

“I DON’T WANT THEM TO LEAD THIS LIFE:” RAISING CHILDREN IN NAIROBI'S SLUMS

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Abstract

Parenting young children and adolescents offers challenges in any context. Raising children in slum settings, where their children may face heightened risks to health and security compared to non-slum areas, may increase the difficulties mothers experience in keeping their children safe as they grow up. Few studies, however, have examined the specific obstacles encountered by mothers residing in slum settlements with their young children and adolescents. We rely on the results of 70 in-depth interviews with mothers aged 19 to 49 living in Korogocho and Viwandani, two slums in Nairobi, Kenya. In this paper, we use mothers’ own experiences and words to draw out themes related to childrearing in high-risk urban slum neighborhoods, highlighting both positive and negative aspects identified by mothers. In particular, we focus on mothers’ fears about negative peer influences, financial difficulties in providing every-day care for children, poor health, and concerns over safety and security.

Introduction

Parenting young children and adolescents offers challenges in any context. This is especially true for childrearing in developing countries, where children are often at increased risk of morbidity and mortality. Those raising children in slum settlements in rapidly urbanizing cities may encounter even greater difficulties, due to high levels of poverty, lack of infrastructure, and risks to health and security.

Life in informal settlements can increase children's vulnerability in a number of ways. The physical environment of many slums is often hazardous to children's health. Housing structures in slums are frequently made of low-quality materials which are not always durable or suitable for conditions. In addition, slums are often overcrowded with many structures in close proximity (Oxfam 2009; APHRC 2002a). Poor sanitation, a lack of safe drinking water, and no or insufficient toilets also contribute to negative outcomes for children (Ersnt *et al.* 2013; Oxfam 2009; APHRC 2002b). Urban services and infrastructure are often severely lacking in slum settlements; in particular, access to healthcare services and educational opportunities is quite low in many slums in sub-Saharan Africa (Archambault *et al.* 2012; APHRC 2002a).

Child health outcomes are often poor in slum settings, especially given the difficulty in accessing healthcare and harsh environmental factors. Children living in Nairobi's slums have infant and child mortality rates higher than their non-slum urban and rural counterparts, high rates of morbidity, low rates of full immunization compared to Nairobi and Kenya as a whole, and high rates of malnutrition due to food insecurity (Kimani-Murage *et al.* 2014; Kimani-Murage *et al.* 2011; Mutua *et al.* 2011; Magadi 2004; APRHC 2002a). Young adolescents living in slum settlements are at risk of early sexual debut, risky sexual behavior, and unintended pregnancy (Mumah *et al.* 2014; Beguy *et al.* 2013; Kabiru *et al.* 2010; APRHC 2002a). Concerns about violence & insecurity are high among those living in Nairobi's informal settlements, including children (UN-Habitat 2012; World Bank 2006). Increased gang activity among young people living in slums has prompted worries not only about experiencing crime but also about their adolescent and adult children joining such groups and engaging in criminal activity themselves.

While some parents have made the choice to move to and remain in Nairobi's slums, other parents may feel they have few options available to them and may reside in informal settlements largely due to necessity. Although cost of living is typically lower in slum areas compared to non-slum areas, families living in slums may live at risk of evictions, due to a lack of tenure security or due to slum upgrading programs (Oxfam 2009). Meth (2013) notes a lack of stability is a key characteristic of living in informal settlements, which can impact families and mothers' ability to parent their children effectively.

Extensive research has highlighted the outcomes and consequences of growing up in informal settlements, but few studies have looked at the experience of raising children in slums (for exceptions, see Meth (2013) in South Africa and Kejerfors (2007) in Brazil). We know very little about how the particular vulnerabilities presented by slum settings affect how mothers parent their children. Using the words of mothers living in two Nairobi slums, we will explore how mothers negotiate with the challenges and risk they face in raising their children in rapidly-growing slum settings.

Setting

The setting of this study is two slum communities, Korogocho and Viwandani, in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. Korogocho and Viwandani are located on the outskirts of Nairobi, near a heavy industrial area, highly polluted rivers, and Nairobi's dump site. More than 60% of Nairobi's residents are estimated to live in informal settlements like Korogocho and Viwandani or in slum-like conditions (UN-HABITAT 2006). Conditions in Korogocho and Viwandani, like in other slum settlements throughout Africa, are often over-crowded, and residents face a number of problems and risks to their health and security. The majority of residents in both communities were born elsewhere, but a larger

percentage of the population (95%) are in-migrants to Viwandani compared to 75% of the population of Korogocho. There is high in- and out-migration in both communities, with significant rates of migration for women and for young children (Beguy *et al.* 2010).

