Intersectionality in Motion: Refugee Migration and Urban Food Security in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Research on African cities has often examined South-South migration and urban food security as separate issues, overlooking how migrants' legal status, gender roles, and labour market participation jointly shape household food access. This paper applies an intersectional framework to analyze the food-security experiences of Somali migrants in Eastleigh, Nairobi. It builds on previous analyses of baseline vulnerabilities and pandemic-related shocks to highlight how intersecting social categories such as gender, documentation, education, household structure, and remittance flows create distinct patterns of hardship and adaptation. Evidence from 30 in-depth interviews shows that female-headed and newly arrived households experience compounded deprivation, while larger or better-connected families mitigate risk through remittance support. Persistent legal precarity and reliance on informal work reinforce inequalities in access to stable food sources. By integrating intersectionality into migration-food-security research, the paper identifies the structural constraints that shape migrants' everyday lives and calls for multi-level governance approaches responsive to these overlapping inequalities in rapidly urbanizing African contexts.

Keywords

Urban food security, South-South migration, gender, intersectionality

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Cover Image

Street food stall in Eastleigh, Nairobi. Photo credit: Zack Ahmed

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Introduction

Cities across the Global South are undergoing rapid and uneven transformation driven by rural and urban migration, population growth, and global interconnectivity (Crush et al., 2020; Grant, 2015). In many African countries, these cities have become economic hubs that attract migrants from rural areas and neighbouring states in search of employment, services, and social mobility (Glaeser & Xiong, 2017; Kessides, 2006). This demographic expansion has intensified the challenges in urban planning and governance, especially in the provision of housing, infrastructure, and affordable, nutritious food (Kessides, 2006; Rakodi, 2016). Although research on urban food security in Africa has grown, focusing on rising food prices, precarious work, and weak public services, less attention has been paid to how migrant groups experience and shape these vulnerabilities (Chikanda et al., 2020; Crush, 2013).

Recent studies highlight the increasing importance of South-South migration and challenge traditional North-South migration frameworks (Chikanda et al., 2025; Crawley & Teye, 2024; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2024). Nearly half of all migrants from developing countries reside in other developing nations, and most move between neighbouring states (Ratha & Shaw, 2007). These movements require new theoretical and policy approaches because the dynamics of South-South migration differ significantly from those of South-North flows (Nawyn, 2016; Zeleke & Smith, 2024). Displacement caused by conflict or environmental crises remains a major driver of migration, but voluntary mobility in search of opportunities is equally prominent. Migrants arriving in expanding cities often encounter discrimination, exclusion from formal labour markets, and reliance on informal economies for survival (Oka, 2011; Umbyeyi, 2024). Xenophobia and restrictive governance also limit integration and sustainable urban development (Landau, 2007). However, a neglected question concerns how these migrants obtain, prepare, and consume food in unequal and competitive urban settings.

Migration from Somalia to Kenya illustrates this gap. Decades of state collapse, conflict, and climatic shocks have displaced millions of people (Broek & Hodder, 2022; Meharg, 2023; Menkhaus, 2003; Warsame et al., 2022). Although international attention often focuses on the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, many Somalis move directly to cities such as Nairobi. Eastleigh has become well known for its intense commercial activity and transnational Somali networks that sustain both remittances and cultural identity (Carrier, 2017; Carrier & Lochery, 2013). At the same time, the neighbourhood represents a deep marginalisation. Residents struggle with uncertain legal status, periodic police operations, and minimal access to formal support systems (Campbell, 2006; Carrier & Scharrer, 2019). These conditions not only generate insecurity, but also stimulate entrepreneurship, as migrants depend on small-scale trade, retail activity, and street vending to meet daily needs (Rinelli & Opondo, 2013; Varming, 2020).

This paper builds on two previous articles exploring related dimensions of Somali migrant food security in Eastleigh. The first analyzed spatial and socio-economic determinants of household food insecurity and identified income, duration of residence, and education as key predictors (Ahmed et al., 2024a). The second examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, documenting how lockdowns, market closures, and remittance disruptions intensified vulnerability (Ahmed et al., 2024b). However, these studies did not fully explain how social factors such as gender, legal documentation, and household composition intersect to produce different food-security outcomes.

This paper addresses that gap through an intersectional framework rooted in feminist legal scholarship, which conceptualises social categories as interlocking systems of privilege and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991). Somali migrants in Nairobi are not a homogeneous group. Outcomes vary between, for example, a recently arrived widow without legal documents and a long-term resident with secure remittance support. Applying intersectionality to food security allows analysis to move beyond general demographic indicators to an understanding of how overlapping identities and power relations influence access to food (Carney, 2014; Mackay, 2019; Riley & Dodson, 2020). The paper examines how identity markers converge in daily experiences of hunger, coping, and resilience. It also links individual and household practices, such as dealing with policing, legal documentation, or family obligations related to remittances, to broader governance and economic systems that determine resource distribution. The study contributes both conceptual and policy insights by showing how intersectional inequalities shape migrant food security in rapidly urbanizing African settings.

