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INTRODUCTION

> Most men don't confide in their wives about their problems and frustrations. You can't discuss your malaria with a mosquito.
>
> *Meme circulating on Kenyan social media*

'Have you heard about the soldier who was killed by his wife here in Pipeline?' Andrew[1] asked after completing a set of biceps curls while Carl and I were waiting for Isaac to finish his set of bench presses. 'Strong, strong, light weight, light weight' was how Isaac, a manual labourer who worked in the nearby industrial area and came to the gym whenever his day- or night-shifts had ended, 'psyched' himself while finishing the last repetitions of his set: 'Big chest, big chest! Sexy weight, sexy weight!' 'Someone who has been to Somalia, has survived landmines, grenades, and AK-47s only to be killed by his wife. He must have been a weakling,' said Andrew, a former soldier of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), shaking his head, probably wondering how a woman could have killed one of his former comrades. 'Maybe she also lifts weights like we do here in the No Mercy Gym,' I suggested. Isaac, by then sitting upright, trying to regain his breath and sweating profusely, joined the conversation: 'In the Bible, it is not specified how many days or weeks Adam lived alone in peace. Then Eve came and brought stress. Everything became complicated. Women….' 'They say she bit him in the shoulder and chest. Who dies from biting? Maybe she was a vampire', 'Yeah, or a member of the Illuminati'. While Andrew and Carl, the owner of the No Mercy Gym, exchanged rumours, I lay down on the bench, stabilized my back, grabbed the barbell, and began my own set. 'Strong, strong!', 'Light weight, light weight!', 'Big chest, big chest!'

As soon as I had left the gym, I started to search online for information about the alleged murder. The first article I found featured on the homepage of *The Star*, a Kenyan newspaper (Ombati and Odenyo 2021). The deceased was indeed a KDF soldier. The incident, however, had not happened in Pipeline, a low-income high-rise tenement settlement in Nairobi's east and the main location of this book. His wife was highly unlikely to be a member of the Illuminati, an organization feared by many Kenyans who believe that its members are involved in satanic activities such as sacrificing human blood for material riches. What, then, had happened? The 37-year-old soldier had discovered that his wife, a former gospel singer who had begun trying her luck in the Kenyan pop music scene, was renting a second apartment on the quiet. Upon finding out, the jealous soldier had left his military base at Gilgil, 100 kilometres northwest of Nairobi, and rushed to the couple's home in Kahawa Wendani. When he arrived, he confronted his wife and an argument broke out. The argument escalated and turned physical. The wife bit her husband with what the Kenyan television channel NTV called her 'jaws of death', after which he collapsed. He was rushed to the hospital, where he subsequently died.

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[1] Most personal names as well as the names of a few places and organizations, such as Kaleko, the No Mercy Gym, or the NGO Maendeleo, are in fact pseudonyms. To further protect various identies, I sometimes rely on composite characters.

Given its cartoonish absurdity, the 'jaws of death' incident could easily have been created by a Nollywood screenwriter. Even so, the fact that Andrew, Carl and Isaac – three migrants who had come to Nairobi with high expectations of a better life – spoke about it while working out alludes to some of the issues that *Migrants and Masculinity in High-Rise Nairobi: The Pressure of Being a Man in an African City* tries to make sense of: stressed-out men who feel that they have 'lost control' over their wives and girlfriends, rampant misogynism, invocations of brotherhood voiced against the 'threats' of feminism and homosexuality, incommensurate marital expectations, and gender-based violence. In some way or another, these issues speak of a social constellation characterized by increasing mistrust between Kenyan men and women who perceive the reciprocal understanding of male and female perspectives as crumbling due to encompassing economic and social pressures, which were further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the urban geography of Pipeline, one of sub-Saharan Africa's most densely populated estates, largely inhabited by blue-collar workers, students, and people active in its vibrant local economy.

This book reveals how heterosexual male migrants between the ages of 25 and 40 dealt with the above-mentioned challenges in Kenya's capital. It describes how migrant men from western Kenya (mostly, but not exclusively, *jo*-Luo (Dholuo, 'people of Luo descent', singular *ja*-Luo)),[2] made sense of the gender relations and the economic situation they encountered in the city and how they tried to carve out successful lives for themselves and their rural and urban families. I show how male migrants' understanding and enactment of masculinity changed when they travelled from the village to the city, taking with them high expectations of a better life. For most young men who lived in rural western Kenya, migrating to Nairobi was a crucial step in their ongoing transformation from dependent boys and sons to successful men and fathers. Moving to the capital city promised economic success, sexual adventures, and personal development.

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[2] Nairobi is characterized by a multitude of different languages and constant code-switching. Most of my interlocutors spoke and mixed at least three languages: their mother tongue (in this study usually Dholuo), English, and Kenyan Swahili or Sheng, this being 'a variety of Kenyan Swahili closely associated with Nairobi's urban youth'

Although some came to Pipeline straight from their rural homes and others had been living elsewhere in Nairobi, the male migrants I met during my fieldwork faced similar economic and romantic challenges and spent time in the same masculine spaces: barbershops, gyms, videogame joints, pool halls, betting shops, and bars named after exotic places such as Sahara, Caribbean, Emirates, or Amazon, as well as mental states such as Oblivion and Amnesia, which point to alcohol's ability to make men forget, if only momentarily, about the pressures they were facing. It was inside these masculine spaces that migrant men planned and enacted their personal and economic visions and discussed their frustrations as they tried to fulfil the expectations they believed Kenyan society in general, and Kenyan women in particular, obliged them to meet, thereby downplaying the extent to which these expectations also circulated and structured relationships between the men themselves.

Men as breadwinners

Most of my male and female interlocutors did not intend to replace the narrative of the male breadwinner and provider with radically different understandings of masculinity. There were only a few male migrants who, often cautiously, tried to change what was considered proper male behaviour by taking over family responsibilities that other men and women marked as female and emasculating, such as changing nappies. Instead, most migrant men I encountered tried to challenge, downplay, or adjust to what they perceived as a female distortion of the prevailing narrative of what it means to be a successful man. The traditional narrative of the male breadwinner has its roots in sometimes violently enforced colonial wage labour (Cooper 2003) and was further intensified through the economic effects of the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programs, as well as through what Ngala Chome called 'a wider "Pentecostalization" of Kenyan society, through which Christian religious symbols, imagery, and language were rapidly entering the domain of public

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(Githiora 2018: 1). Whenever I mark something as 'Kiswahili', I refer to the Kenyan non-standard variety of Swahili.

life' (2019: 547). This Pentecostalization, which began in the 1990s, further solidified social notions about men as authoritative husbands and fathers who provide dutifully for their families. According to this narrative, the husband and father should be an economically stable, stoic, strong, pious and prudent provider and 'head of the house' (Dholuo, *wuon ot*), whose actions and conduct demand and bring forth 'respect' (Kiswahili, *heshima*, Dholuo, *luor*). This attitude was aptly summarized by a member of the No Mercy Gym, when he mentioned that the first rule in his home was 'My way or the highway'.

