

**Limited agency in a neo-liberal world: the case of  
female sex workers in Mombasa, Kenya**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

Neo-liberal practices based on economic theory and supported by appropriate discourses are explored in this thesis to show how these processes affect social, economic and patriarchal structures, and explore their gendered effects. The sex industries are analysed as an example to show how women who are in a disadvantaged position in society manoeuvre the socio-economic and patriarchal scene, 'bargain with patriarchy', and attempt to make a living or progress socially and economically through unconventional choices. This task is undertaken through the analysis of Mombasa self-identified sex workers' life stories and narratives.

Neo-liberal practice resulted in increased poverty and ruptures in social structures. Even though some women manage to manoeuvre the patriarchal and economic systems of Kenya to their own advantage through unorthodox choices (selling sex being one of them) and manage to change their initial disadvantaged position, many women are unsuccessful in this undertaking. An analysis of sex workers' work strategies and plans for the future shows that women aim to capitalise on gender and economic inequalities that marginalise them in order to advance. In order to succeed in this endeavour, women have to find entrepreneurial ways to perform certain socially accepted gendered roles. Therefore, it will be argued that in a socio-economic system influenced by neo-liberalism that builds on gender inequality, the individuals who internalise neo-liberal logic can succeed in improving their initial disadvantaged position to some extent, but that such individual agency is limited because it fails to challenge socio-economic and patriarchal structures.

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## List of acronyms

AIDS – acquired immune deficiency syndrome

ARV – antiretroviral treatment

ASWA – African Sex Workers Alliance

AWLI – African Women Leadership institute

CV – curriculum vitae

EPZ – export processing zone

FIDA – *Federation International De Abogadas*, Federation of Women Lawyers

GBP – Great Britain pound

GDP – gross domestic product

HIV – human immunodeficiency virus

ICRH – International Centre for Reproductive Health

IFIs – international financial institutions

IMF – International Monetary Fund

KANU – Kenya African National Union

KASH – Keeping Alive Societies Hope

KSWA – Kenyan Sex Workers' Alliance

KHRC – Kenyan Human Rights Commission

KSH – Kenyan shilling

LGBTI – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex

MPS – Mont Pelerin Society

MYWO – Maendeleo Ya Wanawake

NACC – National AIDS Control Council

NGO – nongovernmental organisation

OPEC – Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries



SAPs – Structural Adjustment Programs

SOLWODI – Solidarity with Women in Distress

STD – sexually transmitted disease

TV – television

UN – United Nations

US – United States (of America)

VIP – very important person

WB – World Bank

## 1. Introduction: Duality of neo-liberal character and sex work

*What do prostitutes and their customers do together? Men, for example, rarely visit a prostitute in order to subsidize peasant households, and women hardly ever become prostitutes so that they can have sexual relations with men.*

*Luise White (1990 : 10).*

This thesis explores women's agency in a world influenced by neo-liberal discourse and practice. Kenyan women traditionally have less formal employment opportunities and occupy less-paid jobs in the informal sector, so the experiences of women who earn money in unorthodox ways – through sex work in this instance – are both revealing the agency of women and about its limits. This research will look at the social, economic and societal structures that neo-liberal narratives and reforms influence, their gendered effects, and to what extent individuals internalise neo-liberal economic logics in order to find their way within the structures and make or improve their living.

The contemporary global economy is greatly influenced by neo-liberal discourse, policies and reforms. Despite the fact that neo-liberal policies did not yield the expected outcomes in developing countries, such solutions continue to be promoted by international financial institutions (IFIs) as can be witnessed in their recent policy prescriptions. The on-going global crisis has shaken neo-liberal fundamentalism, and, as Overbeek and van Apeldoorn (2012 : 5) point out, reveal the multiple levels of crisis that is experienced by neo-liberalism:

... the crisis is first of all simultaneously a crisis of the dominant accumulation model of the past decades, a crisis of the hegemonic ideology underpinned by that model, and consequently also a crisis of the political and social order in the heartland of global capitalism.

However, this crisis of neo-liberal ideas does not mean that the neo-liberal project is seriously challenged. As Harrison (2010) argues, neo-liberal ideas acquired a meta-theoretical status and therefore alternatives to this model face

difficulties in gaining space in the public discourse. This pervasiveness of neo-liberalism has partly to do with the 'adaptive capacity of neo-liberalism, as a flexibly mutating regime of "market rule"' as pointed out by Peck et al. (2010 : 95). Therefore, processes of liberalisation, privatisation and marketisation continue, even if sometimes their forms shift.

Neo-liberal practice, and especially free markets, which are supposed to bring benefits to all parties involved according to neo-liberal logic, build on existing societal structures and allow for an increase in profits through the exploitation of already existing inequalities between rich and poor, men and women, and Western countries and the developing world. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2001 : 8) point out, such a system seems to include and marginalise people at the same time: those who master the technologies and can manoeuvre the markets can ensure great profits for themselves; yet those who do not, experience threats to the most basic elements of their livelihoods. This duality of the neo-liberal regime means that, while certain groups of individuals function in a society defined by free markets and choices, there are 'exceptions to neo-liberalism' to use Ong's (2006 : 4) term, such as migrant workers, for instance, who are excluded from the living standards created by policies in a market society. Sassen (2002 : 254-255) argues that migrant women, who as a result of internationalised, globalised and unequal economies travel various distances to find employment as nannies, domestic workers, maids or sex workers, constitute 'survival circuits' and are of key importance for the functioning of the global economic order. Both Ong and Sassen explore movements of people across borders, and how such processes are connected to the contemporary global political economy. This thesis will argue that the duality of contemporary neo-liberal market regimes creates very similar processes that rely on gendered structures within countries as well.

The experiences and world view of women selling sex in Mombasa and their life stories form the basis for the analysis in this thesis in order to illustrate the processes described above. The main argument of this thesis is grounded in women's life stories and the choices they make when responding to both difficult living conditions in the market economy and to sex workers activism or

NGO activities. The voices of women who are part of the Mombasa sex work scene will be used to show both women's agency and its limits in relation to discourses surrounding prostitution activities and neo-liberal ideas; it will also help to show the position of women towards both the organisations and movements that target them. This thesis will explore neo-liberal practice and discourse in Kenya. First, it will look at how neo-liberal economies affect societal structures, and what gendered effects these processes have. It will explore how some women are both marginalised and included in the labour force as a result of neo-liberal reforms and discourses, and how livelihood opportunities within traditional socio-economic and patriarchal<sup>1</sup> structures are often complicated by neo-liberal practice. The second angle of analysis will take the example of sex work and explore: how neo-liberalism influenced socio-economic structures and gender inequalities are experienced by women who sell sex; to what degree and in what ways the neo-liberal order, among other influences, is internalised by them; and how the advancement and survival strategies of self-identified sex workers correspond to social, economic, political, institutional and gender rules as they try to 'elbow out an effective sphere of action for themselves' (Bujra 1977 : 14). The analysis will reveal to what extent women can challenge socio-economic structures and gender inequality – conditions not of their own making, to echo Marx – and exercise their own agency in what Lonsdale (2000 : 6) calls 'tight corners'. It will show that choices that women make when entering sex work have a potential to change their initial position. However, women, who want to succeed in this endeavour, have to behave in ways that are compliant with existing social and gender structures. Therefore, the position of one individual can be changed and it is possible to break out of the marginal initial point; yet the gendered structures that are enforced by neo-liberalism remain largely unchallenged.

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<sup>1</sup>This work will use the term of 'patriarchy' as defined in to Sylvia Walby's (1989) article 'Theorising Patriarchy': 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women'. This work admits that patriarchy is not static and universal, takes different forms and depends on the interaction of different patriarchal structures (patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal relation in cultural institutions).

## **Focus of the research**

This section defines the main problems that will be investigated and will situate them in the appropriate bodies of literature. First, the concept of neo-liberalism and the use of global political economy will be explained. Second, the use of the term 'sex industries', its issues, and limitations will be discussed. The third part will explore links between neo-liberalism, sex industries and how gendered markets influence women's options. Lastly, the choice of Kenya for the case study will be explained, before moving on to the research questions.

## **Neo-liberal global political economy**

Neo-liberalism is a key to understand contemporary global political economy; however, the term is not clearly defined. As Harrison (2010 : 19) notes, most attempts to define neo-liberalism emphasise individual freedom as a fundamental good, which is best attained through a competitive market society that requires the non-interference of the state in the economy. As a result, neo-liberalism can be seen as a social practice that is based on economic theory and supported by a certain discourse, which emphasises the importance of free markets and the individual.

Neo-liberal economic theory was developed in opposition to socialism (Gamble 2001) and as a voice of the 'old' liberal school. Two institutions – Mont Pelerin Society and the University of Chicago – were especially important for the development of neo-liberal thought.

The Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) was established in 1947 by Friedrich von Hayek and marked the efforts of liberal intellectuals of all nationalities to meet and discuss the revival of liberalism. This intellectual movement promoted a change of course in political life, which hoped to 're-establish the principles of liberal society and those of the market order' (Turner 2008 : 71). MPS united all the most influential (male) critics of collectivism of the time – Hayek himself, Milton Friedman, George Stigler, Wilhelm Ropke, Ludwig von Mises, Karl Popper, Lionel Robbins and many others (ibid.). A number of these intellectuals were based in the University of Chicago's School of Economics where Hayek and Friedman were teaching. Both MPS and the University of Chicago served as

places for the exchange of ideas and were crucial for defining neo-liberal thought. The University of Chicago was important in the course of the development of neo-liberalism for a more practical reason as well – it managed to bridge ideas with funding. A group of mainly United States-based wealthy individuals and corporate leaders who opposed state intervention in their business interests were generous in financing institutions and think-tanks promoting liberal ideas (Harvey 2007 : 21-22). That is how, with the help of the University of Chicago and MPS, a network of foundations, institutes, and research centres that promoted and disseminated the ideas of Hayek and Friedman came into being (George 1999).

This network of institutions, as well as neo-liberal ideas, remained at the margins until ‘stagflation’ – or a combination of low growth rates and high levels of inflation – took hold in the major world economies during the 1970s. Then, as neo-liberal thought seemed to offer solutions for stagnant economies and also had great support from research institutions and political actors in countries such as the United States and Great Britain – which together played a key role in outlining a new approach to economic development – the language, policies, and ideology of neo-liberalism started to pervade the world’s political and economic scene.

Neo-liberalism is built around the idea of freedom. In the context of the end of the Second World War, this focus was attractive given that individual freedom and dignity were often threatened by fascism, dictatorships, communism, and different forms of state intervention (Harvey 2007 : 5). However, the particular notion of freedom endorsed and used by neo-liberal thought is closely associated with the concepts of the market, equality against the law, and individual rights, through which a neo-liberal conception of freedom is attained.

Neo-liberalism, as any other theory, is a model based on abstraction built upon certain values that can help one to interpret practice, but, as Harrison (2010 : 29) observes:

In itself, neo-liberalism does nothing; its ‘presence’ emerges through its embodiment in discourse and practice, and only then through the effort of interpretation and critical reconstruction.

Therefore when speaking about neo-liberalism it is important to marry theory to human agency and to see what transformations and modifications neo-liberalism faces when it is implemented in practice (Ferguson 2006).

In practice, the first departure from neo-liberal theory is its assumption of 'economic correctness' and apoliticism. Following neo-liberal theory, the neo-liberal system leaves little or no space for politics, because decisions in the market are theoretically made on the basis of efficiency, economic growth, and implementation of 'economically correct' policies. Ferguson (2006 : 77-80) calls this phenomenon 'scientific capitalism', because neo-liberal policies are presented as neutral, non-moral, efficient, and based on technical principles that are in fact very rarely justified. This notion of scientific capitalism suggests that decisions in the market or state are not political, but rational and the 'correct' way to behave. This view of apolitical decisions is problematic because, as Harrison (2010 : 30-31) argues, all practice is social, and all social practice is political and based on certain values and expectations. As a result, scientific assumptions about knowledge, and cause and effect are difficult to predict, and neo-liberal policies are less scientific and more political than they purport to be.

The second issue, which reveals a disjuncture between neo-liberal theory and practice is the way neo-liberalism is implemented. As Turner (2008 : 135) observes, the oft-labelled neo-liberal international financial institutions (IFIs) are often criticised by neo-liberal theorists for the manner in which neo-liberal policies come into practice: the top-down economic planning that is performed by these institutions contradicts the notion of spontaneous order in the market and the non-interventionist attitudes that are emphasised in theory. It is important to note that neo-liberalism has nowhere been fully implemented as described in theory: IFIs that promote neo-liberal policies do not act according to the theory, while states that are considered to be 'neo-liberal' (for example, the US) do not have free markets and are reluctant to abolish state regulations and protectionist practices (such as subsidies for the agricultural sector).

Neo-liberal theory and practice also come into tension since, as Polanyi (1944 : 48) observed drawing on anthropological research, 'man's economy, as a rule, is

submerged in his social relationships'. This is why neo-liberalism, which puts emphasis on market exchange alone, fails to explain transactions that happen through other institutions than the market meaning that women's work rearing children or doing other work in reproduction, for example, are not accounted for. Moreover, ignoring social power relations means that the market builds on existing social inequalities and as a result new patterns of exclusion start to define societies influenced by neo-liberalism. Patterns that, to quote Comaroff and Comaroff (2001 : 2), 'inflect older lines of gender, sexuality, race, and class in ways both strange and familiar.' Neo-liberal theory claims that all individuals are equal against the law, yet, the inequalities that are in place because of power imbalances (between genders, classes, and countries) remain, and in many cases become even more starkly defined.

Neo-liberal practice involves not only neo-liberalism influenced policies and reforms, but also a certain discourse that supports such changes. Harrison (2010 : 4) points out that when discussing neo-liberal discourse in relation to Africa, one has to be aware of the interaction of two discourses - of Africa's exceptionality and liberal integration globally.

'Africa' as a category entered Western knowledge as a construct that is opposed to Western civilisation, progress, modernity and history (Ferguson 2006 : 2). Mbembe (2001 : i) notes that contemporary discourses on Africa continue this tradition and present African human experience through a negative interpretation, and often as only partly human, 'of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality'. The negative associations that surround Africa are strengthened through the discourse of the continent's failure to create 'proper' economies or, as Harrison (2010 : 18) argues, to neo-liberalise. This 'failure' to advance in the liberal global world is interestingly intertwined with the neo-liberal discourse of advancement which is based on the notion of depoliticisation and neo-liberal policies that are 'common sense' (Harrison 2010 : 25). One implication of this neo-liberal logic is that African states are themselves responsible for such economic failings (Ferguson 2006 : 12). Therefore, as neo-liberal policies are so 'common sense' and individuals are rational universally, Africa's 'backwardness' resembles Mbembe's (2001 : 2)



claims that Africans are constructed to be only 'familiar to us' (the rest of the world), so in essence they are 'the beast' which needs domestication in order to enjoy human life. This discourse of African exceptionalism reflects unequal power relations internationally – Western countries dominate global political economy and as a result of this process Western ways of life are often seen as 'better ones'. The neo-liberal discourse, which acknowledges diversity (everyone has different wishes), is silent about inequalities of social differentiation (Clarke 2004 : 39), and therefore African exceptionalism is constructed as a result of an African inability to be 'like everyone else'.

While international institutions, international organisations and the global community debate the reasons for Africa's failure to integrate in the global neo-liberal project, Ferguson (2006 : 21) observes that

Most Africans can hardly feel that they are being dominated by being forced to take on the goods and forms of a homogenizing global culture when those goods and forms are, in fact, largely unavailable to them.

The unavailability of consumer goods that is due to the poverty that is so prevalent on the continent can restrict consumption, but, as Lury (1996 : 6) points out, this restriction cannot prevent participation in consumer culture. Therefore, the willingness of Africans to live the life that is not available to them is manifested through a number of local discourses and practices that resemble neo-liberal ideas about society. One example can be Zambia's 'new culture', which promoted business-friendly, future-oriented, youthful and technocratic attitudes that were supposed to get the country 'up to date' (Ferguson 2006 : 120). Another example is Wiegratz's (2010) study of Ugandan trade practices between smallholder farmers and traders in rural markets, which highlights the development of practices that are 'in line' with neo-liberal ideology. As Harrison (2010 : 19) argues, due to the extent to which neo-liberal reforms have been implemented in Africa, African countries can be seen as the 'cutting edge' examples of neo-liberalism in practice. Tracks of neo-liberal thought can be observed both in the material arrangements of countries, and in the attitudes, perceptions, and ideas of people who live in these realities.

This thesis explores the Kenyan economy by considering local political factors and global influences. Neo-liberal practices that adapt to the local Kenyan context, find new ways to frame exclusions and exploitation within neo-liberal socio-economic structures and the neo-liberal discourse that supports this process are the main themes for investigation in this work. For this reason the thesis draws upon literature on critical studies of African political economies in the neo-liberal order (for example Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Ferguson 2006; 2004, 2010) as well as from studies of global economies and the gender effects that they have (for example Appadurai 1996; de Koning 2009; Ong 2006; Sassen 2002; Standing 1999; Storper 2001).

### **Sex industries and sexualities**

This thesis also engages with literature on gender, sexualities, and sex work.

The influential work of the Parisian public health official, Parent-Duchatelet marked the beginning of modern studies of prostitution in the early nineteenth century. In an effort to prove that prostitutes are biologically different from other women, he examined eye colour, weight, and the father's occupation of a group of prostitutes. He concluded that prostitutes are not different from other women and that they do this job because of economic reasons for short periods of time (White 1990 : 2). The emphasis on the economic reasons for prostitution was soon replaced by the pioneering discourse of English reformers who attached sanitary and disease issues to prostitution through the introduction of the Contagious Disease Acts in 1864 (White 1990 : 3). Women engaging in prostitution (and women who were suspected to be prostitutes) were obliged to have a medical examination because they were 'spreading' diseases to men in the military and dock workers. This link between disease and prostitution became commonplace and provided the baseline for sexuality research in Britain and beyond. By the early twentieth century, ruling European elites considered both African women and European prostitutes as possessing an 'immoral hypersexuality' which had to be controlled (McCurdy 2001 : 222). As Tamale (2011c : 16) points out, since then, sexuality research in Africa has been medicalised and reduced to its purpose of reproduction.

The literature on prostitution in the Kenyan context started emerging in the late twentieth century as a result of anthropological studies (Bujra 1975; 1977; Nelson 1987; White 1990). However, with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, research on prostitution came back to the domain of health and medical research with sexual practices again held up as a threat to larger communities (Boyce et al. 2007; Tamale 2011b, c). As a result, the majority of the contemporary studies that research prostitution are quantitative and deal with assessing knowledge, behaviour, and attitudes towards sex, as well as condom use (Spronk 2012 : 22). Since prostitution is seen as a societal problem in such research, the features of women who sell sex are well documented. As such, it is known that Kenyan prostitutes can see this work as a part-time or full-time activity with a significant number of women having other sources of income from small businesses, trade, brewing, etc. It also reveals how female sex workers operate in a wide range of locations including homes, hotels, bars, and streets. The majority have children and, while about 40 per cent are single, the other 60 per cent are married, cohabiting, widowed or divorced with the vast majority of prostitutes reported to have no, or only primary level education (Elmore-Meegan et al. 2004; Gysels et al. 2001; Luchters et al. 2008; Mufune 2003; Pickering et al. 1993).

Spronk (2012 : 22) highlights how a problem with these epidemiologic studies is that they show the patterns, but do not explain their causes. Another problem is that they create certain categories to identify groups of people, such as 'prostitutes' or 'sex workers', which do not adequately reflect social realities. Epidemiologic studies often use data gathered from a certain group of women selling sex who are not representative of a larger group of sex workers (see Pheterson 1990). For example women serving truck drivers on a highway might have very different realities and understanding of their actions than Nairobi sex workers serving rich clients or other groups of women who sell sex. Due to these problems of epidemiologic studies, it is difficult to determine how reliable such quantitative data about any sex trade scene is. For instance, the Kenyan National AIDS Control Council (NACC) together with the UN Population Fund conducted a research project entitled 'HIV/AIDS situational analysis on sex

workers and their clients 2009', and as a result of this a lot of data about Kenyan sex workers came into the public domain. Yet, the NACC researchers who conducted it point out that the research process was difficult because of the stigma surrounding sex work and the unclear legal status of the occupation, which raises the question of the reliability of the data. Moreover, due to the stigmatisation of male sex workers – a group that is an important part of the sex industries, as indicated by the growing body of literature on 'Beach Boys' and male sex workers (Boyce and Isaacs 2011; De Albuquerque 1998; Jamison 1999; Omondi 2003; Sindiga 1994; Taylor 2001) – their research focuses only on the female sex worker population (NASOP 2012 : 20).

This thesis is interested in exploring how women engage in sex work in a world that is defined by neo-liberalism influenced socio-economic structures and discourses. For this reason, even though the quantitative literature at points will be referred to, the main body of scholarship that this thesis borrows from is the scholarship on gender in a changing socio-economic climate. In response to the medicalised approach of societal relations in the context of AIDS, a body of literature that explores social changes, particularly with respect to the position of women, came into being (for example see Arnfred 2004; Hodgson and McCurdy 2001b). This literature situates prostitution in the social context of changing societal realities and gender relations. It is interesting to note that despite the fact that the debate on prostitution 'is probably as old as prostitution itself' (Ericsson 1980), women who prostitute themselves become the cause of moral panic and harsh societal critiques in historical moments marked by difficult social and economic circumstances (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001a : 14). Social and economic difficulties are usually the result of a changing system in which society is functioning, and has more to do with shifting power relationships within community/culture/country than with a 'moral crisis' as it is often articulated in public discourses (Allman 2001). Following the historical records of prostitutes' work it is clear that, at different periods of time, interpretations regarding sexual conduct varied - from 'natural', 'holy', and 'criminal' - as well as formed different ideological explanations surrounding prostitutes' labour (Truong 1990 : 193).

Another body of literature that this thesis draws on is the scholarship on sex work in developing countries (Brennan 2004; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Lim 1997; Truong 1990). Scholars analysing the expansion of sex industries in Latin America and South Asia link studies in areas of gender, sexuality, tourism, migration and economy. The last three decades have witnessed a great growth in the scale of the global sex trade. In order to see the change in the scope of sex work one can compare the geography of sex industries. For instance, Perry (1978 : 207) observes that in Europe during early modern times '[t]hese "lost women" were not lost at all geographically for everyone in the city knew where to find them'. Communities had more limited areas where prostitutes gathered and could be found, for instance areas surrounding central Nairobi – River Road, Pumwani and Pangani – between the World Wars (White 1990 : 70). The contemporary geography of sex industries is much wider, as Agustin (1998 : 66) notes, sex services are available in a great variety of locations:

...brothels, bars, clubs, discotheques, cabarets, sex shops, peep shows, massage parlours, saunas, hotels, fetish clubs, flats, barber shops, beauty salons, restaurants, karaoke bars, dungeons, bachelor and hen parties and, in fact, anywhere that occurs to anyone, including boats, airplanes, automobiles, parks, the street.

What could have been called the European sex industry a few decades ago nowadays includes sex tourism locations such as Thailand, the Caribbean islands, and Kenyan beaches. In addition, sex workers are often highly mobile and travel to and from cities and countries where money can be made (for example Agustin 1998; Brennan 2004). This is because the sex trade has largely become globalised and internationalised.

Literature points to the fact that global and local sex industries are connected in various ways. For instance, some developing countries (like Thailand, Brazil, Kenya) developed what Lin Lean Lim (1998) calls a 'commercial sex sector' and this sector constitutes a great part of each country's economy (Enloe 2000; Truong 1990). It is important to note that tourist-oriented sex work constitutes only a part of this commercial sex sector, and that local clients form a considerable group of customers. This research aims to link both tourism-

related and local sex work that are usually analysed in the context of AIDS in the literature, as women who sell sex very rarely make such a distinction.

The term 'sex industries' that is often used in academic studies and public discourses is, of course, ambiguous. First, even though sex trade is highly globalised and internationalised, it is not organised in ways that many traditional industries are. Two women selling sex in different locations may have similar problems, but they might not be connected in any formal way. Moreover, one of them might consider herself to be a sex worker, while the other one might be insulted by the alleged association with prostitution or sex work. Which points to the second issue of the usage of the term 'sex industry' – women who seemingly act in a same way and exchange sex for money in seemingly similar circumstances often do not share the same ideas about their identity, and can perceive their actions in very different ways. Whereas two factory workers in different settings are likely to consider themselves to be both factory workers, two women selling sex might have two completely different ideas about their relation to what is called 'sex industries'. Therefore, it can be more correct to speak about multiple disconnected instances of selling sex with different levels of organisation in different places and regions of the world than about global, or in the case of Kenya, national sex industries.

Hence, when I use the term sex industries in this thesis I am referring to such multiple disconnected instances of selling sex rather than to a singular interpretation of what an industry is or what sex work is. For analytical purposes the term 'sex industries' is useful to observe tendencies or similarities of the phenomenon of selling sex. This work will refer to sex industries by denoting the many overlapping ways that women sell sex and approach men that they target.

There is also a great deal of confusion as to who can be called a 'sex worker' and how this differs from the term 'prostitute'. As Bakwesegha (1982 : 5) observed in the 1980s speaking about urban prostitution in Uganda, 'everybody "knows" what "prostitution" is except the experts on the subject'. The term 'prostitute', in many languages and cultures, came to signify a specific identity, or even the

psychological characteristics, of a woman and is often accompanied by negative connotations. For example, the Swahili word 'Malaya', which is often translated as 'prostitute', can mean not only a woman who sells sex, but also a woman who commits adultery (Day 1988 : 424). In addition to that, as Ferguson (1999 : 186) finds in his research on the Zambian Copperbelt, the concept of prostitution is close to worthless in a society where sexual relations have a strong economic content: women are often dependent on men financially and for this reason, merely receiving money for a sexual encounter does not make a woman a prostitute, quite the opposite – such payments and gifts are seen as legitimate and acceptable. The emerging literature on love in Africa (see Cole and Thomas 2009) also points to such relations between sexual and material exchange.

Another term that is often used to refer to women selling sex is a 'sex worker'. The term 'sex worker' was born from the prostitutes' rights movement in Western countries in the 1970s and was formulated to mean a specific form of labour, but not a social identity (Kempadoo 1998 : 3-4). This term is also increasingly adopted by African sex workers' movements and scholars (see Nyong'o 2010; also Tamale 2011a). The term 'sex worker' has a political background, but as this research will show, women who sell sex tell stories that point to a more complicated understanding about their actions than just a form of labour. What many women refer to as 'sex work' usually combines a form of labour with personal life, different identities and reproductive activities.

This research will use the term of 'sex work' to refer to a complex income generating activity, which is often concealed and made to look like a life-style by women in order to increase their profits. Even though words, such as sex worker, prostitute and, in some cases, *Malaya* will be used, all of them will be used to denote an income-generating activity which involves exchange of sex for money, but not to denote specific characteristics or the identity of the person doing this job. Moreover, this thesis will focus on women who aim to exchange sex for money, as opposed to sex in return for food, goods, house rent or any other non-monetary items or services, to make a distinction between 'sex work' and to what is often referred to as transactional or survival sex.

## Linking neo-liberalism and the sex industries

This research links changes in sex work to changes in social life, including political and economic conditions, following from the structural approach of scholars researching prostitution in colonial Kenya (Bujra 1975; 1977; White 1990). The socio-economic changes that take place since the early 1980s will be analysed in order to see the changes in gender relations and power. Neo-liberal influence is important, but by no means the only factor affecting these changes – historical events, contemporary local and global political decisions as well as factors such as population growth or the HIV pandemic are also important in shaping the current status of the gender power relations.

First of all, it will be argued that there is a link between neo-liberal practice and gender inequalities in society. The neo-liberal policy of privatisation leads to the restoration of the (mainly male) elite and their hold on economic power (Harvey 2007 : 19). At the same time, the mainly female marginalised and poor class remains dispossessed of wealth and power. As women are gaining more power by participating in formal labour, it may seem that gendered inequality and patriarchal relations are unsettled by markets; yet it is important to observe that often women are employed only because they are women. Thus it will be argued that the neo-liberal market also exploits unequal gendered labour relations and uses women as a cheap and less problematic labour force. Neo-liberal deregulation policies in Africa not only contributed to extreme poverty but also to the great shift from the formal economy to the informal one (Mbembe 2001 : 53-55). In many developing countries the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) exaggerated gendered poverty, because poor women found themselves excluded from medical services and education – locked in to the poverty they were born to (Babb 2005 : 213). Therefore, neo-liberalism influenced practice is an important link to understanding gender dynamics, inequalities and power relations.

Gender power relations within the socio-economic structures of society are a key area to understand the link between a gendered economy and prostitution. Women, just as men, make choices about their living options. In socio-economic structures that have little opportunities for female employment, or independent



living, women still make choices when deciding to get married, to run away from abusive families, to work as maids, or to become sex workers among other choices (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001a; Showden 2011). Since poverty is feminised, and the informal economy is strongly gendered, many women face engaging in sex related activities as one of the few survival strategies available. This thesis will explore how women who sell sex perceive their possibilities in the neo-liberalism influenced Kenyan economy, and how making choices in the adverse socio-economic structures have led them to sex work.

Finally, the analysis of neo-liberalism inspired practices has to be complemented with the ideas derived from neo-liberal discourses to emphasise the link between neo-liberalism and what is often referred to as the sex industries. Neo-liberal thought emphasises that individual choices and needs, in tandem with market forces, create consumer societies and evoke the process of commodification, during which even the most intimate social aspects of individual life are labelled with a price (Harvey 2007 : 166). For this reason, the discourse surrounding the 'sex industries' often unites ideas about individual freedom to choose, individual entrepreneurship and the market. The female body is often sexed and objectified in that it can be seen as being constructed by public discourses to correspond to male sexual desires and wishes (Barry 1996 : 22). Yet, it is also important to note that the commodified body can also be seen as a tool of the neo-liberal subject that helps to reach certain aims (see for example Hofmann 2010). In this way, women can portray themselves in specific ways that they see as useful for their strategies of manoeuvring socio-economic structures. Racial differences, colonial pasts, poverty, and cultural differences can all be commodified through sex work.

This thesis will explore the ways in which women selling sex attempt to survive or progress in Kenyan society that is defined by neo-liberal socio-economic structures and discourse. Looking at these structures and how women who sell sex manoeuvre them is helpful in the task of troubling the distinction between women selling sex being seen as victims or agents – as is often the case in the Kenyan NGO sector. This thesis will use sex workers' narratives to explore to what extent such distinctions are useful in understanding the realities of the

commercial sex scene in Mombasa, and how much influence neo-liberal ideas have over them.

## Kenya

Kenya was chosen as a case study for this research for several reasons. First of all, Kenya has a long history of orthodox economic decisions and engagement with IFIs. For this reason Kenyan socio-economic and political history is shaped by neo-liberalism in its different phases: early ideas of market fundamentalism, later emphasis on good governance, and the recent shift of bringing the state back in without moving away from the core neo-liberal ideas regarding the long-term importance of free markets. The long history of engagement with neo-liberal ideas in Kenya also allows the analysis of neo-liberalism influenced public discourses.

Second, the Kenyan sex industries are visible and an important part of the country's economy. For instance, according to statistics from the Institute of Tropical Medicine (Vandepitte et al. 2006 : iii23), Kenya has the second highest number of sex workers in sub-Saharan Africa with an estimated 5.5 per cent of the whole female population engaging in paid sex. As was discussed previously, such statistical data is problematic because of the stigma attached to sex work and therefore it is difficult to determine if such numbers are reflecting reality well. Moreover, due to Kenya's popularity for different HIV/AIDS projects or organisations, women can be more outspoken about their sex work than neighbouring countries where such topics can still be a bigger taboo<sup>2</sup>. Yet, the most important factor is that sex work is part of the country's life, and even though it is surrounded by debates about its legal status, morality and promiscuity, the existence of sex industries is acknowledged and often referred to in public discourses. Lastly, the Kenyan Sex Workers Alliance (KSWA) which was formed in 2009 is another sign of the Kenyan sex industries' visibility and suggests a quest for space in the country's political life.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Daughthie Ogutu, the co-founder of the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), 13/05/2011 Nairobi.

Kenya is connected to global processes and the global economy because of its tourism industry, exports, and the fact that it is the financial hub of East Africa with many regional headquarters of international banks, international and regional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multinational corporations and companies that provide accounting, legal and information services based in Nairobi. The long history of neo-liberalisation, incorporation in the global economy, and visibility of the sex industries in the country means that Kenya presents a good case study to investigate the relationship between a neo-liberal global economic system and the sex trade.

The life histories of self-identified Mombasa sex workers will be analysed as part of global processes that shape Kenya's position in the international economy and its participation in global consumer societies. Processes inside the state of Kenya will also be analysed to show how internationally and nationally determined policies affect the population in terms of poverty intensification and increasing gender inequality.

### **Research questions**

The main question that this research aims to answer is as follows:

To what extent, and in what ways, do neo-liberal practice and ideology influence the agency of women selling sex in Kenya?

In order to answer this main question, the research will engage with these sub-questions that help to underpin the main argument:

To what extent and in what way do structures defined by the neo-liberal order position Kenyan women in the economy and society?

How do women manoeuvre these structures to 'elbow out' some space for their agency?

How do women who participate in the 'sex industries' perceive the changing nature of their positions?

What are the strategies sex workers use for survival and advancement? How do these relate to their strategies when selling sex?

To what extent, and in what ways, is the Kenyan commercial sex scene connected to the global spread of neo-liberalism as discourse and practice?

Exploring these research questions this thesis will argue that neo-liberal practice and discourse is an important influence curtailing and shaping the agency of Kenyan women who engage in sex work.

This is so, because neo-liberal practice builds on the pre-existing socio-economic gender structures of society, while they also change gender-power dynamics. For this reason, even though neo-liberal markets seem to give more freedom for women through incorporating them in the labour markets, the opportunities that are available for women are poor and related to the old gender order. Furthermore, because of the changes that resulted from neo-liberal reforms, traditional gender roles and perceptions became difficult to live; new masculinities and femininities that emerge from this process become increasingly connected to sexualities (for men) and commodified, objectified and sexualised bodies (for women).

Moreover, the ambiguous character of neo-liberalism – both building on and destroying socio-economic structures in place – is visible when analysing the strategies that poor women employ in order to make a living. Women use traditional gender roles in order to depend on male wages, but do so in unorthodox ways – cohabitating, but never marrying, being mistresses and saving money for their businesses, having multiple partners, or engaging in sex work. Through these arrangements that fall out of traditional gender structures, women manage to create some space for independent action. The strategies that Mombasa sex workers employ in order to maximise their profits from sex work, clearly indicate women's entrepreneurial agency and ability to manoeuvre structures that disadvantage them. Women perform different gender roles, select places to work from, appearances and behaviour patterns when targeting different groups of clients and internalise market logic well when explaining these choices. An entrepreneurial way of thinking is also clear in sex workers' insights about competition that they relate to concepts of witchcraft and the supernatural.

Women choose different work strategies that are in line with their future plans and dreams. The idea of a 'good life' that prevails in sex workers' dreams for the future indicate women's wishes to break away from their disadvantaged position in society and re-incorporate themselves and their children in a better position within the socio-economic structures of Kenya. Women's plans usually indicate that sex work for them ideally should be only a phase before the next stage in their lives – marriage, business, or work in the formal sector.

However, despite the fact that women make their choices both when considering their work in the sex industries and with regards to their future lives, it is also important that these choices are made in a very limited and difficult environment that limits women's agency. Women perform different gender identities that are in line with social gender norms and plan lives that rarely challenge their disadvantaged position within society. What is more, only part of sex workers exit the sex trade on their own terms – many of them succumb to the challenges inherent in the sex industries and therefore have to exit the sex trade without reaching their dream of a 'good life'. In that case women have to live in very similar, or even worse, conditions than those which resulted in them starting to sell sex.

In all stages of a woman's choice to enter sex work, the way she decides to operate while selling sex, and in forming her ideas of a 'good life' and planning for it, one can observe the neo-liberal footprint. Some women, who internalise entrepreneurial ways of thinking, can use their income and experience from sex work to advance in society. Still, just like in neo-liberal theory, there is always a group of women who will remain in a disadvantaged position in the neo-liberal world, because of the factors inherent to the market logics.

### **Methods and methodology**

This research is seeking to understand the practices and experiences that relate the sex industries and neo-liberalism. For this reason grounded theory methodology was chosen for this thesis. Grounded theory can be described as 'theory that is induced from the data rather than preceding them' (Lincoln and Guba quoted in Cutcliffe 2000 : 1477). In a classic version of this theory,

theoretical insights and conceptual categories are drawn from data, which can then help to explain the topic studied (O'Connor et al. 2008 : 30). This theory is qualitative in its nature, and can use a variety of different sources for data collection: interviews, observations, documentary analysis, media sources, letters, and books (Corbin and Strauss 1990 : 5). Data gathered in these different ways is then interpreted, explored and constantly compared, and thus data collection and analysis is conducted simultaneously. As a result, the researcher is 'guided' through informants and locations by the emerging theory, and allows the research to develop freely with its focus being directed by data (Goulding 1998 : 53). This method is well suited for this research, since it allows studying change while rejecting both strict determinism and non-determinism (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 2008).

Another important reason for the choice of grounded theory is the importance of female sex workers' perspectives for this research. Political research has been criticised by feminist scholars for focusing mainly on official and public figures; this way the female condition and position is excluded from research because they tend to dominate unofficial, private, and the invisible spheres of societies (Burnham et al. 2004 : 271). Thus, a grounded theory research method that generates insights based on data will help to include women's perceptions of the contemporary social-economic situation.

A grounded theory approach was applied throughout the data collection process in this research: data obtained through semi-structured interviews was constantly triangulated with information from grey and academic literature. The interview data was the main force in forming the main argument of this thesis.

This research uses data triangulation between sources collected through primary and secondary means. In order to collect primary data, two types of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The first group of interviewees consisted of representatives of various nongovernmental and governmental organisations, movements that work in various fields including gender, sexuality, health, poverty relief, and public policy. The second group of

interviewees were women engaged in the sex trade themselves. Information obtained through interviews was complemented by observations. Even though observation played a less important role in this research, as the main source of data was experiences lived by people in Mombasa, the observation of social relations provided the researcher with data useful for the research as a whole. Secondary data includes media reports, government documents, and secondary literature. Triangulating data gathered from different sources facilitated an analysis of the connection between sex work and neo-liberalism from different perspectives and therefore a better understanding of their connections.

### Research location

This thesis is largely based on primary data collected during the period of October 2010 to May 2011 in Nairobi and Mombasa. Nairobi is Kenya's capital city and the main hub for many international and local NGOs as well as government offices, and interviews were mainly conducted with people who engage with the sex industries from a professional perspective, such as health clinic workers, donors supporting sex workers-activism, sex worker-activists, people engaged with the promotion of women's rights, academics writing on neo-liberal reforms or gender, and many others. The Kenyan National Archives and the archives of two main daily newspapers (*The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*) were also consulted.

However, Mombasa was the main location of the research where I spent six months conducting interviews with people in the non-governmental sector and women who identified themselves as sex workers.

Rather than a small village or town, the coastal city of Mombasa was chosen in order to be able to observe different types of sex work. Mombasa is the second biggest Kenyan city with a population of approximately 452.000 in 2009<sup>3</sup>. As Mombasa is the main port of Kenya, it has a number of foreign sailors entering the city every day. In addition to sailors, a large number of international and national tourists visit the city and its surroundings for beach holidays. Finally, a reasonable number of Western men reside in Mombasa and its surrounding

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<sup>3</sup><https://opendata.go.ke/>

areas due to their work or retirement arrangements. Local men and all these different types of people are targeted by sex workers in different ways, and so the choice of Mombasa as a research location allows studying sex industries as a complex, multi-layered entity. The second reason why Mombasa was chosen as a research location is the range of NGOs and institutions present in the city that work on the issues of gender, sexuality, and development, such as Solidarity with Women in Distress (SOLWODI) and the International Centre for Reproductive Health (ICRH).

## **Primary data**

### *Interviews with sex workers*

Interviews with women who identify themselves as sex workers are at the centre of this research. In order to find participants for my research I contacted the Solidarity with Women in Distress (SOLWODI) office in Mombasa. SOLWODI helps women who are in the sex industries to get qualification training, provides them with knowledge about HIV/AIDS, and has support groups. The organisation allowed me to accompany a field coordinator in her meetings with women who used to be sex workers, have benefited from SOLWODI's trainings, and now have their own businesses. During these field trips and interactions with people at the SOLWODI office I found a research assistant, who was employed by the organisation as one of the field coordinators and whose job involved going out to bars and clubs at night, speaking to sex workers, and letting them know about HIV/AIDS and other programmes that SOLWODI run. The research assistant used to be a sex worker herself, so she knew many active sex workers, their operation places, schedules, and other details of sex industries that were of great value to the research.

SOLWODI was of crucial importance for this research, because it allowed forming initial contacts with women who sell sex; however, after these initial contacts, research participants were found using a snow-balling technique and research was carried out independently from SOLWODI activities. This independence of research was aimed for by the researcher, because the thesis problematises both the reformist agenda of NGOs such as SOLWODI and the sex



workers' rights agenda of the movements such as KSWA that were also consulted for the research. The main source of information for this thesis are the voices and stories of women that were contacted through a snowballing technique and who have different opinions on, and affiliations to, the NGO sector targeting sex workers – some of the women in this research are connected to the 'reforming' NGOs and benefit from their programmes, others are affiliated to the sex workers' movement, still others have sceptical opinions of both.

Together with my research assistant we discussed the composition of the Mombasa sex work scene and identified different groups of sex workers that we aimed to interview. This included women who are new to the industry and those who have been in the sex trade for longer periods; those who trade sex for survival reasons and women who are 'doing well' in sex work; young and middle-aged women, those engaged in sex work as part-time and full-time occupation; those who target local men, tourists, and sailors; and those who operate in bars, clubs, beaches, streets and other locations. My research assistant identified several women with whom I started interviews, and, after speaking with these women, I asked them if they knew anyone else who would be interested in talking to me. Using this snowball technique, I interviewed 41 women who identified themselves as sex workers and who were of different income, backgrounds, and ages. I interviewed only adult women, who are at least 18 years old, and for this reason I had to turn several potential underage interviewees down. Yet, I cannot be sure that none of the women lied about their age. The youngest interviewee was 18 years old, the oldest 44 years old.

The initial interviews that my research assistant arranged took place in the SOLWODI offices where I had a separate room to speak to sex workers. However, many of the following interviews took place in my research assistant's house, as women felt more comfortable just stopping by, spending some time with us, and not necessarily speaking to me that day. Indeed, many of the women whom I eventually interviewed I had met on several occasions; they came with their friends to my research assistant's house or just stopped by while I was around. I believe that spending time with these women, eating

lunches, and watching films together at my research assistant's house was a very important part of my research for several reasons. First, it allowed some valuable observations. Second, it helped me to establish a degree of trust, as a result of which, during the interview women were able to be relatively open with me even on controversial topics. For example, some of them admitted that they steal from their clients, which is considered to be extremely bad behaviour among sex workers, while other women told me that they have had abortions, which is illegal in Kenya.

My research assistant would normally introduce me to women, tell them that I was interested in their life-stories and that I am writing a dissertation about sex workers of Mombasa. If a woman agreed to be interviewed, I explained to her in detail what my research is about, how the research material would be used, and ensured that the anonymity of their identity will be maintained. I also asked if they were happy for me to use the voice recorder. I did not ask women to sign consent forms, as many of them did not go to school and could not read and at the beginning of the interview I did not have any information about the woman's education, so I did not want to insult them or put them in an uncomfortable position. Yet all the interviews I conducted had verbal consent (that I recorded on an audio recorder if the woman agreed for me to use it, or, alternatively, in my notes). While explaining that all interviews are anonymous and before starting to record, I asked women to think about the nick-name that they would want me to use in my research when referring to their story. This way, when I started audio recording, women were presenting themselves with a nick-name and could be sure that their anonymity will be maintained. Six women did not want to be recorded, so I took notes during our conversation instead.

Most interviews were conducted in English as the majority of women have good knowledge of this language. Still, seven interviewees did not speak English but Swahili, so our conversation was translated by my research assistant, or, in one case, by the interviewee's friend.

In-depth open-ended and semi-structured interviews were conducted, so interviewees had an opportunity to tell their own story (Devine 1995 : 199). I usually started with questions about where they were born, how many siblings they had, what did their parents do, did they go to school, and how many classes they completed. Usually these initial questions opened the way for women to tell their remaining life-story the way they wanted me to hear it. While women were telling their life-stories, I asked additional questions about why they made some choices and what were the alternatives (with regards to jobs and income generating activities), what changes they saw in society and the sex industries in their experience, who they saw as important actors in their lives, about their strategies for making money, how they spend the money that they earn, what their plans for the future are, and so forth. This method of semi-structured interview, which could be called interview-conversation, was employed because it allowed me to record the narratives and interpretations of women regarding their reality, which are often standing in stark contrast to global dominant narratives. As Tettey (2008 : 163) notes, such a method 'also gives subalterns the opportunity to voice their interpretation of realities, their location within them, how they negotiate them, and why they relate to them the way they do'. In addition to this, the collection of life stories is important not only as a documentation of personal experiences, but also as an indication of social structures, social movements, and institutions (Connell 2005 : 89), which is an important part of this research project.

The openness of the interviews also helped to investigate unexpected topics that became evident after the investigation had already begun (Bouma et al. 1995 : 207). For example, the importance of witchcraft and the supernatural, religious beliefs, and ethnic politics were brought by interviewees and followed up by me. This type of interview was also chosen because it allowed for further probing when relevant, and this was especially important when speaking about daily life, consumption patterns, and many other questions relevant to the central research questions. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1.5 hours, most of them averaging around 40 minutes of recorded conversation.

Political science and the spheres of public politics that are being studied, as Randal observes, are still often silent about the 'gender dynamics' of contemporary processes (2002 : 113). Women's subjective experiences, and the meaning that they attach to it, are of key importance in this research but are not well documented in the academic literature (most studies concerned with sex workers are conducted in the context of HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention). Therefore, methods employed in data collection helped to fill in this gap.

### *Interviews with people, employed in the formal sector*

In addition to interviews with sex workers, interviews with a wide range of organisations and personalities in Mombasa and Nairobi were conducted.

Professionals working in areas of gender, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and development were targeted for the first interviews. Then, using a snow-ball technique I contacted more people who were recommended to me as having knowledge in the area of my research: Kenyan feminists, activists, academics and people working in various NGOs. Semi structured interviews with such professionals were conducted. These interviews served as background information in understanding the environment where sex workers operate, the help and support that is available for them, the problems that they encounter legally and economically, as well as the activism around sex workers issues. Therefore, questions varied greatly depending on the expertise of the interviewee. All the informants gave their consent for the interview, which was recorded on the tape-recorder or notebook.

### **Secondary data**

The secondary data sources that are utilised by this research fall into three main groups: academic literature, 'grey' literature and publications in the press.

Academic literature helps to form conceptual methodologies, provide the framework for the research, and supply general information on the research topics. 'Grey' literature includes reports and other documents like brochures or newsletters that are produced by local and international NGOs, research

institutions and international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Part of such data was given to me by people who were participants of this research, other information I got from publicly available sources, such as organisations' websites. Finally, information that appears in the media (such as the BBC, or the two main daily national Kenyan newspapers *the Standard* and *Daily Nation*) was analysed and included in the research.

### **Ethical considerations**

This research complied with the ethical recommendations of both the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee and the ethical requirements attached to the research permit by the Ministry of Science and Technology of Kenya.

### ***Anonymity***

Sex workers are in a grey zone of legality; therefore all information obtained during these interviews was strictly anonymised for the safety of research participants. Only interviewees who work in public office and consented to be identified (for example representatives of NGOs, activists) are named. All the remaining interviewees are referred to according to how much information the interviewee wanted to disclose. All interviewees gave their formal consent either in writing or verbally with verbal consent recorded on an audio-recorder or notebook. The names of bars, clubs, and other locations that women mention in their interviews are also anonymised in this thesis.