Data

The data used in this paper are drawn from approximately 70 in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted in the two slum communities over two separate rounds of fieldwork. The first round occurred in July-August of 2011 (forty interviews) and the second round took place in July-August of 2013. Interviews were conducted primarily in Kiswahili, the main language spoken in Nairobi, by three trained fieldworkers with significant experience in the two slum communities. The eighty respondents were randomly drawn from the Nairobi Urban Health and Demographic Surveillance System (NUHDSS), a longitudinal survey run by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). The NUHDSS has collected data on key health and demographic events in the two slums since 2002. Fieldworkers used the sample drawn from the NUHDSS to find and interview twenty respondents in each slum during each round of fieldwork. The results of 70 of these interviews with women aged 19 to 49 are used for this paper.

Interviews primarily concerned topics of women's migration experiences, childrearing, and children's living arrangements. Women were asked for detailed information about each of their living children, including their connections with fathers and other family members, their children's early life, and how they perceive their children's lives in Korogocho and Viwandani. Particular attention was paid to women's children living separately from their mothers, as well as mothers' experience raising their children and adolescents in the slum settlements, focusing both on positive and negative aspects of childrearing.

Interviews were transcribed directly from Kiswahili to English by a native Kiswahili speaker. MaxQDA10 was used to review and code the interviews thematically.

Preliminary Findings

Of the 70 respondents, the majority had at least one of their living children residing with them in the slums. Children ranged in age from newborns to adults, with many of the women having adolescent children living with them. Our respondents discussed many issues related to raising their children in Nairobi's slums; in this abstract, we address two such themes.

Risks of Raising Children in the Slums

One long-term resident, who migrated to Korogocho in order to earn a living and support her children, is unsatisfied with the life her children are living. Having migrated from a rural area in Western Kenya, she believed her children would have access to more opportunities in Nairobi than if she had remained at home, but notes that overall, "it has not improved their standard of living" (45 years old, seven children, Korogocho). Another mother who migrated before her children were born felt similarly, noting that while she was unhappy with how life had turned out for her children and herself, "I had to accept the situation" (48 years old, five children, Korogocho).

A mother of five children, including adult children as well as young adolescents, identified the environment in Korogocho as causing significant problems in the lives of her children. "Nairobi has many challenges. Often, we are idle. Being idle leads one into trouble... I don't see anything good about Nairobi. Even though my children have gone to school, they aren't doing much with their lives now..." (39 years old, five children, Korogocho). Similarly, a mother of five children ranging in age from 4 years to 15 years insisted that life for her children would be much improved if she was living in her rural home, stating "Life at home is good. Life in Nairobi derails children—the environment in Korogocho is not healthy. Life at home is better." (29 years old, five children, Korogocho)

Protecting children from the risks and difficulties faced in the slums was a point made by several of the mothers, who worry that their choice to live in Korogocho and Viwandani left their children vulnerable. The importance of providing discipline and guidance, especially as their children approached young adulthood, was brought up by several mothers, some of whom felt that proper supervision and access to education could help counter the negative aspects of life in the slums:

“It’s a little bit of a risk [to have children in Nairobi]. Bringing up children here is a challenge. I have to bring them up closely and guide them on how to live.” (35 years old, two children, Korogocho)

Negative Peer Influence

Many of the mothers, particularly those with adolescent children, emphasized their fears for their children’s safety and security in the community. The majority of mothers raising teenagers voiced concern over the potential for negative peer influences to derail their children from the lives they hoped for. When asked about whether the environment in the slums was a good one in which to raise children, many mothers firmly stated it was not the best place for young people to live as it resulted in them developing negative characteristics and behaviors. Worries over what several mothers called “misconduct character” were voiced by mothers with children of all ages:

“They [children here] drop out of school and join bad companies... They have bad misconduct characters like one of my boys; he can go two to three days without coming to the house... [My neighbors] have negative attitude towards him, including me. I wish he could be jailed” [sic] (45 years old, seven children, Korogocho).

Concerns over misconduct, violence, and peer pressure had several mothers considering sending their children elsewhere, especially as they enter adolescence. Other research on children’s living arrangements in Nairobi’s slums indicates that a sizeable proportion – about 18% – of mothers send their children to live outside the slums (Cotton & Beguy 2014). In order to keep adolescents out of harm’s way, several mothers wished to send them away:

I: Are you happy to raise your kids here in Korogocho?

R: No, I am wishing to take them away.

I: Why?

R: I don’t want them to have misconduct character.”

(27 years old, four children, Korogocho)

“I wouldn’t want to bring him up here. Right now he is young [two years] but he may face a lot of peer pressure in the future. For now I am fine with him living here.”