The male migrants I worked with characterized what they perceived as the female distortion of this narrative as an extreme and exclusive focus on monetary wealth and the material goods women expected at the very beginning of romantic relationships. Comments posted online in response to the 'jaws of death' article in *The Star*, and to a music video of one of the dead soldier's wife's songs, ironically called 'Gimme Love', which was uploaded to YouTube, allude to the gendered dimension of this distortion:

> Corona has brought a lot of stress. Women are now biting your thing when on their knees if you don't give more money. *Mjichunge*. (Kiswahili, 'Take care of yourself')
>
> This can't be a wife but *mtu wa kunyonya pesa yako tu aende*! (Kiswahili, 'someone who just sucks away your money and leaves!')
>
> It's time for men to date and marry Gynoids, aka female robots, aka sexbots! A Gynoid will never drive you nuts or kill you […]! Dangerous women!
>
> Men should avoid red flags like single mother, model, social media, long painted nails, funny hairstyles. Men should change or perish.

These comments construe women as materialistic and money-minded sociopaths who could potentially castrate their boyfriends and husbands if they were to withdraw their financial support. 'Auma', a famous song by Musa Juma, also disapproves of the detrimental effects that the equation of love and money had on romantic relations, thereby echoing the sentiments of most of my male interlocutors. Describing the behaviour of an unfaithful woman called Auma, the song blames money for her immaturity: 'Today's love needs money, […] if you don't have money, you will feel ashamed' (Dholuo, *Hera masani dwaro pesa*, […] *kionge pesa, iyudo wich kuot*).[3] For many male migrants, money (Dholuo, *pesa*) was indeed desirable, not only as an end in itself, but also because it brought respect, which was paramount for every social relation. Poor men risked being seen as worthless, for it was difficult to establish sustainable social relations without money.

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[3] Both *benga* music, which emerged in the 1960s and was further popularized by artists such as Okatch Biggy, Musa Juma, and Johnny Junior in the 1990s and 2000s,

Equating a 'good man' with one who was rich and generous influenced how male migrants who struggled to make ends meet conducted their daily lives and planned their futures. Under constant economic pressure to succeed, the majority aspired to show off their wealth by inviting friends round and giving their girlfriends or wives expensive gifts. It was thus not only the expectations others had of them, but also their personal understanding of how to ensure a brighter future that shaped and sometimes unsettled male migrants' lives, complicated their practices and plans, and helped to foster dominant narratives about what it meant to be a man. As a consequence of the pressure the economic expectations forced on them, many migrant men emphasized other aspects of the cluster of traits characterizing success without directly challenging the equation of a good man with a rich man. These traits included prudence, physical strength, a natural and religiously vested primacy of the male gender, and the playful mastery of the urban space.

Yet, and this is the main political economic contribution of this book, migrant men's diagnoses of women's distortions of an ideal form of masculinity based on the capability to provide, as well as their own defence of this ideal, reproduced the notion of the man as the breadwinner. This reproduction of the notion of the male breadwinner obviated systemic problems of Nairobi's urban economy, which was characterized by widespread unemployment, underemployment, and precarity. These problems were further exacerbated as a result of 1.7 million Kenyans losing their jobs during the three-month period after the COVID-19 pandemic reached Kenya (April–June 2020) (Omondi 2022). The dire state of Kenya's urban economy made it close to impossible for many families to survive on men's income alone. In addition, migrant men felt that the expectations of rural kin as well as wives and girlfriends

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and the more recent *ohangla* music by artists such as Freddy Jakadongo, Prince Indah, Emma Jalamo and Musa Jakadala were important reference points for Luo migrants in Nairobi. Titles of popular songs such as '*Dag e ngima miyiero'* (Dholuo, 'Live the life that you choose') or '*Kwach ogolo koke'* (Dholuo, 'The leopard has shown his claws') were used in everyday discussions and printed on T-shirts, which were popular with migrant men. Predominantly performed by men, many of these songs discuss relations between the village and the city, as well as romantic and economic issues, often in the form of praise songs dedicated to specific women (Awuor and Anudo 2016 offer a critical analysis of misogynism in *ohangla* music). *Ohangla* artists also acted as role models in terms of their sartorial style, which was characterized by expensive suits, ties, hats, and shoes.

had actually increased. Rather than receiving sympathy for their hardships, many of them felt even more pressured.

Instead of actively criticizing the problems of Kenya's economy (for instance, through political protest), male migrants employed creative practices that were a result of what I call the social disposition of 'expecting success', thereby taking up Marcel Mauss' observation about the 'importance of the notion of expectation' as 'a form of collective thinking' (1969 [1934]: 117, my translation; see also Bryant and Knight 2019, Ferguson 1999). In Pipeline, most men and women had normative expectations of male success. They subscribed to the notion that men *should* be economically successful. However, many of the men I spoke to engaged in practices, narratives, and discourses that revealed their imbued expectations of success. They thus also believed they *would* be economically successful. By creatively postponing true success, socializing the path toward an economic breakthrough, employing the language and behaviour of successful men and wearing and showcasing signs of success, male migrants in Pipeline reassured themselves and others as to the certainty of their future achievements. In so doing, they lessened the intense pressure that resulted from what they perceived as society's expectation of male success.

Some of these practices resembled those explored in the literature on male youth worldwide, such as 'hustling' (Thieme et al. 2021, Van Stapele 2021a), 'bluffing' (Newell 2012), 'waiting' (Honwana 2012, Masquelier 2019), or 'zigzagging' (Jeffrey and Dyson 2013). Even so, male migrants' practices in Pipeline cannot be reduced to any one of these. The type of practice enacted by my interlocutors, both by those who were formally employed and those who were not, was contingent upon the context and who was involved. Depending on his own expectations – as well as those of his girlfriend, his wife, or his male friends – a young male migrant, for instance, could exaggerate his success in front of his rural kin even though he was making do with minor jobs because of his wife's expectation for him to put food on the table and pay the rent.

