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## Making Sense of Marriage: Gender and the Transition to Adulthood in Nairobi, Kenya

**Objective:** *The objective of this study was to examine how young people in Nairobi, Kenya, are making sense of marriage, both in terms of their own lives and its social significance.*

**Background:** *In many sub-Saharan African communities, marriage has been a fundamental marker of the transition to adulthood. However, union formation is changing, particularly in urban areas—partnering is occurring later and nonmarital cohabitation is increasingly common with the pathways to union formation differing by gender. Young people’s perspectives on marriage are valuable for a deeper understanding of these trends.*

**Method:** *A total of 74 in-depth interviews with youth living in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, were qualitatively analyzed with particular attention*

*to personal and normative understandings of marriage along with how they vary by gender.*

**Results:** *Marriage emerged as an important part of most respondents’ life projects, whether or not they considered it key to socially recognized adulthood. Attitudes differed by gender, with young women’s greater ambivalence and aversion toward marriage, particularly early marriage, contrasting with young men’s frustrated desire for marriage amidst economic constraints. Young men’s main worry about marriage was not being able to support a family, whereas young women were often concerned that marrying would thwart their aspirations regarding education and work.*

**Conclusion:** *Marriage continues to be a significant social marker of adulthood despite a shifting demographic reality. Differences in young people’s attitudes are related to gendered concerns around marriage and economic independence.*

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In many communities in sub-Saharan Africa, marriage has been a fundamental step to being recognized as an adult (Cole, 2005; Langevang, 2008; Mains, 2012; Masquelier, 2005; Sommers, 2012). However, union formation is undergoing rapid change across the continent, particularly in urban areas. Increasingly, couples are partnering later and choosing to cohabit without undergoing any religious, traditional, or civil

marriage ceremonies (Bocquier & Khasakhala, 2009; Calvès, 2016; Mokomane, 2005; Posel & Rudwick, 2013). In Kenya's capital city Nairobi, this study's setting, these consensual unions, colloquially known as "come-we-stay," predominate, and their legal standing has become a source of national policy debate (Bocquier & Khasakhala, 2009; Chigiti, 2012). How then do young women and men living amidst these shifts in union formation view marriage? Do they consider it central to their own lives, both current and future? Do they think marriage is still necessary to being seen as an adult by others?

Drawing on qualitative interviews from two slum settlements in Nairobi, where between 60% and 70% of the population live in slums or slum-like settings (UN-Habitat, 2008), we examine how young people in these communities view marriage and whether their attitudes differ by gender. We analyze their perspectives from two vantage points. The first examines their personal evaluation of the centrality of marriage to their life projects—"the socially attuned and culturally inflected aims and aspirations they have for their life course" (Smith & Mbakwem, 2010, p. 345). The second examines how young people assess their normative environment and whether they consider marriage as a key marker of adulthood. We then further analyze the gendered patterns in attitudes that arise by examining how other themes around marriage and the transition to adulthood—such as economic stability, having children, and leaving school—are brought up in different ways by young men and women.

#### MARRIAGE IN FLUX IN URBAN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Marriage in sub-Saharan Africa was once considered early and universal (Van de Walle, 1968). However, survey data suggest that this assessment is no longer accurate. The age at first marriage has risen considerably, particularly in urban areas (Garenne, 2004, 2014; Shapiro & Gebreselassie, 2014). In South Africa, where declining marriage rates have been documented since the 1960s, the median age at marriage is now older than 30 years for both men and women (Hunter, 2010; Statistics South Africa, 2015). In addition to later marriage, nonmarital cohabitation is rising across the continent, particularly in urban areas (Bocquier & Khasakhala, 2009; Calvès, 2007; Mokomane, 2005; Posel &

Rudwick, 2013). The proportion of sub-Saharan Africa's population living in urban areas is expected to rise from 40% in 2014 to 56% in 2050 (United Nations, 2014), making the concentration of these shifts in urban areas salient for future marital trends in the region.

The continent-wide shifts in union formation are reflected at the national level in Kenya. Rural and urban Kenyan women born in 1940 married, on average, at around 18 years of age (Garenne, 2014). By 2014, the age at marriage had risen to 19.5 years for rural women and 21.5 years for urban women. Among men, the median age of marriage in 2014 was 19.5 years in rural areas and 24.8 years in urban areas (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics et al., 2015). Shifts in marriage are especially striking in Nairobi, where the median age of marriage is the highest in the country—22.1 for women aged 25 to 49 years and 26.1 for men aged 30 to 54 years—and where the majority of young adults in unions are cohabiting rather than married (Bocquier & Khasakhala, 2009; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics et al., 2015). In a 2001 survey, Bocquier and Khasakhala (2009) found that among adults aged 25 to 34 years and who were in unions, 87% of men and 72% of women were in informal cohabiting unions. Furthermore, only 1.4% of these unions were formalized each year, suggesting that cohabitation is generally not a prequel to marriage (Bocquier & Khasakhala, 2009). Policy debate intensified around "come-we-stay" relationships in 2012 when a proposal, which ultimately did not pass, was put forward to recognize them legally as marriages if they had lasted more than 6 months (Chigiti, 2012). In this article, we examine how young people living amidst these considerable shifts in union formation view marriage.

#### GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PATHWAYS TO UNION FORMATION

The predominant explanations for the rising age at marriage differ by gender. For young women, research suggests that a key driver is education, and in particular its autonomy-enhancing effects and the perceived incompatibility of schooling with marriage (Lloyd, 2005; Mensch, Singh, & Casterline, 2005; Shapiro & Gebreselassie, 2014). The smaller body of research on men's age at marriage in sub-Saharan Africa has drawn on ideas in line with Oppenheimer's theory of marriage timing, which posits that economic

uncertainty complicates the partnering process, thereby delaying marriage (Antoine, 2006; Calvès, 2007, 2016; Oppenheimer, 1988). These shifts may also underlie the rise in cohabitation in sub-Saharan Africa: rising education levels may lead young people to partner differently from previous generations and precarious employment may result in individuals preferring to cohabit rather than marry (Calvès, 2016). According to Oppenheimer's framework, cohabitation is more flexible and thus more appealing than marriage in times of economic uncertainty (Kalmijn, 2011; Oppenheimer, 1988).

These theories are not mutually exclusive: Ideational shifts, as a result of education or otherwise, and the economy can work in concert. Indeed, empirical tests, mainly from Francophone Africa, have supported both these arguments for later marriage and show gender differences in the socioeconomic correlates of union formation. In a study of four African capitals—Dakar (Senegal), Yaoundé (Cameroon), Antananarivo (Madagascar), and Lomé (Togo)—Antoine (2006) found that men and women with higher levels of education as well as men who were apprentices or unemployed were less likely to marry. In Nairobi, Bocquier and Khasakhala (2009) found that job security and residential independence were significantly associated with union formation for men but not for women. Similarly, Calvès (2007) found that in two cities in Burkina Faso, education and type of work were significantly associated with entry into union for younger but not older generations of men, indicating the growing importance of men's economic circumstances to forming a union. In contrast, according to a later study by Calvès (2016), for women in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital city, working for pay was negatively associated with entering both a cohabiting and marital union. These findings suggest that education and economic resources carry different implications for men and women's union formation.

Gendered pathways to marriage are also reflected in qualitative research that both affirms the continued significance of marriage as a normative and desired life event as well as highlights gender differences in the ability to actualize it. For example, from ethnographic research in the Ethiopian town of Jimma, Mains (2012, p. 117) noted that for young men, marriage means "essentially, becoming a full adult."

However, urban young men said that without work, they were unable to attract a wife, let alone pay for the wedding costs; they thus remained unmarried, living with their parents into their 30s (Mains, 2012). Scholars have documented similar links between changing aspirations, livelihood options, and later or nonmarriage among young men across sub-Saharan Africa in countries such as Kenya (Mojola, 2014b; Prince, 2006), Madagascar (Cole, 2005), Niger (Masquelier, 2005), Rwanda (Sommers, 2012), and Uganda (Stites, 2013).

In contrast, qualitative research has not found the same thwarted desire to marry among young women. Women describe wanting to complete their education and find work before marriage to allow economic independence from their husbands as well as the difficulties they face in finding men that they consider to be suitable providing partners (Boehm, 2006; Hannaford & Foley, 2015; Mains, 2012; Mojola, 2014a; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992). Even if not hostile to the idea of marriage, marriage appears less of a priority for women when compared with men. From research in Lusaka, Zambia, Hansen (2005, p. 11) noted that although young women assumed that they would one day marry, young men talked about "organizing their lives" economically to prepare for marriage and having a family.

In sum, both quantitative and qualitative research from across sub-Saharan Africa suggests that marriage figures differently in the life trajectories of young men and women, but our understanding of these patterns could be deepened. First, explaining gender differences in the socioeconomic correlates of marriage in quantitative research could be enriched by qualitative insights into how young men and women think about marriage, education, and work. Second, many qualitative studies focus on either young men or young women, rather than both groups, and in a few studies, marriage is not the primary focus but, rather, comes up when investigating other topics such as violence or the experience of urban space. Our article builds on existing research by focusing on both the personal and the perceived social importance of marriage as well as systematically examining gender differences in attitudes toward marriage among low-income young women and men in a major sub-Saharan African city where formal marriage appears to be in flux.

#### A TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD APPROACH TO MARRIAGE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Social demographers generally conceptualize the transition to adulthood as a process in which individuals experience various life events such as completing education, starting full-time employment, marrying, and having a child, which in different settings signify entry into adulthood (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Setterson, 2005; Lloyd, 2005; Shanahan, 2000). Although this model is valuable in identifying markers of adulthood, anthropologists such as Bledsoe (2002) and Johnson-Hanks (2002) have argued that it is limited in its ability to capture the actual reality of young people's transition to adulthood. Johnson-Hanks (2002, p. 865) noted that in many African settings, the life events that comprise the adulthood markers "are rarely coherent, clear in direction, or fixed in outcome."

Indeed, in many African communities, including those in Kenya, marriage poses particular challenges to a life cycle model. Its starting point can be "fuzzy" because it is more of a process involving multiple steps, such as introduction ceremonies, parents and family blessings, and bride wealth payments, which serve to legitimize the union, unite families, and thereby complicate couple's separation (Antoine & Lelièvre, 2009; Meekers, 1992; Ogbu, 1978). Across ethnic groups in Kenya, bride wealth is often a significant component of the marriage process, with the groom's family giving gifts such as money, livestock, clothes, and food to the bride's family (Mburugu & Adams, 2005; Meiu, 2017; Shipton, 2007). Reflecting the processual and at times elongated nature of African transitions to adulthood and the uncertainty that can result, Johnson-Hanks (2002) proposed a theory of vital conjunctures that focuses on aspirations around life events and the social institutions, such as school and state, that make life stages salient.

