

SURROUND SOUND KENYA: CHANGING THE STORY ON GENDER EQUALITY

MEET 'GEN FREE': TELLING A NEW STORY ABOUT EQUALITY, WORK, SEX AND SCHOOL WITH KENYA'S GEN Z

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM A MIXED-METHOD FORMATIVE RESEARCH STUDY





ABOUT THIS REPORT

At the start of 2024, Shujaaz Inc and MTV Staying Alive Foundation launched an ambitious 5-year mass media programme, designed to tackle restrictive, harmful norms that perpetuate gender inequality in Kenya. Surround Sound Kenya combines the reach and impact of the internationally recognised MTV Shuga brand and the national reach and local networks of Shujaaz to regularly engage 70% of 15-24-year-olds with award winning media that tells a new story about gender equality in Kenya. The first phase of the programme is being supported with funding from The Gates Foundation, Co-Impact, Echidna Giving, Imaginable Futures and The Wellspring Foundation.

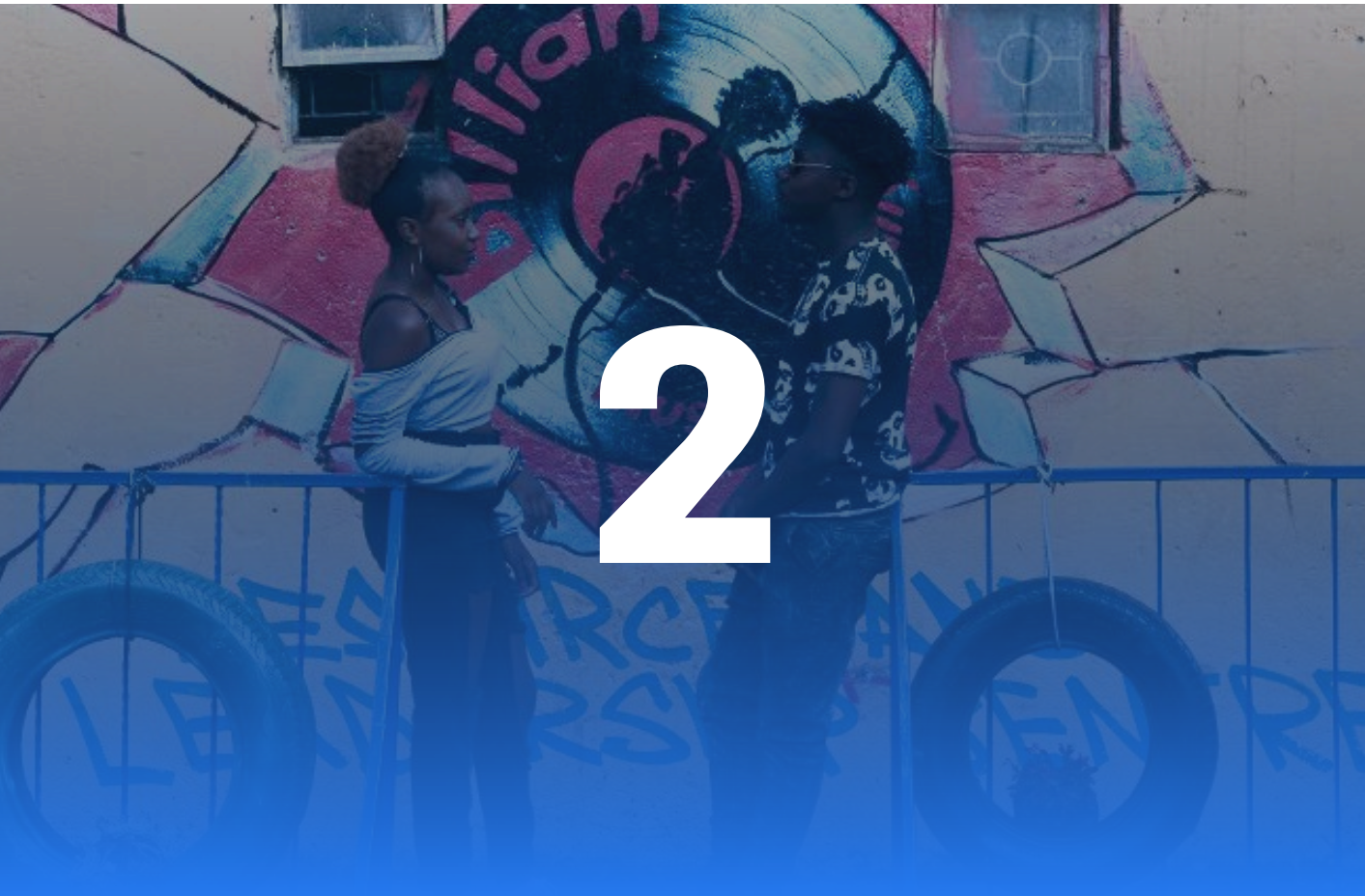
In February 2024, we delivered a national participatory youth research project in collaboration with Open Phences, a think and do tank based in Kenya. The research was designed to explore young people's perspectives on gender equality and the norms shaping their experiences of sex, relationships, HIV and gender-based violence and work, school and education. This summary report captures the key trends and findings from our research. It is designed primarily for colleagues working on mass-media programmes, but we hope it will provide valuable insights for everyone designing policy and programmes for young people in Kenya.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

Building on the existing research from Shujaaz Inc, MTV Staying Alive Foundation and the wider field, this formative research had three key objectives:



To develop a deeper understanding of young Kenyans’ perspectives on the key concepts of gender, equity, and equality, and their impact on young Kenyans’ identity, livelihoods, education, sexual & reproductive health (SHR) and experiences of HIV, and views on gender-based violence (GBV).



To identify the most relevant norms, manifestations and reference groups, and the barriers and drivers of norm change in young people’s contexts.



To describe the process and dynamics of young Kenyans’ socialisation and the sources of normative influences, including people, institutions, contexts and information sources.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The study focused on three constituencies: young Kenyans aged 15–24, positive deviants and role models identified by young people, and trusted adults in communities where young people work, study and live.

Methodology

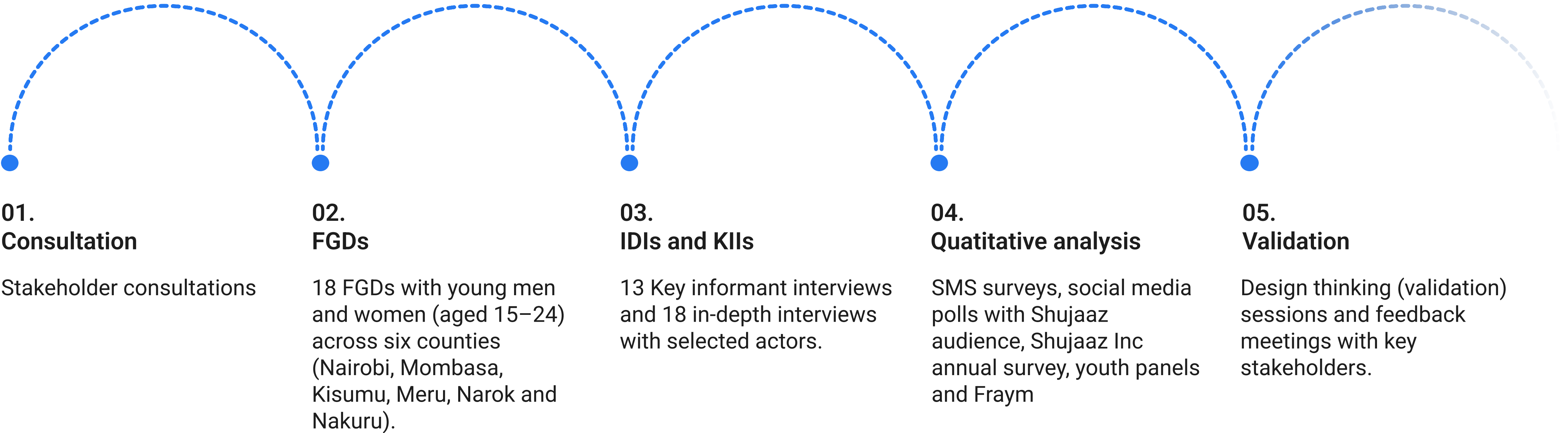
This study was designed around a range of participatory action research methods, intended to shift control of the research process to participants. This included deploying a range of visual, auditory and oral techniques, used alongside traditional research methods, to empower and encourage participants to discuss complex and sensitive topics in a safe, culturally sensitive context.

The mixed-method study was conducted in six counties in Kenya: Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Narok, Meru and Nakuru. It combined qualitative, quantitative and design-thinking methodologies.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The research followed a five-step process:

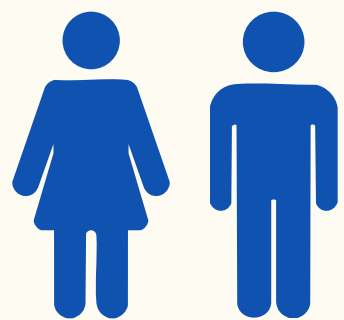


RESEARCH CONTEXT

KENYA’S GEN Z ARE TRYING TO CHANGE THEIR STORY

In Kenya today, 1 in 5 people are 15–24 years old. At over 11 million, this is the biggest youth population the country has ever seen. This is the generation that will decide Kenya’s future. And they know it.