What I did not encounter during my fieldwork, however, was a predominant focus on the uncertainty of the present. In as much as my interlocutors struggled to earn enough money to get by, prior expectations and their ongoing desire for a successful future continued to drive them forward. *Migrants and Masculinity in High-Rise Nairobi* should thus be read as an attempt to complement the scholarly interest in understanding how disadvantaged urban men in impoverished informal settlements dealt with existing economic stressors (Thieme 2013). However, transferring concepts such as 'navigating' (Vigh 2009) or 'hustling' to the lifeworld of male migrants in Pipeline risks misunderstanding their perspective on their environment, which was neither characterized by 'anxiety' (Falkof and Van Staden 2020) nor by an atmosphere of mere 'survival' (Simone and Abouhani 2005). In fact, Pipeline struck me as a place of aspiration, whose inhabitants believed they would thrive and prosper (Dawson 2022).

Men and masculinities in Africa

The challenges and conflicts male migrants encounter in Nairobi are not unique to the Kenyan context.[4] As the growing literature on masculinities in sub-Saharan Africa testifies (Lindsay and Miescher 2003, Ouzgane and Morrell 2005), African men are confronted with new and increasingly challenging relations between money and social interactions (Boulton 2021, Mains 2011, Smith 2017). These challenges are further aggravated by changing notions of love, marriage, and sexuality (Cole and Thomas 2009, Spronk 2012); new technologies for negotiating intimacy (Archambault 2017); rural expectations of success, remittances and, ultimately, physical return (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992, Smith 2019: chapter 4); the effects of racial capitalism (Matlon 2022); the economics, politics and aesthetics of male violence and paranoia (Hendriks 2022, Pype 2007); non-heteronormative notions of masculinity (Meiu 2020, Vorhölter 2017); the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics (Baral 2021, Van Klinken 2013, Wyrod 2016); the ordeals of modern fatherhood (Richter and Morrell 2006); the so-called ‘neglect of the boychild’ (Pike 2020); and societal discourses about the proper upbringing of children (Fay 2021). Journalists and scholars sometimes subsume these challenges under the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Francis 2006, Perry 2005) that is deemed responsible for outbreaks of violence, war, and protests organized by young men who see themselves as members of sub-Saharan Africa’s rising ‘surplus population’ (Trapido 2021).

Voices from several disciplines have protested this simplification and the colonial stereotypes it perpetuates, such as images of aggressive, impulsive, and instinct-controlled black men who stick to archaic notions of masculinity. Scholars have deployed two main strategies to counter this narrative that deprives African men of agency by assuming that dire circumstances compel them to become violent and delinquent. On one hand, we have witnessed a rise in articles, monographs, and edited volumes exploring non-heteronormative notions of masculinity on the continent (Spronk and Nyeck 2021, Van Klinken 2019). On the other hand, scholarly studies on the roles of men in Africa (and elsewhere) increasingly call for heightened attention to the multiple forms in which heteronormative masculinity becomes manifest in different contexts (Gutmann 2021). The authors of the introduction to a themed section of the journal *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* tellingly entitled 'Masculinities in Africa beyond crisis: complexity, fluidity, and intersectionality' summarize these research trends by stating that their primary goal is 'to counteract the tendency to deny pluralistic representations of masculinities in Africa' (Amman and Staudacher 2021). Among the explorations of other types of masculinity across Africa, we find work on 'post-crisis masculinity' (McLean 2021), 'African-centred masculinities' (Mfecane 2018), 'precarious masculinity' (Kovač 2022), 'aspirational masculinities' (Izugbara and Egesa 2020), and 'divergent masculinities' (Bolt 2010).

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[4] Confirming to prevailing notions of masculinity was also perceived as challenging in different historical epochs, as shown by Paul Ocobock’s *An Uncertain Age: The Politics of Manhood in Kenya* (2017). (See also Blunt 2020, Callaci 2017, Epstein 1981, Mutongi 2000).

As much as this research has produced important insights by highlighting alternative ways in which masculinity is enacted, it also entails some risk. By pluralizing masculinity and focusing on non-heteronormative practices, we could overlook the ongoing influence and 'stickiness' (Berggren 2014) of the ever-prevalent global image of a successful man being an economically capable, physically strong, well-educated, independent, pious, and prudent provider (Crompton 1999, Ehrenreich 1984, Komarovsky 2004 [1940], Koppetsch and Speck 2015). The 'crisis of masculinity' hypothesis not only obscures the existence of diverse forms of masculinity but also makes it difficult to analyze practices perpetuating the narrative of the male breadwinner as being deliberately chosen by both men and women (Mojola 2014). For example, instead of understanding incidents of gender-based violence against women as an effect of male migrants' economic circumstances, it might be more fruitful to interpret them as men's attempts to restore their challenged authority, with the ultimate goal being to reap the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell 2005 [1995]: 79). As shown by the omnipresence and 'ordinariness' of gender-based violence during my fieldwork, many migrant men in Pipeline, like many men elsewhere in the world, felt their masculinity was becoming increasingly fragile and their traditional privilege under attack (Kimmel 2019). Losing their status as the breadwinner frequently led to scathing criticism, and sometimes outright mockery and derision. Deemed 'useless' by their friends, girlfriends, wives and rural kin intensified their feelings of inadequacy and expendability.

This book explores how the persistent influence of the narrative of the male breadwinner impacted discussions, decisions and practices of male migrants in Pipeline. It illustrates how migrant men both contested and tried to emulate this ideal form of masculinity in their everyday lives. Despite agreeing to the narrative of the male provider in principle, they felt that women had begun to focus exclusively on a man's economic wealth when assessing his value. Men criticized this distortion of the narrative of the male breadwinner by, for example, emphasizing the evil nature of fast and illicit money-making activities or contrasting the sexual prowess of poor yet young and muscular men with the vanishing virility of old and feeble Nairobians known as *wababa*, who had to resort to material favours in order to have sex with young women (see Groes-Green 2009, Silberschmidt 2001). As a consequence of their inability to fulfil what they perceived as the excessive economic expectations of their intimate others, migrant men had begun to lessen this pressure by pretending to be wealthy already or by spending more and more time with other male migrants outside their marital homes. While almost everyone I met in Pipeline agreed that men had to provide and perform, it was far from clear what this exactly entailed.

