

From Marginalisation to Agency: Empowerment-Theory Insights on Primary to Secondary School Transition in Kibera

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Abstract:

Background: Existing research on educational marginalisation in informal settlements has tended to treat households' historical disadvantage as a static condition that predicts poor outcomes, with little attention to how disadvantaged households interpret that disadvantage and translate awareness of it into proactive strategies for their children's schooling. Kenya's policy of a 100% transition from primary to secondary education is a step towards achieving universal basic education. However, the factors influencing the policy's implementation in historically marginalised areas, such as the Kibera Informal Settlement, remain poorly understood. This study examined how households in Kibera, an informal settlement in Nairobi, understand and respond to their historical marginalisation, and whether this understanding is associated with children's transition outcomes.

Materials and Methods: Using a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, questionnaires were administered to 291 of 398 sampled households, alongside five key informant interviews and three focus group discussions (n=24) with teachers, community leaders, parents, and youth who did not transition. Contrary to what a structural, reproduction-based account of disadvantage would predict, households that explicitly attributed their circumstances to historical marginalisation accounted for a markedly smaller share (3 out of 84) of non-transitioning children than those that did not make this attribution (81 out of 84). The study argues that this pattern can be explained by empowerment theory, in which conscious recognition of structural disadvantage is associated with proactive household mobilisation rather than resignation.

Results: Historical marginalisation, which included historical exclusion from education and economic activity, colonial and post-colonial practices, and the unequal distribution of public educational facilities, demonstrated significant influence on transition from primary to secondary school ($p=0.011$).

Conclusion: The findings suggest that interventions should build household awareness and agency alongside material support, rather than treating disadvantaged households solely as passive recipients of policy.

Key Word: primary-to-secondary school transition; empowerment theory; historical marginalisation; Kibera, Kenya.

Date of Submission: 04-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 14-09-2026

I. Introduction

The United Nations has made universal access to secondary education a central goal under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), aiming for all boys and girls to complete free, quality primary and secondary schooling by 2030 (UNESCO, 2026). However, globally, an estimated 273 million children and youth are out of school, the largest share of any level, with 130 million in upper-secondary age. Only two in three students worldwide complete secondary school (UNESCO, 2026). Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia together account for roughly three-quarters of this global out-of-school population, and low-income countries have out-of-school rates more than ten times those of high-income countries.

Kenya's experience with the primary-to-secondary transition fits within this broader global pattern, in which the transition from primary to secondary schooling, rather than initial enrolment, is an increasingly significant point of loss (KIPPRA, 2021). Kenya's introduction of the 100% primary-to-secondary transition policy commits the government to ensuring that every learner who sits the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education proceeds to secondary school (KIPPRA, 2021). The policy is underpinned by fee subsidisation intended to remove the cost barrier historically associated with non-transition. As of the first quarter of 2020, Nairobi County recorded the lowest transition rate nationally at 47%, against a national high of over 90% in several other counties (KIPPRA,

2021). This was attributed to urban poverty, with families in informal settlements struggling to meet the costs of uniforms, transport, and upkeep (KIPPRRA, 2021). More recent data show substantial improvement: by the end of 2020, Nairobi's transition rate reached 90.2%, above the national average of 86.13% (Naeku & Irungu, 2024). While some existing grey literature attributes the improvement to the Elimu scholarship programme and bursaries from the National Government Constituency Development Fund (NGCDF), targeting vulnerable learners, other literature attributes it to the community mop-up programmes by the chiefs and other government administrators who walked from door to door, ensuring every student transitioned to secondary schools; the efforts of the parents remain unexplored in the literature.

Kibera informal settlement offers a useful setting for examining this gap. The settlement's origins and ongoing underdevelopment are widely linked to colonial and post-colonial urban planning decisions that concentrated infrastructural neglect in areas occupied by lower-income and historically marginalised populations (Macharia, 2008). This pattern of historically concentrated neglect continues to shape Nairobi's informal settlements today, as a recent analysis of urbanisation confirms (Population Matters, 2024). Government slum-upgrading commitments dating back to the late 1980s have been only partially realised in practice, and secondary school provision in the settlement remains dominated by private institutions, limiting the practical reach of fee subsidies regardless of household effort (Agayi & Sağ, 2020). Existing scholarship on educational marginalisation has tended to treat this kind of historical disadvantage as a largely static determinant of poor outcomes, consistent with a reproduction-based account in which accumulated disadvantage compounds across generations (Edwards & Means, 2019). However, this literature has not adequately tested whether household awareness of historical marginalisation itself changes outcomes, rather than merely reflecting them. This is a meaningful gap: if households that recognise their structural disadvantage respond differently from those that do not, policy design should engage household agency directly rather than treating disadvantaged communities solely as recipients of top-down subsidies.

The purpose of this study is therefore twofold: first, to establish the empirical relationship between household attribution of historical marginalisation and children's transition outcomes in Kibera; and second, to identify which theoretical account, an empowerment-based reading emphasising household agency or a reproduction-based reading emphasising structural determinism, better explains the observed pattern. In pursuing this purpose, the study reports a finding that runs contrary to the reproduction account typically applied to this kind of setting and proposes that this departure has practical implications for how transition-support interventions should be designed.