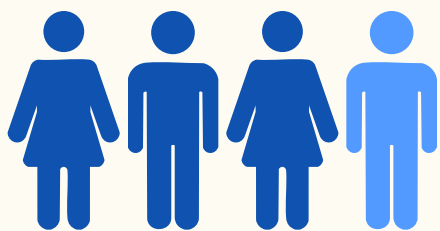
But they’re facing some serious challenges. Since 2019, young Kenyans have reported that their average earnings have fallen, while the costs of essentials have continued to rise. In face of increasing financial insecurity, three-quarters of 15–24-year-olds now report having to earn money to help their families stay afloat – up from just 47% in 2016. But only 5% will ever find work in the formal sector, leaving 95% to hustle in the informal sector economy. In a tough environment, more than half of young Kenyans now report struggling with their mental health.



1 in 5 people in Kenya today are aged 15-24

11M

The current youth population is the biggest the country has ever seen



3 in 4 youth having to earn money to supplement the household income to make ends meet

5%

Formal employment vs. 95% informal (Hustle economy)

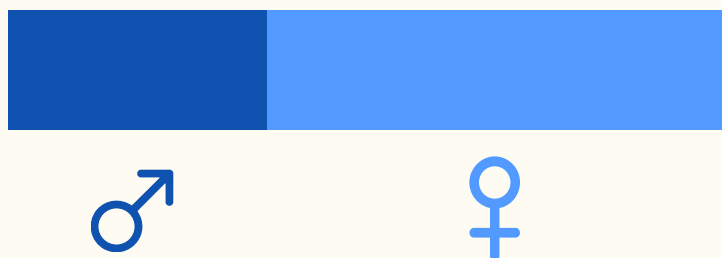
RESEARCH CONTEXT

KENYA’S GEN Z ARE TRYING TO CHANGE THEIR STORY

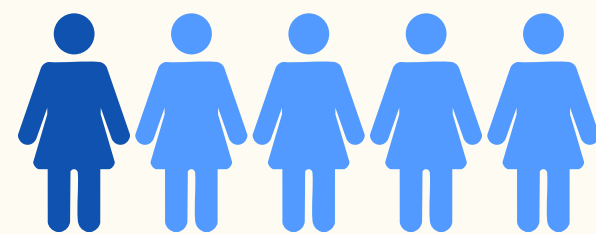
While all young people, male and female, are navigating the same challenges, the effects aren’t equally felt. The proportion of women who don’t get paid for their work is nearly five times higher than among male counterparts. Far too many young women report that they’re having children before they’d choose to. And 42% of HIV infections in Kenya are recorded among young people, with rates twice as high among women. Today, 20% of young women and adolescent girls report having experienced physical violence. Between [2016 and 2024](#), more than 500 women were victims of femicide.

5x

Women are 5x more likely to perform unpaid work



42% of HIV infections in Kenya recorded among young people. (Rates 2x higher among women)



20% physical violence among girls

500+

500+ femicide cases between 2016-2024

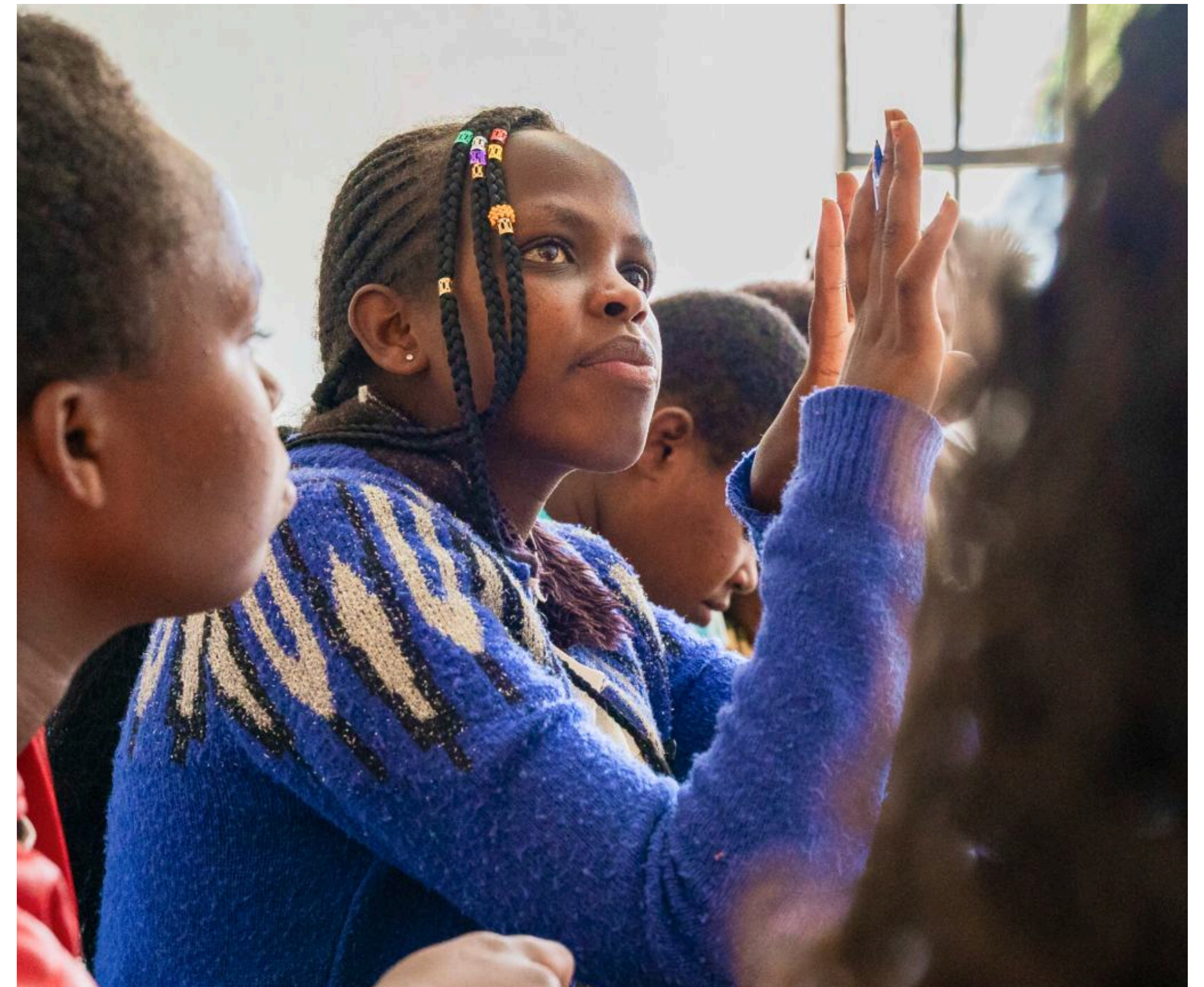
RESEARCH CONTEXT

KENYA'S GEN Z ARE TRYING TO CHANGE THEIR STORY

As we conducted our research, Kenya's historic 'Gen Z' protests erupted. While the protests broke out in response to the 2024 Finance Bill (which included proposals to increase taxes on a range of essential items), they became a bellwether of young Kenyans' frustration with a socio-economic system they feel is rigged against them – and designed by an older generation they see as out of step with their experiences, values and priorities.

Coordinated across Twitter, TikTok and WhatsApp, and super-charged by AI chat-bot tools, Kenya's increasingly digitally networked generation were demanding to be heard. As one person put it to us: *'They used to say we are the leaders of tomorrow, well, tomorrow is now, we've arrived. Tomorrow is right now, right? We are the society.'*

Issues of governance weren't part of the scope of this work. But the political, economic and social context of this research suffused our findings. Throughout our discussions we encountered a generation of young people who, faced with an incredibly challenging environment – but increasingly aware of their power – are in the process of contesting, challenging and re-thinking many of the systems and stories they've been taught to believe in. From work and income, to sex, relationships, education and gender equality, they're trying to change the story.



“

They used to say we are the leaders of tomorrow, well, tomorrow is now, we've arrived. Tomorrow is right now, right? We are the society.”

”

Focus group, Nakuru, mixed (18-24)

1. The Big Picture: How young people think about equality and identity
2. Mapping the cornerstone norms influencing: Education, money & work, sex, HIV, relationship & GBV
3. Reference groups and drivers of change

1. THE BIG PICTURE: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT EQUALITY AND IDENTITY

THIS GENERATION BELIEVES IN THE VALUES OF EQUALITY

Throughout our discussions, young Kenyans asserted their shared belief in the values of equality, and of gender equality in particular. They defined this as ‘similar treatment of young men and women’.

In a rejection of the traditional attitudes of older generations, young people across all age groups and locations talked about the importance of equal access to education (including STEM subjects), equal access to formal employment opportunities, and equal opportunities for civic participation and engagement. But they were also clear that equality means reciprocity of behaviour – including negative behaviour. As a few people put it in our conversations: *‘If you hit me, I hit you’, or ‘When he starts cheating, I also cheat.’*

We ought to know that we are all equal. Like no one is better than the other. We all need to know that respect is the key; we should respect each other, and we are all equal.

