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# SOCIAL AGENCY OF LOW-INCOME 'YOUNG' WOMEN IN GABORONE CITY, BOTSWANA

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*Empowerment should be a bottom-up process driven by a detailed understanding of how the disempowered sections of society view and respond to their own livelihood situations. The concept of social agency has brought a new perspective to the empowerment of women and other disempowered sections of society such as 'the' youth. This paper presents findings of a study which investigated how low-income 'young' women in Botswana exercise their social agency to improve their livelihood situations. The findings show that these 'young' women are indeed exercising their double social agency (both as women and as youth) to improve their livelihoods both in practical and strategic terms. They do not only demonstrate high sense of entrepreneurship but they are also becoming strategic in self-social positioning within their complex socio-cultural contexts. Although they are exercising their social agency in many different ways their main concern is to enhance livelihood situation of their families.*

***Key words:*** *gender, livelihood trajectories, empowerment, social agency, young women*

## Introduction

The main qualitative study from which this paper is drawn sought to understand youth livelihoods from the perspective of young women engaged in street vending in Botswana. The study identified that livelihood trajectories of youth in Botswana are embedded within complex historically situated socio-cultural contexts that are inextricably intertwined. The five key contextual factors that emerged to be differently shaping youth livelihood trajectories involve the dynamics of family life, multi-dimensionality of poverty, complex gendered power relations which mainly privilege men, lack

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of marketable skills, and tensions and contradictions between traditional and modern religious beliefs. The study was based on the premise that youth in general and young women in particular are not passive victims but active social agents who re-shape their own livelihood trajectories. It took as its point of departure emphasis within youth studies that there is a need for more research to be focused on scaling up young women's social agency (Robson et al., 2007).

In understanding social agency of young women the study drew insights from two streams of scholarly literature. On the one hand, feminist development theorists are now advocating for the recognition of social agency of women as the best way towards attaining the desired empowerment (Chitsike, 2000; Endeley, 2001; Ntseane, 2004). This is in response to the failure of successive approaches from the Women in Development (WID) through Women and Development (WAD) to Gender and Development (GAD), which are generally geared towards the 'inclusion' of women within mainstream development (Datta, 2004; Kabeer, 1994; McIlwaine and Datta, 2003; Moser, 1993). The empowerment of women and of other disadvantaged sections of society in general is now of one the main goals of the development process the world over (Lind, 2006; Moser, 1993; Willis, 2001).

On the other hand, there has recently emerged within the new sociology of childhood, conceptualization of children and youth as both 'being' and 'becoming' which emphasizes that young people are not only 'becoming' future adults but are also present human 'beings' with their own perspectives and preferences within their contextual 'belonging' (Ansell, 2005; James *et al.*, 1998; Jones, 2003; van Blerk *et al.*, 2008). This approach came about as a response to the shortcomings of two dominant conceptions of childhood and youth which dominated development research and practice, namely, 'youth as problem' and 'youth as transitions' perspectives. The youth as problem approach view youth as either perpetrators of trouble within societies 'youth-as-trouble' or victims of troubles within societies 'youth-in-trouble' (Roche et al., 2004). Development policies and practices based on conception of youth as problem are generally aimed at either controlling deviant youth or protecting those at risk (Ansell, 2005; Roche *et al.*, 2004). Although the notion of transition in relation to youth is conceptualized differently, the popular one view youth as a structural stage situated between childhood and adulthood (Ansell, 2005; McIlwaine and Datta, 2004; Valentine, 2003; van Blerk *et al.*, 2008). Development policies and practices based on conception of youth as transition are generally

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aimed at preparing 'youth' for the future or to 'become future adult leaders'.

It is now acknowledged that 'women' and 'youth' as two 'underprivileged' social categories are not entirely passive victims but are active human beings who differently exercise their multiple social agencies to improve their own lives and livelihood situations. This paper presents findings of a recent study which sought to understand how low-income 'young' women engaged in street vending in Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana exercise their social agency to improve their livelihoods given complex socio-cultural contexts within which they are embedded. The paper begins by briefly looking at the three interconnected key concepts of empowerment, power, and agency underpinning the study. It briefly describes the research methodology and then presents and discusses the findings.

**The meaning of empowerment**

A wealthy body of literature indicate that in recent years, development thinking globally has incorporated into its vocabulary notions of 'empowerment' in advocating for social change in its various dimensions, which includes but is not limited to gender relations (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 1999; 2005; Rowlands, 1997). The concept of empowerment has become a development catchphrase for almost all agencies at local, regional, national, and international levels. Despite the fact that empowerment has gained popularity it has also been embraced in a complex, vague, and even contradictory manner. It is an elusive concept, defined and used differently by different writers and organizations depending on their own diverse understanding and intentions. Rowlands (1997: iv) states that "empowerment is a concept used by the people who hold a wide range of views, to the right and left of the political spectrum". Batliwala (2007: 557) argues that "of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past 30 years, empowerment is probably the most widely used and abused".

The empowerment approach acknowledges inequalities between men and women as well as the origins of women's subordination in the family (Moser, 1993: 74). This approach acknowledges the importance for women to increase their power but does so more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and less in terms of domination by others (ibid). It arose from an understanding that increasing women's participation in development processes without fundamental changes to the

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processes that increases gender inequalities would bring little change (Fonjong, 2001).

