

Hustling over the life course: Reconciling cultural norms and socio-economic realities for young mothers in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on qualitative interviews with 50 mothers and 31 fathers from the *Jamaa na Afya ya Mtoto* (JAMO) project to examine the role of “hustling” in romantic relationships and motherhood in low-income communities in Nairobi, Kenya. Using a life-course lens and grounded in the “doing gender” framework, we explore how young mothers engage in hustling to pursue socially recognized adulthood. Thematic analysis reveals two key forms: hustling in motherhood—balancing caregiving with income generation—and hustling in marriage—legitimizing unions through bridewealth involvement and endurance. In a context of economic precarity and limited institutional support, hustling becomes not only a survival strategy but also a gendered practice through which adulthood is performed, reinforced, and at times subtly contested. This study highlights how young adults navigate fragmented life-course trajectories amid shifting gender expectations and material conditions, ultimately reshaping emerging norms around gender, work, and family in low-income urban settings in Africa.

1. Introduction

“Eliza Samba, a widow and mother of three, has spent the past four years working as a shopkeeper, house help, waitress and laundrywoman since losing her husband. She often goes for several days without an income because she can’t find work every day (Kimega, 2021).”

Eliza Samba’s circumstance, as described in a Nairobi newspaper, is a poignant example of what ‘hustling’ looks like in practice: never-ending hard work to piece together daily survival. Given the growing number of urban poor in Kenya, her situation is common and increasingly the focus of media attention. However, Eliza’s hustling would have likely persisted even if her husband were alive, because hustling encompasses not only economic survival but the process of attaining social standing through performing her roles as a wife and mother. While academic interest in the ‘hustling’ concept to understand the precarious lives of young adults in low-income African contexts (Naomi, 2021; Thieme, 2018) has grown, much of the focus centers on the livelihood strategies of men. In this paper, we draw on qualitative data from the *Jamaa na*

Afya ya Mtoto (JAMO) project to explore how hustling unfolds in the lives of young mothers (ages 18–29) in two low-income areas of Nairobi, Kenya. In doing so, we offer hustling as an alternative conceptualization for life course research that normally centers transitions into discrete stages (Johnson et al., 2007; Shanahan, 2000; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). The paper begins by defining “hustling” and exploring its relevance to life course research. It then situates the concept within existing literature, emphasizing its gendered dynamics. The subsequent section describes the study site, sample, and analytic approach. Following this, the findings are presented in two sections—examining how young mothers ‘do hustling’ in motherhood and in marriage. Finally, the discussion reflects on the broader implications of these findings, situating them within theoretical debates on gender, agency, and life course transitions.

2. What is “hustling”?

Hustling has various meanings but, generally, is understood as a

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response to economic uncertainty. Some use ‘hustle’ or ‘hustle culture’ as a noun to denote a context in which sustaining gainful employment, both formal and informal (Griffith, 2019; Van Doorn & Velthuis, 2018), or holding multiple jobs as in the case of the gig economy in the US (Cuervo et al., 2024; Ravenelle, 2019), is the goal. While frequently used to characterize marginalized groups, it is relevant for anyone striving for economic success including highly educated individuals engaged in “white-collar hustle” (Walker, 2019; Yarrow, 2021). However, the identity of being a hustler (Thieme et al., 2021; Zollmann, 2021) is likely more applicable to those in the informal economy or the working class. A variation has been put forth by Thieme (2018), who describes it as the blend of daily survival struggles, social interactions, and opportunistic behaviors that arise in the absence of formal institutional support, particularly in low-income communities. While “hustling” can be used by both men and women to describe and express specific practices and experiences, it is more often than not associated with men. Men more frequently use “hustle” to describe gender-specific experiences related to the hardship of obtaining socially recognized male roles, often connected with the male provider norm (Hunter, 2006). They also link their ability to hustle with a gendered sense of self and “masculinity” (Naomi, 2021).

The concept has gained notable traction in academic work situated in urban Africa to better understand how young people display agency in navigating acute crises and chronic uncertainty. This process involves defying established rules and exploring alternative pathways to access not only essential services but other material goods. For instance, in Monteith and Mirembe (2021), we witness how Mirembe hustles in his role as a moneylender and his strategic adoption of an LGBTQ identity to seek asylum and UNHCR support in Kenya. Chulek (2020) applies hustling to examine the trash picking industry in Nairobi as a means to build stability and social connections for slum dwellers. Anwar et al. (2023) investigates Nairobi’s ride-hailing drivers’ resilience during COVID-19, showing how they diversified into street trading and off-app services to survive economic precarity. Notably, the majority of these examples focus on men (Monteith & Mirembe, 2021), and even when women are included in the analytical sample, male interviewees’ responses remain the primary focus of the discussions (Anwar et al., 2023; Chulek, 2020), highlighting the gendered nature of the concept and its predominant association with men. Lastly, it is important to mention that ‘hustling’ has taken on political salience in Kenya. For instance, the dichotomy of “hustlers vs dynasties,” effectively utilized by the current president, William Ruto, during his election campaign, is considered to be an emerging form of class-based identity politics in Kenya, rivaling ethnicity which has long dominated Kenyan politics (Muga, 2020).