Some methodological remarks

When I started my fieldwork in June 2019, it was not with the intention of writing a book about how notions of masculinity impacted the lives of migrant men in Pipeline. I had just begun a project on the experimentalization of development aid, analyzing how the paradigm of evidence-based intervention influenced the livelihoods of the inhabitants of Kaleko. My long-term field site, this small western Kenyan market centre in Kabondo-Kasipul constituency is roughly an eight-hour bus ride from Nairobi. Realizing that I needed to interact with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nairobi at least one or two weeks each month, I asked my friend Samuel Onyango, a 28-year-old Luo migrant whom I had met in Chabera (a market centre not far from Kaleko) while he was waiting to start his law studies in Nairobi, if he could help me to find an apartment in Nairobi, preferably one not far from his own. Renting an apartment in Nairobi's less affluent east would not only cost less per month than a few nights in a hotel but would also allow me to combine my stays in the city with visiting and hosting friends. Less than a week later, Samuel informed me that he had found a bedsitter – a single room with a private bathroom – less than a five-minute walk away from his own.

Milele Flats (Kiswahili, 'Eternity Flats', see Figure 1), a massive tenement block painted green, orange and black, had just been finished. Only a few of the more than 100 bedsitters were still vacant. After climbing up to the seventh floor, Samuel and I inspected the bedsitter, a room less than fifteen square metres with a small bathroom and a tiny kitchen area equipped with cupboard, sink and tap. Tiled and freshly painted, it was large enough for one person. I indicated my wish to rent the apartment, and the caretaker gave me the bank account details for the deposit and the first month's rent, after which Samuel and I went to one of the numerous shops offering bank services, paid the rent (6,500 Kenyan Shillings [KSh] for the first month plus the 6,500 KSh deposit, a total of roughly 130 US), and returned to Milele to give the transfer slip to the caretaker to secure the deal.

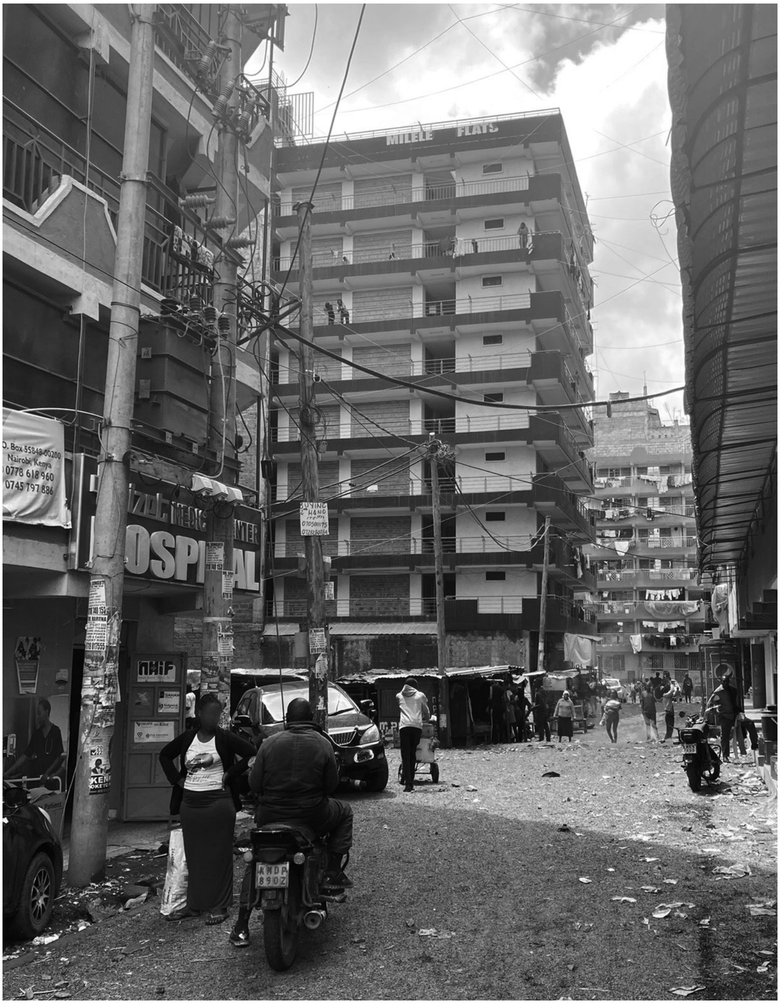

Figure 1 Milele Flats. Photograph by the author, 2 June 2022.

During the three years I spent in Pipeline, I leaned on networks I had established in western Kenya. Samuel's assistance in finding accommodation helped me find my feet and I mostly hung out with friends I knew from western Kenya as well as friends of theirs. My integration into rural-urban networks intensified when, fed up with nearly two months of no running water, I met up with William Odhiambo, one of Samuel's childhood friends who had gone to secondary school in Chabera but had grown up in Kaleko and whom I had come across a couple of times. William and I decided to move into a one-bedroom apartment that was a five-minute walk from Milele Flats. Shortly thereafter we were joined by Dennis Okech, a mutual friend from Kaleko, who had just left his wife.[5] Over time, we housed relatives and friends from Kaleko, Chabera and other places in Nyanza who were passing through Nairobi.

Pipeline's maze-like layout fascinated me from day one. The estate struck me as unique, yet in terms of the scholarly literature on Nairobi it was all but completely overlooked (Huchzermeyer 2011, Ondieki 2016). Even though huge tenement blocks housing hundreds of people had replaced older housing structures all over Nairobi, the population density of Pipeline was unparalleled, except for some areas along Thika Road (especially in the constituency of Kasarani), and far surpassed the density of informal settlements such as Kibera. Intrigued by the myriad ways of how the estate's inhabitants made ends meet, I decided early on to gather data for one or two articles on Pipeline's history and economy. I spent my days conducting participant observation in the offices of Maendeleo, a research and advisory firm that had the infrastructure to implement behavioral economic experiments, and my evenings, nights, and weekends in Pipeline, where I watched football, went out for drinks, and shared my professional and romantic struggles with friends old and new.

Shortly before I had to leave Kenya due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized that my perspective on Pipeline and the lives of its inhabitants was decisively male. I fraternized with male labourers who worked in the nearby industrial area, played endless rounds of pool with men, drank beer with aspiring male politicians and landlords, worked out in a gym whose only regular female visitors were the owner's wife and young daughter, and played checkers and the FIFA videogame with, and surrounded by, teenage boys and young men. When I returned to Pipeline in November 2020, my new research focus was clear: migrant men and their experience of economic and romantic pressure.