### ***Potentially painful interview topics***

Before the interview I always told the interviewees that we can stop the interview and that they can change their mind and not speak to me at any point. Sometimes when women told me about difficult experiences in their lives I saw that they were getting upset and offered to stop the interview. However, none of the women agreed to stop speaking. For example, when Miriam (31 years old) started crying recounting the story of how she went to sell sex for the first time, I told her that we should stop, and that I did not want to make her feel sad. However, Miriam disagreed. She said that she wanted me to know her story and

write about it, and continued telling her story. Moments like this were the most difficult part of my fieldwork as a researcher.

Literature on the methodological and ethical issues in potentially sensitive topics' research emphasise the importance of listening and support during the interview, since some research participants find the experience of telling their stories cathartic and bringing them the sense of relief (Jewkes et al. 2000; Rosenthal 2003). During the interviews with my informants I used what Rosenthal (2003: 919) calls 'active listening' technique. It means that in the difficult moments in the talk, when the interviewee was getting upset or started crying, I was responding with emphatic understanding by showing interest in understanding the respondent's situation and willingness to be open to her feelings. I aimed to create the environment where women could speak without judgement and could feel safe.

In addition to listening to women recounting the painful or traumatising experiences and supporting them emotionally, I often offered information that could be useful in relation to their problems. For example, if a woman was scared about an HIV infection, I made sure that she knows where and how she can get tested and for free. I usually was referring them to the services provided by the international and local NGOs working in the field, which I knew about from my interviews with the NGO sector and from conversations with my research assistant.

### *Managing participants' expectations*

The fact that I am an outsider from Europe in Kenya meant that some interviewees had expectations that were beyond the researcher's abilities or scope of the research.

Interviewees from NGO sector or local communities sometimes hoped that I could find contacts in Europe through which they could secure more funding for their activities. Local actors sometimes hoped that I could help to fund some of their activities (for example, support their schooling program). However, I could not help with any of these or similar expectations. For this reason, before arranging the interview I was always clear about the fact that I cannot provide

any material help and that I am coming as a University student with no links to European NGOs. In some cases after the interview I could provide information about funding possibilities within Kenya (about which I knew from my other interviews), or in Europe; but while arranging the initial interview, I was always clear about the purpose of the interview and my affiliation.

Managing the expectations of my research assistant proved more difficult. Even though we had agreed on the work conditions, responsibilities and payment at the beginning of our work, I was asked to assist with unexpected situations on several occasions. In cases where I was asked for money, I was just providing payment for the future work, and made clear that this is the future salary that I am giving. Yet, there were more complicated situations where I actually had to go and help my assistant to get home, in hospital or with her other responsibilities in her job. Even though such help was beyond my role as a researcher, I still helped as a friend as long as such help did not create a relationship of dependency. What started as a strictly work relationship with my assistant at the beginning of the research was transformed to a more personal relationship at the later stages, which mean that managing expectations became more difficult.

Finally, interviews with sex workers proved to be less problematic than anticipated. The issue of compensating women for participating in research was discussed with my research assistant. As Van den Borne (2005 : 19) points out discussing the methods that she employed conducting research with Malawian sex workers, since women that take part in the research lose the opportunity to earn money while participating in the research, compensation for their time is necessary. In my case, I was interviewing women during day time and usually when they would not be engaging in the sex trade. However, most women travelled from different parts of Mombasa or villages around to meet me, so I compensated them for their travel expenses and provided them with lunch. In cases when interviews took place at my research assistant's house, I bought the food that we all cooked after; in cases when interviews took place in SOLWODI offices, I had lunch with my informants in the nearby café.

### *Data storage*

All data collected is anonymised. Only anonymous data is stored. A coded file with names and files is kept in a locked cabinet. All written field notes (about interviews, participant observation) are locked in cabinets and all electronic data is kept on password protected computers and uploaded to the University M:/ drive where it is possible to maintain security.

### **Structure of thesis**

This thesis consists of six main chapters and a conclusion which brings the main arguments together.

The second and third chapters provide the necessary background for the thesis. The second chapter will look at political economy and social change in Kenya since independence. The continuities in Kenyan politics and economy will be emphasised and changes that came with neo-liberal structural adjustment discussed. This chapter will explain the contemporary political economy of Kenya and outline the major influences that define its character. Neo-liberalism will be discussed as a major force in this process, yet other important aspects such as population growth, patronage, ethnicity-centred politics, and HIV/AIDS pandemic will be touched upon as well. This chapter will serve as a point of reference for further analysis.

The third chapter will explore gender in Kenya. It will be argued that neo-liberalism induced changing material realities together with neo-liberal discourse affect both Kenyan men and women in different ways and have an influence on people's self-perceptions and understandings of masculinity and femininity. The first part will explore how neo-liberal economic restructuring affected Kenyan socio-economic structures. Thus, the diminishing economic power of many men, and the implications of the process will be analysed. Moreover, the ambiguity of the position that many women occupy in the Kenyan economy will be discussed: women are increasingly included in labour markets, but at the same time they are increasingly excluded from mainstream economies because of a lack of education, an increased burden at home, and the informal nature of work that is available to them, so that they often continue to



depend on the income of men. The second part of the chapter will look into changing masculinities and femininities. First, and following on from the financial disempowerment discussed, changes in people's understanding of what it means to be a man and perceived masculinities will be analysed. After that, changes in femininities, processes of commodification, objectification, and sexualisation will be explored.

The shift in positions that men and women occupy in society will be further analysed from the perspective of Mombasa sex workers in chapter four. It will be argued that in a 'situation of duress' Kenyan women often continue to be dependent on male wages due to the existing socio-economic structures; yet, the way women attempt to frame such dependency is gaining new features in the neo-liberal era. First, women face difficulties in the labour market and attempt to depend on male wages in new ways (cohabiting, but not marrying, having multiple partners, informal marriages); this tendency will be explored with sex work presented as one of such strategies. The commodification of love will be further analysed in the section on how sex workers perceived male desires and structure their work and life strategies accordingly. The contemporary sex industries build on cultural, socio-economic realities and reflect the neo-liberal commodification of love, patriarchy, and the income inequalities of society. At the same time, a process of commodification allows sex workers to profit from the socio-economic inequalities, and through this, their role in local society starts changing as well: sex workers income is relied upon by local businesses and benefits not only sex workers and their families, but also an extended circle of actors in the local communities, as will be explored in the last part of this chapter.

The fifth chapter will further explore sex workers' agency within neo-liberalism influenced structures. It will be argued that a neo-liberal footprint can be observed in the functioning of sex work: women attempt to exploit the market by crossing the boundaries, adapting their appearance and behaviour, and perceive themselves as entrepreneurial agents. Moreover, the neo-liberal logics of the sex industries can be further illustrated by the fierce and at times violent competition among sex workers. This chapter will first explore how women

exploit the prevailing trends, life situations, inequalities and perceived male desires in order to maximise their profits by crossing various borders in society. Then the analysis will move to the exploration of competition in sex industries and how it is seen as being connected to witchcraft and supernatural beliefs by some women. Supernatural beliefs will be analysed as a tool that helps sex workers to deal with their ambiguous position: in order to be successful women have to be alone and trust no colleagues because of competition; yet, in order to stay safe in sex trade, women have to cooperate and help each other.

Chapter six explores the dreams of women in the sex industry and reveals how sex workers aim to change their status quo, improve their financial and social situation, and break out of the cycle of poverty. First, the chapter will analyse the notion of a 'good life' that prevails in sex workers' narratives and reflect on what such a 'good life' consists of. The materiality of sex workers' dreams in a political economy of scarcity, and women's willingness to change their position will be discussed. Second, the future plans of sex workers and desired outcomes of the sex trade (through marriage or through work) will be analysed. Finally, the chapter will look into what dreams sex workers have for their children; this will reveal that while women in the sex industry understand well their limited opportunities because of their disadvantageous positions (lack of education, skills, capital) and wish for rich husbands or businesses as ways to exit sex work and live a better life, for their children they have a completely different set of dreams – a life with good education and professions that can ensure an independent existence and material comforts. The analysis of plans and future dreams of women in the sex industries is important as a sign of attempts to challenge the disadvantaged position that women occupy in Kenyan society.

The dreams of sex workers discussed in chapter six are often in contrast with the realities faced by women in the sex trade. The seventh chapter will draw on the structures that define local globalised economies and thereby limit women's opportunities, and examine the structures that are inherent in the sex industries to show why many sex workers do not manage to live their dreams and 'good life'. The first part of the chapter will look at the challenges that define sex work– the need and temptation to spend a lot of money in order to

get better clients and make more money; the possibilities of getting pregnant and the difficulties arising from such an event; alcohol, drug addiction and risks of violence; and the possibility of being infected with HIV/AIDS or other diseases. Sex workers' experiences will show that it is difficult to safely manoeuvre the sex industries in order to reach the aim of the imagined 'good life'. The second part of this chapter explores the possible options for an exit from sex work with the help of the non-governmental sector and will argue that most attempts to help women in distress to exit the sex trade are built on the structural inequalities that pushed women into such occupations in the first place. Moreover, the NGOs and movements that aim to help women to leave the sex trade usually see sex workers as victims (hence, the reforming NGOs), or as entrepreneurial agents (for instance sex workers' movements). This chapter will argue that both of these attitudes are unhelpful in understanding the realities of sex work. For these reasons, many NGOs do not succeed in improving the life of sex workers or manage to do so to a very limited extent. Yet, a new trend of making an exit from sex work by building on the experience of being a sex worker will also be analysed to show that some women actually manage to leave sex work on their own terms.

In the concluding chapter I will reflect on women's agency in neo-liberalism influenced structures and its limits. The experiences of Mombasa sex workers will be analysed as part of global processes influenced by neo-liberal practice and discourse. The duality of neo-liberalism will be brought back to the analysis – even though some women manage to manoeuvre sex industries and through their entrepreneurial agency leave 'survival circuits' and stop being 'an exception', many women are unsuccessful in this undertaking. Therefore, it will be argued that in a neo-liberalism influenced socio-economic system individuals that internalise neo-liberal logic well can succeed, but such individual agency does not challenge the structures itself and therefore is limited.

The discussion of female agency in a neo-liberal world that forms the backbone of this thesis adds new dimensions to many academic debates. First, the debate about gender in neo-liberalism does not limit itself to only neo-liberal ideas, practices, or discourses and unites all of them, which allows for a more complex

analysis. Women's agency can then be discussed as influenced by neoliberalism as practice, as well as discourse or ideology. Second, a discussion of the commodification of the female body and sexuality in this research shows that such processes can be employed as part of the strategy of women to progress or reach certain aims in life, which brings together debates of commodification with debates of pertaining to agency. Third, the analysis of sex workers' dreams and plans for future adds to the literature on risky sexual behaviour in a new way as it shows the motivations for it. Moreover, by looking at women in local socio-economic life, sex workers are analysed as important local economic actors, who, in some cases, capitalise on their experiences of sex work or of being HIV/AIDS positive for their own benefit. Finally, this thesis explores how neo-liberal ideas are internalised by women in the sex industries and how this means that sex workers adapt different gender identities when targeting different clients and employ the market language of competition when explaining their choices, which adds to the growing body of literature on neo-liberal societies in Africa.

## 2. Political economy and social development in Kenya since independence

*'All major social forces have precursors, precedents, analogs, and sources in the past. It is these deep and multiple genealogies that have frustrated the aspirations of modernizers in very different societies to synchronise their historical watches.'*  
(Appadurai 1996 : 2)

It is often appealing to separate the economic and political spheres of certain countries for analytical reasons. Yet, as Hornsby (2012 : 4) points out, such a sharp division is of limited use, since politics and economics are intertwined to such a degree that one cannot be discussed without considering the other. For instance, various redistributive and growth-oriented economic policies in the history of independent Kenya can only be fully understood when one considers who was benefiting from them at certain periods of time (ibid). For this reason, this chapter will explore both economic and political developments in Kenya since independence in order to set the stage for further analysis.

The main argument that this chapter puts forward is that the contemporary moment in Kenyan political economy is heavily influenced by neo-liberal reforms implemented since the 1980s. However, neo-liberal practice alone cannot explain all particularities of the workings of Kenyan socio-economic life. For this reason, the history of Kenya's political economy and society will be overviewed and the key important aspects, events and changes pointed out.

Kenyan post-independence economic history is generally seen by economists as consisting of three main periods (Legovini 2002; Swamy 1994; wa Githinji and Holmquist 2009). The first period was marked by economic growth and the expansion of social services, and lasted from independence in 1963 until the early 1980s. The second period, which started with the oil shock of 1979, coincided with the end of the cash crop boom in Europe and severe droughts in East Africa (Ilfie 2007 : 260); and therefore its main features were slow or

negative economic growth, losses in social provisions for the Kenyan population, increasing poverty, and the country's engagement with international financial institutions. The third period started with Mwai Kibaki's presidency in 2003. During this period Kenyan economy started to grow again, yet, as this chapter will show, the economic growth did not translate into increasing equality or prosperity for the majority of Kenyans, rather the opposite –social and economic inequalities deepened and opportunities available for the poor remained limited.

The political history of independent Kenya is also considered as consisting of three main periods (Hornsby 2012; Iliffe 2007). The first two periods were presidencies of Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi. Like in many African states, both periods were marked by one-party (KANU) rule and clientelism, in combination with centralised and bureaucratic politics. Kenya, in stark contrast with its neighbours, managed to avoid wars and military coups (Hornsby 2012 : 3). Whereas both presidencies had their similarities in terms of authoritarianism, centralisation of power, and ethnic bias, it was different parts of Kenya that benefited from such policies under different presidents. As wa Githinji (2012 : 13) argues, the mechanism of Kenyan administration was inherited from colonial administration and based on ethnic authorities; moreover, the system was:

...a winner takes all system of elections in a capitalist political economy but with a relatively weak capitalist class. In this context the state is a major player in the economy and the president particularly has tremendous powers in making appointments to various state owned or public-private enterprises.

This meant that politicians rewarded key support bases with access to state resources. As a result, Kanyinga (2004 : 264) observes how, analysis of poverty by districts in Kenya shows that central province, which is predominantly Kikuyu, the ethnic group of presidents Kenyatta and Kibaki, is more developed than other regions. The second most developed areas coincide with areas of Kalenjin, Meru and Kamba ethnic groups that were promoted by President Moi. Ethnic groups that benefit from access to state resources changed over time depending on the changes in presidency and resulted in visible inequalities among different regions within the country. The third political period in terms

of political history started with externally endorsed general multi-party elections that ended one-party rule in 1992 (Iliffe 2007 : 300). Even though Daniel arap Moi retained his position as the president of the state and KANU won the majority of the seats in parliament, the elections of 1992 are considered to be the beginning of the democratisation process in the country (Barkan 1993 : 85).

This chapter will explore how economic and political decisions influence one another alongside the material realities of people in Kenya since independence. Hornsby's (2012 : 4) observation that wealth is of extreme importance on the route to power, and political power is salient for wealth accumulation in Kenya, is key for understanding these developments. Political change can be seen as the continuity of a declining economic situation. At the same time, economic decline was also partly influenced by political decisions, as I will discuss below. For this reason this chapter will first look into the socio-economic and cultural developments of the 1960s and 1980s, before moving on to the period that started in the 1980s, and then continuing to explore the current moment.

### **Kenyan political economy and social development, 1963 - 1980**

Independence and the creation of the Kenyan state were followed by years of optimism. Economic expansion, which was propelled by the commodity boom of the post-war years in the 1950s, continued with annual average real growth rates of five to eight per cent until the 1980s (Legovini 2002). New national leaders were inspired by their political success, encouraged by such continuous economic growth and aimed at replicating the modern states of the time with development plans and the bureaucratic control of industry (Iliffe 2007 : 260).

A 'mixed economy' was the chosen development strategy of the Kenyan state. This strategy meant that the state would play an entrepreneurial role and encourage the rise of African capitalists. According to this strategy, these African capitalists would come to replace state capitalism once they were strong enough (Himbara 1994 : 471). The sessional paper no. 10 'African socialism and its application to planning in Kenya' (RoK 1965) which set out the objectives of the KANU government, outlined political equality, social justice,

human dignity, freedom from want, disease and exploitation, equal opportunities, and high (and growing) per capita income equitably distributed as the main aims and objectives of Kenyan development. This strategy, also maintained that, as Gertzel (1984 : 429) points out, 'the objectives of equity and justice could be achieved within a merit-based, achievement-oriented competitive society which recognised and rewarded individual initiative'. It is interesting that independent Kenya was putting emphasis on the individual, competition, and merit as the important basis for society's development, as these aspects are considered to be the corner stones in contemporary neo-liberal understandings of how growth can be achieved (Harvey 2007; Turner 2008). Yet, the Kenyan government's take on the role of the state in the process of development was very different from a neo-liberal one, as the state's role was recognised as key for facilitating such a process, just as outlined in the development theories of the time.

During the first two decades of independence Kenya was seen as a success story by Western countries. In the early years of independence a number of political economists (see Beckman 1980; Kaplinsky 1980; Leys 1975, 1978; Schatzberg 1987) analysed the example of Kenya in what became known as the 'Kenya debate'. The question of whether the dependency model could be applicable to the Kenyan experience or not, was at the core of this debate. Some scholars, for example, Langdon (1975 : 26), maintained that Kenya's incorporation into the international capitalist economy is best described through 'enduring dependency relations between Kenyan and the centres of the international economy'. Kaplinsky (1980 : 104), who was also a student of the dependency school, believed that even though the Kenyan indigenous capitalist class managed to benefit from its relation to foreign capital and accumulate through industry, 'the inbuilt contradictions of economies of this type [small non-oil producers like Kenya] make it difficult to foresee that such a pattern of accumulation — with or without foreign capital — can proceed in a viable form.' The other side of the Kenya debate – scholars that were critiquing the dependency theorists – were inspired by the successful industrialisation of several Latin American and Asian countries. Building on the Marxist analysis of



the development of capitalism and imperialism, Leys (1978) argued that Kenya had the prerequisites for a 'transition to the capitalist mode of production', which became possible because of the emergence of a domestic bourgeoisie and its control of the state. Revisionist scholars saw the Africanisation of the private sector as a success, which indicated progress in the industrial realm as foreign actors were replaced in the Kenyan economy.

Scholars participating in the Kenya debate were building on the economic development theories of the time and their outstanding analysis of the structural factors affecting the Kenyan economy is a valuable addition to development theory. However, as Berman (1998 : 307) points out, such analyses were 'uncomfortable with cultural factors that suggest African idiosyncrasy and difference within the global development of the capitalist world system.' Therefore, as Berman (1998 : 308) continues, in order to understand the African state, it is necessary to adopt a historical approach and consider the cultural logics of politics, which can be understood through the analysis of linkages between cultural rationality and material political and economic dynamics. In the case of Kenya, it is important then to understand the relationships between power and politics, ethnicity and class, and patronage networks and accumulation.

### **Power, wealth, ethnicity and patronage**

Like all societies, African societies have always been marked by multifaceted differentiations of wealth and power (Berman 1998; Iliffe 2007). It is important to point out that in pre-colonial African polities power was not based on control of land, because land was plentiful. As Herbst (2000 : 36-41) argues, control of the land 'was often not contested because it was often easier to escape from rulers than to fight them.' As a result, and in response to population scarcity in Africa, it was rights over people that were important signifiers of power. Relations of domination and dependency were based on patriarchal power that cut across differences of gender, generation, lineage, clan, language and culture; and thus the power relations of pre-colonial Africa were usually of patrons and clients (Berman 1998 : 310). These power relations extended from the household level to the communities and to bigger political units. Formal

political control was not an easy achievement, as it had to be constructed through the establishment of loyalties and oppression (Herbst 2000 : 41). 'Big men' – who controlled complex networks of clients – had reciprocal but unequal relations with 'small boys', governed their women and children (Berman 1998 : 310-311), and drew their power from unequal patron-client relations. However, as Schatzberg (2001 : 24) notes, in the African context such power of the 'chief' came with fatherly responsibilities. It was the responsibility of a 'big man' to nourish, provide and protect those over whom he exercised his power. 'His own kind' had to be seen to have enough to eat, decent clothing, shelter, and healthcare. In addition to that, a man also had to be a 'teacher' and make sure that young ones are decently raised and kept moral values and ethics (Schatzberg 2001 : 148). As a result, powerful 'big men' had to accumulate wealth in order to maintain their client networks and provide for their dependents, as only in this way could they continue to be powerful.

The arrival of colonialists modified the dynamics of patron-client relations. Metropolitan states did not want to invest a lot into the civil apparatus and the administration of their colonies (Herbst 2000 : 68). For this reason, colonial states applied the strategy of divide and rule: African political activities were fragmented and isolated from each other so that no sustained alliances against colonial rule would be formed (Berman 1998; Mamdani 1996). Each administrative unit ideally contained a single 'tribe' and people lived with indigenous and newly invented institutions and structures of authority. Relationships between local authorities and the colonial administration took a patron-client form, as colonial administrators were providing local chiefs with sources of income, rewarding them and elders with some profits of commodity production and trade, and this way securing their loyalty (Berman, 1998: 316). This system had some unexpected outcomes and shifts in the existing local power relations: the chiefs and headmen in their active quest for accumulation of wealth distributed patronage to their kin and supporters, and often abused their powers to punish enemies and extorted extra-legal payments from populations under their control. Lonsdale refers to this process as the 'vulgarisation' of power (Lonsdale 1992a : 5). Such actions started the

processes of social differentiation, class formation and created the base for class conflicts and construction of more bounded and politically salient ethnic identities (Berman 1998 : 317).

The new sources of wealth that came with colonial commercial farming, the building of cities and missionary education, were extremely important in expanding areas of patronage networks. Ethnicity, which used to be relatively fluid and negotiable in pre-colonial times, became more rigid and singular during the years of colonialism (Lynch 2006 : 49); as such, it has been at the centre of Kenyan class formation. As Berman (1998 : 331) points out, a dominant class emerged from many overlapping groups of chiefs and elders, literate intellectuals, successful farmers and traders who were interested in claiming their customary rights to control land and labour, as well as being eager to maintain social networks of clientage. Meanwhile, poor and disadvantaged people used ethnicity to support their access to land and other resources, while reminding the wealthy and powerful of their responsibility to care for their kin. During colonial times, ethnicity came to be an important aspect of the organisation of social and patronage networks.

Independent Kenyan politics focused on the presidency and, as Gertzel (1984 : 410) observes, manifested the continuity of colonial power dynamics – the presidential institution was based on the principles of patronage which required that political leaders would sustain a local base if they wanted to remain in power. Patronage was distributed through the party and, interestingly, such workings resulted in a highly participatory political system, where local pressures were exercised through the party mechanism ‘right up to the President’ (ibid.). As Peel (1984 : 182) reiterates, traditional norms of redistribution and communal responsibility were continued to be practiced, because political and economic elites saw such a system as being beneficial for them. Networks of patronage were important as a basis for political support and were increasingly organised around ethnicity. The state, at the same time, played a central role for the accumulation of wealth. As Berman, citing Bayart, (1998 : 334) observes:

”Civil service departments and public enterprises constitute virtually bottomless financial reservoirs for those who manage them, and for the political authorities which head them.” The result has been the extension of ethnically-based patron-client networks to the very centre of the state apparatus, with their ramifying linkages reaching from cabinet to village to produce what J-F. Bayart graphically describes as the 'rhizome state'.

For this reason, understanding ethnicity based networks of patronage is of extreme importance when analysing the political economy of independent Kenya, as it helps to explain the Kenyan government’s decisions over time and people’s perceptions of them.

## **Agriculture**

The Kenyan economy was shaped by its colonial experience – as Schatzberg (1987 : 2) points out, the British designed Kenyan economic policies in accordance with the needs of the metropolitan economy. For this reason, production concentrated mainly on the export of primary products, while importing (mainly British) manufactured goods that were required (Adedeji 1984 : 196). As a result, secondary and tertiary economic activities, that are necessary for the development of local industries, were not well developed at the time of independence (Schatzberg 1987 : 2). It was agriculture that has generally been the source of wealth in Kenya and, in the post-war cash-crop boom period, sustained the continuous growth of the economy. As a result, a bias towards rural development and agriculture were important in independent Kenya’s development policies.

The Kenyan government saw smallholder agriculture as key for the country’s development. For that reason, half a million hectares of land were used to resettle about 34,000 families of farmers (Legovini 2002 : 14). Farmers were encouraged to grow tea and coffee, as well as hybridised maize, and peasant production expanded greatly (Iliffe 2007 : 260). Expanded agricultural production was enforced by self-help programmes that also contributed to agricultural growth. Yet, it is important to point out that there were great regional differences in such tendencies and that the post-independence agricultural expansion contributed to increasing socio-economic inequalities. As Gertzel (1984 : 442) argues, the land reform programme modified the patterns

of land distribution in rural societies, with poor peasants being the most disadvantaged, as wage earners and richer farmers started expanding their land into the former 'African areas'. Moreover, division and 'Africanisation' of land previously owned by European expatriates initially absorbed the expanding population; however, rapid population growth with close to eight births per woman (Odile and McNicoll 1987 : 209) meant that marginal land was divided by more people and as a result of that, increased the numbers of rural poor (Ilfte 2007 : 261).

It is important to point out that, in contrast to many other African countries, in Kenya there was a strong relationship between the national urban elite and involvement in agriculture. As Peel (1984 : 168) observes, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, food shortages, inflation, and rising prices motivated some members of the elite to move into large-scale farming of food-crops that were intended for urban consumption. The elite used their connections and influence to obtain more land and to get financial support from state institutions. For example Legovini (2002 : 14) notes that as a result of large farmers' lobbying efforts, prices for Kenyan farmers' output were very competitive and reached 90 per cent of international prices. Such policies immediately delivered an increase of agricultural output and economic growth. Yet, as she continues, the marketing parastatals that were responsible for the control of interregional movements of agricultural produce, often kept producer prices above market prices, and as a result of such policies, parastatals such as National Cereal and Produce Board or Tea and Coffee Board were important reasons for fiscal imbalances in public finances.

Whereas such policies were labelled as 'irrational' by IFIs, given the political context of the time, they were in no way irrational. As Ilffe (2007 : 264) points out, policies that were implemented in the early years of independence were primarily political, not economic. Seeing the example of Congo breakdown in front of them, African political leaders aimed at strengthening the state and avoiding state collapse. And they did that in a way they knew best – through the strengthening of governmental controls and the multiplication of networks of patronage. Supplying constituents with good prices for their agricultural

produce and providing jobs for people from their patronage networks was seen as a way to ensure the political stability of the government (Bates 1989; 1987).

### **'Africanisation' of the private sector**

Whereas a strong focus on agricultural development was an important part of independent Kenya's policies, it was the Africanisation of the private sector that was the main item on the independent government's agenda (Gertzel 1984 : 429).

In the late colonial years Kenya's internal market for consumer goods was developed enough to have some local manufacturing industries supported by policies of import substitution. As Peel (1984 : 173) observes, these were neither basic, nor heavy industries, and were mainly concentrated in the areas of light manufacturing and assembling, dependent on foreign capital. As a study conducted in 1963 shows, Kenyan manufacturing firms were owned mainly by local Indians (67.2 per cent), followed by local Europeans (24.1 per cent), some interracial partnerships (5.2 per cent) and 3.4 per cent of manufacturing firms were in foreign hands (Chandaria's research quoted in Himbara 1994 : 470). Local African entrepreneurs did not have the capital and skills to develop such industries and were occupied mainly in distributing manufacturing produce or producing small scale consumption goods for the urban population (Peel 1984 : 173).

Immediately after independence, several policy documents were announced by the independent government pronouncing that, while Kenyan leaders accepted the role of foreign capital and local non-Africans as wealth creators, the African population should have an opportunity to engage in such wealth creation as well (Himbara 1994 : 470-471). The Trade Licensing Act of 1967 provided a basis for the transfer of foreign owned trade and commerce to African hands (Gertzel 1984 : 430). In addition to the 'Africanisation' of the private sector, the Kenyan government took an active role in creating entrepreneurial parastatals that were supposed to facilitate the private sector of African capitalism and assist Africans in entering simple industrial processes (Himbara 1994 : 472). State investment in industrial projects usually took the form of partnerships

between local capital, foreign finance and technical expertise (Swainson 1978 : 375). Swainson (1978 : 375-376) argues that state participation in such joint ventures did not necessarily mean state control as these projects were run under management contracts. However, she continues to show how the conditions of the contracts were intensively negotiated and suffered from high levels of political corruption within the state; one important minister of the 1960s, for instance, earned the reputation of 'Mr Ten Per cent' among foreign companies.

Another problem with state initiatives was that the Kenyan population saw it as ethnically biased towards the Kikuyu community. As Lynch (2011 : 177) observes, the Kikuyu community has been over-represented among the country's elites at independence and gradually came to a dominant position in the political and economic scene in the early seventies. Even though it can be disputed that this process of 'Kikuyisation' was centrally managed, it is difficult to deny that Kikuyu elites made little efforts to address growing regional inequalities in the country.

The Kenyan policies of 'Africanisation' and parastatals did not reach their proclaimed aims. First, the parastatals sector was ineffective. Already in the late 1970s and early 1980s various commissions of inquiry arrived at the same conclusions: parastatals were becoming a financial burden, because they operated unprofitably due to the fact that their chief executives were politicians and not skilled managers; moreover, shielded from competition, parastatal companies showed various degrees of inefficiency, were producing inferior products, and had high wage bills (Himbara 1994 : 474). All these inefficiencies point to the working of social and patronage networks that were discussed earlier. Second, state involvement in the private sector failed to create the independent class of African capitalists as intended. This failure is best illustrated by the effects that the transition from Kenyatta to the Moi presidency had on governing elites. The most successful Kikuyu capitalists that rose to wealth and power in the beginning of independence (and usually were connected to the Kenyatta family with personal ties) were soon replaced by Kalenjin power holders in many multinational corporations and domestic firms'

boards (Himbara 1994 : 477). Such a process of state bias shifting from 'Kikuyuisation' to 'Kalenjinisation' as Lynch (2011 : 221) has put it, reflects the importance of parastatal control for patronage and self-enrichment. Therefore, to use Berman's (1998 : 338) phrasing, some of those, who were 'eating' or 'devouring' while getting their share of state resources, were themselves eaten in the 'amoral food-chain of politics'.

It is important to point out that the state's involvement in the private sector and industries did not change the way the Kenyan economy was incorporated into the international economic system. Despite increasing growth in the private sector, the country still depended on foreign imports to a high degree. Gulhati and Sekhar (1982 : 955) point out that such import dependence was the result of transnational corporations that controlled Kenyan industry preferring foreign imports to local ones. In addition to that, Kenyan exports were growing and entering new markets, but still largely depended on the purchasing power of neighbouring countries and especially the East African Common Market, which collapsed in 1977. Dependence on foreign capital, imports, and markets proved to be of extreme importance for the Kenyan economy, largely contributing to the economic decline of the 1980s, as will be discussed later.

### **Socio-cultural change**

The early 1970s in Kenya were marked by continuous growth, with many people better off than ten years before. The strategies of the Kenyan government in the fields of agriculture and the private sector also resulted in more people benefitting from economic growth. Yet, some serious weaknesses in these policies were becoming visible as well.

First, after independence, a whole range of new occupations were opening for the Kenyan population. A diversity of opportunities arose for educated people; the workforce of industry and commerce became increasingly diversified and specialised; and the urban working class population became more stable and committed because of new pension schemes, wage increases and extending welfare schemes (Gertzel 1984 : 440). Yet, this process also increased visible inequalities in society, since, as the gap between Africans and non-Africans



narrowed because of a rapid increase in African earnings, the gap between different groups of Africans widened. The differentiation and ranking of occupational categories also became increasingly visible because of the colonial legacy of segregated residential areas in urban areas, and the most visible were the ever increasing population of the urban poor living in squatter housing and working mainly in the informal sector for wages less than half of those prevailing in the formal sector (Gertzel 1984 : 441).

In addition to the 'vertical' inequalities of society, 'horizontal' inequalities between regions (natural and ethnological) within the state also deepened. As Peel (1984 : 143) points out, the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' dimensions of social integration in Kenya are linked, as there was a tendency for regions and communities to structure around an emerging hierarchy; moreover, the composition of social strata was not accidental with regards to its regional and ethnic origins. This relationship between economic class and ethnicity made ethnic rivalry a central issue of politics, because ethnic associations were linked with the economic opportunities available. Gertzel (1984 : 443) gives an example of late 1960s Kenyan school children's awareness that the advantages or disadvantages that they had depended on the province they resided in. The Central and Nyanza provinces that were used in the example reflect the perceptions of Luo deprivation in comparison to Kikuyu advantage.

Inequalities of opportunity were largely linked to the different levels of education that people had. The Kenyan educational base had been growing since the end of the Second World war and the independent schools that started being opened in 1920 played an important role in this process (Gertzel 1984 : 444). Local communities were establishing their own schools that were supported by communities themselves, and not by the colonial state or missionaries. These independent schools were especially popular in Central Province, and therefore people from Kikuyu areas were overly represented among educated Kenyans. As Peel (1984 : 178) points out, this growing number of educated people provided clerks for the colonial government, commercial companies, and teachers for schools. Educated youths that were occupied in the formal sector formed a new generation of elites and were conscious bearers of

new values, differing from the 'old elite' which consisted mainly of chiefs holding local political authority.

After independence, Kenya's educational strategy was aimed at increasing education at all levels and redressing regional imbalances. Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's prime minister of the time, called for a development strategy based on a spirit of self-help (*Harambee*) in 1963:

As we participate in pomp and circumstance and as we make merry at this time, remember this: we are relaxing before the toil that is to come. We must work harder to fight our enemies – ignorance, sickness and poverty. I therefore give you the call: *Harambee!* Let us work hard together for our country Kenya (quoted in Mwiria 1990 : 351).

This *harambee* movement is responsible for the construction of many schools in independent Kenya. Bogonko (quoted in Amutabi 2003 : 130) observed that there have been more secondary schools erected through the self-help movement than built by the state. Amutabi (2003 : 130) points out that Kenya's first Education Commission had issued warnings about the expansion of *harambee* schools and drew attention to the fact that such institutions were producing 'disastrously poor results'. Yet, such warnings were ignored by politicians, who were often involved in sponsoring *harambee* schools.

The support for the expansion of education by politicians is understandable – in Kenya, education, along with politics and ethnicity have been perceived as the key to privilege and power and sought after by many. Therefore, in the end of 1973, marking the ten years of independence, President Jomo Kenyatta announced a decree declaring free education for the first four years of schooling in primary schools, which boosted primary school enrolment (Amutabi 2003; Somerset 2009). The second wave of increase in education enrolment followed the 1978 presidential directive by President Moi who expanded free education for the whole duration of primary education (ibid.). With two million children enrolled in primary schools and 300,000 in secondary schools, Kenya was able to achieve impressive enrolment results in the late 1970s (Gertzel 1984 : 448). Yet, as Gertzel (1984 : 450) observes, Kenya maintained the inherited colonial school system. This way, even though racial segregation was abolished, the

system of high-cost, low-cost and free schools that remained meant the inequality with regards to access to education became based on economic strata. Criticising the 'politically fronted schools that threaten to tear the Kenyan society apart', Amutabi (2003 : 130) points to the economic un-viability and unequal quality of education throughout the country. This conflict between the popular demand of education, the ideal of a more egalitarian society, and the need for skilled man-power with relevant training, points to the process of social transformation that was affecting an increasingly unequal society with limited resources (Gertzel, 1984 : 449).

### **1980s: the transition**

The economic success of the early independence years turned into a crisis in the late 1970s. Political structures and issues played an important part in setting up the stage for financial crisis, but there were several reasons for the crisis that were outside the reach of Kenyan politicians.

One of the most fundamental reasons for the economic melt-down was rapid population growth. Kenya's population growth rate rose from 3.4 to 3.8 per cent from 1962 to 1979 and was among the highest in the world with fertility rate of 8.1 births per woman in the early 1980s (Sindiga 1985 : 73). Such demographic change is directly connected to improvements made in health care and nutrition. The early years of independence were marked by the construction of large hospitals in big cities and primary health care centres in rural areas. Aid donors supported the establishment of teaching hospitals and a lot of emphasis was put on improving health, diet, and hygiene (Oliver and Atmore 2005 : 325). As a result of such efforts, infant mortality in Kenya halved from 160 to about 87 per 1000 live births between 1958 and 1977 and crude death rates decreased (Sindiga 1985 : 74). The victory over disease and death is surely a great achievement for the Kenyan population, yet it also brought the young state under great economic and social stress. As Oliver and Atmore (2005 : 325)note, '[i]t meant that, until childbearing habits adjusted themselves to the new levels of life expectancy, the young nations of Africa would have "to run in order to stand still".' For this reason, even though Kenyan economic progress was

remarkable in absolute terms, when taking into account the needs of a growing population this success was only modest (Adedeji 1984 : 226).

In addition to a growing population, the second important reason for Kenya's economic decline was changes in the global economy. The manufacturing sector of Kenya was aimed at local consumers and exports to the East African Community (Low 1982 : 293). In 1977, the custom union between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania broke down and Kenyan export markets started suffering (Legovini 2002). Kenya's economic growth in the post-independence years was mainly based on agricultural exports supplying the post-war commodity boom. This long post-war boom ended in 1973 with the oil producers' price increase. During the 1970s the price of oil had increased fifteen-fold, and the consequences of this increase for countries like Kenya, which relied on oil imports, was that essential imports cost more (Oliver and Atmore 2005 : 332). In addition to that, Africa's dependence on motor (not water or rail) transport meant that transportation systems and many other aspects of the economy left them especially vulnerable, and their terms of trade declined rapidly (Illife 2007 : 261). The years of 1979 and 1980 were also marked by severe droughts and agricultural prices fell, which affected the Kenyan economy particularly harshly (Legovini 2002). As Illife (2007 : 261) points out, while other continents were producing competing commodities and the focus of international trade shifted to the exchange of manufactured goods between industrial countries, sub-Saharan Africa's share of international trade fell down to probably its lowest point in a thousand years.

The consequences of this crisis were disastrous for Kenya. As Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) invested their surplus from oil trade in the financial sector, vast amounts of money became available for lending (O'Brien and Williams 2004 : 223). The availability of such external funding was seen as a solution by the government to stabilise the country's economic situation. As Oliver and Atmore (2005 : 333) observe, in the decade from 1975 to 1985, African economies that were borrowing money relatively easily went untransformed and so the structural weaknesses resulted in even more devastating results. In 1986, Kenya's external debt was 64 per cent of its GDP

and it rose to 86 per cent in 1992 (Legovini 2002). Serving such a huge external debt sometimes cost more than the revenues received for exports and soon enough sources of borrowing started to decrease (Oliver and Atmore 2005 : 335).

In 1980, Kenya became one of the first African countries to accept IMF surveillance and to receive a World Bank structural adjustment loan (Gibbon 1995 : 7). At that time, Kenya was seen as a reliable country and a good place for investments by Western powers and IFIs. For that reason, the first structural adjustment loan was only tied to requirements to implement more outward oriented policies in the industrial sector. After receiving the loan, the Kenyan government showed initiative and introduced two important macro-economic reforms on its own: the exchange rate devaluation and the introduction of real positive interest rates by the Central Bank (Gibbon 1995 : 11). The second Structural Adjustment loan that Kenya received in 1982 had more extensive conditionalities of trade liberalisation and reforms in agricultural sector attached. Trade liberalisation was slowly implemented by the Kenyan government, but agricultural sector reform proved to be more 'difficult' (Gibbon 1995 : 12). The main difficulty was the World Bank's requirement to privatise maize marketing. Marketing chains were of extreme importance for the Kenyan government not only because it was the main channel for the country's food supply, but also because, since the death of President Kenyatta, it became the centre of the national political patronage system (Ikiara et al. 1995 : 31). For this reason, the Kenyan government resisted reforms regarding maize marketing. Therefore, a pattern developed whereby the Kenyan government would agree to conditionalities attached to the loan, but after receiving the money would find reasons for non-compliance (Gibbon 1995 : 13). This process lasted until the early 1990s.

Economic difficulties were not the only problem for Kenya in this transition time. The relatively easy gains of the post-independence period were now over, and politically it was also becoming increasingly difficult to justify the state's legitimacy (Gibbon 1995 : 10). This was not a new issue in Kenya, as during the Kenyatta presidency the state's legitimacy was ethnically partial and not all

ethnic groups had access to the fruits of independence. The discontent felt by peasants who saw some lands being passed over to members of Kenyatta's own Kikuyu ethnic group – particularly among those who regarded themselves as 'locals' of the same area – was shared by a critical part of the intelligentsia who opposed the regime. The state under Kenyatta was criticised not only because of its ethnic politics and for the enrichment of a small group (which included Kenyatta's family and friends), but also because of an increasing concentration of presidential power that was becoming less accountable (Gibbon 1995 : 10). Another issue that led to the questioning of the legitimacy of the Kenyatta state was the level of state repression met by anyone who challenged the president. Even though Kenya of 1960-1970s was a relatively free and open country and Kenyatta allowed some criticism and political debates, 'he came down with an iron fist whenever his leadership was threatened' (Lynch 2011 : 176).

With Moi's accession, advantages enjoyed by the Kikuyu started being redistributed and the areas of state legitimacy shifted; however, the feeling of state illegitimacy gained even more intense forms, as the political-administrative classes and free professions that were preferred by Kikuyu produced some strong and vocal opposition. Moi's response to such opposing voices – restrictive measures for political freedom – brought the Kenyan government's legitimacy to the centre of international debates (Gibbon 1995 : 10). With a changing situation in the international political arena because of the end of the Cold War, Kenyan autocratic rule resulted in frequent suspensions of on-going aid programmes and calls for democracy. The restoration of multi-party democracy (Lynch 2011) marked the end of transition and start of the second period in the political economy of Kenya, which is the main concern of this thesis.

### **Kenya in structural adjustment and later neo-liberal policies**

As was already mentioned, Kenya implemented only introductory reforms that were prescribed by the World Bank until 1993. After 1993 the new government started complying with IFI requirements attached to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that were building on neo-liberal theory.

Neo-liberalism is built around individual freedom as a core political and economic value. This is best attained through a competitive market society, which requires the non-interference of the state in the economy. The individual's right to choose, to participate in the markets and to fulfil his needs are always emphasised when explaining the benefits of neo-liberalism and the 'miracle' of a system in which markets help everyone to fulfil their dreams (Duménil and Lévy 2005 : 16). The market is the cornerstone of the neo-liberal doctrine, and the market mechanism is offered as a solution to almost all economic and social problems (Howard and King 2004 : 40).

At the heart of structural adjustment conditions was the deregulation of markets (liberalisation), privatisation, macroeconomic stability, and withdrawal or 'rolling back' of the state (Braunstein 2012 : 33). Many of the important neo-liberal concepts were not far from how the Kenyan government imagined developing society, as was mentioned before. Yet, the withdrawal of the state from any economic decisions was problematic, not only because of the state's heavy presence in the country's economy, but also because of patron-client relations that were an integral part of such interference. For this reason the Kenyan government resisted implementing many of the required reforms until 1993. The poor results of the SAPs were blamed by IFIs on such non-implementation; yet, as Gibbon (1995, 1996) convincingly argues, even full implementation of prescribed policies could not have led to a great economic recovery because of the erroneous intellectual foundations on which structural adjustment policies were built on.

First, the assumption that the free market would bring efficiency can be debated. The market economy is claimed to be superior to any other system because of its ability to mediate free exchange and trade which, in turn, supposedly brings increased welfare to all parties involved (Turner 2008 : 115). However, such an understanding of the market fails to understand the social constructions that determine the structure of production relations and relations between producers and external forces (Gibbon 1995 : 21). The study of Ikiara et al. (1995) of the Kenyan Cereal Chain shows how many public and private players interact in the cereal market which makes it difficult to believe that state's

withdrawal from this mix would end certain practices, such as for example 'rent seeking'. Moreover, Ikiara et al. (1995 : 67) argue that the private sector alone is not able to take over the role of National Cereals and Produce Board unless it is assisted to do so, which points to the difficulties of separating politics, state and economy. The separation of state and economy, which is seen as an ideal by neo-liberal structural adjustment, also raises the question of how such separation would happen. If, as Gibbon (1995 : 21) argues, the link between state and economy should be severed by political actions, keeping in mind the patronage networks related to the state, it is possible that the withdrawal of patronage from the public sector can result in an increase of patronage in other forms of public assets, such as in land as occurred in Kenya (see for example Klopp 2000).

Second, studies that were conducted in Kenya to evaluate grassroots development and change over the course of 1980s (Kanyinga 1995; Ngunyi 1995) show that there are many criticisms that could be directed to the World Bank's accounts on resources that might act as adjustment bearers, such as the private sector or voluntary organisations (Gibbon 1996 : 763).

'Civil society', in the logic of structural adjustment, is supposed to play the role of pluralising the institutional environment and promote democratic ways of political interaction. Yet, in the case of Kenya, many social movements, for example, *harambee* or Kenyan churches, have a variety of different relations to the state and political elites and therefore their pluralising effect is a complex and ambiguous issue. For instance, *harambee* movements, which could be seen as a manifestation of civil society, serve both the interests of Kenyan elites and communities as an instrument of politics and economics (Thomas 1988 : 4). Instead of acting as a pluralising force, *harambee* movements are part of Kenya's political life. Similarly, the NGO sector that grew tremendously between 1996 and 2006, often fails to play the supposed pluralising role and in fact is serving as a tool to maintain the social and political status quo (Hearn 2001, 2007; Mercer 2003).



Such situation is in part to do with changes in donor policy: since the first generation of reforms (SAPs) did not reap the expected results by the 1990s, IFIs abandoned heavy-handed, unpopular reforms. The approach to development shifted towards emphasis on partnership, participation and good governance which are supposed to create 'ideal conditions' for international finance and investment (Craig and Porter 2003 : 54), and, in turn, would result in social development. Therefore, instead of strict conditionalities international donors endorsed partnerships as a new way forward – this new development strategy, instead of prescribing interventionist decisions to countries, holds that recipient countries must own reforms and make their choices for development (Collier and Dollar 2001; Craig and Porter 2003). The ownership of reforms is promoted by involving NGOs and civil society organisations as representatives for the poor. Yet, as Craig and Porter (2003 : 54) argue:

But these approaches are nonetheless prone to accusations of being mere 'spin and deceit', embodying a basic duplicity in dealing, on the one hand, with 'the poor' – who are to be 'included' –and, on the other hand, with the political economy of poverty and inequality – which is not robustly addressed, except through commitments to growth and 'inclusion'. As others have noted, Third Way rhetoric certainly has a special facility for re-branding and re-spinning new progressive outfits for old liberal policy [...].

Having started with SAPs in the 1980s, neo-liberal reforms morphed into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in the new millennium, introduced new policies and what Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (2001) call the 'neo-liberal newspeak' that surround them, but the essence of the reforms that are promoted by the IFIs are the same 'sound' macroeconomic framework, liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation that should increase economic growth and efficiency (Abrahamsen 2004b). What is more, as Abrahamsen (2004a) argues, this new emphasis on partnerships 'invoke specific technologies of global liberal governance which help produce modern, self-disciplined citizens and states that can be trusted to govern themselves according to liberal democratic norms.' So the recipient states can no longer be simply described as governed through coercion and domination; as Abrahamsen continues, the power in partnerships is voluntary and coercive at the same time and produces new forms of agency and discipline.

Consequently, in this process, as Harrison (2001) points out, it is difficult to determine between external and internal actors and interests, because interests of donors and political elites are converging. Since the era of neo-liberal restructuring, donors are trying to make countries 'own' neo-liberal reforms; at the same time, in the face of dried up opportunities to earn money in the private and public sectors, the NGO sector arose as an alternative for making money and rent-seeking (Hearn, 2007 : 1102). For this reason, many NGOs are created by civil servants, who lost their positions during restructuring, but still maintain good contacts with ministries (Fowler in Hearn, 2007 : 1103); and who adopt neo-liberal discourses. Therefore, while some elite (mainly international) NGOs serve as a haven for elites looking for gainful employment, most NGOs are small, understaffed and heavily donor dependant, and are 'more likely to be concerned with the practicalities of service provision and income generation than with policy debates on debt and macroeconomics'(Mercer, 2003 : 754).