The portrayal of hustling is complicated and almost always centered on economic behavior in contexts of uncertainty and resource scarcity. On one hand, it is often framed as an alternative to informality, marginality, and inferiority, all of which emphasize deficiencies, to highlight instead the agency individuals exhibit in adapting to changing circumstances. On the other hand, the romanticization of ‘hustling,’ through rags-to-riches narratives in media or books, risks distracting attention from the structural problems that compel people to engage in ‘hustling’ in the first place. Throughout this paper, our approach aims neither to denigrate nor romanticize. Instead, we focus on the experiences of young mothers, portraying them not as dependents reliant on the male provider, but as motivated agents who exhibit perseverance and diligence in navigating their socio-economic realities to fulfill societal expectations of being a “good mother” and achieving adulthood.

2.1. Gendered ‘Hustling’ in life course research

‘Hustling’ has been used to describe the structural constraints and agentic behaviors involved in political or economic practices in the absence of institutional support, but its strength also lies in its ability to illuminate the agentic practice of young people as they navigate social status and strive for recognition as “adults” (Thieme, 2018). In

particular, “hustling” can contribute to life course research in social contexts where conventional discrete life course transition markers—such as leaving school, securing employment, establishing independent residence, marriage or cohabitation, and parenthood—are less clear. While recent work on “waithood” recognizes the challenges of attaining these milestones (Honwana, 2012; Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2020; Mains, 2013; Sommers, 2012), it falls short in elucidating the volatility and concurrence of multiple roles. Increasing variability in life trajectories, including transitions to adulthood and self-perceptions of adulthood (Eliason et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2007; Mortimer & Moen, 2016; Shanahan, 2000), highlights the need for such frameworks.

This is particularly salient in settings characterized by poor quality education and school drop out, high under and unemployment, unstable romantic relationships and young parenthood, along with kinship support that is not assured at all times. Young adults in such settings often struggle to reconcile the expectations of their communities in performing adulthood with their capabilities. In other words, young people are acutely aware of what defines an “adult” or the traits of a “good adult” and the social status that accompanies attainment of key life course transition markers such as marriage and parenthood (Eliason et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2007; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). Family formation serves not only as an important subjective criterion for ‘feeling like an adult’ at an individual level (Eliason et al., 2015) but also as a socially recognized marker of adulthood. However, early parenthood, when not accompanied by other markers of adulthood such as stable employment or educational completion, often fails to confer full recognition of adult status and may instead be stigmatized, reflecting the expectations of achieving adulthood at the ‘right’ time under socially sanctioned conditions.

Hustling, therefore, can be viewed as a set of agentic practices to attain some, albeit incomplete, version of adulthood. While the bulk of scholarship on hustling has focused on young men’s struggles to meet masculinity norms (Finn & Oldfield, 2015; Naomi, 2021; Schmidt, 2024; Smith, 2017; Swartz & Bhana, 2009), there are notable exceptions, including Chernoff’s (2003) exploration of “hustling” as a livelihood strategy for Ghanaian *ashawo* (bar girls) and Bocast’s (2023) study of young university women in Uganda engaging in “transactional sex” to pay tuition. Other work of note includes Honwana’s (2012) work on women involved in cross-border small-scale trade, and Steedman and Brydges’s (2023) study of female filmmakers and designers in Nairobi, Kenya. Our analysis contributes to this emerging focus on women by broadening the conceptualization of hustling to encompass the totality of women’s lived experiences—not only as economic actors, but also as individuals negotiating complex social expectations around marriage, motherhood, and employment in their pursuit of economic security and social legitimacy over the life course.

To do so, we draw on the concept of “doing gender,” defined by West and Zimmerman (1987) as the process of “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’” (p. 126). This process is enacted routinely across diverse contexts, in both private and public spheres, through interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions. Idealized images of a “good husband,” “good wife,” “good father,” and “good mother”—often tied to cultural scripts of adulthood—are themselves sustained and reproduced through such gendered performances.

Within this framework, hustling thus takes two broad forms: striving to fulfill traditional ideals through non-traditional means, or working to reconcile these ideals within uncertain socio-economic realities. Both forms require significant physical and emotional effort, especially when resources are scarce and social expectations are layered and often in tension. While studies of young fathers often emphasize the first form, our data highlight the second: young mothers working to fulfill caregiver roles while also adapting to economic necessity. The gendered nature of hustling also differs. For young men, hustling to provide economically often aligns directly with norms of good fatherhood,

building on existing masculinity norms. In contrast, women's hustling is layered with contradictions. While earning income may be necessary for caregiving, this economic role does not traditionally fit the image of the "good mother," or the "good wife" by threatening provider masculinity.

In sum, hustling arises in contexts marked by structural constraints and minimal institutional support—often in precarious, marginalized urban communities shaped by intersecting inequalities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Hustling functions not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a mode of identity, signaling resilience and agency amid limited opportunities. Young adults who hustle frequently navigate non-linear, fragmented life course trajectories distinct from a delayed entry into adulthood. They are often recognized as adults in some respects but denied full status as "good" adults in deeply gendered ways.