Being around men tended to mean not being around women. Even though I can rely on roughly 25 long qualitative interviews with female migrants who lived in Pipeline, I spent far less time with women than men. This imbalance resulted from the 'social invisibility of women in male-dominated contexts' (Smith 2017: 129) as well as the relatively strict separation between the sexes. Most of my male friends would interpret any social encounter with a woman as flirtatious, often with sexual undertones, which sometimes led to uncomfortable comments about the woman's physical traits. If she was known to them personally, they would also discuss her virtues and vices. Consequently, most of the women I got to know were female relatives of my male interlocutors. In an effort to correct this imbalance, I chatted with and spent as much time as possible with women I met on a formal, regular basis, such as the owner of a shop where I bought daily necessities or the female security guard in the high-rise block in which I lived. Nonetheless, everything I write about in this book is influenced by a male perspective.

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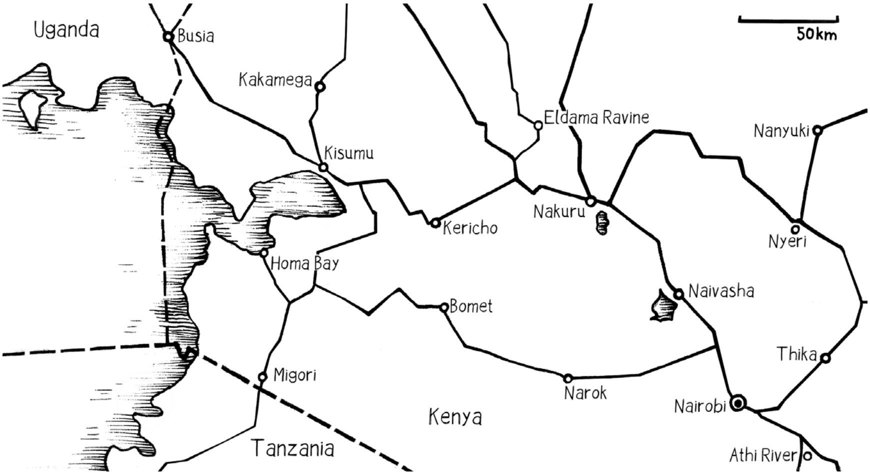
[5] I lived in my Milele Flats bedsitter from August to December 2019 and February to March 2020, when I had to leave Kenya because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2020 and from January to March 2021, I shared a one-bedroom apartment with Dennis Okech and William Odhiambo, who moved out in March 2021. I continued to live with Dennis until I returned to Germany in May 2021. After spending the summer in Germany, I returned to the one-bedroom apartment in Pipeline, where I lived on my own from August to December 2021, February to March 2022, and May to September 2022.

Migrants in high-rise Nairobi

Pipeline's urban geography, architecture, and materiality were saturated with promises and expectations of wealth and modernity, especially from the perspective of rural migrants. It was an aspirational estate where landlords lured migrants with the promise of tiled and clean housing, a free subscription to Premier League football and a supposedly reliable supply of water and electricity. For less than 4,000 KSh per month, for example, you could rent a single room with shared bathrooms. While the estate's fancy bars allowed men to participate in the 'sweet life' of those with money, proudly displayed consumer goods such as flat screens, smartphones and laptops reassured others of a migrant man's upward trajectory. Even so, few of my interlocutors thought of Pipeline as a long-term place to stay. Instead, they viewed the estate as the launching pad for their personal development and professional careers. Preparing their onward migration to greener pastures, some attempted to save a portion of their meagre salaries, while others bought into Kenya's narrative of entrepreneurship and tried their luck by becoming 'self-employed' (see Dolan and Gordon 2019) in Pipeline's thriving local economy, where vendors sold almost everything from pre-cooked food, electronic gadgets, children's toys, and clothes to illegally brewed alcohol (Kiswahili, *chang'aa*), drugs, and sexual services.

Male migrants from western Kenya had to deal with many of the pressures created by the narrative of the male breadwinner in an intensified way. The spatial movement from the rural to the urban entailed leaving behind what many perceived as a life of the past (see map 1). Through talking with migrants who had lived in Nairobi for some time, I realized that they viewed their parents' lifestyle as infected with a burdensome traditionalism and governed by social rules that they perceived as suffocating. Somewhat ironically, when they first arrived in the city, their clothes, bodily and sexual practices, language, and material goods immediately gave away their rural origins. If they did not want to be branded as 'village' or 'farm boys' (Dholuo, *apuodho*, from


Uganda
Busia
Kakamega
Kisumu
Eldama Ravine
Nanyuki
50km
Nakuru
Kericho
Nyeri
Homa Bay
Bomet
Naivasha
Thika
Migori
Narok
Nairobi
Kenya
Tanzania
Athi River

Map 1 Southwestern Kenya. Map drawn by Robin von Gestern.

puodho, 'farm'), male migrants had to adjust to urban dress codes, acquaint themselves with the city's complex public transport network (Mutongi 2017), and learn how to deal with the many perils of urban life such as pickpockets, con artists as well as unexplored sexual practices such as kissing and oral sex.

Upon arriving, they immediately came face to face with these pressures to adapt to urban life as well as the demands from home. Rural kin soon wanted proof of success, and those relatives who had contributed to their secondary education expected remittances and regular updates on their educational or economic progress. However, because of the differing challenges of urban and rural life, expectations of friends in the city and relatives at home did not always match. For many of my male interlocutors, the allure of urban living, such as women, material goods, alcohol, and drugs, which could be enjoyed in the shadow of the city's anonymity,[6] ate up the same meagre monetary resources that relatives were anticipating. The COVID-19 pandemic brought into even sharper relief the ongoing economic and social relevance of this ‘urban-rural connection’ (Geschiere and Gugler 1998, see also Ross and Weisner 1977, Weisner 1976). The measures to curb the spread of the virus not only restricted travel between Nairobi and western Kenya, but also led to an economic crisis that made it more and more difficult to send remittances home, which upset carefully negotiated financial arrangements.

