# Townships as Intersectional Spaces of Gendered Economic Vulnerability among Young Women

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*Abstract*

Young women's realities, particularly if they grow up in townships, are produced through continuous negotiations between subjective economic actions and constraints posed by the structuring of the township environments. The structural constraints are reflected in the exigencies and convergences of population density, youth unemployment and gender inequality. These characteristics work together to create the social and economic limitations that frame the township environment. The realities of young women are not static but are subject to change. The change is underpinned by women's interpretation of their situation within the experiences of dependency, instrumentality and vulnerability that characterise their agencies. Against this background, women's economic actions are often marked by coexisting experiences of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage that they navigate as they forge their realities. This paper provides a discussion of feminised plans devised by township young women to attain their desired lifestyle goals.

*Keywords*
agency, dependency, instrumentality, vulnerability

## Introduction

This paper discusses the socio-economic means through which young women in financially constrained township spaces access their lifestyle goals. The study unpacks how the young women's mechanisms are influenced by the intersectional township space in which the women live. It uncovers the dialectical interplay between the women's social space and subjective

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lifestyle goals and the implication it has on the reproduction of gendered inequalities that characterise the livelihoods of young women in these township spaces. This discussion is important in providing a lens with which to examine the continuation of experiences such as early school dropouts and teenage pregnancies that often lock young women in unemployment as well as low paying jobs. These financial positions result from their lack of skills that are underlined by inadequate formal training which is shaped by an early school drop-out.

The objective of this analysis is to reflect how young women negotiate with the socio-economic vulnerabilities that characterise their context in ways that enable them to meet their lifestyle demands. This study answers the research question of what means do young women in socio-economically vulnerable spaces employ to meet their desired lifestyle goals? This paper presents a viewpoint that agency among young women is intertwined with experiences of dependency and vulnerability which underlie the socio-economic agencies through which the women secure their finances.

## Young Women's Realities as Grounded within Township Experiences

In this paper, agency is conceptualised as the meaningful socio-economic action that young women engage in daily towards meeting their lifestyle goals. This is the economic action that is framed within the day-to-day mechanisms such as hustling (making an economic plan): braiding hair, painting nails, selling beauty products as well as receiving money from boyfriends. These are some of the common ways engaged in by these women towards meeting their financial goals (Salo, 2009; Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2019; Willan et al., 2020). Hustling is often devised within a broad range of progressively implemented strategies such as studying, employment and/or lack thereof within which the daily economic means tend to fit. This suggests that young women's agencies are many-sided and dependent on the women's lifestyle goals in relation to their economic background. Lifestyle denotes women's desires for better lives rather than the bare lives that tend to characterise their goals in the township space (Madyibi, 2017; Soper, 2009; Zhan & He, 2011).

The desire to afford regular dining in expensive restaurants, buying of branded clothes such as Gucci and holidays in destinations such as Dubai and Bali suggest that young women aspire towards lifestyles that demonstrate affluence, commonly known as the 'soft life.' Soft life is a socio-economic

reality different to the scarcity as well as hardships that are often reflected by township patterns (Bongazana, 2014; Masvawure, 2010; Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017). The soft life which includes consistent access to fashion, cell phones, night clubbing in upmarket lifestyle clubs and lounges is often imagined against socio-economic limitations that reflect the livelihoods of many township households (Mnisi, 2015; Posel, 2010). As suggested by Posel (2010), material consumption carries multiple meanings that include expression of self, communicating ones class related status and negotiating connections/ potential relationships with those who fit the portrayed status. It is against these limitations that young women imagine alternative plans, ranging from part time employment to relying on their boyfriends and sugar daddies/blessers to access money to meet their goals.

This paper suggests that young women in townships constantly devise ways to meet their economic desires. They employ means within the experiences of dependency, instrumentality and vulnerability. The women's economic actions are not free from structural limitations that characterise their economic backgrounds (Posel, 2010). It also proposes that the young women's instrumentalities are intertwined with the gendered vulnerabilities that characterise the heteronormative social spaces in which the women's agencies are negotiated. It further proposes that an examination of young women's economic actions be recognised within the notion of *icebo* (IsiXhosa word for plan). This view recognises the women as active agents who participate in the forging of their realities (Hunter, 2002; Shefer, 2016). As maintained by Shefer (2016), young women devise a range of ways to resist male power, challenge men and to negotiate their pleasurable lifestyles.

The instrumentality of young women lies in their willingness to imagine better lifestyles that sometimes contradict the dominant lifestyles reflected in their township environment (Howell & Vincent, 2014; Leclerc-Madlala, 2004; Mampane, 2018; Moodley & Ebrahim, 2019; Wojcicki, 2002; Zembe et al., 2013). Instrumentality is subsequently reflected by how the women partake in various forms of hustling (making economic plans), negotiating resources through alternative and sometimes risky means. Risky economic means is how exploiting sexuality for material gain through transactional sexual relationships tend to expose the women to gender based violence and emotional abuse, although the women are instrumental in the choice of men from whom to access the desired materials (Lerclerc-Madlala, 2004; Mensah, 2020).