There is an understanding that empowerment means changes in prevailing gender relations through the re-distribution of power within, as well as between societies, so that women have more of a say in their own lives. Garba (1999: 131) discusses two dimensions of empowerment with respect to women, namely the static (the notion of women having an effective voice, and the dynamic (a process of developing capacities of individuals). Empowerment is a process not something that can be given to people and that for it to prevail women need to be able to assert their own agency to break out of gender inequality (Karl, 1995). Kabeer (1999: 437) emphasizes that "inasmuch as [the] notion of empowerment is about change, it refers to the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in the context where this ability was previously denied to them".

Beyond gender, empowerment is commonly associated with a shift in development approach known as top-down or technocratic towards bottom-up or grassroots approach. Unlike, the top-down approach where 'development' is brought to people, the bottom-up approach put more emphasis on initiating 'development' from below through participation of the people directly and/or indirectly affected. Empowerment has conceptually evolved from the idea of lay participation in technical activities to a broader concern of improving life situations of the poor (Rifkin, 2003: 169). It occurs at both the individual and collective levels enabling individuals and/or groups to change balance of power in social, economic and political relations in a society (Garba, 1999; Jentoft, 2005; Rifkin, 2003). It is something an individual or a group of individuals acquires over time (Garba, 1999).

Jentoft (2005: 20) states that "it is partly psychological and partly social, [where] the former emphasizes emotional qualities and the latter the importance of social interpersonal relations". It is both a condition and a goal of the development process. More broadly, empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action geared at improving the quality of lives of people (Karl, 1995). These characteristics relate to the three dimensions within which empowerment operates, namely, personal, relational, and collective (Rowlands, 1997: 15). Empowerment explicitly addresses the issues of social and political changes and looks at liberation, struggles, and community activism [and] it confronts the issue of power (Rifkin, 2003: 170).

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**The meaning of power**

The empowerment approach to gender is geared towards changing the prevailing gender relations through re-distribution of power within, as well as between societies so that women have more of a say in their own lives. This approach sees power less in terms of domination over others or the dominance of men to be replaced by the dominance of women, but more in terms of facilitating the increase of choices and voices and control and autonomy (Moser, 1993; Rowlands, 1997). Difficulties encountered in attempting to define empowerment emanates from the vagueness of defining the root concept of power itself. There exist different interpretations of power which have significant implications in the way empowerment is being conceptualized and used by different writers and organizations. Different understandings of the concept of power shapes the way in which models of empowerment are constructed (Pease, 2002). Notwithstanding the complexity of defining the concept of power, the four alternative ways of power over, power to, power with, and power from within are acknowledged as invaluable in providing the basis for defining the concept of empowerment within the field of development (Rowlands, 1997).

These four alternatives confirm that empowerment is a complex concept, which in practical terms makes it impossible to confer a universally accepted definition. The notion of power over entails the power that permits an individual or a group to dominate other individuals or groups in the existing economic and political structures of society without changing those structures. Rowlands (1997) indicates that it is important to view empowerment on the basis of power to which puts emphasis on creating new opportunities and access to decision-making without any form of domination. In terms of power with, empowerment can be seen as a result of symbiotic relationship whereby, by virtue of working together, individuals gain power to achieve a developmental goal which they cannot achieve when working separately. The notion of power from within emphasizes self-esteem, self-belief, and personal competence of individual members of the community to have positive attitudes about themselves to take action. Empowerment can then be defined as power to act upon situations which may lead to powerlessness and the inner strength and self-esteem to do so through power from within, and do it both individually and collectively 'power with' (van Driel, 2004). This dynamic perspective of defining empowerment highlights that people must be capable to act upon situations they are faced with by way of exercising their 'agency', a key concept which is briefly dealt with below.

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**The meaning of agency**

Despite complexities involved in defining the concept of empowerment which has, over the years, become a paramount goal of development, the above section ended by providing a comprehensive and dynamic perspective upon which empowerment can be viewed. Although empowerment has been embraced in gender and development, there has been a failure in actually achieving the intended outcome of bridging the gender gap. As indicated earlier on, feminist development theorists are increasingly advocating for the recognition of social agency of women as the best way towards attaining the desired empowerment. Similar to the concepts of empowerment and power, agency is also not easy to define. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 692) contend that "the concept of agency has become a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought". Defining agency is more problematic because it is rarely defined as a standalone concept but rather in relation to the concept of structure (Ahearn, 2001; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Robson *et al.*, 2007).

Fuchs (2001: 24-25) argues that "the relationship between agency and structure is one of the many unresolved core enigma in social science and social theory [as] there are many theories about both agency and structure, plus many different suggestions on how to integrate the two". However, Ahearn (2001: 130) emphasizes that "no matter how agency is defined…implications for social theory abound [and] scholars using the term should define it clearly, both for themselves and for their readers". Ahearn (2001: 130) concludes that "one fruitful direction for future research may be to begin to distinguish among many types of agency: oppositional agency; complicit agency, agency of power, agency of intention while recognizing that multiple types are exercised in any given action". Panelli et al (2005: 498) define agency as "a term for the variously situated and dynamic capacities and choices women [and/or men] hold when drawing on the social positions and discursive subjectivities of which they are aware".

