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Mutuality and Power: An Analysis of Non-State Actors' Influence in Mitigating the Negative Consequences of State Response to COVID-19 on Adolescent Girls in Kenya

Nyawira Wahito^a



ABSTRACT

The gendered impacts of pandemics tend to be very conspicuous in how they destabilise the lives of women and girls. However, they are also visibly inconspicuous in academic literature and research. This especially pertains to how these impacts categorically affect adolescent girls and the underpinning leadership dynamic that facilitate the brunt of these impacts. Available literature tends to present women as a homogenous category and focuses on leadership through its governing bodies. This paper aims to contribute to this academic gap by interrogating the influence of state and non-state actors in mitigating the negative consequences of COVID-19 on the lives of adolescent girls in Nairobi and Machakos Counties of Kenya. This study does this by exploring two main objectives; 1) To understand the impact of societal mobilisation in response to COVID-19 on adolescent girls in Nairobi and Machakos; 2) To investigate the degree to which women's rights organisations are able to mitigate the impact of the state's response on adolescent girls. The study examines the patriarchal power dynamic that sustains Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and led to the spike in teenage pregnancies in Nairobi and Machakos. The leadership concepts of mutuality and power help this study unpack the relationships of the state, non-state actors and adolescent girls; as well, as how these actors influence adolescent girls stemming from the social bases of power they hold.

Keywords: COVID-19; Kenya; Sexual and Gender-Based Violence; Leadership Infrastructure

1. INTRODUCTION

Pandemics and infectious diseases have long afflicted Africa, with extensive literature documenting their devastating effects; however, vulnerable groups such as women and girls often receive inadequate attention.¹ Unlike men, women and girls are disproportionately

disadvantaged during crises due to existing gender inequalities, which are reinforced by state-supported structural norms, gendered expectations, and cultural beliefs. These inequalities have wide-ranging effects on their lives.

^a Nyawira is the Executive Director of the Resource Center for Women and Girls' (RCWG), Kenya

¹ Marindo, Ravayi (2017), "Gendered epidemics and systems of power in Africa: A feminist perspective on public health governance", *Africa Development*, Vol.42 no.1, p.203

The COVID-19 pandemic brought these gendered structural inequalities into sharper focus. Although data by the World Health Organization (WHO) positioned Africa as the second least affected region in the early phases of the pandemic,² women and girls in Africa acutely felt COVID-19s ripple effects. These effects included increased care burdens, heightened risks of sexual and physical violence, and loss of livelihoods. In Kenya, adolescent girls faced multifaceted challenges. A report by the Kenya Data and Health Survey (KDHS) revealed that before the COVID-19 pandemic 1 in 5 girls aged 15-19 was pregnant or a mother.³ Teenage pregnancies surged⁴ during the pandemic as society was mobilised to mitigate the virus's spread, including school closures and lockdowns, inadvertently heightened girls' vulnerabilities.

Societal mobilisation is defined here as the 'rapid deployment of the aggregation of an entire population and its resources to fight against this threat to their common existence.'⁵ Societal mobilisation measures included movement restrictions, ban on gatherings and curfews exacerbated risks and increased the chances of girls' defilement, early marriages and sexual exploitation.⁶ A report by the Children's Department revealed that in Machakos County, 4,000 girls below 19 years were defiled, raped or impregnated during the 'first wave' lockdown period up until June 2020.⁷ Similarly, Nairobi County recorded 11,000 pregnancies among girls aged 10-19 under similar circumstances.⁸ This study focuses on older adolescents aged 15-19 years. The reported numbers prompted other counties to release similar data on teenage pregnancies.⁹

State responses to the pandemic were criticized as being gender blind, ignoring the challenges faced by adolescent girls and thereby increasing their vulnerability. Particularly since girls represent a significant portion of society and the country's future, leaders should have ensured girls needs were taken into count, seeing to it that they are not left behind.¹⁰ While crises and their responses fall in the realm of leadership, which entails dealing with uncertain situations that cannot be predicted,¹¹ the state's approach to managing the pandemic's complexity overlooked their plight.¹² This neglect, compounded by pre-existing mistrust,¹³ left vulnerable groups behind.

Women's rights organizations such as the Resource Center for Women and Girls (RCWG), Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), Bridges Centre, and Zamara Foundation filled critical gaps in leadership, leveraging their experience in adolescent girl programming to mitigate the pandemic's effects. These organizations provided vital support and advocacy, underscoring the importance of alternative sites of leadership during crises.

This study examines the influence of non-state actors in mitigating the consequences of state responses to COVID-19 on adolescent girls in Kenya. Focusing on Nairobi's informal settlements and Machakos County, the study explores the impact of societal mobilization on girls and assesses how women's rights organizations addressed gaps in state leadership. These informal settlements, referred to as "outlaw spaces," understood as such because 'they are intentionally pushed outside of the law since they are not habitually privy to the most

² World Health Organization (2020), "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) situation report-184,"

https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200722-covid-19-sitrep-184.pdf?sfvrsn=7680210a_2 Accessed 5 August 2020

³ Glory Muturi, "Teenage Pregnancy in Kenya: Gloom and doom in education health," National Council for Population and Development. <https://ncpd.go.ke/teenage-pregnancy-in-kenya/>. Accessed 5 August 2020

⁴ Allan Gichigi "Rise in Teenage Pregnancies in Kenya linked to COVID-19 Lockdown," Global Citizen. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/rise-in-teenage-pregnancies-during-kenya-lockdown/> Accessed 24 January 2025

⁵ Olonisakin, 'Funmi and Walsh, Barney (2024), Leadership in Crisis: Markers of sustained influence for societal mobilisation in response to COVID-19, Journal of Leadership and Developing Societies, Vol. 9, No. 1

⁶ CREAW, FIDA-K, COVAW, SDGs Kenya Forum, GROOTS Kenya, Equality Now, KEFEADO, *Advisory Note- The Shadow Pandemic Demanding Concrete Actions to Protect Women and Girls from Violence during COVID-19 pandemic.*

⁷ Enock Muswii, "Crisis as 4000 girls impregnated in Machakos in the last 4 months alone," *Citizen Digital*, 17 June 2020. <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/crisis-as-4000-school-girls-impregnated-in-machakos-in-the-last-4-months-alone-335903/> Accessed 10 August 2020

⁸ African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP), "Adolescents (age 10-19) presenting with pregnancy at health facilities," 26 June 2020. <https://www.afidep.org/publication/adolescents-age-10-19-presenting-with-pregnancy-at-health-facilities/> Accessed 10 August 2020

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Zeedah M. Mang'eli, Director-Resource Center for Women and Girls, Discussion with Author. 5 July 2020

¹¹ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024), p.5

¹² John Kotter (1990), "What leaders really do", *Harvard Business Review*

¹³ Max Bearak, "Kenya's pre-existing condition: Mistrust in the government," *The Washington Post*, 8 May 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/kenyas-preexisting-condition-mistrust-in-the-government/2020/05/08/ed41e624-9062-11ea-9322-a29e75efc93_story.html Accessed 10 August 2020

basic rights enshrined in the constitution and are outlawed in that they are consistently criminalized.¹⁴

Evidently, Kenya's leadership infrastructure has a weak software component, as this study will demonstrate; meaning the leadership foundation 'in a given society is essentially about relationship of trust between guardians and managers of the leadership hardware (governing bodies) and society',¹⁵ and is evident even in how the state implements its policies. This weak software component was also palpable during societal mobilization. The societal mobilization responses were ad hoc reactionary, and attempted to copy models from societal contexts vastly different from Kenya's. They did not immediately consider what these measures would mean for a great section of society who would be negatively affected. This study seeks to answer: "What is the nature of influence of non-state actors in mitigating the negative consequences of state response to COVID-19 on adolescent girls in Kenya?"