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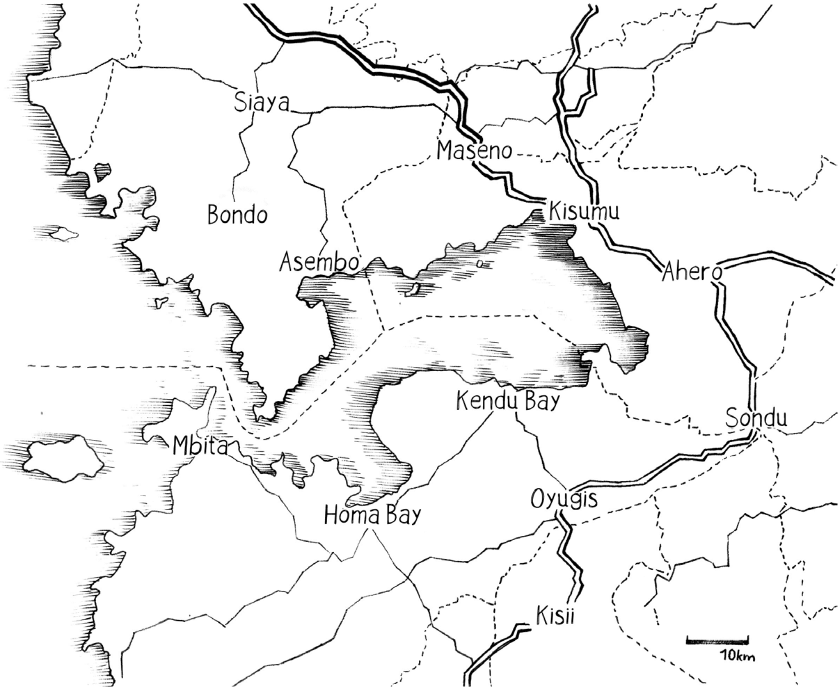
[6] During their youth in the village, many of my male friends could not invite a girlfriend to their father's house to 'chew her' (Dholuo, *nyamo nyako*, 'to chew a girl', *nyamo* is exemplarily used for sugar cane, which is chewed and then thrown away), as this would have constituted a ritual transgression. To get round this, Samuel and some of his friends used an abandoned house in Chabera to perform what they called their 'nocturnal surgeries' (see Githinji 2008 on sexist language in Kenya). Other opportunities for sexual exploration arose when young men visited boarding schools or attended funerals, when people engaged in night-long dancing and partying (known as *disco matanga*, or *lawo thum*, Dholuo, 'chasing the music') and young women could be seduced in nearby fields.

To contextualize migrants’ lives and economic expectations in Kenya’s capital, the next section describes Kaleko, the rural place I know best. A short introduction to life in Kaleko and neighbouring market centres such as Chabera, illustrates the extent of the urban–rural contrast and helps us understand why many male migrants initially, and quite euphorically, conceptualized Nairobi as a launching pad for their careers, and for masculine success more broadly, only to later realize that things would not work out as smoothly as expected.

Male migration as an aspirational practice

‘Many schoolchildren had no shoes, there was no electricity, no blackboards, and our desks were placed on bare soil. On top of all that we had to fetch firewood for our teachers, imagine, early in the morning before school.’ After we had finished our dinner, Samuel and his close friend Caleb Omondi, who also hailed from Chabera, began to tell stories about life growing up in rural western Kenya. Maybe trying to impress Jane, a friend who had grown up in a village close to Nairobi, Samuel and Caleb engaged in a practice I had observed among other male migrants. By portraying western Kenya as backward and underdeveloped (Morrison 2007), migrant men painted a picture of their journey as ‘a rite of passage in which the migrant must confront risk and the unfamiliar to ensure his social becoming’ (Kleinman 2019: 13) and of themselves as pioneers who had transformed from boys walking barefoot and dressed in torn clothes to men wearing suits and designer shoes. Irrespective of their absolute wealth, many male migrants from western Kenya (see map 2), a region viewed by most as politically and historically neglected, arrived in Nairobi with a feeling of superiority vis-à-vis poor urban residents or migrants from places closer to Nairobi. Puzzled by the difference between her school days and those of Samuel and Caleb, Jane told us that those stories reminded her of how her mother had described going to school when she was young. In coming to Nairobi, it seemed, Caleb and Samuel had not only travelled in space but also forwards in time.

Urban Kenyans considered places such as Kaleko and Chabera not only far away geographically but also as temporally distant and backward. Rural villages did indeed offer few economic opportunities for young men. In 2009,



Map 2 *Piny Luo* (Dholuo, 'Luo land'). Map drawn by Robin von Gestern.

when I visited Kaleko for the first time, I felt as if I was being transported back in time. Donkey carts transported bricks that local youths had made by hand, and women in colourful traditional clothes carried sacks of maize on their heads to the local market. Passing through the maize fields that surrounded polygamous homesteads (Dholuo, *dala*, see figure 2), which were organized according to patrilocal and patrilineal principles that were more than a century old, I quickly realized that social and political relations were still influenced by the clan and lineage structures referenced by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1949). Few houses had electricity and there was no running water or a basic sewage system. It was not surprising that many young people perceived Kaleko as a place stuck in the past. Other than farming and selling the produce at the local markets, working in the local informal economy, or becoming a teacher or nurse, job opportunities were limited. When asked why so many men migrate to Nairobi, one male migrant from Homa Bay County stated that 'if money could be found in the village, we would not be in Nairobi'. Most young men, in other words, did not see a future in Kaleko (Schmidt 2017a).

The narratives of entrepreneurial and professional success in the capital and signs of urban modernity, such as the newest technological gadgets, sparked

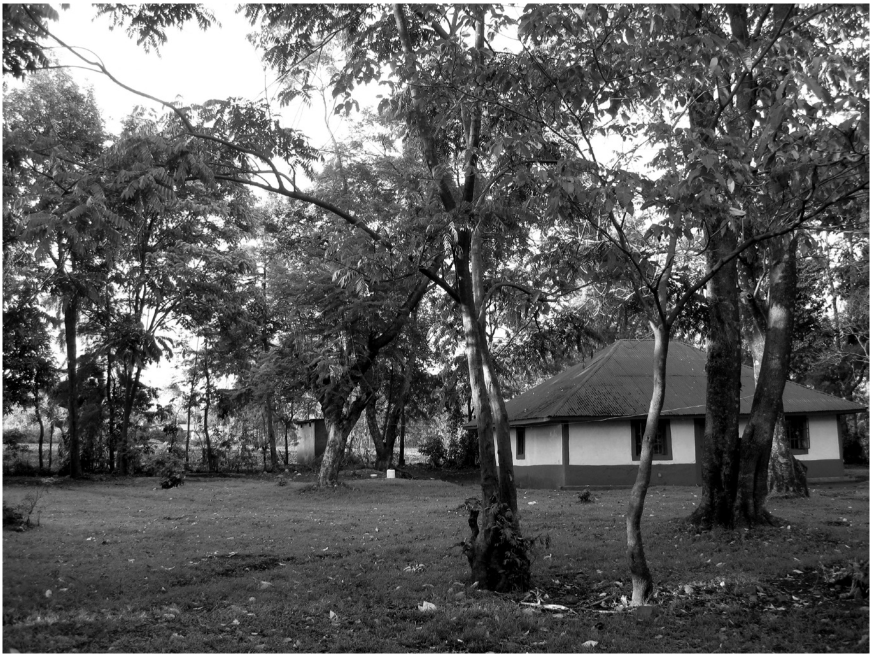


Figure 2 Patrilocal homestead in Kaleko. Photograph by the author, 20 April 2015.