Neo-liberal adjustment was based on a Western understanding of economics and ignored the history and culture of recipient countries when implementing governance reforms (Nanda 2006 : 272). This way the power of informal political processes, as Chabal (2009) points out, was ignored in development policies and resulted in a situation where, for example, in Kenya, both formal and informal governance was cohabitating in the state. This means that, domestically, political leaders were behaving according to the workings of informal politics (maintaining relations and delivering benefits to their clients) and that relations with the outside world were based on a formal modern Western bureaucratic model of the state (Chabal 2009 : 6). Of course these dual demands of two types of governance were conflicting, as investments in the name of self-sustaining economic growth were spent to please clients and so, once resources to sustain this system ran out, informal governance came to dominate. Such a misunderstanding of continuous cultural and political practices had profound effects in different spheres of the Kenyan state.

## Adjusting Kenyan economy and employment

The process of structural adjustment had significant effects for the Kenyan population. First, opportunities for wage employment shrank and income generating activities shifted from the formal to the informal sector. Political reforms that were aimed at increasing the efficiency of the Kenyan economy resulted in significant personnel reduction in the parastatal enterprises which traditionally accounted for a big share of public sector employment. In addition to shrinking employment opportunities within state enterprises, the size of the civil service was also reduced through voluntary early retirement and retrenchment programs (Oiro et al. 2004 : 9). Moreover, the implementation of trade reforms in early 1990s meant that local firms, especially textile and agriculture-based ones, were facing strong competition from imports. As a result of that, most firms could not sustain high levels of employment and, exploiting a new 1994 redundancy law, started reducing the number of their workers (Manda 2004 : 18). The situation further worsened when facing stiff competition from abroad; companies in the textile and sugar sectors started closing down, leaving thousands of former employees unemployed (Manda 2004 : 28).

This massive loss of employment is important on several levels. First, the most obvious effect of decreases in waged employment is for the previously employed person and his or her immediate family. With massive reductions around the country, it became increasingly difficult for people to find alternative waged employment which meant that many families lost their main sources of income and had to adjust their living standards to the new realities. Moreover, due to continuous population growth labour markets could not absorb a rising labour force into the formal economy. This meant that many families could not afford education for their children, or suddenly found it difficult to seek for medical help. However, besides this immediate effect, there was another important social aspect of unavailable waged employment. Because of existing patron-client relations, many employed people were sharing their income with a wide network of clients: income was trickling down to wider networks of kin, relatives and other people. Severing such income from

waged employment meant that all of the people in such networks experienced financial loss (see Dia 1996 : 192).

The on-going reforms resulted in a great shift of workers from the formal to the informal sector as can be seen from the growing share of workers in the informal sector (from 20 per cent in 1990 to 70.4 per cent in 2000) and the shrinking share of wage employment (see Table 1). Jobs that appeared as an alternative in the informal sector were not only poorly paid, but also rather insecure due to the low survival rate of firms which made workers vulnerable to poverty (Manda 2004 : 26).

*Table 2.1: Employment outside small-scale agriculture (1988-2000)*

Year	Total '000'	Wage employment (%)	Self-employed & unpaid workers (%)	Informal sector (%)
1988	1736.3	77.5	2.5	20.0
1989	1796.2	76.2	2.5	21.3
1990	2395.0	58.8	2.0	39.2
1991	2557.1	56.4	2.0	41.6
1992	2753.2	53.1	2.0	44.9
1993	2997.5	49.2	1.9	48.9
1994	3355.1	44.8	1.7	53.8
1995	3855.1	40.4	1.6	58.0
1996	4325.8	37.4	1.5	61.1
1997	4698.4	35.1	1.4	63.5
1998	5083.2	32.7	1.4	65.9
1999	5477.5	30.5	1.2	68.2
2000	5893.0	28.4	1.1	70.4

Adapted from Manda, D. K. (2004). *Globalisation and the Labour Market in Kenya*. Nairobi: Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis. P.25

During the 1990s formal sector employment expanded by 1.8 per cent a year in comparison to a 3.5 per cent labour force annual growth (Nyangito et al. 2004 : 27-28), which means that structural adjustment reforms did not manage to create enough jobs for the growing population of Kenya. This, in turn, meant changes in the ways of making a living: acquiring education and seeking formal employment in big towns, which was seen as a good way of making a living since colonial times, ceased to sustain families in the face of government

downsizing and privatisation policies (Smith 2001 : 430). Local commercial activities remained as the main income generating activity for many. This process also had highly gendered implications as will be further discussed in chapter three.

Agricultural production, which had grown since independence, started declining in the 1980s and continued to decline after the reforms of the early 1990s. As mentioned before, such a decline was partly related to external factors such as bad weather conditions and the end of the commodity boom. However, as Kimenyi (2002 : 11) points out, structural adjustment reforms also had an influence through the failure to improve agricultural performance because of the institutional void that was created by market liberalisation policies. The policy packages were general for all developing countries and concentrated on removal of government subsidies, market deregulation, reduction of import tariffs, and privatisation of marketing and service provision (Nyangito et al. 2004 : 9). What is more, policies were implemented abruptly, with no transition period allowed. It was assumed that the role previously played by the Kenyan government would be taken over by the private sector. Yet, as the example of the National Cereal and Production Board shows, the private sector was not ready for such challenges (for example see Ikiara et al. 1995).

As a result, the agricultural sector showed mixed results after the reforms. On one hand, the total population of the country continued to increase and the domestic food production, which grew at 1.5 per cent per annum in 1990s, did not match population growth (Nyangito et al. 2004 : 16), which meant that Kenyan food security started declining and the country started depending on food imports to meet the needs of its population. On the other hand, some Kenyan crops were still important cash earning sources. For example tea became the most important cash-crop with horticulture produce following close by, and coffee and sisal remaining important export commodities (Legovini 2002). Kenyan horticulture received a lot of attention and was celebrated as a success story by the IFIs. However, it is important to point out that such 'success' was made possible by the investments of foreign companies that

export most of the produce to European markets and employ local labour at exploitative terms and conditions (Barrientos et al. 2003; Dolan 2002; Hale and Opondo 2005). Many 'successful' companies in Kenya rely on foreign capital and employ Kenyan labour in conditions very similar to those under colonial rule. It thus seems that the process of 'Africanisation' of the Kenyan industries was overturned and the Kenya debate of 1970s suddenly gained a renewed relevance for the contemporary Kenyan economy.

Seventy-five per cent of the Kenyan population live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Nyangito et al. (2004 : 86) observe that there has been a shift in the contribution of household incomes from the dominance of agricultural in 1982 to non-agriculture related activities. The non-agricultural activities that sustain most farmers today also experienced a shift from wage employment in 1994 towards mainly informal businesses and activities later on. Such shifting patterns are related not only to reforms in agriculture, but also to reforms in many other sectors. For example, the relaxation of employment laws had a significant influence on the informalisation of labour. As a Kenyan Human Right Commission report (Mutunga et al. 2002 : 17) shows, multinational companies that came to dominate production use new laws to increase their profits. For example in the case of Del Monte, in 1999, only 31 per cent of the whole workforce working for this multinational company was composed of permanent workers. The remaining workforce was either seasonal or hired on a daily basis, which means less protection and social security for the latter two groups. Therefore, a shift in the nature of household income does not necessarily mean a shift in occupation. People in rural areas still depend on agriculture-related activities for their livelihoods, yet, they work on different terms than before the reforms and their income has fell. The average income of the rural household which has been increasing between 1982 and 1994 started experiencing a decline since the reforms (Nyangito et al. 2004 : 66), even if part of the people work in the agro-companies that are considered to be successful by the IFIs.

Tourism came to be one of the most important pillars of the Kenyan economy. In the first decade of independence the number of people visiting Kenya as

tourists increased by 132 per cent and since 1987 tourism has been the leading earner of foreign exchange overtaking tea produce (Omondi 2003). Kenya's natural beauty, wildlife, good climate and white sand beaches attract a large number of tourists every year, while its standing as the regional business hub for East Africa means that the country also enjoys a significant number of business travellers. The Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics (2009) counts that in 2008, which was a bad year for Kenyan tourism because of the electoral violence of 2007, saw 1.2 million international arrivals. In 2010 this number grew to 1.6 million (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2011). The presence of the tourism and business travel sectors and its links to domestic industries are seen as a success in terms of attracting investments, but the effect of this 'victory' on society can be somewhat less than triumphant: as Julia O'Connell Davidson (1998 : 74-87) observes, the tourism sector that attracts a lot of investments does not always have a 'trickle down' effect on societies that host multinational corporations occupied in this field. Most of the profits come back to developed countries and opportunities that are available for local populations are often limited to low-paid and unskilled jobs. A big tourism sector also brings inequalities between places far away and local populations into sharp relief, as both visitors and people who host visitors can see the differences of their purchasing power, opportunities, and living conditions.

Whereas the economic situation of post-colonial Kenya became more uncertain as a result of changing economic opportunities, the Kenyan population also experienced significant social change.

### **Social change**

As a result of neo-liberal fiscal policies centred on balancing the national budget, the Kenyan state found it increasingly difficult to fund public services in the sectors of health and education.

Health sector 'user fees' were introduced across Kenya in 1989, but cancelled after less than a year on the grounds that they denied access to healthcare to poor people. Finally fees were re-introduced in 1992 with some changes that required payment of the fee after receiving treatment and expanded the groups

of the population that were exempt from fee payment (Bedi et al. 2004 : 7-8). Despite healthcare reform formally taking the poor population into consideration, studies show that contrary to the guidelines on the pricing policy in public dispensaries, fees continued to be charged and the Ministry of Health was unable to enforce fee waivers (Nganda, 2000 quoted in Bedi et al., 2004 : 9). Mwabu et al. (1995) report a drop of about 50 per cent in public clinics' attendance after the introduction of fees and a discussion paper by Bedi et al. (2004 : 30) concludes that most Kenyans started relying on non-governmental services for healthcare. This includes not only private healthcare clinics, but also traditional treatment and home remedies. Private health facilities are nearly four times more expensive than government ones, however, they attract an increasingly larger number of people, even the ones who struggle to pay the expenses, because of their superior quality (Bedi et al. 2004 : 31).

Structural adjustment also coincided with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The first reports of AIDS cases in Kenya in the mid-1980s were denounced as alarmist and racist by the Kenyan government. As Thomas (2003 : 181) observes, the government's response was influenced by the financial constraints of the country. First, some government officials were worried that too much attention to HIV/AIDS would have bad consequences for Kenya's reputation as an attractive tourist destination. Yet, income derived from tourism was crucial for the government's ability to repay loans and purchase expensive exports. Second, the Kenyan healthcare system was already overburdened and the government had no means to increase its spending. This slow government response to the epidemic, can be linked, at least in part, with high HIV infection rates among Kenyan adults (15-49 years), which reached 14 per cent in 1990 (Thomas 2003 : 182). HIV prevalence rates continued to grow until 2000 when they reached 13.4 per cent of the population and then started to slowly decrease<sup>4</sup>. The reasons for the decreasing HIV prevalence rates are attributed to President Moi finally declaring HIV/AIDS a national disaster, the encouragement of condom use, and to the death of many infected people.

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.avert.org/hiv-aids-kenya.htm#contentTable0> accessed 25 October 2012



High HIV infection rates in combination with the government's reduced spending on social services and an increasingly difficult economic environment meant that many Kenyan households faced severe problems. First, people who were infected were of the most productive age which means that many of the families lost their bread-winners and had to care for the infected. Loss of family income has strong gendered effects as women are more likely to take the burden of caring for the sick, to withdraw from income-generating activities because of their home duties, and are more vulnerable to stigmatisation because of social perceptions, as will be discussed in chapter three. In addition to the financial burden that caring for an infected family member (or a few as is often the case) brought, there was the stigma related to HIV/AIDS. These two processes together, as Beckmann (2010) shows, are related to the breakdown of social and emotional support networks and points to the broader processes at work – commodification in areas of treatment and care-giving as well as the emergence of markets for health. The gendered effects of this change will be further discussed in chapter three.

Education was another area significantly affected by structural adjustment. Cost-sharing reforms in education were introduced in 1988 and, similarly to healthcare reform, led to a fall in primary school participation rates. Somerset (2009 : 242) shows that between the census of 1989 and 1999 the number of pupils attending primary school increased by only 1.25 per cent which is significantly lower than the growth of the total 6-13 year age group which was 2.68 per cent. The introduction of user fees for education meant that young people from poor backgrounds could not afford education and in this way remained locked in the vicious circle of poverty (Babb 2005 : 213). This especially affected girls who still suffer from negative stereotyping in society, and drop out of schools at a much higher rates than boys; as a result of that, only 16 per cent of females (compared to 23 per cent of males) who enrol in primary education reach tertiary education (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang 2004 : 409). The initiative of free primary education for all introduced by President Mwai Kibaki in 2003 marked a 35 per cent increase in school enrolment, however, issues regarding the quality of education remains. Private

schools out-perform public schools in examinations by a significant margin (Somerset 2009 : 249). Surveys of school quality in Kenya show that many schools still suffer from limited quantities of textbooks and other learning material available, while groups as large as 100 pupils (see Bailey 2009) are sometimes found crowded into classrooms that are too small for such an amount of students. Somerset (2011 : 496) points out that many schools need substantial resources that are well beyond those available to them in order to achieve an 'acceptable level'. The poor quality of public education means that many parents struggle to send their children to private schools even if it puts a heavy burden on family finances.

In the face of shrinking state entitlements in Kenya, market based private institutions and organisations offer a wide range of services and social care for those who can afford them. However, in a country where 45.9 per cent of the population is estimated to live under the national poverty line and 31 per cent of the population below minimum dietary energy consumption (World Bank 2011 : 47-48) one has to consider two groups of Kenyans. As Were et al. (2005 : 50) point out, structural adjustment reforms disproportionately affected the poor 'deepening asymmetries in income and access to resources' and resulted in winners and losers in the process. An analysis of the real monthly earnings of individuals with different levels of education in Kenya since 1978 shows that winners after neo-liberal adjustment are highly skilled and university-educated individuals as their earnings increased with time. Unskilled and semi-skilled individuals, though, constitute a group of 'losers' who experienced great losses as a consequence of the reforms (Manda 2004 : 35-36). Given the high inequalities in Kenyan society that prevail since structural adjustment, the commodification bias has two dimensions. First, rich and middle-class Kenyans, who are what Were et al. call 'winners' after reforms, experience the marketisation of their lives. Private healthcare, private pensions, private children/elders care, and private education are available to them and women of these households can rely on the help of modern imported technology, hired house-help, drivers, gardeners, maids, and cooks. The issues of shrinking state

entitlements are not affecting this group very much, because they have financial means to seek private services.

Still, the group of 'losers' who experienced losses as a result of reforms are operating in very uncertain conditions with very little or no social security and no clear job prospects. Harvey (2007 : 18) notes that the implementation of neo-liberal policies in the state results in increased inequalities in society and the creation of extremely rich individuals that profited from the privatisation process. This is surely the case in African states where the interaction between rich, middle class and poor reminds one of Sassen's (2002 : 255) description of global cities and the labour division in them. Rich and middle class professionals are highly-paid and occupy managerial and coordinative positions in key areas for the global economy. Groups of such professionals can be easily spotted in the cities of Kenya, as they work for international corporations, NGOs, and technology companies; earn salaries that allow them to live independently from their parents; and maintain a certain lifestyle (see for example Spronk 2012). Companies that create demand for other highly-skilled professionals also create demand for low-paid service workers. The demand for low-paid labour is created not only by companies operating in the global economy and requiring cheap farm labour for their produce, for example; but also by the lifestyle of the people who are benefiting from such a system. The lifestyle of the high-paid professionals create low-paid job opportunities for maids, nannies, and staff at expensive restaurants, bars, shops, and hotels that well-off people patronise. As Sassen (2002 : 255) observes, traditionally, a growing economy or growth in certain sectors has been a source of workers' empowerment. Yet, in the current moment of the global political economy, which will be defined in the next part of this chapter, such a link is broken and produces a class of workers who are isolated, marginalised, and barely visible.

### **The current moment in Kenyan political economy**

Despite the changes in the international political economy and the fact that the on-going global financial crisis challenges the IFI's hegemony (Hickey 2012), the main features defining the Kenyan economy today are still large inequalities, unemployment, and inadequate social services. These issues are not new;

analogous problems in the Kenyan economy were pointed out in the early years of independence. For example, commenting on the late 1960s Gertzel (1984 : 417) pointed out that Kenya was in a phase of growth with no corresponding development. Similarly, as wa Githinji and Holmquist (2009 : 113) argue, the impressive growth rates that started to be recorded in Kenya since 2002 are not sustainable and do not generate development that would be sufficient for social inclusion and equality. This is so due to the nature of the economic growth and inequalities. Wa Githinji (2010 : 10) analyses the year 2005, which recorded one of the biggest growth rates, as an example illustrating this: 78 per cent of value added growth generated by exports that year was owed to the cut flower sector, which amounts to 25 per cent of growth in agriculture, but occupies less than 0.01 per cent of the agricultural land in the country. Large commercial farms generate a considerable part of the recorded growth in agriculture, yet this does not mean the reduction of poverty or significant improvement of living conditions in rural Kenya, since the majority of people occupied in agriculture are small-holders and subsistence farmers. Therefore, the IFI's focus on the economy as a whole does not necessarily translate in the improvement of the economic position occupied by the poor. Neither of periods considered here – early independence and recent economic growth – have transformed the economy of the country, and thus both have failed to bring about more equality through the 'trickle down' effect.

The issues of contemporary Kenya are the legacy of different policies adopted over the years of independence and even during the colonial period. Neo-liberal policies that are an important marker in defining the contemporary Kenyan economy are also as relevant today as at the time of their implementation. As Braunstein (2012 : 1) observes, despite the fact that the term 'Washington consensus' sounds old-fashioned, the macroeconomic policies that are recommended and prescribed for developing countries are little different from those prescribed in the early 1980s. A burgeoning criticism of reforms resulted in international donors reintroducing the state, accompanied by the concepts of democratisation and good governance, to the neo-liberal discourse and the agenda for Africa (World Bank 1997). The IFIs saw the failure of SAPs as a

result of a lack of 'adequate institutional depth and capacity', not because of unsuitable policies, so commitment to neo-liberalism remained (Woods 1999 : 40). Although there is still no clear criteria for what constitutes good governance and how to measure it , the emphasis of the IFIs shifted from crude 'liberalisation' to the state's capacity to effectively use development assistance through the good governance framework (Nanda 2006 : 270-274). For this reason the new generation of reforms are more concerned about the nature of state action: institutional capacity building, civil service (or more broadly public service) reform, the introduction of new forms of information technology, finance management and human resource management, technical assistance, and the facilitation of public participation in policy monitoring, evaluation and development (Harrison 2004 : 18).

The new face of neo-liberal practice in Kenya, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2001 : 36) point out, commenting on 'millennial' capitalism, is marked by the sense of change and crisis. The Comaroffs see such a sense deriving its strength from the state's inability to assure its citizens a regular income, to protect them from destitution, and ensure their safety. Neo-liberal capitalism is marked by contradictions: it seems to both include and marginalise in unanticipated ways, and it produces desires on a global scale, yet at the same time reduces certainty of work and security for many (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001 : 8). In addition to this ambiguous nature, the current moment breaks away from the past because of the influence of media and migration, as argued by Appadurai (1996 : 3). Because of the expansion of mass media and its increased reach, people today are more aware than ever of their 'place-in-the-world', to use Ferguson's (2006) term, and of global inequalities. People are also better connected and have good knowledge of the lifestyles that are unavailable to them. In combination with the mass media's outreach, the process of migration is another force of change – both media and migration allow for the imagination to create dreams that are no longer bound within specific local, national or regional spaces (Appadurai 1996 : 4). Neo-liberal practice locks the poor in restrained economic realities and poverty, but is accompanied with neo-liberal ideas and discourse that

emphasise freedom and entrepreneurship. This ambiguity is important when defining the socio-economic life of Kenya.

The Comaroffs (2001 : 9) call the current moment 'the "new" world order', Sassen refers to it as the 'New economy', however, in the case of Kenya the current moment, even if different from previous historical moments in some aspects, still bears a lot of continuities of colonial political economy and post-independence policies. For this reason in this thesis I will speak about a contemporary political economy which emerged in the early 1980s with structural adjustment and continues until today. By contemporary political economy I mean the political economy which is grounded in neo-liberal theories and practices, that are encouraged by IFIs and implemented by the Kenyan government; where the workings of the market, as the Comaroffs point out, create sharp divisions between populations by including and marginalising people often at the same time; and where, because of the outreach of mass media and the scale of migration, people's dreams reject the marginalised positions that locks them in and across local, national and regional borders. The political economy of Kenya has strong links to the global political economy not only through its trade, agriculture and tourism, but also because of expanding consumerism.

## **Conclusions**

The current moment of Kenyan political economy is influenced both by neo-liberal ideology and by domestic political developments. The neo-liberal project experienced some shifts within the global and national politics of development since mid-2000s. It is argued that the cancellation of debt in many African countries (or having a manageable debt, as a case in Kenya), finding new resources such as oil or gold for example, investment and aid originating from new rising powers such as China, and social protests generated by the food crisis opened the door for the emergent unorthodoxies in African policy and development ideology, as can be observed in the recent examples of Uganda and Malawi (Harrison 2012; Hickey 2012). The role of the state in the process of development is finding its way back into public discourse and some practices.

However, as Hickey (2012 : 688) argues, even though it is now recognised that the most effective institutions are the ones fitting the specific characteristics of the country for which they are intended, and that such an approach now is visible in the IFI documents and discourses speaking about 'best-fit' practices, the main focus of the IMF still remains macro-economic stability and a limited role for the state. To be precise, the role of the state in the process of structural transformation is acknowledged by IFIs in the short run, with a WB report (Randa et al. 2012) calling for investments into Kenyan transport and electricity infrastructure in order to create high-productivity wage jobs; but the core emphasis on macro-economic stability and free markets remains.

Even though the global hegemony of neo-liberalism seems to be weakened, the processes that previous neo-liberal reforms set in motion now have taken life of their own. The neo-liberal project can be best seen through changes in social practices (Harrison 2010; Wiegratz 2010), and thus, the effects of socio-economic realities shaped by the political economy of the country have a profound effect on its population at the current moment not only because of the work opportunities it creates (or does not create), but also because changing material realities have a strong influence on gender relations, power, and understandings about what it means to be a man or a woman, which will be further explored in the following chapter.

### 3. Neo-liberal practice, discourse and gender

*'Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul' (M. Thatcher quoted in Harvey 2007 : 23)*

Neo-liberal theory often claims rationality and scientific neutrality towards gender, but neo-liberal practices have gendered assumptions concerning human resources, their allocation to production, their reproduction and maintenance (Elson 1995b : 166). As Griffin (2007b : 224) points out, neo-liberal discourse builds on the assumptions of a 'reality' of heterosexual reproduction that is based on the duality of a man and a woman, and where sex is reproduced as a 'natural' binary. Such an understanding of reality implies static gender relations where oppositions of feminine and masculine correspond to women and men, and where such a gendered order and power relations constitute the 'reality' in which economies are functioning. As a result, the implementation of neo-liberal policies and reforms has gendered effects that are particularly strongly felt by those who fall out of the traditional model of family and whose identities do not (or cannot) correspond to traditional understandings of what constitutes being a man or a woman.

Neo-liberal macroeconomic policies do not simply have a negative social impact, they are designed in a way that carries an unjust social content and does not treat men and women or households of different financial capabilities in the same way (Elson and Cagatay, 2000: 1355). This chapter will explore in what ways neo-liberal practice together with discourses surrounding it affect men and women differently in Kenya.

First, this chapter will look into gendered possibilities in the labour market and social justice, and how changes in these areas affect power relations between Kenyan men and women. It will explore how neo-liberal restructuring affected the male ability to earn money in traditional ways, and what wider consequences such reduced financial power had. Furthermore, in response to



this change and with increasing demand for cheap female labour, the position of women in the Kenyan labour markets will be analysed. Whereas neo-liberal restructuring disrupted traditional gender relations and realities through economic and social reforms, it also affected the societal understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. In turn, hegemonic masculinities responded to economic difficulties by often shifting the emphasis to sexuality and/or violence, and hegemonic femininities also started experiencing changes. These changes will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

This chapter will argue that inequalities and the marginalisation of certain people in neo-liberal political economies happen not because neo-liberal policies are intending to negatively discriminate, but because these policies fail to recognise and to take into consideration already existing gender inequalities in the economy causing problems to be deepened further. Changes in the material conditions that people live in have been brought by neo-liberal restructuring and continue today. However, the implications of neo-liberalism in practice are reaching further than just loss of economic opportunities or social security. In response to the worsening living conditions of many, societal understandings of gender roles and norms started shifting, affecting Kenyan masculinities and femininities.

### **Gender in contemporary Kenyan political economy**

Neo-liberal restructuring in Kenya, as discussed in the previous chapter, focused mainly on the reform of fiscal policies (deflationary policies), the liberalisation of the economy, and agricultural reform.

The fiscal policies had a two-fold effect on the Kenyan population: first, balancing a budget meant cuts in the funding of the public sector, which in turn meant a drop in public sector jobs. Considering the Kenyan government's heavy involvement in the economy as discussed in the previous chapter, public sector jobs were one of the main employment options for educated people. Loss of jobs in this sector meant that many Kenyan families lost their main source of income. Moreover, high population growth rates in combination with increased access to education, contributed to the large number of people who could not find

employment. To fully understand the implications of this situation it is important to remember the high Kenyan dependency ratio, which in 2010 reached an average of 4.6 dependents per one working person,<sup>5</sup> and look into the gender effects of these policies.

The majority of people who lost their jobs during restructuring were men, as Kenyan women constitute, and have historically always constituted, a minor part of formal sector employees (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2011 : 72). This massive loss of jobs and lack of alternative options for employment for those who lost their jobs or new entrants to the labour market directly affected a great number of families previously reliant on male wages. Still, the effect of a decline in income goes beyond just the immediate families: as discussed previously, patron-client networks are of extreme importance in understanding Kenyan political economy as they constitute informal safety nets for the population. A World Bank publication (Dia 1996 : 192) recognised that the presumed social and political costs of civil service reform usually ignore such informal flows of money. As a result, a reduction in civil servants' income leads to a reduction of transfers in informal social networks. This, in turn, increases social inequalities, and reduces the ability of the poor to access schooling and healthcare.

The reduction in public spending affected women in different ways than men. First, women who previously directly or indirectly (via informal social networks) depended on male wages started facing financial hardships and increased burdens in their families (I will expand on the double burden of women below). Second, women who were employed in the public sector were affected. As Manda (2004) points out, women in Kenya were not necessarily targeted by downsizing programmes, yet they were more likely to experience a considerable drop in earnings. Moreover, inequalities between male and female earnings tend to be smaller in the public sector than out of it, entailing a bigger loss for women who lose their jobs after retrenchment, this especially being the

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<sup>5</sup> The World Bank data, accessed 8/02/2012 through <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/> World Bank defines dependants as people who are younger than 15 or older than 65 year old and their calculations are based on this assumption, however not all 16-64 year old people are employed in Kenya, so the dependency ration can be higher than this.

case for women who are breadwinners in their families (2004 : 27). It is important to remember that, between one fourth and one third of African households are headed by women (Heise and Elias 1995 : 935) and so the cut of employment in the state's social sectors can be directly linked to the increasing poverty in female-headed households. In addition to this, the public sector offers some benefits, such as maternity leave, which are not always available in the private sector and are unavailable in the informal sector, which is an alternative to the public one. This is another reason why women suffer bigger losses in the process of public spending cuts (Manda 2004 : 28). Finally, high population growth rates meant that while opportunities for formal employment became scarce, the number of educated women who could not find suitable employment started to grow.

To summarise, whereas the reduction of public servants was seen as a way towards more effective governance by IFIs, the realities of retrenchment meant the disruption of the Kenyan social order. Men who lost or experienced the reduction of their income started having problems for maintaining their power positions in patron-client networks. What is more, many men could not find an occupation in formal employment at all due to population growth without corresponding economic growth. Men faced increasing financial difficulties in their families and their position as head of the family was shaken. The financial difficulties experienced by men had direct connections to the insecurity of women who depended on male wages and to poor segments of society who previously relied on informal safety networks (Dia 1996; Elson 1995a).

The decline in the effectiveness of informal safety nets is of great importance when considering the second effect of neo-liberal fiscal policies – the state's reduced ability to fund public services. The introduction of 'user fees' in the areas of healthcare and education resulted in less Kenyans using these services, as was discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, this does not mean that the Kenyan population stopped being sick or ill – care for the sick and ill often simply transferred from the public sphere to the private sphere of the household. This usually means a bigger work load for women. Not only do women usually take care of the sick at home, they are also more likely to

withdraw from the labour force and lose their income if they have to care for a family member because of social expectations (Upton 2003; Urdang 2006). In situations of financial hardship and uncertainty, women are bearers of the privatised 'costs of social reproduction' (Elson 1995a : 1852).

With a decline in the possibility to participate in the consumption of goods and services, women start carrying a double burden. This is especially the case with women from poor households, because, as Buvinic and Gupta (1997 : 264) state, such poor women do not have other women to do their household jobs. Moreover, in addition to housework, they spend more time getting water or preparing food because that is cheaper than buying semi-processed food. Poor women face greater time and mobility constraints than men or women from better-off households and that is why they often 'choose' jobs that can be done in addition to housework even if they are poorly paid and insecure. For this reason, poor women provide their services to better-off households or companies as casual agricultural labourers, maids, cooks, and nannies. Insecurity of employment usually accompanies women because of the nature of their work: it can be seasonal, formulated as a temporary contract, and often accompanied by (sexual) harassment, especially when working in a familial environment (Hale and Opondo 2005 : 309). Nevertheless, in periods of economic decline, as the one following structural adjustment, the situation of women from poor households only deteriorates, because they are more likely to lose their jobs, and take up more responsibilities when dealing with the negative effects of recession (Elson and Cagatay 2000 : 1356).

Cuts in public spending, or deflationary policies are important because of their gendered consequences (Braunstein 2012; Elson and Cagatay 2000). Removing the deflationary bias from macro policies would not deal with gender inequalities, because there are other biases at work. For instance, a male breadwinner bias which comes from the assumption that social reproduction is connected to the market economy through the wage that is paid to a male breadwinner and which largely provides cash for his dependants (Elson and Cagatay 2000 : 1355). This bias manifests itself through the connection that the state makes between the right to claim state benefits and the norm of a full-time

life-long formal employment. Individuals who do not fit in this model have fewer rights to claim social protection or have to do so through the persons they depend on. As a result of this, many women are excluded from entitlements and are dependent on others during periods when they have to take care of others (children, sick) or when they are old themselves (ibid.). In Kenya, where the majority of women never enter formal employment (the majority of women are occupied in agriculture), they might be excluded all their lives. During structural adjustment, the loss of jobs was an important factor in the reduction of social security; yet, years after SAPs, neo-liberal practice continues to reduce social security in other ways than loss of employment. For example, through labour force discrimination according to employment contracts (regular contract, seasonal, temporary, daily workers) which have different levels of social security attached to them (see Mutunga et al. 2002).

Another major area of structural adjustment reforms that carried gendered consequences in Kenya was agriculture. Reforms in this area were long resisted by the Kenyan government and started being implemented only in 1993 (for more about agricultural reform in Kenya Ikiara et al. 1995; Nyangito 2003; Nyangito et al. 2004). The first important consequence of liberalisation in agriculture was that while new opportunities created by marketing and pricing policies benefited better-off farmers, resource-poor farmers were hit severely by rising consumer prices and had to resort to wage labour. What is more, neo-liberal practices came in place at the time when due to population growth the pressure on land was increasing and becoming a farmer became more difficult. This had an especially strong influence on the feminisation of poverty as Kenyan women account for approximately 75 per cent of smallholder labour (Gibbon 1992 : 80).

The second important gender aspect of agricultural reforms in Kenya is its effect on increasing male-female disparities within the household income because of a gendered division of labour. Women start having more expenses, because they traditionally are seen as responsible for the household budget among other care tasks. Men are primarily responsible for cash crops so they benefit from an increased income (Gibbon 1992 : 80). Of course, this description

of the household does not capture the variety of different household organisational patterns among the different ethnic groups that live in Kenya. However, the division of labour in the household usually follows patriarchal hierarchies and in most cases women still remain at a disadvantaged position in comparison to men. Relations between husband and wife and labour division patterns in households are important factors when determining a household's ability to successfully farm (for example, how household structure defines its success in farming new cultures see Heald 1991). Moreover, in addition to farming specificities, in a society which is 'as comprehensively male dominated' as Kenya (Gibbon 1992 : 80-81), in the process of land individualisation women's rights to land – traditionally safeguarded via family membership – started disappearing (Aliber and Walker 2006; Drimie 2003). This is especially important, because female property ownership and inheritance is problematic, even more so in rural areas (Carrier and Miller 1999; Daley and Englert 2010; Gibbon 1995). As a result, women have become increasingly disadvantaged and started having less bargaining power in the household because in the case of disagreement, if no agreement is reached and a woman is on her own, she usually has less capacity than when she is in cooperation with a man (Elson 1995c : 6).

Neo-liberal restructuring sought to increase economic growth and, according to neo-liberal logic, should have increased employment. History shows that neo-liberal restructuring did not manage to create enough economic growth that would meet the needs of a growing population. What is more, neo-liberal discourse, as Griffin (2007a : 723) argues, is based on the core concepts of 'economic growth, trade liberalisation, foreign direct investment, the size of the public sector, debt crises, monetary policy, economic freedom and choice'; and thus, the notion of gender becomes visible through its absence. This is so, because neo-liberal practices are based on gender inequalities. As Braunstein (2012 : 15-17) points out, in countries with labour-intensive export-oriented sectors, like Kenya for example, it is low female wages that ensure competitiveness and profitability for companies and generate economic growth. In turn, and as a result of neo-liberal practices, gendered hierarchies are

maintained through the incorporation of women in low-paid labour. Kenyan women started experiencing an increase in job opportunities in the horticulture sector and export processing zones (EPZs) since 1990 (Mireri 2000). However, these opportunities for women came into being precisely because they are women: they are expected to marry a few years after starting work and therefore less likely to join trade unions, and in addition to that, women generally agreed to work for a smaller salary (Braunstein 2012; Elson and Pearson 1981). What is more, work opportunities in these sectors are tightly intertwined with new labour laws that made it easier to make workers redundant (or where Kenyan labour law did not have power, as in the case of EPZs) and with a new fashion of temporary work contracts (Hale and Opondo 2005; Manda 2004 : 29-30). This increase of female labour demand came at the same time when women were already experiencing an increase in their domestic labour, as was discussed previously, and therefore resulted in more work and worse conditions for many.

Neo-liberal economic practices disturbed power relations between genders: because of general economic decline, both men and women started experiencing financial difficulties. Whereas men found it more and more difficult to maintain their roles of providers for their families because of public sector retrenchment and other fiscal policies, women experienced ambiguous changes. On one hand, women saw an increase in their work load at home, on the other hand, female labour came to be valued in the labour markets as well. As Standing (1999 : 583) points out, such gender outcomes in labour markets reflect the outcome of discrimination and disadvantage and not natural differences between men and women. Neo-liberal markets build on existing gender inequalities in search for profits, and this working of neo-liberalism affects both the position of men and women. Neo-liberal practice and its gendered effects are of extreme importance when understanding the contemporary political economy. As Braunstein (2012 : 1) points out, even though speaking about the Washington consensus seems old-fashioned, from a macroeconomic perspective little has changed since the early days of adjustment, as the key policy recommendations remain the same. The following

sections discuss the changing understanding of femininities and masculinities as influenced by the changing material realities of Kenyan men and women.

### **Masculinities and femininities of the neo-liberal order**

African societies, according to Harrison, can be seen as the 'cutting edge' of neo-liberal practice because of their long history of external involvement and neo-liberalisation (2010: 19). Neo-liberal practice involves the promotion and implementation of economic sector reforms, but, as Wiegratz (2010 : 124) points out, in order to have a functioning market economy 'market societies' are needed. Such 'market societies' embrace the market economy and capitalist social relations. In order to do so, as Wiegratz continues, a corresponding set of moral norms is needed: individuals should be rational (*homo oeconomicus*), basing their decisions on cost-benefit analysis, with a strong sense of self-interest and expressed individualism, oriented towards material success, egoistic, and individualistic. The neo-liberal reforms in Africa that introduced changes in economic organisation resulted in the disruption of those norms, values and practices that did not mesh with neo-liberal ideology, and this had an adjustment effect on societies and culture (Wiegratz 2010 : 125-126). An emphasis on individual utility maximisation together with increasingly difficult economic conditions affected the self-perceptions and realities of men and women. This transformation will be further discussed in the following sections.

### **Adjusting masculinities**

Every culture produces a number of masculinities that correspond to cultural and institutional settings; as Connell(2005 : 36) argues, different categories of masculinities (hegemonic, complicit, marginalised and subordinate) form a hierarchy and interact via relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. Drawing on Connell, Miescher (2003 : 89) points out that in the colonial African setting it was usually not clear which masculinities were dominant or hegemonic, because understandings of gender depend on the specific context and the actor's subject position. However, this section will argue that the socio-economic evolution of independent Kenya had a strong influence on the strengthening of a dominant model of masculinity – that of the 'big man'. The



financial hardship that followed structural adjustment and continues to define Kenyan economic life today disrupted this hegemonic notion and produced new ways through which people perceive 'proper' male behaviour within different settings.

Traditional pre-colonial East African communities were mainly patriarchal, suffered from generational tensions, and included multiple types of masculinities. Iliffe (2007) explains that in pre-colonial Africa a way to adulthood was marked with initiation rites through which elders dominated the young. By custom, young initiates were forming an age-set and with the entire group were passing a sequence of grades from junior warrior-hood to senior elder-hood. Junior warriors usually undertook military tasks and were forbidden to marry. Although the exact arrangements of this kind varied from society to society, generally such a system allowed elder men to keep a monopoly over wives and power while avoiding generational tensions (Iliffe 2007 : 120). It also allowed different types of masculinities to coexist in the same space peacefully. Elder men, or 'big men', were at the top of the social hierarchy and controlled the networks of clients, or 'small boys', with whom they had reciprocal, but unequal relations, as well as women, children and other dependants (Berman 1998 : 311). As was mentioned in the previous chapter, in the African context, control over people is a key for power. Therefore, male sexual control over women and the resulting offspring is of uttermost importance for the construction of 'big man'.

The new opportunities created by colonialism and commercialisation meant that masculinities became intertwined with financial potential. First, colonial powers institutionalised the system of 'big men' and their patron-client networks, as was discussed in the previous chapter. In addition to village 'big men' receiving payments from the colonial government, some young men managed to find another route to adulthood through the money earned in migrant labour or skilled trade (Lindsay and Miescher 2003 : 10). The Hut Tax, which was introduced by British colonialists in Kenya (Gertz 2007 : 58), was probably the most important factor influencing changes in traditional authority, as young men started migrating, finding employment, and having independent

financial power. These new economic opportunities that were available through formal education and jobs in towns challenged traditional village elders' authority and contributed to the emergence of new masculinities that were closely related to new ways of accumulation. However, the power that came in traditional or 'new' ways carried responsibilities to provide, nourish, and protect. Mutongi provides example from colonial Western Kenya where assisting widows in the community was an important part of affirming one's masculinity. Women were calculatedly presenting themselves as 'poor widows' to men of the village and in such a way placed men in a situation where aiding the 'bereaved widow' would uphold the male self-image and masculinity (Mutongi 2007 : 8). As a result, in order to maintain power, individuals have to 'invest' in aiding others and maintain social relations, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

The archetype of the African 'big man' became probably the most enduring image of African masculinity during the independence years. The power of the 'big man' came with responsibilities to care for his 'own kind', and this model of a big man that takes 'proper care' of his family has become the dominant form of masculinity throughout postcolonial Africa as stereotypes in contemporary popular culture also affirm (Lindsay and Miescher 2003; Spronk 2012). A wealthy powerful patriarch with business and government networks both in the city and in rural areas, he can be found in many satirical essays or caricatures about contemporary Kenya and other African countries. For instance the archetype of the 'big man' can be found in Ngugi wa Thiongo's short story 'Minutes of Glory' (1975) when describing the clientele of Treetop Bar:

The owner was a retired civil servant but one who still played at politics. He was enormously wealthy with business sites and enterprises in every major town in Kenya. Big shots from all over the country came to his bar. Big men in Mercedes. Big men in Bentleys. Big men in their Jaguars and Daimlers. Big men with uniformed chauffeurs drowsing with boredom in cars waiting outside. There were others not so big who came to pay respects to the great. They talked politics mostly. And about their work.

Even though this hegemonic form of masculinity is out of reach for most men, the focus of most types of masculinities remains the male wage and its ability to

provide for a large group of dependants, both kin and non-kin. The power of the African man was always dependant on his membership in certain social units and his access to land, labour, and resources (Berman 1998; Berry 1989). Spronk (2012 : 187), in her research on young Nairobi professionals' sexualities, observes that the notion of being 'responsible', which implies that a man is self-reliant and financially able, is still the key to young males' understanding of what it means to be 'a man' in contemporary Kenya.

Another important trait of the archetypical 'big man' masculinity is its connection to male virility and sexuality. An active sexual life and having multiple partners is a very prominent trait of the powerful man in many African societies (Spronk 2012; Tamale 2011b). Kenya is no exception, and, as Odhiambo (2003 : 432-433) concludes in his analysis of post-independence Kenyan literature, men search for women to boost their ego and self-esteem through sexual relations, be it within the family, or through extra-marital affairs. Sexual desire being defined as a mostly male 'need' both by Kenyan men and women (Spronk 2012 : 212) points to the importance of being sexually active in feeling masculine and identifying as a man. In turn, the number of love and sexual relations, girlfriends, lovers that a man has, is a sign of his prestige and thus his masculinity (Haram 2004 : 221).

In contemporary Kenya, the two traits of masculinity – financial power and sexuality – are to a high degree intertwined. The connection between love and money is not a new phenomenon in what Cole (2009) calls 'economies of intimacy'. It is also not a new combination in the understanding of masculinity, as Schatzberg (2001) shows in his analysis of African leaders as fathers and providers. In her essay on *fitiavina* – a Malagasy word usually translated as 'love' – Cole shows how affect and exchange are both equally important in constituting *fitiavina*. Traditional cultural practices in Madagascar emphasise the importance of reciprocal exchange of material support and care in binding people together (Cole 2009 : 113). Yet, as Thomas and Cole (2009 : 21) argue, the increasing inequality and growing monetarisation of social relations in much of Africa has disrupted the balance between affect and exchange and resulted in the introduction of a new pattern – that of love versus money—with

all the problems that arise out of such an opposition. As a result, the contemporary discourse of a man as provider and controller also involves new cultural influences that emphasise sexuality, especially female sexuality in entirely new ways (Cornwall 2003 : 240).

Contemporary African men emphasise the ability to spend money on a woman, to sustain her and the family, as an important issue (Cornwall 2003; Silberschmidt 2004; Spronk 2012). Images of desirability include not only the simple provision of food and shelter; contemporary young Kenyans also speak about cars, elegant clothes, and other means to impress (see for example picture 1). Courtship, the sexual advances of men and finance are directly related in the way people speak about these matters. For example Mills and Ssewakiryanga (2005 : 92) point out references to the international corporate culture that are employed by students of Makerere University when referring to the dating scene:

Courting thus involved “presentation of your C.V.”, seduction necessitated a good deal of “science”, but student poverty, “structural adjustment on the pocket”, made the whole process near impossible.

Picture 3.1: Taxes<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Published in *The Standard*, 24/06/2011

Another example is that of Nairobi underground hip-hop artists who sing about the three most important life areas for men of Nairobi: drinking, partying, and having sex (Mwangi 2004 : 5). All these examples show new ways of connecting finance and a simplified version of affection. The poverty that was created by structural adjustment is directly connected to the rising common understanding that there is 'no romance without finance' in an economy where money has a social power and love always has a material aspect (Bennett 2011; Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2005).

The connection between wealth and sexuality became especially problematic with the financial difficulties arising from structural adjustment. As was discussed earlier, processes of privatisation and government downsizing left many men without sources of income and forced them to look for other means of survival. In addition to that, more women were entering the formal labour force and men found it more and more difficult to earn money and maintain their role as breadwinner. Traditional power relations were further disrupted by the arrival of the discourse of human and women's rights in the growing NGO sector. As a result, it became difficult to maintain the status of 'big man'. Silberschmidt's (2004 : 234) research in rural and urban Tanzania found that men in both settings were experiencing disempowerment because of changed social and economic conditions and their inability to provide. According to Silberschmidt, this disempowerment resulted in men's lack of social value and self-esteem. Being unable to fulfil the deemed masculine role of male breadwinners, men started to link their masculinity and self-esteem to sexuality and sexual manifestations. Having multiple partners and sexually aggressive behaviour became a way to strength or reassert one's masculinity. Emphasising this trait of masculinity becomes a mechanism to compensate for the lack of financial stability and the ability to provide – the major part of masculinities. Lindsay and Miescher (2003 :20)observe that in the wake of structural adjustment young men were caught in between different images of masculinity – from responsible provider to insatiable lover – that were difficult to fulfil. In the face of social expectations of economic potency, becoming a man and withholding power became a difficult task.

Men are expected to be not only financially stable, to provide, and to be sexually potent—the notion of masculinity also carries some traits of violence and aggressiveness. Heald's research of Gisu people in Kenya and Uganda (1982, 1991, 2001) shows that becoming a man, and thus masculinity itself, is associated with a 'bubbling up' quality of *lirima* which can dictate a man's actions and thoughts (1986 : 67). Even though this quality is very important in the transformation process of becoming a man and marks the main difference between sexes (1982 : 31), in everyday life it is seen as dangerous, because it is associated with violence (2001 : 49). For this reason men are expected to control their *lirima*. However, in present day Kenya, violence is not well controlled by individuals or the state as indicated by the rising criminality rates and violence (Abrahamsen and Williams 2005 : 427) and high – around 50 per cent – levels of intimate partner violence (Lawoko et al. 2007 : 774). Sexual violence is an important part of intimate partner violence, but it is difficult to measure its scale because of blurred boundaries between coerced, forced, and consented sex (Kilonzo et al. 2008 : 189). According to various studies, non-consensual sex is a common feature of early sexual experiences in Kenya for young women. Erulkar's research on sexual coercion among young people in Kenya shows that one in five sexually experienced young women had non-consensual sex, perpetrators usually being women's intimate partners (2004 : 186). Moreover, ever-married women are more likely to report coercion than their never-married counterparts indicating a high level of sexual violence in families (Erulkar 2004 : 187). Kilonzo et al. (2008) attributes high levels of sexual violence to the lack of clarity of what is consent in marriage and in relationships. In addition, violence and sexual violence could be seen as shaped by masculinity in need to compensate for a lack of financial power. Silberschmidt (2004 : 242) points out that in East Africa, contemporary masculinity became almost synonymous with toughness and aggression.

When being tough, financially stable, or sexually potent fails, a man risks losing all he has. Sembene Ousmane in his novel 'Xala' (1976) describes exactly such a situation: when El Hadji Abdu Kader fails to consummate his marriage with a third wife, he loses not only his manhood, but also his friends, two wives, wealth,

and reputation. With changes that already disrupt many traditional notions and diminish male financial power, men are preoccupied with their position in society, and look for alternative ways to emphasise their masculinity and power. Such tendencies are not specific to the African setting. As examples from post-adjustment countries in Latin America, Caribbean and East Europe show, work insecurities that were brought by neo-liberal restructuring and incorporation in the global economy had profound effects on masculinities worldwide (see Ashwin and Lytkina 2004; Bourgois 1996; Chant 2000).