This question matters beyond the academic interest of resolving a theoretical tension. If historical marginalisation operates purely as a reproduction-based constraint, the policy implication is straightforward: closing the transition gap primarily requires material investment in infrastructure, subsidies, and school places, with household-level behaviour treated as a secondary or downstream consideration. If, instead, household awareness and interpretation of disadvantage meaningfully shape outcomes, then interventions that stop at material provision are likely to underperform relative to their potential because they leave untouched the household-level mechanism by which material support is actually converted into a completed transition. This study sought to distinguish between these two possibilities, using empirical evidence from a setting where both material constraint and documented historical marginalisation are present.

Historical marginalisation

Historical marginalisation has been widely documented as a contributor to poor educational outcomes in disadvantaged settings across diverse structural and cultural contexts. Agarwal (2020) documents comparable, historically rooted educational exclusion among marginalised communities in Delhi, India, while Farkas (2014) reports similar dynamics affecting Roma children's access to education across Europe. In sub-Saharan Africa, Mugiraneza (2018) found that historically marginalised households in Rwanda were more likely to involve children in income-generating activities, including forms of child labour, to meet basic household needs, thereby reducing children's opportunities to progress beyond primary schooling. This account is broadly consistent with a reproduction-based reading of disadvantage, in which historically disadvantaged households are expected to reproduce rather than escape their circumstances.

In the Kenyan context, Macharia (2008) traces the origins of urban educational differentials in Nairobi's informal settlements to colonial-era planning decisions that systematically under-provided infrastructure, including schools, in African settlement areas, a pattern that post-colonial governments have only partially reversed. Agayi and Sağ (2020) document that Kibera's slum-upgrading programme, though formally in place since the late 1980s, has not materialised at the required scale, leaving the settlement dependent on a secondary-

school landscape dominated by private provision. Edwards and Means (2019) situate this outcome within a broader global pattern in which globalisation and privatisation in education tend to compound, rather than offset, existing marginalisation in under-resourced settings.

A separate body of literature has examined household-level responses to disadvantage more directly, yielding mixed conclusions about whether structural constraints compound disadvantage or whether households retain meaningful agency within them. Mukabana et al. (2024) found that poverty, childcare responsibilities, and stigma constrained adolescent mothers in a Nairobi informal settlement from returning to school, illustrating how structural and social constraints can operate jointly to limit household options; the study focused on structural and historical constraints on transition. Pinchoff et al. (2021), examining the same broad setting during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that economic and social shocks affected households unevenly, with some households in Nairobi's informal settlements showing greater capacity to adapt than others facing comparable structural exposure. Fuller and Lain (2019) similarly found that female-headed households, often assumed to be structurally disadvantaged, were not uniformly less resilient in the face of shocks, suggesting that household-level responses can diverge from what a purely structural account would predict.

Within the Kenyan transition literature, cost-related barriers have attracted the most sustained attention. Mwikya, Cheloti, and Mulwa (2019) found that the direct and indirect costs of secondary education significantly affected transition rates in Machakos Sub-County, while Jeptanui (2024) found that hidden educational costs continued to depress transition rates in public boarding secondary schools even after formal fee subsidisation. Tabwara and Maina (2019) identified parental-level factors, including parental attitudes and household circumstances, as significant predictors of transition in Matuga Sub-County. Ilie and Rose (2016) situate this pattern regionally, arguing that equal access to post-primary education across South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is unlikely to be achieved by 2030 without deliberate attention to the household-level mechanisms that mediate between policy and outcomes, rather than relying solely on policy design.

Empowerment Programmes and Historical Marginalisation in Informal Settlements

A related body of work has examined empowerment-oriented interventions delivered directly in informal settlements and whether historical marginalisation limits their effectiveness. Abuya (2025) describes the design and early lessons of a school-support programme for Nairobi's informal settlements, noting that even well-resourced interventions struggle in areas with severe historical infrastructure gaps. Turning Point Trust (2024) reports similar constraints in a Kibera-specific programme aimed at returning vulnerable children to school, while UNICEF Kenya's (2021) national re-entry programme found uneven uptake across counties, partly attributable to differences in how affected communities perceived their eligibility and agency within the programme. Kigongo (2018) reports that programmes targeting girls' transition in urban poor settings were most effective when they explicitly built participants' confidence and system-navigation skills, rather than providing material support alone. This finding is directly relevant to this study's argument that awareness and agency, not subsidy alone, drive transition outcomes.