The paper addresses three main questions: first, how do overlapping social positions such as gender, legal status, and household composition shape Somali migrants' food-procurement strategies and vulnerabilities in Eastleigh? Second, which structural or external factors, including governance gaps, informality, and global shocks, intensify or mitigate these vulnerabilities? And third, what policy and programmatic responses can an intersectional analysis inform in order to improve food security among South-South migrants in urban Africa? Addressing these questions advances understanding of the migration-food security relationship and has practical implications for local authorities, humanitarian agencies, and community organizations. By moving beyond aggregate metrics, the paper highlights how intersectional disadvantages trap certain households in chronic insecurity while enabling others within the same neighbourhood, to build more stable and sustainable livelihoods.

Intersectionality, South-South Migration, and Urban Food Security

Research on South-South migration has expanded rapidly in recent years, recognizing that large numbers of migrants now move between countries in the Global South rather than toward traditional Northern destinations (Crush & Chikanda, 2018; De Lombaerde et al., 2014; Ratha & Shaw, 2007; Short et al., 2017). This trend is particularly significant in Africa, where economic change, political volatility, and regional conflict intersect to propel people across multiple borders (Gagnon & Khoudour-Castéras, 2012). Urban centres such as Johannesburg, Nairobi, Lagos, and Accra have absorbed substantial migrant populations, producing complex socio-spatial patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Bakewell & Jónsson, 2011; Landau & Freemantle, 2016; Smiley & Koti, 2010). Although scholarship has begun to explore the developmental implications of South-South migration, there remains limited understanding of how these mobile populations engage with and navigate food systems in rapidly changing cities (Chikanda et al., 2020; Crush & Tawodzera, 2017).

Urban food security research, by contrast, has focused primarily on locality and governance structures as determinants of access to food (Battersby & Watson, 2018; Haysom, 2021; Tacoli, 2009). However, this focus often overlooks how the' legal status or socioeconomic position of migrants introduces additional layers of vulnerability (Orjuela-Grimm et al., 2021). The' precarious employment of migrants in the Global South is closely related to food access and affordability (Chikanda et al., 2020; Crush & Ramachandran, 2024; Crush & Tawodzera, 2017; Crush et al., 2012). Many settle in areas with limited infrastructure and weak services, relying on informal work in sectors such as small-scale trade or domestic labour (Awumbila et al., 2017; Tietjen et al., 2023; Vammen, 2023). Informal livelihoods can provide an entry point into the urban economy, but rarely offer stability or legal protection (Chen, 2009; Sankaran, 2022; Tsikata, 2009).

Street and market vendors often face police harassment, restrictive bylaws, and extortion (Dragsted-Mutengwa, 2017; Gaibazzi, 2017; Kyed, 2019; Resnick, 2019). Such actions often seek to "sanitise" public space and impose modernist visions of urban order (Adama, 2020). Migrants without documentation face increased risk, as they lack legal recourse when authorities confiscate goods or evict them (Addi et al., 2024; Lawanson, 2014). Because daily income directly determines the ability to purchase food, any disruption in informal earnings has an immediate effect on dietary quality and diversity (Giroux et al., 2020; Resnick, 2017). Households may therefore sacrifice nutritional adequacy by substituting cheaper staples for diverse or protein-rich foods to pay for other urgent expenses such as rent or medical care.

Migrants are not only consumers in these urban food systems, but also key suppliers. Many operate grocery stalls, restaurants, or transnational distribution chains that connect rural producers with urban markets (Etzold, 2016; Giroux et al., 2020). In Eastleigh, Somali traders have built extensive commercial networks that include halal meat markets and specialised imports such as flour and spices (Carrier & Lochery, 2013). These enterprises diversify local diets and expand cultural food repertoires for both migrants and host populations. However, migrant-led food businesses generally function outside formal regulatory systems, which limits access to credit, constrains supply chains, and exposes operators to inconsistent enforcement of health and safety regulations (Ahmed et al., 2015; Moyo, 2014).).

Within these contexts, the relevance of intersectionality becomes increasingly evident. Originating in Black feminist legal theory, intersectionality holds that categories such as gender, race, and class interact to produce overlapping structures of disadvantage and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). It stresses that these categories are inseparable and mutually constitutive across individual, institutional, and structural domains (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Widely discussed in feminist, sociological and policy scholarship (Harris & Bartlow, 2015; Robinson, 2018), intersectionality advances beyond additive conceptions of inequality to show how systems of power reinforce each other (Davis, 2014). It also informs research design and policy analysis by revealing how certain populations remain marginalised despite formal equality frameworks (Nakhid et al., 2015).

