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### Respectable 'illegality': Gangs, masculinities and belonging in a Nairobi ghetto

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## **CHAPTER 5: 'We are the Community!' Gangs and Other Social Groups and Authorities in Mathare.**

### **Introduction**

As explored in the previous chapters, individual members of working gangs faced great difficulties in trying to leave and establish themselves as senior men. This had an impact on their personal well-being and impinged heavily on their individual relationships with wives, girlfriends, other family members and peers. Gangs, however fluid and transient, also engaged in relationships with other, similarly fluid, social groups and authorities. More often than not, interactions and connections between these different groups were fraught with tensions and outbursts of direct acts of violence. The volatile relationships between gangs and other social groups and authorities cannot, however, be separated from the overall perilous relationships between groups, organisations and power structures in Mathare. For instance, women's groups were often at loggerheads with village elders (a group that was dominated by men) over community projects such as building and managing water taps, and it was not uncommon for such conflicts to result in the bodily harm of the people involved. In contrast to the dominant discourse, which casts gangs as the main perpetrators of direct acts of violence in Nairobi's ghettos, gangs were, in fact, no more or less prone to violence than other social groups and authorities. All processes and incidents of direct acts of violence should always be considered in the context of how routine violence is experienced by people in the everyday. In approaching experiential levels of such social processes, it is thus crucial to analyse direct acts of violence by including analyses of routine and everyday violence (see Introduction).

This chapter focuses on several conflicts between gangs and other social groups and authorities in Mathare, and aims to go beyond the dominant representation of gangs as sole perpetrators of direct acts of violence in Nairobi's ghettos. To this end, it explores why and how conflicts between gangs and other groups emerged, and how these were tied to the anxieties over manhood shared by the groups of young gang members involved. Accordingly, this chapter brings out the multiple effects of the shrinking space of young ghetto men in Kenyan society as a whole (*see also* Vigh 2006:89-116), and how this had a bearing on group relations inside Nairobi's ghettos. I start this chapter by analysing a standoff between young alcohol gang members and women from a community development organisation over the control of a public toilet. This case provides insight into how tensions within the intimacy of marriage also played out between groups of women and men in the public sphere. It analyses why these young ghetto men claimed to be entitled to manage the toilet for money, and legitimised their claim by invoking popular notions of local belonging and male gender roles. I then proceed to discuss the volatile relationships between gang members and community residents in general by taking a closer look at the attempts of a gang of drug dealers in Kosovo to build stronger ties with the community. This and the previous case show how shared fears of becoming redundant

as men in relation to female family members – and the community at large – influenced relationships between gangs and (groups of) community residents in Mathare.

Like the groups and organisations dominated or led by women, gangs also had strained relationships with NGOs and CBOs in general, especially those run by peers. Below, I analyse a case of drug dealers in Kosovo who protested against a CBO that was managed by a young man from the area, because they felt exploited by this organisation. This case, as well as another in which young men from Kosovo tried to claim local resources, shows why it was difficult for young men to overtly resist restrictive structures and claim power in relation to NGOs, CBOs, the chief, police and, needless to say, the entire justice system. I then continue to discuss why, how and when these young men decided to openly resist dominant powers and were able to claim small victories. I conclude this chapter by describing a case that saw a group of young men not only successfully resist one of the most powerful NGOs in Mathare, but also thrive as an officially registered CBO. All of this will show that most groups of young ghetto men shared anxieties and frustrations about their social positions as men, and that these groups often felt obstructed by groups, authorities and organisations close to them when trying to live up to dominant standards of masculinity. At the same time, this chapter argues that these men were not powerless victims; instead, these groups were incessantly and relentlessly engaged in the negotiation of restrictive power structures. In contrast to dominant representations, group strategies to claim power were not always based on violent confrontations, but also on creatively navigating changing power relations.

### **Who owns the toilet?**

Kira, a 26-year-old mother of a toddler, came back from lunch at two. She took over managing the Manoki public toilet from a young man who had cleaned it and collected the payments from visitors for her when she had gone to eat. Most houses in Mathare did not have indoor plumbing, and so residents relied heavily on public toilets for access to water taps, toilets themselves and bathroom facilities. People paid up to 5 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 0.05 Euros) to visit the toilet or use a bathroom and 2 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 0.02 Euros) for fetching 20 litres of water. When they lacked money – but also at night when venturing outside the house was considered to be too dangerous – people were forced to relieve themselves in small plastic containers or plastic bags. Indeed, Mathare was littered with black plastic bags containing human excrement that were thrown outside the houses at night and were known as the infamous 'flying toilets' (Mberu et al. 2013). Then, early in the morning, people usually kicked the bags into the many open sewers snaking through the ghetto.

On this particular day, the early morning rain had flooded the open sewers and turned the small dirt paths of the ghetto into tiny rivers of putrid mud. The morning customers had already soiled the white tiles inside the public toilet with their muddy shoes, and the connecting sewer had started to cough excrement back up, causing some of the toilets to overflow. Kira sighed; sometimes, working at the toilet when it rained felt like a battle against the odds, although she mused that the sewer was giving her more of a

problem today than was normally the case. Kira managed the toilet for the Bondeni Village branch of Muungano wa Wanavijiji (hereafter referred to as Muungano) in Mathare. This was a Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) affiliated federation of the urban poor in Kenya (Bradlow 2011:48). She turned the radio back on and helped a customer heaving a 20-litre jerry can filled with water on her back. When she heard screams, Kira's first thoughts were that it was the music on the radio, but soon a woman rushing past the toilet warned her that a group of young men were coming wielding crude weapons in their hands and shouting slogans. Kira suddenly heard them chanting: "We are the community." Alarmed, she immediately called her sister Mama J on her mobile phone. She was one of the leaders of the local Muungano branch, and within minutes a group of women gathered near the toilet to face the approaching mob of angry young men who were bellowing insults and pointing at them with machetes.