Taken together, this literature suggests that empowerment-oriented interventions in informal settlements can be undermined by the same historical structural gaps- infrastructural, financial, and institutional- that produced the marginalisation they are designed to address. Programme effectiveness appears to depend on whether interventions build household awareness and agency directly, rather than providing material support alone. None of these studies, however, directly test whether a household's own interpretation of its historical circumstances, as distinct from its objective material position or programme participation, predicts transition outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is interpreted primarily through the lens of Empowerment Theory. Proposed by Julian Rappaport (1981), Empowerment Theory holds that individuals are not passive recipients of their social circumstances but active agents capable of shaping outcomes when given opportunity, resources, and self-belief. Its three core tenets are: self-efficacy, the conviction that one's actions can alter one's circumstances (Kroecker, 1995); proactive agency, the mobilisation of personal, social, and material resources under conditions of disadvantage (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980); and contextual enablement, the recognition that the broader social environment shapes, but does not determine, individuals' capacity to act (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Cohen and Uphoff (1980) distinguish material, social, and personal dimensions of empowerment, arguing that positive outcomes depend on the alignment of these dimensions rather than on any one in isolation. Kroecker (1995), studying empowerment processes in a Nicaraguan agricultural cooperative, similarly found that individual and organisational empowerment reinforced one another when members recognised their collective position and organised around it. Maton and Salem (1995) extend this reasoning to community settings more broadly, arguing that settings which foster belief in members' capacity to influence outcomes tend to produce more proactive engagement than those that do not.

This theoretical position is adopted in preference to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction, which holds that unequal access to economic, cultural, and social capital is reproduced across generations, largely independently of individual effort. A reproduction-based account would predict that households with greater historical disadvantage, particularly those that recognise it, should show poorer outcomes, since disadvantage is expected to compound rather than resolve. The results below show the opposite: households that explicitly attributed their circumstances to historical marginalisation saw their children transition at substantially higher rates. Social reproduction theory offers no ready mechanism for this reversal; empowerment theory does, since households that consciously name their disadvantage may be precisely those in which self-efficacy and proactive mobilisation are most active, consistent with Cohen and Uphoff's (1980) argument that personal and material empowerment operate jointly. This does not mean structural constraint is irrelevant: historical marginalisation, measured as a composite index rather than a specific attribution, is negatively associated with outcomes at the aggregate level. The position taken here is that conscious awareness of one's structural position functions as a protective factor operating within, rather than against, that constraint, a more defensible claim than either a purely structural or purely agency-based account alone, and the claim this study tests.

II. Material And Methods

This cross-sectional, convergent mixed-methods study was carried out among household heads in Kibera Informal Settlement, Nairobi County, Kenya, between August 2023 and October 2023. A total of 398 households were sampled using systematic random sampling, of which 291 fully participated in the study (73% response rate), alongside five key informants and 24 focus group discussion participants purposively selected to provide complementary qualitative data.

Study Design: Cross-sectional, convergent mixed-methods design (quantitative and qualitative data collected concurrently and merged at the interpretation stage)

Study Location: Kibera Informal Settlement, Nairobi, Kenya.

Study Duration: August 2023 to October 2023.

Sample size: 398 households sampled; 291 fully participated (quantitative); 5 key informants and 24 focus group discussion participants (qualitative).

Sample size calculation: Quantitative Sample

The study employed standardised techniques for sample selection in order to facilitate scientific replicability: Yamane's Formula (1967) was used to determine the sample size for quantitative precision, and a systematic random sampling method with a defined skip interval ($k=155$) was used for sample reliability in all 13 Kibera villages (Kianda, Soweto West, Raila, Gatwekera, Kisumu Ndogo, Makena, Kichinjio, Kambi Moru, Mashimoru, Lindi, Laini Saba, Soweto East, and Silanga).

Using Yamane's Formula (1967),
$$n_0 = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where n_0 = desired sample size at a 95% confidence interval

N = Target Population (61,651 households)

e = acceptable margin of error (0.05 for 5%)

Thus, the sample size was:
$$n_0 = \frac{61,651}{1 + 61,651(0.05)^2}$$
$$n_0 = 397.42 \text{ respondents}$$

The sample size was therefore 398 households, from which the household heads were interviewed.

Qualitative Sample

For the qualitative component, purposeful sampling was used. Informants for key informant interviews (KIIs) were selected based on their professional or community roles that provided insights into the secondary school environment and the transition process in the Kibera Informal Settlement. One MoE education officer responsible for the Kibera Informal Settlement area, one head teacher from a primary school with a high KCPE completion rate, two secondary school principals (one from a public school, one from a low-cost private school), and one seasoned community leader (a village elder who has lived in the Kibera Informal Settlement for more than fifteen years) participated in five KIIs. To triangulate viewpoints from various nodes of the education system, this sample was purposively varied across institutional positions.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for focus group discussions (FGDs). Three FGDs were held, each with a distinct participant composition: (a) parents whose children had successfully transitioned to secondary school ($n=8$), recruited during the survey; (b) parents whose children had not transitioned

(n=7), recruited through purposive identification by village elders and during the survey; and (c) out-of-school youths aged 15-21 who had completed KCPE but had not proceeded to secondary school (n=9), recruited through a combination of purposive identification and snowball referral. The purpose of these participant compositions was to provide comparative narratives that highlighted differences between transitioning and non-transitioning experiences.

