

# Role of Education and Sustainability of Single Mothers' Livelihoods in Kariobangi North, Nairobi

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## Abstract

Single motherhood is rising in many urban areas and often brings economic strain and social vulnerability. This study examines the role of education in sustaining the livelihoods of single mothers in Kariobangi North, Nairobi County, Kenya. The research draws on Human Capital Theory and the Sustainable Livelihood Approach to show how skills and learning interact with social and economic resources to shape long-term well-being. A qualitative case study was conducted with participants connected to two local organisations (Kariobangi Women Promotion Training Institute and Pro-Life). Data were gathered through interviews with 26 single mothers and four key informants and analysed thematically. Findings show that limited access to education—driven mainly by financial constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and gaps in targeted support—reduces opportunities for stable formal employment and confines many women to low-paying informal work. Those who accessed vocational training or continued education reported better income strategies, improved self-confidence, and greater ability to meet household needs. The study recommends targeted bursaries and scholarship schemes for single mothers, flexible and locally delivered vocational training, and stronger links between education providers and employment opportunities. A short policy implication drawn from the findings urges policymakers to integrate education-for-livelihoods measures into urban social protection schemes to reduce intergenerational poverty and strengthen community resilience.

**Keywords:** *Single Mothers, Education, Livelihoods, Sustainability, Social Transformation, Kariobangi North, Nairobi County.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Single motherhood has become a growing social and economic reality across the world. In both developed and developing contexts, the rise of single-parent households has reshaped family structures and gender roles, often placing increased economic pressure on women (Amato, 2010; World Bank, 2023). In many African countries, including Kenya, the number of female-headed households has increased sharply over the past two decades due to factors such as divorce, separation, widowhood, teenage pregnancy, and, in some cases, deliberate choice (Wachege & Omwoyo, 2018; Ntoimo & Mutanda, 2020). While single mothers provide both financial and emotional support for their families, they often face multiple vulnerabilities arising from limited access to quality education, decent employment, and supportive social networks (Raniga, 2018; Ahiaku & Ajani, 2022).

Education remains one of the most powerful tools for empowerment and economic advancement. It enhances self-reliance, decision-making power, and the ability to break out of intergenerational cycles of poverty (UNESCO, 2022). Globally, single mothers with limited education face major challenges in securing stable jobs, as most formal employment sectors demand higher qualifications (Laurie, 2017; Rousou, Kouta, Middleton, & Karanikola, 2013). Their lack of educational attainment often leads to dependence on casual or informal sector work, which is poorly paid and lacks social protection (ILO, 2021). Moreover, education influences family well-being beyond income—it affects parenting practices, access to healthcare, and children's educational outcomes (Scharte & Bolte, 2013; Evans & Akos, 2020).

Across Africa, the relationship between education and women's livelihoods has drawn increasing policy and academic attention. Studies in South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana highlight that single mothers with secondary or

tertiary education are more likely to diversify income sources and achieve economic independence (Raniga et al., 2019; Doroba, 2018). Conversely, lack of education entrenches reliance on low-paying informal activities such as vending, domestic work, and casual labour, particularly in urban informal settlements (Ntoimo & Odimegwu, 2014). The African Union's Gender Strategy (2020) also recognises education as a foundation for women's empowerment and sustainable livelihoods, linking it to broader goals of poverty reduction and social inclusion.

In Kenya, this challenge is especially visible in low-income settlements such as Kariobangi North, Mathare, and Mukuru. The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (2022) reports a steady rise in female-headed households, now constituting over 32% of urban households. Many of these women have low levels of education and limited access to vocational skills training, which reduces their chances of finding stable employment (Madhavan et al., 2021; Mbithi, 2019). Studies by Clark et al. (2017, 2023) show that education significantly determines the ability of women in informal settlements to sustain small-scale businesses, access microcredit, and participate in community development programs. However, the cost of schooling, household responsibilities, and lack of flexible learning opportunities continue to exclude single mothers from mainstream education systems (UN Women, 2020).

Education, both formal and non-formal, therefore holds transformative potential for single mothers. It equips them with employable skills, strengthens self-esteem, and enhances social capital by improving their participation in networks that support collective livelihood strategies (Raniga & Simpson, 2019). Yet, despite these benefits, access remains unequal due to socio-economic and gendered barriers. Many single mothers must choose between education and caregiving, often prioritizing immediate income needs over long-term learning (Kabeer, 2015; UNDP, 2021).