Connell in his work speaks about the significance of masculinity therapy as a form of masculinity politics (2005 : 211). The most popular Kenyan version of masculinity therapy that concerns itself with healing male wounds, is undertaken by local traditional healers and witchdoctors as can be observed from street-side advertising (picture 2), and is very much directed at sexual power.

*Picture 3.2. Manhood. October 2010, Nairobi*



The tendency of therapeutic practices is towards accommodation between men and women, and current socio-economic conditions. With Kenyan women experiencing an increase in the demand for their labour (both skilled and

unskilled), as well as women's rights movements, Kenyan men have to redefine themselves in relation to these new female roles. As Spronk (2012 : 216-220) shows in her analysis of young Nairobi professionals, men still find it difficult to accept women in senior positions or even as colleagues. Even though young male professionals feel that they are the new generation which has broken away from that of their fathers, the emphasis on 'Africanness' and feeling in touch with one's heritage are very important features in people's lives. As a result, traditional notions of masculinity are complemented with some 'modern' features and define new masculinities that correspond to older ideas about what it means to be a man to different degrees.

Lindsay and Miescher (2003 : 19) suggest the example of S. M. Otieno as a new type of African masculinity, that of a modern, cosmopolitan man who is a western educated lawyer, quotes Shakespeare, has a wife from a different ethnic group, and breaks with older models of patriarchy by choosing (according to his wife, as no written will remained) to be buried away from his Luo patrilineage. However, the finale of the burial saga (see for example Stamp 1991), which featured the Otieno clan's victory in court to the right of burying the body, shows that such a type of masculinity is seen as a threat to tradition by both the legal system and Kenyan society. Another similar example of a masculinity that is seen as a threat by his own community is that of John Githongo, who investigated bribery and fraud of under the presidency of Mwai Kibaki (Wrong 2009). As Wrong shows, Githongo did not meet the loyalty expectations of the 'big men' in his ethnic group by choosing to investigate ruling elites' frauds. In the context of prevailing patron-client political relations that have an important ethnic aspect, such behaviour is seen as a betrayal of traditional society.

These examples of new modern forms of masculinities are few, contested by society, and raise many doubts and confusions in young 'modern' peoples' lives (see Spronk 2012), but they still involve financial stability as a means to achieve other good qualities of a man, which points back to the archetype of a 'big man'. As Connell (2005 : 216) observes, a hegemonic masculinity has been incredibly successful in maintaining economic, ideological, and sexual domination. That is



why it is more common to encounter modern Kenyan men who correspond more to the traditional notion of masculinity. For example, a very modern educated man with a successful business who still has his main home in his rural village, and his family living in a way that is very compatible with more traditional notions.

Changes in social, economic and political conditions had a strong influence on male roles in society. Despite shifting power relations between genders, 'important socialising institutions' – the mass media, church and education systems – still encourage traditional gender roles (Lemon 1995 : 63, for how Churches respond to realities of contemporary lifestyle see Spronk, 2012 : 219) and place men in a contradictory position. When speaking about the example of Nigeria, Cornwall observes that male identity and agency are marked by these changes in everyday conditions. Men speak less of obedience and endurance and more about love and romance, are more anxious to satisfy women's sexual and material needs, and point out that love has a price. Coming back to the Kenyan case study, in one interview, Christy (30 years old) explained to me that she would not marry any man that earns less than 20,000 KSH a month (which not many men do), because for less money she does not think it is possible to sustain a family. Christy's reasoning implies that marrying is only worthwhile if a man brings in enough funds to considerably improve her own life, mirroring the traditional ideal of what it means to be a man. However, such expectations carry great imprints of the contemporary political economy, where the social life of people becomes increasingly monetarised and labelled with a price. In such a context, masculinity starts having new aspects that are very closely intertwined with money, even if it seems to be reflecting the traditional notion of a 'big man'. While the media and advertisements continue to reinforce a picture of a 'real man' that meets traditional expectations (in the advertisements Kenyans usually see men dressed in suits, working in modern offices and driving cars – all pointing towards their power and financial stability); an event featuring a Nigerian pastor who promised to help women to get husbands held at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre in the end of

2010 which was attended by hundreds of women (Harun 2011), points to the fact that this type of masculinity is not achieved easily.

Men hold power in African social, cultural, economic and gender structures, but their position has worsened since the restructuring of the Kenyan economy after the 1980s. As Silberschmidt (2004 : 240) notes, even though men have more freedom compared to women, particularly in sexual matters, their diminishing opportunities to earn money put them into a precarious position as heads of the household and breadwinners. Male authority diminishes with changing gender power relations and so does their self-esteem. Many women understand that the romantic ideas of partnership are not enough and choose men who are generous and wealthy, even if they are married (Haram 2004 : 221). This is very well reflected by the explanation that Peninah Mwangi, the director of Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme, gave to the myth that Kenyan women outnumber Kenyan men by three times. Kenya's society has no significant diversions from the natural sex ratio, which means that there is approximately an equal number of males and females in the country. However, Peninah explains that when she and other women count males, they count only the ones that meet the requirements of 'men', or rather, the ones that correspond to the dominant notion of masculinity. For many women, as Peninah points out, men are needed for two reasons: 'making a baby' and 'to pay the rent'. Both notions correspond to what is deemed the most important parts of masculinity: the ability to provide, financial stability, and sexual potency. If many men are not able to fulfil these expectations, women start to believe that it is better to share one man than to have one 'not-man'. As this section showed, neo-liberalism inspired policies that were implemented in Kenya and the financially uncertain environment that Kenyans experience today have had a strong influence in defining new ways that people understand what it means to be a man. As gender relations are always defined in relation to each other, it is important to see what changes contemporary political economy brought to understanding what it means to be a woman as well, which will be done in the following section.

## **The commodification, objectification and sexualisation of women**

Whereas the contemporary economic conditions made men vulnerable in ways that were unimaginable before and shook the common understanding of what it means to be a man, women experienced socio-economic changes in ambiguous ways. On the one hand, as discussed earlier, many women started experiencing an increased domestic burden and financial difficulties. On the other hand, with the increase in demand for female labour and women's movements some women started having some opportunities that were not available to them before. New 'liberties' are still highly restrained by economic and societal structures, but the discourse and perceptions of such a freedom are important in understanding new emerging femininities, as will be discussed in this section.

If men and masculinities are traditionally defined by a man's ability to provide, his sexuality and strength, women are identified as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers – i.e. femininities are traditionally defined in relation to men. The colonial authorities of Kenya continued to embrace this definition of women in their relationship to men, and considered women separately only when they became a 'real' problem (i.e. when they started entering town on their own as domestic workers, prostitutes, or when they were left behind by men in their rural areas) (Frederiksen 1994 : 60; also see White 1990). The main features of hegemonic femininity are caretaking and devotion, with motherhood being celebrated as the ultimate symbol of womanhood (also see Ampofo 2004; Spronk 2012 : 167). In a traditional understanding women are assigned to the domestic, informal sphere and usually only enter the public sphere in periods of social change when conventional gender roles are unsettled (Spronk 2012 : 137). In such historic moments, as for example when women started seeking careers as nurses, teachers, clerks, and businesswomen in towns, the moral panic about women becoming 'wayward' or about the rise of 'prostitution' is not uncommon (Allman 2001; Cooper 2001; also see Cornwall 2001; Hodgson and McCurdy 2001a; McCurdy 2001; Mutongi 2007 : 144; Parpart 2001). Following this pattern, the moral panic that can be observed in the contemporary Kenyan press about women who are engaged in sex work (Kiarie 2012; Mghenyi 2012;

Oluoch 2006; Warigi 2012) points to changes in the social realities in contemporary Kenya.

The changes that affect women's position in society are influenced by many different forces. The influence of neo-liberal practice and discourse are at the centre of inquiry of this thesis; yet, other forces, such as women's movements have to be acknowledged as well. Oduol and Kabira (1995 : 206) argue that conventional notions of social movements cannot fully explain the women's movement in Kenya. Women have been active actors addressing their problems since pre-colonial times when groups of women formed self-help units aimed at assisting one another during periods of distress. Some of these women groups were mobilised during the colonial times to rebel against colonial policies such as forced soil conservation policies, or low-paid coffee picking for example (ibid. : 195). Late colonial years and independence saw the formalisation of women groups into various organisations and formation of big umbrella organisations and NGOs such as *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*<sup>7</sup> (MYWO) for example. Women's groups were actively engaged in various small-scale projects responding directly to their daily issues in rural areas, raised strong voices through the formalised movement in urban areas, or even acted as individuals for women's liberation (for example Wangari Maathai); however, such efforts were often uncoordinated, fragmented and oriented to specific local situations (ibid.).

The neo-liberal era saw the boost of the number of organisations that aim to deal with women's issues and prioritise gender justice, women's rights and gender equality. Most of these NGOs are responding mainly to the consequences of neo-liberal reforms such as reduction of public spending, failure to provide legal reforms and reproductive health services to women (Muteshi 2009 : 132). What is more, such a growth in women's organisations can be attributed to the Western-based human and women's rights movements and connected to the funds provided by Western donors to further such an agenda (Kanyinga 2009; Mutua 2009). As a result, even though women's organisations were undeniably successful in many areas, it is also correct that women's movements do not

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<sup>7</sup> It means 'Progress for Women' in Swahili.

fundamentally challenge the status quo in the country. Moreover, the women's movement remains fragmented and its different fractions sometimes have conflicting aims. For instance, whereas the Kenyan Human Rights Commission (KHRC) supports sex workers' movement for their rights, the FIDA (Federation of Women Lawyers) is opposed to such an idea. Dr Willy Mutunga<sup>8</sup> explains such fragmentation by the fact that different women's organisations are dominated by women from different social backgrounds, social classes, and some of the organisations are closely following religious lines. Therefore, certain issues, such as sexuality for instance, become difficult to agree on and mean continuous fragmentation of the women's movement.

Despite the fact that the women's movement is not very united in Kenya, individual women living in rural areas, or in town and cities were influenced by different organisations that aimed to liberate women. Be it a woman in a rural area that benefited from women's groups common purchase of land and now feels emancipated because she owns the produce of that land (Oduol and Kabira 1995 : 199), or an urban woman benefiting from the legal advice of FIDA, Kenyan women experienced an increase of possibilities for freedom in the recent few decades.

In addition to women's movements, changing conditions in the labour market contributed to the feeling of emancipation of women. However, these forms of freedom were accompanied by neo-liberal developments linked to commodification that went beyond commodification of female labour, and started the process of commodification of female bodies.

As a result of structural adjustment, markets expanded into the sectors of healthcare and education. Such an expansion of markets was justified by efficiency, individual choice and private interests (for how some terms are related to neo-liberalism see Turner 2008). Clarke (2004) insists that the primacy of the private should be a starting point of neo-liberal discourse analysis. The 'private' in the neo-liberal context first appears in the form of

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<sup>8</sup>Interview with Dr Willy Mutunga, the representative to Kenya at the Ford Foundation, 20/01/2011, Nairobi.

'private interests' that are exchanged on the market. Clarke makes an observation that the private interests of an individual in this discourse mean both the interests of a person ('economic man') and a corporation. As corporations in neo-liberal discourse are personified, human individuals are brought into the economic realm. The superiority and universalism of economic truths or what Ferguson calls 'scientific capitalism' (2006), dominates neo-liberal discourse. Economic logic and competition – two very important terms in neo-liberal theory – present both types of individuals (corporations and humans) as a rational, transparent and readily calculable 'bottom line' when seeking for private interests (Clarke 2004 : 35). As a result of this, people start distinguishing each other in terms of possessions and their value (Wonders and Michalowski 2001 : 548). As Clarke points out, anything that does not have a monetary expression (for example women's house-work, or care-work in the domestic sphere) is ruled out as irrelevant, while at the same time more and more aspects of human activity are brought into the market, commodified, and labelled with a price (2004 : 35).

The process of commodification in the Kenyan context is slightly different from Clarke's description. While women's domestic labour might not be valued since it is not expressed in monetary value, the same labour has a value if it is employed outside the household. And indeed, many women (and in some cases men) have been employed as house-help in African households since colonial times, even if wages paid for the domestic servants were very poor (see for example Bujra 2000). What is new in this process of commodification in the era of neo-liberal restructuring is that many new goods that were not for sale before are also brought to the market. Markets offer human organs for transplantation (Sharp 2000 : 294), the possibility to purchase a certain lifestyle through accommodation in a specific area (Jackson 1999 : 100), the feeling of adventure through exotic trips (Truong 1990 : 124), female and children's bodies for a wide range of services that correspond to male desires (Barry 1996 : 22), the 'original' ethnic experience (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), and many others. This process of commodification is a direct response to the increasing consumerism and the neo-liberal idea that markets bring benefits to

everyone participating in them. However, as Sassen (2002) points out, while people who are at the top of economic structures can enjoy such consumer lifestyle (see Spronk 2012, especially chapter VI for the consumerist lifestyles of Nairobi young professionals), people whose social and financial security was decreased with neo-liberal practices are the ones who are commodifying their labour and bodies in response to these consumerist lifestyles.

The neo-liberal understanding of consumption constructs the meaning of participation in markets while employing a notion of individual freedom. Thus consumer societies and the neo-liberal discourse surrounding them are the key prerequisite for the justification of market economies. Individual wishes and consumption are strongly interdependent because desires are developed when facing a need and choices about fulfilling desires are made when evaluating what possibilities of choice are available (Elliott 1997 : 292). Elliot also observes that choices of consumption (i.e. ways that an individual seeks to satisfy his/her wishes) play an important role in structuring the social world (and understanding about gender relations) and that marketing and the effects of advertisement are too important to be left only for marketers (1997 : 285). In addition to that, as Lury notes, 'commodities hold a wide range of cultural associations and illusions' (1996 : 42), which is why the analysis of marketing and advertisement can tell us much about neo-liberal consumer societies' cultures and values as well as how neo-liberal discourse feeds into ideas about the roles of men and women. Many marketing solutions are based on prevailing understandings of masculinities and femininities when targeting an audience. Therefore, if we look at Kenyan advertising, we will observe the prevailing hegemonic understanding of womanhood that places women into the domestic sphere; yet there is a new trend in the sphere of advertising, that of the sexualisation of women.

Connell (2005 : 252) observes that through the notion of freedom, the international media paints a very specific picture of gender ideology which is full of sexualised images of women, celebrity gossip, and eroticism. The simplistic model of this picture is that of men choosing women and women making themselves available. Whatever does not fit into this normative model

(homosexuality, female domination) is often made into a freak show for entertainment (ibid.) Of course, the understanding of masculinities and femininities are culturally specific, but the power of the international media - which portrays Western lifestyles and which often informs people all around the world about the possibilities that are not available for most of them - should not be left out. For instance, Spronk (2009, 2012) observes how young Nairobi professionals struggle to be both 'modern' and 'African' and how accusations of being Westernised hurt them. Similarly, Ferguson (1999) in his analysis of Zambia Copperbelt workers' strategies points out the interaction of 'locality' and 'modernity' in observed lifestyles. The fusion of local and global, or modern and traditional is increasing with the global expansion of mass media. As Appadurai (1996 : 3) observes, such media expansion is one of the key factors in understanding the current moment of inter-societal relations. It is because of the work of the imagination that boundaries become less important and people in different locations can dream of similar things. The reach of the mass media and the global neo-liberal emphasis on consumption create conditions for commoditised ideas about peoples' social lives. In this way the picture of young women 'driving on the left side' of hip young men, dressing in a certain way, and exhibiting their sexual capital became a social style in African public space (Posel 2011 : 133).

Kisiang'ani (2011) observes that Western ideals of the female body that come through international magazines, music videos, and movies have an influence on Kenyan understandings of the body. Moreover, this understanding has a strong gender division, and Kisiang'ani gives the example of a small experiment he did to prove his case. After selecting and analysing the most popular African and Western songs in Kenya, he concluded that in most video clips 'disciplined' female bodies that meet beauty standards and display strong sexual messages are important objects of adoration. However, he continues, unlike in the case of (mainly) male singers, nobody ever knows their names; which shows how women in the public sphere are constructed as insignificant and their bodies are given higher priority than themselves (Kisiang'ani 2011 : 62-63).



The normative understanding of woman and the construction of femininity can be observed through the analysis of advertising that uses images of female bodies as an essential tool of informing consumers about the choices available in the market. Female bodies in advertising (and media, musical clips, movies, series, TV shows, etc.) are constructed to represent beauty 'as an achievable goal of self-transformation through the use of commodities' (Kisiang'ani 2011; Lury 1996 : 135). In addition to that, through those female body images, the media construct women as a sexed object (Barry 1996 : 22). Kenyan media workers in Kisiang'ani's (2011 : 56) research admit that in their work they usually just replicate their Western counterparts and point towards popular TV series and Western movies as a source of inspiration, which indicates a strong Western media influence in Kenya. Processes of objectification and sexualisation of the female body lead to a situation where women are valued for their appearance (Taylor 2001 : 142), and where widespread sexualisation is normalised for the sexed society (Barry 1996 : 8).

The sexualisation of society can be observed not only through an analysis of sexed musical video clips', but it can be also attributed to the popularity, spread and availability of pornographic material. One of the most interesting findings of Kisiang'ani's (2011 : 56) research was that one Kenyan media company purchases European sex video tapes and sex magazines that are later replicated in local magazines. Moreover, pornographic material in Kenyan towns can be easily purchased from street vendors and is an important force forming youth sexuality (Wurzburg 2011). This situation reflects the position of women in contemporary consumer societies where, as Mohanty (2003 : 334) notes, women culturally and ideologically are constructed as the 'Other' in the representative discourses of science, literature, law, language, cinema, and other fields. Still, despite the obvious influence of the international media on the process of female body commodification, it is important to point out that such a process shows female agency responding to a deteriorating economic situation. Women commodify their bodies in order to make a living in a difficult situation defined by little available opportunities to choose from. For instance, Mills and Ssewakiryanga (2005 : 93) in their research asked female students what they

would never tell their boyfriends. The response that surprised the researchers was that they hated him. Women explained that sometimes their relationships had other motives than love, sometimes they did not like their boyfriends, but liked their money, and so they pretended to be in love.

This two-way process of commodification of female bodies is a response to the deteriorating living conditions that were affected by neo-liberal reforms and to the increased outreach of Western media in Kenya. Women, thus, are in an ambiguous position in contemporary Kenya: on the one hand they still have to be good wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Yet changing labour relations and economic situations, as well as increasing commodification, allow women to deal with daily challenges in completely new ways. Despite Western influence, normative gender behaviour is always being negotiated in the local context; and African women, as Hodgson and McCurdy (2001a : 5) point out, provoke a re-thinking of theories of gender and power by the myriad ways in which they express their demands and exercise their agency.

## **Conclusions**

Neo-liberal ideology, discourse and practices had a profound effect on the structure and workings of the Kenyan economy. Because of processes of privatisation and liberalisation, as well as macroeconomic deflationary policies, many Kenyan people started experiencing financial difficulties. However, the changes that were brought by neo-liberal policies were felt differently by men and women.

Men composed the majority of people who experienced difficulties in finding jobs as a result of restructuring. As a result of that and population growth, many of them found it difficult to find other adequate sources of income and many families that depended on a male wage started experiencing financial difficulties. It is also important to note that because of the workings of informal social safety nets, the consequences of the weakening of male financial power are much wider than for just their immediate families. The financial difficulties felt by many men disrupted the traditional power systems and gender and kinship hierarchies and had a weighty effect on how men perceive their

masculinity. As a result of the lack of financial power and ability to provide, some men started emphasising sexuality and violence as defining traits of their masculinity.

Women lived the effects of structural adjustment in different ways than men. Whereas financial difficulties affected women, and many of them had to take up extra burdens in order to keep their families going, women also started experiencing an increase in the demand for female labour. However, such an increase of this demand is directly connected to Kenyan women being seen as cheap labour by international markets, and therefore such opportunities in the labour market do not bring more gender equality. In addition to these changes in women's structural position in the Kenyan social structures, the process of commodification is important in order to understand society's perceptions of women, and women's changing livelihood strategies. As women are increasingly depicted as commodified, objectified, and sexualised in the mass media, common ideas about femininities also started shifting.

The lived experiences of women and their perceptions of both what it means to be a woman and a man will be further explored in the next chapter in which I will discuss sex workers' views on gender relations and survival strategies for women in Kenya.

#### 4. Women, love, sex and money in a 'situation of duress'

*Gendered subjectivities, as well as a range of masculine and feminine styles, emerge not simply as a mechanical effect of structure (the old "sex roles" of functionalist sociology) but as a form of self-fashioning in which there is room for subversion, ambiguity, and play. At the same time, however, such self-fashioning does not imply free creation by a individual, for gender is a performance crafted under a "situation of duress," and in response to social and economic compulsion (Ferguson 1999 : 94).*

Gender, according to Butler (1988 : 522), is a 'performative' act, a construction of meaning; and gendered styles come into being under certain conditions, a 'situation of duress'. Therefore, gender and gendered performances are strategies of survival within 'compulsory systems' that individuals function in. As Ferguson (1999 : 99, footnote 20) points out, Butler does not elaborate on these 'compulsory' systems to a great extent, nor does she explore how such systems work and why certain gender styles function as survival strategies in these conditions. Moreover, Ferguson continues, 'duress' under the 'compulsory systems' is felt unequally among individuals, and some of them are in a more disadvantaged position within political-economic systems than others. However, these linkages between performative 'stylistic strategies' and structures defined by social, political and economic conditions, are what Ferguson explores. This chapter will build on Ferguson's insights to analyse how conditions of 'duress' influenced by neo-liberalism interact with gender in the case of Kenya's sex workers.

The socio-economic structures that define the lives of Kenyans today were discussed in the previous chapters. This chapter will explore how these systems are perceived by women in the sex industries. It will start by analysing the ways through which women cope with the difficulties of finding jobs, making enough money to survive, and taking care of their families, before moving on to see how women enact different gender roles (wife, informal wife, mistress, lover, sex

worker) in order to be able to depend on men and male wages, or – to use Kandiyoti's (1988) term – to bargain with patriarchy. Following Ferguson's research of Zambian mine workers and their adopted and performed 'cultural styles' that secures their survival in the rural-urban political economy of Zambia, the first two parts of this chapter will examine how a socio-economic framework influenced by neo-liberalism positions women under a 'situation of duress'; and why and how certain gender performances – or 'cultural style' – 'work' in such a context. These sections will serve to show that, as Ferguson (1999 : 99) has argued, 'such styles are motivated, intentional, and performative but not simply chosen or lightly slipped into'. Therefore, women choose to position themselves as wives, mothers, lovers or sex workers in order to make a living and progress in society as a response to the difficult socio-economic and patriarchal environment they live in.

The question of choice is of great importance for this research, and this chapter will show how women make choices within structures that disadvantage them. Even though I will argue that the notion of choice is of extreme importance in order to understand the contemporary sex industries, it is also important to point out that choices are often made and performative roles constructed through social practices that do not necessarily have a clear meaning. For, as Ferguson (1999 : 210) argues, 'stylistic practice, in its social context, [takes] on meanings not through decoding so much as by provoking guesses and surmises, activating prejudices, and inviting conjectures'. In relation to this research, guesses, surmises and prejudices both serve to enhance certain gendered performances of women in order to be able to depend on men, as explored in the second section of this chapter, and are also used as tools when shaping activities within the sex industries. Therefore, the role of sex workers' perceptions about men and their desires will be analysed in the third part of this chapter.

Gender relations are continually produced and re-produced in the context of power relations (Ferguson 1999 : 94). Gender relations are being constantly redefined when interacting with socio-economic structures and changes within them. Therefore, changes that were brought by neo-liberal practice resulted in

individuals adapting to the role of consumers in addition to their gendered identities. The last part of this chapter will look into sex workers as consumers in the Kenyan society to explore how changes in Kenyan economic structures affect changes in gender relations and power. Whereas women are disadvantaged in society and use their feminine roles in order to depend on men, it is also true that as a result of such actions some women become important actors in local economies. This sequence of shifts in gender power relations points to the working of both patriarchal and market systems that define Kenyan lives today.

### **'It is not easy in Kenya by the way': global economy and local realities**

The life stories and experiences of Mombasa sex workers are very revealing regarding the structures – or the situation of 'duress' – that define possibilities for women in the Kenyan economy and society. The majority of women who started trading sex did so because of poverty. One reason for initial poor living conditions is loss of household income, which often results from job loss, or loss of a breadwinner due to death or desertion. Yet, it is important to acknowledge another type of poverty – when women have jobs but still struggle to survive and provide for themselves and their families, because of the extremely low income that these jobs bring. Poverty is further complicated by the rising costs of living. As was discussed previously, bringing healthcare and education to the market already meant increased expenses of the households and a double burden for women. What is more, liberalisation of markets means that the state has no power in price control, which, in turn, results in rising prices of food and other basic commodities. These economic problems that affect women, as Sassen (2002 : 264) argues, have grown – at least in part – as a response to the effects of economic globalisation in developing countries. Sassen uses the term 'survival circuits' when speaking about the feminisation of survival and points out that this term indicates 'a degree of institutionalisation' since families, communities and even countries depend on women for survival (Sassen 2002 : 265). This section explores the survival circuits that sex workers belong to, or the situation of 'duress', as Butler calls it, as well as the material realities of

women from a sex workers' perspective. Building on it, the following sections will explore how, in addition to difficult material conditions, women in survival circuits also want to enjoy goods and services that their poverty denies them.

The prevailing structures of gender relations define the possibilities available for women to a great degree. Most of the opinions for survival and living are expressed in relationship to a man; and so many sex workers connected sex trade to the poverty that followed the loss of their husbands or fathers (divorce or death). For example, Lorin (42 years old) started selling sex after her husband (12 years of marriage) and father of her three children died in an accident:

By bad luck he [husband] passed away in 2002. And from that year up to now [2011] I am staying alone, with my children, and passing so time. Because I don't have any experience of any work. I was doing house-help at my friend, another woman staying near here. I was working almost two months and then I had a problem with this [pats on her back], with a backbone. I told her, that when I am washing I have some pains here, so I cannot work this work. So I stopped working up to now. I keep walking here and there, asking, looking for a little job like washing, ironing or washing house, washing windows only. They pay me 300 sometimes, 250 sometimes. And I have 3 children. So it is sad. My first born completed form 4 in 2008, up to now I haven't taken her to college, she keeps on sitting. She doesn't tell me any problem that she is facing; she is just quiet, just thinking, thinking, sometimes crying. She was big, now she is coming thinner.

Lorin's experience points to gender structures – being a wife and a mother, she did not work while married and so did not have any work experience once her husband died.

The gender structure, in which a woman's role is subordinate to her father's (and then husband's) can become problematic for women in the instance of their departure. Rural societies had ways of incorporating widows and divorced women back into village life. For instance, Mutongi (2007 : 189-190) points out that in the societies of western Kenya a widow or co-widows usually remained on their deceased husband's land tilling it and raising children together, while their livelihoods were ensured according to indigenous law. In practice it meant that widows still remained incorporated in the patriarchal structure, as the land belonged to their sons, and they had usufruct right to this land until their sons

were old enough to inherit. Other societies practiced widow inheritance, which also made sure that widows are re-incorporated in society (Gwako 1998; Luginaah et al. 2005). Yet, such practices became extremely complicated with rapid urbanisation and migration, as people did not know what to do with urban informal wives following the death of the man. In order to be able to rely on rural kin and family help, urban people have to maintain a good relationship with their rural homeland, as Ferguson (1999) shows in his work on the urban workers of Zambia's mines. The failure to maintain a good relationship results in diminishing security in case of accident or death. Stories like Lorin's point to such difficulties: women come to Mombasa from other regions of Kenya with their husbands, they take the traditional role of wife, mother and domestic carer, yet, after losing their husbands, women are left to care for their children and often have no relatives or kin to rely on in Mombasa or anywhere else. The patriarchal structure of gender and the economic system that is based on it are prominent factors that place women like Lorin into survival circuits.

Whereas Lorin can be seen as disadvantaged because of her compliance with the traditional role of a wife, it is important to emphasise that the narratives of sex workers' who entered the sex trade after losing their husbands (or other male breadwinners) often point towards multiple failed attempts to find different ways of earning money and finding their place in the economy. For instance Tabitha (42 years old) recounts her attempts this way:

I was a messenger. Yeah. I also make the cleaner. I found a job like a casual, not permanent. Casual, this was like a casual. So there I stayed for three months only. Then they say: "Now- no job", so then I started to walk in the beach. Yeah, because I know to make massage, and *rasta*<sup>9</sup>. So I walk, I speak to the white people like you, if they like the massage, I make a massage, and if they give me small money, I came back home, children eating. And in the night I go to the bar, restaurant, I stay, I speak to people, in the night club, like that.

Tabitha's experience not only shows that the sex trade was her last choice; but more importantly, it shows what possibilities for women exist in the local globalised economy and what keeps them in the survival circuits.

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<sup>9</sup>Matted coils of hair, a popular hair-style.



First, Tabitha gets a temporary job. Barrientos et al. (2003 : 1514) point out that flexible production and working arrangements are adopted by many African companies to maintain competitiveness in the global economy; competitiveness is also ensured through temporary labour contracts, which allow companies to accommodate demand instability and shift the risks of the industry onto workers. Women are targeted for such jobs (see chapter three), yet, at the same time, women are especially vulnerable to job loss because of the male-breadwinner bias – the assumption that a wage paid to a man provides him and his family (Elson and Cagatay 2000 : 1355). The persistence of such perceptions can be observed in a Kenyan Human Rights Commission Report on the struggle for workers' rights (Mutunga et al., 2002 : 16): when discussing the exploitative wages of Del Monte workers, the report gives a table that compares Del Monte wages (permanent, seasonal, and casual) with the basic monthly needs of a family of six. A family of six is chosen as an entity for comparison, because that is the average family size in the district where the Del Monte factory operates. The importance of such a comparison for this research is that it assumes only one wage earner in the family, who is male. The existence of such a bias makes it difficult for women to receive competitive salary in the labour market. Moreover, the male-breadwinner bias also means that many families favour boys with regards to education (see Chege and Sifuna 2006) and thus women remain less literate and less skilled, which in turn means lower female wages overall.

For this reason, after Tabitha failed to ensure her livelihood through formal employment, she turned to the informal sector, and started offering massages for tourists. Tourism is an important source of foreign exchange in Kenya, and certainly an important industry in terms of employment on the coast. Yet, due to the nature of tourism that is promoted by the Kenyan government – large scale, capital intensive tourism, and hospitality projects – the local population is rarely involved in the provision of core services, and mainly engage in the marginal and informal businesses surrounding tourism industries such as hawking and vending (Akama and Kieti 2007 : 742-743). The opportunities that are available to local people are not only informal and less profitable, as

Tabitha's story points out, but such opportunities are also gendered, with women having lower paid and less stable opportunities than their male counterparts (Sinclair 1998 : 31). The most popular options for women in the tourism industry, as Mombasa sex workers indicate, are being a maid or a waitress in the big hotel or resort. Some women mentioned the option of working as a security guard in the bars and night-clubs. More profitable options such as transportation, catering services and the management of facilities are usually occupied by men. In the informal sector men also secure more profitable opportunities such as guide services, transportation and the vending of souvenirs.

The economic opportunities that are available for women are an important factor pushing some women to trade sex. They are also the reason why some women choose not to exit the sex industry. Precious (23 years old) was clear in explaining her choice among opportunities available:

In a hotel they pay 3000 [per month]. It is too small for me, because I have to pay rent, my kids have to pay school fees, food, so I say, very small small. I have to go out, if I go out to have sex, then he [a potential client] gives me 3000 per day. And then another day like this.

It is important to point out, that Mombasa sex workers often emphasise their role as mothers and providers for the children, just as the Peruvian sex workers of Nencel's (2001 : 222) research. The role of a mother and the responsibilities that come with it are often at the centre of discourses surrounding the motivation for engaging in sex work. Such discourses also point to the gender structures of society and emphasise the responsibility of women to take care of their children, despite the limited means they have to do so. NGOs, government officials, people on Mombasa streets and sex workers themselves often emphasise poverty when speaking about women engaging in sex work. In this way, the choice of the sex trade is legitimised in the public discourse, it is constructed as an 'honourable gender identity' (Nencel 2001 : 224), because it is for a good reason – to feed families. This ambiguous position that sex workers occupy in public discourse can be explained by the prevalence of patriarchal gender structures in society. The reproductive role of women to care for children is acknowledged, yet, because sex workers do not depend on a man

and thus cannot be controlled, they are constructed as being a threat to society, so that at least they can be policed.

Whereas a government official would complain about how the economy in Kenya is getting worse and that is why the 'vice occupation' of selling sex is widespread<sup>10</sup>, sex workers themselves do not like to speak about morality and concentrate on their everyday economic issues such as the lack of money for children's school fees, the difficulties in finding enough money to feed them, or the rent that is due and which will not be paid on time this month. For example, when asked about morality, Ritangeri (36 years old) did not like my question:

They [people] can talk during the day, and at night they can sleep, and the trade will continue. So what else can I do when I have nothing on my table to give to my children?!

The women who are part of the sex industries often fall out of the traditional family model and of traditional patriarchal structures ensuring that a man would take care of a woman's financial needs. Sex workers rarely belong to a male-headed household, and thus are outside male provision and control. However, despite a woman's supposed independence, they still have their traditional patriarchal responsibilities of taking care of their children and the majority of them are de facto or de jure heads of female-headed households. Neo-liberal restructuring made it more difficult for men to take care of their families and presented women with new opportunities in the labour market, as was discussed in chapter three. These new material realities have challenged traditional gender hierarchies to some extent, however unequal gender power relations remain, because neo-liberal markets build on existing inequalities, which they then try and exploit, as was discussed in chapter two. So even though some men find it increasingly difficult to get a waged job that would ensure they can provide for their families, male salaries are still generally higher than female ones. Likewise, the fact that many women cannot traditionally depend on men financially and have more opportunities in the labour market still means that they have to care for their families and look for new ways of getting a share of the male salary. Both Kenyan men and women

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with civil servant in the District Gender Social Development Office, 28/03/2011, Mombasa.

face new economic conditions in their communities, yet they are still operating in the gendered social structures that define their opportunities.

Sex workers, like the nannies and maids of global survival circuits (see Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), carry a strong responsibility to care for their families, and this responsibility defines their spending and their daily worries. These worries are a direct response to the socio-economic structures that define the livelihoods of women. For example, in an interview Cinderella (28 years old) explained how:

Like today something happened to me in the morning: we were coming to Grace's house, when my child came home. Then I said: "What is wrong?", "They have sent me, for 500 money for school fees." I said: "Where I can get money now?", then I write a letter to the teacher: "Please, let my child get in class, on Monday I will look for money". Now, then I remove from here, when I go back to Mtwapa, I have to go and look for money. So that on Monday he can go to school.

Cinderella has to find money for her son's school fees in order to ensure that he is educated; in this way she is fulfilling her responsibility to take care of her family. Yet, Cinderella's story outlines another important aspect of contemporary care – parents have to pay for public services that are supposed to be free. In a similar vein, Precious (23 years old) explained the reality of commoditisation this way:

But you know, life is very hard. Life is very hard. We need everything. And you know, everything, you buy - water, [for] everything I use money. Everything is money.

As a result of socio-economic structures, Cinderella and Precious have to pay to educate their children (the reason why many Kenyans prefer private schools to the government ones was discussed in chapter two) and manoeuvre both the neo-liberal socio-economic structures that define their poor options in the labour market and to purchase commodified services for their children's and their own well-being.

At the same time, sex workers comply with the traditional role of carer that is prescribed to Kenyan women by society. Twenty-nine studies reviewed by Buvinic and Gupta show that when levels of child malnutrition and school

performance are considered, female-headed households show a slight bias towards protection from poverty in the next generation, especially in African societies (1997 : 268), which reflects the gendered hierarchies and norms that prevail. The fact that a woman is a household head does not mean that poverty will not be reproduced, as female-headed households differ in their income and coping strategies. Nevertheless, the spending patterns of the female carer reflect their decisions over their children/siblings' well-being which can bear some important differences when compared to other types of households. For example, research conducted by Kennedy and Haddad (1994 : 694) found that some of the poorest female-headed households in Kenya have more successful strategies to deal with child nutrition and schooling than other types of households.

The socio-economic structures that disadvantage some women can also be seen from statistics about sex workers. Research on Kenyan sex workers (NACC 2011) shows that 95 per cent of the women who trade sex have a secondary income. Or rather, to paraphrase this number while reflecting on the life stories of interviewed sex workers, the majority of women in the sex trade find that the occupations in the labour markets are not paid enough and have to be complemented with income derived from sex work. As a result, some of today's women with low income choose to complement their income with sex work. Which occupation is seen as the primary and which one as the secondary depends on the individual woman, yet it is important to emphasise that income from other occupations are often not enough to make a living due to the exploitative nature of neo-liberal labour markets. The labour markets disadvantage not only unskilled women who usually do temporary jobs like laundry, cleaning houses, braiding hair, or massage; but equally, women who hold low-paid jobs in the formal modern sector, for example a secretary or a maid in a hotel, also seek for additional income through sex work. Having these jobs requires at least secondary education, but still pays a low wage. For instance, Anita (35 years old) explained:

I finished primary, secondary and college [education]. I studied for a secretary, but with computers. Not a simple secretary. I got employed, 2000 shillings and the guy was harassing me. 2000 shillings – small.

The situation is not better in the informal sector, for example for women who sell clothes, food, and drinks. Often when trading is not profitable it is substituted by earnings from sex work. For instance, Miriam (31 years old) was selling food on the market for a while:

You buy there, let's say, potatoes and then you sell. You lost a lot of money. Because if you buy today and tomorrow there are new potatoes that come from upcountry, and you have from yesterday, nobody wants to buy what is from yesterday. Buy for today and come in the market. So that was how I was doing and losing money, losing money, losing money. You have to pay house rent you have to pay everywhere. So [if there is] no other option that gives money so you can't continue.

The petty economic activities that are available to women usually have a small profit margin. In such cases, the income that is generated through sex work helps women to keep these not so profitable activities running. Sassen (2002 : 265) argues that the feminisation of survival means that women operating in survival circuits as migrants, sex workers, or victims of trafficking, are increasingly relied upon by their households, communities, and even governments and enterprises that function on the margins of the legal economy. The daily realities of Mombasa's sex workers point to exactly such a situation – sex workers' households, and the small businesses that they run, are benefiting from and depending on the income that is earned in the sex industries. I will further explore to what extent local communities rely on the sex workers' income in the last section of this chapter.

It is interesting to observe that there is a generational difference of how sex workers deal with unexpected hardship and poverty. Whereas older sex workers were telling stories of attempts to get some help from their kin and family, the young generation did not seem to even try to rely on traditional social structures. This could be explained by changing social norms in society. As Wiegratz (2010) explores in his analysis of Uganda, the changing material realities that were influenced by neo-liberal restructuring result in changing understandings of moral norms and social values. Consequently, many older sex workers saw relying on their kin as a viable option and tried this route. However, the majority of younger sex workers who grew up during structural adjustment were witnesses of the fact that increasing poverty means an

inability to help kin, and so do not even try to follow this traditional route. Miriam's (31 years old) story illustrates such a pattern of thinking: she was staying with a man whom she considered her husband and had a daughter with him. Then she found out that her 'husband' had another family, they argued, broke up and she found herself (and her daughter) in poverty which led her to trade sex. Miriam still had a family back home upcountry, but did not want to go back and claim her part of the land for a very practical reason:

It is better to stay here. When my father dies and gives me a piece of land, they [her 3 brothers and 4 sisters] will start fighting with me for this small land. It is better I look for my own. I struggle, if I get something, I can buy here. I can stay here than to go there and start fighting. That I don't want. Because I have my daughter. If my daughter goes back to upcountry, to my brothers' place, they will not accept her. I say they will not accept her if I have a fight with them. But when I don't have a fight with them, they stay together. So it's better to stay far. Just communicating, that's all.

Miriam knows that her father's land, divided by eight siblings, will not be enough for a decent living. For this reason she refuses to try to rely on her family when facing difficulties with the hope that such a sacrifice will mean social security for her daughter.

This calculated and weighted decision is not a one-off instance. Sex workers try to make a living in a difficult economic environment, which is influenced by global political economy and the division of labour. What is important to note is that individuals can change their status quo only as much as existing structures allow them to. Still, Kenyan women try to use the system that disadvantages them for their own benefit. Women position themselves in society and take different gendered roles in order to be able to depend on male income and benefit from such relationships. The following section will explore such attempts in more detail.

### **'I would love him so much': blurred boundaries between love and money**

Having to operate in a difficult socio-economic environment that was discussed in the previous section, sex workers often spoke about their attempts to depend on different men – fathers, husbands, boyfriends, uncles, bosses in institutions,

managers in factories and hotels, husbands of other women in families where they were working as a house-help, and, finally, their clients. All the women had played different roles during their lives: they were daughters, wives, girlfriends, farmers, traders, maids, messengers, secretaries, house-help girls, and friends before (and often while) they traded sex. Each of these roles required different performances in order to ensure their livelihoods, as women chose from different forms of femininities available to them (Moore 1994 : 147). This section will examine the ways that Kenyan women are dependent on male income, and how these options often combine a performance of love in exchange for money.

Being dependent on a male income can take multiple forms. The access to male income can be ensured through a marriage as a sexual contract, where a man takes care of his family and in exchange has access to his wife's body and sexuality (Pateman 1988 : 17). Pateman's analysis focuses on a marriage in a Western context and for that reason has to be applied carefully in non-European contexts. Traditionally, marriage in Kenyan societies meant an on-going relation between two families that started with marriage negotiations and continued as an on-going practice that could result in other possible marriages or other benefits through the extended family network (Frederiksen 2000 : 215; Heald 1995 : 492). So the access to a woman's body was ensured through marriage not only by a man, but also by his family. Today marriage still requires a bride price in many communities. For those who can afford marrying into a family with urban connections, this can open more possibilities in the urban labour market through a new extended family network (Luke and Munshi 2006). However, bride price was already a problem fifty years ago as men rarely had the money required. The implication of a marriage without bride price is that men do not have complete control over women (Silberschmidt 2004 : 237). Furthermore, as argued by Ferguson in the case of the Zambian Copperbelt (1999 : 178), the boundaries between marriage and other forms of cohabitation became increasingly blurred with urbanisation; and there is no clear separation among many different arrangements of a short or long run. Still, men's partial control over women means that if a woman is dissatisfied, she



finds it easier to complain or even to leave (Cornwall 2003 : 240; Frederiksen 2000 : 216; Hunter 2002 : 112).

The life stories of interviewed sex workers confirmed such tendencies. For instance, in her first formal marriage, Chichi (32 years old) suffered when her husband did not give her money, beat her and locked her out of the house, but she did not leave him. After their divorce, when she found another man with whom she was staying with 'like my husband', Chichi did not continue suffering once the abuse started:

And then it ended, because when I was pregnant, he almost beat me up. I have listed a complaint to the police station, for him to leave me alone.

Sex worker stories confirm that cohabitation of the couple without completion of families' negotiations, or even in the absence of them, is seen as an informal marriage, just as Frederiksen (2000: 216) points out. Even though such 'staying together' is explained as the ideal of a love marriage, and offers more room for equality in the household, such unions have the weaknesses of insecurity and of an unclear recognition of children's identities in the case of separation (Frederiksen 2000 : 215-216).

East African cultures, as Heald (1995 : 492) points out, can be dubbed as 'respect cultures', in which respect is largely based on controlled sexuality. Yet, as Ferguson (1999 : 186) points out, in a society such as that of the Zambian Copperbelt, or Mombasa for that matter, where most women depend on men economically in one way or another, respect is not linked to receiving money for sex; respect is more defined by how 'properly' a woman is married, how often she changes her partners, and what is the social status of her partner – the type of gender role that she enacts. Therefore, the image that corresponds to respectable gender roles, as that of a mother or a wife, is important in the local society, and some Mombasa sex workers emphasised this. For instance, Precious (23 years old), when reasoning why she does not dress up in a sexy way when going to look for clients, explained:

When I go there, I put on my long trousers, my top. Because I have kids, I have to put on well. When I put something like that [shows something short], and I have a kid, that is not good.

The image of respectful woman, a mother, is important as part of women's strategies in the sex industries, as will be discussed in chapter five; still, some women felt that they have to conform to these social expectations of respectability as can be seen from Precious' opinion. Preoccupations about respect mean that marriage is seen as the best way to be respected. Kenyan women refer to the men they depend on as 'husbands' regardless of how official the marriage is, and traditional gender-related responsibilities are expected to define such union.

Depending on a man through marriage (both formal and informal) is often described through the word 'love'; nevertheless, 'love' is usually accompanied by other words involving money. For example, Miriam (31 years old) explained that 'when somebody loves you, and is providing you, providing you money also, so you can do something'. Such an understanding of love that combines both the affect and exchange is not unusual in African societies, as was discussed in chapter three (also see Cole 2009). Boundaries between love and material security are blurred as many stories of love and marriage reveal. Some women, as for example Floriana (41 years old), after divorcing an abusive husband, enter an informal love marriage. However, while Floriana loved her second husband, after being abandoned by him once his financial situation improved, she concluded that 'my love is not good', but still believed that 'if there is peace and love in house, even if the house is empty, you wouldn't leave'. Other women used words meaning love and money almost interchangeably as if referring to a notion of marriage that has a strong material aspect. For example Lisa (36 years old) is sure that if she finds a German tourist who would marry her and take her to Germany, provide for her and her daughter, she would 'love him so much'. Articles in the daily newspapers, for example, 'Wooing women, wallet-first' (Mutembei and Ndoria 2012), 'I love you, but where is the cash?' (Odunga 2012), and 'Why bedrooms turn icy in January' (Odongo 2013) echo these ideas and emphasise the importance of financial power for a stable relationship, including marriage. Of course, newspaper publications often reflect gender stereotypes and prejudices rather than a complicated 'reality'; yet, the existence of such

narratives in the media points to existing tensions when speaking about love, relationships and money.

Terms such as 'like' and 'love' were used interchangeably in many of my interviews. Women claimed that they would love a man who would marry them. When I asked whether they would love him even if he was not very attractive or abusive, they would all emphasise the material aspect - if he provides, she would love him. A similar conflation of these terms was present when speaking about sex work. For example Toto (23 years old) started our interview by telling me that she likes to stay 'in a good relation with other people', but she also 'loves commercial sex work'. Then she continued to talk about how difficult this job is, how men can be abusive, and how much competition there is. Finally, when speaking about her daughter, she said that she is doing everything she can so that her daughter would have a different life than herself. At that point I reminded her that she said she loves sex work, but Toto explained that she loves sex work, because it gives money, but it will not be good for her daughter. There are two important things that Toto tells in her story. One is the difference in the imagined dream life for herself and her daughter, which will be further explored in chapter six. The second is the (lack of) choice available and her relation to this situation. Drakulic (1992 : 13-14) in her essay about communist Poland comes to the conclusion that 'the word "like" is not the best way to explain the food situation (or any situation) in Poland'. She continues by explaining that in a situation of shortage, such words have different meanings, implying actual choice, refinement and even indulgence, which is a whole different attitude to food than that of the everyday communist citizen. The reality of the very few choices that Toto disposes of (being born to a sex worker mother, never attending any school, and starting to sell her body at the age of 11) entails that words such as 'like' or 'love' have a very different meaning than the same words used in situations where choice is plentiful.

For women who do not have many choices for surviving on their own, due to limiting socio-economic structures in place, depending on a man (or men) and his (their) income is one alternative. The performance of 'love' or 'like' in a situation such as that of Toto is directly connected to material (in)security, not a

romantic choice. This is not to say that there is no affection in Kenyan women's lives. Heald (1995 : 500) notes that, in many East African societies close companionship between a man and his wife is desired, however, it is not expressed in terms of an ideology of romantic love. Chichi (32 years old) told a beautiful romantic love story of her own about a Maasai man who she likes and who stepped in to protect her in her abusive relationship with the father of her child. She was telling how the man she likes came to save her with 'Maasai *panga*<sup>11</sup>', how he helped her to get back her 'freedom', and how since then they both support each other in difficult situations and how important the man is in her and her children's lives. Yet, even though this story had all the elements of romance, the word 'love' was not used once while recounting it.