During the qualitative data collection phase, saturation, the moment at which further data gathering stopped producing new thematic insights, was tracked. The primary researcher observed that by the third FGD and fifth KII, the main themes were continuously recurring among informants with no significant new additions, confirming the qualitative sample's suitability for triangulation and contextualization as planned.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Household heads residing across all 13 villages of Kibera (Kianda, Soweto West, Raila, Gatwekera, Kisumu Ndogo, Makena, Kichinjio, Kambi Moru, Mashimoru, Lindi, Laini Saba, Soweto East, Silanga), selected via systematic random sampling with a skip interval of 155 from a target population of 61,651.
2. Included, purposively: two secondary school principals (one public, one private low-cost), one primary school head teacher (from a school with a high KCPE completion rate), one Ministry of Education officer responsible for the Kibera area, and one community leader/village elder with 15+ years' residence.
3. FGD (a): parents whose children *had* transitioned to secondary school (n=8)
4. FGD (b): parents whose children had *not* transitioned (n=7)
5. FGD (c): out-of-school youth aged 15–21 who completed KCPE but did not proceed to secondary school (n=9)

Procedure methodology

After receiving written informed consent, the household heads were given a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix II) in person by the researcher and trained research assistants. There were four sections to the questionnaire: Section B (Social Factors) evaluated proximity to secondary schools, community information networks, bursary awareness, and parental engagement with the education system; Section C (Economic Factors) evaluated household income range, number of income-earning members, ability to meet direct and indirect schooling costs, and bursary application history; and Section A (Sociodemographic Profile) measured the gender, age, and educational attainment of the household head, household size, household structure (single- or two-parent households, village of residence; Perceptions of public school availability and sufficiency, knowledge of the 100% Transition Policy, and perceptions of past government investment in educational facilities in Kibera Informal Settlement from 2018 to 2022 were all examined in Section D (Structural and Historical Factors).

Items included five-point Likert scales measuring attitudes and views, ordinal categorical items, and closed-ended binary replies. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of multi-item scales. Before being fully implemented, the instrument was tested with five households in Karanja village that were not included in the primary study sample. The pilot sample was removed from the final analysis after two items—ambiguous income-range categories and a perplexing question about the distance to school—were judged to require clarification.

Key informants participated in semi-structured interviews using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix III) that included 11 open-ended questions organised into three thematic clusters: perceptions of the primary factors influencing transition success and failure; the impact of school type, availability, and cost on outcomes; and an assessment of the 100% Transition Policy's implementation efficacy. Interviews with five key informants, who were purposively selected based on their institutional or community roles, took place at a time and location of their choosing and lasted between 35 and 55 minutes. Participants gave their express agreement for the interview notes to be taken, and member checking—reading the notes back to respondents to verify, amend, or clarify their statements—was employed.

A semi-structured guide (Appendix IV) was used to conduct three focus group discussions (n = 30), with 8 to 12 members per group: two mixed-gender groups (n = 10 and n = 12) and a female-only group (n = 8). The participants included out-of-school youth aged 15–21 who had finished KCPE but had not enrolled in secondary school, as well as parents of children who had and had not made the transition. This study's gender balance enabled comparison of transitioning and non-transitioning experiences. The third conversation achieved saturation, at which point no new theme emerged.

The Maseno University Ethical Review Committee, the Maseno University School of Graduate Studies, and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) provided formal ethical clearance for all data gathering. For every individual who was not enrolled in school, parental or guardian consent was also acquired. In addition to being informed of their right to withdraw at any time, respondents were

guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in any future publications. Completed instruments were kept under the researcher's exclusive control for at least five years, digitally encrypted, and stored in hard copy.

Statistical analysis

Using SPSS v32, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse quantitative data. Tables containing percentages and frequencies were used to display the data. Figures are given to others. The impact of social and economic factors on the transition rates was also tested using inferential statistics.

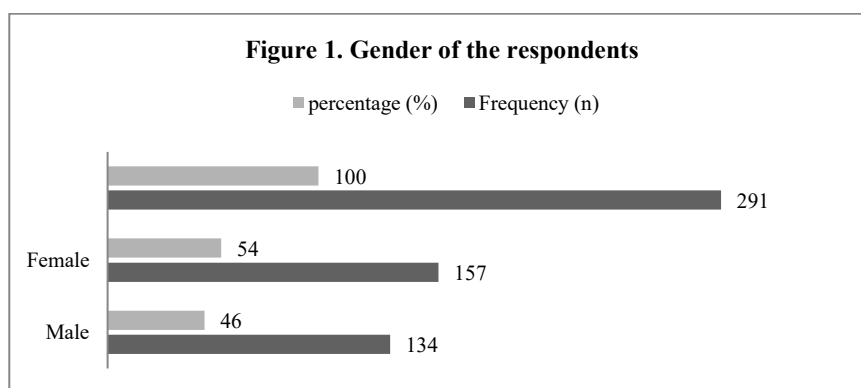
On the other hand, thematic analysis approaches were used to organise and analyse qualitative data. The main ideas that emerged from the interviews were presented in narrative form and arranged according to particular study objectives or research questions. Each narrative response was then critically examined to identify recurring themes consistent with the study's goals. Excerpts from the main text report were used to present the qualitative data. This suggested that, to emphasise the unique interactions between variables, emerging themes were defined qualitatively. Narratives and verbatim quotes were used to present the qualitative data.