Instrumentality exposes the young women to vulnerability which is conceived as the potential risk that they may be open to because of their location within their diverse economic mechanisms. The susceptibility is informed by the structural constraints that form the background to the context in which the mechanisms are constructed and devised. Young women's instrumentality is recognised as influenced by the environment that is shaped by the interplay of gender, class, race and age among other structuring structures (Diaz, 2018; Diraditsile & Ontetse, 2017; Mosoetsa, 2011; Swartz et al., 2016; Xulu-Gama, 2017). The intersectional interaction shapes the gendered power relations underlying unequal access to resources through which men continue to have control over financial resources. It subsequently informs the context in which the young women's access to these resources is through their bodies. Hence, pleasing masculine sexual pleasure is a rule of economic engagement.

These structuring categories work together in ways that produce the normalised culture of violence that characterises township spaces. The violence is often exercised when women refuse to give men access to their bodies. Gqola (2021) maintains that patriarchy has a full violence toolkit from which it draws in order to exercise its will. The persistence of township violence as indicated by gang-related crime is a common characterisation of township realities. This is infused with lawlessness as well as a culture of excessive drinking. These should be recognised in how they are an indication of the far-reaching impact of intersections through which patriarchy maintains its grip through fearful constructions of *ekasi. Ekasi* is a slang isiXhosa term meaning township, similar to hood or ghetto that is found in other countries. *Ikasi* style suggests ways in which hegemonic masculinity as embodied in behaviours such as criminal activity (for example house break-ins and robberies), violent behaviour (for example the common occurrence of street fights and beating of girlfriends), excessive alcohol consumption and substance abuse are normalised to ensure their reproduction without being challenged (Swartz et al., 2012). It is within this normalisation that townships share a common image as intersectional violent spaces.

## Townships as Intersectional Gendered Hustling Spaces

The economic situation of young women in townships continues to worsen even in the capitalist context that promises a trickling down effect

of economic benefits from the haves to the have nots (Sekhampu, 2012). This indicates a consistent failure of the social, economic and political policies to address the systemic causes of intersectional gendered poverty that results in the reproduction of economic exclusion in the lives of township women. Hence, Diaz (2018), Mosoetsa (2011), and Webster and Francis (2019) suggest that many of the households within townships do not have enough funds at their disposal as their money is not even sufficient to put food on the table. To meet their subsistence needs, people in these locations increase their low total household income by taking loans from *mashonisa* (micro-lenders).

The characterisation of townships therefore suggests that townships were intentionally created to produce gendered racialised cheap labour (Fataar, 2007; Hunter & Posel, 2012; Swartz et al., 2012; Webster & Francis, 2019; Xulu-Gama, 2017). Therefore, the lack of investment in well-resourced schools through which young women could improve their socio-economic positioning and the lack of well resourced and well-maintained facilities such as recreation centres that are easily available to young people in urban areas within these social spaces should be understood within the colonial construction of townships. This is an intentional colonial construction that excludes township youth from access to cultural experiences that would provide stimulation and from enabling environments in which to imagine their better future. The intentional construction of townships as spaces of cultural exclusion is captured in apartheid policies such as Section 10(1) of the Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, as amended in 1955 through which South African townships were produced. As indicated by the Act, township spaces were intentionally produced as spaces that prohibit socio-economic development, limiting its occupants to colonial workers who had to be constantly regulated to ensure adherence to colonial restrictions.

Through the social, economic and political structuring of townships as locations of gendered economic inequality and by enclosing this construction with laws and sanctions, these construction boundaries would separate townships from key surrounding economic hubs, excluding dwellers from easy access to economic opportunities. For example, the reliance on public transport such as taxis to access workspaces is a common feature of livelihoods in townships. Subsequently, a large portion of the salaries earned by township dwellers goes to covering transport fares to and from work—a situation that differs from that of surrounding suburbs where there is easy access to all facilities (Lucas, 2011). Townships were therefore constructed

as unique in themselves and in relation to the surrounding urban locations that are endowed with schools that have libraries and laboratories. Notably, access to education and its resultant benefits lead to improved livelihoods by producing perceptions and approaches to life that reproduce conditions within these settings, as well as an enhanced social standing of townships in relation to the surrounding locations. Hence, Fataar (2007), and Webster and Francis (2019) maintain that the lack of resources in township schools is an approach through which colonialism excluded the township youth from economic emancipation. This socio-economic exclusion persists during the current democratic context, underlying  the reproduction of poor township education.

By denying access to good education, young women in townships are denied employability and other opportunities to improve their livelihoods (Nortje, 2017). Education, skills and knowledge are important in how they link not only to work but also to better social status, because employment and its wages determine the lifestyle an individual can afford. In this way, wages are linked to social status, thereby granting privilege, which is linked to one's ability to afford socio-economically related benefits such as access to cars, medical aid and houses (Seekings, 2003). Therefore, being locked intownship locations particularly during an era of global connectivity may provide a reaffirmed sense of socio-economic destitution for young women in these spaces (Ngarachu, 2014). This is because the women continue to navigate in socio-economic contexts that limit their access to a better lifestyle that is displayed on social media by other young women of the same age group but from 'better off' socio-economic spaces.