and catalyzed the migratory dreams of young men from Kaleko and other places in rural western Kenya throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989). During my fieldwork, many men still considered migration the most promising way to explore new worlds and make money, and then return home later in life. Due to a high population density and an increasing shortage of land around Kaleko, many young men were well aware that they would not necessarily be able to build homesteads adjacent to those of their fathers' or uncles', as had long been traditional cultural practice (see Geissler and Prince 2010: chapter 4). The majority would either have to buy land elsewhere or be content with tiny plots that would barely allow any form of subsistence agriculture. This impending scarcity of land in western Kenya further intensified the pressure on young men to migrate to the capital to make enough money to be able to retire in their natal village.

A successful migration would fulfil the promises of a narrative of migrant modernity, one to which many Kenyans still adhere. Focusing on excelling in the domains of 'schooling, formal employment, and households' (Smith 2008: 114), these expectations of migratory success have historical roots in western Kenya's colonial history as a labour pool and have also been perpetuated by stereotypes of *jo*-Luo as excellent academics, lawyers, and politicians. Such expectations were further reinforced through the narratives of success shared by elder migrants. However, the structural adjustment reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with an explosion in the number of college and university degree-holders, made it difficult for migrants to achieve economic success in Kenya's capital. Three decades later, the economic recession and inflation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine further impeded migrants' attempts to meet their rural families' expectations, never mind their own. Caleb, whose salary was cut by 50 per cent during the first months of the pandemic and who shared his Nairobi apartment with his girlfriend and three relatives, summarized this predicament as follows:

> Due to the economic pressure, you know, maybe what you were offering before might be different from what you are offering now. […] Like right now there are priorities, right? And maybe your cousin or somebody tells you like, 'I need this amount of money', and you don't have that money right now, because you know with them, the expectation is still intact, they have the mentality that you are working, and that you are in Nairobi, the mentality they have is that you have money.

Relations between the village (Dholuo, *gweng*, Sheng, *ushago*, *shags*) and the city (Dholuo, *boma*) were complex, and both places figured in the minds and plans of migrants as more than geographic locations. While the virtual presence of money and urban commodities influenced the dreams and visions of male migrants long before they left for the city, behavioural traits that were associated with rurality and backwardness, such as speaking with an odd accent or refusing to eat unknown food, shaped how migrants were seen during their first few months after they arrived. For many migrant men the city was simply a place to make money, experiment with new lifestyles, and make a family of their own before returning to their ancestral homes. However, as this book will show, these goals tended to obstruct one another.

Organization of the chapters

This book has two parts, each consisting of three chapters. The first part – *Experiencing Pressure* – introduces Pipeline and discusses the romantic and economic challenges men encountered after migrating to Nairobi. It describes how their own expectations and those of their rural kin, wives, girlfriends, and male friends structured, influenced, and disrupted their attempts to find success. *Experiencing Pressure* thus outlines the social and economic consequences of the ongoing relevance of the narrative of the male provider and explores some of the frustrations male migrants experienced. The second part – *Evading Pressure* – focuses on three homosocial spaces in which men tried to evade or overcome the experience of pressure: an ethnically homogenous investment group of Dholuo-speaking Kenyans who socialized with one another in the bars and pubs of Pipeline, the interethnic No Mercy Gym, and the sphere of self-help culture embodied by those I call 'masculinity consultants', such as pastors, authors and motivational speakers who tried to capitalize on male migrants' experiences of pressure by giving advice on how to become an economically and spiritually successful man, husband, and father.[7] Going to bars and clubs, working out, or reading self-help literature allowed periods of release, renewing the energy male migrants required to sustain their efforts to provide for their urban and rural relatives. Ultimately, though, these practices failed as lasting solutions for their economic and social frustrations. The most socially validated form of masculinity – economic success – remained both a sought-after 'privilege and a source of lived insecurity' (Hendriks 2022: 144) for most male migrants in Pipeline.

Chapter 1 offers an introduction to Pipeline's materiality, history, and geography. It shows that the emergence of the estate must be understood against the background of Nairobi's colonial and postcolonial history and housing policies characterized by racial segregation, political corruption, and illegal land grabbing. The chapter closes a research gap in the scholarly literature on Nairobi that has predominantly focused on informal settlements, such as Kibera or Korogocho, by portraying some of the challenges and forms of exclusion caused by Pipeline's urban architecture, the state's neglect of the significant increase in tenement housing that began in the early 2000s, as well as the residents' rather instrumental approach to living in the estate's high-rise accommodation. I conclude by suggesting that in being ignored by the state yet catalyzing the aspirational dreams of migrant men and landlords alike,

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[7] I focus on these places because they differ from other masculine spaces such as barber shops, open-air pool halls and videogame joints in one major respect. Male migrants who wrote or read self-help books, participated in investment groups, or worked out in gyms tried to change their futures actively. These spaces seemed better suited to gaining an understanding of the influence of the expectation of success. Although men also frequented betting shops to change their futures actively, I decided not to include them as a case study in this book. It is nevertheless important to mention that betting shops were one of the social spaces that migrant men visited after work to avoid spending time with their families. Aware of the economic and social pressures men faced, the owners of betting shops allowed potential customers to hang around and watch the evening news or chat with friends even if they did not have money to bet. Furthermore, engaging in systematic betting, which not only demanded a detailed analysis of the strength of players and teams but also fiscal prudence, allowed unemployed men to experience the dignity of having something comparable to a business or job (Schmidt 2019).

Pipeline is best understood as a place everyone expected a lot from while no one was really willing to emotionally invest in it.

Chapter 2 describes Pipeline's economy and the strategies male migrants employed to navigate both 'landscapes of debt' and 'horizons of expectation' (Cole 2014). It distinguishes the experience of pressure from the experience of stress by defining the first as a negative somatic reaction resulting from an actor's assessment of expectations as reasonable in kind but not in degree, that is to say, qualitatively justified but quantitatively excessive. This conceptualization of pressure has several benefits. Apart from explaining why migrant men's experience of pressure was often accompanied by quantitative qualifiers, such as 'not yet, but soon I will be one of those successful men', or 'you are right, but you ask for too much', it also allows us to grasp the intimate and culturally as well as socially inflected nature of the relation between the cause of pressure and the person who experiences it (see Jackson 2013 on the history of stress as a diagnosis and metaphor in the twentieth century). Male migrants were intimately attached and emotionally committed to what they perceived as the causes of their pressure, such as the narrative of the male breadwinner, urban life, or the expectations of their wives, girlfriends, and rural kin. Finally, understanding migrant men's pressure as caused by expectations that they considered qualitatively justified helps to explain why they rarely engaged in more radical political critiques of Kenya's highly unjust capitalist system. Male migrants did not want to change the rules of the game. They just wanted to win it.

