

# Expanding Gender Analysis: The Rise of Breadwinner Femininity in Urban Northern Tanzania

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## Abstract

This paper explores the lived experiences of breadwinning women in urban Northern Tanzania, challenging the pervasive masculinity bias that frames economic provision as an inherently masculine role. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how women—often single, separated, or in long-distance partnerships—elude patriarchal control, not through overt resistance but by cultivating alternative forms of authority grounded in motherhood, relational embeddedness, and economic contribution. Many do so by remaining (ostensibly) single, strategically distancing themselves from a patriarchal framework that associates femininity with submissiveness. Instead, they embody a socially valued femininity centred on provision and communal care—a model this paper terms *breadwinner femininity*. In a context where motherhood often takes precedence over marriage as a marker of social adulthood, these women assert a respected womanhood rooted in leadership, responsibility and care. Their economic strength is frequently invested in their children's well-being and education, enhancing their moral authority and garnering communal respect. Drawing on African feminist perspectives, the paper critiques rigid gender binaries and advocates for more plural, relational and female-affirming models of power. Ultimately, it argues for an expanded gender analysis of the intersection of seniority, economic strength, and caregiving as key to understanding feminine power and social legitimacy in African contexts and beyond.

**Keywords:** Relationality, female power, provision, seniority, ethnography

## Introduction

“Women from the North are fierce fighters when it comes to money. . . so that they don’t get controlled by any man, they’ve automatically adapted their way of life.”<sup>i</sup>

This response from an online discussion (Jamiiforums 2016) about women from Northern Tanzania reflects a broader societal perception that Chagga women defy traditional gender roles. The forum post, by a man from the Lake Zone, opened with a description of women of Kilimanjaro as *majike dume*—a term that roughly translates to “male females”, followed by an appeal to the men and women of Kilimanjaro to reconsider this behaviour because he thought it was destructive for African values. In the forum discussion, women were both celebrated and criticised for their industriousness, autonomy, and economic leadership. For some, they symbolise progress and strength; for others, they embody a perceived threat to the patriarchal order.

These debates highlight a central tension in dominant gender discourses: the persistent binary that associates femininity with submission, dependence, and nurturing while equating masculinity with authority, autonomy, and economic provision. These assumptions, reinforced by colonial framings of African gender systems, have long obscured the complexities and pluralities inherent in local structures. Such narrow interpretations marginalise women’s contributions and frame their actions—such as breadwinning, leadership, and community provision—as anomalies, often masculinising them. This bias effectively excludes economic power and agency from the realm of femininity, perpetuating the perception that women are inherently disempowered. African feminist scholars have long challenged such reductive framings, calling for more nuanced approaches that foreground dynamism, relationality, and sociocultural embeddedness of their experiences (Amadiume 1997; Oyěwùmí 1997; Arnfred 2004; Nzegwu 2020; Sudarkasa 1986). Normative gender relations often position men as providers and decision-makers, relegating women to caretaking roles and subordinate positions within household and community structures (Aidoo 1985; Asante 2000). While this portrayal persists in societal narratives, it is increasingly challenged by women’s lived realities, particularly in regions such as Northern Tanzania.

Over the last several decades, political and economic shifts in Tanzania have transformed gendered labour dynamics. While women have long contributed to household economies, the economic crisis of the 1980s and the liberalisation policies of the early 1990s led to their increased engagement in income-generating activities beyond the household, often in the informal sector. Over time, some women have come to occupy the role of primary breadwinner—pursuing economic provision both out of necessity and to achieve ambition. For these women, breadwinning is not a rejection of femininity but a central component of their gendered sense of self. Economic provision, far from being a marker of masculinity, becomes a celebrated aspect of their sense of self as women. Meanwhile, motherhood often replaces marital status as the defining marker of adulthood, and women navigate patriarchal constraints by choosing separation, singlehood, or long-distance relationships. Their roles as breadwinners are interwoven with their positions as caregivers, enabling them to claim socioeconomic independence while remaining deeply embedded in familial and community life.

This paper examines these transformative roles through the concept of “breadwinner femininity”. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Tanzania, it highlights the way women’s breadwinning practices reconfigure dominant gender frameworks. These women’s lives challenge stereotypes of femininity as inherently passive or dependent. By embracing breadwinning, they redefine what it means to be a woman in their communities. Their contributions extend beyond their households to neighbourhood groups and community leadership roles, where they are recognised as influential figures. Breadwinning, often viewed as a hallmark of masculinity, is reimaged here as a socially valued and integral aspect of femininity.

This paper portrays the experiences of Mama Randa<sup>ii</sup> as exemplary of the experiences of many women in Northern Tanzania. Women like Mama Randa take great pride in their ability to be breadwinners, which gives them a sense of being good mothers and strong women. Importantly, their pursuits and successes are also applauded by their social environment. This pride and recognition compel me to reconsider notions of gender hegemonies. Mama Randa, through her breadwinning, achieved a respected social status and held positions of authority—achievements that historically have often been integral

to the conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinities, that is, masculinities that all men aspire to and/or are positioned in relation to.