III. Result

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

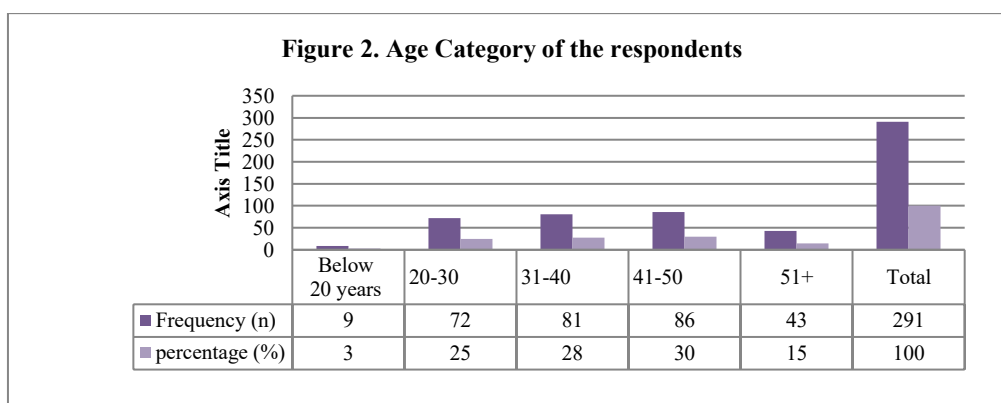
Gender of the Respondents

As illustrated in Figure 1, 54% (157) of the respondents were female, compared with 46% (134) male. The slight difference between the numbers of female and male respondents may be explained by the fact that more female than male parents were found in the households during fieldwork. This is because more men in the informal settlement were engaged in gainful activities away from home, whereas women were either housewives or ran small businesses near their homes.



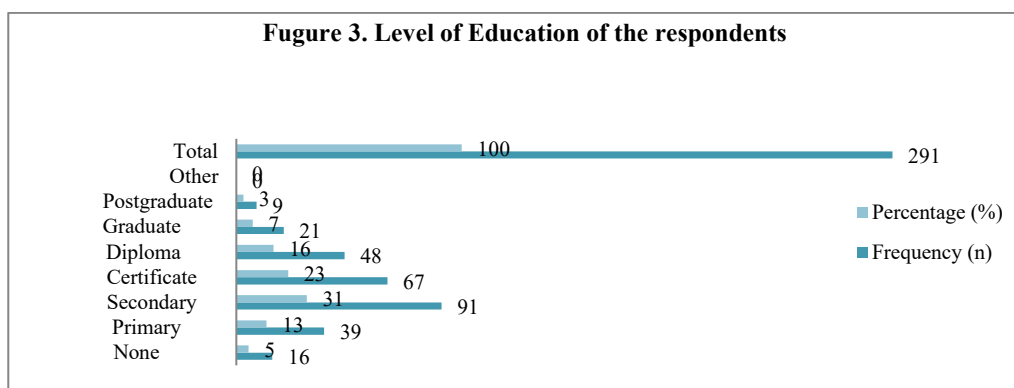
4.2.2 Age of the Respondents

The findings in Figure 2 show that a majority (30%) of the parents (caregivers) were between 41 and 50 years of age, closely followed by those between 31 and 40 years at 28%. Those aged between 20 and 30 years accounted for 25%, whereas those aged over 50 years accounted for 15%. Only 3% (9) of the respondents were aged below 20 years, representing those who were caregivers or guardians to students who were not necessarily their own children but were instead siblings or close relatives.



4.2.3 Level of Education of the Respondents

The findings in figure 4.3 show that 5% (16) of the respondents did not have any educational qualification, 13% (39) had primary education, 31% (91) had secondary, 23% (67) had a certificate, 16% (48) diploma, 7% (21) had a graduate, while 3% (9) had postgraduate education qualification. Overall, nearly 81% of the respondents had obtained at least a secondary school education. On the other hand, only 26% of the respondents had a college diploma or higher as their highest level of education.



4.2.4 Transition Status of Sampled Households

The study found that 84 of the 291 sampled households (28.9%) had at least one child who failed to transition from primary to secondary school during the 2018-2022 reference period. This non-transition rate of 28.9% is more than twice the national average of approximately 13.87% (based on an 86.13% national transition rate) and approximately three times the Nairobi County average of 9.8%, both for 2020 (Naeku & Irungu, 2024). It indicates that households in the Kibera Informal Settlement face a fundamentally different transition environment from the national norm, one that the 100% Transition Policy's standard mechanisms are not adequately addressing.

Of the 291 participating respondents, 60 (21%) attributed their household's ability to afford secondary education to historical disadvantage, while 231 (79%) did not. Table 1 presents the relationship between this attribution and children's transition outcomes.

This attribution reflects a single questionnaire item (see Measures above), distinct from the four-item composite used in the regression model in Table 2.

Table no 1: Household Attribution of Historical Disadvantage and Share of Non-Transitioned Children

Household attribution	n (%) of households	Share of non-transitioned children	Non-Transition Rate
Attributed to historical disadvantage	60 (21%)	4%	7%
Did not attribute to historical disadvantage	231 (79%)	96%	35%

Households that attributed their circumstances to historical disadvantage accounted for only 4% of children who did not transition to secondary school, whereas households that did not make this attribution accounted for 96%. This pattern is the inverse of what a reproduction-based account of disadvantage would predict and forms the central empirical basis for the theoretical argument developed in the Discussion below.