Focus group, Nairobi, Girls (15–17)



BUT THERE'S A GROWING BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER 'EQUITY' APPROACHES AS BOYS FEEL NEGLECTED

While support for the values of gender equality is high, understanding of the systems that generate and perpetuate inequality is less clear. Young people might believe in the values of gender equality – but their understanding of and support for the principles of gender equity remain relatively weak. With a few exceptions, explored later, for most young Kenyans equality means 'equal or similar treatment regardless of gender' – not tailored approaches, responsive to gendered experiences.

In fact, we encountered a persistent backlash against gender equity approaches in government and in the policies of NGOs. For example, in discussions in Nairobi, male participants highlighted that female students often have lower entry requirements for secondary and tertiary education, which they perceive as unfair treatment.

In Nakuru, young people talked about equality 'doublespeak', which they described as the desire to push for equality while simultaneously 'favouring' girls and 'neglecting' boys.

We encountered this view across almost every topic area. This manifested both as frustration, and as a call for more support for boys and young men. As one person put it to us: *'People say: "When you empower a woman, you empower the community." That's where the discrimination against boys starts ... it all starts in the community.'*

'People say: "When you empower a woman, you empower the community." That's where the discrimination against boys starts... it all starts in the community.'

Focus group, Nairobi, Girls (15–17)



“

...you have to understand that we ourselves are fighting for equality, right? So why is it that when it comes to that, it seems like girls are the ones being helped more than boys?

”

Focus group, Nakuru, Mixed (18–24)

YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE DISTINCT GENDER ROLES AT HOME

Young people in Kenya believe in equality for everyone – and in maintaining distinct gender roles. For example, when it comes to relationships, marriage and the household, young people near-unanimously believe that men and women have different roles to play.

Even with increasing equality in employment among young people, men are expected to play the primary provider role. The perception is that they should meet major household costs like rent, while women should play a more active role in raising children and in domestic tasks. As one person in Narok described: *'We've grown up with that mentality. From way back, we've been brought up knowing that men must provide. So, even when a lady has her own money, she still expects a man to provide.'*



YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE DISTINCT GENDER ROLES AT HOME

Young people were more divided over what equality means in the context of household duties. A section of girls expressed that men need to play a more active role in doing housework. But almost all young people expressed a reluctance to alter traditional gender roles, often attributing gendered responsibilities to physical differences.

One male participant in Nairobi summarised: *'Okay, I don't deny, even I can cook. And a girl can be an engineer, right? I could have been a chef right now, or even hairdressing, right? But for sure, I can't give birth.'* Another put it more stridently: *'It's not about gender equality. It's about African culture. African men should stop losing their ways, you see. Let's stick to the rules.'*

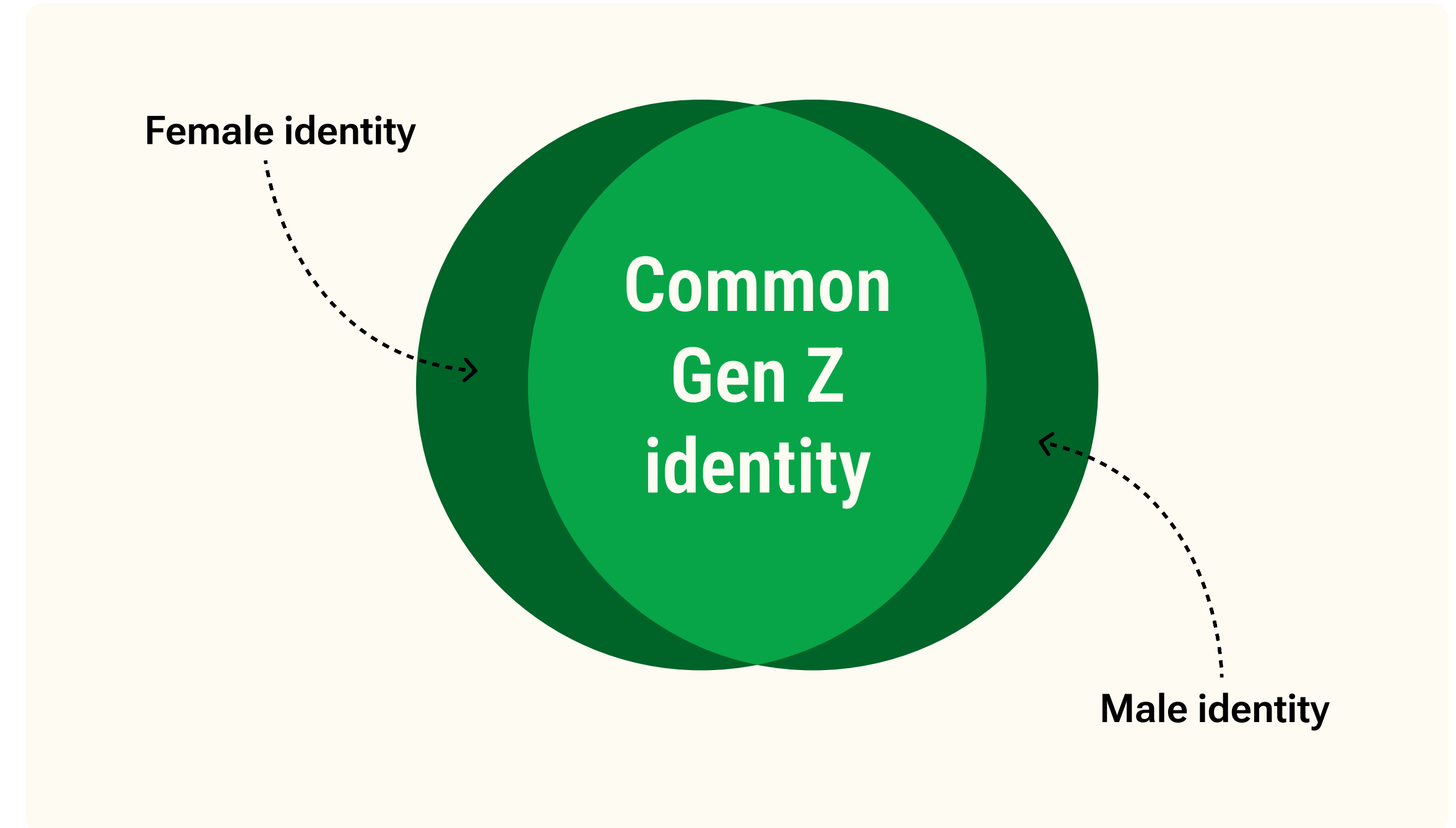


BUT YOUNG KENYANS' STRONGEST IDENTITY IS SHARED: BEING 'GEN Z'

Throughout our conversations and workshops, young people consistently described their sense of identity in terms of their gender roles. But they also described another, sometimes stronger, shared identity: being part of Gen Z.

Rooted in opposition to the beliefs, mindsets and behaviours of older generations, young people described being Gen Z as being about 'free' thinking, a commitment to social justice, and a desire to challenge existing systems and do things differently. The 'Gen Z' tag was strongly associated to an increasing sense of agency and power – and a belief that together, young people are breaking away from an old order that they view as unfair and dysfunctional.

Unlike distinct, sometimes oppositional gender-based identities, the 'Gen Z' tag was used to talk about a shared struggle, rooted in shared experience.



In conversation, young people referenced being part of Gen Z when talking about why and how they're challenging traditional norms. For example, as one person in Nairobi put it: *'I don't know, are you going to show off to a girl saying you have a PhD, a master's in whatever, a bachelor's in finance? That's all bullshit right now. As Gen Z, we're smart. Even if it means scamming to get that money; if it means selling a kidney [laughs].'* In almost every topic area, young people's message was the same: the old system isn't working for us any more, and our generation is going to do things differently. This identity and mindset has a significant influence on how young people think and feel about gender equality.

