be understood and sought developed with attentiveness to their distinctive histories, cultures, structures, spatial qualities, and demographics – even if they are within the same city.

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