3. Data/methods

This paper draws on data from the JAMO project, a longitudinal study of the role of kinship support and marriage on infant and child development. The study comprises six waves of survey and three rounds of qualitative data collection starting with a sample of 1203 mothers aged 18–29 with at least 1 child 0–24 months. Details of the project and survey sample can be found at (<https://www.jamokenya.org>). Our sample is not nationally representative. JAMO is based in two low-income urban informal settlements in Nairobi: Korogocho and Viwandani. Both communities are characterized by inadequate housing, limited living space, insufficient infrastructure for clean water and sanitation, hygiene challenges, and precarious accommodation tenure (Un-Habitat, 2006). Fig. 1

For this analysis, we focus on the first round of qualitative data, collected from purposively selected subsample of 50 mothers included in the survey, and 31 men (30 biological fathers of the focal child, and one

current partner), resulting in 31 dyads, as each father was reached through an interviewed mother. The longitudinal qualitative subsample was selected first by drawing a random $\frac{1}{4}$ sample of survey respondents following wave 1 data collection, then stratifying by site, and purposively sampling on key explanatory variables to capture a range in levels of kinship support (based on number of reported kin who provide monetary or childcare support) and "union strength" across four major ethnic groups. By union strength, we selected women across a reported range in couple relationship quality (measured across four domains), and the extent to which their marriage had been formalized — defined as the steps through which a union attains social legitimacy — ranging from living together to introductions to kin, to more formal processes including wedding ceremonies. Of 85 women initially selected for recruitment, 50 agreed to round 1 qualitative interviews, as did 31 of their partners. Our qualitative subsample was not significantly different from the overall survey sample with respect to mean age, number of children, or employment status, but they slightly lower educational attainment.

The interviews covered a range of topics including relationship history, relationship quality, types and levels of kin support, stress and coping strategies, willingness to work, and perceptions of the qualities of a good wife or husband. These interviews were conducted individually and privately in a semi-structured format by four qualified research assistants who were prior or current residents of these communities. [Table 1]

We prepared the data for both thematic and narrative analysis. Simultaneously transcribed and translated interviews were uploaded into Atlas.ti for thematic analysis coding. We began with deductive codes derived from our semi-structured interview guide, reflecting key topics discussed in the interviews, as well as codes generated during earlier formative work conducted in the community. The analysis was carried out by a team of Kenyan and U.S. based researchers, including

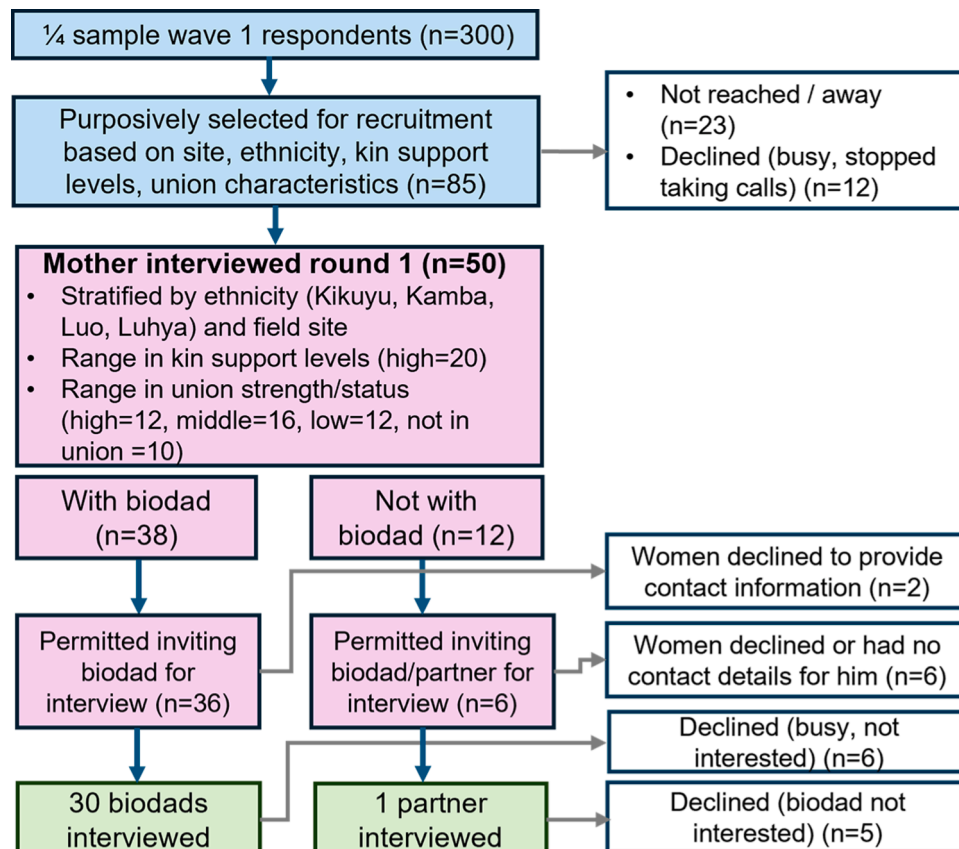


Fig. 1. Sample selection for qualitative sub-sample.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of qualitative sample, JAMO Round 1.