“

**Gen Zs only fear three things:
marriage, pregnancy and data
running out!**

”

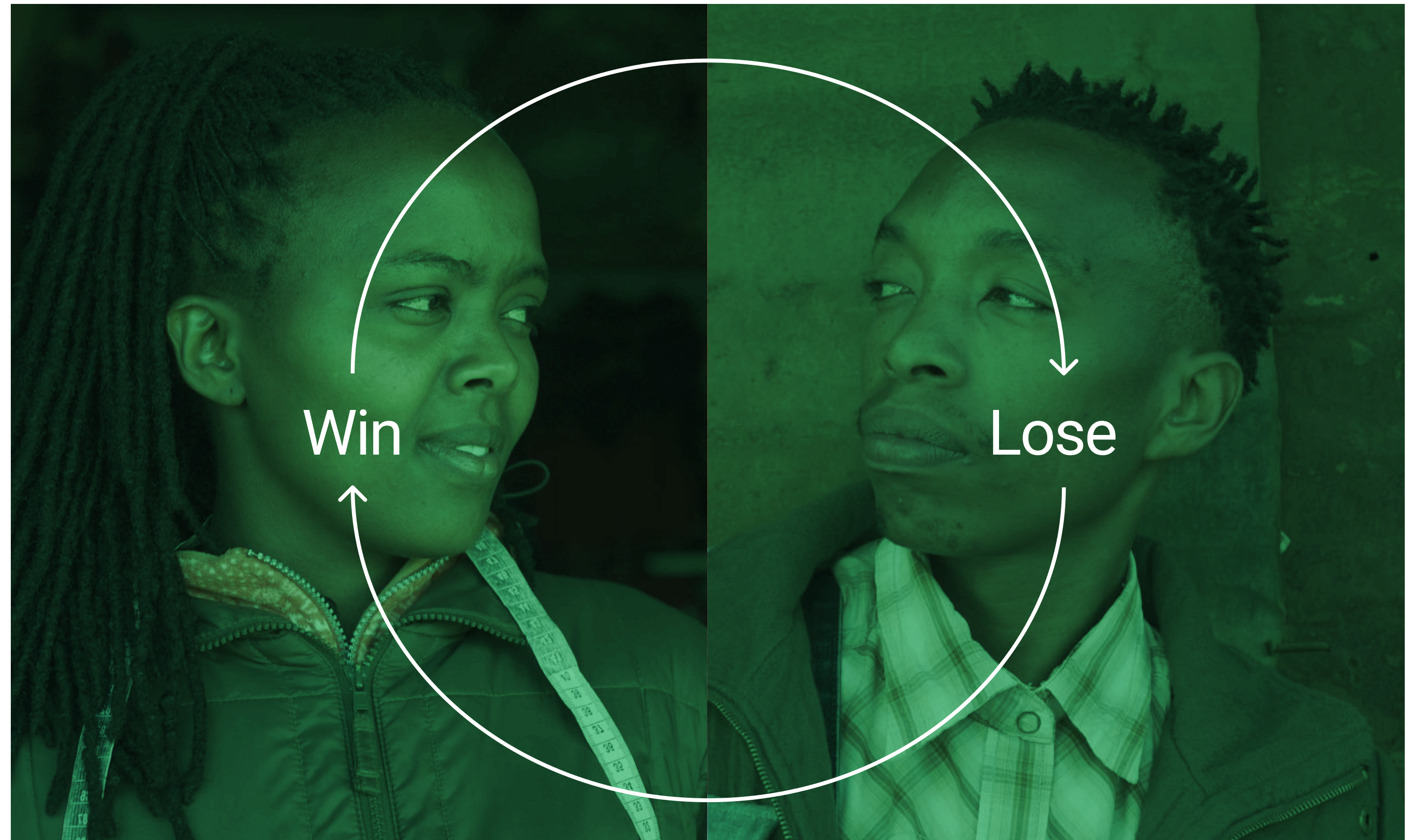
Focus Group, Nairobi, Mixed Group

CHECK-POINT: A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR KENYA'S GENDER EQUALITY STORY

We found that young people talk and reason about gender equality by drawing on two distinct mental models – with significantly different implications.

1. Zero-sum thinking: 'you win, I lose': Fuelling division and backlash

The first model, zero-sum thinking, is based on the belief that resources and opportunities are finite and limited – so gains for one gender must mean losses for another. This is often expressed through phrases like '50:50', reflecting the fear that if one gender gets 60, the other can only get 40, or that achieving equality means boys and men must lose out. In this view, creating opportunities for women necessarily takes them from men, reducing support for gender equality and fuelling division. This model is deployed in narratives found in the 'manosphere', which frames gender equality as a threat to young men.



CHECK-POINT: A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR KENYA'S GENDER EQUALITY STORY

2. Solidarity: 'you rise, I rise' – enabling progress

Our stories should reject the idea that equality is a zero-sum game. Instead, we should tell stories of solidarity and shared success. In stark contrast to 1990s Hollywood narratives in which a woman's success was often the product of a man's downfall, we should elevate real stories of young people celebrating and enabling each other's progress.

This is a pivotal moment: the model that takes hold and becomes the dominant story will shape the future of gender equality in Kenya.



CHECK-POINT: A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR KENYA'S GENDER EQUALITY STORY



01. Reflect shared values of equality

Our stories should hold up a mirror to young people's belief in gender equality as well as their views on distinct gender roles. We can do this by creating characters who embody and model young Kenyans' shared belief in equality of access to education, work and civic participation, as well as their commitment and contestation of gender roles.



02. Tell stories of solidarity: 'when you rise, I rise'

Our stories should reject the idea that equality is a zero-sum game. Instead, we should tell stories of solidarity and shared success. In stark contrast to 1990s Hollywood narratives in which a woman's success was often the product of a man's downfall, we should elevate real stories of young people celebrating and enabling each other's progress.



03. Harness the 'Gen free' Gen Z energy

Just as Hollywood films in the 1980s reimagined what it meant to be a teenager in post-1950s America, our stories should harness the energy of Kenya's 'Gen Z'. We don't need to explicitly reference the Gen Z protests, but the world of our media should feel informed by them – and grounded in the bigger story of a generation who are working together to challenge conventions and build a better future. Characters in our stories should explicitly voice this belief, as young people did in our conversations.

“

They used to say we are the leaders of tomorrow, well tomorrow is now, we've arrived. We are the society. So, let's stop saying we're blaming society. What society? Isn't it just you and me?

”

Focus Group, Nakuru, Mixed group (18 -24)

1. The Big Picture: How young people think about equality and identity
2. Mapping the cornerstone norms influencing: Education, money & work, sex, HIV, relationship & GBV
3. Reference groups and drivers of change

2.

MAPPING THE CORNERSTONE NORMS THAT INFLUENCE EDUCATION, MONEY & WORK, SEX, HIV, RELATIONSHIPS & GBV

UNDERSTANDING THE CORNERSTONE NORMS THAT SHAPE GENDER EQUALITY

In this section, we explore the norms that shape, influence and structure gender equality in Kenya. In particular, we focus on the ‘cornerstone norms’ – those that affect behaviours and outcomes in more than one area, for example shaping who has access to education, who controls resources, how relationships are formed, and how violence is tolerated or challenged.

This report focuses on four key areas: **Education; Sex & HIV; Money & Work; and Relationships & Gender Based Violence (GBV)**. For each, we identify the cornerstone norms and analyse the strength of the norm; the shifts occurring around it; its effects on behaviours and outcomes; and the key factors influencing each norm today.

What emerges in a normative landscape that’s shifting fast. Partly powered by their Gen Z identity, this generation of young Kenyans are in the process of contesting, challenging and re-thinking many of the structures, norms and stories they’ve been taught to believe in.

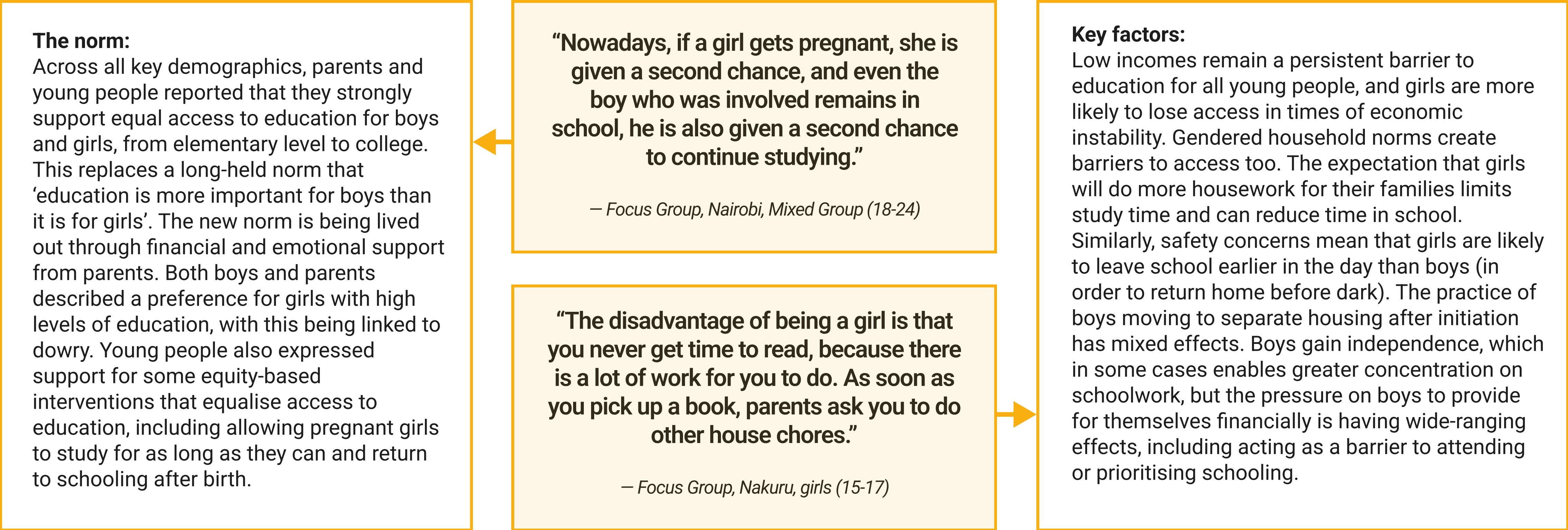
		WHAT THE NORM WAS	WHAT GEN Z IS SHIFTING TOWARD
EDUCATION		Education is more important for boys than girls	Equal access to education for both boys and girls is now widely supported
		Some subjects (like STEM) are more suited to boys	Gen Z increasingly believes girls should access all subjects, but STEM bias still exists
		Formal education guarantees a better future	Education is important; but 'street smarts' and digital skills are increasingly valued over formal qualifications
MONEY & WORK		Men must lead relationships (financially and in decision making)	Men are still expected to lead; girls increasingly expect respect, financial equality, and better treatment to maintain the relationship
		WHAT THE NORM WAS	WHAT GEN Z IS SHIFTING TOWARD
SEX (SRH) AND HIV		Sex should be saved for marriage, especially for girls	Sex before marriage is common among young people. But having sex at an early age is still frowned upon by parents, elders and wider parts of the community – so being discreet is still important
		Girls must stay pure: heavy stigma around contraception	Girls still bear the burden of contraception, but use of condoms and emergency contraception (P2s) is rising; stigma is reducing but persists
		HIV is highly stigmatized; dating someone with HIV is taboo	Some reduction in stigma: more openness exists, but fear and misinformation still hinder HIV testing and discussions
MONEY & WORK		Violence within marriage is tolerated; women must endure it	Violence outside marriage is increasingly condemned; more families encourage daughters to leave violent relationships