Within minutes, the narrow corner of the alleyway that led to the public toilet was packed with people, and angry words soon filled the air. Motion, a One Touch gang member, stepped to the fore and yelled at the top of his lungs: "This is our toilet. You took it from us." Other young men murmured in approval. Most of the protestors were members of the One Touch and Kiharu gangs that worked at the distilling sites located near the public toilet. A few gang members from Shantit (see map) accompanied them. A particularly angry young man interjected: "Blood will flow in *mitaro* (sewers in Kiswahili) if we don't get our toilet back." At that precise moment, sewer water full of human excrement flowed from inside the toilet and reached the shoes and bare feet of the women and men standing on the frontline of the clash. Another young man with a club in his hand laughed biting and proclaimed: "You cannot even take care of the toilet, look at it, one small drop [of rain] and the sewer overflows, you do not deserve the toilet, it is ours." Some of the women, and a few older men from Muungano who joined them, shouted back that the men should go back down to the riverside, that the public toilet had been renovated by their organisation, and that they were rightfully managing it. One of the leaders on the side of the young men exclaimed that they should take this matter to the chief, adding with a cunning smile that they were willing to unclog the main sewer that congested the entire toilet, but only if they were paid a substantial fee. Some of the women already suspected that the young men had blocked the toilet on purpose and were outraged by their behaviour.

Mama J told me later that the entire crowd had walked to the chief's camp on the fringe of the Mathare ghetto to take the issue to him.

We were shocked because the chief ruled in their favour. I don't know how, he gave us the toilet, but they must have given him something, he was on their side. We had to pay 50 thao ('thousand' in Sheng), so we looked everywhere for money. They said 'we need this money so we can unblock the toilet', but not to settle the case, because they want the toilet. They said the toilet is theirs, and that they did not have jobs, but they have families, how can they feed their families? That is what they

asked. They said Muungano is run by one family only ha ha ha you know what they mean. They said we are not the community, they are, they are the community and the toilet is for the community, not for us. They said they were born here, but so are we ... why are we not from the community? They said they can fight us, that blood will flow in the *mitaro* ... after the post-election violence, we take these words very seriously. You can't ignore them.

Mama J and the other Muungano members, both men and women from Mathare, frantically pulled together pocket change and hidden savings. A few hours later, they were able to present a sum of 15,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 150 Euros) to the chief, who was asked to pay the young men, settle the case and ask them to unblock the toilet. Even if it was not the amount they had initially demanded, the men reluctantly agreed to accept the money and laid down their weapons. Since then, the Muungano members have been on alert, as they feared a repetition of the clash. In Mama J's words: "Now they know where to get cash." This case begs the question of why these young men felt more entitled to manage the public toilet than the predominantly female members of Muungano, and why they were prepared to even resort to violence in their attempt to claim control over it.

### **Groups and the control of public resources in Mathare**

The sense of entitlement shared by the young, male gang members confronting the Muungano women at the Manoki public toilet was partially informed by the history of gangs and their control of public services in Nairobi's ghettos. The young men who strived to take over the toilet were gang members from different alcohol distilling groups that worked on the Mathare riverbanks close to the Manoki facility. Most of the young protesters had grown up in the Manoki area, and had witnessed a wide array of different gangs (including their own) and youth groups that had alternated in terms of managing the public toilet for income since the mid-1990s.

In 2001, Mungiki gangs took control of Mathare by occupying resources such as the Manoki public toilet. Within a year, these gangs not only controlled all of the public toilets in Bondeni Village, but also all of the water points and electricity connections, exacting a 'security-fee' from each house, bar, business and shop. In this way, the Mungiki gang members collected astronomical sums of money that mostly flowed back to their leaders. As a result, many young men (and a few women) in Mathare believed that becoming a member of such a gang would give them access to multiple economic opportunities that were previously out of reach for most. The strong Kikuyu profile of the local Mungiki gang in Bondeni, or 'cell' as it was termed by its members, and the strict rules of conduct, led to the exclusion of many young people with multiple ethnic (including Kikuyu) backgrounds who did not want to become a member. When the gang attempted to increase the distilling tax in November 2006, One Touch and Kiharu members teamed up with those belonging to the Taliban gangs from 4B, and violently ousted the Mungiki gang from Bondeni Village (BBC 2006; *see also* Introduction).

The One Touch gang members re-claimed the Manoki toilet in the aftermath of this clash, but their management was radically disrupted by the violence that followed the 2007 general elections (Waki Report 2008). In the ensuing chaos, Muungano (the organisation of predominantly women that managed the toilet at the time of the described clash) took charge of the toilet in early 2008 with the help of the chief, who aided the group to obtain permission from the city council to renovate the facility. The One Touch gang members had simply been overpowered by Muungano, which had been helped by its partner NGOs to persuade the local administration to give the organisation control of the toilet. The One Touch gang members, as well as their Kiharu and Taliban counterparts, had fought to expel the Mungiki gangs, and subsequently felt a certain amount of entitlement to manage the Manoki toilet as remuneration. Being side-lined in their own *mtaa* ('ghetto neighbourhood' in Sheng), first by the Mungiki gangs and later by the Muungano organisation, intensified their shared experiences of marginalisation and so feelings of frustration, which partly led these young gang members to violently claim what they regarded as theirs.