Due to economic changes that influence the institution of marriage, depending on a husband in contemporary African societies became an uncertain surviving strategy for many women. The nature of the Kenyan economy means that some men migrate to other towns for work purposes and women remain behind (Hattori and Dadoo 2007; Luke 2010). The vulnerability of marriage when a man migrates long distances for work is confirmed by sex workers' life stories. For instance, Chichi (32 years old) admitted that after her first husband left for Nairobi and his money stopped reaching her regularly, she started looking for other jobs. Finding a job and earning her livelihood is certainly a good alternative to dependence on a man. However, as was discussed in the previous section, because of the position that women occupy in the labour market, this can be difficult to achieve or a poorly remunerated option. For this reason, depending on men other than a husband or father arises as a survival strategy. As so many other women, Chichi did not find a better job than the possibilities the sex industry offered.

Work as a house-help is one of the most popular unskilled occupations for women in Kenya. In developing countries, as Bujra (2000 : 2) observes, 'for many people there is no parallel to the specialised role of the "housewife"'. For this reason, domestic service remains a popular job option in an unequal society. Still, the work of a house-help means that a woman usually depends on a man

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<sup>11</sup>Maasai men carry with them a sword which is called 'panga'.

and male income of another family for her survival. When asked about their work experiences most sex workers mentioned working as a house-help for certain periods of time. Yet, most of these experiences involved abuse from their employers and in some cases even sexual violence while being paid very little (most sex workers indicated that they had received 1000-2500 Kenyan shillings a month<sup>12</sup>). This type of employment is also not a very stable option, because house-helps are often blamed for ills within a household: the disappearance of a mistress's dress can be reason enough for a dismissal, let alone cases where the man of the house has an affair with a house-helper and this information reaches his wife. In many cases, the sexual advances of a man were a reason why women decided to leave such employment. For example Miriam (31 years old) explained:

He [the man of the family she was working for] wanted relationship with me but at that moment I was still young, so I refused. And I decided to resign the job. Because to destroy somebody's family it's not good. So I decided to leave the place.

In other cases women left this kind of employment because of mistreatment. Chichi (32 years old) recounted her experience:

I started as a house girl. The lady I was staying with was so rude to me! She had a *mzungu*<sup>13</sup>, a white man from Germany, so she was mistreating me. Sometimes I go for a walk to know some areas, when I come back, the door is closed, they are inside, I can knock, [but they do not open]. I sometimes even sleep outside in the veranda for several days.

Mistreatment of women and girls who work as house-helps is commonplace and for this reason is often not an attractive way of making a living. Another problem with being a house-help are the difficulties of combining such an occupation and a woman's duties in her own household, especially when a woman has children. This difficulty is well known to the employers, and for that reason women, who have young children, have more difficulties in securing a position as a house-help. If working as a house-help fails, women have to find other ways to survive through work or depending on men.

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<sup>12</sup>7-18 GBP. For comparison, the Basic Minimum Wage set by Kenyan Government was 10.606 Kenyan Shillings (77.2 GBP) a month in 2011.

<sup>13</sup>In Swahili- a white man or a white person. Plural- *wazungu*.

Co-habitation or a relationship with a man who already has a family can be seen as one alternative to marriage or work. Male migration has a two faced effect on women's dependence on men. Luke's research in Kenya shows that the size of migrant male remittances back home often depends on extramarital affairs in the destination area. Non-familial relations in the destination area replace the psychological support of the family and successfully compete for the share of male wages (Luke 2010). So, even though male migration means that his original family has less financial support and may face difficulties, at the same time it also means that part of his wage is redistributed to other households through non-familial intimate relations. As a result, while one family might be worse off, other women seek out the possibility of such extra-marital relationships to help them survive.

It is important to point out that, due to the limited possibilities for women in local economies, depending on a male income becomes a necessity both for a woman's survival and personal advancement. Haram (2004 : 220) in her research found that women in East Africa often have unrealistic expectations and ideals regarding marriage. Modern ideas about intimacy are merged with another criterion used to assess men – financial means (Spronk 2012 : 166). Since there are few men who could meet all these expectations due to difficult economic situations, such unrealistic expectations feed into the process of some women making a decision to have multiple lovers or temporary partners of various types to ensure their economic security, enjoy their freedom, pursue individual aims, and lead a 'modern' life (Haram 2004). In a similar vein, Alicia (24 years old) told me that she is in the sex industry to find a *mzungu*, because her chances to marry locally do not satisfy her. She could get married to an 'old' man, but she hears her friends who did so complain about how their older husbands mistreat them and she does not want that. Young men that she would like to marry look for wives of the same social standing and, given that Alicia does not have university education, she does not stand a chance for upwards mobility. This and other similar examples suggest that few men fulfil the expectations of many women in contemporary Kenya or fit into expected masculinity frameworks. Women who chose to seek a European husband or

boyfriend through sex work, or the women that Haram interviewed who have multiple partnerships with different men but never marry, seem to echo the explanation that Peninah Mwangi (the director of the Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme) gave to the popular rumour of Kenyan women outnumbering men: 'it is better to share one good man than having one bad man for yourself'.

The fact that men who have money are shared by several women can be seen from HIV/AIDS infection statistics that van den Borne (2005 : 47) quotes in her research on Malawi: women, whose partners are skilled workers, students, business men or professionals – all groups of men who have more money than unskilled workers or farmers – have the highest HIV prevalence rates in Malawi. Van den Borne explains such statistics by the fact that women who have richer partners often share the partner and his money with other women. Not all women who are willing to 'share' a 'good man' with his wife are sex workers. Some of them choose to depend on different men at different times, others have extramarital affairs or are long-term mistresses. However, the persistence of the idea of 'sharing a man' is important in itself when looking at the socio-economic structures prevalent in Kenya. On the one hand such necessity to 'share a man' indicates the prevailing patriarchal gender structures and gender-defined possibilities of action and choice. On the other hand, this idea also speaks about the difficulties of living with normative gender roles and increasing individualism in society as both men and women seek for household arrangements that suit their interests and do not necessarily involve the creation of a family unit. Neo-liberal theory explains the efficiency of markets by the fact that individuals seek their self-interests when acting. Yet, the historical changes in the family institution in developing countries show a slightly different picture – individualism becomes important in society, because of the inability to maintain family relations, which is tightly connected to poverty, itself enforced by the neo-liberal economic arrangements.

Women depend on men through various relationships; they employ the language and performances of 'love', when trying to ensure their and their children's livelihoods. These relationships are diverse in form and intensity and

the sex industry is one such set of relationships. Tinsman (quoted in Tamale 2011b : 148) argues that 'sex is central to the way in which all women are exploited in all types of work', and that sex work, like other women's work, is structured by global markets and gender relations. Women are responsible for reproductive work and perform emotional labour when they are wives, lovers, partners, but also as sex workers (Sanders 2008a : 413). The performance of this type of work can be profitable when deployed deliberately because it corresponds to male illusions and desires. However, this work does not require any training and has no entry barriers, and therefore is available to every woman in need. In the face of limited formal employment opportunities and the commodification of sex through male migration, urbanisation, media, and discourses about masculinity (Bennett 2011 : 82), sex work has risen as a viable alternative way of 'sharing' good men and depending on male wages.

It is important to recognise female agency when speaking about the options available to women in Kenya, even if those options might be limited. As Showden (2011 : 4) argues in her discussion of women's agency '[i]f the only options available to a person are "bad" ones, choosing under such conditions does not negate the autonomy of the actor'. Even though Kenyan women have limited possibilities in their career choices and have to depend on men in many cases, it is also true that women make choices based on considerations about what they think is better for them. Moore (1994 : 146-147) points out that, the degree to which individuals recognise alternatives available to them is variable and does not always involve conscious reflections. The choice is made through practice and sometimes does not even require an intellectual awareness of the process itself. Women find original ways of surviving and advancing in the system, often using their sexuality as a tool. A run-away wife or a newly divorced woman has to find another way to earn her livelihood which in some cases may lead to sex work.

The option of sex work becomes even more realistic if a separation with the husband (or loss of the husband) leaves a woman with children to care for. Several sex workers interviewed described such situations in these terms - 'I am a mother and a father'. For example, Daughtie Akoth (2011 : 177), one of the



Kenyan sex workers activists, tells the story of a woman that she picked up one morning to do her laundry in Nairobi:

This woman has young children who are not in school despite the fact that there is free primary education in Kenya. All she has to do is buy them school uniforms, but she says she can't afford it. When people don't know that their *nyeti* (vagina) is power, they lose out a lot.

However, one has to be careful when speaking of choices and power, because choices are made and power is exercised within certain frameworks and socio-economic and political conditions. Disadvantaged by the labour markets, and having limited power to participate in decision-making structures, many women became dependent on their bodies and sexual relations with men, ranging from marriage to the trade of sex (Bakare-Yusuf 2011 : 125). The same socio-economic structures mean that men find it increasingly difficult to sustain their families and fulfil expectations that surround the idea of normative masculinity. As a result of those changing material realities and financial insecurity relationship categories such as marriage, co-habitation, love affair, extramarital affair or just a couple, become fluid and more uncertain than before the neo-liberal era. Tensions between love and money are the sign of inequality in society; yet the same tensions open a space for women to enact different forms of femininity that they perceive as responding to gender structures in order to make a living in such an unequal society.

Sex workers often replicate these roles of better-off women in relationships to maximise their own profits and reach their aims, as chapter five will explore. The different strategies that sex workers employ are based on their perceptions of masculinities, male needs, and their position in society, as the next section will analyse.

### **'Now men do not want to marry: no job, no money, no marriage': perceived male desires and the sex industries**

Scholars (Bujra 1975; White 1990) who have studied prostitution in colonial Nairobi emphasise that women who were selling sex responded to the needs of male labourers who migrated to Nairobi for work purposes, living in overcrowded accommodation with few comforts, and leaving their families

behind in rural areas. What colonial prostitutes sold was a differentiated social reproduction, and their services depended on the labour form that women chose (White 1990 : 224). Today, as Ssewakiryanga (2004 : 113) rightly points out and the author's interviews with sex workers confirm, exchange of sex for money cannot be accurately described as women offering 'a bed' to a man. Contemporary prostitution interacts with the complexities of urban living and survival; even if at first glance it might look very complicated and different from the colonial sex trade, it still responds to the needs of men and is influenced by how women perceive male needs.

Sanders suggests that there are two categories of motivations for buying commercial sex that fall into 'push' and 'pull' factors. 'Push' factors are elements of men's lives that are lacking, 'pull' factors are aspects of the sex industry that attract because of their entertainment character (Sanders 2008b : 39-40). In the case of Kenyan men, disrupted notions of masculinity and difficulties in 'living' the normative masculinity that were discussed in chapter three serve as a 'push' factor. Likewise, different performances of femininity that are available in sex industries serve as 'pull' factors.

The need for domesticity was an important factor that made prostitution profitable in colonial times. Colonial policies with regards to who can and who cannot live in cities meant that many male workers had to leave their families behind in rural areas when coming to work in Nairobi. Thus, Nairobi *Malaya* prostitutes were providing men with comforts that mimicked services available in their marital home and were not available in their Nairobi life – bathwater, food, cleanliness, and respect shown to a male client (White 1990 : 13-20). Men who could not afford paying for all these services still could purchase 'fleeting domesticity' for less money from *watembezi* and *wazi-wazi* women who provided less sophisticated services than *Malaya* prostitutes, but still responded to male needs. Today the need for domesticity is still central, because of financial difficulties that define the livelihood possibilities of many men. Sex workers recognise and point out this need when explaining why men buy sex, as pointed out by Christy (30 years old):

Yeah, nowadays they [men] don't want to marry, nowadays they don't want completely, they don't want. I don't know why. I think for them, they find the life is tough, that is why I think they don't want to get married. Things are expensive, things are getting harder, that is why. I think even them, if they compare, maybe a man, ok, maybe he is working, ok, let's say he is being paid, maybe 10,000 [KSH]. What is 10,000? You have a wife and family. Ok, let's say he has a family. Is that 10,000 enough? With a family? It is not. So I think that men, they have sat down and found that it is hard. Because especially here in Kenya, even getting jobs is a problem.

This need of domesticity is exploited by sex workers who adopt the identity of 'a decent woman' to replicate the domestic situation, as will be explored in the following chapter. However, it is important to observe that while mirroring the 'comforts of home', as White (1990) terms it, has been at the centre of sex trade since colonial times, nowadays such domesticity is increasingly dominated by a discourse about financial calculations. For example Tony, a bachelor quoted in the article of *Standard* (Ayodo 2012), explains why he often uses the services of sex workers this way:

The budget of treating a girlfriend from Friday to Sunday can hit 15,000 [KSH] as you will be drinking and eating all meals out yet the costly girlfriend will not even touch your clothes for fear of messing up her manicured nails. I would, therefore, rather spend 5,000 [KSH] on drinks with the boys from Friday to Sunday and summon a hook up to sort me out, cook, clean, wash and iron at 300 [KSH].

Tony refers to the fact that many sex workers are willing to do extra services such as cooking, cleaning and washing in addition to their sexual services in order to secure a good pay. Yet, while in colonial times men were paying for such services because they simply could not have their families with them in towns, today's urban bachelors buy such services because they see it as a more financially viable choice. The same article quotes Apollo, who sees sex workers as 'service providers' and considers them being 'a treat' since some women are good cooks, others do laundry well.

Furthermore, the need for intimacy and emotional support is another important factor. Different socialisation into gender roles and gendered possibilities in communities among most Kenyan ethnic groups mean that most men depend on their wives (girlfriends, fiancées, and lovers) for emotional support (Heald

1995; Swartz 1982). This intimate relation between men and women becomes more difficult when a man migrates in order to provide for his family. More importantly, it is absent if a man cannot marry or provide. Unfulfilled emotional needs in marriage is one of the main topics in the Kenyan post-colonial literature, as Odhiambo (2003, 2007) observes, and this missing emotional link between man and wife often leads to the problems that the heroes of the stories experience. Luke's (2010) research shows that a relationship exists between the fulfilment of emotional needs and the size of migrants' remittances back to rural Kenya. When a man has a girlfriend(s) who fulfils his emotional needs in the migration destination place, the remittances back home become smaller, because part of the male wage is shared with another woman. Therefore, emotional fulfilment and the ability to share money are strongly related and many sex workers emphasise the importance of talking and the need to listen to men as one of the male needs, the fulfilling of which can ensure a good pay. For instance Maureen (28 years old) put it this way:

I just go to the man, we speak, chat. And you listen to him. More carefully. You balance yourself and other, not to be difficult.

The emotional needs of many men are unfulfilled partly because of changing economic conditions and the decreasing possibilities to share a wage with women, which have a strong effect on Kenyan masculinities. As a result, the sex industries rise as an alternative place where services mimicking intimacy can be purchased. Men who are better off might invest in extra-marital relations and sustain several girlfriends (some of which can be found via the sex industries), but poor men cannot afford this luxury and seek for a woman in the sex industry. Most women who work in the sex industries know how to play male desires and the need for intimacy to their own benefit. As it will be seen in the analysis of sex workers' strategies in chapter five, sex workers differentiate their services and cater for all income groups.

Neo-liberal ideas about market and choice, in tandem with the commodification of love, are important forces influencing these changes. Moreover, with the increasing global outreach of media and migrations, as indicated by Appadurai (1996), women's movements, and changing gender relations, ideas about family

experienced a shift as well. Middle class individuals not only break away from deemed traditional familiar arrangements, as indicated by Spronk (2012), but also are increasingly preoccupied about their image. Such an image is connected to global ideas about masculinity and female roles. For example, one journalist reporting for a major daily newspaper from Mombasa explained the significance of appearance in this way:

Rich men are looking after beautiful ladies. Like footballers, Berlusconi, like everywhere. When you have money, you can get a lot. And as women spend a lot, a flashy lady wouldn't go for a poor guy. So flashy lady is a doctor, lawyer or has a rich husband. Most of these ladies are in Nairobi, because Mombasa is marginalised.

The connection between wealth and beautiful women is an important one when analysing the sex industries. Men, who cannot afford having a 'flashy lady' as their partner, might purchase the services of sex workers to compensate for it. Some men who aspire to the status of a 'macho' who is 'in control' look to command multiple sexual partners (Posel 2011 : 133) and for this reason might turn to specific sections of the sex industry that ensures a 'flashy lady' next to them for the evening.

The feeling of being rich is a push factor for buying sex for African men as well as for their Western counterparts. Brennan (2004) in her analysis of sex tourism in the Dominican Republic argues that sex tourists arriving in a developing world holiday destination experience that everything is cheaper than at home. In turn, tourists' relatively low social and economic status in their place of origin is inverted and they can consume as rich people. O'Connell-Davidson (1998 : 1) argues that Western men are travelling to sex tourism destinations to get easy access to women who would be considered out of their reach in their home countries because of social, economic and other reasons. Research shows that the same is increasingly true for Western women holidaying in poorer countries (De Albuquerque 1998; Meiu 2011; Taylor 2001). Kenyan sex workers know how to deploy Westerners' feelings of wealth to their advantage as will be discussed in the following chapter; still, the fact that Westerners can feel like 'big men' while using the services of the Kenyan sex industries is an important 'push' factor.

Men who buy sex are not a homogenous group and belong to different social, economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As men are different, their motivations for buying sex vary as well. Women who sell sex build on these different motivations when choosing a work strategy, and try to capitalise on the needs that they think men have: the need for domesticity, even if commodified and framed in different ways than in colonial times; a lack of emotional support and intimacy; a willingness to build a certain image and be seen as a 'big man'. Contemporary sex workers, in contrast to their predecessors, often find it more profitable to conceal their 'profession' and adopt the identity of other types of femininity than that of a sex worker in response to male desires, as will be further explored in the next chapter.

Moreover, despite all the difficulties that women experience in their lives, sex workers do not believe that Kenyan men have an easier life. Women recognise gender inequalities, and speak about different access to education for themselves and their brothers, explain how many privileges such as jobs are reserved for men, elaborate on the family arrangements and lack of voice for women in them, the violence against women and the lack of support from state institutions; yet, none of the women agreed that Kenyan men manoeuvre life with less struggles. When I asked Lilian (27 years old) if it is easier in Kenya to be a man, she answered:

No, no. For a woman it is kindda easier. Because most women use their *pinky*<sup>14</sup> to get jobs. For a man, men tarmac a lot to get jobs. True. For women it is quite easy. A boss tells, you have to do this and this, yeah, fine, I will do it. And then she gets a job. I have so many friends who have done that.

Recognition of the patriarchal socio-economic arrangements, but negation of male privilege in these structures is of no surprise in this situation. Sex workers believe that they benefit from unequal gender relations and that they use their bodies and sexuality to advance in society. Since sex workers manage to reach their aims to a certain degree, they do not see men as having an easier life. Furthermore, having access to male wages through their work, they understand

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<sup>14</sup> Slang for a vagina.

the difference in effort that men and sex workers have to make in order to lead certain lifestyles, which will be further elaborated in the next section.

### **'I go and I buy a big cheeseburger': sex workers in the local economy**

Sex workers are important actors in the local economies and are seen as good consumers by local businesses. Women who sell sex control amounts of money that in traditional family arrangements would be in male hands. When assessing consumption from an historical perspective, Trentmann (2004 : 10) points out that growing consumption and a new identity of 'the consumer' redefines pre-existing social identities, especially those of women. Mombasa sex workers are becoming important consumers in a context of continuing poverty. Yet, despite the economic power that sex workers hold, they are still discriminated against because of the way they earn their income. Such a situation echoes Comaroff and Comaroff (2001 : 8) who point out that the core of neo-liberal capitalism is defined by contradictions – it appears to both include and marginalise in unexpected ways. Sex workers are both marginalised by society because of their 'vice occupation' and included in local economies as important actors. Betty's (31 years old) narrative points to exactly such contradiction:

You know, they [people] normally see [sex work] is normal. If you get a *wazungu* is normal, yeah. But sometimes you hear your baby and another baby they call outside, my boy come and tell me: "Mama, I will kill that baby, they call me *mtoto wa Malaya*<sup>15</sup>..." Yeah. But people understand, it is not a big... stigma. No. Like now, you can get house...even you hear people say: "the *Malaya* house". Because the landlady doesn't want another married people, they only want sex workers, because sex workers they don't have a problem to pay their house, yeah. Even you can get a *mzungu*, they pay the house for one year, so you see, that they prefer better. So you hear people saying, "That is a white house called *Malaya* house". (laughs)

Betty also explains that the stigma of being a *Malaya* was more important a decade ago when she started trading sex. However, now Betty does not see many challenges apart from her age: she calls matatu drivers, bouncers at clubs and waiters 'friends', keeps good relations with them, goes to church, prays and believes that her prayers help her to succeed. The good relations that Betty has with her landlady, bouncers, matatu drivers and even her church can be

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<sup>15</sup>A Child of a prostitute (in Swahili).

explained by the fact that Betty is a good consumer. She, in contrast to the married people that she mentions, has money to pay the rent for her house; she travels a lot with matatu and - even if she sometimes does not have enough money for a fare - always pays back the debt later; she tips waiters that give her a hint about a good customer; and she donates money for her church. She is an important consumer and contributor in the local economy of Mombasa.

The economic difficulties and the stratification of society that prevail in Kenya were discussed in chapter two. Sex workers fall into all levels of income – there are sex workers who earn very little and barely survive, but there is a group of sex workers that earn amounts of money similar to wages prevalent in private businesses or the local government, and there is also a group of sex workers that would be considered rich in Kenya (women owning houses, matatus, trucks and other small businesses). It is important to point out that because of their trade, all sex workers spend more money and consume more goods and services than people of other professions in the same income range would. As will be discussed in chapter seven, sex workers spend considerable amounts on their clothes, beauty procedures, perfumes, use different kinds of transport, pay entrances to clubs, buy drinks and food there, and also have more expenditure connected to their health. What is more, as the high season of tourism approaches, some local gyms fill up with sex workers who are waiting for their European boyfriends to arrive and are aware of European beauty standards<sup>16</sup>. All these businesses welcome sex workers as good consumers and clients. Some people even specialise in serving only women occupied in the sex industry. For example some owners of internet cafés make special, more private arrangements for sex workers to video-call their European boyfriends through Skype<sup>17</sup>. Some night clubs and bars would attract very few clients if not for the presence of numerous sex workers (Oluoch 2006). Truck stops along the Mombasa-Kampala highway and locales surrounding the Mombasa port or Kenyan navy base would get much less business opportunities if not for the fact that sex workers are serving truck drivers and sailors there. Matatu drivers, night club bouncers and waiters and even the police patrolling at night would

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with a gym friend, 14/02/2011

<sup>17</sup> Interview with internet cafe owner's husband, 25/11/2011



get less 'tips' if not for their 'friends' like Betty. The purchasing power that sex workers hold is recognised by local businesses, and relied upon.

In addition to the businesses and people that benefit from sex work-related spending, it is also important to highlight other parties that benefit from money earned in the sex trade. First, it is sex workers' children and siblings who are educated, families that are fed and taken care of, as was discussed previously in this chapter. For example, when asked if her daughter goes to a government school, Toto (23 years old) proudly explained that her child would not go to public school, because she is her daughter, and that is why she sends her to a rather expensive private school in town. Similarly, Lilian (27 years old) paid her brother's driving classes and he now works as a driver.

Most sex workers do not tell their kin and families where they derive their income from and try to keep their occupation secret. Floriana (41 years old) explained the need for secrecy in this way:

You know, like now, I have to respect myself, because I have children. I am doing it secretly, because they cannot know.

Secrecy and the decision not to ask too many questions seem to be a mechanism for society to deal with the uncomfortable moral questions that the sex trade raises. Many women claim that their families and neighbours do not know what job they are doing. But it is also worth asking, if it is just not more comfortable for the brother that is put through college and therefore can ensure a safer future for himself not to ask how his 'waitress' sister earns so much money and why her shifts are always so late. Some families might suspect the nature of their mother's/sister's income, but choose not to speak about it openly because of the economic benefits that are available for them through the income that reaches the household. Other families are in full knowledge of the way that money is earned. For instance, Cinderella (28 years old) does not hide her occupation from her children:

Because they can see different men here. "This is our father?" "No, no". (laughs) You know, they are big and I want them to grow, to know bad thing and good thing. I told them: "You have to learn, when you don't learn, you bring here some different men like me. And I don't like [that]. You know me, I didn't go to

school, because my father and mother didn't want to take me to school. Now I do this because we eat and you go to school. Or you want me to stay here?" They say: "No, it's better you go!" (laughs).

Sex workers make choices about spending for their families and in such way try to gear their lives towards the dream of a 'good life' for themselves and for their kin, as will be discussed in chapter six. The spending that is connected to their children or siblings indicates a strong willingness for upward mobility, and helps justify their work not only to themselves, but to the wider society, and sex workers' choices often reflect that.

In addition to sex workers' families and small businesses that are directly related to the sex trade, there are other businesses that indirectly profit from the sex industries' existence. For example, the tourist industry indirectly benefits from sex workers operating in Mombasa. It is important to mention the linkage between tourism and sex that is emphasised by many researchers (Crick 1989; Oppermann 1999; Pettman 1997; Ryan and Kinder 1996; Wonders and Michalowski 2001). Jones (2006 : 15) points out that many tourists who arrive in Kenya have a conscious or an unconscious desire to engage in sexual activity with local people, but not all of them have clear plans or expectations to find sex workers. As it follows, the presence of Kenyan women in tourist places (for example hotels) have a potential to increase profits for such locations, as tourists pay for women to stay there, buy them Western-priced drinks, and take them to safaris and other tourist trips.

Sex workers are important actors in the local economy not only because they are able to consume considerable amounts of goods and services, and not only because they play an important part in the tourist industry. Many sex workers are involved in diverse economic activities that bring an additional income to their families as discussed previously. Other sex workers are making investments related to their future plans, for example continuing with education (finishing their college courses, doing their degrees) in order to pursue careers in the formal economy. Lilian (27 years old) explained her entry into to the sex industry this way:

I had to come here to look for a job in the EPZs, in the export proceeding zones. I checked, I checked, and no luck in getting. We went, my friends were being taken, and I was left out. My only faith was to do the other work. People call it the dirty work.

Income derived from this 'dirty work' has already financed Lilian's courses in management and marketing; now she does an IT course, and plans on taking driving lessons because:

I need so much, because driving goes with sales and marketing, if I have to get a job, I must have a driving license. And also I have to be intelligent in computer. All diversities, all areas I have to be perfect, which I don't know now.

The Kenyan Situational Analysis on Sex Workers and their Clients shows that 21 per cent of female sex workers are students in tertiary education institutions (NACC 2011). The share of sex industry workers paying fees at educational institutions and which is working hard to get jobs in formal economy or to become businesswomen is far from negligible. Other women who earn a high income from sex work are already businesswomen besides their prostitution activities. Sylvia (26 year old) for example, owns a house and rents some rooms. Female sex workers in the highest income group are the ones that have the biggest amounts of money to invest into other economic activities, and even if just a part of them do so, it is an important to point out their impact as entrepreneurs or just as active economic actors.

The importance of economics and the ability to earn money that is constantly emphasised through the neo-liberal discourse centred on a rational individual gained a central place in society, especially in the face of the lasting economic hardship of the past several decades. As a result, the individuals who play important roles in the local economy can challenge the notion of marginality in society. As this section shows, sex workers are important consumers in local economies. The nature of their households and work means that they are seen as good clients or customers by many local businesses. The economic power of sex workers is clearly recognised and relied upon, while the scale of the sex industries itself, as well as of all the businesses that are connected to this industry cannot be ignored. Women are disadvantaged by prevailing socio-economic structures, challenge them in new ways, and manage to depend on

male wages. Women's dependence on male wages in some cases gives women possibility to outgrow such dependency and set up their own businesses or get engaged in other activities that guarantee actual independence and emancipation. In the contemporary political economy women perform different gendered identities, always keeping the identity of a consumer, which is an especially important sign of the neo-liberal footprint in Kenyan society.

## **Conclusions**

Butler (1988 : 522) argues that cultural interpretations are significant in our understanding of what constitutes a 'woman'. Therefore, when analysing the agency of women in Kenya, it is important to understand what possibilities are available for different women in society in the economic and social spheres. Both of these spheres are influenced by the prevailing cultural interpretations and constitute what Butler calls a 'situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs'. As this chapter has shown, women who sell sex explain the functioning of a 'situation of duress' elaborately – they tell stories about the difficulties of finding an alternative occupation, depending on men, and the responsibility to care for their families and maintain their positions in society. In all these efforts women explain how their role is defined as that of a wife, mother, widow or daughter.

A set of historical gendered possibilities to make a living, survive or advance in the society that is available for Kenyan women does not deny female agency. As this chapter has shown, when women fall out of traditional gender structures that are supposed to ensure their survival in society – such as when they lose their husbands, fathers or brothers that were breadwinners in the family – they attempt different routes and different gender performances when seeking for alternative ways to survive or progress. Many try opportunities in both formal and informal gendered labour markets, but if that fails, women position themselves in different ways that allow them to depend on a male income. Some marry, others enter informal marriages, still others become mistresses, lovers or trade sex making sure that sex is exchanged for survival or socio-economic security. In this case Butler's 'situation of duress' then is a combination of all these historical conventions and processes of change that shape contemporary

Kenya. Functioning in a system that is now heavily influenced by neo-liberal practices and ideas, Kenyan women choose different gender performances that ensure their survival within those structures. The functioning of the sex industries is an interesting example for the analysis of how socio-economic structures affect women's lives in Kenya. On the one hand, the sex industries are influenced by prevailing gendered socio-economic structures and unequal power relations – women enter such a trade in the face of poverty and limited alternative possibilities in the local economy. On the other hand, women adjust their performative gender roles to the individual situation, and trading sex can be seen as one of such performances, as sex workers' testimonies indicate. By making these choices women challenge and manipulate the perceived world order and patriarchy to a certain degree – by trading sex women take control over their bodies and sexualities from one man, they commodify love, and make unorthodox living arrangements that are better or just more profitable and break away from male control. Moreover, engagement in the sex trade helps many women to change their marginal position in the local economies, as they become important consumers that many local actors rely on.

The way the sex industries are organised and function reflects wider changes in society: when gendered performances in society experience changes, sex workers start changing their strategies as well, and this will be further explored in the following chapter. Moreover, changes in the local and global economies also influence sex trade and bring changes in this field: processes of increasing consumerism, commodification, and the marketisation of the social sphere are aligned with prevailing gender relations and reflected in the sex trade. It is important to note, however, that even though the sex industries challenge prevailing systems of inequality, and some women manage to benefit from manipulating male desires and accumulating from male wages, changes are still not challenging the existing structures fundamentally, and women manage to carve a space of action only as much as the system allows. Looking at the case of the contemporary Kenyan sex industries, one can see that women in the sex trade, who have been marginalised by neo-liberal economic practices, behave according to neo-liberal logics themselves. They take entrepreneurial initiative,

employ the discourse of freedom, choice, competition and market, and attempt to exploit male desires for their own benefit. How these processes work will be further explored in the following chapter.

## 5. Manoeuvring the neo-liberal sex industries and competition

*I don't like jokes when I'm in my business, I don't like jokes. I make stone-face.  
(Cinderella, 28 years old)*

There is no single way to describe a neo-liberal society, as different countries implement policies and subscribe to neo-liberal doctrine to a different degree, and at a varied speed and intensity. However, the emphasis on the 'economic man' and his actions in the market is a common pattern almost everywhere, and African countries are no exception. Actually, African countries could be seen as 'a study of 'cutting edge' or most contemporary neo-liberalism in practice' because of the extent to which neo-liberal reforms have been implemented (Harrison 2010 : 19). Three decades of SAPs and later PRSPs resulted in a clear understanding of what markets are capable of in places like Kenya. Three decades of changes in the socio-economic sphere also left an imprint in the discourse that Kenyan people employ in their everyday language and in their self-perceptions. Today it is not surprising to hear a taxi driver speaking about how 'competition is good'<sup>18</sup> and for a language teacher to employ terms like 'cost effectiveness'<sup>19</sup>, both examples pointing to what Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) call 'neo-liberal newspeak'.

The footprint of neo-liberal discourse and practices are present in everyday life, and even though neo-liberalism is not the only force shaping the socio-economic structures of Kenya, the main attributes of neo-liberalism – markets, competition, individual responsibility for one's welfare, consumption and entrepreneurship – are often seen as positive factors by many Kenyans.

A similar neo-liberal footprint is also visible in the functioning of the contemporary Mombasa sex industries. First, many sex workers see themselves as 'business ladies', or entrepreneur agents just as in Hofmann's (2010)

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<sup>18</sup>Observation, Taxi driver 4/10/2010, Nairobi.

<sup>19</sup>Observation, Swahili language teacher 13/12/2010, Mombasa.

research of sex trade on the US-Mexico border. The entrepreneurial way of thinking becomes more obvious when one looks at the strategies that sex workers employ to maximise their income by making choices about the locations to sell sex, the adaptation of their appearance, and the behaviour and management of their bodies and personal skills, as will be explored in this chapter. The managerial way of thinking about the self and body that is prevalent in neo-liberal capitalism today (Hofmann 2010 : 234), is clearly expressed in the way sex workers function in the sex industries. Women adopt various gender identities to access different strata of clients, to cross social borders, and to ensure their income. Sex workers position themselves strategically in the cityscape, and use their bodies and personalities in ways that bring the highest profits. Sanders (2008a : 412) describes how important the reorganisation and repackaging of female sexuality is in sex work in such a way that women can earn their living from male desires that go beyond the basic sexual act. In a similar vein, as suggested by Mombasa sex workers' narratives, the working strategies of women seeking to trade sex for money often include concealing their identity and mimicking gender roles that correspond to social realities. Such strategies of deriving an income through the use of a woman's body and sexuality, while avoiding association with commercial sex, are important. They are a sign of the disruption of moral norms that are in the process of gaining more neo-liberal characteristics, while still corresponding to prevalent gender norms.

Another important area that points towards the workings of neo-liberal practices is sex workers' perceptions about competition and witchcraft. As White (2000 : 22) argues, vampire stories in colonial Africa were considered to be political realities and reflected emerging new social relationships, such as those of hired labour operating machinery, for instance. Similarly, changes in social realities that were brought by neo-liberal reforms also saw the increase of stories about Satan's arrival to Kenya, devil worship and witchcraft allegations (Blunt 2004; Deacon and Lynch forthcoming; Smith 2001). Consequently, witchcraft allegation stories in sex work speak about ruptures and ambiguities in the social and material realities that sex workers experience.



The sex trade is a dangerous occupation –there are many risks posed by clients, the police, lifestyle, the nature of work, and other factors, as will be further discussed in chapter seven. In addition to all these threats, sex workers also face competition and possible violence from their colleagues. For this reason, sex workers find themselves in an ambiguous position – in order to remain safe in the sex trade, women have to cooperate and trust each other; still, the trusted colleague might be a source of danger, because of fierce competition for personal gain, which is particularly significant in the sex industries. The second part of this chapter will explore how such competition interacts with danger and results in the discourse and practices of witchcraft that are employed to cope with such ambiguities and fears.

Neo-liberal rationality is at the heart of the socio-economic reforms that changed the material realities of many Kenyans in the last three decades. Therefore, as the neo-liberal footprint – to use Wiegratz's (2010) term – is visible in socio-economic relations and discourses, it can also be observed in the working of Kenyan sex industries since women who trade sex behave in ways that correspond to neo-liberal ideas.

### **'I am a good business lady': exploiting the market, crossing boundaries**

Ssewakiryanga (2004) in his study of sex work in Kampala shows that sex workers negotiate different identities in different contexts and construct them in relation to societal structures of power and material contexts. Similarly, I argue that gender relations and social practice in relation to gender roles are especially important in understanding sex workers' negotiations and adaptations of their identity. Variables like age, education, space, certain looks, and mastery of languages are especially important when defining the marketability of sex workers, because they allow them to access different spaces and interact with different strata of clients. Sex worker identities respond to different contexts and different logics so 'sometimes, the prostitute has to emphasise her femininity and "availability" and at other times, she has to "wear" the identity of the "sophisticated woman"' (Ssewakiryanga 2004 : 118). Different kinds of experiences for sale are available, with the specialisation and

personalisation of services in the sex industries serving as a 'pull' factor to clients. What is more, sex workers look for a way to make a living, and re-brand their activities from 'prostitution' to that of 'mistress' or 'girlfriend' or the illusion of 'flashy lady' – all of them in exchange for money. The construction of different identities that sex workers employ in order to maximise their profits involve a careful selection of the place where a woman would look for her clients, as well as the looks and behaviour that fit such contexts.

### Space and place

The space and place that a sex worker chooses to operate from defines the possibilities for different identities. Harvey (1984 : 31) argues that the neo-liberal turn increased the class power of the rich, which is then reflected in the spatial forms of cities, which become ever more fragmented, and consist of many 'micro-states' of gated communities, privatised public spaces, and areas of poverty. These 'micro-states' host inhabitants belonging to different social classes, as reflected by the services available in them –contrasts which are especially visible in developing countries. De Koning (2009 : 134) in her research on gender and class in contemporary Cairo observes that young female professionals navigate the city and hop from one middle-class location to the other without getting in touch with less wealthy segments of society. In opposition to Egyptian middle class women, Mombasa sex workers navigate the city to cross socio-geographic boundaries and to access clients from different social strata in different locations, just as maids and servants do. Sex workers' strategies of work involve a careful choice of the space for operation and a matching identity that goes with that place, as will be discussed below.

Some places are known as solely sex trade locations and have a fixed 'prostitute' identity associated with them. For example, the street, massage parlours, brothels or areas where women receive clients in their rooms leave little negotiation space for a woman to adjust her identity depending on the client. Women who work in the 'K street' of Nairobi,<sup>20</sup> or its equivalent in Mombasa, are very explicit about what they are doing there and play along the stereotypes

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<sup>20</sup> Sex workers' slang for Koinangestreet that is known as a red district of Nairobi. Interview with coordinator of sex workers' clinic, 26/10/2010, Nairobi.

of a street-based sex worker or 'prostitute'. For example, Ashley (22 years old) explained:

You have to put a mask. And be like crazy, you know. But during the day you have to be new thing, some kind of respect. But during the night you are someone else. Maybe just wear short skirts and all that. Showing your body somehow. Touching men.

This clear role of 'prostitute' does not require much investment and is a relatively easy way to get money. For this reason on their arrival to Mombasa many sex workers start their trade on the street.

The street is seen as a place where profits are fairly certain, even if the amounts that women earn there are often smaller than those available in other locales. However, in most cases, the street is only a temporary location because of police harassment and the inability to forge relationships with clients who will offer more substantial financial support. For example, Chiquita-Banana (40 years old) said:

Maybe a month I go to the street and then I see how with police, [you have to] run away, what what... So then I decided to go to the club.

Given the ambiguous legal status of sex work in Kenya, sex workers' relations with the police is difficult. Selling sex is not illegal, yet women are often arrested on different grounds, such as loitering with intent to commit crime, being a vagabond, creating public disturbance, or drunkenness (Wambua 2010). Police officers have the power to harass sex workers and extort bribes from them. For this reason, interaction with the police is often avoided by most women, except for the ones who bribe police officers even before starting to work in order to avoid complications.

Apart from police violence, sex workers emphasised that the interaction with clients that they meet on the streets are often more dangerous than those in other locales. For instance Maria-Karen (21 years old) noted how:

You can find some they are nice, they treat you good, *yanni*, like a human being, but some days, eeh... You can find that he is a human being, but you don't even understand.

Violent clients pose a danger to all sex workers and women's strategies to stay safe and avoid violent clients will be discussed further in the second part of this chapter. Still, it is important to point out that the street and other 'red' hot spots are perceived to attract more dangerous clients than other locales and many women pointed this out when explaining their choice of working areas.

The other reason why some women avoid operating from the street is the fact that sex is traded in secret. As, for instance, in the case of Chichi (32 years old):

Before I worked on street, but now I am... my daughter is older now, maybe someone can see me, and tell her "I saw your mom yesterday".

Working on the street or in the other 'red' areas is not safe for women and none of the women that I interviewed worked on the street all the time. Most of them engaged in street sex work when they needed quick money or at the beginning of the night in order to find a client who could pay her entrance to the club. However, despite the fact that most of the women had to work on the street sometimes when money was short, most of them preferred other locations which were perceived to be safer to work in, and gave them more room to negotiate slightly different identities than just that of a street 'prostitute'.

Street or brothel based sex workers are most visible and for this reason the easiest to identify. The coordinator of the sex workers' clinic<sup>21</sup> remembered that when establishing the clinic in early 2000s, street sex workers were the first ones they targeted and offered their services to. However, after a while, workers at the clinic realised that many sex workers have different strategies than the sex workers of '30 years ago' and are not operating only from their rooms or from the street. New generations of sex workers were flexible about their operation areas, and could not be located easily in one space or another, because they were operating in a variety of 'hot-spots'. Hot spots include bars, restaurants, hotels, beaches, townships, plantations, places outside military bases, the port, shops, and many others. Each of these locations can be in poor, rich or middle class areas of town. Some of these places, such as Club Simba, Titanic, or California Hotel in Mombasa, are well known as places where one

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<sup>21</sup>Interview with a coordinator of sex workers' clinic in Nairobi, 26/10/2010.

could potentially find a sex worker, however, these places are not exclusively sex-work connected and many come to these locations simply to have fun, dance and eat, without the intention to purchase sex. Other hot-spots where sex workers operate are spaces that do not even have a connection to the sex trade in public eyes, such as a shop in a poor neighbourhood or a restaurant downtown. The sex workers who are in the industry for a longer time described this geographical spread of sex work locations as a new phenomenon. For instance Chichi (32 years old):

Before it was secretly, but now, everyone coming for Mombasa, just to look for *mzungus*. And they start with sex working before you get a *mzungu* to marry you. Because before people were doing it when you are hiding, no one knows. Only those that go to the pub, but now, even me, I work even on the streets, you can meet those who are doing even in public, even daytime.

The geographic and temporal expansion of the sex industries in the city is important for several reasons. First, it indicates the scale of distress that Kenyan women feel. Documenting prostitution in colonial Nairobi, White (1990 : 20) observed that the most aggressive and visible form of prostitution was practised by women who were accumulating money to support their rural families that were facing financial problems. Likewise, contemporary sex workers who are expanding the visibility of the sex industries are in difficult financial situations and are trying to find money for survival in an increasingly difficult socio-economic climate. Second, the geographical expansion of the sex industries also speaks about the choices that women make in order to make a living. Indeed, in their decisions about which workplace to operate from, sex workers behave according to business logics – they maximise their profits by targeting different clients, adapting their services to them and reaching out for different consumers in a market. That is the reason why sex work locations constantly change and are difficult to pin down. Modern technologies are also playing a part in the contemporary sex industries – the internet, phones, and social networks are used to find potential clients and arrange meetings. For example Kemuto (44 years old), who is a recent widow with five children still in her care, does sex work in secret in addition to her chores in the village. She has given her phone number to several men in the military base, which is not too far

from her home, and arranges meetings with her clients by phone so that she can invent a cover story for her departures.

The variety of hot-spots means that the sex workers of Mombasa, just as the sex workers of Kampala in Ssewakiryanga's (2004 : 131) research, have to negotiate different identities to be able to fit into different contexts. Working in different spaces might require different looks and different behaviour in order to make a profit from sex work. For instance, Anita (35 years old) explained that one day, after receiving a text from 'a friend' that a big cargo ship docked in the port, she would dress provocatively and go directly to Titanic to wait for 'sea-men'<sup>22</sup> who frequent the place. After a few days she would go to the beach in an everyday outfit, 'buy *miraa*<sup>23</sup> and pretend like you want nothing. And just as people are swimming, you chew *miraa*, one of them will come and talk to you'.

The choice of a place where a woman seeks for clients depends on her work strategy. Women who are in the industry for bare survival would just go to the street or another easily identifiable sex-trade destination. Susan (24 years old) and Katherine (18 years old) both told similar stories of desperation which led to their arrival on the street. Toto (23 years old) and Kate (21 years old) after running away from their abusive mother at the age of 11 and 10 respectively, also went directly to the beach that is known for child sex work and started there. However, not all women are in the industry for bare survival, and as sex workers stories in this research indicate, many women in this trade have strategies for advancement, just as in Brennan's (2004 : 23) research of Dominican sex workers. Women who use sex work as an advancement strategy, usually hope to find a rich husband and marry, or to find a 'sponsor' who would give them initial capital for opening a business, or to accumulate enough money to buy a house or start their own business, as will be discussed in chapter six. This group of sex workers chooses to operate in places which leave room for identity negotiations and do not make a direct connection to the sex industries.

It is important to point out that Mombasa sex workers have a hierarchy of clients that they prefer: from the European tourists down to local men with

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<sup>22</sup> Sex workers of Mombasa call sailors 'sea-men'.

<sup>23</sup>A plant that is known for its stimulating effect. It is a popular form of drug in Mombasa.

little income. This hierarchy has a racial dimension and resembles the preferences of domestic servants towards their employers in Bujra's (2000) research in Tanzania. However, as Bujra (2000 : 137) observes, such accounts appear to be more connected to the social distance of employers than to 'race'. Tanzanian servants, just as Mombasa sex workers, seek for the most culturally distant employers, because it is believed that they are most likely to pay well. Nevertheless, some sex workers observe that such beliefs are not always true. Mary (23 years old) pointed out:

But nowadays even *mzungu* pay 1000. It depends now, even there is Africans who are rich, they pay like *wazungu*, the *wazungu* pay like Africans.

In order to find well-paying clients, sex workers try to enter spaces that are associated with rich people – expensive hotel bars, night clubs frequented by rich men, and tourist destinations.

Not all women are successful in crossing social borders and profiting from it. Just as the city is divided by boundaries separating wealthy populations from the poor, and clients are ranked according to their ability to pay, so sex workers have a hierarchy according to how many boundaries they are able to cross and how 'successful' they are. Many sex workers pointed out that, since the 2002 Mombasa bomb blasts, they are not allowed into private hotel territories and those caught doing so are sent off for disturbing visitors. Christy (30 years old), for example, complained about this new 'trespassing' policy of the hotels because it reduced the number of wealthy clients she finds. However, this policy of protecting hotel visitors is not as strict as it is selective. Dafnie (22 years old), who is much younger than Chisty, dresses less 'crazy crazy' and whose English is better, told me that the private beaches of hotels are actually a very profitable area to work in, but they are also an area that requires investments – a standard one-off bribe of 10.000 KSH to the guards<sup>24</sup>. The bribe of 10.000 KSH allows one to enter hotel territory in the morning and daytime, the entrance for evenings costs more. People who are allowed to bribe are selected by guards, as if creating a class division among sex workers. Women who were telling me about

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<sup>24</sup>Approximately 72 GBP. For comparison, a guard could expect a salary of 4000 Ksh a month, and house-help pay is usually 1500-2500 Ksh per month.

their work in hotel territories were usually the ones who knew how to find expensive brands in the second hand clothes markets and to dress in a 'smart' way, and how to order expensive dishes and had preferences among them<sup>25</sup>. These are also sex workers who have the ability to mingle freely with tourists. Some Mombasa sex workers navigate the changing tourism scene well - they adapt their looks and behaviour, and find different ways to cross the boundaries that should separate the unwanted local poor from rich tourists.

The sex workers who are less successful with tourists target different locales. Usually women start their night in locations that are known to be frequented by tourists, but if the hot-spot does not look promising, women move to other clubs which can be a hub for sailors, middle-class Kenyans, local bars for clerks, or even places that cater for the poor. Some sex workers have their preferred client groups, but most women are flexible and try to access different clients at different times depending on how successful they are that night. For example, Ritangeri (36 years old) pointed out:

To go to a higher class club you need to be a bit younger. So I start with clubs in a village here. And from here I go to Titanic in the town. I go up to Magongo, you know, it is on a way to the airport. Those places have many local people going too.