	Mothers(n = 50)
Age (mean)	25
Ethnicity (%/N)	
Kamba	24.0 (12)
Kikuyu	22.0 (11)
Luhya	26.0 (13)
Luo	24.0 (12)
Somali/Borana	4.0 (2)
Education level (%/N)	
Primary	48.0 (24)
Secondary	44.0 (22)
Tertiary	6.0 (3)
Employment Status (%/N)	
Formal	8.0 (4)
Informal	18.0 (9)
Unemployed	74.0 (37)
Earn > 5000 KES (~35 USD)/month	6.0 (3)
Mean age of focal child (months)	13.4
Mean number of children	2.0
In union (%/N)	80.0 (40)
Level of Union Formalization (n = 40)	
None	5.0 (2)
Cohabitation only	7.5 (3)
Introduction to partner's family	50.0 (20)
Formal processes (e.g. bride wealth paid)	15.0 (6)
Kinship support above mean (%/N)	40.0 (20)
Relationship Quality Quartiles (%/N)	
Bottom 25 %	25.5 (10)
Middle 50 %	58.9 (23)
Top 25 %	15.4 (6)

the interviewers. We held weekly calls to discuss approaches and ensure consistency in coding. As the analysis progressed, additional inductive codes were added to the list following team discussions and consensus. This collaborative process was essential for coding all 80 interviews effectively. In addition, each transcript was reduced into a narrative summary that offers a holistic account of the participant's experiences, with a focus on participants' accounts of their marriage history, current relationship quality, and experiences navigating the demands of family, employment, and motherhood or fatherhood. These summaries served as the basis for thematic narrative analysis—wherein the meaning of key experiences (e.g., marriage processes) are compared across participants' accounts. To enhance the credibility of our analysis, field interviewers independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and drafted narrative summaries, which were then compared with those created by the research team.

Drawing from the narrative summaries and selected codes, we searched for common themes across the entire interview set (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Initially, we reviewed all 80 narrative summaries to gain a general understanding of how relationships began, their quality, the extent to which unions were formalized, the type of work mothers engaged in, how mothers perceived their work, and their partners' views toward it. Building on the themes identified in the narrative summaries, we concentrated on codes related to union formalization, relationship quality, the male provider norm, the mother's work, her partner's evaluation of her working, and his employment. We then examined text that had been coded with both the above codes as well as codes capturing participants' perceptions of the concepts of "good father" and "good mother." Additionally, during a week-long analysis workshop with the interviewer team we discussed the notion of gendered hustling. The field team's in-depth understanding of the social context of the study sites, participants, and cultural scripts, such as the male provider norm, meant their insights, comments, and feedback were invaluable to this paper. This process led to the identification of two main themes related to how young mothers' hustle in different domains of their lives.

4. Results

Our primary argument in this paper is that hustling to meet economic needs is generally sufficient for men, given the centrality of economic provision in 'doing gender' for men, but not for women. While the economic dimension also applies to women, we argue that they must additionally hustle to fulfill the roles of marriage and motherhood. Accordingly, our findings are organized into two sections: hustling in motherhood and hustling in marriage.

4.1. Hustling in motherhood

To understand the theme of 'hustling in motherhood', we first need to understand *esteemed motherhood* in these communities. Traditionally, a "good" mother is seen as performing the roles of doting homemaker and child caregiver. Financial contribution, if expected, is generally confined to household budgeting and small-scale domestic production, and assumes the presence of a reliable male provider.

However, in contemporary urban Nairobi—particularly among young mothers in low-income communities—performing "good motherhood" is becoming increasingly unattainable. Many male partners face chronic unemployment or underemployment and cannot consistently fulfill the breadwinner role. As a result, young mothers must hustle—not only to make ends meet, but also to uphold their identities as good mothers and responsible adults. This introduces tension as it often requires mothers to stretch traditional expectations to include financial contribution, while also balancing evolving demands within the gendered dynamics of their relationships.

For example, some women are wary of working—partly due to resistance from their partners, who may see their own income as sufficient, and partly because of concerns about community perceptions, health risks associated with certain jobs, and the challenges of securing childcare.

Annette, an 18-year-old mother of two, explains this precise situation:

The income generating activity that I do, sometimes he does not feel good [about] because he thinks he will provide for everything I need, but I don't think he can provide for everything that I need. He won't provide most of what I want, and also what the kid wants, because Zedrick has more needs than me. I tell him I can't sit down and he pays rent, he feeds and buys clothes for me and the children. I have to do something that will hold me for the time being because I have a young child. After the child is grown up and I know he can stay alone the whole day, I can go to look for work, even if it is not permanent, I will still do it. For example, he might be sacked and I will pay rent that month.

