



**INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIALT ARBETE**

”We are the real men”: Masculinity, poverty, health and community  
development in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya

of

Chimaraoke Izugbara

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Fakultetsopponent är Jeff Hearn, professor i sociologi vid University of Huddersfield.  
Gästprofessor vid Institutionen för humaniora, utbildnings- och samhällsvetenskap

## Abstract

Title: “We are the real men”: Masculinity, poverty, health, and community development in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya

Author: Chimaraoke Otutubikey Izugbara

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This thesis, comprising a five-chapter comprehensive summary (kappa) and four published papers, presents findings of a study that addressed Nairobi’s poor men’s (a) constructions and performance of masculinity (b); views of masculinity vis-à-vis their personal health and wellbeing, and (c) portrayals of the implications of masculinity for the development and progress of their community. The study was conducted in Korogocho and Viwandani slums in Nairobi, Kenya between 2009 and 2012, using qualitative research methods, including ethnography, in-depth individual interviews, and focus group discussions. The study was guided by critical masculinity theory as exemplified in the works of Connell, Messerschmidt and other social constructivists and queer theorists who view masculinity, and indeed gender, as socially-produced and fluid dynamics that derive their meanings within specific social contexts. Emerging evidence highlights breadwinnerhood as the common denominator in local discourses surrounding ‘properly masculine’ men in the slums of Nairobi. Narratives constituted poverty as both a challenge to masculine identity as well as a promoter of ‘true’ manliness, defined mainly in terms of persistent pursuit of providerhood in the face of poverty. Further, although it was largely out of their reach, poor men celebrated and clung doggedly to the ideal of provider-masculinity, pursuing it through a variety of remarkable and, sometimes, contradictory strategies. It also emerged that the while men recognized the complicated cultural origin of poor health, they stressed on gender and masculinity in particular, and everyday livelihood situations in general, as critical for their health and wellbeing. With respect to community development, men’s cognizance of the structural and contextual constraints to the development of their communities intersected with both a feeling that they have helped to hamper community development and an adamant sense of their own criticality and centrality in ensuring it. Poor men also generally hinged community development and progress on traditional masculinity scripts, often negatively depicting community development activities that seek to promote gender equality. The study concludes as follows: First, work with men must build on the ways they articulate and understand the issues that they face in their everyday life. Further, interventions with poor men must pay mind to the diverse ways poverty and a sense of masculine deficit can motivate their performance of themselves as men. Lastly, the process of making men allies in the global struggle for gender equality and an inclusive social system must start with supporting them to enjoy improved livelihoods and comprehend the beliefs and social forces that motivate their everyday behaviors.