The realities of young women in township spaces can therefore be explained through Crenshaw's (1989) illustration of multiple conjoining street intersections. The conjoining streets characterise the ways in which multiple systems of domination overlap in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. These outline the coexistence of power, lack of power, privilege and under privilege within which young women's realities are negotiated. Crenshaw's analysis proposes that social, economic, cultural and political structures should be recognised as joined highways where racial, gendered, class and age streets overlap forming the background in which women's realities are negotiated. Thus the policies, the institutions, as well as the township culture, all interact in ways that inform the intersectional setting in which young women's realities are negotiated.

The above views suggest that in addition to carrying a social and economic meaning, township spaces also convey historical, political, racial, gendered and cultural meanings (Nkooe, 2018; Segalo, 2015). These connotations are internalised through socialisation which occurs at various stages of young women's lives. Segalo's (2015) articulation of social divisions within the context of power relations and the State is important in locating young women's realities within townships as spaces of cultural production in which their aspirations are both imagined and negotiated. Their understanding is similar to one shared earlier by Collins (1990), who maintains that there are intersectional connotations that are embedded in the ideologies that rule townships as sites of cultural production. These principles are loaded with multiple and often racialised class-based gendered meanings that reinforce young women's complex realities.

The above discussion suggests that for young women within the townships, future goals are imagined in a context of economic limitation where the young women are locked within multiple vulnerabilities (Swartz et al., 2012). This is a multi-layered context of structural violence where poverty, poor education and the crime-prone township environment they inhabit are not encouraging the realisation of the women's dreams. Hence, Ramphele (1989) conceptualised township spaces as places of confusion where families, schools and communities are all in crisis. The foundation of the confusion here lies in the political and economic production of townships and the reproduction speaks of how these locations are subsequently internalised and externalised in behaviours that replicate their disadvantages. There is therefore a need to recognise how the structuring of townships produces overlapping experiences of inadequacy that form the background against which young women imagine their lifestyle goals. There is also a need to examine how township constructions influence young women's imagined lifestyles.

According to Bhana and Pattman (2011) in a poverty-stricken township context, consumption of fashionable clothing and accessories becomes positively linked with the middle class and as such is used to demonstrate an image other than that of scarcity as characteristic of township realities. This means that although the need to survive or attain a 'bare life' is the top priority, the need to conspicuously consume may take precedence because of its link to a better social status (Mnisi, 2015). Clothing is therefore used to represent both an identity and social class. The young women declare who they are through what they wear and where they shop as well

as the price of the items they bought. This increases young women's confidence and allows them to fit into global social constructions of how an ideal young woman should look. It is within this view that Madyibi (2017) argues that the desire to acquire and consume displayed by young women in townships stems from a place of wanting to feel important. There is the longing for current trends that is rooted in the material realities that characterise these locations they inhabit (Salo, 2009). Young women therefore opt for fictional accounts of gendered cosmopolitanism which serve to resolve the apparent socio-economic contradictions they embody.

Young women's agencies in townships result from an interplay of multiple overlapping structuring structures such as poverty, patriarchy and vulnerability to violence characterising contexts (Allen, 2018; Gordon & Collins, 2013; Mpani & Nsibande, 2015; Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017). While advancement of education may be important to financial independence, its pursuit may be compromised by lifestyle goals which put pressure on the young women, creating a need for immediate access to money. The need for instant access to a better life is also produced by social media pressure where young people from all countries post their lifestyles, creating envy among those who cannot afford it.

The envy and lifestyle pressures coexist with limited experiences of financial independence as young women may take on temporary economic activities such as selling goods, braiding hair and working in restaurants and shops. The experiences of financial independence often occur side-by-side with economic gendered dependence as young women draw money and material benefits from intimate partners. These are fluctuating and constantly negotiated activities that inform experiences of vulnerability and limited financial freedom for the young women, hence the need to conceptualise the young women's agencies as framed within the intertwined experiences of advantage and disadvantage.

## Conclusion

The discussion in the paper indicated that the agency of young women in township spaces does not position the women as entirely vulnerable to the structuring structures that underlie township spaces. Nor do their economic actions position them as excused from the intersectional spatial constraints that characterise their social spaces. However, the young women's instrumentality is an ongoing negotiation through which they swing between

experiences of advantage and disadvantage, privilege and under privilege. This fluctuation depends on the situations that characterise the context within which they are negotiating.

This paper subsequently demonstrated that the interplay of structuring structures such as race, gender, class and age inform young township experiences, shaping the setting in which their lifestyle goals are imagined. This recognises the grounding of women's realities within a vulnerable economic system which outlines both the settings in which their economic constraints are produced as well as the strategies and mechanisms through which they are often addressed. This recognition conceptualises young women's agencies as ongoing negotiations between the women's subjective experiences and the complex intersectional social construction of township spaces that have far-reaching effects on their lived experiences.

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