Annette believes it is essential for her to work to cover basic living expenses because her husband's income is not enough. In the past, she sold cooked food and braided hair to earn money. However, at the time of the interview, she had decided to put off working until the child "had grown up" in order to fulfill the expectations of a good mother. Many mothers desire or need to work, but are wary of community approbation for not being with a child who is perceived as too young to be left with another caregiver.

The mothers in our sample who did work mostly did so in the informal sector, managing their work schedule alongside domestic responsibilities without additional support. Margaret, a 24-year-old mother of three, earns a living by doing laundry for others to help cover her family's needs, such as food and school fees. Despite her husband's disapproval, which sometimes escalates to conflict, Margaret continues to juggle her work with household responsibilities. To manage her time, she starts her day at 5:00 am, completing chores before heading out to work. Similarly, Victoria, a 25-year-old mother with one child also washes clothes for her income and has a similar schedule to Margaret. Her husband also voiced disapproval because of their child's age as explained:

He does not want [me to work] because he says the child is still young and that it hurts the child. I wonder what I will do and we can't depend on one person and he also does not have a job; he is just a hustler. ... Sometimes we can just quarrel because when something small happens and the child gets sick he will say I am the one who is making the child get hurt and she got sick because of me. He wants me to stay at home and raise the child. He disturbs me because of that.

Her disparaging description of her husband as “just a hustler” belies the complexities of doing gender in these communities and the gendered dynamics of economic contribution. While several of our male interviewees proudly self-identify as “hustlers” or “jua-kali” workers to signify their income-generating efforts, Victoria clearly does not see this as a real job or a source of stable, adequate income. As a result, she may feel less conflicted about engaging in work that offers very limited returns—typically around 200 shillings, much lower than the 500–600 shillings she considers ideal—despite the difficult working conditions.

To put this in context, a 300 ml can of soda costs approximately KSh 40–60 in most supermarkets. With 200 shillings, Victoria can afford a basic meal, such as chapati and stew. In contrast, 500–600 shillings could cover 2–3 similar meals or purchase several essential household items. Despite these challenges, she continues to work because, at the very least, it allows her to repay debts.

However, as seen in Victoria's case and echoed in other interviews, women's hustling—particularly when tied to motherhood—often fails to gain recognition from their partners. This lack of recognition can result in anything from minor quarrels to more serious conflict. Just as men's hustling does not always secure their status as providers, women's hustling does not automatically establish them as fulfilling the ideal of a “good mother.” Hustling, then, is an effort to meet gendered ideals of parenthood, but it does not guarantee success in doing so.

Across all interviews, young mothers described hustling as a daily effort to balance breadwinning and caregiving—waking early, managing household chores, and returning home in time to care for children. This balancing act reflects not just economic necessity but also a strategic negotiation of gender expectation. Many mothers framed their labor as part of performing “good motherhood,” seeking to uphold ideals of care and responsibility despite limited resources and unreliable male support. However, many men framed women's work as directly conflicting with the performance of being a good mother; and it is navigating this line that constitutes hustling in motherhood.

In addition, this same effort often places women at odds with expectations of “good wifehood,” which emphasize deference and dependency. When women act independently to meet their children's needs—particularly when men's income is unstable or insufficient—they may unintentionally threaten their partner's sense of masculine identity. In this way, *doing gender* through motherhood can lead to an unintentional *undoing of gender* within marriage.

Thus, while hustling is central to how young mothers claim moral and social legitimacy—as good mothers and responsible adults—it also exposes the gendered contradictions they must navigate. As we move to the next section, we explore how these tensions continue to shape their intimate relationships through hustling in marriage.

4.2. Hustling in marriage

While closely tied to hustling in motherhood, *hustling in marriage* reflects a distinct set of pressures—particularly those stemming from the absence of institutional support for single parents. In such contexts, the dissolution of a relationship brings steep costs for women, including financial instability, social stigma, and reduced access to resources. As a result, a significant part of women's hustling focuses on sustaining the union itself.

As Nancy, a 29-year-old mother of three, explains, the status of being ‘married’ carries significant social and financial weight:

He is important in my life because he is the head of my family, he is the father of the children. He has made me at least be able to stand before people, if you don't have a husband and you have children, you hear people saying, she is giving birth unnecessarily. But if you are with their father, there is a class you have. Also, financially [it is more stable].

Nancy's words highlight how formalized relationships offer more than material support—they confer recognition, respectability, and belonging. In this way, hustling in marriage is not only about maintaining emotional or financial ties but also about gaining legitimacy in the eyes of kin, community, and institutions—which is essential for being recognized as embodying ‘good adulthood.’

Traditionally, marriage in Kenya, as in many African contexts, followed a linear trajectory: securing work, formalizing the union through kin involvement in introductions and bride price, and then parenthood—reflecting the broader understanding of marriage as a process (Meekers, 1992; Madhavan et al., 2022; Stoebe et al., 2024). However, in many low-income urban settings, this sequence has been changed. Economic precarity and limited employment opportunities have made it increasingly difficult to secure work and save for bride price. As a result, many young couples begin families without formalizing their unions, often entering into informal “come-we-stay” relationships (Pike et al., 2018; Madhavan et al., 2022; Stoebe et al., 2024).