In the last decade, research on young people's aspirations has yielded important insights on the experience of coming of age in sub-Saharan Africa today. One example is study by Frye (2012) of young Malawian women's educational ambitions, in which she argued that their often unrealistically hopeful dreams of becoming lawyers and doctors, for example, are assertions of moral identity. In our study sites, research shows young people's imagined futures impact their life trajectories, with many youth

maintaining high aspirations and attempting to achieve these goals through education, religion, moving out of the slums, and delinquency (e.g., robbery; Kabiru, Mojola, Beguy, & Okigbo, 2013). In this article, we draw on the vital conjunctures framework by examining attitudes toward marriage among young people who have recently married or for whom the prospect of marriage is on the horizon as well as the circumstances and experiences that shape these attitudes. This dual perspective enables a better vantage point for examining "how youth actually navigate their lives" (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006, p. 16) and illuminates the extent to which attitudes toward marriage among youth align with the changes in union formation in Nairobi.

#### METHOD

##### *Study Setting*

The study draws on 74 in-depth interviews with young people from two slum settlements in Nairobi: Korogocho and Viwandani. The city has a population of more than 3 million people, 60% to 70% of whom live in slums that occupy 5% of Nairobi's land area (UN-Habitat, 2008). Similar to other Nairobi slum settlements, Korogocho and Viwandani are characterized by low-quality and crowded housing; poor access to health, education, and other social services; and a lack of water and sanitation infrastructures. Few slum residents have salaried work, and casual work is the main source of income for a large proportion (Emina et al., 2011).

##### *Data*

The in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted once in 2009 and were nested within the Transition to Adulthood project, a 3-year cohort study that surveyed 4,058 randomly selected young residents of Korogocho and Viwandani aged 12 to 22 years at baseline in 2007. The 74 interview participants (41 females and 33 males) were purposively selected from the larger Transition to Adulthood sample to provide variation in terms of transitions to adulthood, that is, the sequencing and pacing of sexual debut, marriage, parenthood, employment, and residential independence. Interviewers with previous experience working in the two slums conducted the interviews in Kiswahili, the national language. The interviews were voice

recorded and primarily conducted in the respondents' home. A bilingual translator transcribed the interviews, which lasted 1 to 2 hours on average, into English. All respondents provided informed consent prior to the interview and, for those younger than 17 years of age, parental or guardian consent was also provided unless the respondent lived alone. We use pseudonyms in our presentation of the results to ensure respondents' anonymity. The Kenya Medical Research Institute approved the study.

The interviews were semistructured: The interviewers had a question guide developed by a team of researchers experienced in working with Kenyan youth, but they were encouraged to ask follow-up questions. The questions at the beginning of the interview were on adulthood and growing up more broadly, including questions such as "What in your opinion distinguishes adults from nonadults/children?" Questions at the beginning also focused on respondents' relationships with their parents and thoughts on living in the slum. The remaining questions were grouped around certain adulthood markers: education, work, family life and marriage, romantic relationships and first sex, and parenthood. On marriage, both the married and unmarried were asked the following: "How important is it to you (and maybe to your family, community) to get married? Why is marriage important or unimportant?" Follow-up questions for married respondents focused on their marital experiences, whereas questions for the unmarried focused on marital expectations.

*Sample descriptors.* As Table 1 illustrates, most respondents were between 19 and 24 years old. There were gender differences in the experience of marriage and parenthood, with a higher proportion of women who were married and parents when compared with men, reflecting the generally lower age of marriage and child-bearing for women when compared with men in this study area (Beguy, Kabiru, Zulu, & Ezeh, 2011). Ten unmarried women and five unmarried men had children. Two contextual points on marriage are worth noting here. First, polygamy is rare in Nairobi—1.5% of married men in Nairobi report having two or more wives (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics et al., 2015). Second, same-sex marriage is illegal in Kenya (The Republic of Kenya, 2010). Thus, marriages reported here are heterosexual marriages.

Table 1. *Sociodemographic Characteristics of Sample*

| Characteristic  | Female,<br><i>n</i> = 41;<br>% ( <i>n</i> ) | Male,<br><i>n</i> = 33,<br>% ( <i>n</i> ) | Total,<br><i>n</i> = 74,<br>% ( <i>n</i> ) |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Age, <i>y</i>   |                                             |                                           |                                            |
| 13–15           | 5 (2)                                       | 3 (1)                                     | 4 (3)                                      |
| 16–18           | 15 (6)                                      | 24 (8)                                    | 19 (14)                                    |
| 19–21           | 51 (21)                                     | 24 (8)                                    | 39 (29)                                    |
| 22–24           | 29 (12)                                     | 48 (16)                                   | 38 (28)                                    |
| Marital status  |                                             |                                           |                                            |
| Married         | 34 (14)                                     | 9 (3)                                     | 23 (17)                                    |
| Unmarried       | 66 (27)                                     | 91 (30)                                   | 77 (57)                                    |
| Parental status |                                             |                                           |                                            |
| Has children    | 51 (21)                                     | 21 (7)                                    | 38 (28)                                    |
| No children     | 49 (20)                                     | 79 (26)                                   | 62 (46)                                    |
| Education       |                                             |                                           |                                            |
| Primary         | 44 (18)                                     | 48 (16)                                   | 46 (34)                                    |
| Some secondary  | 22 (9)                                      | 18 (6)                                    | 20 (15)                                    |
| Secondary       | 27 (11)                                     | 21 (7)                                    | 24 (18)                                    |
| Higher          | 5 (2)                                       | 12 (4)                                    | 8 (6)                                      |
| Missing         | 2 (1)                                       | 0                                         | 1 (1)                                      |
| Employment      |                                             |                                           |                                            |
| Student         | 7 (3)                                       | 24 (8)                                    | 15 (11)                                    |
| Employed        | 34 (14)                                     | 48 (16)                                   | 41 (30)                                    |
| Unemployed      | 59 (24)                                     | 27 (9)                                    | 45 (33)                                    |
| Ethnicity       |                                             |                                           |                                            |
| Kamba           | 20 (8)                                      | 21 (7)                                    | 20 (15)                                    |
| Kikuyu          | 39 (16)                                     | 37 (12)                                   | 38 (28)                                    |
| Kisii           | 10 (4)                                      | 3 (1)                                     | 7 (5)                                      |
| Luhya           | 12 (5)                                      | 12 (4)                                    | 12 (9)                                     |
| Luo             | 7 (3)                                       | 21 (7)                                    | 14 (10)                                    |
| Other           | 5 (2)                                       | 0                                         | 3 (2)                                      |
| Somali          | 5 (2)                                       | 6 (2)                                     | 5 (4)                                      |
| Missing         | 2 (1)                                       | 0                                         | 1 (1)                                      |