This attribution effect is distinct from general optimism about government performance. When asked whether the government was doing enough to ensure 100% transition, 32% of respondents felt the government was doing enough to ensure the transition; among households whose children did not transition, 55% expressed such optimism, compared with 45% who were sceptical. General confidence in government efforts, in other words, did not predict better transition outcomes; if anything, it was slightly overrepresented among households whose children did not transition.

When asked whether they considered the area well-endowed with enough schools and other infrastructure projects, only 31% of respondents felt their area was adequately endowed with schools and other infrastructure; 69% disagreed. This perception was directly linked to outcomes: households dissatisfied with the availability of schools and infrastructure recorded the highest share of non-transitioned children, at 65%, broadly consistent with

a reproduction-based account in which perceived present-day deprivation tracks with worse outcomes. This is a materially different measure from the historical-disadvantage attribution reported above: dissatisfaction with current infrastructural conditions is a complaint about the present, whereas attributing one's circumstances to historical disadvantage is an interpretive claim about causation. That these two related but distinct perceptions point in different directions- present-day dissatisfaction tracking with worse outcomes, historical attribution tracking with better ones- suggests that it is specifically the act of locating one's disadvantage within a historical, structural narrative, rather than general dissatisfaction with current conditions, that is associated with the protective effect this study identifies.

When asked whether there were policies that still perpetuate the inequality and marginalisation of certain areas, only 24% of respondents believed that policies were still in place that perpetuated inequality and marginalisation in specific areas; 76% did not hold this view. This item was strongly and significantly associated with outcomes: households that believed such policies remained in effect recorded a failure rate of only 11.3%, compared with 34.5% among those who did not. This pattern mirrors the central attribution finding above rather than the infrastructure-adequacy finding below. This convergence and divergence are examined further in the Discussion.

Two objective, area-level infrastructure indicators (the presence of a government day-school and the total number of schools in the area), distinct from the self-reported items above, were also tested. Households in areas with no government-day secondary school recorded a 33.2% failure rate, compared with 11.9% among households with at least one nearby government-day secondary school, $\chi^2 (1) = 9.405$, $p = .002$. Total school count was also significant but non-monotonic ($\chi^2 (3) = 11.128$, $p = .011$): failure rates were 32.2%, 35.9%, 14.8%, and 33.3% across the 0, 1–3, 4–6, and 6+ school categories. Read together, these results suggest that the type of provision, specifically the presence of subsidised government schools, predicts outcomes more consistently than school count alone.

A separate regression model examined historical marginalisation factors as a composite index, alongside social and economic factors, as predictors of transition policy implementation. Table 2 presents the resulting model.

Table no 2: Regression Model of Social, Economic, and Historical Marginalisation Factors on Transition Outcomes

Predictor	Unstandardized coefficient	Interpretation
Constant	2.312	Baseline level of transition policy implementation
Social factors (X1)	-0.121	Higher levels associated with lower implementation
Economic factors (X2)	-0.123	Higher levels associated with lower implementation
Historical marginalisation factors, composite (X3)	-0.142	Higher levels associated with lower implementation

For the historical marginalisation sub-model specifically, the correlation coefficient was $R = 0.291$, and the coefficient of determination was $R^2 = 0.282$, indicating that historical marginalisation, as a composite index, accounted for approximately 28.2% of the variance in transition policy implementation. Read alongside Table 1, these results indicate that while historical marginalisation, as a general structural condition, continues to depress transition outcomes on average, households that recognise and attribute their circumstances to that condition depart sharply from this average, showing markedly better outcomes than households that do not.

Qualitative data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews were broadly consistent with this pattern. Parents who described their household's situation in terms of historical disadvantage frequently described specific steps taken in response, including seeking bursary support, prioritising school fees over other expenditures, and drawing on extended family or community networks. Parents who did not frame their circumstances in these terms were more likely to describe their children's non-transition as an outcome they had neither anticipated nor actively planned for. A household head described concrete steps taken specifically because they recognised the constraint they faced. He described making a small but meaningful saving and reallocating it directly towards schooling costs:

"Since we live nearer to the school, I do not spend money on transport so I can use the money for other things the school require like books and fees." (Focus Group Participant, Male, Parent)

Another described actively pursuing formal and informal support simultaneously, despite inconsistent success:

"The budget I allocate for my child's school fees is never enough, even when it comes to the basics for my household, due to budgetary constraints. Most of the times I try to apply for the bursary from the CDF, but which is not always guaranteed. Sometimes I also approach friends or relatives, but it is not easy." (Focus Group Participant, Female, Parent)

A third parent, though ultimately unsuccessful at the time of the interview, described sustained effort rather than resignation in the face of a setback:

"My son had passed to join secondary school, but as we were trying to look for money for him to join secondary in a few months' time, we were shocked to find out that he had joined some bad group of boys and appeared completely disinterested. We have been trying to persuade him to change his mind, but that has not happened yet. We still hope something will happen to change his mind in the near future." (Focus Group Participant, Male, Parent)