Kabeer (2005: 1999) argues that agency as an aspect of empowerment has both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, she argues that the notion of power to confer positive connotation to the concept of agency in the sense that it relates to people's capacity to define their own life-choices and pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others. On the other hand, power over is considered to have negative connotation to the concept of agency as it refers to the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others. She concludes that the

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concept of agency as applied in relation to women's empowerment implies not only actively exercising choice, but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. The concept of agency as applied in this paper can be taken to refer to an individuals' or groups' socio-culturally mediated capacity to act and take initiatives independently or collectively to improve their own livelihoods. In the context of this paper, an empowered person can then be viewed to be someone who understands forces that are impacting on her/his livelihood and has the inner strength and confidence to act individually or collectively in situations that demand her/his attention.

**Research methodology**

In order to understand diverse meanings the participants attach to their livelihood situations the study was conceptualized from a social constructionist and life-course perspectives. The methodological approach the study adopted was qualitative, based on triangulation of multiple methods involving in-depth life history interviews; self-administered open ended questionnaires; observations; photographic elicitation; policy documents and the media. Although the study was conceptualized to focus on the lived experiences and points of view of young women, it embraced the flexibility and emergent principles of qualitative research designs by taking into account perspectives of other key research participants. Selections of research participants was based on a diagrammatic model the author developed to guide the study beyond mere engagement of 'young' women in street vending, and explore their livelihoods within their real life social contexts of interaction. Hence, data were collected from a sample of, young women (aged 18-35 years) engaged in street vending, young women not engaged in street vending, young men engaged in street vending, and old women (aged above 35 years) engaged in street vending.

The study involved rich life history data and thus narrative analysis became the technique for analysing data (Bryman, 2008; Conle, 2000). Narrative analysis consisted of identifying interesting themes through a process of thorough side by side reading and re-reading of the transcripts, field notes, and other data sets (Bryman, 2008: 554). As a research approach, narrative did not stay confined to data representation, but became an entire mode of inquiry where data analysis and final documents did not have to relinquish their narrative quality (Conle 2000: 51). The research findings are thus evidenced by detailed verbatim extracts of the research participants' own words to preserve complexity and diversity of narratives they generated about their livelihood situations. The following four broad

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interlinked thematic narratives emerged to signify meanings embedded within the complex ways in which the research participants are exercising their social agency. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the human element and anonymity of the participants.

**Research findings**

***Being highly entrepreneurial***

It is essential to indicate that the desire to earn money emerged strongly in this study, and as such, it is not surprising that the research participants are 'being highly entrepreneurial'. Chigunta et al (2005: v) define entrepreneurship as "a way of thinking, reasoning and acting that is opportunity oriented [and/or as] the process whereby individuals become aware of the self-employment career option, develop ideas, take and manage risks, learn the process and take the initiative in developing and owning a business". Engaging in street vending has been found to inculcate power within the participants to become economically independent by venturing into bigger own-account businesses beyond the street level. Although their lived experiences greatly varied, it emerged from the study that the participants are committed to their current engagement in this informal economic activity not only as an end on its own but as a vital step to become bigger and better entrepreneurs. It appears that the research participants are adopting an opportunistic approach to their current livelihoods situation. They consider their engagement in street vending as a transitional stage towards self-determination and positive economic advancement. They engage in diverse strategies as evidenced by this personal narrative by Mma Keitshokile:

Initially I was selling at the station. I moved out after they constructed those market stalls. They wanted us to pay P225 monthly for occupying the pavement...My business is currently doing well. I can do a better business if I have money and secure space. On weekends I visit national stadium to sell if there is an activity going on like football game. My ambition is to make money and buy a car. I earn more money during football games but not all games are played in Gaborone. Having a car will make things easier for me. I usually use public transport to follow games played in neighboring settlements but I am unable to carry many things to sell.

Mma Keitshokile stated that she never had any salaried job in her life apart from engaging in street vending since 1990 after staying with her uncle for five years in Gaborone 'working for him as unpaid housemaid'. However, the above extract indicates that she does not

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regard her lengthy engagement in this informal sector activity as an end on its own right nor does she confine her operations within the geographical boundaries of Gaborone. Rather, she has ambitions of moving up the economic ladder by establishing a more viable business, and as such, she is undertaking some initiatives to achieve her ambitions. Keamegile's personal narrative below substantiates conceptualization of street vending as an experience marking particular transitions and/or turning points in people's life-courses:

My main challenge in life at the moment is to find myself proud of my school results…At the beginning of this year I wanted to enrol with Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) but I had no money to pay for the examination fees. I have realized that I am making a lot of money for my current employer. I have started to save some money so that I can establish my own small business. I am good at baking and I want to sell homemade bread. Working with one's own hands and making personal money is the only way to achieve one's ambitions. Waiting for someone's money is a waste of time. I agree with an idiom 'work like a slave to live like a king'.