Connell (1995) introduced the seminal notion of hegemonic masculinity to describe socially valued masculinities. However, this paper demonstrates that breadwinning women do not aspire to such masculinities. Instead, their positions and pursuits reflect a plurality of ways to be respected as a woman. The current literature on gender hegemonies largely neglects women like Mama Randa. It either portrays femininity (or womanhood) as the subordinate other to men through notions of “emphasized femininity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Jakobsen 2014), or it labels those who refuse to be subordinate, like Mama Randa, as “pariah femininity” (Kitetu and Kioko 2013; Levine 2019; Schippers 2007). Yet, such implied rigid gender dualisms do not align with the lived realities of the women in this research, as they leave little room for non-subordinate differences. The conceptualisation of hegemonic femininities proposed here follows Nzegwu’s (2020) call for “female-affirming models of power” that centre relational authority and communal care, rather than reproducing masculinist frameworks. Therefore, this paper argues for a plurality of womanhood through the concept of hegemonic femininities that shows a plurality of socially dominant and desired ideals of female behaviour and attributes.

## **Methods and Field**

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in urban neighbourhoods and surrounding villages in Northern Tanzania, a region shaped by early supraregional trade, missionary activity in the late nineteenth century, and a growing tourism industry near Mount Kilimanjaro. My engagement with this region spans more than a decade, beginning with volunteer work in local NGOs. This longstanding involvement laid the foundation for my doctoral research in 2019/2020 and continues to inform my postdoctoral work. As a white researcher from Germany in my 30s, I was visibly an outsider, but long-term engagement and daily interactions enabled me to build relationships and participate in everyday spaces. Over the years, my familiarity with the region developed through shared daily experiences such as

cooking or farming with community members, attending weddings and funerals, and working locally to support children's education.

Ethnographic methods that can provide qualitative insights into the lived experiences of women were at the core of this study; these included participant observation, informal conversations, and unstructured interviews conducted in Kiswahili. Key sites of interaction included small neighbourhood bars, family homes, community gatherings, savings group meetings, and markets, where I could observe not only what women said about economic autonomy but also how they practised it. My unmarried status also influenced research interactions, particularly in discussions about marriage, financial independence, and male control. Many of my interlocutors were single, separated, or in long-distance relationships. Being unmarried, like many of them, created common ground for these conversations. This may also have influenced which aspects of lives and relationships were emphasised, as women who saw me to be aligned with their experiences might have been more forthcoming about financial hardships and stories of dysfunctional partnerships. Ironically, these stories reinforce types of narratives deployed by broader developmentalist discourses. Yet, inspired by African(ist) feminist scholarship, my aim was not to reproduce “the tired polemics of violence, disease, and reproduction” (Tamale 2011, 30) that have long dominated research on African women's lives. Instead, I sought to attend to the more ambiguous, creative, and relational aspects of the ways women position themselves economically and socially. These included moments of pride, care, humour, and negotiation—dimensions often overlooked when research focuses primarily on constraint or lack. This approach also underscored the importance of moving beyond formal interviews and looking at how women relate to one another in their wider social surroundings. Observing women's daily interactions in their communal networks revealed not just what they said about financial autonomy, but also how they positioned themselves and were positioned as breadwinners. These everyday engagements allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between self-reliance, social expectations, and economic interdependence, factors often missed in structured conversations alone.

A defining feature of this study is the cohort of women whose lives I have been following since my first arrival in Tanzania. The women who are

central to this research have been actively involved in interpreting ethnographic data and shaping how emic concepts are understood, ensuring that local perspectives and meanings remain central. The research focuses on a cohort of women aged 35 to 65, who are mostly of Christian faith and from the Chagga ethnic group predominant in the Kilimanjaro region. Many are single, separated, or in long-distance relationships. These women are often the primary breadwinners in their households. Their entrepreneurial activities span diverse, mostly informal economic sectors, including subsistence farming, broiler meat production, and trading in second-hand clothing. Almost all women also partake in neighbourhood savings groups such as *Vikoba* (pl.). Women's savings groups emerged as a vital resource in the lives of my interlocutors. They not only provide financial support but also foster social cohesion and mutual aid, and this makes them integral to the fabric of community life (Ott 2022; Kesanta and Andre 2015). Neighbourhood group meetings often serve as spaces for exchanging personal experiences, offering advice, and organising collective responses to life events such as weddings and funerals. Beyond their economic functions, the groups provide leadership opportunities for women, enabling them to gain visibility and influence within their communities.

The women in this study challenge entrenched binaries of dependence and autonomy. While they may project an image of self-reliance, their economic ambitions are deeply intertwined with networks of mutual support and social obligations. Such networks are built on reputation, respectability, and reciprocity, forming the foundation for their breadwinning activities and their position within their communities. While neighbourhood groups often exclude the very poor due to income thresholds, they offer participating women a socioeconomic safety net and pathways to upward mobility. This relational framework enriches our understanding of breadwinning not merely as an individual economic role but also as a socially embedded practice that transforms dominant notions of femininity and gendered power.

## Socioeconomic Shifts and Women's Breadwinning

Women-led households are not a recent development in Tanzania. During colonial times, the rise of cash crop production and labour migration led many men to leave their villages—and their families—in search of work, leaving their wives to manage households independently (Tungaraza 1995). Labour migration remains predominantly male-driven today (Duda, Fasse, and Grote 2018). After independence, under President Nyerere, Tanzania adopted a socialist agenda in 1968. Part of this agenda prioritised formal education for women, political inclusion, and the establishment of women's groups, encouraging their participation in the workforce. These efforts became even more critical in the 1980s, as the global economic recession and challenges of the socialist period placed a significant strain on the country's economy. Labour migration from villages to urban areas from colonial times to the early 1970s declined significantly in the 1980s. Although linked to Nyerere's villagisation efforts, the shift was driven largely by the country's growing economic crisis. Those with formal jobs, which were taxed and monitored by the government, often did not receive their full monthly salaries. Such formal or salaried jobs were a male domain. As urban wage-earners' incomes and living standards plummeted, women, compelled to seek alternative income sources, engaged more in entrepreneurship and in the informal sector from the 1980s (Kiondo 1990). Some women assumed the role of primary breadwinners in their families; they fulfilled their responsibilities by engaging in businesses primarily centred on food production, processing, services, and retail selling (Rutashobya 1995).