This research adopts an exploratory case study approach, guided by the 'what' and 'to what extent' questions outlined by Robert Yin.¹⁶ The approach also examines groups, social phenomena and political dynamics¹⁷ emphasizing learning through observation noted by Stake.¹⁸ It focuses on Nairobi and Machakos Counties, key areas impacted by the pandemic¹⁹ and where I have prior experience working with adolescent girls. To achieve the objectives, I conducted desktop research using journal articles, NGO reports, data from Kenya's Ministry of Health, and articles from credible leading newspapers like *The Daily Nation*, *Citizen Digital* and *The Standard* during the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also conducted 7 phone and internet interviews with women's rights experts in Nairobi and Machakos. The data was analysed thematically to identify patterns in adolescent girls' experiences in both counties. The experts, selected based on recommendations, media coverage of their COVID-19 responses, and prior work in adolescent girls programming, provided consent to use their real identities. They are identified by name individually and as respondents collectively in the research.

Following this introduction, the paper is organised into four subsequent sections. Section two below reviews existing literature and presents the conceptual framework, grounding the study in feminist and

leadership theories to analyse the gendered impacts of pandemics as well as highlighting the lack of leadership analysis within said literature. Section three examines the negative consequences of societal mobilization during COVID-19, emphasizing the emergence of male predators, the exploitation of adolescent girls through cultivation of thin mutuality and the understanding of how thin and transactional this mutuality was. This section shows how Kenyan state's societal mobilisation efforts to curb COVID-19 in the early stages of the pandemic was detrimental in the girls' lives, in effect leading to the emergence of alternative sites of leadership. The fourth section highlights the emergence of women's rights organizations who respond to the devastating impacts of COVID-19, and the cultivation of positive and binding mutuality with vulnerable groups, assessing whether their mitigation efforts led to any transformative change in the girls' lives. Finally, the conclusion consolidates the findings to show how non-state actors effectively mitigated the shortcomings of the state's COVID-19 response and provided sustainable solutions for adolescent girls' challenges.

2. Building the Framework: A Review of Key Concepts & Literature

This literature review unpacks the gendered nature of pandemics as a foundation to understanding adolescent girls' experiences of COVID-19. Existing studies often generalize girls' experiences under women's, overlooking their unique vulnerabilities due to intersectional factors such as age, geographical factors, ethnicity and religion. The review explores structural gender inequalities that exacerbate Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) during pandemics. It highlights increased sexual violence and teenage pregnancies during Sierra Leone's Ebola epidemic, links structural inequalities to heightened SGBV and HIV risks for Kenyan girls during the HIV epidemic, and draws parallels with COVID-19, which has similarly led to a rise in teenage pregnancies. The review concludes with a conceptual framework analysing the role of actors and power dynamics sustaining sexual violence against adolescent girls during crises.

2.1 An overview of previous pandemics

¹⁴ Wangui Kimari (2020), "City & Society: Outlaw Nairobi vs the Pandemics," *American Anthropological Association*, pp.1-9

¹⁵ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024) p.5

¹⁶ Yin, Robert K. (2018), *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th Edn. (London: Sage Publications), p.40

¹⁷ Yin, Robert K. (2003), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd edn. (California: Sage Publications), p.13

¹⁸ Robert E. Stake (2006), "Single Cases" in *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, (Guilford Publications).

<https://www.guilford.com/excerpts/stake.pdf?t> p.4. Accessed 20 August 2020

¹⁹ Muswii, "Crisis as 4000 girls impregnated"

The Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) is a virus transmitted to people from animals such as fruit bats and then transmitted from person to person. Its first cases reported in Central Africa and has a fatality rate of 50%. Since its discovery, the outbreak in West Africa was the largest and most complex.²⁰ According to evidence collected by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Sierra Leone, a West African country, was the most affected with over 14,000 cases in total.²¹ Ravayi Marindo and Aisha Ibrahim's work noted that females seemed to be infected and affected more by the EVD.²² Marindo highlights how EVD affected women and girls through heightened caregiving roles, loss of livelihoods, and increased violence. Drawing on Kimberle Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, which argues that women are not a homogenous group and this, shapes how they experience violence,²³ both examine intersecting factors like ethnicity, poverty, age, location, and race shaped women's experiences.

Ibrahim and Marindo respectively acknowledge that societal and gendered roles, reinforced by differences in notions of masculinities and femininities exposed men and women to different degrees of risk to EVD. Women made up 51% of those who succumbed to EVD.²⁴ While both authors advocate for an intersectional approach, they both overlook girls' specific experiences during EVD, grouping them under women. Additionally, both scholars recognise a huge gap in feminist responses to previous pandemics and emphasize the undeniable need to render a feminist lens when responding to health crisis and emergencies, to address inequalities affecting women and girls.

Documentation of adolescent girls' vulnerabilities during epidemics is limited. An Irish Aid and UNDP report on SGBV during Ebola highlights state-imposed quarantines, lockdowns, and livelihood losses, which heightened family stress and increased physical, emotional, and sexual violence against women and girls.

There were also high numbers of orphaned, neglected and abandoned children, which gave rise to cases of defilement, rape and sexual exploitation of girls. As a result, teenage pregnancies increased by 40-65%.²⁵ This report provides a more detailed account of the experiences of adolescent girls during the EVD and how they were impacted. It also underscores that there is a lack of clarity on whether these teen pregnancies were because of consensual teenage relationships or abuse.²⁶ I argue that these situations reflect false agency and negative mutuality, as consent, shaped by the desperate circumstances girls faced, led to sexual activities, some of which were transactional. Existing research so far only vaguely features leadership in its analysis, instead highlighting the role of the hardware leadership infrastructure through governing bodies²⁷ but failing to paint a comprehensive leadership picture during EVD.

Compared to Ebola, there is more literature on HIV and its impact on adolescent girls, who form part of key populations.²⁸ In *the Dual Feminisation of HIV/AIDS*, while Sophie Harman presents evidence to demonstrate how girls are affected and infected by HIV/AIDS, it does not offer a critical leadership analysis. Harman mentions socio-economic, cultural, structural inequalities and biological factors to demonstrate how and why adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by the epidemic.²⁹ Like previous authors, Harman reiterates the increased vulnerability of girls due to intersectional factors such as poverty, gender, and age, and the high risks of SGBV from a young age.³⁰ The singling out of adolescent girls in this piece of work is key in understanding the different positions of women and girls in society, which differently exposes them to HIV.