EDUCATION: EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION BECOMES THE NEW NORMAL

The new normal: ‘Education is important for both boys and girls’

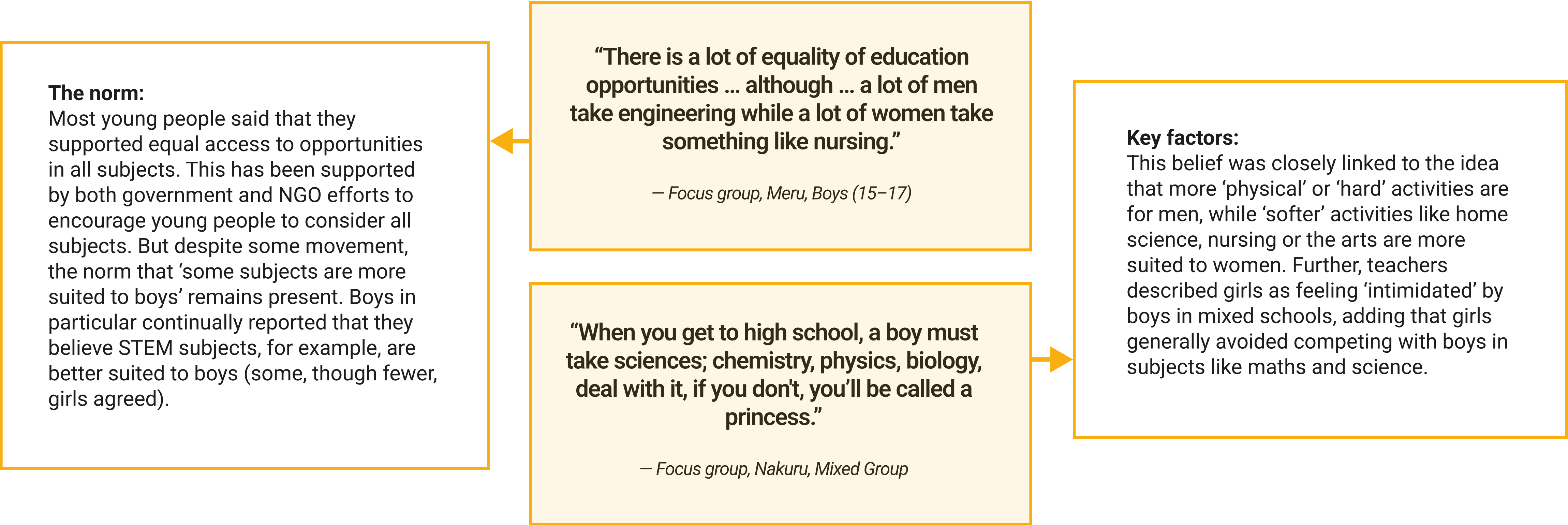
The norms that underpin gender equality in education have undergone a generational shift. Today, young Kenyans and most of their parents support equal access to education. A growing number of young people now believe that girls should be able to study all subjects, including traditionally ‘male’ subjects like science and maths.

But persistent household norms are still preventing girls from prioritizing education – and in a challenging economy, young Kenyans are beginning to question if formal education is the most effective route to success.



EDUCATION: EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION BECOMES THE NEW NORMAL

Contested: ‘Some subjects are more suited to boys’



EDUCATION: EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION BECOMES THE NEW NORMAL

Challenged: ‘Education leads to a better life in the future’

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But persistent household norms are still preventing girls from prioritizing education – and in a challenging economy, young Kenyans are beginning to question if formal education is the most effective route to success.

The norm:

While still strongly held, the belief that education is linked to better jobs, life outcomes and incomes is being challenged by young people. Today, less than 10% of young people ever find formal employment. The majority have to find work in the informal economy. As a result, young people talked about the value of ‘street smarts’ over ‘book smarts’ – with core skills like the ability to network, or digital skills, beginning to be seen as more important than formal qualifications. However, girls frequently emphasised that education had been crucial to building their confidence, agency and self-belief, including building their confidence to seek employment.

“You can go for further education, but... when you go to school, don’t base it on thinking that studying will get you a job. Most of us have graduated, and I’m very sure that the courses we did – they don’t know anything.”

— Focus Group, Nakuru, Mixed Group

Key factors:

The emerging challenges to this long-held norm could reduce long-term support for access to education and its many benefits, for both genders.

“

We are now in the generation where *your skills matter*. What do you have to offer? That's what will feed *you*. You can decide to do OnlyFans, or you can become a TikTokker. Whatever you decide to offer to society is what will give you wealth. We can't say that education matters nowadays.

Focus group, Narok, Boys (15-17)

”

SEX & HIV: YOUNG KENYANS ARE RE-THINKING SEX AND MARRIAGE

The new normal: ‘Sex before marriage is common among young people’

Young Kenyans are in the process of re-thinking, challenging and contesting some of the norms that underpin sex, sexual reproductive health and marriage – and related gender roles and expectations. Unlike their parents’ generation, young people now believe that sex before marriage is normal among their age group.

But despite increasingly liberal views on sex, and a growing prioritisation of short-term relationships over long-term commitment, complex stigmas around HIV and the use of contraception remain, and the responsibility for preventing pregnancy remains squarely with young women.

The norm:

Young people expressed increasingly liberal views on sex, with present but reducing double-standards between genders. Traditional norms like the belief that young people in general, and girls in particular, shouldn’t engage in pre-marital sex (or should remain pure) were infrequently invoked. Instead, sex before marriage, as well as sex with multiple partners, was perceived as increasingly normal, and even widespread among their generation. However, young people reported that having sex at an early age was still frowned upon by parents, elders and wider parts of the community – so being discreet is still important.

“Long ago, people were like ‘sex is meant for marriage’. Our generation? If someone is interested in you, it’s just simple communication. As you know, I’ve been seeing you, I know we’re not dating, but we can have that one night.”

— In-depth interview, Female, Mombasa

“Gen Zs only fear marriage, pregnancy and data getting finished.”

— Focus group, Nakuru, Girls (15–17)

Key factors:

This new normal was closely linked to an emerging trend in young people expressing preferences for short-term hook-ups and relationships (with clear pre-conditions) over long-term relationships and marriage. ‘Gen Z only fear marriage, pregnancy and data running out’, a recurring phrase, connected this trend to this generation’s focus on freedom, and their desire to challenge traditional or outdated structures that are seen as threats to their agency. During our conversations, we found a growing sub-culture of both young men and women who are openly discussing sex, and admitting to having multiple sexual partners who play different roles in their lives. For example, some young women felt it was normal to have partners for love, and partners just for sex. These emerging norms and behaviours are having a range of effects on gender equality measures, including contraception use, as well as perception of the risks associated with HIV.

SEX & HIV: YOUNG KENYANS ARE RE-THINKING SEX AND MARRIAGE

Dominant: ‘Girls are responsible for contraception and preventing pregnancies’

The norm:

Contraception, and therefore preventing pregnancy, is overwhelmingly viewed as the responsibility of women and adolescent girls – particularly outside of marriage. But despite increasingly liberal views on sex, the use of contraception remains complicated. Almost 9 in 10 sexually active young Kenyans say they’ve now tried at least one method of modern contraception, but girls (15–17) still felt that their peers would disapprove of their use of contraceptives. And some older girls reported that they prefer not to carry condoms, for fear of being perceived as promiscuous by their partners.

“When I offer you a condom to use, you say that you don’t trust me ... so, we (girls) use the emergency pill.”

— Focus Group, Mombasa, mixed group

“I felt there’s no need for me to take it [the pill]. I’m still young, and it could harm my eggs, it could ruin me, and I could miss out on life ahead.”

— Focus group, Nairobi, Girls (15–17)

Key factors:

Despite the stigma that remains, friends and peers remain a primary source of information for most young people, and a big influence on their contraceptive choices. However, misinformation about long-acting forms of contraception is persistent, and is sometimes reinforced by mothers who are resistant to the use of family planning services. Women most often sought support from boyfriends if seeking abortion care, with mothers less frequently referenced as a source of support. Most young people reported that both condoms and emergency ‘P2’ contraception were accessible and affordable. Many young women said they started using condoms first, with a growing preference for P2.