Under Nyerere, restrictive licensing policies and regulations—part of a socialist economic framework that aimed to centralise control and reduce income inequalities—hindered small entrepreneurs from operating legally. Those restrictive policies made it difficult to obtain a business license, limited where businesses were allowed to operate and in what kinds of goods and services, and imposed often unpredictable and unfair taxation. Driven by necessity, people ran their businesses without registration, thereby challenging state policies and creating alternatives to the state's failing systems. The expanding informal economy pressured the state to liberalise policies and ease control over entrepreneurship. In 1985, Nyerere stepped down from the

presidency amid growing criticism of his Ujamaa socialism, and his successor, President Mwinyi, introduced a new paradigm of economic liberalisation.

The emergence of women's urban associations has been a pivotal force in the socioeconomic and political evolution of the country. The formalisation of women's groups evolved in the 1940s and 1950s from different programmes that focused on religious duties and instruction, and domestic education (Swai 2010). In the post-independence era, women's groups were supported by the state to promote development and gender equality, with an emphasis on women's education, political rights and economic inclusion. During the economic downturns of the 1970s and 1980s, these groups developed into autonomous networks. They became crucial for women's entrepreneurial ventures and for providing savings and credit services, especially as the state's extensive role diminished with the onset of liberalisation and structural adjustments from the mid-1980s. These collectives gradually broadened their reach: they addressed diverse issues from health and education to legal rights, thereby transitioning from a concentration on welfare to an added focus on empowerment and advocacy. Aili Mari Tripp's (1997) research emphasises how these groups served as catalysts for women's political participation and resistance to restrictive policies. Structural changes, including improved access to loans and credit, enabled women to participate in entrepreneurial ventures. However, many women remained reliant on men, as male moneylenders often controlled such financial resources (Koda 1995). Beginning in the mid-1990s, women's savings groups such as Vikundi were increasingly formalised, and others such as Vikoba were established<sup>iii</sup>. These changes stemmed from reforms to the Tanzanian financial sector in 1991 (Randhawa and Gallardo 2003), which provided women with greater autonomy to save money, access resources, and create financial support networks.

## **Navigating Patriarchy**

The story of Mama Randa illustrates how women in Northern Tanzania navigate economic and social challenges to assert their sense of self as breadwinners (Häbel 2024). At 60 years old, Mama Randa has lived without a male partner for over two decades, during which time she has built a life grounded in economic pursuits and community leadership. Her work has

spanned farming (which entailed managing men who worked for and with her on the fields), running a chicken-breeding business, chairing a neighbourhood savings group (Kikoba), and serving up advice—or offering small loans—to people in need. She has held down all these responsibilities while supporting her two youngest children’s education up to university level, a notable achievement given her somewhat lower-class background. Her decision to separate from her husband arose from his repeated acts to sabotage her economic efforts: he burnt her goods, took her earnings, and undermined her aspirations. He perceived her income generation as a threat to his status as the sole breadwinner. Reflecting on those times, she remarked, “If I had stayed with my husband, my children would have no future.” She felt that his sabotage curtailed her aspirations to what she considered to be a good life for herself and her children, especially her desire to provide her children with the best education.

Mama Randa’s story underscores the ways in which women confront patriarchal systems that restrict their potential. Separation from her spouse was not merely a rejection of a dysfunctional relationship but a deliberate strategy to achieve greater socioeconomic mobility for herself and her family. Through her entrepreneurial efforts, she achieved financial stability and social recognition as a community leader and family elder. Through her growing business ventures, she provided job opportunities to people in the neighbourhood, developed the capacity to lend money, and was financially stable enough to participate in savings groups.

Her story challenges simplistic portrayals of female-headed households. While media and international human rights discourses often present a “feminisation of poverty”, such reductive depictions have also been effectively challenged. Sylvia Chant (2008) points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of intra-household dynamics and cautions against viewing all female-headed households as economically disadvantaged. Research from Tanzania supports this point. Sakamoto (2014), for instance, found no substantial difference in poverty rates between female- and male-headed households. In fact, many women have created supportive environments for themselves and others. In southeast Tanzania, Sakamoto documented the way female-headed households employed diverse livelihood strategies and occupied

important roles in community support systems, as providers as much as recipients.

At the same time, such strategies were rarely built in isolation, as women usually relied heavily on their kin. Most of my interlocutors belong to the patrilocally organised Chagga ethnic group, where a woman traditionally moves to her husband's family compound provided for him by his father. However, patrilocality is not a rigid system and is also subject to change (Moore 1991; Odgaard 2022). In and around Kilimanjaro, for instance, land has been subdivided to such an extent that young men often cannot inherit their own plot. More importantly, the Land Act of 1999 has enabled Tanzanian women to own land. Consequently, some women, such as Mama Randa, returned to their maternal homes, where they received initial support after separation and a portion of the clan's land to establish their own households. This was almost always after they had given birth and it had become clear that they would not move to a new permanent partner's home.