Harman highlights that women make up the majority in governing bodies of community-based organizations (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international NGOs targeting HIV/AIDS responses. The "feminization of HIV" refers to the increasing prevalence

²⁰ World Health Organization, "Ebola Virus Disease," https://www.who.int/health-topics/ebola#tab=tab_1 Accessed 5 August 2020

²¹ Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, "2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa," <https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/history/2014-2016-outbreak/index.html> Accessed 5 August 2020

²² Marindo (2017), p.204

²³ Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity politics and violence against women of colour," *Stanford Law Review*, vol.43, no.6, p.1245

²⁴ Aisha Ibrahim (2017), "I am a Woman. How can I not help?: Gender Performance and the spread of Ebola in Sierra Leone", in *Understanding West Africa's Ebola Epidemic: Towards a Political Economy*, ed. Ibrahim Abdullah and Ismail Rashid, (London: Zed Books), p.163

²⁵ Irish Aid and UNDP, "Assessing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone, Report," https://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/assessing-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-the-ebola-cris.html, Accessed 5 August 2020, p.8

²⁶ Irish Aid and UNDP, "Assessing SGBV during Ebola Crisis," p.9

²⁷ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024), p.4

²⁸ Ministry of Health, *Kenya AIDS Strategic Framework*, (Nairobi: 2014/2015-2018/2019), p.17

²⁹ Sophie Harman, "The Dual Feminisation of HIV/AIDS," *Globalizations*, Vol.8, No.2, p.213

³⁰ National Crime Research Center, *Gender-Based Violence in Kenya*, (Nairobi:2014), p.2

of HIV among women, with women now accounting for nearly half of all people living with HIV worldwide. Harman emphasizes that women, being most affected by HIV, should lead the response, positioning them in governance roles.³¹ However, governance, like management, is largely about responding to known challenges through tested systems and does not provide a comprehensive *leadership* analysis of the complex dynamics these challenges present.

2.2 The Gendered Nature of COVID-19

Like the EVD and HIV, the COVID-19 pandemic had the same impact on adolescent girls. In Kenya, cases of SGBV soared since March 2020 due to state-imposed measures to mitigate COVID-19 spread. These increased cases of SGBV led to increased teenage pregnancies in the country.³² While the pre-existing literature unpacks, albeit in a limited way, the nature of gendered pandemics from a feminist and leadership perspective, COVID-19 presented an opportunity to address this gap further. The literature shows that health crises worsen SGBV against women and girls, making them more vulnerable to infections. Pandemics like Ebola, HIV, and COVID-19 amplify these dual risks, as this paper will demonstrate.

This paper examines the power dynamics sustaining violence against women and girls in informal settlements and rural areas of two Kenyan counties. It highlights how women's gendered experiences are state-supported, as evidenced in their exclusion from social, political, and economic forums.³³ Jane Bennett describes the relationship between being gendered and violence as an intimate one, which wraps human beings into categories of otherness alien to their own being.³⁴ Bennett argues that controlling sexuality was a tool of gender oppression, with gender-based violence covering rape, domestic assault, incest, and sexual harassment.³⁵

Kenyan society is patriarchal, with men dominating cultural, religious, and political spaces, rendering women "others" as foreign or alien in these spaces. Like Crenshaw, Bennett stresses the need for an intersectional analysis of class, age, race, ethnicity to gender-based violence since women with fewer

resources are usually more vulnerable to sustained violence.³⁶ Adolescent girls from low-income backgrounds in Kenya, lacking any bases of social power to influence the system and relying on limited parental resources, face stark vulnerabilities in a male-dominated society. It is thus clear that even when a negative mutuality is cultivated; it is the girls who have much more to lose than the men or their families. This is because of the financial muscle men hold in that exchange of influence where negative mutuality is cultivated.

2.3 Conceptual Framework of Analysis – the role of leadership

This paper employs power and mutuality as core leadership concepts to provide a framework to analyse the dynamic between girls, the state, and non-state actors, highlighting state-supported gender discrimination and the critical role of leadership in this research. The concepts of "mutuality" and "power" are crucial for examining how Kenyan leaders perpetuate gendered discrimination against girls, further exacerbated during crises. Keith Grint's four typologies of leadership lays an important foundation of how leadership is traditionally understood either as person, position, results and (rarely) as process.³⁷ According to Grint, leadership as person provides the essence of who a leader is, leadership as position is about where the leaders operate from, and leadership as result has to do with what leaders achieve.

The three typologies provide only a partial understanding compared to leadership as process. Leadership as process is about how leaders get things done – the ways and means of influence are the central starting focus point of interest. How things are done depends on who has the resources and power. In the communities of focus, which are highly patriarchal, men have more power, physically and financially and in effect, how things are done highly reflects this power. So, leadership as process does not ignore those who are in a position of authority (or their personalities, or the results they achieved or not), but seeks a more detailed understanding of the leadership-follower relationship

³¹ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024), p.5

³² Moraa Obiria and Kamau Maichuhie, "It's enough! Uhuru wades into teen pregnancy, SGBV crisis: church, educationists demand action to end vice as parents' role brought to fore," *Daily Nation*, 10 July 2020.

<https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/gender/it-s-enough-uhuru-wades-into-teen-pregnancy-sgbv-crisis-1446810>

Accessed 5 August 2020

³³ Ibrahim (2017), p.163

³⁴ Jane Bennett (2010), "Circles and Circles": Notes on African feminist debates around gender and violence in the c21, Jane Bennet, *Feminist Africa*, Issue 14 (South Africa: All Africa House), p.25

³⁵ Bennet (2010), p.27

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Grint, Keith (2010), *Leadership: A very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, p.38

than assuming they are always the most influential or impactful actors. This process-based typology also encompasses context as a critical factor in the performance of leadership. Albert Murphy argued that leadership is a function of a whole situation and does not reside in a person, and therefore the choice of leaders is dictated by group needs.³⁸ Again, group needs here are usually dictated by an intersection of factors. While male voices may take precedence due to patriarchy, financial and physical power, women's needs may take precedence over girls' needs due to the age factor. Depending on the situation and context, the demands on leadership are varied.³⁹ For Grint and Murphy, understanding the context/situation is key; building mutuality - which is the aspect of trust, shared goals and understanding between leaders and followers - then plays a critical role in how leaders emerge and deliver on the demands on leadership depending on the situations they find themselves in.

Michael Cornell defines mutuality as the intangible element that connects leadership together. It produces lasting results from the relationship of shared goals between leaders and followers.⁴⁰ He distinguishes ownership and buy-in as two types of mutuality. The ownership type of mutuality, herein used interchangeably as "thick mutuality", involves shared goals and collaborative efforts. The buy-in type of mutuality, herein used interchangeably as "thin mutuality", is transactional, where one party adjusts to align with the other, often due to limited choices.⁴¹ In many instances, the follower tolerates much more in this relationship, if they are limited in choices and the unsteady relationship is muddled by the lack of a joint vision creation and use of power.⁴²

2.4 Relevance to Kenya

In Kenya, the state's lack of mutuality with adolescent girls, compounded by patriarchal power structures, diminishes trust and leaves gaps filled by alternative leadership infrastructures, such as youth groups and NGOs.⁴³ This is usually either on a short or long-term basis, and they create thick or thin mutuality with the girls and provide for the services girls seek for survival and well-being.

This alternative leadership infrastructure fills gaps left by the state through its influence over adolescent girls.