This study investigates how education influences the sustainability of single mothers' livelihoods in Kariobangi North, Nairobi County, an urban area characterised by high population density, unemployment, and economic precarity. It seeks to understand how educational attainment, access to training, and informal learning experiences affect single mothers' capacity to achieve income stability, resilience, and social well-being.

➤ *The Study Was Guided by the Following Objectives:*

- To examine the influence of access to education on the sustainability of single mothers' livelihoods in Kariobangi North.
- To explore the barriers that limit single mothers' participation in educational and vocational programs.
- To identify strategies that can enhance educational opportunities and long-term livelihood sustainability for single mothers.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Human Capital Theory (HCT) and the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA).

According to Human Capital Theory, individuals who invest in education and skill development increase their productivity, income, and overall well-being (Becker, 1993; Spirin et al. (2021). Education enhances individuals' ability to participate effectively in the labour market, leading to improved living standards and intergenerational benefits (Mayilyan & Yedigaryan, 2022). For single mothers, this means that access to formal and vocational education directly strengthens their earning capacity, reduces dependency, and promotes resilience.

The Sustainable Livelihood Approach (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999) complements HCT by highlighting the broader social, financial, and institutional factors that shape livelihood outcomes. It recognises that education interacts with other assets—such as social networks, access to credit, and health to determine overall sustainability. The integration of HCT and SLA provides a holistic framework for understanding how single mothers use education not only to improve their personal capacities but also to negotiate structural barriers that limit their livelihood opportunities.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative case study design to explore how education affects the sustainability of single mothers' livelihoods in Kariobangi North (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It drew on Human Capital Theory and the Sustainable Livelihood Approach to frame questions about skills, assets, and resilience (Becker, 1993; Grugulis, 2024; Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999).

The research took place in Kariobangi North, a densely populated informal settlement in Nairobi. Two purposively selected partner organisations provided access to participants: Kariobangi Women Promotion Training Institute (KWPTI) and Pro-Life Organization. The study population comprised single mothers aged 20–50 engaged in these local programs.

Purposive sampling selected 26 single mothers and 4 key informants (two program officers, one community leader, one trainer) to allow in-depth insight rather than statistical generalisation (Mason, 2010). Inclusion criteria were: residence in Kariobangi North for  $\geq 2$  years, responsibility for at least one dependent, some engagement with education or training, and willingness to participate. Semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews were used to probe access to education, barriers, livelihood strategies, and perceptions of sustainability (Bryman, 2016). Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were conducted in English or Kiswahili per participant preference, and were audio-recorded with notes. Thematic analysis guided coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo 12 supported data organisation and retrieval. Analysis focused on

patterns related to access, relevance of training, employability, and resilience.

Clearance was granted by Tangaza University Research Ethics Committee and NACOSTI. Participants gave informed consent, received confidentiality assurances, and could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities (Resnik, 2018).

#### IV. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine how access to education affects the sustainability of single mothers' livelihoods in Kariobangi North, Nairobi County. Data gathered from interviews with 26 single mothers and four key informants revealed that education plays a complex but transformative role in shaping livelihood strategies, income stability, and psychosocial empowerment. Thematic analysis generated four main themes: (1) limited access to formal education, (2) the role of vocational and skills training, (3) education and income stability, and (4) education as a source of empowerment and resilience.

##### ➤ Limited Access to Formal Education

Most participants had low levels of formal education. Only three had completed secondary education, while the majority had dropped out during upper primary or early secondary levels. Several participants attributed this to early pregnancies, lack of financial support, and the need to assume caregiving responsibilities at a young age.

- *One Participant Recalled:*

*"I was in Form Two when I became pregnant. My parents said I had embarrassed them and refused to pay school fees. I left home and never went back to school."*

- *Another Mother, Aged 28, Explained how Economic Pressures Limited Her Education:*

*"Even before getting a child, school was hard for me because we used to go without food. After I became a mother, I could not afford fees at all. Education became a luxury."*

These accounts show that financial deprivation and social stigma intersect to reinforce educational exclusion. Participants emphasized that, without formal education, they were unable to access stable employment or qualify for higher-paying opportunities. Many ended up in informal activities such as washing clothes, vending vegetables, or working as casual labourers.

- *Key Informants Confirmed this Pattern. A Program Coordinator at Kariobangi Women Promotion Training Institute Noted:*

*"Most of the women we receive here are school dropouts. Some stopped schooling in primary, others after one or two years of secondary education. They tell us they wish they could go back, but family duties make it hard."*

Such narratives echo earlier research indicating that limited education reduces employability and confines single mothers to informal and unstable work (Ntoimo &

Odimegwu, 2014; Laurie, 2017). For many participants, lack of education was seen not just as a missed opportunity but as a source of regret.