In these situations, where union formalization follows a non-linear trajectory, women frequently find themselves needing to hustle not only to support their children but also to legitimize their partnerships. In our interviews, many women had not yet undergone bride price payment but strongly emphasized its significance. They often described persistently reminding their partners of its importance, sometimes even offering financial support in household matters to ease the burden. This contribution, while aligned with hustling in motherhood, also reflects a strategic effort to help their partners save for bride price—a task traditionally outside the female domain.

For example, mothers, like 26 year old Millicent, strive to strengthen their relationships by encouraging or pressuring partners for bride price:

I will keep reminding him all the time. I will tell him and explain to him the importance of that issue - the importance of paying dowry. We have agreed to live together. In a relationship, it is not only one hand that gives; there needs to be two hands so that they can support each other in life. So, I can support him financially if I am able. ... We need to make our lives better and, once he is financially stable, he can pay the bride price for me.

Such accounts highlight how women's involvement in bride price—traditionally a marker of men “doing gender” through financial provision—has begun to shift. While young mothers still uphold its cultural importance, their roles in the process have become more active, ranging from verbal pressure to actual financial cooperation. Although their efforts are not directly aimed at saving for bride price, they believe their financial contributions help ease their partners' overall burden, thereby enabling them to save for it. This reconfiguration transforms bride price from an exclusively male responsibility into a shared endeavor that reinforces the social legitimacy and stability of their unions. Securing social legitimacy through bride price is not only important for women to be recognized as ‘legitimized’ or respected wives within the family, but also helps protect their children's rights and status as ‘legitimate’ members of the lineage.

Further, women's involvement complicates the symbolic meaning of the exchange, which was historically a transfer of resources from the groom's family to the bride's in exchange for rights over her reproductive and domestic labor (Horne et al., 2013). This blurring of gender roles in the domain of bride price payment exemplifies a form of “undoing gender, (Butler, 2004)” as women engage in an area traditionally reserved for men.

However, this shift does not necessarily indicate increased empowerment. Rather, it reflects the constrained choices many young mothers

face in both private and public spheres. Hustling to sustain the relationship becomes a necessary strategy, as opting out is rarely a viable option. These limitations often compel them to continue *doing gender* by embracing the ideal of the good wife through constant endurance, even under difficult circumstances. For example, 'perseverance' emerged as a recurring theme in our interviews—and notably, only women used this term to express their ongoing commitment to the relationship despite various challenges.

Pamela, a 26-year-old mother, remains committed to her relationship despite serious challenges, such as her partner's infidelity—illustrating how endurance and accommodation are central features of hustling in marriage:

There have been many changes. He still loved to party, so life started getting tough, but we persevered. There were times when I wanted to leave because I was tired, but he would come and resolve our issues, and we would continue our relationship. This pattern continued even after we had our second child, in 2010. Life continued with its challenges, and in 2016, I had our third child. Despite the challenges, we carried on. I can't deny it; their father enjoys having fun, and we navigate life together like that.

Despite the multiple ways in which the relationship has not met her expectations, she perseveres in a concerted effort to optimize her hustling to shore up a safety net. While the underlying reasons are not explicitly identified in the interviews, it is clear that the cost of failing in a relationship is high and in a context of economic precarity, the consequences for women and children are likely to be significant.

In that sense, continuing to have children with him may signify a way to commit to making the relationship work (Edin & Tach, 2011), even though this strategy may impose a higher financial burden and act as a double-edged sword—both securing commitment and increasing the cost of union dissolution in the lack of institutional support. This may place both partners under even greater economic strain, demanding more 'hustling' from both. For men, this might mean striving to fulfill the role of a provider, while for women, it may involve navigating conflicting expectations—'hustling' as a working mother to contribute economically while simultaneously taking on more household chores and care work to adhere to traditional gender roles.

These varied forms of hustling highlight the multifaceted burdens young mothers carry in navigating both economic survival and gendered ideals. In this context, traits like diligence, perseverance, and strategic negotiation are not only integral to the practice of hustling but are also deeply connected to culturally esteemed notions of 'good adulthood.'

5. Hustling, gender, and the possibility of change

The preceding sections primarily examined how young mothers—and, to a lesser extent, young fathers—engage in hustling to meet both material needs and culturally embedded expectations of adulthood. While often driven by economic necessity, hustling also operates as a practice through which gender roles are upheld, negotiated, or subtly reconfigured. For women in particular, these efforts go beyond filling gaps left by inadequate male provisioning; they may gradually prompt a rethinking of the roles women are expected or permitted to assume within the household. Although such changes rarely amount to a direct challenge to prevailing gender norms, they suggest that household responsibilities and expectations are not fixed but subject to ongoing negotiation. In this way, hustling reflects how gendered ideals—such as being a "good" mother, wife, father, or husband—are simultaneously reinforced and, at times, quietly contested or reinterpreted in response to shifting social and economic conditions.