French and Raven's framework in the five social bases of power provides insights into how power operates in society. They define referent power based on P's identification/admiration with and for O; reward power based on the perception that P can mediate rewards for O; legitimate power based on the perception by P that O has a legitimate right to prescribe behaviour for O; and expert power based on the perception by P that O has some special knowledge or expertise; and coercive power based on the ability by O to punish P for failing to conform to the influence attempt.⁴⁴

This paper utilises French and Raven's framework for understanding the social bases of power, and Michael Cornell's understanding of the thickness and thinness of mutuality to test three propositions. First, despite the state's legitimate power, it failed to create binding mutuality with adolescent girls in its COVID-19 response. A top-down, gender-blind approach left adolescent girls in informal settlements and rural areas particularly vulnerable and excluded altogether. Second, male predators emerged, exploiting this gap by creating thin and "negative" mutuality with girls through coercive, transactional sexual engagements to meet basic needs during lockdowns. This coercion contributed to increased sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies. Third, women's rights organizations through their expert and referent power built strong mutuality with girls and families, offering more sustainable solutions. Interviews with experts explore whether this binding mutuality resulted in transformative structural change.

The use of mutuality, power and by extension leadership as process to demonstrate the exchange of influence, leader-follower dynamic in Kenya during COVID-19 pandemic offers an interesting and unique dimension to the academic literature on the gendered effects of pandemics.

3. Unmasking the Dark Side: The Rise of Male Predators Amidst Societal Mobilization

This section examines the Kenyan state's societal mobilisation efforts to curb COVID-19 in the early stages of the pandemic, its detrimental impact on girls' lives, and the emergence of alternative sites of leadership and the transactional nature of their emergence. Kenya's first

³⁸ Albert J. Murphy (2011), "A study of the leadership process," in *Leaders and the Leadership Process: Readings, Self-Assessments and Applications*. (Mc-Graw Hill), 6th edn. p.12

³⁹ Murphy (2011), p.12

⁴⁰ Michael Cornell, "Mutuality on a spectrum: Ownership and Buy-in," *Leadership and Societies Journal*, Vol.3, no.1 (2019), p.1

⁴¹ Cornell (2019), p.1

⁴² Cornell (2019), p.3

⁴³ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024), p.5

⁴⁴ Ibid

case of COVID-19 on 12 March 2020⁴⁵ initiated the start of different phases of societal mobilization to prevent and mitigate its impact on society.⁴⁶ As the number of COVID-19 cases increased, measures such as banning public gatherings, school closures, lockdowns, and curfews were imposed.⁴⁷

3.1 Weak Mutuality between Government and Women Rights Organisations

While the government enforced the above directives, women's rights organizations like Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Kenya), Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW), SDGs Kenya Forum, GROOTS Kenya, Equality Now and Kenya Female Advisory Organization (KEFEADO) issued an advisory note urging gender-sensitive COVID-19 responses that address the heightened risks faced by vulnerable groups, especially women and girls.⁴⁸

The expert power⁴⁹ women's organisations have from working in communities was not enough to influence the state into acknowledging and acting on their advisory note. Evidently, in a state that has a majority of men in charge and holding positions of power, there was a huge gap in how the measures were implemented. This was a mistake in leadership because in developing this response, they assumed or believed that the input of the people (women) was not important,⁵⁰ which then ended up having long term negative effects on adolescent girls. In addition, this kind of approach perpetuates the narrative that leaders are superior, which is not the case in reality. The government, despite its legitimate power,⁵¹ failed to build binding mutuality with women's groups

reflecting a flawed leadership model that prioritized authority over collaboration.

3.2 Weak Mutuality between Government and Adolescent Girls

Schools, often safe havens for girls⁵² from traditional practices like child marriages, female genital mutilation and other forms of violence and abuse,⁵³ meant increased vulnerability and no alternative protective measures. Girls who relied on free sanitary pads distributed in schools were left without access, exacerbating said vulnerability.⁵⁴ And because 'periods don't stop for pandemics',⁵⁵ these girls were left to their own devices. Feeding programs in schools also ceased, increasing economic burdens on families already struggling under lockdowns.⁵⁶ In informal settlements and rural areas like Machakos and Nairobi, lack of electricity and internet rendered online learning inaccessible.⁵⁷

Lockdowns and curfews heightened domestic tensions in already strained households, creating environments of physical, sexual, and emotional violence against girls. Kenyan leaders failed to deliver a clear, inclusive COVID-19 response plan and vision. Power was not used wisely, which then meant losing the trust of followers.⁵⁸ Trust would enable this relationship to work but was highly absent and, therefore, resulted in high frictions between the followers and leaders, as well as a lack of accountability, predictability and reliability from the leaders.⁵⁹ In Mombasa, for example, police fired tear gas at ferry commuters and beat individuals with batons as the curfew began.⁶⁰ At a time where Kenyans would expect empathy from custodians of their safety and wellbeing, such incidents exacerbated the dwindling public trust, as the heavy-handed approach not only

⁴⁵ Mireri Junior, "Health CS Confirms first Case of Corona Virus," *The Standard*, 13 March 2020.

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/health-science/article/2001364067/kenya-confirms-first-case-of-coronavirus> Accessed 3 August 2020

⁴⁶ Junior "Health CS Confirms."

⁴⁷ Ministry of Health, *Kenya Coronavirus Cases rise to four, CS Health*, 17 March 2020. <https://www.health.go.ke/kenya-coronavirus-cases-rise-to-four-cs-health/> Accessed 5 August 2020

⁴⁸ CREAW, FIDA-K, COVAW, SDGs Kenya Forum, GROOTS Kenya, Equality Now, KEFEADO, *Advisory Note- The Shadow Pandemic Demanding Concrete Actions to Protect Women and Girls from Violence during COVID-19 pandemic*.

⁴⁹ French and Raven (2011), pp.136-137

⁵⁰ Zoogah, David B. (2014), *Strategic Followership, How Followers Impact Organizational Effectiveness*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan), p.40-41

⁵¹ French and Raven (2011), pp.136-137

⁵² Discussion with Zeedah, 5 July 2020

⁵³ Wangechi Wachira, Director- Centre for Rights Education Awareness, Discussion with Author. 6 July 2020

⁵⁴ Esther Wambui, Director-Zamara Foundation, Discussion with Author. 13 July 2020

⁵⁵ Rachel Mwikali, Feminist Activist and Community Organiser, Discussion with Author. 26 July 2020

⁵⁶ Discussion with Zeedah, 5 July 2020

⁵⁷ Discussion with Rachel, 26 July 2020

⁵⁸ Cornell (2019), p.2

⁵⁹ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus (1985), *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*, (New York: Harper & Row publishers, p.43

⁶⁰ Al Jazeera, "Kenya Police Under Fire Over 'Excessive Force' as Curfew Begins," March 28, 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/28/kenya-police-under-fire-over-excessive-force-as-curfew-begins> Accessed 24 January 2025

violated human rights but also undermined the government's credibility in managing the pandemic. In addition to using a top-down approach in these responses, coercive power was used to enforce these rules.⁶¹ This included physical assaults and, in some tragic cases, fatalities. Human Rights Watch reported that during the initial weeks of the curfew, at least six people died due to police enforcement actions.⁶² These actions exemplify the severe consequences faced by those who did not adhere to the imposed restrictions, further straining the relationship between citizens and law enforcement. Thus, depleting the already thin mutuality between the state and these communities, especially men who were the higher number of victims of this coercive power through brutality and violence.