*"Sometimes I look at my children and tell myself, maybe if I had studied, I could give them a better life," shared one mother of three.*

##### ➤ The Role of Vocational and Skills Training

In the absence of formal schooling, vocational training emerged as a major pathway to livelihood improvement. Participants enrolled in short courses such as tailoring, hairdressing, catering, and beadwork offered by community-based institutions. These programs were valued for being practical, affordable, and flexible.

- *One Woman Explained:*

*"I joined the tailoring course at KWPTI because they allowed me to come with my baby. I learned to make school uniforms. Even before completing the course, I started selling some pieces in the market."*

- *Another Participant, Who Trained in Hairdressing, Highlighted the Empowerment that Came with Learning:*

*"Before the training, I used to rely on neighbours for food. After learning hairdressing, I started making small money. Now I can pay rent and buy food for my children. It's not much, but it gives me dignity."*

Several mothers appreciated the supportive atmosphere within the training centres. They described them as "safe spaces" where women shared experiences, encouraged one another, and built friendships that extended beyond training.

*"We support each other. When one of us gets a big order, we help. The training is not only about skills but also about standing strong together," said one participant.*

However, challenges persisted. Many women lacked startup capital to buy equipment or materials after completing training. A few mentioned that their businesses collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic due to reduced demand and mobility restrictions.

*"I learned catering, but when COVID came, all events stopped. I had to start selling vegetables again," lamented one mother.*

Despite these limitations, vocational education was widely seen as the most realistic route to improving livelihoods. The findings support Human Capital Theory, which posits that investment in skills enhances productivity and economic independence (Becker, 1993; Grugulis, 2024).

##### ➤ Education and Income Stability

Education was closely linked to the stability and diversity of income sources. Participants with some level of education or technical training reported better planning,

budgeting, and customer management skills, which improved their ability to sustain income.

- *One Key Informant Explained:*  
*“Those who went through training manage money differently. They keep records, plan ahead, and know how to talk to clients. Education gives them confidence and order.”*
- *A Single Mother Who Completed a Basic Accounting Course Shared:*  
*“Before, I used to mix business money with home money. After learning bookkeeping, I started saving small amounts. Now I can pay school fees on time.”*
- *In Contrast, Mothers Without Education or Training Described Unstable Income Patterns and Frequent Financial Crises. One Participant Explained:*  
*“If I don’t get laundry work for two or three days, I cannot buy food. That’s how life is when you depend on casual jobs.”*

These differences illustrate how education influences not only employment but also financial discipline and strategic planning. Similar observations have been made in studies linking education with household income diversification and resilience (Akinyemi, 2021; Evans & Akos, 2020).

#### ➤ *Education as a Source of Empowerment and Resilience*

Beyond financial benefits, education had a strong psychosocial impact. Many participants described gaining self-confidence, communication skills, and a renewed sense of self-worth through learning experiences.

*“Before joining the class, I used to hide when people talked about work or business. Now I can stand and speak. I know I have something to offer,” said one woman proudly.*

- *Another Participant Explained How Education Changed Her Perception of Motherhood:*

*“People used to look down on me for being a single mother. But when they saw me training and later starting my small salon, their attitude changed. Education gives you respect.”*

- *Several Women Also Spoke About How Education Inspired Them to Value Their Children’s Schooling More:*

*“I always tell my daughter, don’t drop out like me. Whatever happens, education will help you stand,” one mother said tearfully.*

Education was also found to enhance social connectedness. Women with some education were more likely to join self-help groups, savings associations, and church initiatives that provided mutual financial and emotional support.

*“We formed a small savings group with my classmates. We contribute weekly and support each other when there is sickness or school fees problem,” explained a participant.*

These findings align with the Sustainable Livelihood Approach, which views social networks and knowledge as critical assets for coping with shocks and sustaining livelihoods (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999).

Nevertheless, some participants highlighted persistent challenges such as limited childcare services and unstable market demand that hindered their progress.