Knowing that she has fewer chances to get a rich tourist, Ritangeri aims for a different clientele – better off African men or sailors who can be found in the Titanic. In a similar vein, Christy (30 years old) explained her work area as:

I mostly go to such clubs that are quiet. Where I know that men who go there they are the decent men. They don't want the club where there is disco, bumbum, they like quiet place.

The locale that sex workers choose reflects their aims in the sex trade. Some spaces are targeted for money accumulation, as Ritangeri does, and different places are chosen if a woman is on the look for a husband, like Christy. Yet other places are frequented if a woman seeks for a European husband or big amounts of money.

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<sup>25</sup> Before my interview with Cinderella (8/03/2011, Mombasa) we were having a traditional lunch of ugali and spinach with her and several of her colleagues. Cinderella was telling jokes about how she eats a lot in the buffets of hotels when she stays there with her clients and how she likes and dislikes certain dishes ('I never take pasta without meat').



The spread of the sex industries in town reflects the changing nature of the town's social and economic lives: women are, as the Comaroffs (2001 : 8) have put it, excluded and included in socio-economic life in unanticipated ways. Sex workers make choices in order to earn money and by choosing specific locations they try to cross social boundaries. In addition to the choice of place, sex workers adapt certain looks to match the space they operate in.

### Appearance

Nelson (1987 : 228) in her research on the sex workers of Mathare Valley in the 1970s observes that sex workers in that location did not dress in any special way, rather the opposite. She also pointed out 'a more recent phenomenon' of women serving wealthy clients at the bars and trying to 'dress prettily and dance provocatively' (ibid.). Yet it was precisely issues of appearance that sex workers mentioned and emphasised when asked about their strategies in the contemporary sex industries. The appearance a sex worker chooses to adopt while working often does not correspond to her realities and self-perception. For example, Robina (34 years old), Sarah (29 years old) and Helen (28 years old), refugees from Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia respectively, who all ran away from refugees camps and are now sex workers in Mombasa, came to the interview wearing traditional *diras*<sup>26</sup> and were telling about the harsh conditions they live in (each of them has one child, and they all share one room, with no electricity or running water). After the interview my research assistant, who met them a few days earlier in a club and who arranged the interview, could not hide her surprise:

When I met them all looking like angels in the club, I thought they'd live in a nice flat, but when I went to get them, I saw that they live in a kiosk!

The difference between the everyday realities of sex workers and their appearance while they look for clients points to the importance of performing certain roles while trading sex. Women try to conceal their poverty and real circumstances as a part of their work strategy.

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<sup>26</sup>Dira- a loose dress worn by mainly Muslim women on the Kenyan coast.

The way a woman chooses to dress depends on her strategy and the type of man she aims to attract as a client. Christy (30 years old) summarised it well:

First thing is to be smart and dress nicely. You have to be... ok, it is not a must, but you have to put some fashion, yeah? Every man has his own choice, there are some men who like these women who wear decent, there are some men who like women who wear sexy and crazy. So it depends with yourself. Like me, I like being smart and being beautiful.

The choice of being dressed 'decent' or 'sexy' is not random. Women who build their identity openly as sex workers, such as Cinderella (28 years old), who calls herself a business lady and approaches clients by offering them a 'cheaper price' explains that to be successful in the 'market', a woman has to buy:

...a nice g-string and a small skirt like this. But something that you can sit and then the man can see advertisement. For attracting customer. When you go there, nice shoes, you make nice hair. You have to use money to get money. You wear something specific. They [clients] can see from legs to head, they can see you [and estimate] how much money they can give.

However, the 'sexy sexy' looks of the woman, similar to when a woman works on the street, signals that she is a sex worker, which changes the dynamics of the relationship with a client into open negotiations. Good negotiators, like Cinderella, can profit a lot from such a strategy, because she targets tourists. After the sex act her 'cheap price' turns out to be 50 dollars,<sup>27</sup> which she claims is still cheap for tourists, and she knows that in the negotiation she has an upper hand because foreigners are scared to be arrested for engaging in sex trade. She is also not afraid to start fighting if her customers do not pay. In other cases, negotiations between potential clients and openly working sex workers can be less fruitful, because men know the desperation of sex workers and refuse to pay more. Christy (30 years old) recounts how the strategy of looking 'crazy crazy' on a street may not be profitable:

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<sup>27</sup> Sex workers operating in the beach told me that for a 'short time' with a tourist they all ask for a standard fee of 4000 KSH which is approximately 50 US dollars. If woman charges less than this amount while working on a beach she is usually beaten up by other sex workers for 'spoiling' the business, as recounted by Dorpató. However, when working in night clubs or on the street, sex workers have no agreed prices, and even though all sex workers start negotiations with tourists from a high price of 5000 KSH, the fee of 2000 KSH is often considered good enough. In bad, off-season, months some sex workers reported earning amounts equivalent to 50 US dollars in a whole month.

You ask a man 2000, maybe a 1000 and the man will tell you “Hey, you don't know it is January? People have paid the school fees, for their kids, so there is no money. Will you take 500?” And you say, e, ok, if you have no money, ok, fine.

Men always negotiate with sex workers, so many women find that it is better to present themselves with different identities to men, as that strategy might yield more profits.

Heald (1995 : 495) argues that in East African ‘respect’ societies, the open display of sexuality is ruled out and modesty is deemed of the greatest importance to men and women. Sex workers whose strategy is to attract better-off African men or potential husbands adapt their identities to this notion. The respectful look was an important notion for women working in many different locations. One of the interesting examples of respectful sex work is women who sell sex on the street while being covered by a *bui-bui*<sup>28</sup>. During my fieldwork, one part of the street, which is known for the sex trade, was always occupied by women in *bui-buis*. I did not manage to speak with any of them, but other sex workers who knew these women explained that by covering their bodies when selling sex these women sought to remain respectful. Such sex workers’ behaviour stirred a lot of discontent from the Muslim population in town (see for example Nene 2007), but did not seem to surprise fellow sex workers, as many of them had their own understanding of respect and were employing what they called ‘respectful’ looks to get clients. For example, Chichi (32 years old) explained:

You know, my secret is to pretend to be decent. Many men like decent ladies, they don't like those that show [naked bodies]. So I can go to a pub, and pretend I am coming to enjoy myself. You know, people look at you the way you dress. There are those who respect your work, but others see you naked, maybe they say she is a prostitute. Prostitutes have little respect from men. So when I dress decent, maybe someone will think I am someone's wife.

Women who spoke about respect in their narratives were pointing out their roles as mothers, wives, or members of communities as the most important aspects of their personality and explained their decision to dress in a respectful way as in line with these roles. Sex work for these women was a way of earning

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<sup>28</sup> Muslim dress for women that covers their head and body, often even their face.

money and thus they did not see it as necessarily interfering with their other roles.

What is more, women who employed strategies that are in line with a 'respectful' or 'decent' image have several strategies to make a man be generous by playing with the double standards of society. Women understand that they have to play the role of a 'decent' woman in order to be used for sex. Dafnie (22 years old), for instance, tells men that she just arrived to town and looks for a way to make a living. As a contrast, Ritangeri (36 years old) tells men that she is a married woman who is in the bar just for fun. Lorin (42 years old) tells men her 'problems' and how hard her life is. All these women conceal their real identities and create situations where a man can live a normative masculinity by pretending to engage in non-monetary flirtatious behaviour, knowing that they will have to financially reward women for their performance. In a society where normative masculinity is connected to providing (Cornwall 2003; Mutongi 2007; Silberschmidt 2004), a 'decent' man would take care of a woman in need, as was discussed in chapter three. Be it a situation where a man can step in and help a young girl or mother in need financially, or a man who can seduce a young woman or someone's wife, sex workers can potentially negotiate a better price by twisting their stories than by doing sex work openly. Of course, there is always a risk that a man will take advantage of women without giving them any money in return, and many sex workers admit that. However, the possibility of earning more money is what motivates women to be fluid about their identities and strategies. The performance of a woman from a different social group is expected to help to cross social boundaries and access the wages of men from a higher targeted social background.

### **Behaviour**

The behaviour that goes along with 'decent' looks is aimed at attracting a man who could potentially become a very well paying or regular client, boyfriend, or, in some rare cases, a husband. To attract men who could potentially fulfil these roles, sex workers aim at local men with considerable income, Western tourists, or, to some extent, sailors. Nonetheless, such men have to be approached carefully. Miriam (31 years old) explained her strategy this way:

Just by talking about love. They like [to speak about love]! So much! If you ask about cars, not everybody want to talk about this expensive things now, the people start thinking: "E, why have you started talking about these expensive things?" You have to start down, not from cars. You can't start to talk from top, you have to start to talk from bottom.

Just as conversation topics are chosen carefully, the fact that a woman is a sex worker is concealed. Robina (34 years old) explained her strategy with such men:

Sometimes you look at somebody, and you feel that you cannot tell him that you are a sex worker. Because he will ask you: "Are you free, can we have a drink together and talk, we can be friends?" Maybe stay together in a hotel, because some are from Nairobi, some are from Europe, whatever. So you have a drink together and he says: "Can you come with me to the hotel?" And then you say "Yeah", and then you can't tell him the amount you want. In the morning he says "Ok, here are the money for you for taxi to go home". He gives you money for a taxi, he is not saying "I give you money because I slept with you", he gives you the money but says it is for a taxi to go home.

Not naming a price first, which is a common practice among sex workers<sup>29</sup>, leaves the sex worker open for abuse, but it also leaves room to manoeuvre and the possibility of more than just a one night business deal. Such clients might come back regularly, pay their house bills, children's' schooling, send money, and ease the living in many ways in exchange for the sex worker playing the role of 'girlfriend' or 'wife'. Such clients can even become husbands at some point, and in the case of such luck, sex workers would be crossing social boundaries for longer than just one evening.

Few sex workers succeed in securing such a relationship, and very often it did not bring the desired security. For example Miriam (31 years old) had 'an old German' who was paying for her house and visiting her every few months, and yet, she still needed money to pay for her daughter's education and for household expenses and for that reason she was trading sex while her German 'boyfriend' was not around. Dorpato (24 years old) also told that she used to have a 'very old *mzungu*' who was paying her house and sending her small amounts of money even when his family put him in the nursing home for the

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<sup>29</sup> Sex workers who do sex work openly emphasise the importance of agreeing the price first and even, if possible, of taking money and giving it to their friend to hold before the sex act itself. All these measures are insurance that man will pay and will not steal their money.

elderly. Even though these 'boyfriends' were helpful for a certain period of time, none of them brought the complete relief that many sex workers dream of. In Mombasa, many people, including sex workers, gossip that old German men come to the Kenyan coast, buy a house, marry a sex worker (always someone that the person telling a story knows), and enjoy their last days before death in the comfort of a young wife who inherits the house after his death. Even though such gossip is difficult to confirm, White (2000 : 83) observes that rumours can be a source of local history that speaks about the prevailing contradictions and anxieties of society. This particular kind of rumour points towards the tensions that prevail in the changing nature of local economies, gender anxieties, and the role that foreign 'boyfriends' are perceived to play in the local globalised economy.

Cinderella (28 years old) said she has five European 'boyfriends' who sometimes pay her house rent and send her money. However, she had her own opinion about how real these 'boyfriends' are:

When they go back to Germany, they switch off their phones, they don't send anything, no contact. When they are near to come to Kenya, they now start: "Cinderella, I am on the way to come in Kenya where can I find you?" When they are near, they are good, when they go there, they sleep there. They just tell they are coming. Now I say this, I cannot show them in my house, this better is business. Some others are contract, when the contract is finished, they go to another lady, and I find another man.

Despite the fact that many other sex workers see the possibility of marriage or having a boyfriend as a desirable option, a business-like kind of thinking is becoming prevalent in the Mombasa sex industries. Sex workers dream not only about marriage, but also about owning small businesses or working in the formal economy. For such women the sex trade is just a period during which they try to accumulate initial capital or pay their education so that they can have a 'good life' later, as will be further explored in chapter six. This group of sex workers deploy their body and different personality traits to maximise their profits.

In addition to the looks and space that sex workers choose depending on what client they aim for, there are other dimensions of their identity that play an

important role. One of them is the knowledge of the English language. Speaking English is important in two respects. First, it signals that a woman went to school and completed at least primary education. As Ssewakiryanga (2004 : 126) points out, knowledge of English is a marker of success and confirmation of a sophisticated sex worker's identity. Good command of the English language and any education that a woman completed also plays an important role in her ability to negotiate a price with a customer. Lilian (27 years old), for example, told me that her prices are higher than other sex workers', because she has been to school. She had completed secondary education and at the time of the interview was taking a course in sales and marketing that she was financing through her sex work:

Most of the people [men] like to go with people who have gone to school. Many, majority [of sex workers] are the ones who have not gone to school. They don't speak English, they are... Some are rather shaggy, you know? And some drink a lot. That's when you go with them, they hardly know themselves. I am not like that. I am very different. I am not trying. I AM.

Moreover, knowledge of languages is important for reasons of simple communication. Chiquita-Banana (40 years old) told me a story which highlights that:

I remember when I started to go to the club, I get a sea-man, and then I did not even know to talk English, because I was... didn't know what he was asking! He said, "What is your name?" I said "Yes"! [laughs]. He said, "Whaaaat?" Because I didn't know what to say!

Fluency or at least the ability to have a simple conversation in English and other languages that tourists speak are important for sex workers. Most of the women I interviewed spoke English and even if they were not fluent they could have a basic conversation. Women who work and live in a Mombasa township with a large population of retired German men, know at least the main phrases necessary for sex trade transactions in German. Similarly, sex workers who travel to work in Malindi are often fluent in Italian, as Italians are owners of many businesses and the main tourist group in that area.

The choices that sex workers make in terms of spaces to operate from, the outfit that they wear, enhanced by their personal qualities such as knowledge of

languages or just a 'decent' behaviour, allow the construction of an identity that is far away from that of a 'prostitute' and probably in some cases reminiscent of the colonial *malaya*, because of its emphasis on respect. Explaining her success and high income from sex work, Kate (21 years old) told me:

You have to behave like a good girl, a good responsible girl. You don't have to behave like a prostitute, because now most of them [clients], they want to take you to places where they want to go, they want to be seen with a nice, decent girl.

A nice, decent girl that is well dressed and accompanies a man in an up-class restaurant responds to different needs of men than a woman who sells her body in a 'red' street for a clearly set price.

Sex workers' work strategies speak about the wider society in which sex workers operate: increasing social and economic inequalities are visible when assessing sex workers' attempts to cross social boundaries and the effort to adopt identities that correspond to different socio-economic notions. The different female identities that are performed in order to get money for sex and the strategies of getting men also point to the prevailing gender structures and the economic power that is in male hands. Mimicry of the female roles in the sex trade indicates the few choices that women have of depending on men financially, and suggest great competition to secure such dependency. The following section of this chapter will explore this competition in the sex industries further.

### **'It is a dangerous job after all': danger, competition and the supernatural**

Sex work is described as a risky occupation by sex workers. The main risks, as outlined in interviews, are: the possibility that men will not pay, abuse from clients (beating, rape, gang rape, forced bestiality and even murder), abuse from the police (rape, request of bribe, arrest), HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, violent competition from other sex workers, and a constant possibility of being bewitched by jealous competitors. Women in the sex industry try to protect themselves from these dangers and have separate strategies to tackle each of them. Strategies that ensure sex workers' safety in



areas of violent abuse and payment require cooperation with fellow sex workers, as will be explained below. However, these strategies conflict with the ability of sex workers to remain competitive and avoid witchcraft, because sex workers believe that in order to stay safe in these areas, they have to work alone and trust nobody. This conflict between sex workers' attempts to stay safe, earn money, work towards the aim of a 'good life', and the dangers associated with competition and witchcraft will be analysed in this part of the chapter. This analysis will serve to show how neo-liberal practice and discourse build on the local context and to what extent it helps to form neo-liberal practices within the sex industries.

### **Client-related hazards and sex workers' cooperation**

Women in the Kenyan sex industries are there to earn money. Therefore, men who have sex but do not pay are seen by sex workers as one of the main challenges and issues in this trade. Issues of violence and threat of HIV infections were also present in women's narratives, yet, they were usually seen as problematic when clients did not pay. For instance, Ashley (22 years old) named the problems of sex workers in this order:

You get a lot of harassment from someone, crying, maybe agree on this amount, later they cheat you, they give you less, you know. Harassment. Also sometimes that you do without a condom. You know, you can't allow that, so fighting in the room. Yeah.

Client violence and threat of infections are present in Ashley's story, yet, the main problem to her and many other sex workers is non-payment.

Many of the women that I interviewed emphasised the importance of agreeing on rules regarding payment before going with a man. Such rules and taking care of personal belongings such as a mobile phone were always at the centre of such rules. Ashley, for instance, explained her strategy like this:

First before you go with a client in the room, you must agree how much [he will pay]. First they give you your money, because some go there and then they just pretend. Say you agreed on 2000 or 3000, and then they go after the action and say: "No, it is 1000". It is not what we agreed on. So they have first to pay you, you put it in the pocket and hold your phone, because some of them they steal

[from] you. You have to keep it [money] or give it to your friend. Such things. First they pay you and then you go. Yeah.

Agreeing on the price and getting paid first is important and many sex workers emphasised that in their stories. The only times when payment was not required in advance was when women were dealing with clients that had the potential to become boyfriends or husbands.

Clients can be dangerous for sex workers not only because they refuse to pay or pay less than agreed. As women rightly point out, some clients are infectious disease carriers and therefore can be a source of health issues. Interviewed sex workers generally had good knowledge of infectious disease prevention and many of them were pointing out the importance of condom use. For instance, Ashley explained the condom use agreement: '[Client has to agree on] using a condom, he says yes or no. If no, you just leave him. You just decide to use the condom.' However, such agreements did not always work. Sex workers were telling stories about men agreeing to use a condom and then not putting them on, but also about rape, abuse, beating and many other dangers that are looming once the door of the rented room closes. For this reason, ensuring safety means relying on fellow sex workers and friends in the industry. Ashley explains this need well:

Better I go with my friends. When I am gone to a certain place or a guest room [with a client], when it takes more than 15 minutes, they just try to call me. Just knocking, just know where I am. It is a bit safer. Yeah. Because others [clients], they go and then they misuse you. When we [group of sex-workers who are friends] go maybe to a certain club, or certain pub, we just agree among ourselves, we just say: "No passing that bridge on that way, no passing that club on that way", so we are just within. So then your client cannot tell you go outside there, because some [clients] they go and they mistreat you. And they can rape you. And we can fight. That is not safe. We put boundaries, no going this side there, not going there.

Many sex workers, especially the ones who tend to engage in an open sex trade, emphasise the importance of having friends in the industry. It is safety through the ability to rely on a peer in difficult situations that such cooperation brings to them. Miriam (31 years old) even told me that if any of her friends starts drinking too much or taking drugs while working, she stops such a relationship.

She emphasised that working together brings safety and that this safety can be quickly ruined if girls start abusing alcohol or drugs.

Cooperation with other women is important not only because of increased security, it can also bring additional clients, as Dafnie (22 years old) pointed out. For this reason Dafnie tries to make friendships in all locations that she works, so that if her client has a friend who needs company, she could call one of her friends, expecting that she would be called if her friend is in the same situation. It can be a colleague who instructs a new sex worker about safe sex, as in the case of Patricia (22 years old), or helps to overcome the shock of finding out that a woman is HIV positive and advises on where and how to get medical help, as recounted by Dorpato (24 years old). A relationship with fellow sex workers who can be trusted to keep hold of money, to check on the woman when she is with a client, call for help in need, help to pay police bribes, warn about abusive clients, and maybe share experience and knowledge about HIV/AIDS or other diseases, is very important for the safety of sex workers.

### **Competition and violence among sex workers**

Yet, not all sex workers agreed that having friendships in the sex industry is a good strategy. Since sex workers are many and the number of men who can pay well is limited, competition for clients can take violent forms. For example Dorpato (24 years old), recounted how when she came to work on the beach for the first time, she was beaten up by other sex workers so badly that she could not work for a few weeks. While telling the story Dorpato was laughing and concluded that the 'beach is full of crazy ladies', still she admitted that when a new sex worker shows up on a beach she warns her to 'come slowly' and not to be 'rough'. In turn, Maria-Karen (21 years old) was explicit on how, in the competition for clients, she can be violent:

When I go there, I go there to work, not to be loved by people, not to be nice to people. You go there when you are serious. Because I go there, and I don't have hair [she has very short natural hair], but I put some wig. I put some wig, so when I go there, I look like, "Eh, this girl, just leave this girl alone", yeah? Because sometimes you even fight with other girls because of men, yeah.

Violent competition for clients is the reason why some sex workers go around their business by themselves and sacrifice the safety that friendship with other sex-workers could provide. For instance, Kate (21 years old) emphasised that she always works alone and never gets into any relationship with other sex workers to avoid violent competition. However, Kate was in a privileged position, because in case of any trouble with other women she always takes a taxi and leaves the place; and she can do so because she is very successful at sex work and always has enough money. For women whose income is not that high, such escape routes are impossible and therefore the violence of fellow sex workers becomes part of their experience.

Almost all sex workers were complaining about young girls, or as Betty (31 years old) puts it 'babies', who enter the industry and charge much lower prices ruining the possibilities for older women. Yet it was not only young sex workers and open violence that are seen as a threat. Precious (23 years old) also explained that she is careful with making friendships in the industry, especially when having a 'good' client, because:

Maybe the other girls will come and you sit there, but they come and seduce that boy. There is a lot of competition, even those girls can make a plan and beat you. Because of the guy they beat you. Some of the girls they can even go to the witchcraft, even make you not normal. [...] Somebody can go to magics, he will give medicine, then will come to you like a friend, maybe he told to do this and this. Then they make you not normal, talking alone in the street, go crazy. So this is work we are doing, but we have to be careful.

In many sex workers' narratives, the topic of witchcraft and the dangers that this force brings came into conversation immediately after my questions about competition in the industry. Fierce competition is the reason why witchcraft is present in the sex industry, and some sex workers saw it as one of the main dangers.

### **Competition and witchcraft**

The fact that competition and witchcraft are intertwined in sex workers narratives is of no surprise. Ciekawy (1998 : 123; 1999 : 228-229), in her articles about witchcraft in coastal Kenya, points out that the accumulation of wealth and power is often seen as a zero-sum game on the Kenyan coast where

accumulation of wealth by one person means loss of wealth for the other. Witchcraft is used to cause blockages of potential development for another person. In the context of the sex industries then, witchcraft is employed as an explanation for personal misfortunes and as an explanation of blockages to success and a 'good life'. For example, the story of Cinderella (28 years old), illustrates this way of thinking well:

I fear a bit [of witchcraft]. For three years I was with *mzungu*. But that *mzungu* went back back without saying even bye. Up to now. They went to *mganga*<sup>30</sup>, there they chased him with medicine. He doesn't remember me, they stole my name, or what? Yeah, people in Mombasa trick. Ladies in Mombasa, they told me: "One day you will never see this *mzungu*". You see, like bad passing there. And he was paying for house, three years. That man, those days I was telling: "God this man is the one who will put me the ring". He liked me very much, liked my parents, liked my children. Every month he was sending for me 80,000. Every month! I was staying like an angel. One day he was telling me: "I will come and marry you. One day. Will you like?" "Yes, of course". He was buying me clothes, I was not wearing clothes from Kenya, my clothes come from Italy. He was coming, big clothes bags. I was with a lot of ladies, my parents tried to stay here, my sister, I forget everything what they have done for me back. That *mzungu* run away and I know it is not clean. It is for *mganga* people.

Cinderella is convinced that her personal misfortune is caused by jealous women who used witchcraft to block her success. Jealousy and revenge are the main reasons for using witchcraft (Ciekawy 1999 : 228).

Another reason why beliefs about witchcraft are abundant in sex workers' stories is the existence of great economic inequalities, both locally and globally. Sex workers who usually come from disadvantaged backgrounds have opportunities to see and experience wealth and luxury through their interactions with clients. Clients take sex workers to their hotels, treat them to upper-class dinners, and buy them presents. Therefore, sex workers are well aware of social inequalities, and such understandings are important when understanding the use of witchcraft. Geschiere (1998 : 814) emphasises the duality of witchcraft in the African context: witchcraft is used as a force that levels the inequalities in society, yet it is the same force of witchcraft that is needed for the accumulation of wealth and power. Such understandings of

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<sup>30</sup>Mganga- a witchdoctor.

witchcraft and the ambiguities that sex work entails (the reality of poverty and performance of wealth as discussed previously) can explain why many sex workers see supernatural forces at work when explaining their own failures to achieve the 'good life' or earn a lot of money.

### **Witchcraft and neo-liberalism**

Several scholars (Blunt 2004; Deacon and Lynch forthcoming; Smith 2001, 2005) point out that in the case of Kenya, forces that are deemed to originate from the invisible and spiritual world and are connected to witchcraft became more active with the advent of neo-liberal reforms. The research of Smith (2005 : 145) found that many people in Taita Hills who experienced a shift from producers to net consumers (because of inflation and failing rains, and as agricultural production became increasingly risky, and households became dependant on purchased maize for consumption) started having standardised anxieties about unregulated consumption, which they connected to witchcraft and the uncertainty about 'who is producing what for whom'. Similarly, Blunt (2004 : 304) notes that the moment Kenyans started suspecting that the promised modernity was no longer present, the period was then marked by the arrival of 'Satan as imitator'. It was a general fear that Satan had swamped the Kenyan moral economy with 'counterfeit signs of modernity', which meant that even the most ordinary activities became unclear and had contested moral implications. The way things appeared did not reflect their substance in part as a result of neo-liberal reforms (Blunt 2004 : 301). Just as in the case of the sex industries, in a situation of uncertainty, deteriorating living conditions, violence and performances of wealth, witchcraft offers moral explanations for the inequalities and everyday situations that people experience.

Sex workers' performances of different femininities could be also seen as contributing to the myths and rumours present in the industry. These rumours include stories about 'girls from good families' who are in the sex industry because 'they like it', and stories about women who became rich from sex work and now own houses, cars and businesses (all markers of the 'good life'). Rumours also include stories about bewitching and spiritual possessions that help sex workers become rich. Gossips often explain how spiritual interventions

can make your competitor unattractive, or even damage her through illness or death thus paving the way for easier accumulation. On the other hand, as Smith (2001 : 434) points out, in coastal Kenya, spirits, or *majini* in Swahili, are symbols of money itself and have the ability to create value from nothing, or convert capital goods such as labour, cattle, or crops into consumption goods such as sugar, tea, and cars. Moreover, Izugbara (2011 : 545) points out that wifeless/husbandless adults in African cultures are often viewed with suspicion because of the possibility that they might have exchanged their sexuality for wealth with spiritual forces. For these reasons, successful sex workers are gossiped about as owning *majini*, or as being involved in witchcraft.

Ciekawy and Geschiere (1998 : 3) argue that rumours about witchcraft often express anxieties about new ways of accumulation and show an interest in hidden opportunities to gain access to these new forms of wealth. The new hidden opportunities of accumulation could be seen as a continuation of past experiences, when people realised that new ways of living and working (for example moving to town and working in an international hotel as in opposition to farming in rural areas) can be more profitable, but at the same time rather selective and not available for all (no international hotel would employ a person without education). These new opportunities, which in the neo-liberal era are connected to strong foreign influences, are mirrored in sex workers' accounts of ghosts and spirits 'from Baharini' and 'good *mgangas* from Tanzania'. Neo-liberal practices brought what Blunt (2004: 303) calls 'multiple forms of false value' in terms of the daily lives of Kenyans. At the same time, the neo-liberal emphasis on individualism is very compatible with ideas about witchcraft, because it is a witch who betrays her/his family and kin and starts accumulation for herself/himself alone. Ciekawy and Geschiere (1998 : 5) observe that in the African context, '[l]ike the market, witchcraft conjures up the idea of an opening, a leakage through which people or resources are withdrawn from the community and disappear into the outer world.'

Interestingly, most of the literature on witchcraft in Africa highlights that the biggest danger of witchcraft and bewitching comes from the closest family members or kin (Ciekawy 1999; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Dolan 2002;

1997, 1998). Yet, in my research, women who were speaking about being bewitched and the 'suspects' that caused their misfortunes were rarely related by blood or even ethnic affiliations. However, I would like to argue that bewitching, jealousy and the violence that it implies, still come from people that are close, and for sex workers, these are friends and colleagues rather than next of kin. Most sex workers travelled to Mombasa from faraway places throughout Kenya and neighbouring countries usually leaving their families behind. Women who were born in Mombasa and around, often had lost or severed relations with their immediate families. Sex workers living with more family than just their children were very few. Therefore, most sex workers live in isolated situations with no family or kin to rely upon around them. In such situations, sex workers rely on each other in their everyday lives and for work safety as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. These relationships that sex workers form with each other, replace the support of the family which would be available in different circumstances. So once the word 'family' is replaced with 'colleagues' or 'friends', Geschiere and Ciekawy's (1998 : 5) observation that witchcraft 'epitomizes the frightening realization that there is jealousy and aggression within the intimate circle of the family where only solidarity and trust should reign' remains relevant.

## Conclusions

Women start trading sex because of the poverty that is often the result of women's position in Kenyan socio-economic and gender structures. However, once in the sex trade, women learn to behave in ways that, as Hofmann (2010 : 252) puts it, 'correspond with neo-liberal governmentality'. Such strategies help women to expand their agency to some degree and allow entering new 'markets' that were non-existent before. More importantly, it shows their individual agency and entrepreneurship under difficult circumstances that limit their available choices and opportunities.

Sex workers build on prevailing social and gender inequalities and attempt to exploit them by adapting different gendered identities that correspond to different types of femininities and social situations. What is more, sex workers engage in the active marketing of their bodies that goes beyond appearance and



involves some personal traits of character and certain skills. As a result, the sex trade expands geographically and gains new forms that are not necessarily associated with the sex industries immediately. Such processes point to the disruption in the social and moral norms that prevail in the society and are connected to the living conditions of people. As this chapter has shown, disrupted moral norms are changing and gaining some features of a neo-liberal market character. The new social realities that emerge out of this process are explained by sex workers in a language of business and markets. Moreover, neo-liberal practices adapt to the local context and ideas about witchcraft and the supernatural are also employed to illuminate this new reality of uncertainties.

Women who trade sex regard themselves as entrepreneurs and view sex work as a form of work that allows them to advance and create a 'good life'. The notion of a 'good life' and sex workers' dreams for themselves and their children's future will be explored in the following chapter in order to understand the motivations of sex work engagement.

## 6. The consumer dreams of Kenyan sex workers

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\* Happy \*  
\*.Valez.\*  
\* \*  
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*2da is valentynes day, t day of lv en among all t gfts on earth roses, chocolata, gold, expencv champagne! I chuz 2 lv u 2da.*

>>>>>>>>HAPPY VALENTINES<<<<<<<<<<'31

People make sense of the world, attach values and meaning to both the material and non-material world according to their own experiences, political and socio-economic setting (Mensah 2008b : 39). The values and meanings that certain objects hold are also very important in marketing, because certain values that are associated with people's dreams help to sell products. For example chocolate has a set of meanings that different people attach to it: temptation, love, generosity, care for a sustainable environment, or a feeling of luxury depending on what, where and when a person purchases and consumes such a product. Buying a European chocolate in Kenya is often connected to luxury and exclusiveness, the ability to consume and enjoy, and therefore receiving chocolate is a sign of attention. It is no surprise that in this setting, Mombasa's sex workers on a commercial Western holiday – St. Valentines – wish each other (and me!) to get that 'chocolata' along with roses, gold and expensive champagne. All these products carry meanings that indicate wealth, luxury and the good life. Just what many women in the sex industry aim to secure.

This dream (as many other dreams that will be further explored in this chapter) is not a mere sign of sex workers' attachments to material possessions and consumerism; rather, it reflects their position within the many layers of power relations. Neo-liberal political economy, forces of globalisation, prevalent gender relations, and international media interact with each other to form

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<sup>31</sup>Text message that my research assistant, an ex sex worker, sent to me on St Valentine day in 2012.

socio-economic structures that shape the lives of Kenyan women. The dreams of sex workers indicate their willingness to break away from such structures: a sex worker, who was born in a rural area and refused to work in a flower farm that provides the market with roses wishes to get such an expensive flower as a gift. She most likely left a village, travelled to town and started trading sex with the dream of a 'good life' in which she is not farming roses, but receives them. This generalised scenario reflects the realities of many sex workers interviewed in this research.

Dreams are a motivational power that shapes one's actions and plans. However, it is important to point out that people dream only of things they are aware of. Furthermore, markets are of uttermost importance when shaping dreams. Through advertisement, information about new things reach different people every day. Tettey (2008 : 166) argues that images of a consumerist Western lifestyle reaches Africans with the help of information technologies, despite the reality of global political-economic disparities. It is through the mass media and interaction with foreigners that Kenyan sex workers know that on the 14th of February they should wish for expensive champagne. As Mensah (2008b : 45) points out, Western consumer culture is undeniably present in Africa. However, by adopting Western culture Africans adapt it to their situation, reinterpret it, and sometimes resist it. A sex worker that tries to get gold and chocolate from her client on Valentine's Day often has many other plans that are connected to her actions – she might be looking for a husband to ensure her material safety, accumulating initial capital for her future business, or saving for her child's education.

This chapter will explore how sex workers' dreams are shaped by international political economy and gender structures. Appadurai (1996 : 3) argues that increasing international media outreach and migration are two major forces having an effect on the 'work of imagination'. People in the developing world are increasingly aware of the distance between them and the lifestyles of people in the West because of the international media. But mass media images are not alone in crossing boundaries at unprecedented volumes: skilled and unskilled labour move from country to country in search for work and better

opportunities. Be it Asian IT specialists working for big corporations in the Silicon Valley, or illegal Indonesian maids in Malaysia as explored by Ong (2006), people move from their places of birth to places with greater possibilities. Such movements of people and images influences people's understanding of their 'place-in-the-world', to borrow Ferguson's (2006 : 6) term. The world then becomes not a 'network of interconnected points', but a 'categorical system within which countries and geographical regions have their "places", with a "place" understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories' (ibid.). Building on the analysis of encounters between global and local cultures, this chapter will see how such interactions of global and local systems of meaning within the international political economy shape sex workers' dreams and plans for the future. Moreover, it will explore how these systems of meanings can be influenced by neo-liberal practices and discourse.

The first part of the chapter will explore the notion of the 'good life' that is prevalent in sex workers' narratives about the future. It will look into what such a 'good life' consists of and how an understanding of the 'good life' differs depending on how successful a sex worker is in her trade. The second and the third parts of the chapter will analyse what strategies and plans women have in order to reach their aims and dreams. The second part will concentrate on women's ideas about attaining the 'good life' through marriage; the third focuses on how a 'good life' can be secured through business and work. The final part of this chapter will discuss what differences sex workers show in their dreams for themselves and their children, and what might be the reasons behind this.

### **'One day I will be driving my own car': the notion of a 'good life' in sex workers dreams**

The 'good life' is one of the notions that sex workers mentioned in many interviews. Some of the women employed this term to explain their future plans and dreams; others used it to compare their own situation with that of their more successful colleagues. Yet, in both contexts, the 'good life' was described in a very similar way and had the same markers: a 'good house', a 'good job', a

car and, in some cases, a 'good husband'. Dreams of a 'good life' always referred to higher living standards and often included many consumer goods. For example, Precious (23 years old) explained what a future 'good life' is for her:

... and one day I will have a good life, my kids can stay a good life. I will eat good, have a good husband, and have good things in a house. I will have a good house, everything is in a house. I have my own television, not to go in the other house looking for television. A fridge of yours, of your own. You just eat what you want. I can eat good things, eat milk. Whatever I need, I can just buy. I have a lot of money, my kids will not drop out of school, they will learn very well. Even I drive my own car. My kids, you know, they are all boys. One can be a mechanic, one can be an engineer, one a pilot for planes. They tell me: "mommy, come", then I go with a plane. You know, my dreams, dreams come true.

Dreams of a 'good life' carry a strong material aspect, as can be judged from the emphasis on material belongings such as a good house, TV, a refrigerator, and good food. The ability to purchase things, consume, or what Schatzberg (2001 : 37) calls the ability 'to eat' is another important dimension of the dream of a 'good life' – the marker of status that can improve one's 'place-in-the-world'. Finally, an illusion of a 'good life' hints to activities that in contemporary Kenya are available only to the rich and foreign tourists – travelling by plane, crossing borders, seeing new places, and meeting different people. This dream of a 'good life' surely carries Western influences, especially an emphasis on the ability to consume goods, own (and supposedly watch) TV. Yet, as Mensah (2008b : 41) observes, and a further analysis of the 'good life' will show, 'cultural traffic between the West and Africa is hardly unidirectional'. While cultural influences are moving in both ways, it is important to point out that such flows depend on and are shaped by unequal power relations between different geographic places in the area of political economy (Mensah 2008b : 47). Women who live in economically, politically and culturally marginal regions of the Kenyan coast, are dreaming of having a comfortable life which resembles the perceived lifestyles of the non-marginal West or Kenyan elites. Sex workers who choose this trade because of their disadvantaged position in the local economy and society, express through their dreams a wish to have purchasing power and abilities which would give control over their, and their children's, lives.

It is important to point out that many of the sex workers' dreams are quite similar and reflect the life styles that they know, have seen, and can compare to their own situation. For example, Winnie (30 years old) considered herself not being very lucky in the sex trade and explained that, as opposed to her, some of her friends have 'good lives' because of sex work. When asked to explain what she meant, she described how her friends live in 'expensive houses with water inside. Also a toilet'. Floriana (41 years old) also referred to an 'expensive, good house like this one' in her interview that took place in my research assistant's flat. What these women saw as an expensive house was not some unreal fantasy of a villa on the seaside, but a living space in one of the many settlements next to Mombasa that had electricity and occasional town-supplied water. Such living conditions are better compared to the poverty that these women lived in. For this reason, in many cases a dream of a 'good house' simply meant the upgrade from poverty to basic living conditions that included the simple comforts of running water and electricity. A good example of such improvements in living conditions is that of Wanjiku (30 years old). After our interview one of her colleagues made this comment:

Now that she has tasted washing, going somewhere out, eating *nyama choma*<sup>32</sup>, drinking beers, and only opening legs for some time, [...] make her to go back to the village! Hahaha!

Wanjiku herself certainly did not think that she is living the dream of a 'good life'; yet, for some other women her living standards seemed like a desirable situation.

What is more, many sex workers' dreams reflected a wish to escape uncertainty and daily worries about survival. As Miriam (31 years old) explained in her elaboration of the 'good life':

That I don't have too much to think what I will eat tomorrow. What my daughter will go to school with... I know that even something happened, I don't have to struggle to pay the house rent, or the bills and all these kind of things. You know, when you are in a safe place and nobody will disturb you. You feel free. And you don't have to think about these things.

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<sup>32</sup>Roasted meat, traditional dish in Kenya.

Miriam speaks about freedom and seems to echo Sen (2001), who argues that development and freedom to choose are the main factors that indicate the quality of life. Such freedom and safety was usually seen by sex workers as attainable through a stable income. For this reason often the 'good life' included not only a 'good house', but also a 'good job' like that of a tour guide, in an office, as a policewoman, or nurse or a 'good husband' who had a stable income. The following sections of this chapter will elaborate on the strategies that sex workers employ in order to get a 'good husband' or a 'good job', and thus to secure the 'good life'.

Some dreams of the 'good life' are shaped by myths and gossip, or were the result of comparing one's situation with that of fellow sex workers and friends. For instance, Lisa (36 years old) gave quite a few examples of how sex work can change lives, and what scenarios of her life she would gladly welcome:

I've seen one lady, she get one guy, and this guy told her to stop working, and she stopped, she has a very big shop in Mtwapa. And now she is cool, she is quiet. I had also another one, she was called Peru, she is now in Germany. She went and got married, and she lives in Germany. Also I have another one, she is called Alia, she is also in Germany. So, you never know.

This comparative dimension is important when distinguishing among different groups of sex workers and how the understanding of a 'good life' changes according to their experiences. Not all women are in the same starting position when entering the sex trade. Their different experiences and situations in life result in different expectations and dreams for the future.

Different understandings of what a 'good life' is also results in the popular myth of 'girls from good families' that do sex work for pleasure. Women who do not earn a lot through sex work, who serve poor men and have difficult living conditions, define the 'good life' as a situation of living in a house with electricity. Yet, sex workers who actually live in houses with electricity but struggle to sustain it and pay bills, have different opinions of what a 'good life' is, and that opinion involves a separate range of things, as will be discussed further later on. This difference is the main reason why sex workers judge each other and do not believe that they all have the same issues. For example, when interviewing Chichi (32 years old), there were many other sex workers that I

had interviewed previously or was to interview in the following days in my research assistant's house. Sex workers who were there at that time were mostly quite successful, earning a high income through the sex trade. They were good at performing the role of an 'expensive lady', but this did not always correspond with their living conditions or realities. Their strategies and income were different from that of Chichi who had a strategy of performing the role of a 'decent lady' and sometimes struggled to pay her rent. Chichi's 'good life' was what she thought these fellow sex workers already had, so after explaining that she added:

Most of the girls who are here now, they come from rich families, yes. They are some who even got a *mzungu*, maybe he build a house like this for them, but they still go out! Doesn't ask what she want? And she has everything- she has a car, she has a house, she can collect friends, why go to the pub and look for another man?

Meanwhile, sex workers, whose clients were rich Kenyans and tourists, have experiences of visiting places that usually are inaccessible to poor Kenyans and so were braver in their dreams. For example Lilian (27 years old), who works exclusively with middle class and rich Kenyans and tourists, expanded the notion of a 'good life' beyond just material safety to the lifestyle that favoured consumption beyond a fulfilment of basic needs:

... honestly, yes, I will have a good life. I have to have a good life. A good life is when I can afford everything for my son. What I didn't get with my parents, I can give it for my son. I can be able to take him to the movies, I can be able to take him to a good school, I can be able to decide that I am travelling and I don't lack money. And let's travel. And clothes, provide good clothes. Expensive clothes, buy him toys. That is a good life for me.

Lilian's 'good life' is more than just basic comforts, because she already ensures basic comforts for her and her son through her sex work. What she sees as an improvement of her life is the power to consume services and goods that are not affordable to many Kenyans. She wants to go to the movies, which is a luxury. At the time of my fieldwork, there was only one cinema theatre in Mombasa, which was located in the shopping complex of one of the richest neighbourhoods. People who were watching movies were usually middle class and rich Kenyans or foreigners who were able to afford the ticket priced at 500-



800 KSH<sup>33</sup>. Lilian also wants to buy expensive clothes, not second-hand attire from the market as she does now. Finally, she wants to have the freedom to travel without difficulties. Lilian is dreaming of freedoms that are available to the elites of the society she lives in, or to the Westerners that she meets in her job.

Castell (quoted in Mensah 2008a : 118) argues that the elites find ways to separate themselves from masses spatially through real estate pricing, residential controls and security. They then create lifestyles that correspond to these special forms segregating them from the masses around the world. In the case of Kenya, a distinction can be made between those people who were 'winners' of neo-liberal reforms, and the rest, who struggle in their daily lives. Such a situation implies that distinctive symbols are not only the VIP lounges in airports and limousine facilities, as Castell points out in his analysis. In the case of Kenya, segregation is marked by less luxurious possessions like a car, the ability to see movies, to buy clothes in shops, and travel in general. Emphasis on similar markers of success (driving a Mercedes Benz, owning a bungalow, working in a bank, having a lot of money) can also be observed in some religious speeches of the new churches of Kenya, where Biblical narratives are used in sermons to prove that God will change people's lives now (also see Deacon and Lynch forthcoming; Gifford 2008 : 208).

Mensah (2008a : 121) argues that global power imbalances are shaped by multiple variables among which class, gender, ethnicity, race, and colonial history are worthy of attention. The inequalities that are created by these imbalances mean that not everyone can equally enjoy freedoms and liberties offered by the system, because 'the "global village" is divided between the "haves" and "havenots" (Mensah 2008a : 124). All sex workers interviewed in this research started trading sex for financial reasons, and therefore were part of the 'havenots'. Their dreams of a 'good life' show their willingness and attempts to move among the 'haves' by improving their standards of living, and transforming their lives, or as Suzan (24 years old) put it: 'A good life, you have

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<sup>33</sup> As a comparison, poor and middle income sex workers in my research reported paying 1500-2500 KSH (10-18 GBP) per month for their flats/rooms.

your money, you are independent, and you get your money in good ways, not like prostitutions.' Suzan sees her current position as being in opposition to freedom and independence and in her dreams she wishes to change this. In a contemporary society that means becoming a consumer. Consuming goods and services not only ensures a better living, but also are indications of a certain lifestyle and status.

While many sex workers dream of a life that the neo-liberal discourse promises them – a life full of choices that are made possible by financial stability – there is a part of them who place the emphasis on their responsibilities to their families. Women, who in many cases became 'shock absorbers' of neo-liberal restructuring in Africa (Brodie quoted in Sahle 2008 : 84), dream of a life that takes this burden away from them or makes that responsibility easy to live. For example, Suzan, after explaining what she means by a 'good life' as quoted above, added:

Apart from having money, you can help your mother, help brothers to go to school. And when I see them happy, that's a good life.

Money is seen as a key that can help in solving many problems, from immediate financial hardship to the happiness of a family. Here it is important to point out that, while some sex workers are in the trade to earn money for themselves and their children, there is a group of sex workers that entered this industry to help their families. For example, Ashley's (22 years old) life changed after her father abandoned her mother and her six siblings. Her mother was not able to sustain seven children in a rural area, so she came to trade sex in Mombasa. As she was not young, she did not manage to earn a lot of money in the sex industries. At that point Ashley, who was the oldest of the children, asked her mother to come back to the village and came to Mombasa to earn money in her place. Ashley's responsibility for her younger siblings and mother is reflected in her dreams as well, because in her vision of a 'good life', a house and cars are not mentioned – what she dreams of is educating her siblings and ensuring the livelihood of her mother. Only after making sure that her family is sorted does she dream of an education for herself, which would lead to a change in her occupation. The neo-

liberal practice of bringing education and health services to the market, which was discussed in chapter two, is an important force shaping Ashley's dream.

In some of the sex workers' dreams, care for others is extended not only to the wider family, but to people in need in general. For example Miriam (31 years old) explained how:

...and no stress about money, about house, something like that. You know, then you can help other people and that is what I ask my God. That when I have money that I can help. Those who are in need, those who are not able. And one day I get money I will do these things. Really, I would want. You see sometimes I go to town, and if I find somebody who is blind, no matter what I got in my pocket, I give, I believe that it is shame not to share. I have that heart. And I like to help, really, I don't know why, but God knows why.

Such a dream that expands the area of care feeds directly into the ideas that compose the Kenyan moral economy. As was discussed in chapter two, wealth in the Kenyan context came with a responsibility to care. Therefore, wealthy individuals in society are considered to be virtuous when carrying out duties and providing for the extended networks of kin, clients and community (Lonsdale 1992b : 352; Lynch forthcoming). Sex workers' dreams reflect the functioning of this moral economy: women often dream of being helped by perfect strangers, but at the same time think about their responsibilities to share in their dream's wealthy future.

For instance Miriam thinks that her dream can come true if she can 'get somebody', and that somebody asks her to stop her sex trade. Brennan (2004) in her research found that Dominican sex workers often dream of a prince-client who would save them just like a rich man saves the prostitute played by Julia Roberts in 'Pretty Woman'. Kenyan sex workers also dream of an intervention from outside that would change their lives by providing money, yet it is not always necessarily a man. For example in the dream of Patricia (22 years old), it is a woman that helps to finish her suffering by taking her to work in a salon. Other sex workers mentioned NGOs as a possibility to get help in the form of loans or employment. In the perfect future scenario, once helped by someone, a woman will be well-enough to help others, and such change is reflected in women's narratives. For instance, Jasinta (28 years old) made this connection quite clear:

My life... How can I explain? I can go and take care of my baby, I can be helping back to my parents, even others if they have problems. Because my problem is finished. If I have something, I can help. Live well. I can be very happy, because now I don't go outside, now I eat *pilau*<sup>34</sup>. Maybe helping people who don't have, like me. Yeah, when I see people suffer like me, I want to help.