Keamegile reveals that individuals re-shape their livelihood trajectories over their life-courses. Her engagement in street vending has given her power to realize that she can reconstruct the path she 'lost' following her father's early retirement from his employment. She is not only intending to become an independent entrepreneur by utilizing her baking skills but she is also exhibiting power within that is indeed essential for entrepreneurship. From another perspective, Kamogelo reveals below that she is drawing upon the lived experiences and successes of her maternal auntie and other women to gain insights on how to become a better entrepreneur in spite of the challenges she is currently faced with:

My business is going up and down. It is not picking much. If you have less stock customers do not bother to come to your stall because it looks unattractive… I used to be the only person selling these things [handmade jewelry] but nowadays we are many. My ambition at the moment is to see my business become successful. I am intending to start selling vegetables like cabbage but I do not have a car. I want to see myself owning a successful business like other women. My auntie is successful because she has a car and she travels to different places. She was operating a tuck-shop at home and her husband was also sending her money. She is now using her late husband's car to sell second-hand clothes.

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Kamogelo has realized that the best way to deal with the increasing competition within street vending is to diversify her strategies. Although it emerged that it will take time for her to actually achieve this, her ambition to own a successful business like other women motivates her to save the little money she is earning. This potential enterprising culture and self-determination of some low-income 'young' women is also confirmed by Segametsi:

I cannot say I am suffering in life because I am an active person. When I want to do something I make sure that I do it. For example, I opened an account at the Post Office and I committed myself to save P400.00 every month for ten months. I was never tempted to take the money to buy new dresses. I used the money to buy this new public phone. Public phones make more profit than airtime… I wanted to expand my business to make money so that I can join companies like 'Go for Health' and 'Lavitta'. I want to have their products to decorate my table to look more attractive to customers. Sometimes this phone business is down and those products will then bring me money....

Segametsi highlights that through both their power within and the savings they make low-income 'young' women are likely to gain power to access potential livelihood resources. In further indicating her high entrepreneurial spirit and how she is currently using it to improve her practical and strategic livelihood needs Segametsi went on to say:

Apart from running this business, I am also a casual worker at Pep Stores. They occasionally call me to assist them with stock taking and re-arranging the shop...I also have a driver's license. I obtained it because there are certain things I want to do. I want to sell agriculture produce such as water melons from my mother's farm. I send her money every ploughing season…I had to learn driving first so that I become perfect before I buy a car.

As will be dealt with later in the paper, it emerged from the study that women in Botswana regardless of age are regarding driving as a potential strategy to improve their livelihoods. However, all the above personal narratives demonstrate that 'young' women are not passive victims of low and/or fluctuating income levels within street vending. Rather, they are actively exercising their social agency by identifying other dimensions to venture into. A closer look at the data revealed that the entrepreneurial spirit of the research participants is broader in scope than commitment to expand their businesses. Some young women have high levels of power within them linked to how most of the research participants defined the

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concept of youth as 'a personal identity of being active, responsible and accountable'. Matshwenyego, a 'disserted' single young mother of three confidently stated that:

Even though I am still failing, I am capable of doing things for myself. I do not want to be spoon fed…I am failing but I am trying to achieve what I want in life. I think government programs should be directed to the elderly and disabled people who are unable to work for themselves. I can do things for myself even though I am still struggling. I am better than some of my age mates. I am doing everything for my children alone. It is difficult but I am not failing to do it. I know it is my responsibility to do everything for them. I have told myself that I am capable of disciplining myself and I do not need to be told what to do.

Although acknowledging complex challenges she is faced with as a single young mother, Matshwenyego is determined to personally work for the welfare of her children and she also reveals high level of power within by stating that she is capable of disciplining herself. Self-determination and self-discipline emerged to be how some young women define the way they exercise their social agency which is directly linked to their high levels of entrepreneurial spirit. Some young women are more positive about their situations and are determined to achieve their ambitions in spite of the challenges they are facing. It appears that their challenging situations give them strength to strive towards improving their lives. The evidence presented above indicates that most of the research participants capitalize both on different opportunities they grab within their complex socio-cultural contexts and on their personal determination to improve their livelihoods. These findings demonstrate that low-income 'young' women view themselves as active social agents who are more capable of re-shaping their livelihood trajectories. The findings appear to suggest that by being highly entrepreneurial 'young' women are to a certain extent able to improve their livelihood situations despite challenges they continue to face. The findings have important implications for development interventions in terms of how low-income 'young' women are viewed and how livelihood opportunities and resources are made available to them.

***Becoming strategic in self-social positioning***

It is evident from the above thematic narrative that young women are practically and strategically improving their economic status by maintaining high entrepreneurial spirit. Beyond this, a closer look at the data revealed that the research participants are knowledgeable insiders who are actively engaging with and strategically positioning

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themselves within their complex socio-cultural contexts. The ways in which different individuals position themselves within their contextual realities depends on their diverse lived experiences and what they consider as significant to their livelihoods. The thematic narrative of becoming strategic in self-social positioning is introduced here to signify different livelihood trajectories over the life-courses of the research participants. This diversity of young women's livelihood trajectories is briefly highlighted below by Ndindoga, a cohabiting young mother of three who personally wants to get legally married:

Our lives as young women differ a lot. Some want to get married and others do not, some want to have children but not marriage, some are abused and others abuse their partners. I want to get married and have my own family. If you are married people respect you. I have three children with the same man. I had my first child when I was very young. I wanted my children to have the same father. As I told you, I have four siblings but with different fathers. It is difficult for us to work together because we belong to different families with different totems…I regretted a lot after having my first child because I was still very young but I am no longer regretting because all my children have the same father…I always tell their father that we must get married and have our own plot and build our own homestead.