SEX & HIV: YOUNG KENYANS ON RE-THINKING SEX AND MARRIAGE

Some reduction: ‘People with HIV face serious stigma’

The norm:

While stigma remains, a significant number of young people felt that their community would be supportive of HIV-positive individuals. Views on dating or being in a relationship with someone with HIV was more mixed – ranging from out-right rejection, to more sympathetic views.

“Society doesn’t lack girls who are organised and have learned about family planning. For them – they don’t fear diseases, but they don’t want pregnancies.”

Key factors:

Young people reported that fear of contracting STIs and HIV is lower than among their parent’s generation (explaining to some degree the preference for P2 over condoms.) This was, they described due to the increasing availability of PrEP. However, as reported in CARE's recent report: *Kenya Norms Diagnosis'* study, young people remain scared about confirming their status, – and getting tested, and asking their partners to get tested isn’t yet the norm.

“

Long ago, people were like ‘sex is meant for marriage’. We weren’t allowed to set our eyes on boys unless they were siblings. Our generation? If you someone is interested in you, it’s just simple communication: ‘I’ve been seeing you, I know we are not dating, but we can just have that one night.

In-depth Interview, Female, Mombasa

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MONEY & WORK: IN A TOUGH ECONOMY YOUNG MEN STRUGGLE WITH THE PRESSURE TO PROVIDE

The (emerging) new normal: ‘Men and women should have equal access to formal work’

Young Kenyans are navigating a challenging economic landscape. Over the last five years, young people have reported a fall in their average incomes, while the cost of essentials has continued to rise. An increasing number of boys and girls report that they’re having to earn income to support their parents and siblings.

In this fast-evolving context, more and more young people believe that men and women should have equal access to formal work opportunities. But the pressure for men to be the primary providers persists, and as that pressure builds, so too do young men’s feelings of frustration, isolation and injustice.

The norm:

Most young people, across demographics, said that they believe all young people should have equal access to ‘white-collar’ (or formal) work, in the same way that they should have equal access to education. As described by young people, this emerging norm is being enabled by changes in school curriculums and in family dynamics, and in some ways advanced by an economic environment that requires more young people to work to support their households. This marks a shift away from traditional gender norms, in which women were not expected to work outside of the home or to contribute financially to household incomes.



“It’s not that gender equality has been fully realised, but there is progress, and it’s becoming more understood. For example, in the past, they used to say mechanics was a job for men, but I personally have met female mechanics who perform those tasks even better than boys. So, I see there’s that development.”

— Focus Group, Mombasa, mixed group (18-24)

“Of course, I don’t expect you to call a man to do laundry for you. Again, if you want these manual jobs done, you need men more.”

— Focus Group, Meru, Boys (15-17)



Key factors:

Young women did, however, report that traditional gender roles persist in the world of work. They said that girls and women were less likely to be hired and/or paid fairly than their male counterparts. They also reported incidences of sexual harassment, and a range of gendered expectations on how they should dress and behave in the workplace. Despite increasing belief in equality of access to formal work, opinions were more divided about the types of ‘blue-collar’ and informal work men and women should do. More ‘physically demanding’ work, for example, was described as inappropriate for young women.

Overall, as research by CARE underlines, there are conditions to this emerging new norm; for example, married women report needing the support of their husbands to work – and ownership of assets (for example of land and housing) remains concentrated with boys and men. However, girls and young women contributing to their households’ incomes was correlated with increased decision-making power over household finances.



‘It's just about us girls continuing to do those odd jobs that had been set aside for boys, and boys doing the same—(nowadays there are even boys working in hotels)...Even though people are talking or saying whatever – just continue with what you're doing because, in time, it will become normal.



In-depth interview | Kisumu

MONEY & WORK: IN A TOUGH ECONOMY YOUNG MEN STRUGGLE WITH THE PRESSURE TO PROVIDE

Embedded: ‘Men and boys must provide for themselves, their families and their partners’

The norm:

Despite some shifts in this area, young people consistently asserted that boys and young men are still expected to provide for themselves and their families from an early age – and to become the primary providers for their partners and their own children. As soon as boys approach puberty, families expect them to start earning. While an increasing number of girls reported either having to (in rural areas) or wanting to (in urban areas) earn money to support themselves and their families, they also felt they were allowed to be more dependent on parents and to remain at home, even at an older age. However as adolescent boys age, their value is seen as tied to their ability to be the primary provider for their partners. This was perhaps most clearly expressed through the phrase ‘Mwanaume ni pesa’ (a man is money).

“Your parent sees that you’ve grown a beard, and they say: ‘hey, get to work; you’re a man just like me.’ If your parent pays your fees and you’re still asking for pocket money, you should be punished. But you find that with girls, they’re still at home, even if they’re grown.”

— Focus Group, Nairobi, Boys (15–17)

Key factors:

Young people described an associated and deep-seated expectation for men and boys to be seen as ‘strong’ and ‘resilient’, proven through becoming independent from their families from a young age (particularly in lower-resource settings). Young men talked about learning this role by observing their fathers and other adult role models, and at times having to adopt that role when fathers were absent.

MONEY & WORK: IN A TOUGH ECONOMY YOUNG MEN STRUGGLE WITH THE PRESSURE TO PROVIDE

Strengthening: Young men are struggling under financial pressure to provide – they feel ignored and deprioritised

Young people (including girls) reported that the 'man must provide' norm is putting undue pressure on boys and men in a tough economic environment. Boys talked about having to drop out of school to start earning money (sometimes against their parents' wishes) and feeling forced to earn an income by whatever means necessary – including by committing petty crimes. Others correlated this pressure to provide with an increase in mental health problems and gambling. Young men and boys were also beginning to describe this pressure as unfair: why do boys have to provide, when girls can work too? They correlated their frustration with a sense that the 'boychild' in general is being ignored and deprioritised, by government and NGO programmes that are seen to prioritise girls.

Many girls similarly expressed concern for the 'boychild'. As one young girl in Nairobi put it to us: *'The boychild needs to be talked to because you see the life of a boy now, either he becomes a thief or he ends up as nothing.'* As we explored in Part 1, the combination of this feeling of pressure and the perception of unfair treatment risks fuelling a backlash against gender equality programming. The pressure to provide is also having significant effects on relationship dynamics and gender-based violence, as we'll explore in the next section. It is also important to note that girls, too, described experiencing pressure to earn an income – and, in a difficult economic environment, transactional sex was seen as a relatively normalised route to making money.





‘When you empower a woman, you empower the community.’ That’s where the discrimination against boys starts. Whether a boy studies or not, he has to provide. He has to hustle. We’ve placed burdens on boys that they’re the ones who should go out and work hard for the family. We forget that girls can also hustle and provide. It all starts in the community.

Focus group, Nairobi, Mixed (18–24)

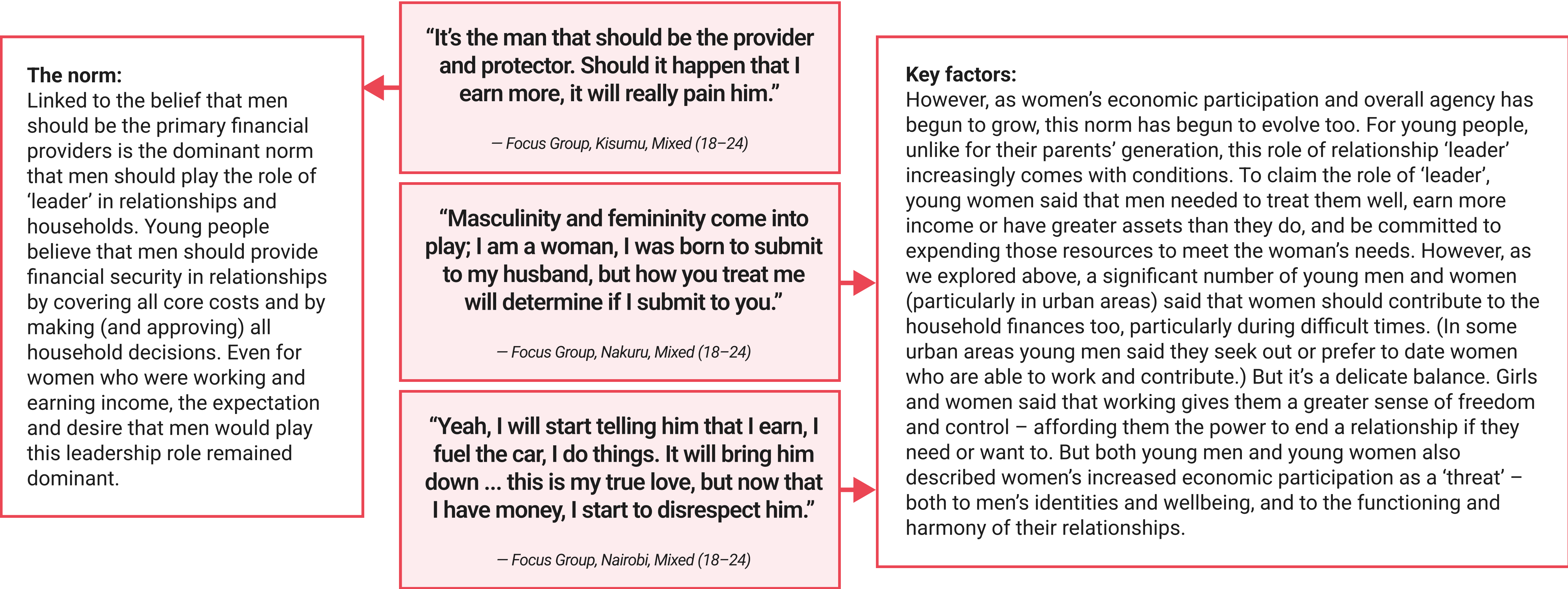


RELATIONSHIPS & GBV: YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE GRADUAL SHIFTS TO LONG-HELD NORMS

Embedded but evolving: ‘Men should lead in relationships’ (but they have to earn it)

