



**Kenyan Male Identity  
in the 21st Century:  
The Challenge  
Socio-economic Change  
Poses Against the  
Successful Performance  
of Masculinity**

*SEXTANT-Sexualities, Masculinities  
& Decolonialities*  
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**Abstract**

Socio-economic change in Kenya has had a profound effect on gender relations, and of particular focus in this article, the performance of successful masculinities. High rates of unemployment and low income have impacted the ability of the average Kenyan man to fulfil their understood social role as the provider and breadwinner of the family unit, which is paramount in this social arena. This has had deep effects on the social value and identity of men. In order to strengthen this identity, we can see a restructuring of masculinity and the emergence of contradictory masculinities. Wherein 'un-masculine' or taboo activities, namely the participation in homosexual sex, is not only legitimised but also recontextualised as proof of manhood. Meanwhile, the change in traditional gender roles in the positioning of women as the new head of the household has led to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity among men. Multi-partner sexual relationships, extra-marital affairs and physically and sexually aggressive behaviour are adopted to reassert dominance over women and re-position themselves internally as the homogenous man.

**Key words**

Masculinities; Fatherhood; Poverty; Insecurity; Socio-economic change

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## **Introduction**

Though consisting of various groups and communities which boast differing traditions and iterations of gendered social roles, across Kenya, providing financially for one's children and wife is key to performing masculinity successfully. However, rapid and unregulated socio-economic changes across the nation have resulted in the dynastic shift of the breadwinner role, as women now head one third of all Kenyan households. Whereas once their roles were clear, defined and achievable, the average man's ability to provide has been impeded by poverty and low employment. This essay aims to examine men's social role, in relation to fatherhood and marriage, in response to this shift in answering three questions; Firstly, what does Kenyan fatherhood look like both traditionally and contemporarily? Secondly, how has this new inability to successfully perform masculinity impacted the current Kenyan male identity? Finally, how does the Kenyan man re-affirm their masculinity in response to this change?

## **Successful Masculinity**

In discussing Kenyan fatherhood, one must look at both the pre-colonial (traditional) and post-colonial (western influence) contexts. It is important to note that prior to western influence Kenya was not a culturally homogeneous nation, but rather contained various groups and societies which governed themselves. As a result, the norms of fatherhood can differ from group to group. Thus, when discussing Kenyan fatherhood, this paper presents it as a general concept incorporating various norms. A main fixture across all groups was the importance of childbearing. Adults without children within these groups would be stigmatised and some even prohibited from positions of power – like the men among the Tiriki (Western Kenya) who cannot become an elder (a position of seniority) if childless. Traditionally the Kenyan father is at the top of the family hierarchy – “He is a patriarch, the symbol and custodian of the ultimate power and responsibility in the family and community at large” (Lasser, et al., 2011, p. 50). His mere presence grants his family legitimacy and respect amongst their community. The traditional Kenyan father would have spent little time with their children during their early years – until the child could speak and walk, the mother would remain their sole caregiver. After these developmental milestones have been met the father would then interact with the child to varying degrees depending on gender. If the child was a son, the father would teach them their craft (a practice seen among the Gikuyu) and educate them on successful masculinity with the influence of other male elders. In modern Kenya, the mass migration of men from rural villages to urban centres has left women as the main workforce and sole caregivers to their children. This mass exodus of men in rural Kenya has led to contemporary fatherhood

being linked to absenteeism and low levels of interaction, as fathers provide little other than financial support (Lasser, et al., 2011, p. 52). Yet, the ability to support your wife and children is key to the successful performance of masculinity in Kenya. This provider ideology applies to all men, persisting even in Viwandani (Viwa) and Korogocho (Koch), two informal settlements located in the nation's capital of Nairobi – areas that are defined by high male unemployment and poverty, which obviously impede a man's ability to provide. Interestingly, poverty can in fact strengthen this sentiment, "Here you cannot claim to be a man, when you cannot put food in the table for your family to eat. Real men are those who can bring something home with all the hardship and poverty around" (Izugbara, 2015, p. 128). Here Viwa and Koch men affirm their masculinity by positioning themselves away from rural men, who they view as not having the character necessary to see and endure poverty. In this way, the ability to withstand hardship is understood to act as a filter between boys and men. Though many men in these areas are unable to fulfil this role as 'provider', judgement upon those who are perceived as having 'given up' is common and encouraged. Such men are referred to by the phrase "Huyo mwanaume ame kua mwanamuke", meaning "one who has shown to act like a woman" (Izugbara, 2015, p. 128). One's inability to provide is used to demean, humiliate and subordinate other men to assert dominance, as seen in the case of Sisko, a Koch local. Sisko when interviewed on the subject stated to only buy drinks for men who would in turn accept being addressed as mwanamuke (woman) or mtoto (child) – "...when they beg me for drinks here, they need to know we are not equals, they are just like women and kids ... and by asking me for drinks they have shown they have given up as providers" (Izugbara, 2015, p. 128).