Some women felt that marriage or cohabitation—and its entanglement with the *mfumo dume* (lit: male system, fig: patriarchy)—hindered women's economic aspirations. This became visible when one of my interlocutors told me as we passed by three women she knew on the street that “none of those three women ever got married/cohabited [...] because they wanted to be economically successful.”<sup>vi</sup> Economic success in this case does not necessarily mean the pursuit of wealth; it refers to financial independence from male control over earnings and decision-making. Additionally, women such as Mama Randa often saw separation as the only way to guarantee their children's access to higher education, and they complained that Tanzania did not have sufficient laws that obligate fathers to provide child support, leaving women as the main providers. The pursuit of economic aspirations allowed women to reject the patriarchal structures that marriage/cohabitation entails. This notwithstanding, women used their economic power and position of authority to help the community; indeed, some of them gained authority precisely because they were not married/cohabiting. This does not suggest that there is a renunciation of relationships with men, nor that all husbands subvert their wives' economic aspirations; rather, it is to highlight the diverse paths women carve out to navigate patriarchy.

Such paths are often modelled intergenerationally. Women such as Mama Randa have shaped notions of womanhood that extend to their daughters—often single mothers—who are not expected to marry and may remain on the family compound well into adulthood; they will also likely inherit their mother's property. For example, Mama Randa's daughter Cecilia, who was in her mid-thirties, remained on the family compound after a slow separation from her partner, but during my 2024 visit, I learned she had recently moved to another neighbourhood to avoid neighbourly and family control. Like several other women her age, she was outspoken about her preference for boyfriends in big cities such as Mwanza or Dar es Salaam. In her estimation, it allowed her both to have an emotional and physical connection with a somewhat stable partner and, given the distance from the city, to elude patriarchal control that could limit her own socioeconomic mobility. In this context, singlehood emerges not as a sign of marginalisation but as a deliberate strategy. Women who avoid marriage or cohabitation often do so to pursue economic goals without the constraints of patriarchal oversight, enabling them to aspire towards a socioeconomic position such as Mama Randa's.

Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism—a feminism of negotiation and give-and-take—offers a powerful ethical frame for viewing women's strategies. Rather than prioritising overt resistance, nego-feminism foregrounds how women navigate patriarchal systems through careful manoeuvre and strategic compromise. For women such as Mama Randa and her daughter, breadwinning is not a rebellion against patriarchy but a quiet reordering of authority. It is enacted through everyday acts of provision, care, and discretion. Choosing not to marry or cohabit, in this context, is not an outright rejection of social norms, but a way of bending them—of securing a position from which to care for others while retaining autonomy. Elusion becomes one of the most subtle and effective forms of negotiation.

### ***The primacy of motherhood***

Acts of negotiation are not only about resisting male control, but also about affirming an alternative form of authority, one that is deeply tied to motherhood. Choosing single motherhood and providing for the family

contradict narratives of women's oppression due to societal pressure to marry a man. Marriage has long been seen as an unquestioned, fundamental social building block. But marriage aspirations have changed and become a more flexible terrain (Pike, Mojola, and Kabiru 2018), and research has criticised the notion of nearly universal marriage as an overgeneralisation (Pauli 2019). Official and formalised marriages (through marriage registration, religious wedding, or payment of bride wealth) play an essential role in paving people's way into social adulthood and are seen as an important source of respectability (see Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe 2014; Kiereri 2023). Yet, marriage rates are declining, even though marriage is still highly valued, and weddings have increasingly become a source of class distinction (Pauli 2019). For example, most people from less affluent families who partook in this research could not afford expensive weddings.

As a result, more couples cohabited without marrying. Steady relationships of three months or longer were referred to as marriage, and the partners were consequently referred to as husband and wife. Such a tendency to engage in unformalised cohabitation opens opportunities for women to separate from their partners. Flexible on and off relationships, singlehood, and often polyandrous motherhood (Guyer 1994) were the norm among my interlocutors. Consequently, motherhood played a greater role than marriage in a woman's transition into social adulthood.

While Western feminist traditions have often critiqued motherhood as a source of women's subordination, African feminists have insisted on its structuring role in public life (Oyèwùmi 1997; Amadiume 1987, 1997; Nzegwu 2004; Nnaemeka 1997; Arnfred 2004; Sudarkasa 1986). Amadiume (1987) documented how senior mothers in Igbo society held ritual and political authority, often surpassing their husbands or brothers in influence. Nkiru Nzegwu (2004) advances this analysis further, emphasising that motherhood in many African societies is not just reproductive but communal, encompassing intergenerational care, material provision and normative guidance. Importantly, these thinkers show that maternal power is not individualistic: it is embedded in reciprocal obligation and public accountability. This line of thinking is not premised on a romantic idealisation of motherhood but on a recognition of its relational and institutional force. It shows that maternal authority is cumulative—acquired not only through childbirth, but also

through one's ability to nurture, provide, and lead across relational fields. It is precisely this dimension of care enacted through responsibility and visibility that renders maternal roles socially and morally consequential. Even critics of the gender category itself, such as Oyěwùmí(1997), do not dismiss motherhood as irrelevant. Rather, they underscore how colonial and Western feminist frameworks misread it by assuming biologically determined, gendered logics whereas African social status was historically conferred through seniority, embeddedness, and the practice of care.