The coercive power enforced on men from lower-income brackets, in this case by men in uniforms,⁶³ led to an explosion of aggressive masculinities. Traditional notions and understandings of 'men' require that they provide for their families, as their way to assert influence and control within the home. The pandemic, therefore, threatened this notion due to enforced lockdowns and curfews posing a threat to this means of authority. Therefore, violence against their partners and children took precedence as a form of regaining and asserting their male dominance and control.⁶⁴ These types of aggressive masculinities are often invoked during times of crisis,⁶⁵ while hybridity's of masculinization are created in collision and rebellion with or against diverse political authorities,⁶⁶ as described by Okech and Bennett respectively.

The struggles of such men to attain social status are usually intertwined with the socio-economic failures of ruling men, in this instance political leaders, to provide

the basic amenities or tackle the high poverty rates, unemployment and inequality in low-income communities. This was evident during the COVID-19 period where 'big man' style state leaders were in assigned positions of leadership whilst managing huge amounts of COVID-19 monies. Meanwhile, other men were excluded by coercively relegating them to the private domain and exercising violence on them. Such men, therefore, find it challenging to attain what may be termed as successful masculinity.⁶⁷ Therefore, they resort to abuse and violence of women and girls since they fall within a framework of those, they would exercise the little power they have over.

Since normalized sites of violence like the home are often overlooked, women and girls disproportionately bear its brunt, often a by-product of broader structural inequalities.⁶⁸ During COVID-19, this dynamic emerged in Kenya's informal settlements and rural areas, fostering cycles of power and violence. Machakos and Nairobi counties reported 4,000 and 11,000 adolescent pregnancies ages 10–19 respectively, as of August 2020.⁶⁹ State leaders' accusatory remarks on this issue focused on pornographic material consumption⁷⁰ and vulgar music aired on local radio stations and consumed by adolescents.⁷¹ The suggestion that limiting access to pornography could reduce teenage pregnancies simplified the issue entirely, by overlooking deeper socio-economic factors and the lack of comprehensive sex education available to adolescents. Meanwhile the focus on the impact of music failed to address the systemic issues girls face in accessing sexual and reproductive health resources. These remarks revealed a clear disconnect between leaders' understanding of complex societal issues and the lived realities of young girls.

⁶¹ French and Raven (2011), pp.136-137

⁶² Human Rights Watch, "Kenya Police Abuses Could Undermine Coronavirus Fight," March 31, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/kenya-police-abuses-could-undermine-coronavirus-fight>.

⁶³ Duncan Moore, "Fury in Kenya over police brutality amid coronavirus curfew," *Aljazeera*, 2 April 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/fury-kenya-police-brutality-coronavirus-curfew-200402125719150.html> Accessed 7 August 2020

⁶⁴ Sandy Ruxton and Stephen Burrell, "Masculinities and Covid-19- Making the Connections" p.25

https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/BLS20254_PRO_Masculinities_COVID19_WEB_005.1.pdf Accessed 24 January 2025

⁶⁵ Awino Okech (2019), "Gender and state-building conversations: the discursive production of gender identity in Kenya and Rwanda," *Conflict, Security and Development*, p.4

⁶⁶ Bennett (2010), p.30

⁶⁷ Kopano Ratele, "Hegemonic African Masculinities and Men's Heterosexual Lives: Some Uses for Homophobia," *African Studies Review*, Vol.57, no.2, pp.118

⁶⁸ Awino Okech, "Alternative discourses: a feminist approach to re-thinking security," in *Women and Security Governance in Africa*, Ed. Funmi Olanisakin and Awino Okech (Nairobi: Pambazuka Press, 2011), p.53

⁶⁹ AFIDEP

<https://www.afidep.org/publication/adolescents-age-10-19-presenting-with-pregnancy-at-health-facilities/> Accessed 04 August 2020

⁷⁰ Benjamin Muriuki, "CS Magoha wants pornography banned in Kenya to curb teenage pregnancies," *Citizen Digital*, 18 June 2020. <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/cs-magoha-wants-pornography-banned-in-kenya-to-curb-teenage-pregnancies-336107/> Accessed 05 August 2020

⁷¹ Anthony Njagi, "Teen Pregnancies: Mutua blames Vulgar Kamba Music," *Daily Nation*, 20 June 2020.

<https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/news/teen-pregnancies-mutua-blames-vulgar-kamba-music-733692> Accessed 05 August 2020

There was evident laissez-faire leadership regarding this issue, referring to widespread absence and avoidance by leaders in getting involved with important complexities.⁷² This laissez-faire leadership was evident as leaders prioritized COVID-19 health measures while ignoring teenage pregnancies. The delay in implementing laws on violence against women, reproductive health, and pregnancy termination sustains a status quo that allows the state to control women's bodies and reproductive choices at will.⁷³

Warren Bennis defines a successful leader as one who communicates a blueprint that shapes and guides followers through a shared understanding of reality.⁷⁴ Leaders lacked a shared understanding of adolescent girls' realities, especially those in lower-income communities with limited access to the internet and electricity. Blaming online pornography for pregnancies ignores these barriers, highlighting this disconnect which led to a gap and the rise of alternative leadership, such as male predators.⁷⁵ Male predators cultivated thin and negative mutuality which is short-term and transactional in nature with no sustainable transformation in girls' lives.

3.3 The manifestation of Negative Mutuality between Male Predators and Girls/Families

'Men use the fact that girls are hungry to prey on them.'⁷⁶

'Lack of free pads led to a gap and an opportunity for girls to have sex for pads which led to increased pregnancies.'⁷⁷

'People are more irritated by the result, than the act which is a crime. Girls are having sex for pads.'⁷⁸

These sentiments echoed by 3 local experts working in women's rights organizations in Kenya highlight the harsh realities faced by adolescent girls there,

particularly in informal settlements where the lack of basic hygiene products like sanitary pads led to transactional sex as girls sought access to these essentials. These sentiments and sources from the media⁷⁹ indicated an increase in transactional sex during the COVID-19 period. While transactional sex has always existed,⁸⁰ the pandemic worsened the challenges girls faced, with the state's sole focus on COVID-19 transmission and health only neglecting the needs of those most affected and failing to address the potential for a shadow crisis.⁸¹

The thin and negative mutuality between girls and male predators is key to analyse. In exchange for basic needs like food and sanitary towels, girls engaged in sexual activities with older men, creating a buy-in form of mutuality.⁸² Girls tolerate these situations due to limited choices and the need for essentials like food or pads. In some cases, parents indirectly encourage this by making statements like 'don't come back without sugar.'⁸³ The emergence of male predators, as Stogdill, Kirkpatrick, and Locke describe, can be attributed to possessing the 'right stuff', in this case, money, which then makes adolescent girls and their families accept their emergence or orchestration attempts, conform to their expectations and in return attain their goals.⁸⁴

The home, meant to protect girls, instead supports the emergence of predators due to families' desperation for basic needs. The COVID-19 cash stimulus meant to help small business owners either arrived too late or did not reach many, worsening the situation.⁸⁵ The cash stimulus program was also marred with discrepancies ranging from registration of beneficiaries to implementation. A report by Human rights watch indicated that only 5% of households were reached leaving the other 95% to fend for themselves at a time where over 60% of business had closed down specifically in the informal settlements, further tightening the grip of the economic hardship families were already facing.⁸⁶ The lack of mutuality between