However, there was more to it than this. During the time that Muungano renovated the Manoki facility, Bishop Margaret Wanjiru, the Member of Parliament for Starehe (the constituency in which Mathare was located until March 2013), kicked off the construction of several large public toilets in Bondeni and a few adjacent ghetto villages. Wanjiru appointed several groups of mostly young men with a Luo background from 4B with Taliban connections to guard the construction sites. These groups had helped her win the elections during the 2007 campaign. In order to access cheap building materials for the construction of the toilets, she also worked with groups of young men, mostly with a Kikuyu background, from Shantit that had a history with Mungiki gangs. These groups had also assisted her during her election campaign. Bishop Wanjiru identified herself as Kikuyu, but competed for the ODM (Nation Team 2010), which was a political party widely imagined as Luo. Accordingly, her main support base was in the purportedly Luo-dominated ghetto village of 4B. However, she also had a massive following of young men with a Kikuyu background in Bondeni, Kosovo and Shantit, many of whom had been affiliated with the Mungiki. They regarded Bishop Wanjiru as a positive change from the incumbent MP John Kamande, who also had a Kikuyu background and was affiliated to the ruling party (PNU see Chapter 1), which many imagined to be Kikuyu. I will continue this analysis in the next chapter, but this information already suggests that ethnic identifications were ambiguous at best, and cannot therefore explain power dynamics and affiliations on their own. At issue here is the fact that several groups of young men from different ghetto villages and with different ethnic backgrounds had helped Bishop Wanjiru to become the MP for the Starehe constituency, and these groups were promised something in return. As a consequence, many believed that participation in the toilet projects was their rightful reward. Observing other gangs taking control of the public toilets, which were constructed by Bishop Wanjiru after she took office, reinforced the sense of entitlement among the One Touch and Kiharu gang members with regard to the Manoki facility, pushing them even further towards reclaiming the right to manage it.

### **'We are the community'**

The struggle over the Manoki toilet was partly prompted by a desire to secure a steadier income that would help the group members to improve their ability to perform their role as provider, and eventually leave the gang. These men carried multiple burdens on a salary of less than 2 Euros a day (on average), whereas the minimum daily expenses for a family of four easily exceeded 4 Euros (excluding rent, clothes, school fees and so on). When these men exclaimed 'we are the community', they were addressing the women directly and accusing them of taking opportunities away from them, whereas they were expected to be the providers and leaders in the community. Gender relations in Mathare were fraught with such contradictions and high expectations, in both directions. A closer look at the exceptionally disheartening circumstances of one of the gang members helps to highlight how utterly hopeless some men felt.

One day in April 2011, I met Odhis, a One Touch gang member, when I climbed up the cliffs near Manoki on my way to the main road. He was part of a funeral-savings group in the Kiharu gang, which helped its members to pay for the funerals of family members. He looked daunted as he shared with me how he found himself trapped by responsibilities that he could not fulfil.

I need your help, Naomi, they killed my brother. Eeeeeeh! Mob justice...they say he stole at Kiamaiko (a place in Huruma near Mathare where they sell goats), did you see the news? That is how we know, we saw it and somebody told me it was my brother... and we found him in the mortuary, maybe it could have taken days or weeks, sometimes you can't even find somebody. You know this happens... He was a thief. Why is this happening to me? And I need to bring him home but I don't have the money. All my money, I spent on my [other] brother's funeral (who was shot dead by police a few months before), and there is no one to help me, it is me, I have to get this money. He is in mortuary, maybe he has to stay there for weeks, months, I don't have the money, but then the bill gets higher and higher...I don't know what to do. I can't sleep, I can't work, I have to arrange everything. At home (his family in the rural area) they tell me to hurry up. I have to bring him home otherwise I can't build a house and be buried at home. My wife needs money for our rent, and school fees, my children go back to school next week. I don't know what to do, sometimes I drink to forget, it is stress, I drink because of stress, I don't know what to do.

On good days, Odhis earned between 100 and 200 Kenyan Shillings (roughly between 1 and 2 Euros) a day doing odd jobs, whereas taking his brother home to Kisumu would cost around 30,000 (approx. 300 Euros). These calculations are exclusive of the funds needed for a proper burial, for which Odhis also felt primarily responsible. He explained that he feared he would be ostracised by his mother and grandmother in the rural area near Kisumu if he could not live up to these responsibilities. The implications of this were

unbearable, because it ultimately meant that, in addition to his brother becoming a restless soul as he was not buried in ancestral lands, he feared he would become one too. Moreover, his social status would deteriorate because he would then have failed to deliver to his family the one thing many families in Mathare strive for, namely a rural home to retire to and, eventually, be buried. Odhis confided in me that he could even "go and rob a house, I have to get the money, how? Everyone is looking at me." By everyone, Odhis not only meant his family members in the rural area, but also his neighbours and friends in Mathare. The funeral savings group and another savings group chaired by his wife had helped him when his first brother had died of alcohol poisoning shortly before his second brother was killed by mob-justice. The brief period of time between the two deaths meant that he had not been able to save or build up enough credit again within the group to ask for assistance and get another loan.

Odhis's mother lived in the rural area and, after his father died in the early 2000s, she toiled the land his father had inherited in order to take care of the younger siblings. She lived in a mud house near his paternal grandmother's plot, and the family did not have enough money to cover even basic needs. Odhis and his older brothers had travelled to work in Mathare during the latter part of the 1990s when Odhis had still been a young boy. He had not finished primary school, and assisted his older brothers in various business ventures, including distilling and selling *chang'aa*, in order to help the family members in the rural area and pay school fees for the younger siblings. He had instantly become the oldest son in the family when his second brother died, and as well as considering himself to be the main provider for his wife and children, he also felt primarily responsible for his mother and younger siblings in the rural area. Odhis's case was not unique. Many young gang members were bogged down by multiple burdens, and often tried to care for many family members who resided in the ghetto and, also sometimes, in the rural area. As noted, these men were expected to be and perceived themselves as the main providers for their next of kin, especially since fathers and other male relatives were mostly absent. Yet, they often lacked the means to do so. As I have shown, being unable to achieve this popular standard of manhood had a major impact on their gendered senses of the self, and many went to great lengths to still pursue this ideal. Paramount in this endeavour was seeking the appraisal of what most young men termed 'their community.' By this, these men often denoted family members, friends and neighbours residing inside the ghetto. Like Malik in the previous chapter, Odhis expressed an utter fear of being regarded as a failed provider and, as such, a failed man by his friends, family and neighbours. In this vein, the statement 'we are the community' can also be taken as an attempt to counter the judgement of fellow residents that was feared so much. Indeed, it expressed a deep sense of longing, and repeating the slogan over and over during the standoff was perhaps an attempt to convince, even by using force, other community residents that they too belonged to the community.