When motherhood is approached as an ethical and political practice rather than a private or sentimentalised identity, it becomes clear why economic provision is not seen as contradicting femininity but as constitutive of it. Within this framing, breadwinning is not a rupture with feminine norms but a rearticulation of maternal responsibility, enacted through acts such as paying school fees, supporting dependents, and organising collective life. For the women in this research, being a good provider was an essential part of being a good mother. Breadwinner femininity, then, is not a masculinised deviation from womanhood, but an assertion of gendered strength within culturally legible forms of power, grounded in care, provision, and moral visibility. While this paper focuses on women who have given birth, breadwinner femininity does not rely on biological motherhood. What matters is not reproduction, but the capacity to nurture others—whether kin, neighbours, or the broader community—and to redistribute care and resources in socially legible ways. Consequently, women aspiring toward breadwinner femininity do not necessarily have to give birth to enact it, as long as they do not see their socioeconomic aspirations as an individual pursuit but as the ability to invest in others as much as in oneself.

### ***Gendered labels***

As shown through the online discussion in the introduction to this paper, women from Northern Tanzania, and especially from the Chagga ethnic group, have garnered a reputation for being industrious, politically engaged, educated, and owning land. I have heard and read of men outside of Northern Tanzania, particularly in Dar es Salaam and in online forums, who describe Chagga women as *majike dume*—literally translating to "male females". This term points

to how they defy common gender expectations by assuming roles often associated with masculinity, such as breadwinning and leadership (Häbel 2024). The phrase carries pejorative connotations, as both *jike* and *dume* are usually used to describe the sex of an animal, and *dume* in particular evokes the image of a bull. Furthermore, men in online forums have criticised Chagga women, labelling them as overly masculine in behaviour and appearance and suggesting that this undermines African culture. Yet, in Northern Tanzania I have never heard this term used to describe women, whether by men or women.

The women in particular reject this framing. Instead, they embrace self-descriptions like *jembe*, which refers to an agricultural tool commonly known as a hoe. While it can technically apply to both genders, I have encountered its use primarily to describe women. While this may have been influenced by my focus on women's lives, it more likely reflects societal attitudes towards men, of whom physically demanding labour is expected and thus celebrated. While industrious men may be described using terms such as *mpambanaji* (fighter) or *mchapa kazi* (hard worker), the notion of *jembe* seems to be particularly reserved for women. This designation conveys a sense of pride not only in women's capacity to undertake a wide range of work but also in their ability to perform physically strenuous labour.

In a previous paper (Häbel 2024), I argued that a gendered lens in ethnographic writing does not always work. I claimed that women are de-gendering their breadwinning by using the term *jembe* and that they portrayed breadwinning as a genderless realm in an attempt to untangle it from its masculine connotation. However, I subsequently recognised how the notion of *jembe* and women's breadwinning in general became gendered through everyday practice. Similarly, when Oyěwùmí (1997) affirmed that ungendered terminology showed how gender was not a fundamental category among the Yoruba, she was criticised for overlooking how things become gendered in everyday practice (Boris 2007; Bakare-Yusuf 2004).

At the same time, I found myself reflecting on my own difficulty—influenced by my upbringing within European feminist thought—in letting go of gender as a primary analytical category. As Nzegwu (2020) rightfully argues, gender is not a neutral framework but a colonial imposition that eroded existing female-affirming and relational systems of power. She urges us to work with

emic concepts such as *omumu*—a power enacted through motherhood—to theorise from within African contexts. In this light, the term *jembe* might be understood not simply as a label, but as an emic expression of a female-affirming mode of power. Yet, I also recognise the limits of grounding a conceptual framework solely in an emic notion such as *jembe*, particularly in a fluid and ever-evolving linguistic context. What is understood as *jembe* today may not carry the same connotation tomorrow. My shift in thinking—about whether women reject gendered labels—reflects my own struggle with the concept of gender, possibly aligned with Nzegwu’s proposition to abandon it altogether in favour of endogenous systems of meaning. There is thus an unresolved tension: how can I reject the conceptual framework of gender, as Nzegwu (2020) advocates, when it has become such a globally dominant analytic, yet simultaneously recognise that the people I worked with in Tanzania themselves invoke gendered labels?

In this paper, I navigate this tension by analysing both what lies beneath such gendered naming practices and how they can inform broader understandings of gendered hierarchies without reinscribing the very binaries that my interlocutors—consciously or not—often subvert. These complexities become particularly visible when comparing how labels such as *majike dume* and *jembe* circulate and are received within and beyond the community. This distinction is important: the label *majike dume* was used primarily by outsiders, especially those who were not from the region. Within the region, however, women such as Mama Randa are celebrated as *jembe*. This term not only highlights their industriousness and hard-working attitude but also underlines their femininity. Unlike *majike dume*, which carries pejorative connotations of masculinisation, *jembe* reflects a sense of pride and respect for women’s contributions, framing their labour and leadership as integral to womanhood rather than a deviation from it. Mama Randa herself happily embraced the label *jembe* and would occasionally use it to describe herself, reinforcing her sense of self as a strong and capable woman whose work and leadership were deeply valued by her community.

## Expanding Gender Analysis

Much research has highlighted the notion that breadwinning is a defining aspect of masculinity and integral to many men's sense of self (Mfecane 2018; Silberschmidt 2001; Izugbara 2015). However, the concept of breadwinning is intertwined with the enduring influences of colonial histories, which have significantly shaped political, economic and social dynamics (Lindsay 2007; Ratele 2008). For men, particularly those with limited economic means, the societal expectation to fulfil breadwinning and head-of-household roles often challenges their sense of self in their pursuit of socially valued masculinities (Richter and Morrell 2006). Connell (1995) described such socially valued masculinity as "hegemonic masculinity". Connell and Messerschmidt conceptualised hegemonic masculinity as a product of social practices that establish gendered hierarchies, representing "the currently most honoured way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 830). They understood that such hierarchies result in the subordination of women as well as some men in relation to other men. While only a few men might enact hegemonic masculinity, all men position themselves in relation to it. As the initial concept of a singular masculinity had been widely criticised, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) expanded it into a pluralistic view of multiple hegemonic masculinities. This concept has subsequently been adopted by a wide range of researchers, who show how "masculinities are relationally adopted, contested, transformed, reconfigured, and intersectional with diverse identities", such as age, place of living, or sexual orientation (Ammann and Staudacher 2021, 2).