Table 1 also shows the educational levels and employment status of the sample by gender. Education levels were quite similar for men and women: For slightly less than half of men and women, their highest level of education was primary school, a similar proportion had completed secondary school or had some secondary education, and a small number had more than a secondary education. About a quarter of the men were still in school compared to only a handful of women, whereas a larger proportion of women stated that they were unemployed than men, although unemployment was still high among male respondents, with about a quarter stating they were unemployed.

*Analysis.* The analysis of the interview transcripts, conducted in Dedoose, comprised several steps. First, demographic characteristics, listed at the beginning of the transcripts, were ascribed to each of the respondents. These are summarized in Table 1. Second, the interviews were analyzed inductively with codes assigned to each mention of marriage. Key themes that emerged included marriage in relation to other adulthood markers, such as moving out of parents' homes, having children, finishing education, and finding work as well as advice from parents about marriage, past relationship experiences, and ideal characteristics of a future spouse.

Third, to systematically examine broad attitudinal differences among a relatively large number of respondents for a qualitative study, the interviews were coded for the importance placed on marriage by the respondent. We distinguished between the following two types of importance: *personal importance* relates to whether the respondent considers marriage an important event in their own lives, current or future, and *normative importance* relates to whether they consider marriage as a necessary marker to becoming a socially recognized adult. The first author developed the coding scheme, outlined in Table 2, after several rounds of reading through the transcripts and adapted it through discussion with the other authors when deciding which cases exemplified the two types. Some respondents explicitly stated the importance they placed on marriage such as one 20-year-old man who said "It [marriage] is very important since one is regarded as an adult." In less clear-cut cases, we relied on other indicators of importance, including whether the respondents raised marriage unprompted, their plans to marry, and the tone in which they spoke about marriage.

Next, we integrated the previous two phases of the coding processes by cross-tabulating the two types of importance to create a typology of attitudes toward marriage among respondents. In other words, do people who think marriage is important socially also consider it important in their own lives? The presentation of our findings is organized around the following three marital attitude types that emerged from the analysis: the marriage-centered, who consider it important in both ways; the marriage-averse, who view marriage as not important in either way; and the marriage-ambivalent, who consider it

important in one way but not the other or only consider marriage to be somewhat important in both ways. Finally, as each stage of the analysis proceeded and gendered patterns became evident, we further examined the gender differences in marital attitudes in relation to the emergent themes, including marriage and education, marriage and economic success, and marriage and children.

## RESULTS

### *The Marriage-Centered*

We found evidence that more than half the men and slightly fewer women in our sample considered marriage important to their life projects and their social recognition as adults, with some respondents careful to assert the value of marriage over "come-we-stay" relationships, which they saw predominating. For example, 23-year-old Patrick, a casual laborer, said that when a man decides to marry, he "knows he is going to provide for her [his wife] and the children but most youths have what we call 'come-we-stay', whereby when either [of] us is tired of the other, you just move out with no obligations."

Young married people tended to highlight marriage's importance socially and in their own lives. For example, Mary, a 20-year-old housewife, said, "anyone who is married, to me is an adult." She described how she first met her husband: "He came to my home and had so many questions, but I liked his behavior. He is a well-behaved and very respectable man." When asked how her relationship was going today, she said, "I am happy, and I am an adult." So, in addition to highlighting the centrality of marriage to adult identity, Mary talked positively about her recent marriage: describing marrying on her own terms, admiring her husband's character, and feeling content in her marriage. Mary, however, did not sugar-coat all mentions of marriage. When asked a major problem a friend is facing, she said, "My friend got pregnant and was married because of that pregnancy and now she is having a lot of problems." This sentiment—that marriage is good but on certain conditions—is pervasive across the marriage-centered respondents but also among the marriage-ambivalent who hoped to marry.