The gendered negotiation of roles and responsibilities becomes especially visible in the case of Angela, a 26-year-old mother of three. Although she believes that financial provision is primarily her husband's responsibility, she actively contributes to their household income by running a sock-selling business. She also covers key expenses, such as school fees, when her husband is unable to do so. Angela views

dependence—even on a spouse—as unwise and prefers to earn her own income and run her own business to avoid exploitative working conditions and low-paying jobs.

Her daily routine illustrates this balancing act:

I am able to balance because this is work which I have employed myself. So, I wake up in the morning and then take the child to school at 7 am, I come back and start washing utensils and by 9 am, I am usually out of the house. ... there is no one who supports me. It is just me. I usually leave by 9 am and I am usually done by 6 pm. That is usually my maximum hours whether I sell or don't, because by 4 pm, I have to go for the child at school. I then have to wash uniforms and cook because they sleep early because of school. I therefore make sure that I close my work by 6 pm.

While her daily schedule mirrors that of many other mothers balancing caregiving and work, throughout her interview there is a clear sense of pride in her economic hustling and self-reliance. Her story reflects both a deep commitment to caregiving and a strong sense of personal agency, illustrating the subtle but ongoing shifts in how gender roles and responsibilities are negotiated within households.

Several interesting points emerge from Angela's story. First, although it is unclear whether her financial capability and active economic hustling empower her directly, her efforts are multidimensional. She not only provides financial support for her family but also offers her husband guidance, which she hopes will strengthen their partnership. Second, she demonstrates remarkable adeptness at economic hustling, having started her business in response to limited job opportunities and her desire to avoid unfavorable working conditions. She is also involved in a *chama*—a local savings group with other community members—where she uses her savings as initial seed money for her business and seeks financial support from her husband when she runs out of funds. Moreover, her response to the question about how she balances work and household chores reveals a sense of pride in her ability to hustle without external support, demonstrated by waking up early, managing her time effectively, and working hard.

In contrast to Angela's negotiated yet still somewhat traditional arrangement, Maria and her husband Musa exemplify a more egalitarian partnership, characterized by explicit sharing of responsibilities. Departing from conventional 'doing gender' norms, some women actively advocate for their partners' involvement in household chores. Maria, a 26-year-old mother of two and a carpenter, manages her household with the active support of her husband, Musa. Their partnership allows them to share responsibilities: Musa works nights and returns home by 4:00 am, staying with their child while Maria leaves for work at 7:30 am. She returns by 5:00 pm, taking over childcare and household tasks while Musa departs for his job. Maria ensures chores flow smoothly by preparing breakfast for their child in the morning, while Musa takes care of lunch. Her perspective on husbands' involvement in household work and childcare highlights the importance of mutual respect:

You need to respect your wife. The first thing is that respect and also loving. You need to love your husband. Right now, according to how life is, you cannot say that all the house chores are for a woman alone because as a woman, I am also supporting you financially and therefore you also need to support me such as cooking, washing his clothes for the marriage to work.

This example echoes the earlier discussion of how hustling serves as a process through which gender roles are maintained, negotiated, and at times subtly reconfigured. In a creative inversion of the Biblical edict for wives to submit (respect) to their husbands and for husbands to love their wives—an idea that is often referenced or mentioned in our interviews—she emphasizes the need for the husband to respect his wife and for the wife to love her husband. Through this, she articulates a vision of marriage grounded in shared labor and mutual support. Although such egalitarian arrangements were rare in our sample, they may indicate an emerging recognition among some men of the diverse

ways their wives contribute to sustaining the household. This example provides insight into how gender roles can be renegotiated and subtly transformed through everyday hustling and the evolving dynamics of intimate partnerships.

6. Discussion

In this paper, we draw on qualitative interview data from young mothers in a low-income urban context in Nairobi, Kenya to examine how “hustling” is experienced and articulated within the realms of motherhood and marriage. Anchored in the “doing gender” framework (West & Zimmerman, 1987), our analysis—organized around the themes of hustling in motherhood and hustling in marriage—highlights how young women navigate non-linear life trajectories that do not neatly align with the notion of “waithood.” (Honwana, 2012; Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2020; Mains, 2013; Sommers, 2012) In this context, hustling has become the primary—if not the only—strategy through which young women (and men) attempt to attain social adulthood. In the absence of robust institutional support across both public and private spheres, hustling extends beyond a strategy for material survival. It becomes deeply intertwined with the pursuit of what is locally recognized as “good adulthood”—a culturally embedded and fundamentally gendered ideal linked to being a respectable mother, father, husband, or wife (Thieme, 2018; Thieme et al., 2021; Van Stapele, 2021)

For young mothers in particular, hustling entails complex forms of balancing and renegotiation: meeting immediate material needs while also managing caregiving, relational obligations, and evolving gender expectations. Hustling thus emerges as a practice through which gender is actively performed, reinforced, and at times, subtly contested. In many cases, young mothers’ hustling unconsciously or unintentionally incorporates elements of *undoing gender*—a quiet subversion of conventional norms. While these practices remain embedded in traditional gender expectations, they may also open space for potential shifts in household gender roles. Although predicting the trajectory of such changes is beyond the scope of this study and our available data, we do observe rare but noteworthy signs of subtle transformation. This tension—between maintaining and reconfiguring gender norms—is one of the most compelling insights that hustling, as a form of *doing gender*, reveals. It resonates with broader understandings of *hustling* as a concept that embodies persistence, irony, contradiction, and the navigation of adversity.