⁷² Bernard Bass & Ronald E Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, (Great Britain: Psychology Press, 2006), pp.8-9

⁷³ Okech (2011), p.54

⁷⁴ Bennis & Nanus (1985), p.40

⁷⁵ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024), p.5

⁷⁶ Discussion with Rachel, 26 July 2020

⁷⁷ Discussion with Esther, 13 July 2020

⁷⁸ Discussion with Scheaffer, 7 July 2020

⁷⁹ "Covid-19 and teen pregnancies in Kenya: Bottomline Africa," YouTube video, 8.48, posted by "KTN News Kenya," 6 July 2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xriHCO0_58

Accessed 06 August 2020

⁸⁰ Donatien Beguy, Joyce Mumah, Salome Wawire, Kanyiva Muindi, Lindsey Gottschalk and Caroline Kabiru, "Status

Report on the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescents Living in Urban Slums in Kenya," Kenya Working paper. UKAID and APHRC, September 2013

⁸¹ Interview with Wangechi, 6 July 2020

⁸² Cornell (2019), p.3

⁸³ Discussion with Zeedah, 5 July 2020

⁸⁴ Jon L. Pierce and John W. Newstrom (2011), "Leader Emergence: A Dynamic Process," in *Leaders and the Leadership Process: Readings, Self-Assessments and Applications*. (Mc-Graw Hill), p.111

⁸⁵ Discussion with Scheaffer, 7 July 2020

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch, "We are all Vulnerable Here": Kenya's Pandemic Cash Transfer Program Riddled with Irregularities, July 20 2021

low-income families and the state created opportunities for male predators to exert financial coercive power on girls.

A 'silent negative' mutuality exists between parents and male predators, with tacit approval of the girl's actions to bring home essentials. In some cases, parents coerce girls into these relationships for the family's benefit.⁸⁷ The financial resources men possess enable their coercive power over girls who need food or pads.

The patriarchal power dynamic in these relationships limited girls' ability to negotiate safe sex, leaving them vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and STDs. As Foucault notes, the political economy of population shaped observations on sex, highlighting the state's responsibility to understand its citizens' sexual behaviours, particularly those of girls.⁸⁸ This can be seen in the laissez-faire⁸⁹ nature of the state in passing the reproductive health care bill in 2019, which mandates healthcare providers to seek parental consent prior to providing reproductive health services.⁹⁰ Later on during the pandemic, there was also a directive by the President to crack down on clinics offering contraceptives to girls.⁹¹ These examples make quite explicit the apparent need by the state to control the reproductive capacities and choices of girls.

Kenya's leaders were accused of failing girls⁹² and put to task by women's rights organisations and experts in Kenya to take responsibility and avoid an escapist approach to this issue.⁹³ The lack of binding mutuality between the state, girls, and women's rights groups stems from a lack of transformational leadership, which is crucial for effective crisis management through planning and appraisal.⁹⁴ Kenya is generally overmanaged and under led: this was laid bare during the COVID-19 crisis.⁹⁵ The structural, systemic inequalities and vulnerabilities that girls face on a daily basis, combined with the lack of a holistic response to COVID-19 by the state was an indication of this fact.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/07/20/we-are-all-vulnerable-here/kenyas-pandemic-cash-transfer-program-riddled>

⁸⁷ Beguy D. et al (2013), p.34

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault (1978), *History of Sexuality*. (New York: Pantheon Books), p.26

⁸⁹ Bass and Riggio (2006), pp.8-9

⁹⁰ The Reproductive Health Care Bill, p.389

<http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2020-02/Reproductive%20Healthcare%20Bill%2C%202019.pdf>

⁹¹ Mwangi Muiruri, "Uhuru Goes After Clinics giving Contraceptives to young girls," *Daily Nation*, 28 July 2020.

<https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/news/uhuru-goes-after-clinics-giving-contraceptives-to-young-girls-1907446>.

Accessed 06 August 2020

Despite arguably having done things right as managers in mobilising society to prevent COVID-19 transmission; they did not do the right thing as leaders in terms of protecting adolescent girls.⁹⁶

4. Mitigation of Societal Mobilisation Negative Impacts: Emergence of Women's Rights Organisations

The Kenyan state has time and again proven not to be neutral in how it treats women because it is an arbiter captured by a particular group of elite men.⁹⁷ This is evident in the over-representation of men in the state structure.⁹⁸ "State capture" by certain men extends to male-dominated cultural, traditional, and religious areas, allowing the state to navigate them as it pleases.⁹⁹ The COVID-19 response in Kenya was largely masculinized, with leaders claiming 'we are in this together,' despite a contradicting reality.

Male state actors' power stems from their proximity to political processes, which excludes women, making their vulnerability central to their powerlessness.¹⁰⁰ An example is the state's rejection of women's organizations' input to include a gender lens in the COVID-19 response, despite women's experiences being crucial in state-building.¹⁰¹ Male state leaders dominate development processes, side-lining women's voices, reinforcing gender inequalities, and flawed state-building approaches.

4.1 Legitimised Shadow Leaders

This exclusion eroded women's trust in the government, with gender and development experts making statements such as:

'The Kenyan government has taught me not to expect the best practice,'¹⁰² - Scheaffer Okore

⁹² Discussion with Zeedah, 5 July 2020

⁹³ Nafula Wafula-Program Director, Bridges Centre, Discussion with Author. 29 July 2020

⁹⁴ Bass & Riggio (2006), p.75

⁹⁵ Bennis and Nanus (1985), p.21

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ R.W Connell (1990), "The State, Gender and Sexual Politics: Theory and Appraisal," *Theory and Society*, Vol.19, No.5, p.512

⁹⁸ Connell (1990), p.513

⁹⁹ Okech (2011), p.54

¹⁰⁰ Okech (2019), pp.2-3

¹⁰¹ Okech (2019), p.3

¹⁰² Discussion with Scheaffer, 7 July 2020

*'By the time COVID-19 comes to an end, funds will have been siphoned for selfish interests'*¹⁰³ – Esther Wambui

'I had a bit of hope, but the directive to ban contraceptive clinics diminished all the hope'.¹⁰⁴–Wafula Nafula

Alternative leadership infrastructure¹⁰⁵ such as CBOs, NGOs and youth groups often fill gaps left by ineffective state leaders, providing services the state should offer. During COVID-19, women's rights organizations like CREAM, RCWG, Zamara Foundation, and Bridges Centre emerged to mitigate the impacts discussed earlier. Leadership often arises from factors beyond the leader themselves.¹⁰⁶ There are forces usually at work within a particular group which play a role in determining which kind of leader emerges.¹⁰⁷ Emergence occurs when situational needs align with a leader's skills, knowledge, and abilities.¹⁰⁸

Interviews with women's rights experts show that organizations specializing in adolescent girls' programming were equipped to address issues like transactional sex, teenage pregnancies, and online education inequalities. Their expertise, gained through years of experience, allowed them to respond effectively. As Okech notes, women's experiences of violence are not limited to crises but reflect the ongoing reality of (S)GBV.¹⁰⁹ Violence is central to women's rights organizations, given their focus on and their lived experiences. Their expert power stems from their skills and knowledge in providing effective responses. Some individuals in these organizations, who have faced similar challenges, have the potential to use their referent power to mentor and model resilience. Their shared goals with girls foster trust and mutuality, enabling acceptance of their influence.