In migration studies, intersectionality has become a valuable analytical tool for understanding how multiple social identities and hierarchies shape migrant experiences (Anthias, 2012; Bürkner, 2012; Magliano, 2015). It helps explain how gender, class, ethnicity, and legal status interact to shape mobility pathways, employment outcomes, and social belonging. Recent contributions extend intersectionality to the study of migration governance, examining how policies and border regimes reproduce layered inequalities (Cleton & Scuzzarello, 2024). The diffusion of the concept across research and policy domains has generated both innovation and critique: while some applications remain grounded in the origins of social justice of intersectionality, others risk diluting its critical edge (Bastia et al., 2023). Within South-South migration contexts, intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, and legal precarity profoundly influence migrants' opportunities for work, community acceptance, and food access.

Food security scholarship has only recently incorporated intersectional thinking, showing that gender, education, income, marital status, and social support jointly influence outcomes (Barak et al., 2024; Barak & Melgar-Quiñonez, 2022). Intersectionality challenges the assumption that vulnerability is uniform within categories such as "migrant" or "refugee." Instead, it reveals how overlapping identities and power relations position different households differently with regard to food access. Migrants and refugees frequently face compounded barriers originating from trauma, limited resources, and complex bureaucratic systems (Steeves et al., 2023; Carney & Krause, 2020). Undocumented migrants can avoid state institutions and social programs out of fear of detection, which undermines their well-being and limits their ability to secure regular meals (Alsharif, 2020; Chekero & Ross, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these

vulnerabilities through isolation, income loss, and restricted mobility (Burton-Jeangros et al., 2020). Intersectionality therefore provides a means to analyse how multiple identity axes shape consumer vulnerability and coping strategies (Bauer, 2014; Saatcioglu & Corus, 2015). However, empirical research on food insecurity among migrants in transit or in urban South-South corridors remains sparse, underscoring the need for standardised tools and comparative frameworks (Orjuela-Grimm et al., 2022).

Structural forces also determine how intersectional vulnerabilities unfold. Informal food markets represent both opportunity and risk: they offer income and social networks but operate under constant threat of regulation and displacement (Greiner, 2011). These spaces can foster social capital and solidarity that help migrants cope with adversity (Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023), although access to such networks varies with transnational ties and social status (Meagher, 2010; Whitehouse, 2011). Remittances provide another crucial but ambivalent mechanism. Regular inflows can buffer households against local shocks (Monteith & Lwasa, 2017; du Toit & Neves, 2009), yet many households also remit outward, which can deplete local budgets and increase food insecurity. External disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of these arrangements by closing markets, reducing diaspora incomes, and restricting mobility (Ahmed et al., 2024b; Luiu et al., 2022; Resnick, 2020). Women were particularly affected when caregiving and employment responsibilities collided (Porter et al., 2021). Crises of this scale magnify pre-existing inequalities because migrants with precarious legal status or limited education have fewer options for adaptation.

Synthesising these debates reveals three core themes for applying intersectionality to food security among South-South migrants. The first is the persistence of informality, which shapes economic participation and interacts with legal status and education to determine the stability of income. The second is the role of remittances, which reflect gender and cultural norms around resource distribution and can either reduce or exacerbate household food insecurity depending on wider transnational obligations. The third concern external shocks, which expose the fragility of migrant resilience by eroding the limited safety nets that households construct. Health crises or economic downturns, therefore, have unequal consequences across intersecting identities such as gender, class, and migration tenure.

This paper positions intersectionality as a transformative framework for understanding how Somali migrants in Eastleigh engage with food systems and governance structures. Rather than treating "Somali refugees" or "urban poor" as homogeneous categories, an intersectional approach examines how gender, documentation, household composition, education, and transnational ties combine to shape outcomes. It also identifies overlooked sources of resilience, such as female-headed households that rely on flexible support networks or recent arrivals who obtain informal credit through diaspora associations. This analytical lens highlights not only persistent inequalities, but also the adaptive capacities embedded within migrant communities.

By integrating intersectionality into South-South migration research, the paper contributes a more nuanced understanding of how structural forces, social hierarchies, and everyday practices together determine who secures food and who remains at the margins.

Methodology

This paper focuses on Somali migrant households in Eastleigh, a Nairobi neighbourhood often referred to as "Little Mogadishu" because of its concentration of Somali-owned businesses, cultural centres, and diaspora networks (Carrier, 2017). Many residents fled Somalia's prolonged conflict and environmental instability, settling in Nairobi in search of safety and economic opportunity (Im et al., 2017). Eastleigh's vibrant informal economy, hawala remittance systems, and clan-based communal ties create a distinctive context to examine how overlapping social identities and legal status influence household food security (Carrier & Scharrer, 2019).