For the marriage aspirants in this group, marriage was similarly crucial to their conception of

Table 2. *Coding Scheme of Marriage's Importance*

| Code               | Personal                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Normative                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Not important      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Answered that marriage is not important to him or her</li> <li>- Negative feelings about marriage</li> <li>- Unmarried: no plans to marry in the future</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explicitly says that being married is not an important part of being an adult</li> <li>- Says that society no longer cares about marriage</li> </ul>                                                                     |
| Somewhat important | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Answered that marriage is somewhat important to him or her; or important in some ways but not in others, or only after considerable probing</li> <li>- Passive or ambivalent feelings about marriage</li> <li>- Unmarried: marriage is not on his or her mind; might plan to marry but in the distant future</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Says that it is important in some ways to being considered an adult</li> <li>- Says that some people think that marriage is important to become an adult but not everyone, or only after considerable probing</li> </ul> |
| Important          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Answered that marriage is important to him or her</li> <li>- Positive feelings about marriage</li> <li>- Unmarried: marriage is on his or her mind; plans to marry either soon or in the future</li> </ul>                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Says that it is necessary to be married to be considered an adult</li> <li>- Says that society considers being married an important indicator that you are an adult</li> </ul>                                           |
| Very important     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Answered that marriage is very important to him or her</li> <li>- Very positive feelings about marriage expressed several times or unprompted</li> <li>- Unmarried: has thought a lot about marriage, plans to marry very soon</li> </ul>                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Says that being married is one of the most important markers of being an adult</li> <li>- Brings up the centrality of marriage to adulthood several times or unprompted</li> </ul>                                       |

normative adulthood as well as their life projects. For example, 23-year-old Paul, who was unemployed but used to sell kerosene at his last job, listed being married as the first attribute that differentiates an adult from a child, noting, "an adult is a person who is married and is responsible." When asked to describe a successful person in the community, he went on to say, "he is a married man, working as a civil engineer, earning 30,000 Kenyan shillings per month [about \$400 U.S. dollars], and also operating a business." Marriage was something he had thought a lot about, and it was central to his vision of his future. He wanted to get married 7 years later when he expected to "be self-reliant" and had a clear picture of his future partner, who would be "tall," "bright," "learned" [educated], "about 22 [years]," and "a Luo [ethnic group] like me." In addition, for Paul, marriage was closely tied to having children. When asked why marriage is important, he said "in my community, we believe that children are wealth so when you get married and have children, you are wealthy," adding that a wife is also considered wealth. In sum,

marriage was highly significant to Paul: It was an important part of his life project, and he saw it as part of being a respected adult man.

For marriage-centered young women, adulthood was clearly linked to marriage and childbearing, and also to residential independence. For example, 15-year-old Rose said, "My being here [in her parents' home] means I am still a child because I am not married and don't have any children." She wanted to get married and planned to do so the following year, when she was 16, explaining, "I feel I am old enough to be married, my friends keep encouraging me to get married for I have experience in taking care of children, and looking after a man." She explained her desire for children stating, "I enjoy when I hear people being called mother so I also long to be one and have children of my own" and said that the appropriate time to have children was when she married. She also highlighted the significance of bride wealth in her imagined future union process saying, marriage was important "because your parents will get wealth through bride price, you will be able to assist

them financially.” An additional related motivation for Rose to marry became apparent when asked why she wanted to get married the next year. She said, “I feel embarrassed living here with my parents,” explaining that when her uncle visited, her parents had to find somewhere else for him to stay because there was not enough room in their home. For many living in the slums of Nairobi, one- or two-room homes are the norm. According to Rose, “It doesn’t present a good picture when my uncle goes to spend the night outside instead of this house and I am here, a big girl who should be in my own house.” Thus, Rose felt that marriage would not only mark her transition to adulthood but also allow her to lessen the burden on her parents by bringing bride price and leaving home.

The theme of leaving home upon marriage to relieve parents also emerged in other women’s interviews. For example, when asked what the importance of marriage is to her family, Martha, an 18-year-old student, said,

It is not seen as a good omen when a girl stays at her parent’s home without getting married. At least when you are married, the responsibility now shifts to your husband and the longer you stay, you get pressure from everywhere to get married.

For young men, residential independence carried a different meaning as illustrated, for example, by Thomson, a 16-year-old male car washer, who when asked what made him feel like an adult said, “I live on my own...I can also marry.” In sum, although marriage was associated with leaving home for women, for men, having one’s own home was a prerequisite to marriage.

Marriage-centered young adults also saw marriage as the proper arena for childbearing. In addition to Paul and Rose, discussed earlier, many other young people described their desire for children once married. For example, David, a 22-year-old construction worker, said, “Since you were born, you also have to give birth. This can best happen if you are married.” However, some gender differences emerged in men and women’s expectations regarding marriage and fertility. Men emphasized preparing themselves to economically provide for a future family. For example, 21-year-old Michael, who said he planned to get married in 5 years, explained, “by then I will be able to deal with the responsibilities as a parent and feed a wife and my

children.” He was hoping to marry an “honest brown girl,” who is “really loving and able to take care of the baby,” but he also hoped that she would be “financially stable so that she doesn’t have to ask everything of me.”

In contrast, women in this group were more likely to emphasize the importance of men’s provision in the home. For example, when asked about when she would have children, one 21-year-old woman said, “when I know that my spouse will support me and the children.” Women were also cautious about thinking of men in this way. One 22-year-old woman said she wanted to start a business, explaining “this way I can be independent and be able to take care of my children in case we get married and we separate and he leaves me with the children.” No woman across any of the attitude types spoke about the importance of financially assisting or “feeding” husbands in the way that some men spoke about supporting wives.

### *The Marriage-Averse*

Few respondents considered marriage of no importance to their life project or social recognition as adults—only three women and no men—suggesting that marriage continued to be a central aspiration of the young people in our sample. Nonetheless, examining accounts from the marriage-averse women—all working mothers with negative relationship experiences—was illustrative of the challenging circumstances in which relationships were navigated in this context, and why aspirations to marry may not, in the end, be realized.