Ndindoga indicated that she wants to get married but complex dynamics within her familial belonging are hindering her transition to this significant adulthood status. However, an important observation to make here is how she defines and positions herself as a 'young' mother. She draws significant meanings from the 'troubled' motherhood of her own mother to define her personal transition to motherhood. Her social timing of motherhood appears to be strategic in the sense that she does not want to follow the same route her mother followed. Although their experiences varied greatly, it emerged that motherhood is one of the most significant social contexts upon which young women are exercising their social agency. Despite the challenges of young motherhood, Ndidonga and other young women demonstrate power within themselves to negotiate their transition to more valued motherhood status within their socio-cultural contextual realities. Keitshepile demonstrates below that some young women have power within and power to openly challenge the gendered contexts within which they make their transition to motherhood:

I fell pregnant in 2004 but the man declined. My parents approached his parents on three occasions but his parents did not bother to take action. My parents then blamed me that I am falsely accusing him.

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This pained me a lot and I told them that I will personally take action against him. After giving birth in 2005 I went to report the matter to the District Commissioner. It took a year to get a response. I informed him that we will be going to the Magistrate Court on 20th June 2007…His parents approached my parents that very same day to apologize but I told them that the matter is now with the Court...My parents went ahead to negotiate for *tega lebele ya me* [damage] in my absence. They settled for four heads of cattle but the standard payment in our culture is eight heads of cattle…This man and his family undermined my parents because we are poor and again [my labour pains] were half priced. I knew that some girls in our village were going to gossip about me...

By approaching the District Commissioner, Keitshepile was not only trying to prove the paternity of her child, but she was consciously positioning her early transition to motherhood within the broader socio-cultural context to which she belongs. Apart from resisting devaluation of her labor pains or motherhood experience, she did not want to become a victim of gossip (elaborated below). From another perspective, Koketso wrote:

I was facing problems from my ex-boyfriend. He was not working and he always wanted to take the money I am making by selling soft drinks at the station. He also wanted to have a child but he had no money to support. I decided to part ways with him because I am also not working and I am still too young to have a child. I told him to find himself another girlfriend who is ready to have a child. I am selling soft drinks to help my younger siblings who are still at school so that they can have better lives in future.

The nineteen years old Koketso consciously ended a relationship with her too demanding ex-boyfriend not only because none of them had a decent job. She placed high value on helping her siblings than making an early and/or non-normative transition to motherhood. She is a capable social actor who is not easily submissive to men-centred power relations. These personal narratives reveal that some young women exercise their social agency to strategically position themselves within their diverse socio-cultural contexts. Their embedment within such contextual realities appears to inculcate power within them and power to safeguard and strategically improve their social statuses. It appears that they are not only resisting power over their livelihood trajectories but as will be dealt with later they are also negotiating interdependent power within their dynamic familial belonging.

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As implicitly captured by Keitshepile's personal narrative above, it is worth noting that some young women are very conscious of and are negotiating strategic power to downplay stereotypical gender identities that are being attached to women. For instance, Basadifela said "I never had a female friend in my life because women like to gossip about people's lives. My female class mates gossiped about our [squatter] house which was demolished by government and this negatively affected me a lot at school". Although their individual lived experiences differed, an important point to highlight here is that both Keitshepile and Basadifela explain that they acted the way they did to safeguard themselves against potential threats of gossip by other young women. The fieldnote below reveals that some young women distance themselves from the alleged gossiping of women:

It transpired from our discussion that young women have a number of ambitions and they have certain ways of positioning themselves within the society...Kutlwano said her main ambition is to get married as she thinks she can be a better wife and mother. She indicated that she is loyal to her boyfriend. She believes that the best way to keep a man is to understand him and also to stay away from gossip and hearsay by other women.

Apart from downplaying potential threats of gossip to their reputation as women, a major stereotypic gender identity narrative that emerged from this study is 'women love money'. Keeping long hair and/or women's personal beautification are defined in stereotypical terms to symbolize the claim that women love money. The alleged women's love for money is viewed to be encouraging promiscuous lifestyles amongst young women. Segametsi and Lekgoba's narratives demonstrate this stereotypical portrayal of women:

Segametsi (young woman): There are some young women who want to be *makgarebe* [smart looking ladies] by relying on boyfriends. I think they are too lazy to work for themselves...They are not bothered that nowadays life is difficult and are not even worried about contracting HIV/AIDS. This is because most women love money. That is why some end up having multiple boyfriends. They want to receive P10 from this one, P20 from that one, P30 from that one and then combine to have more money and buy expensive dresses. I think the best way is to teach such women that nowadays life is difficult and dangerous...

Lekgoba (young man): My main worry about young women is that some of them over rely on men. They now have a fashion they call *dipoko* [ghost husbands]. They go to bars and pick any man to spend

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a night with. They just love money not those men. That is why they call them *dipoko*. Maybe *borra dikoloi* [older men with cars] are the ones who prey on young women but young women also take advantage of this to make quick cash...