A mixed-methods approach (Almeida, 2018) guided data collection between July and August 2022. The first phase consisted of a household survey of 318 households, 268 of which identified Somalia as their country of origin. The questionnaire gathered demographic and socioeconomic data, including education, employment, and monthly expenditures, as well as migration histories and standardised food-security indicators such as the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), the Household Food Insecurity Access Prevalence (HFIAP), and the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) (Coates et al., 2007). This quantitative component provided an initial mapping of vulnerabilities across household types and established a baseline for further qualitative exploration.

Building on the survey results, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with Somali migrant household heads to capture the lived experiences behind the survey patterns. A purposive sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of diverse subgroups defined by marital status (single, married, divorced, widowed), gender, documentation, educational background, and remittance practices (receiving or sending funds). The interviews were conducted in Somali, Swahili or English, according to the preference of the participants, and explored daily food procurement strategies, family obligations related to remittances, encounters with local authorities and perceptions of how gender, legal status, and other identities shape household food security. Confidentiality and voluntary informed consent were maintained throughout the process in recognition of the ' vulnerable legal and social positions of the participants.

The interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo 12 to identify recurring themes such as market closures, domestic labour, and police raids. The intersectionality framework guided this stage of the analysis by systematically categorising data along key axes of difference, including gender, household structure, documentation status, and education level. A comparative matrix was developed to trace overlapping identities between participants, revealing patterns of

vulnerability and resilience. This mixed-methods iterative design captures both aggregate trends in Somali migrant food insecurity and the complex ways in which intersecting social factors shape or mitigate hunger within Eastleigh's dynamic urban environment.

Intersectional Dimensions of Somali Migrant Food Security

The interviews conducted in Eastleigh demonstrate that no single factor, such as gender, migration status, or household income, can fully explain the variation in food security among Somali migrants. Respondents consistently described how overlapping social positions shaped both their daily food-access strategies and the vulnerabilities that could force households to skip meals. Although the survey results indicated clear correlations between income, location and dietary diversity (Ahmed et al., 2024b), the interviews revealed a more complex reality in which gendered family roles, education, legal status and remittance obligations combined to produce distinct outcomes. Some participants also portrayed migration itself as paradoxical, as it provided safety from conflict while introducing new urban hardships. One respondent reflected on the following:

> *Back home, we had only small shops and were often cut off by the fighting. We struggled to buy enough food, and when droughts came, it felt impossible to feed the children well. In Nairobi, there are more shops and markets, and sometimes family members abroad send money, so we don't have to worry about going hungry. It is still challenging with rent and other expenses but moving here changed how we eat and gave us better options to manage our meals every day* (Interview No. 2).

Her observation captures the dual nature of South-South migration. Relocation improved market access, but introduced financial pressures such as rent and childcare that shaped daily trade-offs.

Gender, Marital Status, and Household Structure

A recurring theme in the interviews was the heavy load borne by female-headed households that combined childcare and income generation within an unstable informal economy (Choithani, 2020; Jinnah, 2020; Kersh, 2020;). Nine of the 30 interviewees fell into this category. Most were widowed or divorced, had limited formal education, and relied on low-margin trades such as street vending. Their earnings rarely covered food and emergency expenses. As one widow explained:

> *When my husband died, I was left alone with four kids. I sell vegetables on the roadside, but it's never enough. If one child gets sick, I can't work that day, so we eat less. Sometimes, I skip meals altogether so they can have enough* (Interview No. 22).

Her experience illustrates how widowhood, caregiving, and informal labour combine to deepen precarity. Without legal identification, she avoided travelling beyond Eastleigh for cheaper produce, further restricting her choices. This pattern reflects studies showing that female heads of households often face double responsibilities, earning income while ensuring children's nutrition despite irregular wages (Carney, 2017; Delisle, 2008; Grijalva-Eternod et al., 2012; Madzorera & Fawzi, 2020). Some women resorted to desperate measures:

> *My children needed to eat, and it broke my heart to see them hungry. I ended up selling my gold earrings just so we could buy groceries that week. I never imagined giving up something so precious, but there weren't any other options left* (Interview No. 6).

Such an extreme step underscores how female heads, particularly those bereft of spousal support, shoulder the entirety of household survival. The dual role of wage-earner and caregiver leaves them with little recourse when income drops, forcing them to liquidate personal assets to maintain the nutrition of their children. These pressures intensified during the pandemic shock:

> *I'm a single mother with three children, and we survive on the small income I make from selling vegetables in the market. When the market was closed during the pandemic, we had no way to earn money, and things became very difficult. The prices of food went up, and I couldn't afford to buy enough to feed my children. We often had to skip meals, and it was a very difficult time for us* (Interview No. 17).