Key informant and focus group accounts illustrate this mechanism directly. A secondary school principal described the differential in parental engagement that underlies the education gradient in terms of familiarity with, rather than indifference to, the system:

"The parents who come early, who know what documents to bring, who follow up when there is a delay with bursary processing, tend to be those who have got education. They are not afraid of the system. The parents who do not come, whom we have to chase, who miss deadlines, very often they have no schooling. Not because they do not care. They care as much as anyone. But the system may be unfamiliar and intimidating to them." (Principal, Public Secondary School)

A Ministry of Education officer described the structural ceiling this agency runs into, regardless of household preparedness:

"We have approximately 8,000 to 9,000 children sitting the KCPE at schools in Kibera every year. The four government schools together can take about 1,200 Form Ones. The remaining 7,000 children have to find places in private schools or not go at all. The government says 100% transition. The government provides 1,200 places. You do the mathematics." (Ministry of Education Officer, Key Informant Interview)

An FGD participant further sharpens this picture. Where households lacked awareness of available support, the consequence was not merely disadvantage but a missed opportunity that could plausibly have been avoided.

"Nobody told me about the bursary. My neighbour's son got one and I found out later. By the time I found out, the deadline already passed and the next term already started. I didn't know where to apply or what papers to bring." (Focus Group Participant, Male, Youth)

These accounts suggest that awareness alone does not guarantee a successful outcome, but its absence entirely rules out a targeted response, while its presence, even without success, is consistently associated with some form of deliberate household action.

These qualitative accounts do not establish causality on their own, but they are consistent with the direction of the quantitative finding reported in Table 1 and point to a probable mechanism: households that named historical disadvantage as the source of their constraint appeared to plan around it, whereas those that did not name it were more likely to experience non-transition as an unplanned outcome rather than as a foreseen risk they had actively worked against.

IV. Discussion

The central finding of this study, that households attributing their circumstances to historical disadvantage transitioned children at markedly better rates than households that did not, runs contrary to what a reproduction-based account of disadvantage would predict. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction holds that accumulated disadvantage, in the form of limited economic, cultural, and social capital, tends to reproduce itself across generations largely independent of individual agency. Applied to this setting, that theory would predict that households more conscious of, or more affected by, historical marginalisation should show worse outcomes, not better ones. The 4% versus 96% gap reported in Table 1 is inconsistent with this prediction and requires a different theoretical account.

Empowerment theory offers that account through the recognition that the broader social environment shapes, but does not determine, individuals' capacity to act (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Read through this lens, a household's explicit recognition of its historical disadvantage may function less as a marker of resignation and more as a precondition for mobilisation: a household that identifies the source of its constraint is better positioned to act against it than one that experiences the same constraint without naming it. This is consistent with Kroecker's

(1995) finding that empowerment processes in a Nicaraguan agricultural cooperative were strongest where members recognised their collective structural position and organised deliberately around it, and with Maton and Salem's (1995) argument that settings fostering belief in members' capacity to influence outcomes produce more proactive engagement than settings that do not.

This reading is also consistent with broader findings from Nairobi's informal settlements. Fuller and Lain (2019) found that female-headed households, often assumed to be structurally disadvantaged by default, were not uniformly less resilient to shocks, indicating that structural category alone does not determine outcome. Pinchoff et al. (2021) similarly found uneven adaptive capacity among households in Nairobi's informal settlements facing comparable structural exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that household-level factors, plausibly including awareness and proactive response, mediate between structural constraint and realised outcome. The present study's finding extends this pattern specifically to educational transition and to historical marginalisation as the structural condition in question.

At the same time, this study's results should not be read as evidence that structural constraints are unimportant. The composite regression model reported in Table 2 shows that historical marginalisation, economic, and social factors all carry negative coefficients on transition outcomes, consistent with an ongoing structural depression of outcomes on average, in line with Macharia's (2008) account of colonial and post-colonial infrastructural neglect in Nairobi's informal settlements, and with Agayi and Sağ's (2020) finding that Kibera's secondary school landscape remains dominated by private provision despite decades of slum-upgrading commitments. Mugiraneza's (2018) finding that historically marginalised Rwandan households were more likely to draw children into income-generating activity, at the expense of schooling, illustrates a genuine mechanism by which historical disadvantage compounds rather than resolves. The present study's contribution is not to dismiss this mechanism, but to show that it operates unevenly, and that a household's own recognition of its structural position appears to interrupt it. Another structural mechanism identified in this study's findings reinforces this point. Most Kibera households hold no title deed to the land on which their homes are built, a direct legacy of the settlement's informal status, which has restricted investment in basic infrastructure, including electricity, sewerage, and water systems, that would otherwise support learning environments beyond the school gate itself. This often leaves residents reliant on costlier private providers, diverting already-constrained household budgets away from schooling and offering a specific resource-competition pathway through which historical infrastructural neglect depresses education spending, independent of income level alone. This represents a structural mechanism operating through denial of secure legal and institutional standing rather than through economic capital alone, consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) broader argument that multiple, interlocking forms of capital, not economic capital in isolation, govern access to opportunity.