Although downplaying stereotypic gender identities by young women appears to be a positive self-empowerment strategy on its own right, the perception and allegation that women love money presents a serious challenge to the economic empowerment of women. The microfinance approach is largely viewed to be a key strategy for empowering women to gain control over their lives and to end poverty (Mahmud, 2003; Mayoux, 1998). Although acknowledging the importance of such an approach in the context of Botswana, stereotypic perceptions that emerged in this study appear to be a challenge to its success. For instance, one young woman remarked that "if it is announced that there is money somewhere women will rushed there in large numbers than men". Such stereotypic statements are likely to discourage women from accessing microfinance services, and as such, widespread allegations that 'women love money' have practical implications on development interventions geared towards the economic empowerment of women. Notwithstanding these complexities, it emerged that some 'young' women are engaging in diverse informal microfinance schemes called *metshelo* (plural) *motshelo* (singular) to empower themselves both economically and socially. Nchidzi, a young woman who faced family problems following her mother's death narrates how a *motshelo* has assisted her:

A family conflict started when my aunt wanted to send me to school but my uncles refused. They said I should look for a job because they cannot afford to take care of me and my two siblings…My uncle employed me to operate his public phone. I would wake up early every morning and come back home late in the evening and then prepare supper. In 2006 I started my own business after being advised by some of my friends. I left working for my uncle and my auntie registered me in their *motshelo*. I was the only young person amongst a group of old men and women. We used to meet every month-end to pledge our P100.00 contributions...Even though our *motshelo* collapsed it contributed a lot in my life...It helped me to raise enough money to run this business and to assist my siblings. I am now a better person even though life is still difficult. My uncle was very angry when I told him that I am establishing my own business. Sometimes he does not respond when I greet him but my life has now improved because members of our *motshelo* advised me to just ignore him...

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Despite the challenges she is still facing, Nchidzi highly appreciates that their *motshelo* has contributed a lot in her life and livelihood situation. She has not only gained financial power to establish a stable street vending enterprise, but other members have instilled power within her to strategically position herself within her dynamic familial belonging. Ndindoga, a cohabiting young mother reveals the benefits she will enjoy from a *motshelo*:

I wanted to join one *motshelo* this July but they only accept new members in December. What I like about this *motshelo* is that they use the money at the end of the year to buy food to be shared equally amongst all the members. I want to join it because I face a lot of problems every year during Christmas...I want to budget only for clothes knowing that food is ready...If they do not welcome me I will talk to some of my friends to start our own. I want to try this one first because two of its members are from my home village.

It appears that *metshelo* play a positive role to the strategic self-social positioning of young women like Nchidzi and Ndindoga within the contextual realities of their livelihoods. Although most of the research participants stated that they are and/or were once members of such microcredit schemes, they also indicated that there are some inherent challenges. As Basadifela explains below, lack of and/or diminishing trust amongst members, failure by some members to timely pledge their agreed contributions, and too ambitious criteria of recruiting customers/clients are some of the major problems encountered in most *metshelo*:

I used to be a member of one *motshelo* whose members were mostly elderly people. I left that *motshelo* because it had too many members. The benefits were based on the number of customers a member recruits to borrow money and payback with interest. This created problems because some members were saying they recruited few customers but those people generated more profit. I joined that *motshelo* when I was still new in this street business and I was not trusting people and I failed to recruit them to borrow money. After receiving my share I decided to leave and join hands with my cousin to establish our own.

An important observation to make here is that family relations appear to play a significant role in the operation of *metshelo* both as a source of entry into an already existing one and/or as the main aspect that bring people together to establish their own *motshelo*. Thus, both the dynamics characterizing *metshelo* and the role of the family give significant insights to development interventions on youth livelihoods in the context of Botswana. All these extracts

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confirm that low-income 'young' women are fully aware of their contextual realties and they strategically position themselves in order to improve their livelihoods. Although different 'young' women appear to employ diverse strategies, a significant development policy insight is that some of them are conscious of and are negotiating and downplaying negative stereotypical gender identity narratives that are attached to women. It appears that some young women draw significant meanings from the lived experiences of their own mothers to define their personal transitions to motherhood. Their transition to 'good' motherhood appears to be a reconstruction of the 'troubled' motherhood of their own mothers which has some negative impacts upon their own livelihood trajectories. These findings have practical implications on development policies and practices targeting young mothers in Botswana given the high rates of 'teenage' motherhood in the country.

***Personally becoming skilled***

It emerged from the study that all the research participants appreciate the importance of formal education as a viable strategy towards building decent livelihoods. Their lack of marketable skills is encouraging them to be forward looking by investing on educating their younger family members (dealt with below). Interestingly, it emerged that most of them are personally becoming skilled. Although not all of them follow the normative school-to-work transition, they are acquiring useful skills to improve their livelihoods. Acknowledging the diversity of such skills, the one which emerged to be very popular is learning how to drive with an ambition to either use the skill to get a job or to buy a car. Learning how to drive is featuring in some of the personal narratives presented earlier on. Mma Mosalaesi, an old woman who experienced a great trauma of death in her family and was left to care for four dependents explains below why she has decided to learn driving:

I have decided to learn how to drive because sometimes this business is not doing well…I want to get a driver's license so that I can look for better paying jobs and also be able to attend evening school…It is just my ambition to get a license and use it to look for jobs. My two cousins, a woman and a man, got their licenses and they managed to find jobs. The woman is a delivery driver for a big supermarket and the man works for the government. I have also seen women drivers for *Dimoshara* [Funeral Parlours] like Kagiso. I want to get a license so that I can be able to take care of my child and my late sister's two children.