Her testimony shows how pandemic restrictions removed her only source of income, exposing the fragility of informal livelihoods. Even basic tasks such as buying food were complicated by fatigue and limited infrastructure.

> *I start my day at five in the morning to open the shop, then come home in the afternoon to cook. I want to buy fresh vegetables at the bigger market, but it's too far, and I'm too tired. So we end up with more rice and meat. I wish I had a fridge and more time to shop around, but this is how we manage. It's hard when my children ask for a variety of foods, and I have to settle for what's convenient and affordable at the moment. Sometimes I use my neighbour's fridge…We help each other when we can, but sometimes everyone is struggling* (Interview No. 18).

This participant's story reveals how time poverty, fatigue, and limited facilities reduce dietary diversity even for working mothers. However, some women managed to build modest safety nets through community networks. A divorced mother explained how rotating savings groups and remittances offered some protection.

> *I moved here from Kismayo when I divorced my husband, determined to give my two daughters a better life. At first, it was extremely tough. I only had a little money saved, and my relatives back home couldn't help much. But I joined an ayuuto group in*

> *Eastleigh with other Somali women, some refugees and other longtime residents, and together we pool our earnings. When it's my turn to receive the lump sum, I stock up on staple foods like flour, rice, and oil, and pay down our rent. I also use part of it to invest in my small tailoring business. One of my brothers in South Africa sends me remittances sporadically, which helps with school fees for my girls. These days, I feel stronger because I've built a support system through the mosque, neighbours, and the women's group. I'm still worried about the high cost of living, but at least now I'm not alone. I can make plans, even save a bit for emergencies. It's not easy being a single mother, but I'm proud that I can keep my family secure despite the hardships* (Interview No. 28).

Her account shows that localized networks and intermittent remittances can help offset structural disadvantages. Across the interviews, female-headed households ranged from situations of extreme deprivation to modest stability, depending on documentation status, community ties, and access to external support

Two-adult households did not always experience better food security. Several married participants described power imbalances in resource allocation, particularly around transnational obligations. Patriarchal norms often gave men control over remittance decisions while women managed shrinking domestic budgets (Zakariah-Akoto et al., 2024; Muraya et al., 2017). As one mother of three explained:

> *My husband decides how much money we send to his family each month, but I'm the one who has to stretch what remains. Some months, we have enough for meat; other months, we reduce portions so we can remit more* (Interview No. 1).

Cultural and familial duties to relatives abroad often took precedence over household dietary needs, echoing findings from other transnational contexts (Hannaford, 2016; Wong, 2006). Another respondent emphasized how fragile these arrangements are:

> *Nairobi is better than war, but we survive day by day; there's no cushion if our brother abroad loses his job or if government policy changes. My husband works a small stall in Eastleigh, selling clothes on the street, but one police raid or market shutdown can take away our income overnight. We're grateful for safety here, yet we live with the constant worry that any shift in diaspora remittances or local regulations could unravel everything we've built* (Interview No. 3).

Her reflection demonstrates how legal frameworks, police crackdowns, and tenuous support from the diaspora can come together to threaten fragile stability of a household, even in a married setup that might seem more secure outward. Any policy change or remote financial hiccup can quickly erode the ability to buy groceries or maintain a balanced diet, highlighting how marital status, documentation, and transnational ties form a precarious safety net in the best case.

Education, Documentation, and Economic Precarity

Education emerged as an important but insufficient buffer against food insecurity. Some respondents used their formal schooling qualifications and skills to open small businesses or secure steadier work, supporting research that education can help migrants move beyond survival-level informality (Kuépié et al., 2006; Girsberger, 2017). Yet the advantage was easily undermined by legal precarity. As one participant explained:

> *With my college diploma from back home, I opened a small tailoring shop in Eastleigh. Our earnings are reliable enough that I never miss my ayuuto (savings group) turn. I meet with my ayuuto group every month, and while it's tough to part with the money, when I receive the full payout, I can do so much. I bought extra food for my family, clothes for my three children, and even sent some money to my mother in Somalia. It's the only way we manage when everything else is so expensive. But it's fragile. One police raid looking for documents could shut me down* (Interview No. 20).

Her ability to afford vegetables, and occasionally meat, stems both from running a relatively stable microenterprise and her participation in a rotating savings group, both reflecting how formal credentials and social networking yield moderate financial gains. Another divorced mother who joined a savings group explained that she had "a little more security" through communal and familial ties but still balanced precariously on the edge of financial collapse each month (Interview No.28).