Young Kenyans are in the process of re-thinking a range of norms, from education to sex and work. But as we’ve seen, the cornerstone norms that underpin gender roles and equality in relationships remain deeply rooted, embedded and even aspirational. Young people overwhelmingly say that (even as women start to earn more) they want men to continue to play

the role of primary provider and protector. Young people say they like traditional gender roles within relationships. However, changes in views on equality of access to education and work are having effects – and gradual shifts are starting to take place, generating some challenge and conflict.



RELATIONSHIPS & GBV: YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE GRADUAL SHIFTS TO LONG-HELD NORMS

Strengthening: ‘Gender-based violence (outside marriage) is wrong’

The norm:

Across almost every demographic and region (particularly in urban areas), young Kenyans condemned acts of gender-based and intimate partner violence, particularly in casual relationships, outside of marriage. Many young people reported that their parents and families are now more likely to encourage their daughters to leave violent relationships, and allow them to return home. This marks a shift in attitudes. There was, however, a consistent perception that incidences of violence are increasing, and as CARE reports, young women feeling safe to seek support is not yet normalised.

“Our parents are working hard, have raised you well, and obviously, you also want a good life, right? They say, ‘my daughter – don’t settle for less’. As soon as he beats her – ‘come back home’.”

— Focus Group, Nakuru, mixed group

“Right now, it’s hard to find someone who provides. So, if you see her accepting to be beaten, it’s because she is gaining from him.”

— Focus Group, Nakuru, mixed group

“Violence in a relationship – that is foolishness. But for marriage though, some people support it, but I don’t support it.”

— Focus Group, Nakuru, mixed group

“You should have just said that you didn’t want it the previous day – but you came, now you’re just facing the consequences.”

— Focus Group, Nakuru, mixed group

Key factors:

Views around intimate partner violence are tied to norms around economic participation and financial provision. With some consistency, young people explained cases of violence through the lens of money. If the man is the primary provider in a marriage, it confers authority over the female partner, and makes acts of violence explainable, if not acceptable. Some women described ‘supporting’ some level of abuse or violence to ‘correct’ behaviour, as a natural part of the leadership role. More universally, young people described violence in relationships as sometimes ‘unwillingly’ caused by financial stress and the pressure to provide.

Women’s ability to leave an abusive relationship is tied to their economic independence. Older women in urban areas reported that they would feel more able to leave an abusive relationship if they had financial independence, while younger women in lower-resource contexts said they’d have to weigh their children’s needs against the need to leave.

Young people also accepted or explained violence in instances where a partner had been unfaithful – or when initial consent for sex had been given and then withdrawn. The concept of consent was described and understood in different ways; some described consent to mean ‘permission that can be withdrawn at any point’. But even that definition was contextual. For example, a girl or woman going to a man’s house was interpreted as consent that couldn’t be withdrawn.

RELATIONSHIPS & GBV: YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE GRADUAL SHIFTS TO LONG-HELD NORMS

Emerging: Young people believe that women are increasingly violent towards their partners

Young Kenyans (particularly in Meru) reported a perception that, while most cases of intimate partner violence are perpetrated by men, cases of violence by women are increasing. This perceived trend was viewed as a consequence of equality, female economic participation and shifts in gender norms. As one girl put it: *'Maybe you've married me, but you're not providing anything, but you want to be the one in command, while you're not participating – there's going to be some conflict.'* Many said that boys and men are less likely to report or talk about their experience of violence because of social stigma, and therefore these cases require more attention.

Reports of this perception are tied to the 'zero-sum' thinking model: that as women gain equality, they necessarily pose a threat, both financially and socially, to men.

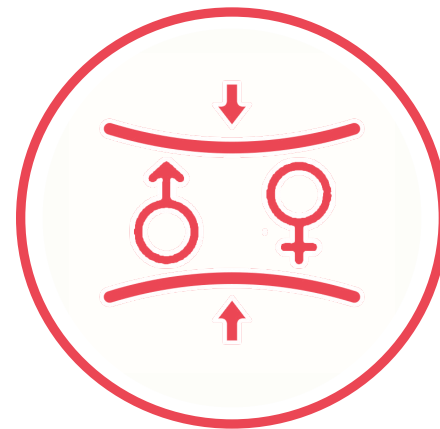


CHECK-POINT: TELL STORIES ROOTED IN REALITY & POWERED BY REALATABLE 'HEROES'



01. Root our stories in reality

Young people in Kenya are navigating a tough environment. Far too many feel lost, alone and misunderstood, and trapped in a system that isn't working for them. The stories we tell must be rooted in that reality: *'We see you, we get you, we understand what you're dealing with'*. They should be authentic, imperfect stories of change and hope.



02. Validate the pressures young woman and men are under

Part of reflecting reality means validating the experiences of all young people – including adolescent boys and young men. Drawing on the real-life experiences and descriptions explored here, our stories should bring to life how unfair systems and a range of restrictive gender norms (like the pressure on boys to provide) are limiting all young people's potential and stopping them from living their best lives.



03. Share relatable real 'hero' stories

Our stories should be animated by ordinary characters, navigating the messy everyday challenges, opportunities and aspirations of being young and Kenyan. But they should be animated by everyday 'hero' characters too, who bring to life the outliers or 'positive deviant' stories of young Kenyans who are challenging restrictive and harmful norms. These could range from the boys and young men who are asking for support from friends, to the big brothers calling out violence on behalf of their sisters, to the women and girls earning money to help ease the financial pressure in their households or starting their own businesses to build their power and live the life they want.

1. The Big Picture: How young people think about equality and identity
2. Mapping the cornerstone norms influencing: Education, money & work, sex, HIV, relationship & GBV
3. Reference groups and drivers of change

3.

REFERENCE GROUPS AND DRIVERS OF CHANGE

EQUALITY AND FREEDOM GROW IN THE 'OUTSIDE' WORLD

Throughout our conversations and analysis, young people described greater gender equality and freedom in the outside world: at work, at school and outside their immediate communities. This happened both in descriptions of first-hand experience, and in their perceptions of how gender equality is playing out in their communities. In the 'outside' world, particularly in the world of work, gender equality is often described as evolving – fast. However, gender norms and roles were described through a much more traditional lens within the household. Even young people who expressed support for re-thinking traditional norms in the outside world described the need to preserve distinct gender roles within the household, and particularly within a marriage. This was echoed both by partners and by descriptions of parents and family.

Similarly, more taboo 'change' in gender roles or equality was frequently associated with 'more' urban areas, outside of young people's immediate communities.



“Out there you might be the CEO – maybe my wife might be the CEO out there, I may be just another commoner out there, but in the house, we are husband and wife.”

— FGD | Nakuru | Mixed group (18-24)