While the relationships between men and plural masculinities have been widely discussed, gender hegemonies directed toward plural femininities still remain under-conceptualised (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Paechter 2018). The interplay between womanhood and breadwinning, in particular, merits further analysis. As notions of masculinities and breadwinning appear to be so inevitably and inextricably connected, breadwinning women challenge this "instituted normative gender order" (Akanle and Nwaobiala 2020). Importantly, women such as Mama Randa do not understand their breadwinning as a masculine trait. This provides analytical insight into how breadwinning shapes their gendered sense of self.

### ***Moving beyond female masculinity***

As women increasingly enter the workforce and commonly male-dominated domains, Halberstam's concept of female masculinity may offer a valuable lens for analysis (Dankwa 2009, 2021; Halberstam 1998; Paechter 2006). Halberstam (1998) explores "masculinities without men", emphasising that masculinity is not confined to male bodies. He critiques the systematic denial of masculinities to people with female bodies, arguing that masculinity and maleness are not inherently connected. Thus, female masculinity transcends binary notions of masculinity and femininity. However, Halberstam notes that female masculinity is often most contentious when coupled with lesbian desire, as seen in representations of butch women. While this framework is significant, its application to breadwinning women requires further consideration, particularly as most women in my research were presumed heterosexual.

Building on Halberstam's work, Serena Dankwa (2009) introduced the concept of "situational masculinity". This approach shifts the focus from visible markers of masculinity, such as clothing or body styling, to masculinity expressed through status or authority. This relational and situational production of masculinity has been observed across the African continent, including among women in anticolonial uprisings (Broqua and Doquet 2013; Obeng 2003). In Ghana, situational masculinity manifests through seniority or socioeconomic power, with interlocutors adopting titles such as "husband" or "king" to reflect their roles and authority (Dankwa 2009, 164, 176). In contrast, my interlocutors, breadwinning mothers, did not adopt masculine titles for themselves, raising the question of how broadly the concept of female masculinity can be applied to women who perform leadership and economic roles without claiming the associated gendered labels.

Mama Randa has developed a somewhat assertive character and has created a wide network of supportive people. She was also the person to turn to for help, whether in her family or her neighbourhood. She therefore created a position of authority through her ability to provide financial support and/or employment, and to give fruitful advice. Her rejection of complementary gender relations was not merely tolerated but regarded as essential to her ability to provide for her family and lead within the community. A woman who complied with the hegemonic notions of femininity associated with passivity or

modesty would not be able to become such a driving force in her community. Mama Randa's social environment therefore benefited from her assertiveness and authority. Her social environment appreciated her gendered sense of self as a (strong) woman and applauded her as a *jembe* rather than denouncing her through notions such as *majike dume* or other terms connected to masculinities. This shows that the plurality of hegemonic expectations of womanhood allows for women to refuse to be the subordinate other to men without falling out of line.

### ***Gender hegemonies***

The respected social status of breadwinning women, who also take on positions of authority, shows that there is no singular practised way of being a woman. In that sense, there is no singular femininity of modest women, submissive to husbands or male authority. While much research has worked toward a pluralistic view of hegemonic masculinities (Ammann and Staudacher 2021; Izugbara and Egesa 2020; Musariri and Moyer 2021; Shio and Moyer 2021), femininity has often been construed as a counterpart that cannot be conceptualised without masculinities (Dahl 2012; Paechter 2018). What is more, when Connell conceptualised hegemonic masculinity, she effectively excluded women from her notions of gender hegemony as “there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men” (Connell 1987 as cited in Paechter 2018, 122). Instead of hegemonic femininity, she suggested an “emphasised femininity” as the subordinate other to hegemonic masculinity that is focused on compliance to patriarchy. While Connell and Messerschmidt recognised the plurality of masculinities and the possibility of local variations in subsequent work, they stuck to the notion of emphasised femininity. Although they recognised “new configurations of women’s identity and practice [...] which are increasingly acknowledged by younger men” (2005, 848), femininities remained a by-product of masculinities in their writing.

Some research has acknowledged hegemonic femininities. Yet, the conceptualisation of economically powerful and/or assertive women has remained in a fairly negative light, such as Schippers’ notion of pariah femininity that refuses to “conform to the complementary relation of male

dominance and female subordination” (Paechter 2018, 122). Schippers (2007) argues that women who do not comply with female subordination are indeed not masculine—an argument that is at the centre of this paper—but she does not recognise the possibility of multiple gender hegemonies. This also reveals that the concept of hegemony itself remains undertheorised or inconsistently defined. For Connell, hegemony meant positions of power expressed through markers such as assertiveness and physical strength. These, she argued, could only be inhabited by masculinities. Schippers, meanwhile, construed hegemony as the dominant and expected norm for a gender. In that sense, Schippers understood hegemonic femininity as that which “guarantee[s] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Schippers 2007, 94). Both approaches require reconsideration if we are to move beyond rigid gender dualisms misaligned with women’s lived realities. I understand female hegemonies as socially valued femininities, as Schippers argues, but I also argue for several hegemonic forms of femininity. Women such as Mama Randa exemplify multiple hegemonic femininities. They were not pariahs in their communities because of their rejection of complementary gender relations; instead they gained positions of authority.