Undocumented migrants in Africa face numerous challenges, including legal, emotional, and practical difficulties (Opfermann, 2020). They often experience discrimination, fear, and loneliness (Bloch, 2008; Opfermann, 2020). The precarious situation of these migrants is exacerbated by restrictive immigration policies, which can push them into street vending and increase their vulnerability (Lakika, 2023). Participants without any recognized legal status described recurrent police harassment and abrupt losses of income and stock, leading to immediate food insecurity. The persistent threat of unannounced police checks and immigration raids reveals the fragile nature of this buffer. As such, migrants often lack any official avenue to contest business closures or property seizures, meaning that one legal sweep can derail months of gradual progress. In practical terms, raids would reduce earnings in an instant, threatening both the variety and regularity of the household's diet.

> *I never finished primary school in Somalia. Here I am struggling to get refugee documentation. I only sell clothes on the street. If the police come, I run. Sometimes they take my goods. Without that day's sales, I can't buy food for my children* (Interview No.5).

Thus, lack of education, documented status, and informal vending converge to erode any safety net the respondent might otherwise have. A single confiscation event directly translates into fewer groceries for the evening meal and unfed children, illustrating how precarious labour conditions intersect with legal insecurity to reinforce cyclical food insecurity. The razor-thin margins of street vending leave little room for error, making each police encounter a potential tipping point into full-blown deprivation.

Transnational Remittances: Lifeline and Liability

Regular remittances from relatives abroad in the Gulf states, South Africa, and North America, are a critical determinant of household food security (Ahmed & Crush, 2025). The interviews showed how such support can shield families from localized economic shocks, echoing prior work identifying diaspora remittances as a stabilizing force for migrants in Global South contexts (Moniruzzaman, 2022; Obi et al., 2019). For example:

> *My sister in Canada sends money every month. We pay rent first, then buy flour and rice. Without her help, I couldn't manage these rising prices* (Interview No.7).

For a single mother with minimal local income, these inbound funds provide a partial firewall against food inflation. However, diaspora earnings and remitting fluctuate with overseas job markets, and recipients are perpetually uncertain and anxious about whether next month's remittance will suffice or even arrive (Bettin et al., 2014; Rougier & Yol, 2019). In effect, inbound transfers may mitigate food insecurity but they also create dependency on external economic conditions beyond local control. However, local shocks such as job loss can completely erase the margin of survival:

> *My husband lost his market job in Eastleigh's Garissa Lodge, and my uncle abroad couldn't send money on time. Sometimes we couldn't afford fresh vegetables or enough cooking fuel. The neighbours helped, but they were struggling, too. We never imagined it could get so hard so quickly* (Interview No.5).

Her narrative exemplifies layered precarities where a local economic shock (losing a market job) combined with a temporary halt in inbound remittances, placed the household at the mercy of neighbourly goodwill. But even good-willed neighbours face their own struggles, underscoring the communal nature of food crises.

While inbound flows secure a measure of stability for some households, outbound remittances linked to social or religious imperatives strain other households' budgets. Participants portrayed these payments not as optional extras but as deeply ingrained obligations toward kin back in Somalia:

> *We try to buy vegetables and meat when we can, but during months when we have to send a bigger remittance, like last month, when a drought struck our village and we needed to support my parents back home, we cut back by reducing meat, skipping breakfast, or stretching meals to last longer. Staple foods like rice and beans become our main diet, fresh produce and fish are too expensive to buy regularly, and sometimes we share smaller portions so the children can eat first. Balancing our budget is a constant challenge, and while we do our best to support our relatives, it's stressful knowing that even at home we're making sacrifices to get by* (Interview No. 8).

Outbound remittances, understood as moral and familial duty, frequently mean reduced local consumption (Owusu-Sekyere, 2014).

Many of the participants attributed their ongoing hardships to the pandemic's long-term impact on overseas employment and local prices (Ahmed et al., 2024b). The pandemic exacerbated economic strain for Somali migrants in Nairobi who rely heavily on inbound remittances to manage everyday expenses, including rent and food:

> *I receive monthly financial support through remittances from my brother in the US to support my livelihood here in Nairobi. This money is crucial for paying rent, school fees, health expenses, and, most importantly, purchasing food for my family. When COVID-19 hit, my brother initially stopped sending me money because he lost his job due to the pandemic. This had a devastating impact on my ability to cover basic needs for my family. We struggled to make ends meet, and I had to borrow food on credit (Interview No. 12).*

Her account showed how the global economic shock of the pandemic intersected with familial norms of obligation, forcing her to ration meals and borrow food.

Migrants, particularly women, often face difficult decisions in balancing economic needs with moral imperatives to provide for family abroad (Aranda, 2003; Merla, 2014). Their choices are influenced by cultural norms, gender roles, and institutional contexts in both origin and destination countries (Contreras & Griffith, 2012; Hughes et al., 2020). Remittances play a crucial role in maintaining transnational family ties but can also create tensions and difficult negotiations between senders and receivers (Sinatti, 2014; Wong, 2006).