The deep longing to be included and feel accepted by the community as a man constituted a powerful driving force behind many young men's social navigation. Buda, a former One Touch gang member, spoke to me one day about a major incident that had

happened to him a few years back. His girlfriend had just given birth, and they had settled together in his one-room house made out of iron sheets. After a few weeks, the girl ran away with the baby to live with another man, and it became clear that the child was not in fact Buda's, even though he had paid for the hospital and all other necessary items (considered locally to be practices of claiming fatherhood). Buda was very vexed about his girlfriend, but explained to me that his frustration was not so much related to discovering that the baby was not his or that she had cheated on him, but his gradual awareness that his girlfriend was a sex worker. As a consequence, he was mostly afraid of how the community would react to this news. Indeed, he was petrified of becoming the subject of village gossip, because that would have a major impact on his status as a man.

They are talking about me. Everyone, they know about my lady. Even my mother, she is hiding alcohol. My friends say *jazaa numba* ('add or fill the number' in Sheng, meaning to join a gang for a robbery) when I am drunk, you know, to join the gang so the number is strong, and go to rob houses. I can even do that when I am drunk, I really have to stop drinking. At night, I don't sleep because of my lady so I drink to forget. When I drink I get *boostah!* ('to get energy or courage' in Buda's way of talking)...I feel like *kude?...kudedi!* try or die, it is *conc* ('strong' in Sheng) and I forget.

'*Kude?...kudedi!*' is a Sheng phrase that literally means 'to die', and loosely translated means 'try or die' in the context in which it is mostly used. It reflects the reality of ghetto life: when you do nothing, you have nothing and you will die! Many of the young men I met and worked with at times lacked hope of a better life, and the term '*Kude?...kudedi!*' expressed a fear of both physical and 'social' death (Patterson 1982; Vigh 2006: 240; Salo 2006).

All of this begs the question as to why young men who sought recognition by members of their community attacked and confronted women who were their family members, friends and neighbours. At once, these men desired to belong to the community, yet seemingly aimed to exclude certain others from it.

### **Gendered notions of class**

Kingi mentioned it the most, but many of the young men in Mathare referred to the community as a "ghetto of women." The gender dimension of the conflict over the Manoki toilet not only derived from the men's desire to live up to dominant masculinities and procure a steady income; their sense of entitlement and ensuing frustrations over being side-lined were exacerbated by the fact that the toilet was run by the predominantly female members of the Muungano organisation. Mama J alluded to this above when she told how the protestors questioned the legitimacy of the women managing the toilet, and even played a trick (blocking the sewer) to illustrate their incompetence. Interestingly, some of the men seeking to control the facility were related to the female Muungano members opposing them at the standoff. Yet again, other young, male protestors like Motion had been founders and long-term Muungano members, and had even helped with renovating

the toilet. All of this further complicated the conflict. What propelled these young men to not only fight the very organisation they belonged to, but also their own female relatives and neighbours? To answer this multi-layered question, we need to look at why many of these young men constructed Bondeni Village as a ghetto of women and, simultaneously, took themselves to be the 'true' representatives of the community.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mathare can be described as a localised matrifocal society functioning within the context of the wider framework of patriarchy that is still pervasive in Kenya (*see also* Spronk 2012: 61-62). Right from the onset, women survived here by distilling alcohol and selling sex to soldiers from the barracks nearby (White 1990; Nelson 1987). Over the years, these women have been able to accrue small, mostly informal, properties (such as tin-roofed shacks) inside the ghetto, and this has enabled them to expand their micro-businesses or open new ones. Indeed, apart from bars, women owned the majority of grocery and food stalls, as the selling of groceries was locally considered to be a feminine practice. Nevertheless, selling groceries was a potentially resilient business, as people always had to eat, even in an economic downturn. This all strengthened the position of the women in Mathare in comparison to the men, who instead engaged in businesses that were considered to be more masculine, such as selling clothes, firewood or luxury food items (e.g. boiled eggs, peanuts and chickens – though not chicken heads). Owning a bar and selling *chang'aa* were locally regarded as more or less gender neutral income-generating activities, despite the still slight predominance of female-owned bars.<sup>1</sup>

Bondeni did have older, and even a few very old, male residents, some of whom owned bars while others had acquired positions as village elders. Most of the village elders were in fact men, and this group supervised government-led community projects (such as the renovation of the sewers or roads), and worked for the provincial administration headed by the chief. Other older men worked outside the ghetto as day labourers at construction sites, and a few even had long-term employment as janitors or security guards. Young and old women, however, constituted the majority of bar owners, shopkeepers and other business owners inside the ghetto, and they therefore had more opportunity to become involved in NGO-led community development projects than older men who often worked outside the ghetto. Although a few women acquired the position of village elder, and were therefore involved in government-led community development projects, many chose different routes and engaged more in NGO- and CBO-led community development schemes. In this way, they were able to circumvent the still highly patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> Competition made it increasingly difficult for anyone to start a bar in more recent times, and this perpetuated the dominance of the older generation of women and their female and male relatives in this sector. What is more, both men and women shared with me that it was easier for the latter to supplement their income by washing clothes in nearby estates than it was for the former to get a day job at construction sites. Above all, the absence of adult men in a majority of households (owing to, for instance, divorce and untimely deaths) also contributed to the stronger social and economic position of women in Mathare. Most women learned to be self-reliant and develop their own small businesses from an early age. In more recent years, the already stronger social and economic position of women in Mathare was also strengthened by a growing NGO presence there, and many micro-credit organisations primarily focused on helping women and girls. This led to a proliferation of women-led and/or otherwise dominated CBOs such as Muungano in recent years.

structure of the provincial administration and claim power in their own ways.