NORM HOLDERS AND REFERENCE GROUPS EVOLVE OVER TIME

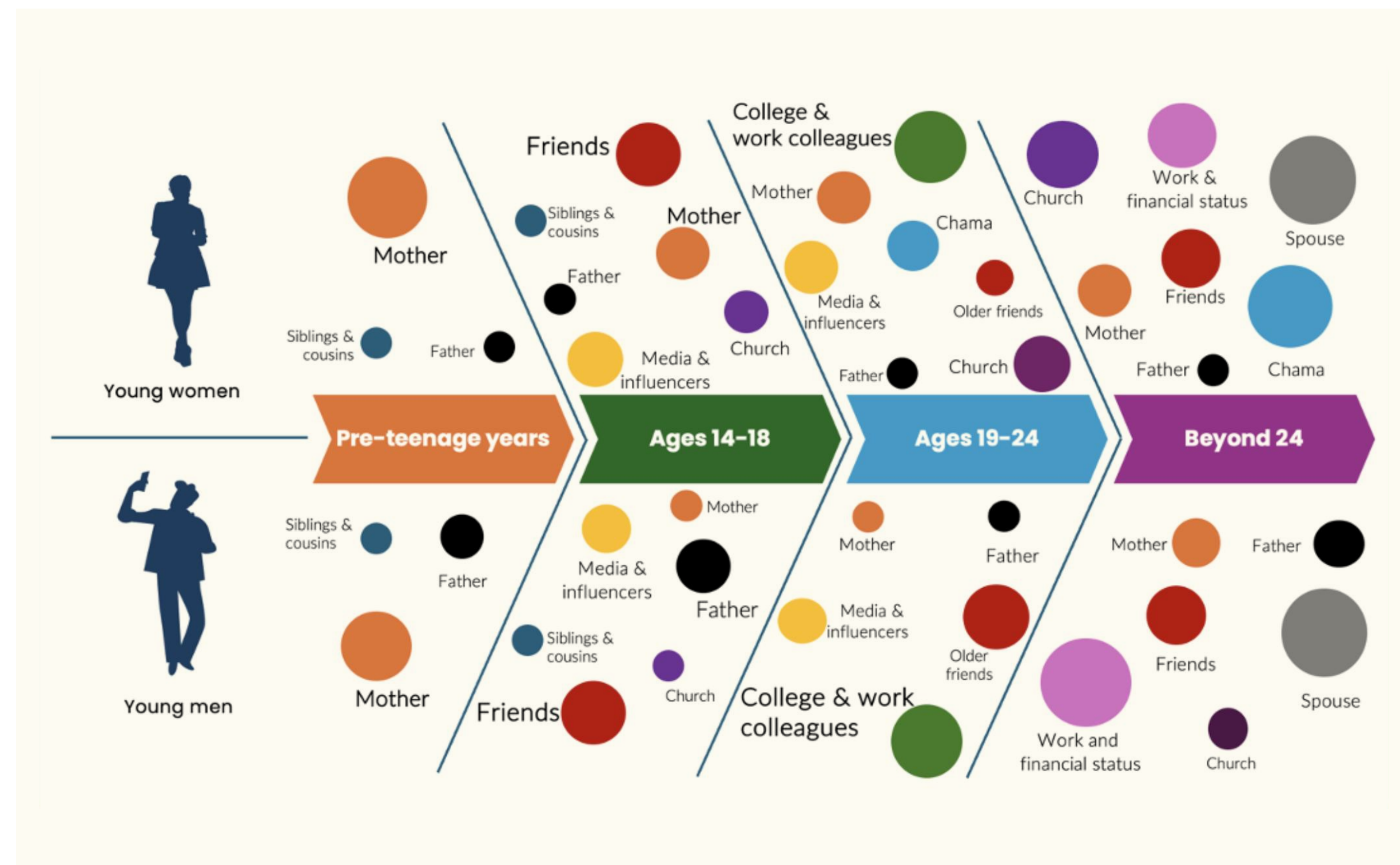
Young people reported that the people, groups and communities that shape their understanding of gender norms change over the course of their lives. In workshops across the country, we worked with young Kenyans to describe the journey of who influences their behaviour over time:

Pre-teen years: Young people described their **mother** as the strongest influence on their behaviour and their understanding of gender norms.

Age 14–18: The mother's influence persists (particularly for girls), and after initiation, the father's influence becomes stronger on boys. Young people described their **friends** (including socialising at church) as increasingly influential, along with **print, TV and digital media** (and online influencers, within the limitations of access and budgets).

Age 19–24: **School and work friends** are overwhelmingly influential at this stage, with chama savings groups and informal reference groups playing a key role. **Media** of all forms becomes increasingly influential, and **church** and the role of the mothers recurs for women, as they start to have children.

Beyond 24: Young people described greater independence and autonomy over their beliefs later in life – but **peer networks** and **media** remain significant.



THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE: COMMUNITY GROUPS, SIBLINGS, PEERS SUMMARY

Malik, a 23-year-old from Dandora, escaped a life of crime, drugs, and the streets to build a new future through hard work and hustle. After losing friends to violence and facing his own crossroads, he found hope through a community rehab center and the support of his siblings. Today, Malik runs his own thrifted clothing business, choosing every day to chase his dreams instead of falling back into his old life. His journey is proof that no matter how dark your past, you can always fight for a brighter future.

My name is Malik, I'm 23 years old and I come from Dandora. I sell second-hand clothes, a hustle I picked up from my big brother and sister who inspired me to get into the business. Growing up, I was a bit of a troublemaker. Life at home wasn't easy. My parents had a complicated relationship, always breaking up and getting back together. As the last born, I often had to choose who to stay with whenever things fell apart.

By the time I was finishing primary school age 13, I'd had enough. I decided to leave home and ended up living on the streets. I didn't have a permanent place to stay, so I'd sleep by the vibandas (kiosks) around my neighborhood. My siblings were mostly away in boarding school, so I was out there on my own. Eventually, I got involved with a group in another hood. We were stealing and robbing just to survive. Along the way, drugs became part of our routine. That lifestyle felt normal then, but it came at a high cost. I lost two close friends from the gang, and the gang leader was eventually gunned down. That was a turning point for me. It shook me and made me question everything that is my choices, my future, my purpose. I went back to Dandora and laid low. Luckily, I got back just in time. There were community centers rehabilitating boys like me, guys caught up in drugs and crime. After rehab, I was enrolled in a school out of town to give me a distance from my past and a chance to start fresh.

That's where I met people who inspired me, who were focused, who had dreams, and who believed in working hard for them. They encouraged me to stay in school and keep pushing. During the holidays, I'd join my siblings at their hustle selling clothes. They showed me the ropes, and I started loving it. After high school, I asked my parents and siblings to support me so I could start my own thrift business. It hasn't been easy, especially with how tough the economy is, but I keep showing up every day. I never want to go back to that life I left behind. Now, I'm more intentional about the kind of friends I keep. Back then, we used to make dumb bets about girls, some of my friends even got girls pregnant over those bets. I see now how wrong that was. These days, I make better choices. I've come a long way, and I'm proud of the man I'm becoming.

THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE: COMMUNITY GROUPS SUMMARY

At just 18, Nancy from Eastleigh refused to let teenage pregnancy define her future. After facing rejection, judgment, and losing financial support, she fought back—joining young mothers' groups, hustling through casual jobs, and building a life for her baby. Against all odds, she returned to school and is now proudly in Form 4, chasing her dreams. Nancy is determined to rewrite her story—and create a powerful new future for herself, her child, and her mother.

My name is Nancy. I'm 18 years old and I live in Eastleigh in Nairobi. I'm a mum to a one-year-old baby. I got pregnant while I was in Form 3 aged 17. Before that, my mother used to always remind me to stay away from boys and focus on school. But I thought I was grown and knew what I was doing. My sister used to tell me, "If you're going to have a boyfriend, at least let him have money to take care of you."

Eventually, I met a guy who had a job. He'd buy me clothes and even give me a small allowance. I felt seen, cared for. But then I got pregnant. I faced judgment from all directions, women in my community, teachers, even some schoolmates. Everyone expected me to be in school, studying to better my life and help my mother at home, not raising a child. My mum and sister were disappointed, especially after all the advice they gave me. I moved in with my boyfriend until I gave birth. Then I returned home so my mum could help me with the baby. At first, my boyfriend was financially supportive, but with time, he stopped helping. That's when life got even tougher. Eventually, I joined a young mothers' group in my community, and another initiative supported by Child Services of Kenya.

These groups really helped, they not only connected us to work opportunities but also provided childcare support, which meant I could actually go out and earn something. I started doing laundry jobs in nearby neighborhoods like Mathare and Majengo. The little I made helped support my mom and my baby. My dream was always to go back to school once my child finished exclusive breastfeeding, and I did. I'm now back in school, in Form 4. I'm determined to finish and get my certificate. To me, that certificate is more than just a piece of paper, it's my steppingstone to a better future. I want a better life for my child and for my mom, who has been my biggest support system through it all.

CONCLUSION

A CHANCE TO TELL A NEW STORY ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY WITH KENYA'S GEN Z

Young people's perceptions of the economy, politics and governance weren't part of the scope of this research. But the particular social, economic and political context of this work have infused every element of it. Across every topic area, we encountered a generation of young people who are navigating an incredibly challenging economic environment – but who, in the wake of once-in-a-generation protests, are in the process of discovering and understanding their power.

In our conversations and workshops, we met young people in the process of challenging and rethinking many of the systems, stories and norms that their parents' generation have believed in – from the type of work they do, to the role of sex and marriage, to relationship dynamics and education, to their understanding of gender equality.

A lot of this re-thinking is live, contested and challenging, but it's part of a longer process to build the future young people want.

Young Kenyans are at a cross-roads. Support for greater equality might be growing, but so is the backlash. The 'manosphere' is telling a powerful, divisive story that risks taking hold: where gender equality poses a threat to boys and young men in an already scarce environment. Instead, we have an opportunity to work with young Kenyans to tell a story about gender equality that's rooted in reality and reflects their values: 'When you rise, I rise.'

ABOUT SURROUND SOUND KENYA

As we look to the future, our ambition is clear: to scale ‘Surround Sound Kenya’ into a truly transformative force that reshapes gender norms and empowers a generation. We have the reach, the innovation, and the momentum. What we need now is the backing to take this proven model further and deeper—into every county, every community, and every conversation. The opportunity is historic.

Join us in amplifying young voices, challenging harmful narratives, and rewriting the story of gender equality in Kenya—together, we can create lasting, systemic change.

If you would like more information about the findings in this report or about Surround Sound Kenya, please contact:

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