Let us first consider Sylvia, a 23-year-old unmarried mother of one. In a long exchange about what differentiates a child from an adult, she discussed multiple markers but not marriage, including a variety of personal qualities such as self-reliance, institutional markers such as obtaining a national identity card at age 18, and other traditional adulthood markers such as residential independence, noting for the latter: “you cannot be 30 years and continue living with your parents, unless you are abnormal.” She met the father of her child when she was working near the barbershop where he worked. They planned to marry but then, she said, they “disagreed and I went my way.” When asked who caused the relationship to end, Sylvia said, “he did bad things... he was double-dealing.” Now she was no longer interested in marriage, responding to



the interviewer's question "Are you intending to get married?" with a firm, "No" elaborating, "the way married people are living is not very interesting. There are always squabbles amongst them." Indicating the centrality of motherhood to her adult identity, when asked what she was experiencing that made her feel like an adult, she said: "I have a child and I am taking care of it." Living with a female cousin, she emphasized that the landlord recognized them both as renters and that they both contributed food to the meals they cooked together. Working as a casual laborer at the airport, she was "looking for capital" to start a business.

Similarly, 20-year-old Christine said that she felt like an adult because she was taking care of herself and her child. When asked what else made her feel like an adult, she said "I passed through having an abusive relationship whereby I took the right decision to walk away." Her hope was to continue working as a secretary and have her daughter go to a good school. When asked what challenges might arise, she answered "maybe if I am forced to get married, that would shatter my dreams forever." Later, in response to a question about future plans to get married, she answered "I just want a break and to take care of my daughter." In these two interviews, we noted how the women grew averse to marriage as they experienced infidelity and physical abuse, and how being a mother along with earning an income allowed them to forge an alternative, socially recognized status as an adult in this setting.

### *The Marriage-Ambivalent*

Slightly less than half the young men and women were ambivalent about marriage, considering marriage important in some ways but not others. Overall, we found that this ambivalence toward marriage was largely rooted in not viewing marriage as particularly important to socially recognized adulthood, and although most of the young people continued to value marriage in their life projects, many, particularly the young women, were hesitant about entering into marriage before they were ready.

John, a 22-year-old man who worked as a metal worker, illustrated this common perspective of considering marriage important personally but not socially. He noted the changed demographic reality he saw, saying the following: "These days, not many of us

are getting married and yet we are adults." Reflecting the challenge of his particular vital conjuncture, he discussed having a girlfriend of 4 years, with whom he had a child. The marriage formalization process had begun (his parents had gone to meet hers), but his girlfriend's mother said that he lived too close to her and her husband and that he had to move "far from here" before marrying their daughter. Thus, the process had stalled. John saw his living in Korogocho slum, a result of his limited finances, as the reason that his prolonged relationship did not lead to marriage, saying, "I would be married by now to even to more than three wives but I had one who told me outright, she can never live in Korogocho. I don't know why women don't like Korogocho." Again, showing his perception of the economic barrier to his marriage aspirations, he said, "If I had money, by the end of this year, I would be married."

An example of a young woman with this outlook was 20-year-old Constance, who won a scholarship in secondary school and dreamed of becoming a lawyer. Similar to John, she described how marriage no longer indicated adult status:

These days, very many children are getting married but a few years ago, marriage was for adults... This girl has a family but is not mature yet so as to be able to take care of a family. We cannot really put that kind of person as an adult.

Yet she too hoped to one day marry; she said it would show she was a "successful woman" and imagined a "Mr. Right ... someone who has achieved like me, someone with the same dreams like me. We can talk and see how we can improve our lives." However, for now, she wanted to focus first on her other goals as "you cannot serve two masters at the same time." Similarly, 17-year-old Vanessa, a student, said that she wanted to marry because "I don't want to remain a spinster but would also like to enjoy life the way my mother did, I want bride price to be paid ... I want children and my mother to enjoy being a grandmother." However, she was not thinking of marriage at the moment: "After completing school, in employment and living on my own, then I can think of marriage." Although not in her current plans, marriage was shaping her behavior. About her relationship with her boyfriend, whom she met in church, she said, "we are waiting till marriage [to have sex] and I don't want those 'come-we-stay' relationships."

In these cases, the aspirations around marriage reflected gendered pathways to marriage. For John, a better economic status was critical to his ability to marry, whereas for Constance and Vanessa, marriage was more a matter of timing to be attained after education was complete and employment ideally secured.

Other less common patterns of ambivalence were seen in those who felt that “marriage is important for being considered an adult by others but marriage is not central to who I am or what I want in life,” comprising only a handful of the young people. Lydia, an 18-year-old single woman who was living with her mother and hoped to return to school, held this less common view. She said when you see a married person, “you will see the difference” compared to a child and that “you will know by looking at the age, you will know that person is an adult.” However, when it came to her own assessment of her adulthood status as an unmarried woman, she indignantly replied: “Of course I am [an adult]! These questions you ask people, really!” Furthermore, marriage did not figure in her life project. She said, “it [marriage] is not important to me,” elaborating, “I have not planned to get married to a rich or poor person, whether he is educated or not, those are things that are not on my mind.” As such, we saw Lydia both regarding marriage as a social marker of adulthood but, similar to the marriage-averse women, also affirming her own adult status and declaring marriage’s lack of importance in her own life. Another woman, Jane, who was 23 years old, was similarly contradictory. Initially she said, “I think it is because society demands that we should be married but personally I don’t see the need or rather the importance of marriage in one’s life.” However, similar to Constance and Vanessa, her desire to marry became clear as the interview unfolded, saying that she hoped to marry after she had finished her education and got a job. The contradictory nature of these attitudes reflects how as young people imagine their futures, their aspirations around life events such as marriage are often “fraught with uncertainty, innovation, and ambivalence” (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 871).