Mama Randa’s case shows the elasticity of gender hegemony and stresses the importance of intersectional approaches. As a woman in her sixties whose parents died a few years ago, Mama Randa became not only a family elder but also an elder in her neighbourhood. As “old age blurred the lines of gender politics” (Ratele 2008, 524), Mama Randa would not be expected to cohabit/get married or submit to patriarchal ideas of female subordination. Furthermore, through her income generation, she had established enough economic power to partake in female-dominated neighbourhood groups, financially support her brothers, and provide employment for men and women. Her ability to provide and her position of authority, therefore, show an interesting interplay between gender, age, and economic power, which compels us to put her position as a female breadwinner in a more contextualised light.

### ***An interplay of seniority, economic power, and care***

While the notion of hegemonic femininities offers important insights into how gendered power circulates, it cannot be fully understood without attention to the role of seniority, the moral economies of care, and the distribution of economic power within social networks. To better understand the dynamics at play in the case of Mama Randa, it is helpful to situate her within a generational cohort of her neighbourhood to examine how factors such as seniority, caregiving roles, and economic success intersect in practice.

Although seniority has often been cited as the key organising principle in some African societies (Oyěwùmí 1997; Sudarkasa 1986), it is not an isolated force. It is entangled in what Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2004, 5) called a “mode of power [that] is like a thread that creates a pattern of significance only when woven together with all the other threads that combine in a specific situation.” Seniority is thus one strand in a broader web of relational power, entangled with gender, kinship, and class (Bakare-Yusuf 2004; Boyce Davies 2015). In the neighbourhoods of this research, seniority did not automatically confer authority or moral standing. Instead, the interplay of age, provision, and social contribution shaped women’s capacity to embody breadwinner femininity in ways that were publicly recognised and valued. In this sense, breadwinner femininity is not a static, given role tied to age or financial status alone, but a position actively earned and sustained through relational labour.

Mama Randa’s brother, Baba Julius, was the eldest among their siblings. By age and gender, he would typically be regarded as the head of the extended family, and indeed, formally he held this position. He and his wife, Mama Julius, lived on the same clan compound as Mama Randa, and were for all practical purposes her neighbours. Yet within the neighbourhood, Baba Julius was not perceived as a figure of moral or practical authority. As one of their sisters explained to me, “Formally, Baba Julius is the head of our family. But he does not have the ability (*uwezo*) to lead the community, nor our family. [...] Any person that has a problem goes to Mama Randa.” *Uwezo*, here, primarily refers to financial capacity, but it also hints at a broader ability to contribute meaningfully to both family and community life.

This perceived lack of *uwezo* reflected the broader household situation. Despite their seniority, Baba and Mama Julius lived in persistent economic

hardship. Baba Julius raised some pigs, chickens, and ducks next to their house for his own use and to sell, and farming jobs that were at times provided by Mama Randa. Mama Julius' modest food stand generated little income as she sold low-quality vegetables. Their household often struggled to maintain basic standards of cleanliness and upkeep. Mama Julius also did not have the financial means to participate in the local savings group (Kikoba), which required a minimum weekly contribution of 3,000 Tanzanian shillings. Nor were they involved in organising neighbourhood festivities, as they lacked both the financial and social capital to contribute meaningfully. The family's concrete house was considered very modest, with two small rooms shared with up to four (grand)children whom Baba and Mama Julius struggled to care for. Their failure to enrol their grandchildren in school ultimately had to be reported to the local government—a serious moral lapse in a community where education is viewed as the main pathway out of poverty, and where breadwinning women often make great sacrifices to ensure their children's schooling. The couple's declining status was further compounded by earlier efforts to assert respectability. Baba Julius arranged early marriages for two of their daughters—an act meant to uphold social norms but one that instead led to community backlash and ongoing family conflict. Taken together, these events illustrate how seniority and formal authority can be hollowed out when not backed by moral credibility and the capacity to provide. While Baba Julius was the head of the family in name, it was Mama Randa, his younger sister, who came to embody the role of moral leader in the eyes of the community.

Mama Richard presents a different kind of dissonance. She held both economic power and seniority, yet she too struggled to gain lasting respect. Mama Richard was one of the most affluent and socially visible women in the neighbourhood. She was a few years older than Mama Randa, and by both seniority and economic standing, she would be expected to hold a position of respect and moral authority. A former midwife, she went on to co-manage her husband's electronics business. She was active in multiple neighbourhood groups and frequently served on planning committees for weddings, send-offs, and other festivities, as she was recognised for her ability to mobilise resources.

Yet, despite her seniority and material wealth, Mama Richard was not regarded as a “strong woman”<sup>vi</sup> by some. One of my interlocutors drew a comparison between a much younger, married, female neighbour and Mama

Richard and dismissed the latter outright: “Mama Richard is not a strong woman. She is totally under [her husband]!”<sup>vii</sup> Her economic power was widely seen as stemming from her husband’s success, and she lacked the autonomy and caregiving labour that many others saw as central to being a truly strong woman. Her household relied on domestic help, and her behaviour in public—especially when summoned by her husband—was perceived as submissive and dependent. Meanwhile she was also known to criticise neighbours and publicly shame other women, which conflicted with local expectations regarding discretion, respect, and care. But she was somehow forgiven because she was still contributing to the neighbourhood by participating in the Kikoba, sitting on planning committees, and paying for beers at the local bar. After her husband’s death, however, she increasingly withdrew from community life; she stopped contributing to neighbourhood events, possibly because she also had to take care of her late husband’s shops that she now managed with her children, and was eventually accused of having *roho mbaya* (a bad spirit), an allusion to what was perceived as selfishness on her part for not contributing to the community anymore and for continuing to denigrate her neighbours. The combination of wealth without humility, seniority without care, and persistent moral transgressions led to her social exclusion.