Migration from Somalia to Kenya can also challenge traditional gender roles and family structures, leading to new caregiving arrangements and emotional struggles (see Coe, 2013; Drotbohm, 2015). But gendered decision-making power also shapes remittance practices. In several interviews, women described that they bear primary responsibility for budgeting and meal preparation, while men have authority over financial transactions, including outward remittances. For example:

> *My husband decides how much money we send to his family each month, but I'm the one who has to stretch what's left to cover our own needs. Some-*

> *times, I worry we won't have enough for a balanced diet here in Nairobi, but I know it's our duty to support his relatives back home. My brother in South Africa also tries to send money whenever he can, and that extra help is crucial for groceries and bills. But when the remittance arrives late, we are forced to cut back. We skip meals, reduce portions, or go into debt just to keep food on the table. The financial pressure is constant, and even though remittances provide a lifeline, they are unpredictable, making it difficult to plan for stability (Interview No. 11).*

One mother weighed the possibility of returning to Somalia to escape Nairobi's high cost of living but ultimately remained, fearing she would sacrifice the relative availability of food in the city:

> *I still have family back home, but they struggle with both the fighting and the lack of rain. If I went back, I worry we'd lose the stable food supply my children have here. In Nairobi, at least we have choices in the market, and sometimes my relatives abroad send extra money when things are tight. Going home might be cheaper for housing, but the food situation is much harder. It's a big risk to give up what we have built here." (Interview No.24)*

Her dilemma shows that migration decisions can simultaneously improve daily nutrition options while introducing new vulnerabilities such as rent expense, reliance on unpredictable remittances, and the constant possibility of confrontation with police. Thus, even the notion of returning to Somalia is weighed against the threat of losing basic urban market access and occasional diaspora support.

Overall, these narratives highlight the complexity of the interplay between global economic pressures, local resource needs, and familial obligations in shaping the experiences of transnational families and their care practices. Food security in Eastleigh is produced through a dynamic interaction of local and transnational conditions shaped by gender, marital status, documentation, education, and cultural duty. Female-headed households often faced the greatest deprivation, though collective savings groups and intermittent remittances provided some relief. Married couples contended with gendered hierarchies and obligations to extended kin that reduced dietary diversity. Education created opportunities but was undermined by police harassment and regulatory uncertainty. Remittances, whether incoming or outgoing, simultaneously stabilized and destabilized households by linking their food access to global markets and moral obligations.

Moving beyond Single-Axis Explanations

The interview findings illustrate that Somali migrant families in Eastleigh must navigate multiple, overlapping challenges and constraints. An intersectional perspective brings coherence to these diverse strands of vulnerability and resilience. Within the context of South-South migration and urban food security, intersectionality reveals how social, economic, cultural, and legal identities interact to shape each household's capacity to secure food sustainably and deepens understanding of the lived realities underlying quantitative patterns. Neither gender, migration status, nor education alone determines which households become food insecure. For instance, one female-headed household may face severe deprivation, while another may maintain dietary variety through support from diaspora networks. Similarly, education can improve earning potential, yet undocumented status can nullify this advantage when police raids or business closures occur. Intersectionality therefore compels a view of food security as a dynamic condition shaped by converging social positions, extending beyond the narrower frameworks typical of migration or food-system research (Choithani, 2020; Crush, 2013).

From a theoretical standpoint, intersectionality exposes hierarchies embedded in patriarchal, legal, and socioeconomic systems that structure vulnerability in Eastleigh. The narratives of widowed and undocumented mothers show how disadvantages multiply when transnational obligations such as outbound remittances are added to local constraints. These patterns caution against demographic reductionism, where labels such as "female," "refugee," or "low-income" obscure the ways structural and cultural forces interact to create distinct forms of marginalization. As scholars have observed, such simplification risks rendering certain migrant groups invisible within both policy and academic discourse (Cleton & Scuzzarello, 2024; Davis, 2014; Polzer, 2008). Intersectionality thus redirects attention from categorical analysis to the lived intersections of inequality.

Intersectionality also clarifies how informal work and legal status combine to produce uneven vulnerability. Urban informality in Africa is often portrayed as a uniform survival strategy, yet in practice it is differentiated by documentation, education, and access to networks (Banks et al., 2020). In Eastleigh, the possession or absence of valid identification often determines who is treated as a legitimate trader and who becomes subject to policing, reflecting wider anxieties about belonging in precarious urban spaces (Rasmussen & Wafer, 2018). Street vendors without formal education or refugee documentation endure frequent raids and confiscations that directly translate into hunger (Interview No.5). In contrast, petty traders or tailors with partial documentation or modest schooling navigate the same landscape with marginally greater security, often relying on clan or religious ties to sustain their livelihoods (Carrier, 2017).