In the ideal world of sex workers' dreams, they are helped by strangers and once their lives improved, they help the ones in need. The model of redistributing money from the ones who have to the ones who need is a reflection of a Kenyan moral economy and a reality for many sex workers who get money from men and then send it to their families; a reality of redistribution that is also repeated in some dream scenarios.

Dreams of a 'good life' are important because they allow us to see the reasons behind women's involvement in the sex trade and what sex workers see as a desirable outcome of this occupation. Many of these dreams will never come true because they are not accompanied by appropriate actions and future plans. For instance, Katherine (18 years old) said that her dream is to become a doctor. Yet, this dream is very unlikely to come true, because Katherine lives and trades sex in a slum, and she does not remember how many classes of primary education she completed or even when that happened. Her experience of education is a very distant memory that is overshadowed by the reality of difficult everyday survival and HIV. Katherine barely gets by and does not have a plan or strategy of how to get out of poverty, not even speaking about further investment in her future – she really only dreams. Anita (35 years old) rightly observed, that in sex work

You just have to have a vision. If you do not have a vision, you will do it till the time you die. But if you are doing that, you know that you get this amount of money, I prefer to do something else [success is not that unlikely].

For this reason, this chapter will further explore how sex workers are planning to reach their 'good life' and what strategies they employ to fulfil their dreams.

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<sup>34</sup>Rice and meat dish popular on the Kenyan Coast.

## **'I will go out there and get a husband': planning a 'good life' through marriage**

Men play an important role in Kenyan sex workers' lives and plans. Depending on a man (or multiple men) is a survival strategy for many women, as was discussed in chapter four. In such a context it is of little surprise that men play an important role in sex workers plans for a 'good life' and their strategies to reach these aims. An important number of sex workers see marriage as the gate to a 'good life'. It is through a 'good husband' that women think they can live a 'good life'. However, marriage can serve different purposes on a way to sex workers' dream fulfilment.

Some women, like Floriana (41 years old), dream of exiting sex work through marriage and then living a life where they reach happiness through shared love, talking, laughing and doing other things together with their husbands. Yet, it is important to observe that despite the emphasis in such a dream marriage on friendship, men are not dismissed of their role as provider. Floriana, for instance, claims that as long as there is peace and love in a house, even if house is empty, she would not leave such a union. But even in this claim there is a house and there is a man who asked a woman to stop the sex trade in exchange for his care. Other women emphasise mainly material security. For example Miriam's (31 years old) vision of how she would like her life to proceed corresponds to such a notion:

If you get somebody who really loves you and he tells you, "Please, don't do this job. I will care for you, what you need just ask me". You see somebody who is ready to care for you, you stop that job, immediately. You know, now that you want to be with this person. I like to have one person. Not today that one, then that one, it's not good, but no other option. But if today I get somebody tell me, "You know what, my sister, this job, I don't want you to do this. You hear?" Yes. Then I stop it. If he is a serious what he says, you stop it.

This group of women want to swap multiple sexual contracts on a daily basis to only one: that of marriage, to use Pateman's (1988) terminology. Of course, these sex workers hope for the best scenario where a future husband is also a friend, or even a partner. For this reason Dafnie (22 years old) adds that such a relationship is possible only if a future husband knows her history and understands the reasons behind her involvement in the sex trade. The dream of

a husband-companion was especially common among women who were middle aged and had spent many years in the sex trade. Like Chiquita-Banana (40 years old):

Yeah, and I just pray God to be with some one man. Now I can stay. But before you tell me to stay, I didn't stay, because I wanted to go [out]. But now, I am tired. Now I decided to get a man, we stay together, we work. Maybe he has a job, maybe a business, maybe selling. To go to Dubai, to buy things, and come and sell them. We can do that.

Such women see the sex trade as a phase before marriage and do not create elaborate plans of how to make this wish come true. Often, when asked what they plan to do to in order to facilitate this dream, women were answering that they can do nothing. For instance, Robina (35 years old) explained 'We [Robina, Sarah and Helen] trust in God, when he thinks we had enough now, then there is a man for you.'

Not all women who aim for marriage in order to get their 'good life' are motivated by romantic dreams of a husband-companion. Actually, it is more common that marriage is a calculated target and sex workers in their narratives are open to the fact that not any man with romantic intentions could be a suitable candidate for marriage. This group of sex workers consists of women who earn well in the sex industries, but are aware that this is so because of their youth. For this reason, this group of women aims to marry rich and this is how they plan to live a 'good life'. For example Christy (30 years old), was very clear that she would not marry anyone who has no job, and even if a man has a job, he has to earn more than 20.000 KSH (around 144 GBP) a month for her to consider such a decision. Kate (21 years old) also had similar plans:

For the time being I don't save [money]. But I keep praying that one day I come across with someone who is rich. Then I settle once and for all. I plan that one day I come across someone who is rich, and he will help me and my children. One of these days maybe some *mzungu* comes, who needs a girl. And pom! Here I go! With a car, big house.

Sex workers in this group, were aware that with their level of education (most of them did not complete primary education) they cannot get better paid employment than what they currently earn in the sex industries. Maria (32 years old), who used to be a strip-tease dancer, but because of her age finds it

more difficult to continue dancing, turned to sex work and was looking for a husband. She wanted to marry well and explained why:

Future dreams? Yeah. For God to give me a husband. Yes. And just be at home. I become like a house wife. Because as for work, I don't think, my system cannot work. Maybe in the office, but I don't like [the office job]. And for the dancing, age is the problem. So maybe that's for my wish. If I have a husband, I will be ok. Enough to eat. Not more, not less. As long as I am eating, my house is ok, then I am ok with everything, I am satisfied.

Yet, part of the women in this group, especially the ones who had previous experience of abuse in marriage, targeted their future husbands even more selectively than just according to their financial situation. The main division was between rich African men and tourists, many women having a preference towards foreigners.

Kenyan sex workers are not alone in planning to exploit sex tourists for their advantage (to obtain a visa, to travel to Europe, to get a better job, to live in perceived Western comforts) as documented by scholars researching sex tourism around the world (Agustin 1998; Brennan 2004; Cabezas 1998; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Wonders and Michalowski 2001). Foreigners are perceived by sex workers in developing contexts as different. Maureen (28 years old) explained it this way:

I think *mzungus* are a little bit different. If *mzungu* marries you and then he gives you some kid, he gives a house like that [pointing to the flat where interview takes place] for a kid. But African, they just throw out you with your kid. They stay away. I don't know. That is what I think.

Likewise, Precious (23 years old), who escaped an abusive marriage with two children, was targeting tourists, because she thought that all local men would cheat. She agreed that tourists are also likely to cheat, but she thought that such an event was less likely. Especially if a tourist is old:

In fact, they say, there are old *mzungus*, who are good. They treat you well. Instead of these young ones. Yeah. The old one, he can tip you well, no frustration, you stay well.

This dream of marrying a white man was the driving force for many sex workers. Such dreams are not specific to Mombasa sex workers, as many women in the developing world have similar dreams (Brennan 2001; Cabezas

1998) just as many women in the developed world have similar dreams of marrying famous people or politicians. However, whereas in many places such dreams are often just dreams and are not related to actual strategies of the dreamer, in what Lonsdale (2000) calls 'tight corners' of the world, such dreams influence women's life and work strategies to a great extent.

Even though almost every sex worker can tell a bad story with a white man, such a dream is still very important. Jasinta (28 years old), had a son with a German tourist who never recognised his child. Still, she dreams of marrying 'a German'. What is more, she sees a marriage with Western man as a way to profit:

But I can see others [other tourists who fathered babies to Kenyan sex workers], they don't do this [abandon their children]. They want to see their baby, they tell: "I want to see my baby". When he wants to see his baby, give my mom 100.000 [KSH], then ok.

Such attitude towards marriage is quite different from the ones discussed above. The main difference is that the sex workers who search for a husband-partner, or a rich husband to marry and settle, see marriage as a long-term plan and strategy. For these women marriage is an aim in itself. For women like Jasinta or Christy marriage is just a first step, a short-term solution that can help with other, long-term plans for their life. For instance, Christy (30 years old) explained why marriage would help her:

I will go out there and get a husband. And then he tells me: "I just want you to change, I don't want you to be doing this, are you ready?" Because that is the only thing, that is the only thing that can change me. Because I can't say that I go out there [in sex industries] and get a lot of money. The only thing that I can get is a man. When he tells me: "From now on I would like you to change your life. Are you ready to be a housewife? Have you decided to change this life?" Yeah. I would be a housewife, but I would be there not to be only in a house. I would be also doing a business. Not only to stay in a house like that. I stay there and I start a job.

Women who failed to save reasonable amounts of money through the sex trade, and struggle with acquiring the initial capital that is needed for starting a business, see marriage as a way to get access to capital. Some women have elaborate strategies to reach this aim. For example, Lisa (36 years old) explained her plans this way:



I prefer to find a white man from Europe and him to marry me (laughing). They [other sex workers] tell me, if you go to Europe, you get a job and you are being paid for hours. I prefer to work. [...] And that's why I wish to go and work at the beach hotel. Because it is easier to get a white man in a beach hotel. And not going at night to the beach. Because when you go into the beach during the night they just pay you they won't change contacts. When you work in a beach hotel, you meet so many people. Maybe there is someone who liked you. And he can take me to Germany. Work there... If he is not going to marry you, he will pay well.

Lisa's main aim is to go to Europe and work there. As she cannot get such a job on her own, she wants to marry a European man. What is more, she is targeting beach hotels as a temporary work place to meet a possible future husband. In this case, marriage is just a short-term plan that leads to the main target – work abroad.

The possibilities to benefit from a relation with a foreign tourist became increasingly visible in the last three decades. Tetey (2008 : 160) argues that neo-liberal policies that helped to create 'despondent populations' in combination with global sex commerce and new communication technologies have created the environment where images, fantasies and desires of foreign male tourists that are based on racial and gendered divisions are fulfilled by young women in financial hardship. While many scholars have discussed the issue of women from developing countries being constructed as exotic and erotic 'others' by Western men (Agustin 1998; Altman 2001; Barry 1996; Crick 1989; Enloe 2000; Lim 1998; McClintock 1992; O'Connell Davidson 1998), in this case it is important to point out, that these 'erotic and exotic others' also have their ideas about Western men. A relationship with a man from a rich country is seen by women in poor settings as an opportunity to escape the economic hardship of their home, and these women believe in the 'opportunity myth' (Brennan 2001). A white man in sex workers narratives is seen as an opportunity, as a way out of poverty, or even out of the country. Sex workers who dream of marriage with a white man do not dream of love, they are quite clear that such a marriage is a way to a 'good life'.

While a good part of sex workers see marriage as part of their plan to attain the 'good life', that is certainly not always the case. There are several reasons why some sex workers do not believe that family life would mean a 'good life' for

them. The first reason is disbelief both in marriage as an institution and in men in general. Lilian (27 years old), for instance elaborated on her plans for the future (what courses she wants to finish and why, what jobs she will target after completion of her education, and how long she will stay in sex industry to make all her plans come true). When asked if there is a husband in that 'good life' that she is planning, Lilian answered:

Ok, mostly, you know... Give me your brother for husband! (laughs) Or relatives! For real. I really don't think about men. I see them in the bars every day. And some are married men. So they just put me off. So I think even my man will be going out there. So it is not in my system. I plan my future for me and my son. If a man comes along, then I am good, but I really... it is not in my schedule.

Lilian is not alone in not necessarily seeing a man in her dream of a 'good life'. White (1990) pointed out that in colonial Nairobi, many women who built their houses from earnings in prostitution, usually chose their female kin, or even adopted younger female sex workers, as heirs. Colonial *Malayas* who were trading sex for personal accumulation rarely entered marriages, and that was their choice. Likewise, some contemporary sex workers also dream of accumulation and wealth, and there are no men in these dreams. These women rely only on themselves in their dreams because of their violent and abusive experiences. Others are disappointed in men and do not believe that they can find one suitable for family. Finally, there are those who do not want to marry, because, as Marcy (18 years old) put it, they want to be independent. Such sex workers often spoke of their business plans in their dreams and how that can help them reach a 'good life', as the next section of this chapter will explore.

### **'If God wills, sex work is just a period before business': planning a 'good life' without a husband**

In addition to women who are suspicious about marriage because of their experiences, there is another group of sex workers who do not want to marry. Women in this group are few and did not have a lot to say about their dreams, believing that they have '*Malaya* blood' and therefore, trading sex is something that they cannot leave. For example, Dorpato (24 years old) was convinced that even if she has a family and a good job, she would still be practicing sex work:

I can't stop to make this [sex work] because it is in my blood. Even if I have the job, I can do my job and then I can go to the beach. Because it is in my blood. [...] I like it [sex work]. I can do this until I die.

*Malaya* blood is believed to be a reason for women entering sex work when they do not have financial difficulties. Such women, are believed to enjoy sex work, and because of that they are often more successful than other sex workers. Winnie (30 years old) explained it this way:

Me, I think, it is inside their [Winnie's more successful friends] body that prostitute blood. I know, I can see. When you see somebody [who has prostitute blood] talking, even general talkings, she talks about sex, men.

Sex workers that identified themselves as having *Malaya* blood usually were content with their situation. They had good and bad stories to tell about their trade and lifestyle, but often did not believe that change in their lives was possible. Probably for that reason these sex workers did not have elaborate dreams or plans for the future. From all of them, only Betty (31 years old) thought that if she could do something apart from sex work, then it would be helping other sex workers with their problems. She was unaware about sex workers movements and seemed very interested in learning more about it.

Other sex workers, who did not believe that they had *Malaya* blood nor considered marriage for their future, insisted that they wanted to do business. When asked further about what business and how they would like to do it, only a few of them seemed to have thought about it in much detail. Many named locally popular and gendered business ideas like hairdressing, tailoring or trading second-hand clothes. Such ideas for businesses can be connected to the training available in NGOs that are trying to 'save' women from sex work by reforming them. For instance Marcy (18 years old) claimed that she plans to be a tailor, because she thinks that people always need to fix their clothes or get new ones, so she would always be needed. Yet this dream might have been shaped by one of the many NGOs active in the area. Marcy attended several workshops about HIV/AIDS and was offered to attend a tailoring course for free. She had already done part of the course, and she knew that she could complete

the rest of it in the near future<sup>35</sup>. The business ideas that many sex workers had were thus mirroring the limited opportunities for, and low expectations of, women in the Kenyan labour market.

Nevertheless, several women had elaborate plans on how to succeed in business and were able to share them. For example, Miriam (31 years old) also spoke about doing hairdressing like many others. Yet, her plan was more elaborate:

You can't put only hairdresser, you have to think about to put some clothes, some pants some bras... Something like that to attract customers. You know, they like that funny funny things so much. If you are clever you can have them and compel them nicely. You have a small shop when you are a hairdresser, you can put on sight some clothes and some shoes. You see... So you mix them [several trades], you don't work for one thing. You have to work for some where you can get also money from somewhere. That is what I mean.

Women who had detailed plans for their future usually had previous experiences in the field and were well aware of the shortcomings of businesses. Such women were also usually saving money from their sex work towards their future plans and were informed about the possibilities for loans or micro-credits. Another important distinguishing feature of dreams that sounded like detailed planning is that such dreaming did not always correspond to the gendered possibilities usually available to women. For example Christy (30 years old) said she wanted to be a matatu driver. She knew all about the prices of starting this job, possible profits, risks and other details. She was also saving money, and the only issue that Christy was debating was whether she should go into matatu driving or if it would be better to buy a car or a truck she could hire. This group of women also had ideas on how to succeed in their chosen businesses and were confident that they would leave sex work at a certain point. As Lilian (27 years old) explained:

My plan is to become a successful business lady. But not a successful commercial sex worker. That is not my dream at all, I want to quit, but just I still need some more money.

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<sup>35</sup> At the time of the first interview Marcy was seven months pregnant and her pregnancy was the reason why she did not complete her training in one go.

Sex workers who are focused and plan their future in detail with what they see as realistic targets are few. The majority of women who trade sex have very limited information about what other sources of income they can create for themselves and were often mimicking what they saw in their everyday lives. For example Dafnie (22 years old) claimed she would like to trade *lesos*<sup>36</sup> just as her neighbour does. Lisa (31 years old) also thought she could trade clothes as many of her friends do, especially if the plan of marrying a German does not work out.

In addition to the traditional occupations of small trade, brewing, cooking and work in a salon, another area of dream jobs emerged in the interviews. Some of the sex workers, in majority the ones who had been contacted by various HIV/AIDS organisations or NGOs targeting sex workers and participated in the programmes that these organisations have, were naming jobs like counselling, mentoring, and gender-based violence connected activities as their dream jobs. These sex workers felt that they have the required experience to do such jobs, because they are the ones who suffered from the issues that are tackled by various NGOs: violence, disease and poverty. For example, Chichi (32 years old), who did a number of different jobs in her life already (house-help, trading vegetables, building houses, cleaning and others), now dreamt of a different occupation:

Maybe any job that I have experience for, like maybe when we did community development, and some got even paid 20,000 per month! So you see, it is a good job.

The 'community development' that Chichi is referring to is an idea that she borrowed from a project that is active in the area where she lives. Seeing the possibilities that this project gave to some local women that she knows, Chichi thinks that she could do a similar job as well. The irony is that many of the NGOs are offering training for low profit, very common and gendered occupations so that sex workers change their trade and 'reduce their risky behaviour', in NGO-

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<sup>36</sup>Lesos are the most prominent article of clothing for women along the Swahili coast of East Africa. The leso is a rectangle of pure cotton cloth, printed in bold designs and bright colours, usually with a message along the bottom.

speak<sup>37</sup>. Yet, what sex workers like Chichi saw in such trainings and programmes was not always a chance to learn skills, related to similar jobs they might otherwise do, but that some of their peers managed to create a well-paid job talking to other sex workers. For instance, Winnie (30 years old) thought that:

I can council somebody. I can go in a village, there I know somebody who got [HIV/AIDS]. I know how to talk to somebody, and I know inside too. I prefer this job for counselling. Because I have the experience. I was thinking maybe [I can work] here in ICRH [International Centre for Reproductive Health branch]. There is this SOLWODI, and this one ICRH. They are here, near Kenoil, there... Many girls there they are peer educators.

A job as peer-educator or councillor in service of an NGO is generally better paid and more secure than cooking or selling street food or sewing – and certainly gains more respect. Sex workers mimic everyday gender relations in their work to maximise their income, as was discussed in chapter five. In their dreams they also look for role models, for women who were in a similar situation but who ‘made it’. These role models can be neighbours who are doing well in their business. It can be an ex-sex worker who married well. Or it can be a colleague who is now employed by an NGO, has a stable salary, and helps to deal with the problems that sex workers know so well. In this way NGO newspeak enters sex workers’ dreams and plans. After a long interview that included a discussion about small trade, suddenly Dafnie (22 years old) added:

I would like to study something like Gender Based Violence. Because I've seen women, here outside [in sex industries], they are cheated. They have no good moments here outside. They are suffering a lot. Mostly commercial sex workers.

Just like Mr. Lebona in Ferguson’s (2006 : 20) account who refuses global inequalities by dreaming of a Western-style house with a tin roof and many rooms, the sex workers of Mombasa refuse both local and global inequalities by dreaming of new jobs in the emerging NGO industry. These women do not want to sell tomatoes, as is often promoted by NGOs, or engage in other low-paid jobs. During a conference<sup>38</sup> discussion on sex work, one of the activists present seemed tired from all the attempts to ‘reform’ sex workers and asked

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<sup>37</sup>Interview with a director of NGO that works with poor women and sex workers, Mombasa.

<sup>38</sup>CPCF3, the third regional Changing Faces Changing Spaces Conference, Nairobi 4th-6th May 2011.

rhetorically: 'What if I want to charge the sex I am giving? And give tomatoes for free?'

Sex workers reject the local gender and international economic structures that position them in low-paid and labour-intense jobs. They chose activities that yield high profits while involving less time, and by doing this many sex workers manifest individual freedom and the possibility to choose, albeit from limited options, just as a rational individual in neo-liberal ideology would. Sex workers' dreams of a 'good life' that is full of consumer commodities, and which is a result of their choice to marry or not, to do business or to work for an NGO, is a perfect example of that. Zambian Copperbelt mineworkers expressed their sense and experience of disconnection from the modern world (Ferguson 1999 : 238); Mombasa sex workers are eager to connect to modernity through their actions. They want to have a 'good life' that includes not only consumer goods and commodified services, they want to do jobs that people in more privileged positions do. 'So what job would you like to do?' I asked Miriam (31 years old). 'Like the one that you are doing' she answered. 'Speaking to the ladies?' I was trying to clarify. 'Yeah. That is a very nice job' she confirmed. However, the dream of a 'good life' does not stop with the desire to exit the sex industry. Interviewed sex workers have another set of dreams related to their children.

### **'I want her to learn and become a lawyer or doctor, not to follow my steps': sex workers' dreams about the future of their children**

Women in the sex industry use their bodies and sexuality to survive and, in some cases, improve their lives. Yet, despite the fact that sex trade can be used as a tool for social and economic mobility, it is important to point out that, the experience of commodification and de-humanisation through this work is very strong. Ashley (22 years old) explained this situation very well:

Yeah, you have to like the job sometimes (bitter laugh), because ... because it is maybe making you to stay a good life. Yeah. To support your parents back at home. You would have kids, you know, you have to like it. You don't have any other option, yeah. I can support my mom. I can pay the school fees for my brothers and sisters back, who are behind me. So you have to like it, you know. Because it is helping you, you are paying the house, you are getting everything you need, you know, you have to like it. But when you come to your real senses, act like a human being, it's somehow, painful, you know.

Ashley makes a clear distinction between her situation and being a 'human being' which points to her own understanding of a process of commodification and objectification through sex work. In opposition to sex workers-activists (for example Nyong'o 2010) who see the emancipatory aspect of sex work, some of the interviewees were more sceptical. Anita (35 years old), who traded sex for about 15 years, was even fatalistic about her occupation:

I am thinking maybe to have a small business. I haven't thought a lot about it, but I just want to be able to live by myself. Through that job of money [sex work], maybe I will get one [man] who will sponsor me, or even tell me: "You marry me". They also marry old people like me. I still have that chance... Whatever, not important. You usually have to have that kind thinking: if there is no way, maybe other way, maybe other way, maybe I can come out. I must give myself a hope to live. If I don't, I can as well die.

The majority of sex workers hope to exit sex work one day. While sex work can help with earning enough money to fulfil other plans or reach certain targets, most of the women also felt that trading sex had its limitations. Besides providing women with the opportunities, involvement in the sex industries also gives them the every-day experience of being an objectified body, 'un-human' experiences, and many other dangers that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

This separation between the bad experiences in the sex industries and what Miriam (31 years old) calls being 'a normal person', is probably the main reason why sex workers are very careful when it comes to dreams about their children. Most sex workers are very aware of their restricted options in the job market and the main reasons for this limitedness. Lack of education is the most oft-cited reason for engagement in sex work, and, in turn, the de-humanising experience that sex workers have. These women dream about the best case scenario that is possible for them given their limited and disadvantaged position as discussed previously. Yet, when asked about their children, the same sex workers show the effort for removing all the possible obstacles from their children's way so that they can have a truly 'good life'.

Ensuring a 'good life' for their children comes at a high price. Often it means that women in the sex industry see their children very rarely, because they stay



with their relatives in other towns. Jasinta (28 years old) explained her situation this way:

She [her daughter] is not here. She lives with my mother. It is better that she stays with my mother, because if here, sometimes I get a client, or I don't get. It is a lot of problems, because of that... I miss my baby too much. Ajajajai, even now. I call, and my mother say: "Oh, she is walking, now she has 2 teeth". Now this, now that. My mother does all her best. Treats the baby very well. If I make something, I send it all to my mom. Like that.

Children staying with relatives in other towns often have a very different life than that of their mothers. They often go to private schools, finish secondary education, colleges, and even universities – most of it funded by their mothers through sex work. Chiquita-Banana (40 years old) admitted that she did not manage to save any capital for her business, because she had to pay school fees and later university expenses for her daughter. Lisa (36 years old) was also struggling, but put all her efforts for her daughter to stay in a good school in Nairobi:

She is doing well. She promised the next year she will be in the class 7. I wouldn't like her to know what I was doing [trading sex]. I always tell her: "Be good at school, do good, [and you] will go to university. Because nowadays when you go to school and play only, your education you won't be promoted to another [level]. Think about education first. Go to university, you can be a doctor and after you can have your own car".

It is important to point out that while sex workers hope to depend on their husbands or multiple clients to live a 'good life', for their children they dream of an independent future. Many sex workers in their dreams see their children as doctors, lawyers, pilots, air-hostesses, nurses, policemen and in other high-education and skilled occupations. They know that such education is very expensive, but are ready to make sacrifices. Wanjiku (30 years old) was one of many sex workers who wanted her son to be a doctor. When I commented that university is very expensive, she replied: 'I know that. But I am a woman, I will work hard.' In sex workers' dreams about their children's future there is no space for un-human experiences that are often the reality of their mothers' lives. Just as these women work hard, they urge their children to study hard as well so that the dream of 'good life' is fulfilled.

## Conclusions

Dreams are important, because it is with inspiration from dreams that individuals shape their needs and start planning their actions accordingly. Mombasa sex workers' dreams reveal what these women are working for and what they think they can accomplish in their trade. The 'good life' is the main objective for most women. Yet, understandings of what the 'good life' is depend on the situation certain women live in and the experiences that they have. In general, the 'good life' can be translated as a better life than a woman has now. Furthermore, women who live in poor conditions imagine a 'good life' like that of their successful colleagues, which often includes the fulfilment of basic needs. Yet, sex workers who earn well and have seen more while being with their clients, dream of a wider range of consumer goods and services that would mean a 'good life'. The notion of the 'good life' reveals an orientation to consumption of different goods and services, which is very limited in these women's lives at the moment.

The understanding of a 'good life' speaks directly to the structures that prevail in society and put sex workers in a disadvantaged position. Dreams of marriage reflect the dominant gendered social and economic structures that prevail in Kenya. In the face of a neo-liberal economy that exploits cheap female labour some women see marriage as a guarantee for material security for themselves and their children and a possibility for friendship, companionship and care. However, the majority of sex workers are aware that in the current political economy, it is increasingly difficult for men to live up to the economic demands of maintaining a family, as was discussed in chapter three. For this reason, many sex workers are selective about their potential husbands and see marriage as a tool that helps them to reach other aims. Some of them want to marry rich so as to ensure themselves a 'good life' with a car, a house and other consumer goods. Other sex workers, especially those who have past experiences of abusive marriages and cheating husbands, are more selective about their future husbands and aim to marry foreigners, because it is believed that in this way they can avoid abuse and still enjoy the money. Such a structuring of dreams

regarding the future points at the interaction of local economic and cultural realities with global flows of media images and people.

The reality of a globalised local political economy is reflected in the dream of succeeding in business. These dreams speak about the limited possibilities that are available to Kenyan women; nevertheless, some dreams challenge such a position by breaking away from the prescribed gendered place-in-the-world. Another way of rejecting the expected scenario of ex-sex workers is to aim for good jobs in the emerging NGO sector. How such dreams and plans meet reality, will be further explored in chapter seven. For many women, the sex industries do not help to fully achieve their future aims. The structures and nature of sex work limit women's space for manoeuvre, and social structures complicate exit strategies, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Still, what the analysis of Kenyan sex workers' dreams shows is that these women, like many sex workers around the world, aim to navigate patriarchal gender structures to the best of their ability and benefit.

## 7. Chasing a mirage: dangers and structural obstacles of exit from sex work

*Because I am a business lady. They [men] don't want to put a ring here [on the finger]. What can I do? And I want to eat, my children need to go to school, I put small money there. [...] Sometimes it is good money, sometimes it is tsss... You can call it work in a high risk. (Cinderella, 28 years old)*

The market is the cornerstone of neo-liberal doctrine, and it offers the market mechanism as a solution to almost all economic and social problems (Howard and King 2004 : 40). The market economy is claimed to be superior to any other system because of its ability to mediate free exchange and trade which, in turn, supposedly brings increased welfare to all parties involved (Turner 2008 : 115). Welfare as an idea itself is acceptable for neo-liberals, with Hayek (1945 [2001] : 59) writing:

There is no reason why, in a society which has reached the general level of wealth ours has, the first kind of security should not be guaranteed to all without endangering general freedom; that is: some minimum of food, shelter and clothing, sufficient to preserve health.

However, the role of the state in welfare provision was unacceptable for neo-liberal thinkers, because the actions of the state inevitably have an effect on the market, and thus can potentially limit individual freedom. Therefore, the neo-liberal suggestion is to reduce the social expenditures of the state by bringing the private sector into welfare provision. Such a view of welfare made a clear distinction between the role of the state and of the market, and emphasised individual responsibility in the provision of financial security. As a result, neo-liberal theory brought back the classic notion of liberalism that welfare should be provided by the family, churches or charities, but not the state (Turner 2008 : 142).

The neo-liberal understanding of markets and welfare is partly compatible with the Kenyan ideas of kinship, power and the responsibility to care, as was

discussed in chapter two. However, economic changes have changed family structures, increased labour mobility, and disrupted community life. In addition, as chapter three has shown, kinship based welfare systems as well as labour markets are strongly gendered and place women at a disadvantaged position. Women try to challenge these gendered social structures in different ways. The sex industries are one of the alternatives where women try to exploit existing gender and social inequalities as was explored in chapters four, five and six. Yet, if the sex industries are just a phase before living a 'good life', as women interviewed in this research indicate, then it is important to see how successful women are at reaching their aims and how sex workers' strategies interact with gendered social structures when they attempt to exit the sex trade. In this chapter I explore the structural obstacles to achieving a post-sex work 'good life', with an emphasis on how gendered social structures are negatively influenced by neoliberal principles.

First, the structures and obstacles that are part of the sex industry will be explored to show why for many women it is difficult to exit sex work on their own terms. The cycle of success in the sex industries, the ability to earn money and spending patterns will be explored to show the difficulties of balancing spending in a way that would be compatible with future plans of a 'good life'. Furthermore, the dangers that define every day experiences in the sex industries, such as possibilities of unplanned pregnancies, the financial strains of raising children, the possibility of alcohol and drug addiction and health risks will be discussed to show how these factors contribute to making an exit from sex work to a 'good life' complicated. Second, the possibility to exit sex work with the help of NGOs will be discussed to show why this route is seen as being of limited use by many women in the sex industries. The economic and patriarchal structures that prevail in contemporary Kenya will be analysed as part of NGO failures to help women leave sex work. Finally, the growing sex workers movement will be discussed to show how sex work activism fits with sex workers' strategies and with neo-liberal ideas prevailing in society.

## **'Each one of us has her own luck': sex workers' challenges in the sex industries**

Cinderella (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) is right in calling the sex trade a 'high risk' business. There are many dangers for women who enter this industry, and women have to be wise and manage their actions well in order to exit the sex trade on their own terms. Women start selling sex because they need money, and this occupation can be highly profitable for a certain period of time, but since this kind of work is directly related to woman's age, appearance and health, the period of high profits does not last long. In this short timeframe, sex workers can make the money that they need and invest in the 'good life' they dream of and move out of the sex industries. Yet, it is important to do so while managing to control spending, and balancing this spending in a way that would bring the highest profits both in the short and long terms, avoiding additional responsibilities such as care for extra children, resisting the temptations and addictions of alcohol and drugs, and, finally, keeping oneself safe from STDs and HIV/AIDS. This is not an easy task, and, as Hofmann (2010 : 233) rightly points out, such a process 'requires enormous levels of discipline, emotional resilience, management skills, stamina, and purposefulness'. Sex workers have to be conscious neo-liberal agents and manage their income well to succeed in this task.

### **Cycle of success in sex work**

Women enter the sex trade when facing hardship and with the hope of finding a way to a 'good life'. However, not all women are equally successful in sex work. There are two key factors that determine a woman's income in sex industries: her age and her experience of sex work. A certain pattern emerges: in the beginning of sex work, women usually do not manage to earn big amounts of money, because they do not know the functioning of the industries well. Once such knowledge is attained, their profits increase and after a period of success, their income starts to gradually decrease. Of course, such a linear understanding of sex work is simplistic and cannot be applied to every individual case because the sex industries give space for many women of different ages, different walks of life, and who have different aims in mind when

entering sex work, as discussed in chapter six. Some women start selling sex when older, others get addicted to drugs or alcohol, still others might not be successful for a variety of other reasons that will be discussed further later on in this chapter and may never enter this phase of the high income. Still, it is the case that sex work most often helps to alleviate financial suffering and improve the living conditions to an extent for women. For instance Mary (23 years old) described her current life in the following way:

My son is now in standard one. In a private school. I pay school fees, I pay bills. He eats, clothes and I eat. We stay good now.

Mary compares her current situation to the poverty she was experiencing before she started trading sex and concludes that she 'stays good'. However, this is not yet the 'good life' that she dreams of, because in the dream of a 'good life' Mary is a business woman, and not a sex worker. Mary is still young and good looking, but already has experience in the sex industry, which means that she knows how to negotiate a good price with her clients. Mary is at the peak of the sex work success cycle, and such success comes through experience.

Very young, often underage girls who enter the sex industries do not have the knowledge and power to negotiate good prices, so men often take advantage of them. Dafnie (22 years old) explained it in this way:

Now there are these young girls who are getting into our business, who are just spoiling it, because they are going for any anyany amount of money. Even 50, 100 bob<sup>39</sup>. Any, as long as it is money, they will go. Some they just say, they [men] just buy a drink for them and they [girls] are drunk, and in the morning they [men] just leave them [girls] there. So they are spoiling everything. So you find that men prefer these young girls to us, because they are less expensive. And they cannot negotiate. Yeah. Some are from those rural areas, they don't know to negotiate, they just go out and start drinking.

Young sex workers who just entered the sex trade have no experience, are often shy and for this reason are an easy target for being tricked by men.

This period does not last long, because with time sex workers often learn how to negotiate and how to stay safer while working. Dafnie herself admitted that her beginnings in the sex trade were difficult for her:

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<sup>39</sup> Slang for Kenyan shilling.

Because in the beginning, I just go to pub and stay like this. I cannot buy any soda, I don't have any money, I wait for somebody to buy, until somebody comes and says "Hi" to me. And asks: "Would you like from me some soda?" But I didn't know how to go and approach someone. Now I can go and approach someone: "I don't have money, can you buy me something? I am just here..."

Women who just started trading sex do not know how to negotiate prices with men. Moreover, as NACC (2011) research shows, the majority of commercial sex workers who do not have knowledge about HIV/AIDS are women under 20 years of age; therefore, they are most vulnerable to an HIV/AIDS infection. Both the inability to negotiate the price and limited knowledge of HIV mean that sex workers who just started trading sex face the highest risk of being cheated, infected or abused. Sex workers' narratives indicate that once women find friends among sex workers, they learn how to protect themselves and negotiate their safety and price, as was discussed in chapter five. Yet it is extremely important to observe that starting off in the sex industries is difficult for most women and many of them make vital mistakes concerning their lives precisely at that moment.

When women are still young, but have experience in the sex trade – sex workers can make the highest profits. For instance Betty (31 years old) remembered well the days when she was younger, had more clients and was making much more money:

Last week? I had two clients. Eleven years ago in a week... Eh! [laughs] One day you can have five clients! One day. Really! For the short time, yeah! In one day you can go and come out with 10,000. But now you can go out, and come just with... short time 500, 200. You can come with 700 to 1000.

Betty is not the only one who has memories of better times when she was younger. Many older sex workers remember that the beginning in the sex trade was more profitable and speak about the big amounts of money that they used to earn. However, this period does not last long and with age women start getting less clients and less income, because they lose in competition with younger sex workers. Betty explained the changes in her situation this way:

Now I see the challenges, when I go to the Simba, they [young sex workers] say: "Oh no, you old mama, go to sleep!" I am becoming old.



The period of relatively easy success is not of the same length for all sex workers and depends on many variables such as her drinking or drug use habits, health, the amount of children she has, and other factors, some women may never enter this phase. However, it is very important to keep in mind that the period of easily gained, relatively high income is of a certain length and if a sex worker does not exit the sex trade then, it is less likely that she will manage to accumulate enough money later when her income decreases. Women, who are at different points in this cycle, usually have different strategies and dreams of a 'good life': younger women aim to accumulate money and move to business or formal employment; whereas older women, who cannot earn the same amounts, are more likely to dream of marriage. Therefore, exit from sex work on one's own terms is theoretically possible at any point; still women who are at the height of their success have the most opportunities and the widest set of exit options. Yet, due to the dangers and obstacles that are inherent in the nature of the sex industries, and which will be discussed in the following sections, the exit from the sex industry on one's own terms can be a difficult task.

### **'Money makes money': balancing spending**

One of the obstacles that prevents women from exiting the sex trade at the peak of their success, or why women never reach the stage of perceived 'success' is connected to the spending that is perceived as needed in order to be successful. Several of the women interviewed insisted that 'money makes money', and indeed a good part of sex workers' spending is connected to their work. Such spending is seen as an investment by sex workers. To start with, women invest in clothes' shopping in the local markets and shops. These clothes can be 'crazy crazy, sexy sexy', or 'decent' clothing according to a woman's work strategy, as discussed in chapter five; but it is really important to constantly renew it, because, as Lilian (27 years old) pointed out: 'You cannot keep on going there with old things, you know.'

Sex workers believe that the outfit and the whole style that is worn when looking for clients is of utmost importance when competing for a client. Maureen (28 years old) explained it this way:

You must wash yourself good. You wear make-up, good make up. Nice clothes. The clothes that can look more interesting. Perfumes. Now you have to look the best one. So you must be the first or among three best of them [sex workers that operate that night in that area], not 15th for the number, because then you don't get a man.

Such investments in a woman's style are necessary to succeed and compete. However, they also have to be balanced with long-term investments and the idea of a 'good life', because higher investments in one's looks come at a price. Mary (23 years old) calculated the expenses that are necessary to maintain her looks in this way:

It comes- it goes. Yes. That's the problem with sexual workers money. You don't know what you do with it. You just wear the clothes, eat and pay the rent. For my clothes I spend like 4000-5000 per month. Or after two months 5000, yeah. Then to do my hair: is 1200 every month. Sometimes 800. Then 200 for the hair food. Then sometimes I do manicure and pedicure in salon.

Mary spends around 5000 KSH<sup>40</sup> a month on self-beautification. This is not an insignificant expenditure, as most of sex workers pay 1500-2500 KSH a month for the rent of their flats or rooms, and many low income sex workers earn only 5000 KSH a month. Sure, not all women can afford spending 5000 KSH to create their style, but women who are at the peak of their success often do so in order to attract well-paying clients. For this reason, many sex workers get caught in the process of spending and admit that they do not save anything for their future when their beauty and youth may no longer bring such relatively high incomes.

The expenditure connected to sex work does not end at self-beautification. As was discussed in chapter four, sex workers have a lot of work-connected expenditures: travel from one night club to another in search for clients, paying entrances to nightclubs, ordering drinks and food, and giving 'tips' to waiters, bouncers, and guards that operate in the areas where they work so that they would not be disturbed. Sex workers also reported that they have to bribe the police in order to avoid arrest when working. If a woman does not have money to bribe the police, she risks being arrested, having to pay a fine or being raped by policemen. In order to be successful, sex workers invest considerable

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<sup>40</sup>Approximately 36 GBP.

amounts of money into their work and often find it difficult to save. For example Chichi (32 years old) explained this fact in this way:

Sex working is, you can say it is a good money, but that coming easy and going easy. Last month, January, I made like 30,000. I don't even know how I spent it! [laughs] 30,000! That's why we say, that if you get money easily, without sweating so much... God bless your hand, the one you work, not doing a sex working. When you are working hard, you use your energy, and whatever, you have to plan for that month. But for sex working you only know money, tomorrow you find someone else to give it to me.

Spending money ensures sex workers' success and continuous income, because looking in a certain way and having a style makes it more likely that a woman will attract good customers. Still, ensuring that such spending pays off both in the short and long terms is not an easy task, because spending for sex business reasons have to be balanced with savings towards a future 'good life'. However, it is difficult to assess what type of spending can be seen as 'wise' or 'careless' – women have different aims requiring different expenditure. For instance, some sex workers manage to use the opportunity and invest their high income into real estate or other businesses, as White (1990) has documented in her work on the colonial prostitutes of Nairobi, or as can be observed in today's Mombasa. Other women spend their money on creating a style that helps them to find a husband. For these reasons, merely spending money on clothes can be seen as a wise or careless choice depending on what the sex worker's strategy is. Since women have different aims and expectations in the sex industry, it is difficult to determine what pattern of spending is useful for different women. This difficulty is well understood by sex workers, as their opinions about money indicate. Still, part of the money, that could potentially be used for reaching women's aims is spent responding to dangers and obstacles that women encounter in sex work: unwanted pregnancies, child-care, alcohol and drug use, and sexually transmitted disease treatment or protection, as will be explored in the following sections.

### **Unplanned pregnancies and children**

One important risk factor in sex work is the possibility of pregnancy. Many sex workers already have children when entering the sex trade and often struggle

to educate and feed them. For instance, Lorin (42 years old) elaborated on her children and what financial difficulties she faces:

Sometimes I don't have money. I wish I could help her [daughter]. Me, just little money 3000, 2000... I do a little shopping, and the rest I give her to go to school. But she is doing well. She is in form 1, B, B-. Yeah. Third born is in class 6. She is 11 years and she is a sick girl, they call it anaemia. Every month I buy drugs for her: from malaria, for irons and for blood. For irons I buy "Folicasit", malaria- "Palodin", for blood- "Orofa". Every month. And we took her to the clinic, we skip one month now, but we took her to clinic in Msabweni. Yeah. They both stay in my sister's house. Me, I am staying here with a big girl. So I keep on praying, I say, I give myself hope that maybe one day I can get a sponsor, to sponsor my daughter to go to college.

Expenses related to schooling children and their healthcare were mentioned in every sex worker's account of spending their income. Many women dream of a better future for their children, as was explored in chapter six, but not all of them can earn enough money to ensure that. Lorin, who devoted most of her income to her children's needs already, was aware that her income is not enough and was looking for any possible way to help her with further expenses.

The financial difficulties of raising children are the reason why most sex workers are very careful not to get pregnant again. Mary (23 years old) explained to me that she has one child and does not want to have more because it is too expensive. Chiquita Banana (40 years old) was equally clear that the one child that she has was not planned, and after giving birth she made sure that the next three pregnancies of hers were terminated. Most sex workers were aware of contraceptives available and were using different methods to prevent themselves from unwanted pregnancies. Still, when condom use or taking the contraceptive pill failed, some of them decided to abort. As abortion is illegal in Kenya, the decision not to have children can mean additional expenses for expensive illegal abortions, as well as the risk of infections and other health hazards because of the way abortions are conducted, which in turn might result in more healthcare expenses.

Sex workers know the costs of raising a child and try to be careful; yet, the nature of sex work means that the possibility of pregnancy can never be ruled out, and sometimes sex workers give birth to unplanned children. Unplanned

additional children are a burden for many sex workers. For example, Dafnie (22 years old), who was already taking care of her four siblings, recounted the experience of getting pregnant this way:

When I got pregnant, I was around 16-17. Yeah, 17, I was 17 years old. Me, I used to protect myself sometimes, but sometimes I was somehow depressed, so I used to expose myself, let me what happen, happen. I was there for the sake of my young ones. After that I became pregnant and before I gave birth I was so much depressed, I didn't know what to do. Even I was thinking about killing the baby, so that I can escape. Then the problems would be solved.

Pregnancy is problematic for sex workers not only because of the costs related to the upbringing of a child. Dreams related to their children can mean that a woman herself cannot progress the way she would have wanted. For example, Chiquita-Banana discussed how, because she had to pay for her daughter's education and university, she never managed to save for her business.

Being pregnant also means that a woman cannot continue with her trade for a while, which is a problem if the sex worker has no savings and nobody to rely on. Dorpato (24 years old) who was six months pregnant at the time of the interview explained her strategies in this way:

Even the guy of this baby, I told him I am pregnant, but he told me: "No, this is not mine, you are a *Malaya*". So then I say: "OK, I don't take the baby out, I can stay with my baby". I am just saving a little small at this moment. Even at this time is 5000, I put it to the Equity Bank. And then it's small money, 100- I eat, eat, 100 and then 100 is for the fare, the new outfit (laughs). But I like to, if it's eight months, I like to go home. And then I have my parents they can help me when I have the baby. See, I don't have friends, I don't have friend who can take care. I have friends only to go to the beach, make clients, to walk, to work, but somebody who can take care of the house? And then when the baby is coming out, somebody who can help me? No, because the other one, all the girls they are busy to their work.

What Dorpato points to is the loneliness that many sex workers feel in the industry. Due to high competition, limited incomes and relatively high expenditures, women can trust each other only to a certain degree, as discussed in chapter five. Therefore, in the case of an emergency, many sex workers cannot rely on anyone in the sex industries and have to look for ways outside the trade to find help.

While Dorpato has parents to go back to when the time to give birth comes, not all sex workers are in such a privileged position. Marcy (18 years old) lost her parents before entering the sex trade, and when she got pregnant she had to be more creative. At the time of the first interview Marcy was seven months pregnant. The biological father of her child denied fatherhood, so Marcy found another man who is 'not that clever' and did not know that she sells sex. She slept with him and convinced him that the child is his. This man now takes care of her, but he does not have permanent employment and for this reason Marcy thinks that this income will not be enough later. While such a solution worked for Marcy for the time being, she was clear that once the child is bigger she will be back to bars trading sex, because she wants a better life. Unwanted pregnancy and the responsibilities that come with a new child often mean that a woman stays in the sex trade longer than she would choose in case if she had no children (or less children).

### **Alcohol and drugs**

Another risk factor of work in the sex industries is addiction to alcohol and drugs. Willis (2002 : 6) points out that in East Africa (just as in most places around the world) drinking alcohol is associated with being happy. Happiness, or just pretending to be happy, in turn is very important in sex work, because, as Sarah (29 years old) explained, 'You don't smile, you don't get the money. You have to smile, be happy. And talk nicely.'

It is of little surprise then that most sex workers drink alcohol or use drugs while working. Cinderella (28 years old) was frank:

I like to drink, because when I go there, I cannot go there when I am sober like this. It is hard. Sometimes I smoke this. What do you call it in English? Marihuana. You know it? I cannot go like this. Sometimes I go and then my head is full and then I add some beers.

Mary (23 years old) added that dancing and drinking helps in becoming cheerful and talking to men. Kate (21 years old) was convinced that drinking

some alcohol and smoking some '*bang*'<sup>41</sup> helps her to speak to men and get better clients, because she becomes braver.

Some sex workers such as Precious (23 years old) are careful about drinking because of their safety:

You know, me, when I go to the pub, I don't drink, just a bit. Because to drink is useless. I drink some, because I am the one who look for money. I have to drink maybe one beer, this sodas, because if you drink, then you are drunk, you cannot think. You cannot get money; maybe you will be raped there. Something like that.

Others, like Ashley (22 years old), admit that it is very difficult to go out and look for clients when sober; but seeing what an excess consumption of alcohol can do encourages abstaining from drinking:

For me I just do it like that, I don't take alcohol. I am just ok, but I try. Yeah, I try to find money, but I try to... to respect myself, you know. Because I never started this because I wanted, you know, if there is something I can do to avoid and not taking drugs, I try to, because that I can, I can avoid that. But this, going out, and doing prostitution, I cannot control, because I need money. You know, I have to go. But for taking alcohol, really I cannot afford that. So I try to avoid what I can avoid.

However, not all women in the sex industry manage to avoid the dangers that come with consuming too much alcohol. Winnie (30 years old) shared her experience:

You drink here one beer, you look after job. No job, another beer. You go there, one beer. No business. When you get business, you are drunk. And this man, he sees you. You put your money here, when you finished sex, the man, he takes your money.