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Mma Mosalaesi and other research participants make a clear link between acquiring skills and improving their access to livelihood opportunities particularly better paying jobs. Apart from responding to limited employment opportunities, Mma Mosalaesi's narration above draws attention to the widespread perception that working as a driver is a men's job. By stating that she has seen many women drivers for Funeral Parlours, Mma Mosalaesi does not only reveal her traumatic experiences of multiple deaths within her family, but she appears to imply that by learning how to drive women gain more power to challenge the gendered socio-economic contexts that disproportionately privilege men. This widespread perception about the gendered power relations within the context of driving is confirmed by Segametsi, a young woman who successfully obtained her driver's license:

The other reason why I obtained a driver's license is that I was told that District Councils nowadays prefer to employ women drivers. It is also difficult for us women to get a job if one does not have a skill to market herself with. If you go around looking for jobs without specifying the one you can do people take advantage and play April fool on you. They can tell you to spend the whole day sweeping the ground. I wanted to be on the safe side so that if life becomes difficult for me I can go around looking for a driving job not any job.

Segametsi moves beyond the gendered perspective of defining driving to emphasize that it is essential for any individual to have a particular skill, which she/he can rely upon in order to obtain a decent livelihood. She reveals that lack of marketable skills is not only limiting access to job opportunities but it can expose someone to unbearable humiliation. To strategically overcome negative power over herself, Segametsi exercised her power to acquire driving skills so that she can go around looking for 'a driving job not any job'. From another perspective, Basadifela, a potential young fashion designer indicates that she is working towards re-shaping her livelihood trajectory:

I started by selling sweets, cigarettes and airtime and I managed to buy this public phone. I can say my life is better now even though I have not yet reached the stage I want...I want to be *motho mongwe mo setshabeng* [a better person in society]. I want to go back to school and learn tailoring. I know how to design dresses but I want to have a certificate. I am currently saving money at the Post Office so that I can supplement my O'Level subjects. I will then apply to Vocational Training Centres to pursue a recognized tailoring course.

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Basadifela revealed that tailoring became her main career ambition ever since junior secondary school where she first studied home economics. In spite of the barriers she experienced at senior secondary school, acquiring this skill remains significant to her life. She believes that acquiring tailoring skills will give her power to become a better person in society, in other words, she has not given up in life but she wants to improve her status. Similar to Basadifela, in spite of the complex challenges she is anticipating in the future, Nchidzi is passionate to become a professional nurse, her career ambition since childhood:

My main aim for this coming year is to continue operating my business in the afternoon and attend school in the evening. I want to register to do form 3 again. But I am afraid that maybe I will not manage to operate my business when I am simultaneously studying. I will be relying on it to pay my school fees and also to take care of my two siblings. Assisting my siblings is not a big problem as such because *Mma Boipelego* (Department of Social Services) is also assisting them. My main worry is that maybe the business will collapse and I will have no money to continue paying school fees. I think I will just go ahead and take risk because I want to become a nurse. I still believe that I can make it.

Despite the fact that most of the participants are dedicated to become skilled, the multi-dimensionality of poverty within their dynamic familial belonging is the main barrier. However, Mma Tshimologo's narrative appears to suggest that, in spite of the challenges they are facing, some people become skilled over time through sustained power within:

I passed my standard 7 in 1981 but there was no one to look for space for me at secondary schools. My mother went forever to Johannesburg without coming back. In 1983 I fell pregnant because I was now grown up. My mother came back in 1985 and she was very sad about this. One day she called me and said "seat down and listen to this radio news bulletin" [and] she said "the person who was reading the news is a young woman just like you but she has gone to school. My intention was for you to go to school and read news just like her but you did not manage". This pained me a lot…In 1998 I registered with YWCA to study for my junior certificate and I wrote my O'Level in 2001 still selling fat cakes on the streets. After completing my O'Level I studied for an AAT at GIPS. I wanted to do an advanced level but my business collapsed. I went to school so that I can work for myself like any other educated person but things are not going the way I thought they will.

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An important point to note here is that lack of marketable skills amongst adult research participants like Mma Tshimologo appears to be linked somehow to previous migration to South African mines. These research findings provide insights on historical forces that remain significant to contemporary development policy making. However, in general terms, these findings demonstrate that the research participants are not passively frustrated by their undesired school-to-work transitions. Despite their low levels of education, the participants are empowering themselves with skills significant to improve their livelihoods. Although they are still encountering some challenges, the evidence from this study appears to suggest that individuals' personal determination to become skilled is more significant.

Despite the diversity of their personal lived experiences, a key question arising is: How can development policy respond to and embrace the skills and knowledge 'youth' with low levels of formal education identify as being vital to their livelihood trajectories? This study suggests that in the context of Botswana, this question remains pertinent. Current generation of 'educated' youth in Botswana have difficulties in getting and/or retaining jobs, and as such, questioning the relevance of the formal education system to the labour market (Preece and Mosweunyane, 2004; Tournas, 1996). It is however undisputable that youth and adults alike require skills to earn a decent livelihood. These findings therefore provide significant insights to holistic development policies and practices that are geared towards preparing youth from their school-to-work transitions.