We also acknowledge that the concept of *hustling* is not unique to sub-Saharan Africa. It has been widely theorized across disciplines and geographic contexts, often carrying broad and flexible meanings. Many readers may find the term familiar or resonant with experiences elsewhere—and rightly so.

For instance, the experiences of young mothers in our sample overlap with what is known in developed countries as the “double burden” of working motherhood. However, a key difference lies in the nature of their engagement with paid work and the level of institutional support available. If paid work is primarily driven by necessity in both contexts, then the experiences of young mothers hustling in Nairobi may not be fundamentally different from those of working mothers elsewhere. In our sample, however, hustling is primarily motivated by the desire to be a “good mother”—though the meaning of that role has itself shifted in response to changing socioeconomic conditions. As expectations evolve alongside structural constraints, what it means to be a “good mother” also transforms. This form of hustling differs from that seen among women striving to be both a “good mother” and a “career woman,” where the emphasis often includes personal fulfillment and professional identity alongside caregiving. Moreover, disparities in institutional support mean that young mothers in Nairobi often carry this double burden with fewer alternatives, more precarious livelihoods, and minimal social safety nets. Their decision to hustle, then, can be seen as an agentic response to structural constraint—a reworking of maternal responsibility under adverse conditions.

Thus, while there are important parallels across contexts, it is crucial to situate *hustling in motherhood* and *hustling in marriage* within specific social, cultural, and institutional landscapes. Overgeneralization risks obscuring the nuanced, situated realities of the young women whose experiences form the basis of this study.

While our analysis makes important contributions to advancing life course research and is grounded in an unusually large qualitative sample conducive to conducting rigorous thematic analysis, a number of caveats should be mentioned. First, it is important to note that our use of hustling is not necessarily consistent with an emic understanding of the concept. In other words, we acknowledge that women and men living in these communities may not employ the term ‘hustling’ to describe their lives as employed in this paper. If there is agreement, it is likely to be with men, which is consistent with the gendered portrayal of hustling in both academic and non academic spaces. However, we endeavored to incorporate the voices of the field interviewers who are from these communities, ensuring alignment with the communities’ understanding of ‘hustling’ to the extent possible. Second, in the interest of clarity, we did not incorporate change over time by drawing on the longitudinal data in our analysis. However, we recognize that hustling, by its very definition, involves change even over short spans of time. We hope to incorporate dynamism into the hustling concept in future work. Third, our analysis is rooted in a low income, urban context in one country. Future research should examine the applicability of hustling in life course research across different socioeconomic statuses (Spronk, 2014), ethnicity and regions across Kenya and, more generally, in other African settings.

In conclusion, we believe that ‘hustling’ holds significant value in understanding life experiences that are difficult to capture using traditional life course concepts. As socio-economic conditions become increasingly precarious, pathways to adulthood have grown more varied, fragmented, and often nonlinear. Some young people are already in the process of transitioning—voluntarily or involuntarily—yet may not fully identify as adults or be seen as such by others (Billari et al., 2019; Mortimer & Moen, 2016; Shanahan, 2000).

Our findings call for a more nuanced understanding of agency in these contexts—one that takes seriously the partial and often unintended ways young people experience gendered transitions to adulthood. In particular, we show how young mothers in low-income urban Nairobi engage in ‘hustling’ to navigate the intertwined demands of childcare, household responsibilities, and economic survival. This form of everyday agency allows them to subtly reshape gendered expectations of ‘good adulthood’—encompassing roles like mother, father, wife, and husband—not through overt resistance, but through persistent, often quiet acts of aspiration and endurance.

As the concept of ‘hustling’ gains scholarly traction, future research should further examine the strategies young women use to manage their multiple roles, the consequences for their and their children’s well-being, and the broader shifts in gender norms emerging in contexts of structural disadvantage. Understanding the experiences of young mothers not only enriches our understanding of gendered ‘hustling’ but also provides insights into the broader context of work, family, and gender roles in the Global South. In many of these contexts, traditional systems associated with marriage and parenthood are eroding, while institutional support to adapt to these changes remains insufficient or lags behind. Hustling serves as a mechanism to reconcile traditional cultural norms with the economic realities of the present and, as such, should be seen as a necessary and in some cases, desired, part of the life course.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rukia Nyambura: Project administration, Data curation. **Victor Ambula:** Project administration, Data curation. **Raphael Musyoki:** Project administration, Data curation. **Milka Omuya:** Project administration, Data curation. **Ann Muthoni:** Project administration, Data

curation. **Seung Wan Kim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kirsten Stoebe**nau: Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Ethical review

This study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board, the African Population and Health Research Center IRB, the Health Africa Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (AMREF) in Nairobi, Kenya, and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation, Kenya.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to declare.

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Data availability

All data will be made publicly available in accordance with NIH guide lines through the project website.

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