This structural argument is borne out quantitatively in the study's own data. Households in areas without a government-day secondary school failed to transition at nearly three times the rate of those with at least one nearby (33.2% versus 11.9%, $\chi^2(1) = 9.405$, $p = .002$), whereas total school count alone was a weaker, non-monotonic predictor. This empirically confirms what the Ministry of Education officer's account and Agayi and Sağ (2020) suggest qualitatively: the type of provision, not raw school volume, determines whether the subsidy reaches Kibera households. This is exactly the structural ceiling the study's theoretical position anticipates: it sharpens, rather than competes with, the empowerment-based argument developed throughout, confirming with hard numbers the constraint within which household attribution and mobilisation operate.

This distinction matters for interpreting the central finding. If the attribution-outcome relationship reported in Table 1 reflected a broader disposition towards optimism or institutional trust rather than a specific recognition of historical disadvantage, a similarly favourable pattern would be expected among households expressing general confidence in government's transition efforts. It is not: as reported above, general optimism about government performance did not predict better outcomes and, if anything, was slightly overrepresented among households whose children did not transition. This indicates that the mechanism identified in this study is specific to households' recognition of their own historical position, rather than a generalised optimism or trust effect, and strengthens the case for an empowerment-theory interpretation over an alternative explanation grounded in generalised positive affect. A related distinction applies to the infrastructure-adequacy finding reported in Results: dissatisfaction with present-day school and infrastructure provision was associated with worse outcomes, in the direction predicted by a reproduction-based account, whereas attributing one's circumstances specifically to historical disadvantage was associated with better outcomes. Rather than contradicting one another, these two findings together indicate that it is the specific act of situating one's disadvantage within a historical, structural narrative, and not general dissatisfaction with current conditions, that carries the protective association this study identifies. Households can regard present infrastructure as inadequate while still mobilising once that

inadequacy is understood as part of a longer historical pattern rather than an isolated present failing. A third finding aligns with this pattern: the policy-perpetuation item tracks the historical-disadvantage attribution finding rather than the infrastructure-dissatisfaction finding (11.3% versus 34.5% failure rates, $\chi^2(1) = 13.054$, $p < .001$). Together, these three measures point to a more precise account than "awareness helps": attribution to a structural or systemic cause, historical or contemporary, carries a protective association; dissatisfaction with present conditions alone does not.

This distinction between historical marginalisation as an aggregate structural condition and as a condition that individual households consciously recognise and respond to is the study's theoretical contribution. It suggests that empowerment theory and social reproduction theory are not strictly competing accounts of the same setting but rather describe different levels of the same phenomenon: reproduction theory describes the average structural gradient, while empowerment theory describes the household-level variation around that gradient. Policy and programme design that treats historically marginalised households only as passive recipients of subsidy risks missing both the households and the mechanism this study identifies as most responsive to intervention.

This household-level variation is consistent with the family-background literature. Li and Qiu (2018) and Lai, Liu, and Huang (2022) found that parental beliefs and expectations shape educational attainment independent of material circumstances, consistent with this study's finding that interpretation, not objective position alone, predicts outcomes. Cooper and Stewart (2021) similarly found that household income effects were mediated by parental decision-making rather than by mechanical constraint. Das and Das (2023) found physical distance to school a significant barrier, independent of household attitude, consistent with this study's own finding on government-day school proximity, discussed below, while Kim, Lee, and Kim (2023) found that single-parent households face constraints regardless of motivation. Together, these findings support the position that awareness operates within, rather than against, structural constraint.

V. Conclusion

This study set out not only to document a household-level pattern in transition outcomes but also to decide between two competing theoretical accounts of disadvantage in informal settlements: a reproduction-based account, in which historical marginalisation is expected to compound largely independently of household agency, and an empowerment-based account, in which conscious recognition of that marginalisation is expected to enable proactive mobilisation. It found that households attributing their circumstances to historical disadvantage accounted for only 4% of children who did not transition, compared with 96% among households that did not make this attribution. This pattern is inconsistent with a purely reproduction-based account and is better explained by empowerment theory. At the same time, historical marginalisation, as an aggregate structural condition, continued to show a negative association with transition outcomes, indicating that household awareness operates as a protective factor within ongoing structural constraints rather than as a substitute for material support. The findings therefore weigh decisively towards an empowerment-based account at the household level, while confirming a reproduction-based account at the aggregate structural level.

These findings suggest that transition-support interventions in informal settlements should not rely solely on fee subsidisation or infrastructure investment, important as these remain, but should also actively build household awareness of the structural barriers they face and link that awareness to concrete mobilisation strategies, such as access to bursaries, community support networks, and school engagement. Programmes that treat marginalised households solely as passive recipients of policy may overlook the household-level mechanism most responsive to support.

More broadly, this study suggests that the theoretical frameworks typically applied to informal settlements, whether emphasising structural reproduction or household agency, are better treated as complementary rather than competing when interpreting variation in policy outcomes within a single disadvantaged population. Researchers and policymakers working on educational transitions in similarly marginalised urban settings elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa may find it useful to test for the same distinction identified here, between structural conditions and household recognition of those conditions, before assuming that either material investment or awareness-building alone will be sufficient to close the transition gap..

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