*“Sometimes I miss classes or clients because there’s no one to watch my baby. It’s hard to move forward when you have no support,” one mother shared.*

#### ➤ *Summary of Findings*

Table 1 Summary of Findings

Theme	Illustrative Participant Quotes	Implications for Livelihood Sustainability
Limited access to formal education	“I could not afford school after giving birth.” / “Education became a luxury.”	Reduced employability and vulnerability to poverty
Vocational and skills training	“I learned tailoring and started earning.” / “Training gave me dignity and hope.”	Practical skills enhance income and confidence
Education and income stability	“After training, I can plan and save.” / “Without education, I depend on luck.”	Education improves income management and diversification
Education as empowerment and resilience	“Now I can speak in public.” / “People respect me more because I went back to learn.”	Education strengthens self-worth, networks, and long-term resilience

## V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that education is a powerful determinant of livelihood sustainability among single mothers in Kariobangi North. The findings highlight that, although most participants faced limited access to formal education, engagement in vocational and non-formal learning significantly improved their economic participation, psychosocial well-being, and resilience. These outcomes are consistent with global

evidence that links educational attainment to women’s empowerment, family stability, and poverty reduction (UNESCO, 2022; UN Women, 2021).

#### ➤ *Education and Human Capital Formation*

The findings affirm Human Capital Theory (HCT), which argues that investment in education and skills development enhances individuals’ productivity and income-generating capacity (Becker, 1993). Participants who acquired vocational or secondary education reported

improved capacity to plan, manage finances, and operate small-scale enterprises effectively. This confirms research by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) showing that education yields high returns in developing countries by improving employability and economic resilience.

Single mothers who underwent vocational training demonstrated immediate livelihood benefits. For instance, one woman who trained in tailoring began earning even before completing her course—showing the short-term utility of skill-based education. Similar patterns have been observed in Kabeer (2015), who note that women's training in practical, marketable skills directly enhances self-reliance and economic independence.

Nevertheless, structural barriers such as financial hardship, time constraints, and gender bias limited educational access and outcomes. These findings mirror Ntoimo and Odimegwu (2014) and Doroba (2018), who found that without family and institutional support, single mothers' investment in education remains incomplete or poorly rewarded. The situation is further compounded by unpaid care work that restricts women's ability to attend classes or pursue full-time employment (ILO, 2021; UNDP, 2021).

Thus, education in this context functions both as a means of economic empowerment and as a contested site of gendered inequality. Women who manage to invest in their education develop greater agency and self-efficacy, but those who remain excluded continue to face multiple layers of vulnerability (Amato, 2010; Raniga, 2018).

#### ➤ *Education and Sustainable Livelihoods*

Viewed through the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA), education operates as a vital asset that strengthens multiple livelihood capitals — human, social, and financial (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999; Scoones, 2015). The findings show that single mothers who accessed education were more likely to diversify income sources, build social networks, and manage livelihood shocks.

In Kariobangi North, vocational education contributed to livelihood diversification, a key strategy for survival in volatile informal economies. Trained mothers combined tailoring, catering, and petty trading, reducing dependency on a single income source. These results correspond with Madhavan et al. (2021), who highlight that education enhances adaptive capacity and innovation among urban women in Kenya's informal sector.

Moreover, the study confirms that education strengthens social capital by enabling participation in women's groups, savings associations, and faith-based initiatives. This social cohesion provides access to information, small loans, and collective resilience in times of crisis (Bebbington, 1999; Raniga & Simpson, 2019). As participants noted, learning together fostered trust and mutual aid key ingredients for sustainable livelihoods in resource-constrained environments.

These results echo Cornwall (2016), who argues that women's collective learning and networking transform education from an individual benefit into a community resource. Education, therefore, not only builds economic competence but also strengthens solidarity, shared purpose, and resilience within disadvantaged urban settings.

#### ➤ *Education, Gender, and Empowerment*

Education's impact extends beyond economic gains; it fosters psychological empowerment and social transformation. The study found that single mothers who engaged in learning developed confidence, assertiveness, and a stronger sense of identity. They spoke of “finding their voice” and “standing on their own feet,” reflecting the emancipatory dimension of education. These findings align with Sen's (1999) *Capability Approach*, which positions education as a means of expanding freedoms and enabling individuals to live the lives they value.

Participants in this study viewed education as a “second chance” that restored dignity and countered social stigma a sentiment also observed by Rousou et al. (2013) in the study of single mothers in Cyprus and South Africa respectively. Moreover, educated mothers became role models for their children, emphasising schooling as a route to a better life, thus reinforcing intergenerational empowerment (Scharte & Bolte, 2013; UNFPA, 2022).

However, empowerment through education is not automatic. It depends on whether learned skills are matched with real opportunities for employment or entrepreneurship. As World Bank (2023) argues, education alone cannot address gendered poverty unless accompanied by structural reforms that enhance credit access, market inclusion, and childcare support.