In addition to concerns about marriage being incompatible with school and securing employment, another source of ambivalence, especially for girls and young women, was that marrying too early would lead to painful experiences. For example, 16-year-old student Veronica said “I have never seen the importance [of marriage].

I see people being beaten so I don’t want it happening to me.” Being beaten was especially pertinent in early marriage. For example, when asked if she would marry without finishing school, 21-year-old Esther said “Marriage? Not now, you get married now and go to suffer there.” In contrast, no young men described “suffering” or experiencing abuse in marriage or made reference to other men in such situations. Rather, for men ambivalence toward marriage often reflected concerns about being able to provide. For example, 22-year-old Mark who was unmarried and had a child from a previous relationship said, “Having a wife is a burden because you can’t expect anyone else to feed you and your family.” Currently working as a garbage collector, he said, however, that he would nonetheless marry once he found a woman who could understand his “situation.”

The final subgroup of the marriage-ambivalent, which included more women than men, were the young people who place minimal importance on marriage either as a marker of adulthood or as a part of their life projects. For 17-year-old Joseph, the one man in this group, his primary concern was finding work now that he had completed secondary school. When asked what he would like to achieve in life, he answered, “a job” and that he would do “any type of work.” He answered “No” when the interviewer asked, “Is marriage important to you in any way?” With some probing, however, it appeared that marriage might figure in his future, contingent on his ability to be a primary breadwinner for a family. For example, when asked when he would like to marry, he said after he gets a job, and when asked whom he would like to marry, he said she should be at least a year younger than him but that her ethnic group and economic background did not matter. Finally, when asked about the right time to start having children, he responded: “when you are working...so that you can be able to look after the children well.” His initial dismissal of marriage, therefore, appears rooted in his young age and worries about finding a job. Similar to the young women described earlier, his hesitancy around marriage was tied to timing, but unlike the women, he was more preoccupied with his ability to provide for a family.

Timing was also a theme in the responses of many young women in this category who considered marriage of minimal importance in both ways. For example, 19-year-old Diane, who lived with her grandmother, was similar to the

marriage-averse women in pinning her adult identity on her ability to take care of her baby and seeing little importance in marriage in her own life, saying "I don't have any plans to get married." About her child's father, she only said "when he discovered that I was pregnant, he disappeared, I don't know where he is." Most of her advice came from her older sister, who on marriage cautioned her, Diane said, "not to go get married now, I am still too young."

More than half of the unmarried women described receiving such advice, often from parents and with completing education as the main justification, compared to two unmarried men. Only one respondent—a 24-year-old male casual laborer, hoping to become a mechanic—mentioned his parents encouraging him to marry. The respondents tended to describe early marriage as a life event thrust upon people, mainly women. Dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, and poverty were frequently cited as factors that left marriage as the only life option. One 16-year-old female student explained how "poverty in the family of the girl" causes early marriages: "The girl does not get the basic needs from her parents and so she opts to get married hoping that these needs will be met on the other side."

When asked the worst problem any of her friends had experienced, Josephine, a 22-year-old married woman with one child, described a typical pathway to early marriage that was evoked by others, namely one involving leaving school and pregnancy. She explained that in high school, she had an "orphan friend," a "very bright girl," who got caught up in bad company and dropped out of school, and "got pregnant in the process." The friend was now married to the man, "living under very hard circumstances." Josephine reflected on how her friend's life might have been different: "Had she continued school, I don't think things would have been that difficult even if she had decided to marry." Another 23-year-old married woman who was selling vegetables described her own experience of marrying "too early," saying "since I didn't have any chance of continuing school, I decided to get married ... I was feeling sad because I could not continue my education with my friends."

In contrast, no respondent described a young man dropping out of school to marry or marrying to fulfill his "basic needs." The only young man who described marrying earlier than planned

was marriage-centered Patrick, who explained that he did so because he lived alone with his father: "I was forced to go out and look for a partner who could help me. When I go out, she is there remaining with my dad, making the home clean and all that." In sum, these discussions of early marriage helped explain the greater ambivalence toward marriage among women in their life projects. Across the interviews, early marriage was presented as an undesirable pathway for desperate women, whereas for men, marrying was generally framed as an autonomous decision, an indication that a man was somewhat financially secure, able to have an independent home, and help cater for his children's needs.

## DISCUSSION

This article examines how low-income young Kenyans are making sense of marriage in a city where cohabitation is increasingly common and on a continent where union formation in urban settings is undergoing dramatic change. Bringing to the fore the voices of youth in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, we find that marriage continues to be an important part of many young people's life projects, whether they consider it central to being an adult or not. Particularly striking, however, is young women's greater ambivalence and aversion to marriage, reflecting a combination of desiring to fulfill other aspirations such as education and employment, having alternative pathways to adulthood through motherhood, as well as a desire to avoid the negative experiences associated with marrying early. This contrasts with young men's frustrated desire for marriage amidst economic constraints and a continued expectation that they should be financially secure prior to marriage.