## **Contradictory Masculinities**

Given the lack of job opportunities and high levels of poverty within urban informal settlements like Viwa and Koch, gang membership is an avenue many men consider. Organised robberies and raids in and around these areas can award significant compensation, particularly if you are at the top of the hierarchy. Moash, a leader of a prominent gang in Koch, lives comfortably with his wife and children. But for this comfort Moash had to make himself and his wife sexually available to senior gang members in order to be bestowed this role. Though one would expect that this act of homosexuality would discredit Moash, losing him both respect and respectability, this is not the case here. Rather, Moash uses the experience to affirm his masculinity; "Few men can take it ... but you see what makes you a man is that you are able to do what other man cannot do ... to suffer ... but at the end you benefit because you can live well" (Izugbara, 2015, p. 133). He is, in fact, more of a man because he was willing to "suffer" to order to provide financially for his family. This kind of

transactional or ritualised homosexuality was too witnessed among male sex workers, most of whom had wives or girlfriends, but engaged in homosexual acts for economic benefit. This too was used to affirm their masculinity, as one man interviewed stated that “money makes you a man and you have to be smart to make money. We are doing what other men cannot do, so we are the real men here. Only brave men do this job” (Izugbara, 2015, p. 134). Both stories highlight the presence of contradictory masculinities within Kenyan society. Though, of course, it should be noted that the presence of a female partner in both of these men’s lives safeguarded them from legitimate accusations of homosexuality. It is interesting how these men, both products of an extremely homophobic and strict cultural environment, were able to not only legitimise their actions, but use them to strengthen their own masculinity.

### **The Impact of Insecure Masculinities on Women**

To relinquish one’s role, abandon one’s family or share the breadwinning role with one’s wife is to communicate one’s inability as a man and to compromise one’s masculinity. The changing socio-economic landscape we see in Kenya today has positioned women in a unique place as the new head of the household. This has undoubtedly led to feelings of inadequacy amongst men who can no longer fulfil their social role. Such feelings of failure are then externalised through acts of violence and alcohol consumption – “men drink and are rude to women to forget they cannot provide the family with blankets” (Silberschmidt, 2001, pp. 661-662). Known colloquially as Kenya’s “hidden epidemic”, domestic violence, though having always been present, has been exacerbated by male unemployment. When interviewed by Margrethe Silberschmidt, a group of men from Kisii, a city in the southwest of Kenya, were quick to exclaim their ability to control (beat) their wives and children, as was their right as head of the household – a right they fervently affirmed. Though this role is intricately tied to economic responsibility, when their wives were later interviewed, they admitted only a minority of their husbands provided household necessities. This heavily contradicts the phrase quoted previously, which likened men who could not provide to women. Additionally, this clearly exhibits these men’s fears and insecurities surrounding their place within the family hierarchy. This inability to fulfil social roles has left Kenyan men looking outside the realm of the economic to affirm their place as men, “if you cannot be a successful breadwinner, you can be a successful seducer” (Silberschmidt, 2001, p. 668). Extramarital, often casual, sexual activity is, in this view, of utmost necessity. After all, it is generally accepted that men cannot control their sexual desires nor can be truly monogamous. This behaviour seems to become a tool in which men can acquire self-esteem and reassert their dominance over women, particularly sexually.

## Conclusion

Though many forms of masculinity exist within Kenya, existing literature, as seen above, suggests the prominence and importance of providing as the ideal performance of masculinity in Kenya. However, the ability of men to fulfil this criterion is hugely stunted by poverty and minimal employment opportunities. The subsequent shift of economic power and control from men to women has had very negative effects in regard to men's self-esteem and feelings of adequacy. Contradictory and violent masculinities have sprung out of this void in order to reaffirm the male identity and their social role. Also springing from male insecurity, particularly surrounding female autonomy and sexual power, is the manifestation of extra-marital, often casual, sexual relations. Thus, one can determine that Kenyan masculinity is dominated and, unfortunately, categorised by insecurity and uncertainty.

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