Walking through Mathare with the young gang members revealed to me the extent to which they constructed both the streets in the ghetto and their homes as female spaces. Many of the young men I visited at home acted in an awkward manner, as if they were out of place, while their wives and children determined the routine of such gatherings and domestic life in general. As noted, most shops, non-governmental community development organisations (such as Muungano) and bars were owned, managed or dominated by women. A glance at Mathare's high street highlighted the position of young men in the ghetto. As women were busy selling vegetables, minding children and doing domestic chores, the young men fetched water and firewood, brewed alcohol or bought food and other necessities from these women. What is more, most of the young men I worked with had accessed their job of distilling alcohol, and had thus acquired their membership of an alcohol distilling gang, through their grandmothers and mothers. Mothers and grandmothers still often gave young, male relatives and potential gang members their first distilling assignment, and referred them on to other, mostly female, bosses. The only male spaces seemed to be gangs, local bars (even though run by women, the bars were mostly visited by men) and distilling sites. Yet, women even intruded in these spaces; at the distilling sites, they often sat high up on a cliff supervising the distilling of their alcohol while the young men near the river worked for them or hid behind a few corrugated iron sheet houses when carrying on with gambling, drinking and smoking.

In the discussion above, Mama J revealed that the young alcohol brewers claimed to be entitled to the Manoki toilet, not only by positioning themselves as providers, but also by stating that they represented the community. This statement has multiple layers, and has to be read in relation to who was addressed by these young men, namely the women from Muungano. They questioned the legitimacy of these women to manage a community project based on their lack of alleged ghettoness, and as such of belonging to the community. Their sense of entitlement thus also emanated from a putative ghettoness which, according to these young men, was embodied by them and not the wealthier women from Muungano. An alleged class divide, based on estimated income, intersected with gender positions, as women in Mathare had more control over and access to economic opportunities than young men. These intersecting distinctions were also evident in the local housing set-up, as many of the female Muungano members and bar owners lived up in the valley near the main road and inhabited one-room accommodation built from solid corrugated iron sheets. Some even lived in stone tenement buildings near the main road. In contrast, most of the alcohol brewers who worked for these women lived down in the valley, close to the river, in shacks assembled from second-hand iron sheets with mud floors. To complicate matters further, some of the gang bosses were also the landlords of the young gang members.

By declaring that the women from Muungano were 'not the community', the young men did not deny their residency, or even origin, in Mathare; instead, they were referring to the disparity in income and ensuing living conditions which, compared to theirs, appeared to be of a different class, which was a class they did not deem to be 'ghetto.' This

class position was often proudly termed 'ghetto *punk*' by Mama J and other women from Muungano. Residents from Upper Bondeni often cast those in Lower Bondeni as 'immoral' and 'criminal', whereas those in Lower Bondeni often took residents from Upper Bondeni to be 'exploiters' and 'corrupt.' Strikingly, these binary labels resonated with the dominant discourse on ghetto residents, as well as with the subdominant discourse on elites imagined by most of these residents. Moreover, many young brewers were of the opinion that their bosses only continued to reside inside the ghetto to save money, not out of necessity. As a consequence, they were perceived to be taking away opportunities from residents who had real needs. In this viewpoint, the Muungano women benefitted from projects that should be serving the poor and not the ghetto *punks* who dominated this and other similar groups. By stating that the toilet is "not for the Muungano women" because "Muungano women do not represent the community", the young men thus verbalised their frustration that they were unable to meet the stringent membership requirements. The way Mama J explained this suggests that the gang members blamed female and wealthier Muungano leaders for implementing criteria that only the wealthier (mostly female) members could adhere to, meaning that the CBO was not inclusive for a majority of (young and male) ghetto residents. Yet, both women and young, male gang members had founded Muungano in Bondeni Village together. How, then, did women come to dominate this organisation in later years and set such high standards for membership?

### **The start of a Muungano Wanaviji in Bondeni Village, Mathare**

During the mid-1990s, there were many forceful evictions and violent demolitions in Nairobi's ghettos. In response, Muungano, the Kenyan Federation of the Urban Poor, was established at the end of the decade to address land and housing rights among ghetto residents (Bradlow 2011). Muungano was assisted by NGOs such as the Mazingira Institute and Kituo cha Sheria (Alam et al. 2005). From the 2000s onwards, the Pamoja Trust, and later also the Muungano Support Trust (MuST), became the main NGOs supporting the development of local Muungano groups like the one in Bondeni. All of these local groups together constituted the National Muungano Federation, which was a member organisation of the International Federation of the Urban Poor, called the SDI (Slum/Shack Dwellers International). Muungano focused on the implementation of programmes geared towards land and housing rights, and the improvement of public facilities and utilities such as toilets, water pipes and electricity connections.

In 2007, Mama J, Motion and a few other Bondeni residents were invited by a man called Mukuria to visit a Muungano meeting in Kibera. Mukuria worked for the Pamoja Trust (and later for MuST – MuST 2012), and had been assigned to explore the possibility of developing Muungano branches in different ghetto villages in Mathare. By then, the Mungiki had already left Bondeni, but were still active in Kosovo. As a consequence, Mukuria chose to start by approaching people in Bondeni in order to circumvent the potential hurdles that the presence of Mungiki gangs might pose in Kosovo. Soon after their visit to Kibera, Motion, Mama J and her mother called the first Muungano meeting at Kinatiko hall in Bondeni, and started a savings and credit scheme (*see also* Kimuyu 1999).