Chapter 3 focuses on how migrant men's experience of pressure destabilized their romantic relations. After illustrating how men classified women according to various categories that were constantly threatening to merge, I discuss how migrant men and women employed practices that aimed at stabilizing the marital house as a social unit. As these practices derived their alleged efficacy from the economically unsustainable idea of the man as the main breadwinner, they further complicated the already intricate relations between money, sexuality, and love. The resulting mistrust and the anxiety of being unable to perform traditional gender roles intensified public negotiations of sexual performances, economic responsibilities, and romantic requests. These public negotiations took place through new forms of smartphone-based communication such as WhatsApp. The chapter ends by extending the discussion of mistrust and secrecy to the issue of urban–rural kin relations. In an environment where many couples lived together in interethnic relationships, husbands and wives often did not know each other's in-laws or mother tongue, which led to further misunderstandings.

Chapter 4 focuses on a welfare group called HoMiSiKi, which consisted entirely of Luo migrants and was named after the first syllables of the four western Kenyan counties predominantly inhabited by *jo*-Luo: Homa Bay, Migori, Siaya, and Kisumu. The group's main goal was to support members in case of sickness or funerals and to save enough money to invest. The chapter illustrates how its official structure and ambitious aims provided a justification for married men to leave their apartments and spend time with other men in their 'playing field' (Dholuo, *pap,* traditionally denoting a field where people danced, initiated sexual relations, organized wrestling matches and other social activities). As *jo-pap* (Dholuo, 'people of the playing field', singular *ja-pap)*, they engaged in practices of wasteful masculinity, such as extramarital sexual relationships, physical violence and an excessive consumption of alcohol. The chapter concludes with a description of how the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected HoMiSiKi's economic plans but intensified celebrations of wasteful masculinity among individual *jo-pap,* which ultimately led to the collapse of the investment group.

Chapter 5 outlines the history of recreational weightlifting in Pipeline by narrating how Carl, one of the estate's gym pioneers and the owner of the No Mercy Gym, started his career as a gym instructor twenty years ago. Following an introduction to Pipeline's gym scene, I delve into the experiences of five members of the No Mercy Gym who trained together almost daily, demonstrating how small interactions (looks, comments, or instructions, for example) and institutionalized practices, such as contributing to funeral costs or participating in post-workout meals and drinks, defined the gym as a masculine space and fostered a strong sense of belonging among its members. The chapter goes on to argue that the recreational weightlifting at the No Mercy Gym represents a paradigmatic form of coping with the experience of pressure produced by a situation in which the causes and effects of economic success appeared to have been disentangled. Lifting weights provided meaning to migrant men by giving them a sense of self-efficacy that they could not find in Kenya's ruthless capitalist economy.

The final chapter explores how masculinity consultants offered guidance to Kenyan men who were seeking ways to alleviate economic and romantic pressures. While Philemon Otieno, a migrant and motivational speaker from western Kenya, suggested combining practices and narratives of charismatic Christianity with those of US-American self-help culture to achieve economic success (see Boyd 2018, Fay 2022), other masculinity consultants such as Amerix, who rose to nationwide fame by giving Kenyan men advice on social media, as well as self-published authors Silas Nyanchwani (2021a, 2022) and Jacob Aliet (2022a), recommended that male migrants reject feminist values and adopt practices focused on re-establishing the patriarchal norms that they believed would transform them into strong and self-sufficient men. These recommendations were strongly influenced by ideas found in the digital 'manosphere', this being a conglomeration of websites, blogs, chat groups, and online forums centred around an anti-feminist redefinition of masculinity (Ging 2019, Kaiser 2022, Van Valkenburg 2021). Widening the book's perspective by focusing on how Kenyan men appropriated, disseminated, and contextualized such masculinizing strategies links the experiences of male migrants in Pipeline with nationwide discussions about the dire state of gender relations, which were further fuelled by men's growing fear of becoming expendable (see Schmidt 2022a).

The conclusion draws out the structural similarities of the three case studies and summarizes the book's findings against the background of the concepts of the experience of pressure and the expectation of success. It recapitulates how discussing and trying to overcome male frustrations and failures has become an integral part of constructing man-, father-, husband- and brotherhood in contemporary Nairobi, where migrants coped with economic and social pressures exacerbated by the narrative of men as providers by creating and frequenting masculine spaces where a feeling of manhood and brotherhood was created, maintained and celebrated (see Fuh 2012). However, this celebration of brotherhood did not entail a critique of but merely allowed migrant men to momentarily evade Kenya's increasing capitalist focus on economic actors' entrepreneurial work ethic. In Pipeline, male validation continued to be characterized by trying, and often failing, to be the breadwinner. Masculinity, in other words, was not only defined by meeting the normative expectations of others but also by genuine efforts to meet them. Trying one's best or simulating success often had to suffice. Being a man in Pipeline was thus a balancing act of trying, pretending, and failing to meet self-expectations and those of others.

Migrants and Masculinity in High-Rise Nairobi portrays what Philippe Bourgois has called 'the individual experience of social structural oppression' (2003 [1996]: 15). It shows how, amidst economic crises and the Kenyan state's failure to offer affordable healthcare and education, migrant men remain under continuous pressure to provide for their loved ones. The book thereby complements the burgeoning literature on how social units such as families (Cooper 2019) or NGOs (Muehlebach 2012) are compelled to or willingly take over responsibilities from a neoliberal state that neglects its citizens. Instead of criticizing the state's negligence and demanding their rights, men and women in high-rise Nairobi remain entangled in a blame game that continues to escalate their economic and romantic pressures. The alleged crisis of masculinity is not primarily a problem of gender relations, but more a result of Kenya's capitalist economy, which relies on the production and exploitation of migrant men's pressured bodies and minds and pits their interests against those of women (see Ntarangwi 1998). Rather than looking to support from the state, men and women in Pipeline expected everything and nothing from each other, a situation that led to misunderstandings, mistrust, violence, and even death.