These contrasting trajectories reveal that breadwinner femininity is not a fixed position or identity conferred by seniority, marital status, or economic achievement alone, but a relational status that must be continually earned and reaffirmed through care, provision, hard work, and social embeddedness. The women who come to embody this form of femininity in ways that are publicly recognised and respected are those who invest in others—materially, emotionally and morally. In this context, authority is not simply about age or affluence but about being seen to support others, contribute to collective goals, and uphold shared norms of discretion and respect. Breadwinner femininity, then, emerges not from what one has, but from what one does, and how one’s actions resonate within the interdependent fabric of a community.

## Conclusion: Female-affirming models of power

Exploring the limitations of applying concepts such as female masculinity to the lives of breadwinning women in Northern Tanzania offers a more expansive view of hegemonic femininities. What emerges is a need for a conceptual framework that captures how these women occupy positions of authority without imitating masculinity or conforming to subordination. This paper thus challenges dominant assumptions about gender hegemony as inherently tied to male power.

How can scholarship recognise female-affirming models of power—such as those theorised by Nzegwu (2020) through the concept of *omumu*—if such power is so often misread through the lens of masculinity, or dismissed for not conforming to dominant masculinist understandings of power? This question is not merely theoretical; it points to an epistemic tension at the heart of gender analysis: the inability—or perhaps unwillingness—of dominant frameworks to take seriously forms of feminine authority that are assertive, directive, and respected, yet remain firmly within the bounds of womanhood. Breadwinner femininity offers a conceptual response to this tension. It embodies what Paechter (2018, 123) has called a “non-subordinate difference” that neither overlooks gendered differences nor plays into the common trope of female subordination. Instead, it captures a form of womanhood that is assertive, respected and morally grounded—without being defined in opposition to men or dependent on male legitimation. This paper proposes breadwinner femininity as an Africanist feminist alternative to common frameworks of gender hegemonies. Rather than understanding hegemony solely as a tool for sustaining patriarchy, it can also be seen as a form of culturally situated legitimacy that may be grounded in maternal authority, economic contribution, and community embeddedness. In this framing, hegemonic femininities do not always serve male dominance but may also articulate locally powerful and aspirational ideals of womanhood.

This perspective also complicates the supposed divide between hegemonic masculinities and femininities. While some research argues that hegemonic femininities are only hegemonic in relation to other women, and not in relation to masculinities (Schnurr, Zayts, and Hopkins 2016), breadwinning women’s experiences in Northern Tanzania compel us to think otherwise. Their

authority often exceeds intra-gender comparison and is judged instead through moral contribution and social embeddedness. Recognising this non-subordinate difference allows us to account for breadwinning women's authority as something firmly rooted in femininity yet capable of navigating patriarchal expectations. Their strength lies not in mimicking masculinity, but in redefining what it means to be a woman as someone who provides, leads, and cares. These women do not reject femininity; rather, they expand its meaning through assertiveness, provision, and social embeddedness.

Ultimately, breadwinner femininity reveals gender to be both contextual and malleable. While people outside of Northern Tanzania may perceive women's breadwinning as masculine, labelling them *majike dume*, the women themselves reject this gendered perception. Instead, they ground their sense of self in womanhood, shaped by their lived experiences. The phenomenon of breadwinner womanhood highlights the interplay of economic power, relational care, and moral authority. These women embody socially valued—hegemonic—femininities, with breadwinning emerging as a significant marker for women's sense of self as female beings. This framing not only sharpens our conceptual understanding of gendered power but also resonates with the ethnographic realities of women such as Mama Randa, Mama Julius, and Mama Richard, whose trajectories illustrate both the potential and the fragility of gendered authority in everyday life.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> “Wanawake wa kaskazini ni fighters sana kwenye hela. . . sasa ili wasionewe na mwanaume yeyote wanajikuta automatic wamebadilika kimaisha.” Comment by a presumably Chagga man named “Mangi flani hivi” (pseudonym), Jamiiforums.com, 5 November 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> All names have been anonymised.

<sup>iii</sup> Both Vikundi and Vikoba (plural; singular: *Kikundi* and *Kikoba*, respectively) are neighbourhood groups established on the principle of collective saving and credit provision. Vikundi tend to be smaller and more intimate, mostly including older female neighbours and family members. Vikoba, as introduced

by CARE international, often involve larger groups and may include younger members and men, with more structured contributions.

iv “Kati ya hawa wanawake watatu, hakuna aliyewahi kuolewa [...] kwa sababu wametafuta hela.” Grace, informal conversation with the author, January 2020.

v “Rasmi, Baba Julius ndio ni kichwa cha familia yetu. Lakini hana uwezo wa kuiongoza jamii wala familia yetu. [...] Mtu yeyote akiwa na shida, anamtafuta Mama Randa.” Mama Anna, informal conversation with the author, February 2020.

vi In different variations, such as “wanawake wenye uwezo” (able/powerful women) or “wanawake wa shoka” (women of the axe, of hard material).

vii “Mama Richard sio mwanamke mwenye nguvu. [...] Yuko under kabisa.” Regina, informal conversation with the author, September 2019.

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