(24 years old, one child, Viwandani)

One mother whose oldest child spent the majority of her childhood living with a grandmother in a rural area was eager for her nine year old son to leave Korogocho in order to keep him safe: “I want him to grow up very fast so I can take him home. I don’t want my son to grow up in this environment. They join bad groups and start misconduct behaviors.” (37 years old, two children, Korogocho)

For some mothers, anxiety over their children’s safety was linked to their household’s level of poverty, with women suggesting that their children would fall prey to criminal activity due to their parents’ inability to provide for them. Even mothers of very young children worried for the future:

“If there is work it’s great [to have my children here], but when we don’t have work it isn’t that great. If we don’t have the means to support them, it will be very easy for them to fall into criminal lives. Once they grow up and see what other children have, the likelihood is that they will want the same things. If I can’t provide these things for the children, they may steal just to get them. Or engage in prostitution—this could ruin their lives.” (28 years old, two children, Korogocho)

Mothers of young girls expressed concern over the general state of conditions in the communities, but largely felt their daughters were unlikely to fall victim as they were “disciplined,” “Christians,” or “good girls.” Interestingly, many more mothers of young men were discouraged by the potential for their sons to become involved in gangs or to fall in with a peer group who would encourage their sons to engage in bad behavior:

“Here he has his peers who are not very well behaved, sometimes you hear that he smokes bhang [marijuana], he goes for some informal ad jobs in industrial area, he steals, etc. Such stories are not good to a parent.” (49 years old, four children, Korogocho)

“[It is] not good [here] because sometimes even the police can shoot somebody mistakenly. There is also high crime level in this setting. We usually just prefer to send other young children during late evenings as opposed to sending him because he is more vulnerable to crime or mistaken identity shooting by thugs or police... Due to high insecurity, you cannot be sure about his safety because as a child he may tell that he has gone to play football with his friends and yet maybe he is in a bad company of bhang smoking. Children are very difficult to trust.” (37 years old, four children, Korogocho)

Some mothers of young women were, however, very apprehensive about the possibility of their daughters becoming involved with older boys (either voluntarily or involuntarily), or entering prostitution as a means of keeping up with their peers and gaining extra money:

“To bring up a girl child, here in Korogocho, is usually a challenge. You may see a young boy but older than her, making move to her with intention of becoming her lover, sometimes she may be forced into love affairs. Let me just say that it is not safe here. Other girls may influence others to drop out of school. You’ll find that some girls do not want to continue with education much as their parents have money for fees. Such ladies would only be concerned with their beauty, drop out of school and influence other girls to do the same. Then they end up joining prostitution.” (28 years old, three children, Korogocho)

“[It is] very bad because Korogocho is not a good place to bring up a child. Unlike in rural where there is no bad company and wrong peer influence, Korogocho is very bad. You find that a very young girl is going to town for prostitution. Korogocho is not very good place to bring up a child.” [sic] (49 years old, four children, Korogocho)

I: Is this the right environment for your daughter?

R: No.

I: Why?

R: Girls are very delicate; they can easily be influenced in bad peer groups. They can also be impregnated; they can indulge in drug abuse...

I: Have you cautioned her against all these?

R: Yes, as a mother I have talked to her but you just can't sit back and wait.” (48 years old, seven children, Korogocho)

“[My daughter] too was in that bad group [like my son]. She began smoking cigarettes and going to town for prostitution. People have bad perception and opinion about them [my children]. But [my daughter] later left the group and she is well behaved now. I realized that grouping in slums and non slums cannot match. [My daughter] tried associating with people from the estates but she could not cope with them. She had to pull out and that has helped her reform” (49 years old, four children, Korogocho)

In addition, fears over the safety of their daughters provoked a number of mothers to be particularly firm with teenage girls, enforcing strict curfews, accompanying them on the way to and from school, and refusing to allow young women to join older friends, who may “train her to get lover boys” (48 years old, seven children, Korogocho). Worries about rape and sexual assault, as well as the possibility of their daughters being ‘snatched’ (kidnapped) were prevalent among mothers of adolescent women.

Future Directions

In moving forward with this paper, we intend to expand on the themes we have highlighted in this abstract, as well as addressing other issues brought up by mothers in their interviews, including child health and environmental concerns, food insecurity, the high cost of providing for children in the slum settlements, issues surrounding security and safety for children and young people, violence, and drug abuse. In addition, we will underscore positive aspects of child-raising in Nairobi’s slums as put forward by mothers themselves. Finally, we will explore mothers’ suggestions for how their children’s lives may be improved.

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