#### ➤ *Structural and Contextual Constraints*

Although education improved livelihoods, its potential was limited by systemic barriers. Participants described challenges such as lack of childcare facilities, limited business capital, and gender bias in hiring. These constraints mirror findings by Mudege et al. (2021) and Mishra & Smyth (2022), who note that single mothers in low-income communities face “double exclusion”—as women and as heads of households.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed fragility in their economic systems. Several women lost clients or jobs and had to revert to casual labour, illustrating the precariousness of urban informal work (ILO, 2021; Onyango & Gichuhi, 2022). Without consistent institutional support, the benefits of education remained short-lived for many.

Thus, while Human Capital Theory highlights education as a driver of productivity, the Sustainable Livelihood Approach reminds us that social and institutional environments determine whether that human capital can be effectively used (Scoones, 2015; DFID, 1999). A lack of enabling policies—such as subsidized training, microfinance access, and affordable childcare—

undermines the full realization of education's transformative potential.

#### ➤ *Integrating Human Capital and Livelihood Perspectives*

Integrating HCT and SLA provides a comprehensive understanding of education's role in sustaining single mothers' livelihoods. HCT explains how education enhances productivity, while SLA situates these outcomes within a broader socio-economic context that includes access to assets, institutions, and networks (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Becker, 1993).

In this study, education emerged as both an individual enabler and a collective catalyst. On the individual level, it built knowledge, self-confidence, and financial competence. Collectively, it fostered cooperation, solidarity, and local innovation—elements essential for long-term sustainability (Raniga et al., 2019; Bebbington, 1999).

This dual role supports Kabeer's (2015) argument that empowerment is both a personal and structural process. For the women of Kariobangi North, education transformed livelihoods not only through income generation but also through redefined identities and strengthened community ties.

## VI. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that education is vital for the sustainability of single mothers' livelihoods in low-income urban settings, but its impact depends on supportive policies and institutions. The following key actions are recommended:

#### ➤ *Integrate Education into Urban Development Policies*

Education should be central in Kenya's urban poverty and social protection strategies, such as *Vision 2030*. Including adult literacy, continuing education, and vocational training in informal settlements would strengthen women's human capital and reduce poverty (UNESCO, 2022; UNDP, 2021).

#### ➤ *Provide Flexible and Affordable Learning Options*

Single mothers need learning programs that fit their realities. Evening or modular classes and subsidised community learning centres can increase participation. Targeted bursaries and micro-scholarships can also reduce dropout rates (Doroba, 2018; Ntoimo & Mutanda, 2020).

#### ➤ *Enhance Vocational and Technical Training*

Expand vocational programs in partnership with community and faith-based institutions. Training should match market needs—tailoring, catering, ICT, or beauty therapy—and include post-training support such as mentorship, toolkits, and microcredit.

#### ➤ *Support Childcare and Social Services*

Lack of childcare limits educational access. Establishing affordable childcare centres near learning facilities would help mothers attend classes regularly.

Psychosocial counselling and mentorship can further reduce stigma and build confidence (ILO, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

#### ➤ *Promote Gender-Sensitive and Collaborative Policies*

Government, NGOs, and community organisations should coordinate education and livelihood initiatives that address gender barriers. Gender-responsive budgeting and inclusion of financial literacy and leadership training would strengthen women's long-term empowerment (World Bank, 2023; African Union, 2020).

In summary, education-based empowerment for single mothers requires integrated policies that combine learning, childcare, and economic support. Such coordinated efforts would build resilient households and contribute to inclusive national development.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study explored how education supports the livelihoods of single mothers in Kariobangi North, Nairobi County. Findings show that both formal and non-formal education drive economic stability, self-reliance, and empowerment among women in low-income urban settings. While most participants had limited schooling, those who accessed vocational training gained better income, planning skills, and resilience.

Drawing on Human Capital Theory (HCT), the study affirms that education enhances productivity and employability, enabling single mothers to diversify income and support their families. From the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) perspective, education also builds human, social, and financial assets vital for long-term stability.

Beyond economic benefits, education promotes confidence, dignity, and social inclusion. Educated mothers were more likely to challenge stigma, value their children's education, and participate in community initiatives. However, systemic barriers such as limited childcare, financial exclusion, and gender bias restrict the full impact of education.

Empowering single mothers through learning is therefore both a social justice and development priority. Integrating education with childcare, financial access, and livelihood support will help Kenya advance its *Vision 2030* and the *Sustainable Development Goals*. Future research should examine how vocational and digital education shape income growth and resilience over time, deepening understanding of education's role in sustainable urban development.

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