The power of women's rights organizations and feminist activists rendered state leaders' influence redundant, as these groups acted with intelligence and courage to organize independently.¹¹⁰ Followership and leadership are more complementary than competitive,¹¹¹ yet the Kenyan government often views alternative leaders as competitors and acts only when these leaders take initiative. One can argue then that,

Kenya is often led "in the shadows" by NGOs, especially women's organizations, addressing issues affecting women and girls. Regardless of crises, these groups consistently respond to injustices. In uncertain situations, individuals surrender power, leading to the emergence of leadership;¹¹² as was seen with women's rights organizations in Kenya when the state leaders abdicated responsibility for protecting vulnerable girls.

4.2 Mitigation of COVID-19 Impact

Out of seven interviews, four women's rights experts cultivated strong, positive mutuality with adolescent girls, addressing their immediate needs during uncertain times. While all women's rights organisations and experts cultivated positive mutuality compared to the male predators, its thickness or thinness varied. These interventions helped alleviate the impact of COVID-19, such as the lack of food or pads, which drove girls to seek these needs met.

CREAW partnered with the EU to support female-headed households in Kibera and Mathare, offering \$79 a month for up to six months, \$50 more than the Kenyan government's support, to help those at risk of SGBV.¹¹³ RCWG, based in Machakos, distributed care packages with food and menstrual products, along with \$10 per girl. They also set up 7 solar-powered stations in rural areas for girls to access online education.¹¹⁴

Scheaffer Okore, a feminist activist and influential public figure due to her role as the deputy leader of a progressive political party in Kenya, leveraged her platform to partner with 9 stakeholders who included sanitary towels manufacturers, distributors and corporates to support her sanitary towels fundraising and distribution project for girls in several informal settlements. Rachel Mwikali, a feminist activist and community organiser based in the informal settlements of Mathare, reached 5000 families, girls included, through the distribution of care packages which also included food and menstrual hygiene management products through community fundraising, social media

¹⁰³ Discussion with Esther, 13 July 2020

¹⁰⁴ Discussion with Nafula, 29 July 2020

¹⁰⁵ Olonisakin and Walsh (2024), p.5

¹⁰⁶ Pierce and Newstrom (2011), p.110

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Murphy (2011), pp.110-111

¹⁰⁹ Awino Okech (2016), "Gender and Security in Africa", *Feminist Perspectives on Governance, Peace and Security*. African Women's Development Fund, p.5

¹¹⁰ Robert E. Kelley (1992), *The power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers who Lead Themselves*, (New York: Doubleday Publishing), p.41

¹¹¹ Kelley (1992), p.41

¹¹² L. Smircich and G. Morgan (2011), "Leadership: The Management of Meaning," in *Leaders and the Leadership Process: Readings, Self-Assessments and Applications*. (Mc-Graw Hill), p.111

¹¹³ Discussion with Wangechi, 6 July 2020

¹¹⁴ Discussion with Zeedah, 5 July 2020

fundraising and independent support from state leaders.¹¹⁵

The interventions of the other three respondents were online through social and mainstream media initiatives and interactions. Saida Ali, a feminist activist was engaging in mainstream media and digital spaces through TV interviews responding to the rise in teenage pregnancies and calling the government out for being unresponsive. She was also actively involved in spaces such as The Africans women's Development and Communication Network¹¹⁶, which enabled her to engage policymakers together with other like-minded feminists.¹¹⁷ Esther Wambui of Zamara foundation shared that she was actively engaged in social media campaigns such as sharing gendered messages and soft skills on how young women and girls can deal with the psychological, physical impacts of COVID19¹¹⁸ and had gotten 4 slots on a radio programme to educate girls on healthy sexual choices. She also linked girl victims of SGBV to health care centres for support such as screening, psychological support, and access to safe shelters.¹¹⁹ Nafula Wafula of Bridges Centre led the 'zuia zogo' advocacy campaign, lobbying local and county governments to address rising SGBV cases. She also pushed for SGBV education in the curriculum, inclusion in online learning, and a child helpline for reporting abuse.¹²⁰

4.3 Degree of Mutuality

'Money is power and whoever has the money can make decisions in the home and those decisions affect people at household level'.¹²¹ This statement made by Wangechi echoes why CREAM partnering with the EU utilised the method of supporting female led households with cash, a strategy that changed the power dynamic in those families. RCWG's cash payment strategy for girls, alongside food essentials for families, created mutuality with parents, preventing redirection of funds to other needs. By addressing critical needs like food and sanitary pads, RCWG reduced girls' vulnerability to exploitation, providing immediate relief

and empowering them to prioritize safety and well-being.

CREAW and RCWG cultivated thick, binding mutuality, with CREAM providing six months of cash support for households to plan, while RCWG ensured girls had six months' supply of sanitary towels and access to internet and electricity for online learning. They were therefore very inclusive in their design as opposed to a top-down approach in the creative process which would not lead to realising long-term gains.¹²²

In addition to expert power, Scheaffer and Rachel's referent power helped them fundraise and build partnerships, bridging the gap in sanitary towel access for girls in informal settlements and enabling their shared vision for dignity during menstruation at the height of COVID-19. Rachel's referent power led to a significant mainstream and social media coverage. This recognition led to her initiative benefiting from several partners, including Scheaffer, through the support of Scheaffer's partners, Red Cross, media personalities and Government leaders. This support from Government leaders confirms that, in varying instances, state actors do, indeed, begin to act when alternative leadership infrastructure acts. An example she mentioned was Esther Passaris, the women's representative of Nairobi County who donated 490 sanitary towels, which translated to a minimum of 4 pads per girl, as well as cash donations from another leader who chose to remain anonymous.¹²³

Rachel and Scheaffer responded to the urgent needs girls had during the lockdown period and therefore the existent relationships of trust nurtured thick and binding mutuality within that target community, because they were sustainable and supportive throughout the lockdown period. Additionally, based on their geographical locations it enabled them to monitor and ensure that girls were staying safe, given previous and existing relationships with the community prior to COVID-19. Like the previous respondents, Rachel and Scheaffer exhibited individualized consideration qualities which refer to paying special

¹¹⁵ Discussion with Rachel, 26 July 2020

¹¹⁶ FEMNET, "African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement," FEMNET, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.femnet.org/2020/07/african-feminist-post-covid-19-economic-recovery-statement/>.

¹¹⁷ Saida Ali, Feminist Activist and Strategy Advisor, Young Women's Leadership Institute, Discussion with Author. 21 July 2020.

¹¹⁸ Zamara Foundation, "COVID-19 Response," Zamara Foundation, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://zamarafoundation.org/covid19-response/>.

¹¹⁹ Presidential Policy and Strategy Unit (PASU), *Promises to Keep: Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescents in Kenya* (Nairobi: Executive Office of the President, 2021), 64.

¹²⁰ Discussion with Nafula, 29 July 2020

¹²¹ Discussion with Wangechi, 6 July 2020

¹²² Cornell (2019), p.1

¹²³ Discussion with Rachel, 26 July 2020

attention to the needs of their followers.¹²⁴ And as echoed by Rachel and Scheaffer in their interview, 'periods don't stop for pandemics.'¹²⁵ Therefore, their work is continuous and long-term with or without a pandemic, which enables them to mitigate the number of girls engaging in transactional sex, thus potentially leading to transformational change in the lived realities of those girls.