Right from the outset, Muungano's main objective in Mathare was the structural improvement of local infrastructure and public services. Yet, an often-used strategy to bring a group together in Mathare (and in other Nairobi ghettos) is to follow the example of women-led savings groups that have existed there since the 1960s (*e.g.* Kimani 2009). Muungano's savings scheme was considered by Bondeni residents to have great potential because of its connection to established NGOs and the SDI. Mukuria mobilised no fewer than 70 members in Bondeni, and within a short time-span the savings scheme was supplemented with other ventures, such as a land project on the outskirts of Nairobi and a micro-credit scheme to help members set up businesses. In recent years, Mukuria and others have also facilitated the establishment of Muungano branches in other ghetto villages in Mathare, such as Kosovo and 4B. As well as group projects, members from the various Muungano groups in Mathare were offered paid work as enumerators for an urban planning and upgrading project that was spearheaded by MuST, SDI and Nairobi University. This endeavour resulted in a 'Mathare Zonal Plan', which was published in July 2012, and was presented as the initial draft of the first ever 'community-led development plan for Mathare' (MuST 2012). All of the parties involved had high hopes that, with the right kind of leverage (such as international support from UN-HABITAT), they could get the government on board for future implementation. At the same time, the Pamoja Trust and MuST had helped several Muungano branches in Mathare with the development of collective income-generating activities, such as water points and the renovation of the Manoki public toilet in Bondeni, and water-pipe connections and a baby-care project in Kosovo.

Yet, from its inception the Muungano in Bondeni encountered insurmountable problems. Women soon began to dominate its membership. Moreover, even though the chair has always been an older man, women mostly determined the agenda of meetings and took up all of the other leadership positions. This power dynamic emerged firstly because the women were able to attend meetings more than most men, as they were often their own boss and could ask someone else to look after their business or just close shop during meeting hours. Accordingly, they were high in numbers during meetings and they shared similar problems. As a consequence, they increasingly determined the agenda of the weekly meetings and amended some of the founding rules and regulations to fit their own circumstances. The dominance of women was a common feature in most community-based organisations, and so on its own did not necessarily constitute a problem. Female members, however, also contributed more to the savings scheme, and within a few months a gendered division emerged between high and low-paying members. This division coincided with the putative class divisions discussed above. The high-paying and mostly female members took up several additional schemes that helped them to access loans at a bank. As a result, most of the female and a few older male members expanded their businesses and eventually earned enough money to become stakeholders in a land-project through which they could eventually acquire property. The low-paying and mostly young, male members thus remained members on paper, but were gradually excluded from the group's progress. Motion, one of the founders, was among the low-paying members. The

exclusion of young gang members spurred a deep-seated resentment among many of them, Muungano members and non-members alike. The young men fighting over the Manoki toilet thus also acted out of frustration at being side-lined from the opportunities on offer from the community development projects instigated by Muungano and other such groups that were increasingly dominated by women.

### **A double bind: depending on and feeling responsible for women**

The Manoki public toilet was the epitome of young men's fear of superfluity, and forcefully demanding control of the facility was a way of repositioning themselves with regard to women and claiming power as men. These fears first and foremost stemmed from tensions within the intimacy of marriage, as described in the previous chapter. Alcohol distillers in Bondeni, however, depended even more on women to access work and opportunities than was the case for drug dealers. A slight majority of the drug bosses were female, but they did not live in the ghetto and middlemen (all young men who had graduated from drug dealing) organised all of the work. In Bondeni, there were no middlemen and many of the predominantly female bosses lived inside the area. These women were either family members or neighbours of the alcohol distillers, and young men felt both responsible for them and depended on them for work. Accordingly, the alcohol distillers found themselves in even more of a double bind than the drug dealers, and this is a crucial dimension when it comes to understanding the Manoki conflict.

In their narratives, some young distillers repeatedly articulated their fears and frustrations to me, and shared how not being able to live up to social demands has led to them sometimes even beating their wives. Cosmos, a One Touch gang member, explained:

When I come home with nothing I feel I am nothing. I tried but I did not get anything, she [his wife] is asking me money. I go out every day, early bird, to catch the worm. If she asks and I have nothing. She makes me feel I am nothing. That moment I want to drink and be with my friends, so that is what I do. I can beat her when she asks. Those nights home is only for sleeping.

In his eyes, his wife accentuated his failure by demanding money he had not been able to earn. He told me he already often felt utterly inadequate as a provider and did not need her to rub it in (*kuweka chumvi* he said, 'to put salt' in Kiswahili). During a spontaneous group discussion at a local *chang'aa* bar, Cosmos and a few other gang members shared with me that they felt systematically obstructed from pursuing dignity and developing meaningful lives as a result of their marginalisation, stigmatisation and persecution in society at large. They confessed that the women in their lives embodied a threat to them, and that they felt deeply insecure in relation to their wives because they made them feel utterly inept as husbands. Though Malik expressed similar sentiments in private, the drug dealers rarely spoke about their fears in a group setting. This may allude to the deep sense of urgency the alcohol distillers had about their position as men. Samii, 26-years-old and a One Touch

gang member, said: "We are scared to find out they can hustle better than us." Samii, Cosmos and the other gang members told me that their wives worked as, for instance laundry women, housekeepers or micro-business owners, but often did not share what they earned, whereas the men were expected to share everything they had (*see also* Chapter 4).