### *The Continued Significance of Marriage*

Overall, we find that marriage continues to be significant despite a shifting demographic reality. Most young people were either marriage-centered or -ambivalent; far fewer were averse to marriage. The majority considered marriage a social marker of adulthood, wanted to marry, had ideas about the type of person they would like to marry, and once married, marriage became central to their adult identity. However, Bocquier and Khasakhala's (2009) findings suggest that most of these young people will

not marry formally and will instead cohabit. Our study thus reveals an important disjuncture between youth marital aspirations and the cohabitation or “come-we-stay” future they will likely encounter. Youth in many poor settings, including this one, often have high aspirations that include completing further education, finding stable, well-paying work that allows them to support a family and, in the case of women, being financially independent from husbands who are faithful and not abusive (Kabiru et al., 2013), but given the barriers to these aspirations, many young people are at a vital juncture, where their desired form of marriage—one that occurs after attaining economic stability—is out of reach. This reality might be reflected in the ambivalence and aversion among some respondents. The accounts of failed serious relationships, such as those of Sylvia and John, are telling in this regard. Initially hopeful about marriage, they grew increasingly disinterested and frustrated as obstacles arose—an unfaithful partner for Sylvia and a lack of money for John. For others, aspiring toward prerequisite goals that are already difficult to achieve in this setting—completed education and secure employment—may further prolong the attainment of marriage, leaving aspirations as just that (see also Edin & Kefalas, 2011).

#### *Gendered Pathways to Union Formation*

Our study also illuminates key gender differences. More women are marriage-ambivalent and -averse and more men are marriage-centered; their narratives provide further clarity on these differences. First, the risk of marriage obstructing aspirations, particularly around education, appears to be greater for women than men. For men, the main concern voiced about marriage was not being able to support a family. For women, “early marriage” is described as a social ill, associated with dropping out of school and “suffering.” This finding is in line with prior research that has documented women’s desire to be economically self-sufficient to reduce their dependency on their husbands and thus, their vulnerability in marriage (Mains, 2012; Mojola, 2014a). On the other hand, non-marriage-averse women and men discussed marriage at the correct time and to the right kind of person as desirable. Second, with their increasing participation in paid employment, women are now able to be household breadwinners and to look

after their children without marriage. Given that children often live with their mothers after the end of a conjugal relationship (Madhavan, Clark, Beguy, Kabiru, & Gross, 2017), socially recognized adulthood as signified by being a household breadwinner and respectable parent appears to be more contingent on marriage for men. In contrast, as is evident in the cases of Sylvia, Christine, and Diane, these women’s identities as good mothers remain intact after their relationships dissolve; if anything, they describe themselves as even more capable because they are providing for their child’s needs without male assistance.

The centrality of economic independence to these young people’s narratives shows that having decent, safe, and stable work is fundamental to young people establishing themselves in the ways they envision and to avoiding the pitfalls that they identify. Our respondents are not unique in their concerns about employment: Young people across Kenya cite unemployment as one of the most important problems (National Council for Population and Development, 2015; Resnick & Thurlow, 2015). However, the way in which making a living relates to marriage differs by gender. For women, labor opportunities in the city, although largely casual and low-paying, allow them to leave marriages or not to marry at all, bypassing marriage as they take pride in having an independent home and supporting their children. These findings are similar to those from southern Africa (Boehm, 2006; Preston-Whyte & Zondi, 1992). From ethnographic work in Lesotho, where the opening of garment factories has expanded female labor opportunities, Boehm (2006, p. 160) described a generation of “women for whom marriage is not a strict necessity to gain access to wages, but rather a possible and desirable option if a proper husband can be found.” As in other urban African settings for men, marriage or even romantic relationships are often contingent on some sort of income or livelihood (Cornwall, 2002; Masquelier, 2005; Mills & Ssewakiryanga, 2005; Mojola, 2014b; Prince, 2006). In sum, an income appears to be a prerequisite for men to partner, whereas for women an income means they do not have to if they wish to delay marriage or not marry at all.

#### *Limitations*

This article has several limitations. First, the interviews come from 2009. Although

this mirrors the publication of Bocquier and Khasakhala (2009), trends may have changed. To our knowledge, no subsequent survey on union formation has been conducted in Nairobi. However, although there have been no legal changes in recognition of come we stay unions, it continues to be a topic of national conversation (Oketch, 2018), and the economic context for young people has changed little with youth unemployment remaining high (United Nations Development Program, 2016). Thus although the survey and our qualitative findings together reflect a particular time point in Kenya, our study nonetheless reveals the voices and experiences of a large sample of hard-to-access yet theoretically and policy-relevant population of low-income youth at a time and context when union formation was in flux. Second, the interviews were not focused exclusively on marriage and so include few details on how respondents married or would like to marry. However, we include in our findings the many instances where respondents distinguished between union types and marriage processes, with some discussing “come-we-stay” relationships and others referencing customary marriage stages such as families being formally introduced and the exchange of bride wealth. Third, grouping the respondents’ attitudes toward marriage as we do inherently simplifies complex perspectives, but we have attempted to provide depth and nuance to the typology through our presentation of particular cases and analysis of gendered themes. Finally, although most Nairobi residents, similar to our respondents, live in low-income areas, attitudes toward marriage among wealthier young Kenyans in the city may well differ.

#### *Future Research*

Our study suggests several possible avenues of further research. First, a survey on union formation in Nairobi and other African cities is warranted to examine both whether trends have continued, or reversed in the city, and how findings in Nairobi might compare with other African cities. Second, our findings suggest additional research to understand the role and enactment of marriage ceremonies in low-income urban slum contexts and whether they are barriers to formal marriage and motivators for nonmarital cohabitation. A third line of research might examine the nature of “come-we-stay” unions—how long these

relationships last compared to formal unions, for example, and how young people make decisions to cohabit—and ascertain whether similar dynamics are occurring in rural areas in response to pressures such as increased land scarcity. The answers to these questions would provide an important basis for policy decisions regarding the official recognition of consensual unions that countries, such as Kenya, are facing.

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