***Being engaged with familial belonging***

Complex dynamics of familial belonging emerged to be the main issue of concern to all the research participants irrespective of age and sex. The multi-dimensionality of poverty characterizing their individual livelihood trajectories is deeply rooted on the broader livelihood trajectories of their families. It is not surprising therefore that most of the research participants are actively engaging with and seek to reverse the adverse effects their familial belonging brings to their personal livelihood trajectories. It appears that the ways in which the participants are engaging with their familial belonging are as diverse and complex as the familial belonging themselves. However, it emerged that most of the participants are negotiating interdependent power within their familial belonging by taking care of the younger and/or elderly family members. As noted previously, some of the participants appear to be forwarding looking and they

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adopt opportunistic approach by investing in educating younger members of their families as is the case with Ndindoga:

Schooling is very good but I think it will be a waste of time now if I think of going back. Things will be very difficult for me if I combine schooling and looking after my three children. I have decided to work hard to make sure that all my children go to school. I want them to be educated so that they can be able to take care of me in the future…I want to get married to their father so that we can easily share the responsibility of educating them.

Although she does not have a child of her own like Ndindoga, Dikeledi stated that:

The most important thing I have learnt in my life is to take care of my younger siblings even though I do not have a child of my own. I am the first born in our family, and as such, it is my responsibility to assist them. Their time will come and they will also assist me. Although life is difficult I am proud that I have managed to push them somewhere…I spend the little salary from this job to buy them food and clothing…

Despite their low educational levels, Ndindoga and Dikeledi prioritize meeting the educational and basic needs of their younger relatives than personally becoming skilled. These participants indicated that they want their younger relatives to become skilled so that they can be in a better position to assist them in the future. Apart from investing in education, it also emerged from the study that some of the participants are actively improving the general living conditions of their families either by building better houses and/or negotiating other 'family' relationships or social networks. The 29-year-old Tshegetsang narrates below how her changing family contexts have instilled power within her to build a better house for her divorced mother, and what that means to her personally:

When our parents divorced in 1989 our mother moved out of the homestead. She was not working and she was temporarily accommodated by her relatives. Looking at that embarrassing situation of our mother, I told myself that by the time I finish schooling, the first thing I will do is to build a house for her…I am proud because I fulfilled my ambition by building her a two-and-a-half house in 2004 when I was working as a petrol attendant...

An important point to highlight here is that some young women attach significant value to and are building houses at their familial

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homes both as a way of defining their social identities and to enhance livelihoods of their families. Tshegetsang remarked that "I encourage women of my age that for you to be a woman you must build a house at your mother's place. Some young women are just *makgarebe* [smart looking ladies] here in town but they do not have houses back home. There is [poverty] at their homes but they are concerned with buying [expensive dresses]". Similarly, Basadifela said that "I am also assisting my mother to build a house at her plot back home. I told her that we must develop that plot first so that when we go home we arrive at our own place not at anybody's". Carrying out of role transitions and social expectations in terms of building a house, taking care of younger and/or elderly relatives emerged to be central in the way the research participants are strategically engaging with challenges within their familial belonging. These research findings demonstrate that by taking care of their family members these young women are not only gaining significant power within themselves but they are also negotiating for long term interdependent power with those members. By building houses these young women are not only gaining power to negotiate the dynamics of their familial belonging but they are positively defining their social responsibilities and obligations.

**Conclusion**

The dynamics of familial belonging emerged in this study to be of overriding significance amongst all the contextual factors shaping youth livelihoods in Botswana. It is not surprising therefore that the participants are showing some commitments towards enhancing their family support systems that are significant to their livelihood trajectories. These research findings clearly reveal that livelihood trajectories of these young women are inextricably linked to broader livelihoods of their families. It appears that in their transitions to adulthood these young women are integrating themselves more within their familial belonging rather than becoming more independent from it. These findings therefore provide important insights to different development policies and practices geared towards the functioning of the family unit, youth and women empowerment in Botswana. This paper presented findings to address the question: What are young women engaged in street vending in Gaborone doing to build and enhance their livelihoods (both short and long term), given the complex socio-cultural contexts within which they are embedded? The findings reveal that, in spite of contextual realities of their livelihoods, these young women and other participants are not passive victims. Rather, they are exercising their social agency to improve their lives and livelihoods both in practical and strategic terms.

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They are not only being highly entrepreneurial but they are becoming strategic in self-social positioning within their complex socio-cultural contexts by personally becoming skilled and also being actively engaged with their familial belonging. The findings also revealed power dynamics characterizing the diverse ways in which the participants are exercising their social agency in the process of obtaining a livelihood. The participants are not only gaining entrepreneurial power within street vending which they require as 'youth' but they are also exercising strategic power over potentially damaging stereotypic gender identities that are generally attached to women. Most importantly, not only are they determined to acquire essential skills and knowledge to improve their livelihoods being 'youth' with low levels of formal education but they are also negotiating long term interdependent power with their family members. Although the participants are exercising their social agency in many different ways their main concern is to enhance family support systems they regard significant in their short and long term livelihoods.

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