Josh, a 28-year-old One Touch gang member, one day discovered that his wife had a secret bank account with substantial savings in it. He was devastated. He did not dare to confront her, as he was afraid she would leave him. He thus kept quiet and suffered in silence, and continued to share what he had in order to provide for their four children. After hearing about and observing growing numbers of similar incidents between husband and wife in Mathare, I discussed with Mama J why many women kept money from their husbands but, ostensibly, expected these men to provide for everything. She told me:

I always worked, but not all women are like that. They expect their husbands to pay for everything, you see my sister, ha ha ha she is like that. Remember she said: 'your husband is only your husband when he is with you. When he is out, he can be somebody else's husband.' Many women fear that. [...] Ha ha but she also said: 'your husband has to take care of you, from your hair to your toenails'. Ha ha ha. When I work, I also want to have my own money, for when Kingi is not around, I can buy things myself. I also don't know if he keeps things aside. You never know. I think that is the problem. But for us, our marriage is good. We share, and I also work. Many times the trust is not there, then the wife can hide money so she does not only depend on her husband. Some husbands are not good, they cheat [with other women], and you never know what will happen to you, so you also cheat by saving your own money. But I don't understand about Josh, he is like Kingi, a very good husband. I don't understand his wife.

Not knowing how much their wives earned while also feeling incapable of providing for their family led to a constant fear in these men that their wives would leave them. This would turn them into bachelors again and seriously impede their social navigation trajectories. As bachelors, they would not only lose their status as family men, but also their connections to savings and loans groups and other community-based initiatives run by women in Mathare. To illustrate this, Kingi and Brayo have been members of Muungano projects through their wives, who had put their names on the members list to double their savings and access to loans. Indeed, when his roadside restaurant burnt to the ground due to a massive fire in Mathare, Kingi was able to build it back up again within a week with help from his wife's loans.

As Cosmos revealed, young alcohol distillers often avoided the domestic setting when they did not make enough money to provide for their families. Samii, for instance, explained that he did not want to eat food his wife had paid for. This, however, added to feelings of marginalisation, and of not belonging, as these men felt ever more excluded, not

only from community based groups like Muungano, but also from their homes. These men often referred to a grammatical gender difference in Kiswahili when describing getting married: men marry (*anaoa* in Kiswahili) women, yet women are being married (*anaolewa* in Kiswahili) by men. To many (men and women alike), this highlighted the role of men as the provider, and that women are supposed to be taken care of by men. Many conversations with men, especially, proclaimed the absurdity of 'women marrying men', which, according to them, would start happening if women made more money than men. How did the idea of the growing autonomy of women become such a source of anxiety for young men, many of whom had been raised by single, strong and independent women?

The deep desire to belong to the community, as articulated in the statement we are the community, stemmed from an even deeper longing to have a strong social position as men within the family set-up. Most young men in Mathare were heavily engaged in a social navigation struggles with a view to being recognised as men within their families, where their very position was highly contested. The discrepancy between normative gender relations in Kenya and the reality of absent, adult men (through death, work or divorce) had to be constantly negotiated by both genders. Shaped by the patriarchal social make-up of Kenyan society, both women and men struggled anxiously with the diverging social and economic contexts that marked Mathare. Many men and women I talked with over the years generally affirmed the dominance of men over women (including the obligation of being the provider that went with that position), and considered the growing autonomy of women to be an anomaly. At the same time, they also shifted positions and enacted alternatives to these rather fixed gender roles. Malik often proclaimed that he was the head of the house, and as such he gave voice to his deep-seated insecurity about his position as a man. At other times, he told me that he would not mind sharing the financial burdens with his wife, and he embraced the idea of sharing household tasks. However, it was hard for young men to share positions of control, and to develop and enact alternative notions of man- and womanhood, without a steady income and thus, in their eyes, from an inferior position. Without a steady income, these men feared that the power balance was tipping in favour of women and was making them more effeminate in the eyes of the community. This explains, to some extent, why young men were so engaged in adhering to the role of the provider, albeit against all odds, whereas failing to live up to this role pushed these men deeper and deeper into the gang space, which was the one space they were trying to escape from.

The incongruity between what was widely deemed to be proper gender roles and the reality on the ground in Mathare, thus sparked great anxiety about obligations and expectations between the two genders. As noted above, the tensions between husband and wife also impinged on relationships between gangs and gang bosses. Kingi once told me:

It is weird. You go to your boss. You know we have to ask for our money, sometimes three days after brewing, so we go chase our money. Ha ha. When you see her, you ask for your money, and she can give it to you, when she has it. So, you want to leave because your boss has paid you. Sometimes, she asks

you to stay and buy her a drink ha ha, because you are a man and she is a woman.

Kingi concluded that a man could not refuse such a request by a woman, even if she was your boss who had just paid you. Many men told me, often jokingly, about similar incidents with their female bosses, and shared how they frequently felt caught between being the employee and living up to notions of manhood that are prevalent in the ghetto. Yet, the other reason why these men often felt they could not refuse this request was tied to the fact that the female bosses could easily choose other men to work for them, meaning that pleasing these women was part of their professional relationships. This all illustrates the contradictions and complexities involved in gender relations in Mathare, which culminated in the Manoki confrontation.

### **An ongoing conflict**

Muungano continued to manage the Manoki toilet after the standoff in 2011, and continued to be dominated by women who employed the alcohol brewers at the riverside. The Muungano members constantly feared a repeat of the incident, and their premonitions turned out to be accurate. Again, tensions surged in the run-up to the 2013 general elections held on March 4. As always, there was a period of intense competition over resources during election time in Mathare, and different social groups fell over each other asking politicians for support and access to specific resources in return for influence, votes and security. Village elders, women's groups, gangs and CBOs such as Muungano all renegotiated their positions of power during the intense months leading up to the elections. Indeed, in the few weeks before the elections, fully-fledged campaigns engaged most residents. Every day, women, elders and youths went to meetings, rallies and secret gatherings, and were paid a lot for their attendance. There had been a few extremely violent clashes between 4B and Bondeni in the months preceding the 2013 elections (Ombati 2012), but the intensified campaigns just before them kept people busy as politicians threw money around. The presidential elections were a victory for Uhuru Kenyatta and yet another defeat for Raila Odinga, which was again disputed by Raila Odinga's coalition party (Odula 2013).