These findings reveal a form of constrained agency in which migrants mobilize limited resources, rotating savings groups, and diaspora ties to offset structural barriers to food security (Kim, 2020; Scharrer, 2020). Intersectionality explains why resilience is so uneven: some families diversify their diets or stabilize consumption, while others, though sharing similar social categories, face recurrent deprivation. Agency here denotes persistence within constraint rather

than freedom from it. This insight challenges binaries of dependency and empowerment by showing that migrant strategies are always mediated through intersecting systems of power.

Remittances are frequently portrayed in the literature as drivers of welfare and development, raising incomes and improving living standards (Andersson, 2014; Dharmadasa & Karunarathna, 2022; Feld, 2021; Koç & Onan, 2004; Quartey, 2006), even though they are "no panacea for solving more structural development problems" (de Haas, 2007, p.27). The Somali households in Eastleigh reveal a more complex reality. Inbound transfers often enhance food access, allowing families to purchase vegetables and protein, yet outbound remittances tied to social and religious obligations can simultaneously erode household budgets (Ahmed & Crush, 2025).

Intersectionality helps explain these dual effects. Transnational obligations intersect with gender norms and marital hierarchies, as seen in families where men decide remittance amounts while women adjust consumption accordingly (Interview No.11). Single mothers depending on smaller or irregular transfers experience an acute moral and financial dilemma, torn between aiding relatives in Somalia and feeding their own children. This complexity challenges linear assumptions that remittances automatically improve food security (Mazwi, 2022) and reveals instead a moral economy governed by identity and obligation.

Global crises such as COVID-19 further expose this fragility. The pandemic disrupted overseas employment, reduced remittance flows, and triggered cascading effects on household consumption, leading to skipped meals and asset sales (Interview Nos.6,.14). Intersectionality traces these linkages from global labour markets to local households, showing how macroeconomic shocks become embodied through intersecting vulnerabilities of gender, education, and legality. This approach aligns with multi-level migration studies that situate household decisions within broader transnational systems while sharpening the focus on how these systems are mediated by social position (Anthias, 2012; Maestripieri, 2021; Saatcioglu & Corus, 2015;).

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that intersectionality provides a critical framework for interpreting the intertwined social, economic, and legal factors shaping Somali migrant food security in Nairobi. It reveals how patriarchal norms, informal economies, documentation regimes, and transnational obligations converge to determine who eats, how often, and at what cost. By analyzing these intersections rather than treating variables in isolation, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of the South-South migration and urban food security nexus. This paper therefore positions intersectionality as an analytical lens for explaining differentiated vulnerability.

Conclusion

This paper argues that intersectionality provides a rigorous framework for understanding how Somali migrants in Eastleigh navigate urban food security within interconnected gendered, legal, and socioeconomic constraints. The findings confirm that food security cannot be explained by income or demographic factors alone but calls for an analysis of how multiple social positions combine to shape distinct experiences of deprivation and resilience. The paper therefore explores the interaction of female-headed status, level of education, legal status, and transnational remittance obligations. These conditions intensify vulnerability, while partial documentation, higher education, savings groups, and sustained diaspora support offer limited protection. The evidence shows that broad categories such as "urban refugees" or "migrant communities" fail to reflect the diversity of household realities and the structural inequalities that sustain them.

In response to the first research question, which asked how overlapping social identities shape food insecurity, the paper examines how gender, documentation, and household composition interact to determine access to food and coping capacity. Some households maintain stability through social networks and remittances, while others with similar demographic profiles experience persistent scarcity. The second question focuses on how structural factors, including informality, policing, and external shocks, interact with these identities. These unpredictable forces reinforce each other, with even minor disruptions such as delayed remittances or police raids destabilizing households already managing low income or caregiving pressures. The third question considered what responses or strategies emerge from these intersectional conditions. The interviews show that migrants rely on collective savings groups, diaspora support, and informal credit to navigate systemic exclusion. These strategies demonstrate agency under constraint but cannot replace inclusive urban policies or formal legal protections. Together, these findings advance the broader objective of linking South-South migration to urban food systems and highlighting how migrants' daily practices are conditioned by intersecting structures of power.

Research should extend this analysis through longitudinal and comparative approaches to trace how documentation reforms, remittance dynamics, and urban governance influence migrant food security over time. Comparative studies between Eastleigh and other African cities could reveal whether similar intersectional configurations occur across different contexts of South-South migration. Collaboration among local authorities, NGOs, and diaspora organizations will be essential for designing inclusive interventions informed by empirical evidence. By situating Somali migrants within broader processes of urban transformation, this paper shows that intersectional identities are lived realities shaping who achieves dietary stability and who experiences chronic hunger. Addressing these layered inequalities is fundamental to creating an equitable and sustainable food system in the Global South and to advancing the overarching MiFOOD aim of connecting mobility, governance, and everyday survival.

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