In addition to losing the money that was supposed to be payment for sex, women sometimes lose even the money they earned before. For instance Betty (31 years old) described such a possibility in this way:

When you got out, you come hangover. You drink. Sometimes you can go, you drink and drink... No money... You think about coming back home....aaahhh! Let me stay here in club, you think. And drink. Sometimes it's bad, because, you drink, you mess. And the same same day you go home without money, because you drink that...

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<sup>41</sup> Slang word for marihuana.

Drinking and drug addiction are potential risks in sex work. Yet, this risk is more complicated than just losing count of the number of drinks consumed and carelessness. The sex trade is associated with many dangerous situations (violence, rape, abuse, harassment, disease, etc.) and in many cases these dangers have an influence on sex workers' drinking habits. Drinking may not only increase women's vulnerability, it also alleviates pain, thereby creating a vicious circle. A good example is Dorpato (24 years old) who started drinking a lot after discovering that she is HIV positive:

I was drinking too much because of shock for this HIV. I was drinking, drinking, drinking... All the time when you found me in the road, I was very drunk. When I find the money, I drink all, but then I found that girl who was a peer educator, she give me food, I say "Ooh, I was like to die by myself, but I have somebody to help me" and then I was hearing everything and then I said, "I can take the medicine".

Whereas alcohol abuse can sometimes be a temporary phase, as can be seen from Dorpato's story, for some women it leads to addiction, which would lock them in the trade earning small amounts of money. The sex industries have other risks that are permanent, such as that of HIV/AIDS infection.

### **Risk of HIV/AIDS infection**

Sexually transmitted diseases were the primary reason for many governments' interest in sex workers around the world (Truong 1990; White 1990). Following the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, sex workers captured the attention of the public again – as a vector for spreading this deadly virus (Day 1988; Gysels et al. 2001; Larson 1989; Van den Borne 2005). This connection between sexually transmitted diseases and sex workers is the reason why numerous HIV/AIDS organisations speak about sex workers' rights to healthcare and medication without discrimination. As a result of successful HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and education throughout the country, most sex workers know about the risks their job brings to them – a national survey on sex workers (NACC 2011) found that 91 per cent of female sex workers know that condom use can protect them from an HIV infection. Many sex workers during interviews mentioned their visits to clinics for check-ups and the importance of protecting themselves by using condoms.



The HIV positive women I met often knew how they got the virus. For example Kemuto (44 years old) narrated her experience this way:

I went into commercial sex work when my husband disappeared. So you know, as a sex worker you have a person who after you do sex work of course you want to do sex and enjoy. So this was the father of the child. Not being very lucky, this man was positive. The rest I do with condom for business, this, the permanent customer I did without condom. So I got a child, and a man was positive and I also live positive now.

Likewise, Dorpato (24 years old) also knew that it was her behaviour that brought the virus:

The other *mzungu*, I sleep with them, without condom. And then I started to go to the other pub and then I was very drunken and then I found the Africa boy in the pub, they go with me, they make sex with me, the condom busts. I slept with a lot of guys and the *mzungu*. And then one day, I was making my body sore and then I say, "Oh, what's happened to my body?" And then, another friend of me, then say to me, "Oh, you must go to the health centre".

The discovery of being HIV positive is a difficult experience for everyone (Laryea and Gien 1993; Mill 2003). Yet, for sex workers this condition can be a crucial factor that prevents them from exiting the industry. Kemuto, for example, found a job in one of the maize mills. But once her employers discovered that she is HIV positive, she was 'chased away'. Stigmatisation of HIV positive people is still prevalent in the region (Beckmann 2010; Turan et al. 2008; Van den Borne 2005). Stigma also means that sex workers who have higher earnings prefer to use the services of private hospitals, even if they are more expensive, because they do not want to be stigmatised in public hospitals.

Living with an infection often complicates women's exit strategies, be it a plan to find a job, or a husband, which, as was discussed in the previous chapter, is one of the most popular sex workers' dreams. Chichi (32 years old), for instance, explains why creating a family with a man she loves is not viable option: 'So I have HIV positive, and he is negative, so we can't be together, and feel well.'

HIV-positive sex workers might not only lose the hope of attaining a 'good life', but also start having difficulties in trading sex. Disease can affect a woman's looks, especially if medical help is not sought after. It can also create difficulties

in the usual routine of the sex trade. Ritangeri (36 years old) explained these difficulties this way:

Now I am taking a medicine [antiretroviral (ARV) medication] and when I go out I am forced to drink to do the job. And it is not good drinking and ARV medication. Life has thickened me, I have seen everything, and I have seen the source of doing a commercial sex work. I have seen the results. So now whatever comes, I am leaving everything in the hands of God. And there is nothing more I can say.

Speaking about the difficulties of their life was not easy for many HIV-positive women. Katherine (18 years old) told me about her ill mother and her three older sisters who are also sex workers in one of Mombasa's poorest neighbourhoods. She revealed that they all are HIV positive and did not want to speak about her situation anymore, because: 'My life is horrible; I don't know what to do.'

The sex industries are not a safe place to work in, and, as this section has shown, women who make their living from the sex trade face many difficulties and dangers that are inherent to this type of work. The difficult reality of uncertainty and constant risk stands in stark contrast to the picture of a 'good life' that many of these women dream of. Maureen (28 years old) summed up the ambiguity of her occupation well:

Sex work is not bad... And it is hard also. You can go looking for a business just one week without nothing. Sometimes is hard, you have three month you did not pay for the room, sometimes you have not paid for the kid school fees. What I can say, it is a hard work.

In order to exit sex work on one's own terms, in the situation that would lead to the dream 'good life', women have to work hard and be careful managing their income, unwanted pregnancies, alcohol or drug addictions and health risks. What is more, women have to be careful not to lose momentum and exit sex work at the right time. A few women manage to successfully navigate the sex industry and find a way out. However, many women in the sex industries do not manage to create the dream 'good life' and end up in very similar or even worse living conditions than those that made them choose sex work in the first place. The next section of this chapter will explore what help is available to women who fail to exit sex trade on their own terms.

## **‘They tell the people to give up the job of sex workers and go to be hairdressers’: sex work exit options and NGOs**

As a result of neo-liberal reforms (that were discussed in chapter two), a lot of social services and welfare provision are undertaken by the non-governmental sector. With the emergency of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, sex workers came into public discussions as a social group that plays an important role in the spread of HIV/AIDS (Elmore-Meegan et al. 2004; Gysels et al. 2002; Voeten et al. 2007; Voeten et al. 2002). Such interest in sex workers resulted in various programmes, projects, and organisations that are targeting this social group and working with it in order to decrease the spread of the infection.

Today major Kenyan towns and especially the areas that are known to have big sex worker populations have some special arrangements for what are considered to be main ‘risk groups’<sup>42</sup>. There are special clinics and drop-in centres that provide free HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases screenings, and these places offer free treatment and free medication (often with the possibility to join support groups). Together with HIV/AIDS screening and medication provision, some NGOs started ‘reforming’ activities that target sex workers and through vocational training, education and the development of business skills encourage them to change occupation, as was mentioned in chapter six. There are also NGOs that do not directly provide medical help and concentrate only on involving sex workers in social projects that would ‘save’ women from poverty-driven prostitution by helping them to have a different occupation (like hairdressing, tailoring, cooking) and live a ‘better life’. Such organisations are important actors providing help for exit from the sex trade for women; however, their efforts are not always effective, as indicated by the sceptical responses from some women recounted below. The director of SOLWODI, one of such NGOs in Mombasa, indicated that the success rate of sex workers actually completing such vocational or professional training programmes is 30 to 40 per cent.

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<sup>42</sup> Risk groups include sex workers (both male and female), homosexual population and MSM (men having sex with men)

Some sex workers, especially the ones who have a very low income from the sex trade (because of age or disease) actively benefit from such projects. For instance, Queen Latifah (37 years old) had many nice words directed to SOLWODI: she knew that SOLWODI helped to bring a change in her life through counselling, educating about protection from HIV/AIDS, and the benefits of reducing the number of clients: 'SOLWODI help me so so many.' It is important to point out, that Queen Latifah is from a small town on the Mombasa-Nairobi highway. Her home town is a place where trucks that are loaded in the Mombasa Port are weighted before being allowed to take the highway. The process of weighting a truck usually takes time, so trucks are stopping in town for a while, which means that there is an active sex trade scene. The truck drivers are not the best clients, paying 200-300 KSH as Queen Latifah identified. This means that women like Queen Latifah do not earn a lot from this trade and struggle to make a living. In such a context, training about HIV/AIDS protection, the introduction of merry-go-round saving systems<sup>43</sup>, and the encouragement to start small businesses selling vegetables are very welcomed and sought after by women from such areas.

Yet other sex workers are sceptical about how suitable these programmes are for them. When I suggested to Winnie (30 years old) that a small business could be an alternative to sex work, she answered:

Market? For tomatoes? You will go and buy those things, and come where you are selling it. Where you are selling it, you have to pay for that shade. You pay for it. You give 10 bob. And maybe at the end of the day you get 300. Tomorrow you don't get something. Ai, those tomatoes are rotten. Those sukumas when they sleep today, tomorrow, they are yellow...

It is interesting that I did not even mention tomatoes or trade in vegetables in my question, but Winnie reacted to the question immediately as if she was not answering it for the first time. She later admitted that a few years ago she was trying to get help with one of the local NGOs, went through counselling, some business training, but never managed to leave the sex trade, because the profits

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<sup>43</sup> Merry-go-round saving is an informal saving and loan mechanism. A group of women agree to pay certain amount of money every week/month. Then they agree on the order of getting funds. And then the first week/month the first woman gets all funds, the second- the other, and so on until all women got their round of money that they can use for whatever purpose.

from trading vegetables were small, uneven and not enough for her and her son. The small profits from the vegetable trade that were enough for Queen Latifah were not enough for Winnie, because she is used to higher living standards. Winnie rents a room, sends her son to a private school, and struggles to collect the required amount every month; still, her income from sex work at the moment is high enough to survive in this way and higher than trading in vegetables.

The narratives of Queen Latifah and Winnie reveal two issues about the programmes that attempt to 'reform' sex workers. First, as previously discussed in chapter six, the occupations that are promoted by many NGOs are highly gendered and correspond to traditional gender roles. Male sex workers are offered courses to train for carpeting or mechanics; whereas female sex workers are pointed to activities such as cooking, hairdressing, and tailoring, which are traditionally not well-paid<sup>44</sup>. Such a gender bias in NGO programmes targeting sex workers means that many female sex workers find it more profitable to continue trading sex than to be 'reformed'. For instance, similarly to Winnie, Ritangeri (36 years old) also went through the process that helped her to secure a job as a guard at one of the clubs (the salary for being a guard was 4000 KSH a month). However, after a while she quit the job and was back on the streets, because: 'For my "goods" I can get more money.'

Another issue is that the re-qualification of sex workers means that they have to attend courses or training and while they do so they stop earning money. Mary (23 years old) explained this problem well:

Yes, they tell the people to give up the job of sex workers and go to be hairdressers. But when you go to a college to spend a day, what are you doing in the college? If it's ok, you take the college then they pay for you everything. It's ok. But they don't pay everything. You have to go to the college and at night you have to go out. You see. You cannot do two things because when you went out, in the day time you want sleep. You cannot go to college. Yes. They paid for me also. I did it for one month, the college.

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<sup>44</sup>Interview with Daugthie Ogutu, the co-founder of the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), 13/05/2011, Nairobi.

The fact that NGOs are not providing sex workers with an allowance for rent and food is an important drawback of the 'rehabilitation' programmes. Yet, it is important to point out that many of these NGOs are funded by international donors, and therefore projects have to be adapted to what donors are willing to fund. Donors, as Beckmann (2010) points out in her research on the commodification of being HIV-positive, are usually opposed to the idea of funding the basic needs of people, because such a process would supposedly create a permanent aid receivers community. International donors are more willing to fund activities that help to 'build capacity' and 'empower' people to 'help themselves'. However, as we see from Mary's account, it is difficult to 'help yourself' when one has to eat and pay rent while being 'reformed'. Well-off sex workers who could take advantage of such projects do not get in touch with NGOs, because being successful they can afford to help themselves – they accumulate enough capital to move into different businesses, marry or have savings to pay for services in case of an emergency. It is women in distress and severe situations that try this route; yet for them such programmes are difficult to complete.

The problem of sex workers bouncing back to the sex trade is not that they enjoy it, as popular Mombasa gossip has it. Most sex workers in interviews were claiming that they want to leave the sex industries, change their occupation and have a job with a regular salary. Sex workers' dreams as well indicate that the vast majority of women see sex work as a temporary part of their lives. The main problem that many sex workers face is that the socio-economic structures that kept these women in poverty and were the reason for many of these women choosing sex work are still at place when they attempt to make an exit. If women do not succeed in sex work, or are affected by any issues or dangers as discussed in the previous section, sex work means just a period of survival, and not advancement. When these women want to exit sex work, they face socio-economic structures that marginalise them again, which makes it difficult to stop selling sex, even if the profits for sex work are not that high. Consequently, women who do not manage to manoeuvre sex industries to their own benefit, are in a difficult position in the local economic and patriarchal

setting: they are disadvantaged by formal labour markets because they are women, and still, because they do not meet gendered beauty and age standards, they are in a disadvantaged position within the sex industries as well.

In this context, it is interesting that sex workers' discourses resemble the neo-liberal ideology to a great degree. They have a great mistrust of the state, and voice concerns about the state's interference with individual progress. For example, Kenyan politics and the state were often mentioned when sex workers were discussing their employment opportunities outside the sex industries. Toto (23 years old) held such an opinion:

I can't get a job, because I don't have an ID. My mother does not have an ID, there are so many people here in Mombasa who do not have ID cards. Especially the Giriama people, the people from the coast.

Toto is pointing to the realities of Kenyan political life, where ethnicity is the single most important factor in political competition (Ajulu 2002 : 251). As Lynch (2006 : 60) observes, people's experiences of the Kenyatta and Moi regimes increased the importance of ethnic belonging. While many Kenyans would speak against tribalism, people still assume that political decisions are made and resources are relocated according to ethnic lines. Such feelings are not uncommon among sex workers: Alicia (24 years old) felt that her ethnicity would not help for finding a job. Anita (35 years old) as well was sure that because of where she comes from, she cannot expect any help from the current government: 'I don't think these people even would show a direction for me.'

Sex workers in this research were from different ethnic groups and no particular ethnicity dominated the sample. In their free time they made jokes about each other and their corresponding ethnic affiliations<sup>45</sup>. Yet, when it came to discussing the Kenyan state, all sex workers voiced a lot of mistrust of the government, 'this new Constitution of Kibaki' and their capacity to make changes that would ease their life. Just as in neo-liberal ideology, sex workers

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<sup>45</sup> For example, one afternoon (5/03/2011) a group of sex workers started discussing which famous man they would like to marry. When Ashley said that she has a crush on Barack Obama, all other women started laughing and named Kenyan politicians that they find attractive- all chose a man from their own ethnic group and explained that to me.

were voicing concerns about the state benefiting from their work. Kate (21 years old) was convinced that:

Even government knows that Mtwapa is a sex industry place. And they don't do anything about it. Even because they can't assist those people who are there. So they just come here and they collect the revenue.

The corruption and the interest in self-enrichment that supposedly prevail in Kenyan politics were another issue that was often pointed at. For example, Cinderella (28 years old) told a long story of how she failed to leave sex work, which also partly blames state interference for her failure to exit sex work:

In 2004 I fought that I will leave this job, because I got some... I bought some plot there, where I stay in Mtwapa. And I built my house, two bedrooms, toilet and bathroom. I was finishing and I was already staying there, but no light, then I was looking money for, so I can put light in. Then one day, they came and... with this [machine] that can take the house. Uhhhhh!!! They came and destroyed all house. They said: "You don't have papers, this plot is for public, and you have to go to court", they arrest us, and put us to the jail. I have to stay five months in jail. Then my things, my things was...people are stealing beds, seats like this of Grace, TV, because then they were pushing the house, the people have to fight, others start to cry, then the police come and arrest the owner of the house. They asked: "Who is the owner of this house?" He said: "This plot is not for you, it is for public, who told you to build this?" Then we asked: "Where were you when we started to build? And now we have finished, we are staying inside, where were you [before]?" You know, we don't have power because they are big, they have many money. We have small. In Kenya money talks. Then I stayed there for six months. My parents come, my father now, that was the first day my father to come to Mombasa. They sell a small plot so they can come and help. Remove me from the jail. Then I feel bad because I am going now and go to pay their house, I was paying for two years. And then I started again to go out.

Exiting sex work without having reached some improvement in one's initial marginal economic position is not easy. In the cases of women who encountered obstacles because of additional children, disease or addictions, such exit might mean that women are even in a worse position than that which they were in before entering the sex industries. Other women, who did not manage their income well might have no savings and therefore cannot make significant changes in their lives. The help that is offered by many NGOs dealing with sex workers is useful for women in severe situations, but of limited use for many others. This is so, because 'reforming' NGOs promote traditionally gendered,



low-paid activities that do not bring enough profits for women and aim to re-incorporate women in the local economy in ways that many of these women found unsatisfactory before entering sex work. Such a situation supports the argument that the NGO sector in fact is serving as a tool maintaining the social and political *status quo* (Hearn 2001, 2007; Mercer 2003) without challenging the fundamental reasons for gendered poverty and exclusion as such. If many women in the sex industries, as this chapter has shown, are sceptical when expressing their ideas about NGO usefulness, their attitudes towards the state are even stricter and echo neo-liberal ideas of state mistrust, inefficiency and corruption.

In sex workers' narratives the only way that is seen as bringing some change is that of individual efforts, which is in line with neo-liberal ideology. On one hand, the stark contrast between the violent realities of every-day experiences in the sex industries and women's dreams for the future raises the question of the extent to which such embedded-ness of neo-liberal discourse is actually beneficial for women, because in the sex market, only the women who manage their trade well seem to be benefiting from selling sex. On the other hand, the sex workers' movement that runs on the platform of human rights and an individual's right to choose – also keywords of neo-liberal ideas – seem to bring some positive changes to all sex workers because of the changing way sex work is perceived by society and sex workers themselves, as it will be explored in the following section.

### **'I don't need to be saved, I saved myself already': sex workers in (political) action**

The recent development of the sex workers' movement in Kenya is an interesting phenomenon. With the declaration of the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a national disaster in 1999, funding organisations or groups that deal with sex workers turned from taboo to priority. The arrival of donors (and funds) increased the number of organisations that work with sex workers. Many of these organisations are faith-based or occupied in the areas of HIV/AIDS prevention, and are interested in 'reforming' sex workers, as discussed previously. However, in contemporary Kenya some voices started saying 'I don't

need to be saved, I saved myself already'<sup>46</sup> and these voices are represented by different types of organisations and groups of sex workers.

Organisations such as the Kenyan Sex Workers Alliance (KSWA) for example are created by sex workers for sex workers and call for empowerment, more rights, and less violence. The human rights training for Sex Workers in East Africa which was organised by the Akina Mama wa Afrika was a starting point for the sex workers movement and in 2009 and resulted in the Sex Worker African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) for East Africa. AWLI encouraged women who are engaged in sex work to share their stories, to speak out, so that society's and the government's attitudes towards sex, sexuality and sexual rights can be changed. Since then an expanded sex workers movement speaks to women who are sex workers and allows them to speak for themselves when deciding what they want and how to deal with their issues (Nyong'o 2010 : viii-x). This movement unites not only sex workers (active or ex-), but also feminists and human rights activists who aim 'at breaking the silence; engaging in the difficult conversations that allow for decoding the politics of sex; sexuality; power and control as central to the feminist struggles' (Nyong'o 2010 : 9).

Giving a voice to women who are engaged in the industry and who know best what their needs and issues are is really important. The sex workers movement being still young, it is difficult to evaluate how successful it is; yet such achievements as increased objective coverage in the media and increasing usage of term 'sex worker' instead of 'prostitute' are mentioned by Kenyan sex worker activists<sup>47</sup>. The results of the sex workers movement are also different in different areas. For example, an organisation from Kisumu (KASH) can name a few successes in their activities: successful cooperation with the police, when police officers are trained about sex workers rights and sex workers cooperate on informing about the night crimes they witness; successful business training for sex workers that increases their income from sources other than sex work. At the same time, the sex workers from Mombasa were pointing out that the town with one of the biggest sex workers population in 2011 still did not have a

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<sup>46</sup> Kenyan Sex Workers Alliance co-ordinator in the conference 'Moving Beyond CFCS3', 4/05/2011 Nairobi.

<sup>47</sup> 'Moving Beyond CFCS3', 4/05/2011 Nairobi.

sex workers clinic which would provide necessary health services. Even though the results of sex workers' activism are mixed, it is important to note that the engagement of sex workers with state institutions (for example the police in Kisumu, meeting the mayor of Nairobi) indicated that the sex workers' movement detaches itself from the political margins. The African Sex Workers Alliance's (ASWA) website claims: 'Nothing about us without us'<sup>48</sup>, and it reflects well the spirit of the movement which is gradually becoming more visible and voices clearly the issues experienced by women in the sex industry.

In her speech addressing activists, the co-ordinator of the KSWA said that '[the] Bible says that anything that makes me happy, makes the Lord happy', and was greeted with a storm of applause from the audience. Such a statement can be read as a challenge to the current marginal position that sex workers occupy in public political discourse in Kenya. Indeed, the recent decision of Nairobi City Mayor George Aladwa to form a committee to look into the Kenyan law on prostitution, and possibly create special zones in Nairobi where sex workers could practice their trade (Ngirachu 2012), points to the possibility for debates about the political marginality of this trade. Sex worker activists eagerly engaged in this debate by claiming that they are ready to pay taxes in order to be recognised (Mutambo 2012). Even though this debate was short-lived and no actual changes in policies towards sex workers were achieved, the event was important as a sign that the unity of sex workers can challenge the *status quo* prevailing in the political arena.

Giving a voice and face to sex workers means that some of them have to 'come out' and provide their face to the anonymous figure of a sex worker. Daughtie, who was a co-founder of ASWA and who co-ordinated KSWA until recently, pointed out that going on a TV programme and giving an interview without asking her face to be covered shows people that sex workers are just regular women who can be your neighbours. Such openness about one's occupation should, according to ASWA's vision, help to create an environment, where sex workers feel safe and secure to access healthcare and ensure their human rights without any discrimination in the process. The discrimination and violence that

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<sup>48</sup> <http://africansexworkeralliance.org/>

ASWA aims to reduce is not only the institutional violence of police, but, more importantly, the everyday violence that sex workers experience in their communities because of the stigma attached to this occupation. The sex workers' march on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, that takes place in Nairobi every year, is part of the sex workers' movement initiatives helping to increase awareness about sex work and show how violent this occupation is. The sex workers movement sees these marches as a success, because it is happening peacefully and has an objective coverage in the media.<sup>49</sup>The decriminalisation of sex work is one of the main aims of the movement, and the efforts towards this goal should benefit all women engaged in sex work, by making this work safer.

Violence and human rights violations in relation to sex workers are important issues. Yet, it is also important to observe, that solving these issues has the potential to alleviate the working conditions of women who are already selling sex, but does not solve the problem of women having little alternative choices to sex work. Funding for programmes dealing with human rights and violence is available from many international donors and can be part of the reason why this young movement focuses on work in these areas. Still, this raises the question, of the extent to which the sex workers' movement can challenge the current situation. Whereas the effect of the sex workers movement on wider social, economic and patriarchal structures remains to be seen; participation in sex workers activism or simply identifying oneself as a sex worker can open some possibilities in the international development industry.

Beckman (2010) in her essay on commodification of the health sector in Zanzibar explores how being HIV positive and disclosing your status opens possibilities to earn a living while participating in the world of international development. HIV positive people who are marginalised in local communities compete to attend international donor funded conferences and workshops for very material reasons – the possibility to have a meal and/or earn a 'sitting allowance'. Sex workers seek similar benefits from the NGO sector. Of course, funds available for NGOs dealing with sex workers are much smaller than those

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<sup>49</sup>Interview with DaughthieOgutu, the co-founder of the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), 13/05/2011, Nairobi.

available for HIV/AIDS related organisations, but the principle is the same – joining an organisation can bring some free services, like for example free health provision, free education for children, or a place on a course on tailoring, cooking, hairdressing or some other type of training in one of the ‘reforming’ organisations. And even though these organisations most often fail to ‘reform’ sex workers because of purely economic reasons as was discussed previously, some of the services of such organisations are sought by women as a possibility to ease their economic burden.

There is another type of opportunity that is offered by sex worker rights NGOs: coming out publicly about your occupation (sex work) opens the possibility to have a well-paid office job in the organisations targeting sex workers, or in the HIV/AIDS organisations. ASWA works in the area of capacity building, and provides opportunities for women to strengthen their skills in IT literacy, organisation management and writing proposals for funding. Such training helps women to access the funds of donors and implement programmes that can improve experiences in sex work. However, the other consequence of such capacity building is that some of the sex workers manage to create themselves jobs in the NGO sector. One of the founders of the ASWA, for example, now has a secure office job as a Program Associate in one NGO. Another example is Grace (37 years old) who used to be a sex worker for seven years and now uses her experience as an ex-sex worker and someone who is HIV positive to get contracts with various health organisations (trainings, community awareness, finding new clients to check up for HIV/AIDS, etc.) while having a position in an organisation who is helping women (mainly sex workers) in distress. She was also contracted by several big USA and UK based TV production companies to find interviewees for their documentaries about the sex industries in Africa and is willing to take various jobs that would bring her income while using her experiences. Women who sell sex are aware of these possibilities, as was pointed out in chapter six, and are eager to use their experience in the sex industries as a stepping stone for creating an alternative income-generating activity.

The fact that sex workers find a place in the public sphere also indicates the professionalisation of sex work: after I finished interviewing Queen Latifah (37 years old), she proudly showed me two diplomas issued by a local NGO that confirms her completing certain training courses and indicates her suitability to work as a peer educator with HIV positive people and especially with sex workers' groups. Terms like peer education, community building, and gender based violence are not unknown to sex workers and many of them claim that they want to work in that area. This possibility to build a very different, well-paid, and very sought after career in the NGO sector is an important alternative to the traditional sex work exit routes, just like movement into business or marriage. It also tells us about the changes in the economic structures of Kenya and what is seen as a source of money. Since the traditional exit routes of marriage or owning a small business are becoming increasingly difficult to reach in the current neo-liberalism influenced economic climate, women show their agency by aiming to benefit from the international aid sector by marketing their own past experiences.

## **Conclusions**

The sex industries are a good case study for exploring the neo-liberal free market model. Women enter the sex industries when in need, and while following their self-interest they behave in entrepreneurial ways, and can make some money. When looking at exit strategies, one can observe the neo-liberal framework as well: exit is made either through self-efforts that indicate individual success, or with the help of charities and religious groups. However, such a neo-liberal footprint also means that the system is beneficial only for the 'winners' or people who are advantaged in it. Just as neo-liberal reforms create more wealth for the rich and continue to marginalise the poor, in the sex industries it is successful sex workers that make their dreams come true. Women who manoeuvre the sex industries well, who manage to avoid dangers and secure what they need, leave sex work for a 'good life'. Yet, women who do not manage their trade well end up in similar or even worse positions than those which pushed them into the sex trade in the first place.

The gendered structures that women try to bargain with in the sex industries are still there when sex workers try to exit the sex industries, or when they face a danger while trading sex. Just as in the ideal of a free market, social security is non-existent in the sex trade, and so women have to be good managers in order to avoid sex industry-related threats that could potentially harm them, and secure their aims in a difficult everyday environment. Such a situation once again shows the limitations of sex workers' agency and differences in the outcomes of sex work that women experience. All women do their best to make more space for their actions in order to further their own goals; yet, just few of them succeed in securing their dreams, and many of them have to exit the sex trade on different terms than those that would have been ideal for them. Yet, such differentiation and inequality among sex workers once again shows the neo-liberal character of the contemporary Kenyan sex industries.

## 8. Conclusions: The limits of agency in a neo-liberal world

*It is striking, then, that although agency is central to rational choice, practice is not.*  
(Harrison 2010 : 65)

Neo-liberalism as a doctrine is based on the idea of free choices and agency in the market. This thesis has explored in what ways and to what extent neo-liberal practice and ideology define women's agency through the example of Kenyan sex work. It has looked at the position that women occupy in Kenyan socio-economic spheres due to neo-liberal restructuring and continuous reforms, as well as the neo-liberal discourse that is re-produced via the Kenyan media and other socialising institutions. Furthermore, relying on the life-histories and narratives of Mombasa sex workers, this work has examined how women who are in a disadvantaged position in society try to manoeuvre the socio-economic scene and attempt to make a living or progress socially and economically through un-orthodox choices, and to what extent these choices are influenced by neo-liberal practice and ideology. Finally, exploring the life-stories of women in the Mombasa sex industries, this thesis contrasted the future plans and dreams of sex workers with the structures of the sex industries and society to see the limitations of global neo-liberal ideas in the every-day local reality of Kenya.

Neo-liberal ideology seems to have individual agency and free choice at its centre. It is through the fulfilment of self-interests in markets that people are supposed to improve their lives. As Harrison (2010 : 65) points out:

Neoliberal ontologies of agency are formulated through rational choice approaches to agency. In a sense, rational choice is all about agency; its methodological individualism produces a range of models for individual action, often articulated through preferential thought experiments of prisoner's dilemmas, tragedies of the commons, and so on. Rational-choice modelling opens up space to look at people's actions, rather than seeing people as bearers of neoliberal structures-in-construction.

Even though neo-liberal theory emphasises agency, social scientists analysing the neo-liberal world, point towards some structures that neo-liberalism-inspired actions create and speak about neo-liberal practice (Harrison 2010),



neo-liberal forms (Ong 2006), and survival circuits (Sassen 2002). The neo-liberal ideas equate agency with freedom to choose in the market; however, agency, as Showden (2011 : 1) argues, is broader than just simple autonomous choice – it includes both the self-governance of autonomy and options to choose from; thus, ‘agency includes not only the personal but also the political’. Therefore, when discussing agency, one has to assess both the actions of individuals and the structures within which the individual is operating.

This thesis used the voices of women in the Kenyan sex industries to speak about both structures and agency that are influenced by neo-liberal ideas and practices and affect these women’s lives and their choices. Literature on sex industries is divided on the matter of choice and agency that women selling sex have. Radical feminists (Barry 1996; MacKinnon 1993) reject the notion of choice or agency in sex work and speak about exploitation, subordination, and male dominance. The other side of this academic debate (Chapkis 1997; O’Connell Davidson 1998) speak about empowerment through sex work and focus on the inequalities prevailing in society as the main reason of engagement in sex work. Inspired by this academic debate, that essentially questions female agency through sex work within wider social structures, this thesis explored the sex industries as an example of female agency and its limits in a neo-liberal world.

First, this thesis engaged with an analysis that aims to understand to what extent the socio-economic structures and position of women in them are influenced by neo-liberal practices and ideas. Building on literatures in areas of African political economy and neo-liberalism, the second chapter looked at the continuities and changes in Kenyan political, economic and social life since independence. Processes that have roots in pre-colonial, colonial and independence periods, such as connections among power, wealth, ethnicity and patronage in Kenyan social and political life; the country’s incorporation in the global economy; rapid population growth and the inequalities that prevail in the country, were discussed as factors that help to understand the Kenyan socio-economic and political structures of today. However, since the 1980s another major force that influences changes in Kenyan socio-economic life is neo-

liberalism. Neo-liberal practice has a dual character. On one hand, as Turner (2008 : 7) argues, neo-liberalism is an ideology of re-invention, which appropriates and re-interprets ideas of the past for the 'new ideological terrain'. Yet, at the same time, neo-liberalism brings disruption to the existing socio-economic and political structures through neo-liberal reforms. Chapter two has argued that in the case of Kenya, neo-liberal practice both builds on and damages the pre-existing features of socio-economic structures and inequalities.

This neo-liberal duality is especially important when assessing the gendered effects of neo-liberalism. As chapter three has shown, neo-liberal reforms and discourses had gendered effects and men and women experienced these changes in significantly different ways. First, changes in the possibilities available in the labour market have a profound effect on Kenyan people. Many men started facing difficulties in securing employment and maintaining their economic power, and such a situation has had consequences for their immediate families and extended social networks (Cornwall 2003; Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2005; Silberschmidt 2004). This diminishing male economic power affected numerous women: since many households' income decreased, women, who traditionally are seen as carers, started carrying an increased domestic burden (Elson 1995b; Sparr 1994). Whereas the fact of women bearing the burden of economic hardship is nothing new in terms of global history, there is a new aspect of such a process in the neo-liberal order – the labour of women who are in difficult and insecure situations became increasingly important in the local labour market and for household survival. Therefore, women are experiencing neo-liberal ambiguity – on one hand they are facing hardship, because many of them cannot depend on the share of male income as before; yet, at the same time, they are targeted in labour markets for their cheap labour. Opportunities created in the free-market neo-liberalism influenced Kenyan economy seem to create space for female agency and emancipation through participation in labour markets, however, such opportunities are built on the old patriarchal structures that do not allow women a full-range of choice and limit them to less-paid and traditionally 'female' jobs that society relies on.

When considering the agency of women in a neo-liberal world, it is important to understand that neo-liberal practice contributes to rising inequalities in society and results in two groups of people who experience the neo-liberal order in different ways. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2001 : 8) argue, the contradictions at the core of neoliberal capitalism ‘offer up vast, almost instantaneous riches to those who master its spectral technologies – and, simultaneously, [can] threaten the very existence of those who do not.’ Therefore, educated professionals, who are in an advantaged position in society, be they male or female, can enjoy the benefits of the neo-liberal order (see Spronk 2012). However, people who do not master the ‘spectral technologies’, fall into ‘survival circuits’ and can only choose from very poor options when making decisions about their livelihoods. It is the agency of women in the latter group that has been at the centre of this research. Neo-liberal practice affects this group of women not only through changing material realities; perceptions influenced by the neo-liberal discourse about masculinities and femininities are of equal importance, as chapter three discussed. The normative masculinity of the ‘big man’ is closely related to the male ability to provide and support his family as well as for extended social networks. With many men experiencing diminishing economic power, sexual prowess and violence came to be emphasised by many men as alternative traits of masculinity, even as society still holds traditional expectations regarding male financial power. Women, in the meantime, have also experienced changes – processes of commodification have facilitated the objectification and sexualisation of female bodies in public discourses.

Neo-liberalism as both practice and ideology is an important force defining the difficult position that many women occupy in Kenyan socio-economic structures. Of course, other factors such as population growth, the HIV epidemic, patriarchy, and patron-client relations also contribute to such a situation; yet, neo-liberal practice builds on many of these processes and the footprint of free markets and individual choice are increasingly visible in Kenyan public life. Women are often in a disadvantaged position within such structures – despite the fact that neo-liberal ideas seem gender neutral, neo-liberal practice builds on the pre-existing gender power disparities and capitalises on the fact that

women traditionally have limited options in local structures and as a result can be exploited.

Second, this research aimed to understand in what ways women manoeuvre the structures that disadvantage them to their own benefit. Chapter four explored the different ways through which Kenyan women in survival circuits attempt to make a living or progress. It looked at the limited and gendered work possibilities in both the formal and informal sectors, at dependence on male income through commodification of love and un-orthodox living arrangements, with sex work being one of such options. The main argument that is put forward in this chapter is that women make their choices by performing different gender roles that are in tune with social norms in order to ensure their living and progress. This way women 'bargain with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti 1988) in order to ensure safer and economically stable life for themselves and their families. This study has revealed that choices are made and livelihood strategies are constructed in a very restrictive and difficult environment; still, Kenyan women believe that they can manipulate male desires and socio-economic structures. This, and especially the analysis of sex workers' positions in the local economies, shows that women sometimes have the power to challenge a restrictive *status quo* to a certain degree. The nature of structures is experiencing some transformations because of neo-liberal practices and discourse that contribute to 'breaking' the traditional 'bargain' available for women. Therefore, women operate in the conditions of social change and have to find new ways to progress in a neo-liberal world.

Furthermore, this research has looked into how women who participate in the sex industries perceive their position by analysing their strategies for survival and advancement. Chapter five has argued that many Mombasa sex workers see themselves as entrepreneurial agents or 'business ladies', and their working strategies reveal strategic thinking –in line with neo-liberal managerial ideas – aiming at maximising profits by choosing places to operate from, and by emphasising a certain appearance and behavioural traits (Hofmann 2010; Ssewakiryanga 2004). Women perform different gender roles that correspond to the realities of social and gender inequalities when targeting different types

of clients, and such managerial behaviour points to the neo-liberal footprint in the sex industries. The neo-liberal character of the sex trade becomes more visible in the analysis of sex workers' narratives about competition: due to high competition for clients women face a dilemma – in order to be safe when working, women have to cooperate, however, such cooperation also means that a trusted colleague might be the most dangerous threat. Such ambiguity surrounding sex work and competition is often explained through the concept of witchcraft by women in the sex industries. The discourse of witchcraft is interesting when looking at agency in neo-liberal structures: just as neo-liberal ideology, witchcraft offers the possibility for an individual to succeed and reach her personal aims. Still, just as neo-liberal restructuring, it is witchcraft that is perceived to be responsible for moral ruptures and inequalities in society (Blunt 2004; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Smith 2005). Mombasa sex workers' narratives show that they make their choices and have clear strategies in their work, and yet, the discourse of witchcraft is a reminder of the anxieties associated with and limits of women's agency in a system that encourages this competition and success through sex work.

Sex workers' work strategies are related to their long-term plans for life. The analysis of dreams and plans that women in the sex industries have for their future reveal their willingness for social and economic upwards mobility – or what they call a 'good life'. A situation that means a 'good life' is different for different women but generally it entails an improvement to their current living conditions. Sex workers' dreams clearly reject the disadvantaged position in the socio-economic local and international context that they occupy as women and aim to manoeuvre the multiple layers of power relations limiting their options (for similar example from Zambia see Ferguson 1999). As the analysis in chapter six shows, there are two main courses of action that sex workers envisage for the fulfilment of their dreams: marriage and a job/business. However, depending on whether a woman sees sex work as a way for survival, or for progressing, these strategies serve different aims. Some women want to marry because they seek companionship and partnership with a man, some women see marriage as insurance for stability and certain living standards, and

for others still, marriage is only a step towards bigger plans of business or migration. The same diversity of aims can be observed in women's business plans – some women conceive of business or work as a source of stable income that is enough to live on, while others have plans of becoming rich, and still others are interested in having careers in the newly available NGO sector with hints to a prestigious occupation. In sex workers' dreams women manoeuvre the patriarchal and economic structures that disadvantage them and aim to secure a 'good life' using some traditional forms of womanhood (see Brennan 2004; Haram 2004). Such behaviour is partly a response to the changing socio-economic structures that are influenced by neo-liberal practices. Moreover, such dreams are limited by neo-liberal and patriarchal structural constraints and women understand that, as can be seen from the dreams that sex workers have for their children. For their children they dream about lives in a situation where un-human experiences do not become an everyday reality, and where their children are free to enjoy all that neo-liberal and modern discourses promise – money, freedom to travel and make choices from a less limited range of options than their mothers.

The dreams and future plans of women in the sex industries indicate the motivations for sex work. However, not all women manage to leave the sex industries on their own terms and live an imagined post-sex-work 'good life'. Chapter seven has researched the complications of the sex industries and the structures of Kenyan society that result in a difficult exit from sex work. It has argued that exit from sex work is made difficult because of both challenges internal to the sex industries' and external structures that prevail in society. Due to the specific nature of the commercial sex market and sex workers' actions aimed at higher profits, many sex workers are vulnerable in the areas of excessive spending (or not managing money in accordance with their future plans), unplanned pregnancies and children, alcohol and drug addictions, and HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. Some women manage to manoeuvre these challenges and remain safe, yet for others one or some of the mentioned obstacles can severely complicate their exit strategies. As a result, there are two main ways to exit sex work: some women manage to reach their

aims or find other suitable exit solutions and leave the sex trade on their own terms (for the examples from colonial Kenya see Bujra 1977; White 1990); the rest of the women either remain in the sex industries, or have to rely on help from various charities or NGOs. Some women might choose using services provided by NGOs, or even organisations themselves as part of a bigger exit strategy, as the analysis of women who seek to find a job in the growing NGO sector showed (for similar tendencies in the HIV/AIDS industry see Beckmann 2010). Still, not many women do so, and the majority of sex workers that attempt to rely on NGO help when making an exit indicate the shortcomings of the aid provided. The main problem of many programmes targeting sex workers is that those programmes rarely help women to improve their position within the prevailing socio-economic structures and many women find themselves in a very similar or even worse position than when they entered sex work.

The gendered structures that disadvantage women in society, that define the possibilities available for them in a labour market and that the same women try to manipulate when looking for ways to secure some income are still there when women attempt to exit sex work. In the last three decades both the structures and people's perceptions about navigating them became influenced by neo-liberal practice and ideology. This thesis has shown that such influences can be observed and are important when understanding women's agency in society. The analysis of Mombasa sex workers' narratives and life stories reveal that many women are negatively affected by neo-liberal practices and as a result of that, some of them enter the sex industries. While selling sex, many women successfully employ neo-liberal managerial ideas and many succeed in securing a good income and create a basis for fulfilling the dream of a 'good life' as a result of their agency and entrepreneurial ideas. Still, not all women are equally successful in this endeavour, and not all of them exit sex trade the way they would like to.

The functioning of the contemporary sex industries has a dual pattern that is characteristic of neo-liberal practice – there is a group of individuals who manage to benefit from their entrepreneurial actions, but the majority remains

outside the reach of the dream of a 'good life'. Therefore, the agency of women is limited, the dream of breaking away from a disadvantaged position is possible, but women have to behave according to the rules of the system. As a result, some women can position themselves in a better position than before sex work, but such actions do not challenge the system itself. As a result of sex work, a single woman, who could not find suitable employment, can find a man to marry and enjoy the status of house-wife after the marriage; a widow can save enough money and open a kiosk and start selling vegetables for a living; an abandoned wife with children might secure work in a local NGO as an outreach worker; but all these options just re-incorporate women back into the structures where gender biases are still at work. Some women may perceive such outcomes as a success, however, at a more general level, the fact that even when women think they succeeded they still operate in an environment with limited options, means that the agency of women is limited in a neo-liberal patriarchal order.

Having reached this conclusion, there are areas for further research that could inform this argument more, but were not within the scope of this thesis. First, neo-liberal restructuring and practices put many men in as difficult positions as women. For example, as Meiu (2011 : 441) shows in his analysis of Samburu men who come to sell sex in Mombasa, economic difficulties and lack of economic opportunities are connected to some Samburu men travelling from rural areas to Mombasa with the aim of exchanging sex with Western tourists for money. As this thesis has shown, neo-liberal practice and discourse also affected Kenyan masculinities. For that reason, comparing male and female sex workers' strategies for work and life can tell more about agency in a neo-liberal world; however, a task of such magnitude far exceeded the scope of this thesis. Another future research direction that can bring more insights when discussing gender, sexuality and agency is the analysis of the African Sex Workers Movement or other sex workers grass root organisations and alliances. These movements are still new and it is difficult to evaluate their effectiveness, however, their success in terms of gaining space in Kenyan public discourses and even in the political sphere are undeniable (see for example Mghenyi 2012;



Mutambo 2012; Wekesa 2012), and for this reason, further research of such movements can contribute greatly to the debate of agency and sex work.

## Appendix: Interviews

### A: Interviewed sex workers

No	Nickname	Age	Language of the interview	Date of Interview
1	Alicia	24	English	27 November 2010
2	Katherine	18	English	26 November 2010
3	Marsy	18	Swahili	28 November 2010 12 February 2011
4	Lisa	36	English	30 November 2010
5	Ritangeri	36	Swahili	29 November 2010
6	Queen Latifah	37	English	9 December 2010
7	Kemuto	44	Swahili	10 December 2010
8	Wanjiku	30	English	4 December 2010
9	Tabitha	42	English	5 December 2010
10	Robina	34	English	2 February 2011
11	Sarah	29	English	2 February 2011
12	Helen	28	English	2 February 2011
13	Miriam	31	English	13 February 2011
14	Christy	20	English	20 February 2011
15	Floriana	41	English	15 February 2011
16	Chichi	32	English	12 February 2011
17	Mary	23	English	1 March 2011
18	Lorin	42	English	2 March 2011
19	Winnie	30	English	5 March 2011
20	Betty	31	English	3 March 2011
21	Kate	21	Swahili	9 March 2011
22	Precious	23	English	4 March 2011

23	Dorpato	24	English	17 March 2011
24	Cinderella	28	English	8 March 2011
25	Toto	23	Swahili	6 March 2011
26	Dafnie	22	English	14 March 2011
27	Maureen	28	English	18 March 2011
28	Vivenzi	28	English	21 March 2011
29	Ashley	22	English	7 March 2011
30	Jasinta	28	English	24 March 2011
31	Lilian	27	English	16 March 2011
32	Suzan	24	English	18 March 2011
33	Patricia	22	Swahili	26 March 2011
34	Maria-Karen	21	English	1 April 2011
35	Stella	29	English	30 March 2011
36	Maria	32	English	31 March 2011
37	Chiquita Banana	40	English	2 April 2011
38	Anita	35	English	3 April 2011
39	Sylvia	25	English	10 April 2011
40	Faith	29	English	14 April 2011
41	Grace	37	English	Multiple interviews November 2010 - May 2011

## B: The rest of the interviews

No	Organisation	Area of organisations work	Person interviewed	Date	Place
1	UHAI- The East African Sexual Health & Rights Initiative	Civil society activism around the issues of health, sexuality and human rights.	Program Assistant	25 October 2010	Nairobi
2	SWOP – Sex Workers Outreach Program	Sexual health.	The coordinator of SWOP clinic in Nairobi	26 October 2010	Nairobi
3	TRACE Kenya	The missing, trafficked and exploited children for labour, (domestic servitude) and sexual exploitation.	Paul Adhoch , director	9 November 2010	Mombasa
4	NGO no 1	Issues of women and children.	Program manager	24 November 2010	Mombasa
5	KAACR – Kenyan Alliance for Advancement of Children Rights	Children rights.	Director	25 November 2010	Mombasa
6	Ford Foundation	Advancements of reforms in land, livelihoods, rights, media and civic participation, particularly for women and youth.	Representative for Kenya- Dr Willy Mutunga	20 January 2011	Nairobi
7	Open Society Institute in	Public participation	Program manager	21 January	Nairobi

	East Africa	in democratic governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.		2011	
8	Daily newspaper	Media.	Journalist	31 January 2011	Mombasa
9	SOLWODI	Support for women in distress.	Director	1 February 2011	Mombasa
10	Administration Office of Mombasa District	Governmental institution.	District Gender and Social Development Officer	28 March 2011	Mombasa
11	NGO no 2	Women and girls support.	Director	29 March 2011	Mombasa
12	Internet cafe	Internet provision.	Owner	15 March 2011	Mombasa
13	KASH – Keeping Alive Societies Hope	Community support.	Manager	4 May 2011	Nairobi
14	KSWA – Kenyan Sex Workers Alliance	Sex workers activism.	Representatives: John and Phelister	4 May 2011	Nairobi
15	ASWA – African Sex Workers Alliance	Sex workers activism.	Co-founder DaughtieOgutu	13 May 2011	Nairobi
16	BHESA – Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Association	Bar hostess and sex workers support.	PeninahMwangi, director	19 May 2011	Nairobi
17	University of Nairobi	Research in economics.	Professor MusambayiKatumanga	16 May 2011	Nairobi
18	NPI-SHAP – New Partnership Initiative	HIV/AIDS prevention.	Program manager	10 May 2011	Nairobi

19	NACC – National AIDS Control Council	HIV/AIDS prevention.	Field coordinator	10 May 2011	Nairobi
20	APHIA II - AIDS, Population and Health Integrated Assistance	Public health.	Meeting with partners	10 May 2011	Nairobi
21	KANCO – Kenya AIDS NGOs Consortium	HIV/AIDS prevention.	Research advocacy fellow	11 November 2010	Mombasa

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