The female leadership advantage is manifesting in the cases mentioned above. Seeing as the mitigation responses headed by women, one can argue for the transformational leadership approach taken by employing these interventions. Transformational here refers to gaining followers' confidence and trust through establishing oneself as a role model.¹²⁶ This therefore also reiterates the point, 'people want to be led, guided, supported and helped by someone who is consistent'.¹²⁷ These women demonstrated that kind of leadership and consistency. They not only created thick binding mutuality with the girls but also their families who, having lost their livelihoods, were facing challenges in providing the necessities for their daughters.¹²⁸

While the remaining three respondents did not directly address the immediate needs for food and sanitary pads to mitigate the impact of the state's societal mobilization, their efforts focused on advocating for policy change and lobbying the government to tackle the root causes of these challenges. Through their work, they aimed to advocate for systemic solutions that would address underlying issues, ensuring long-term support and protection for vulnerable groups. In mitigating the impact of the state's societal mobilisation, the mutuality they built with adolescent girls is thin for the kind of needs girls and their families had at that particular time. However, their approach of including the follower to provide advice to the leader created ownership and binding mutuality. Girls were given platforms to discuss their plight on radio, social media and other conversations, hence diminishing the stereotype upheld by state leaders of political leaders being superior.¹²⁹

These systemic inequalities their interventions addressed, fall within issues that are beyond the respondents' immediate control and would require mobilising of a larger segment of policymakers to realise

the goals. They were keen on taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis, to see if it can produce a paradigm shift which can change attitudes of people in the society which then changes behaviour and transforms the narrative of the violence experienced by girls.

The approaches of all seven respondents were well thought through for long-term gains and change. Their possession of greater social skills which facilitate collaborative and democratic leadership behaviour compared to men is an additional female advantage, as described in a study conducted by Eagly et al.¹³⁰ Unlike the transactional approach of male predators and state leaders' laissez-faire stance on pregnancies, women's transformational leadership provides an advantage in responding to and mitigating the crisis's negative impacts.

4.4 Why is Mutuality Important?

This paper has demonstrated that state-supported gendered inequalities largely contribute to girls' experiences during crises. Alternative leadership that fosters negative mutuality increases the reinforcement of these inequalities during such crises, while women's rights organizations lead potentially transformative responses. However, their efforts are limited by state inadequacies, the state's lack of vision and the states lack of influence in communities. Therefore, in a society that relies on the state to provide social welfare and services, the absence of comprehensive provision and cushioning of vulnerable populations leads to the emergence of organizations such as those referenced in this paper. However, the impact of these organizations is often constrained by said inadequacies, particularly the lack of support and coordination from the government. As a result, their efforts cannot fully complement or amplify their transformative potential in communities.

These women leaders have, ultimately, earned their 'seat at the table' of many societies, seeing as they are consistent and have the emotional glue of trust which binds them and their followers together.¹³¹ In many cases this makes them more influential than the state. They have a vision for the country, and their position reflects this vision through investing in vulnerable groups especially those who represent the future; and

¹²⁴ Bass and Riggio (2006), p.7

¹²⁵ Discussion with Rachel, 26 July 2020 and Scheaffer, 7 July 2020

¹²⁶ Bass and Riggio (2006), p.4

¹²⁷ Discussion with Scheaffer, 7 July 2020

¹²⁸ Xu, Delius, and Pape 2022

¹²⁹ Cornell (2019), p.3

¹³⁰ Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli (2003), "The female Leadership Advantage: An evaluation of the Evidence", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol.14, p.815

¹³¹ Bennis and Nanus (1985), p.153

who the state usually leaves out of planning and implementation of policies.

*'Girls are change makers and are the future of Kenya. Therefore, we have to invest in the future.'*¹³² – Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli

Asked to rate the government's gender responsiveness in the fight against COVID-19 in August 2020, the cabinet secretary for public service and gender, Prof Margaret Kobia, rated it eight of ten.¹³³ However, a deep dive in the on goings of that time suggest otherwise. As well as the findings of this paper outlined above, Human Rights Watch highlighted increased gender-based violence during the pandemic, with survivors lacking adequate access to medical, legal, and mental health support.¹³⁴ A lack of proper and meaningful gender representation and feminist approach meant that the perspectives of vulnerable groups were left out. Therefore, the government lost out on the chance to tap into and leverage their expertise and talents when most needed.¹³⁵ The chronic absence of trust between the state and its citizens continues looming over Kenyan society. This diminishes the state's influence while increasing the power of those groups who speak more truthfully to the communities they are engaged in, thereby creating opportunities to build a binding ownership and the thick mutuality required to tackle the issues most afflicting the daily lives of their followers.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated how non-state actors sought to mitigate the negative consequences of the state's early response to COVID-19 on adolescent girls in Kenya. Using the concept of patriarchal power, it analysed public and private power dynamics and their role in perpetuating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. Leadership concepts of mutuality and power were applied to examine the interactions between male predators, women's rights organizations, and adolescent girls.

The first objective was to understand the impact of societal mobilization during COVID-19 on adolescent girls. It posited that the state failed to cultivate binding mutuality with girls due to its gender-blind, patriarchal approach, leaving vulnerable girls in rural and informal

settings marginalized. Accusatory speech acts by the state further alienated girls, failing to address perpetrators and compromising their safety. The second proposition highlighted the emergence of male predators who exploited the state-created gap. These predators established coercive, transactional relationships with girls, driven by financial and familial pressures. Parents, in some cases, fostered silent negative mutuality by tolerating these arrangements, contributing to increased teenage pregnancies. The third objective examined the role of women's rights organizations in mitigating the state's failures. Leveraging their expert and referent power, these organizations cultivated positive mutuality with girls and their families, addressing immediate and long-term needs. Their efforts contrasted with the transactional approach of male predators, offering more sustainable and transformational support.

This study contributes to literature on the gendered impact of pandemics, emphasizing the need for an intersectional feminist lens to ensure inclusivity. It highlights the overlooked software component of leadership – which necessarily includes a discussion of the social bases power and nature of mutuality within and between different societal groups. It shows this software's crucial importance for effective societal mobilization and enacting meaningful transformative change. Proper use of power fosters binding mutuality, enabling lasting societal influence. While emergent leadership in the absence of the state has played a pivotal role in helping to address immediate needs of specific groups during the pandemic, its reach is inherently limited in transforming deep-rooted societal structures, particularly in relation to gender equality. These interventions have made meaningful impacts and transformational change on the lives of girls and families within the timeline in question, yet the broader transformation of gender issues in Kenya remains a distant goal. Effective, lasting change will require a responsive state that complements grassroots efforts. Nevertheless, these emergent leadership models offer hope for gradual societal progress, demonstrating that even in challenging circumstances, positive transformations are possible over time.

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¹³² Discussion with Zeedah, 5 July 2020

¹³³ Moraa Obiria, Winnie Atieno, George Munene and Eric Matara, "COVID-19 responses Gender Blind," *Daily Nation*, 14 August 2020.

<https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/gender/covid-19-responses-gender-blind-1918452> Accessed 17 August 2020

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