The weeks following the 2013 elections were marked by tensions in Mathare, as people feared a repetition of the violence that had followed the previous elections held on 27 December 2007. Most people thus stayed indoors, closed shop early and laid low while waiting for the ruling by the Supreme Court on the election results (Patinkin 2013). Nevertheless, certain people took advantage of the impasse, and a group of 60 young men and, interestingly, also a few young women (aged between 16 and 25), from the Kiharu and Shantit gangs, used violence to take over the Manoki toilet again. The young women were not part of Muungano in Bondeni, instead mostly being the girlfriends of Shantit gang members or gang members themselves. Most Shantit gang members were involved in stealing inside Mathare and these groups generally also had female members. This time, the Muungano members did not respond immediately. They feared, as Mama J put it, "a

spark that would lead to fire.” Mama J and a few other Muungano members again went to the chief to complain and ask for help, but he refused to intervene. Mama J believed that he did not want to stir up trouble that might lead to outbursts of violence. She also later explained that she and other Muungano members did not know who was supporting the group of youths and why the chief feared to even hear the case. In general, most cases had to be taken to the chief before they could be transferred to the police. The chief, assisted by his own administrative police force, was in charge of settling minor disputes in order to reduce the workload of the police and the judiciary. However, power relations were in flux, and the postponement of the election results created a space for groups to reverse these relationships and take up new positions on their own terms. The group of 60 youths continued to control the toilet for three months, albeit with great difficulty, because they soon found out that sharing 2000 Kenyan Shillings a day among such a large number of members from different gangs was asking for trouble. After three months, Muungano was able to reclaim the toilet once more, because many gang members had left the facility after several internal fall-outs.

The Manoki saga did not end there, unfortunately. In the early hours of 1 January 2014, roughly six months after Muungano had the toilet up and running again, a major clash flared up between young men (mostly from Shantit) and a group of bar owners commonly referred to as 'Ugandan refugees' (*see also* Chapter 2). This unrelated conflict resulted in a fire that burnt 150 houses near the toilet to the ground, and led to the evacuation of the families living in them, who were those who normally used the Manoki facilities on a daily basis. When I visited Mathare in February 2014, the toilet was still only generating half of its previous income as a result of everything that had occurred in the past few years, which were setbacks that most businesses operating inside this ghetto faced. Manoki's volatile history shows that its future will probably continue to be marked by strife, since resources in Mathare like public toilets will always be at the epicentre of local power struggles and political games.

### **Us and the community: an uneasy divide**

The Manoki incident did not stand on its own. There were other groups of young ghetto men in Mathare who violently attacked fellow ghetto residents, not just to access opportunities, but to also give vent to their frustrations over feeling side-lined. The term 'community' was omnipresent in all of my interviews and discussions with gang members, and, interestingly, reflected a rift that young men often experienced between them and others living inside Mathare. The way that all of the research participants evoked this term evinces a deep desire to belong to the community and, simultaneously, a fear of not belonging. Feeling thwarted in their social navigation struggles by community residents who, in their eyes, distrusted and excluded them, has frequently led to violent conflicts between young men and other social groups in Mathare, as illustrated by the Manoki conflict.

A case in point was the way Blue from the Ruff Skwad gang appropriated the term community. When we were talking about the ghetto farm that Blue and fellow gang

members had developed, and which had been on the decline since its inception (see previous chapter), Blue stated the following:

They think the community does not support them. And it's true [...] they don't give us opportunity. We struggle to make these businesses, but customers don't trust us, they buy from others, and competition is high. It is like, we are good security, but we are not serious businessmen. [...] but they need to give some to us, we need our opportunities, we can't work at *grouo* forever. We need a future!

As Blue stated in the above excerpt, the Ruff Skwad gang was taken by most residents of Kosovo to be a vigilante group (Anderson 2002) that punished local thieves, chased out city council tax collectors or power company officials (who regularly entered the ghetto under police protection to try and cut off illegal connections), and protected the village during junctures of violence. Yet, as Blue stated, they were not considered to be a group that was capable (or deserving) of developing a viable business venture. He exclaimed that the gang members do “need a future”, and felt that the way many local residents regarded the group was not only unfair, but also obstructive, because the gang needed local customers to open up pathways out of the gang through business. The Ruff Skwad gang and other residents in Kosovo had an ambivalent relationship. Gang members were often asked to help local residents out. This type of assistance varied from helping to offload a truck of firewood or grocery supplies to settling a score for someone by using violence. Their main purpose from the perspective of other residents, as noted, seemed to be their role as security guards on call. However, their earlier involvement with the local Mungiki gang meant that any endeavours were regarded with great suspicion by most residents; these men were not to be trusted, and every venture that would make them more powerful as a group was monitored meticulously by, for instance, the village elders. Knowing very well the tight-rope they had to walk with regard to their community, the Ruff Skwad gang members did not ask for a fee for their services, unlike the Mungiki gang members. Accordingly, in Malik's words, they threw "*wagoni* ('thieves' in Sheng) outside [Kosovo] for free ...we have to give back to our community."

The Ruff Skwad gang had been engaged with the Mungiki gang in Kosovo from the day the Mungiki members entered the Mathare ghetto in the early 2000s, but their relationship became more pronounced during the final year of Mungiki rule. A Mungiki gang was ousted from Bondeni Village in November 2006 (BBC 2006; *see also* Introduction). Kosovo at the time had been a Mungiki stronghold, and a few fleeing members from Bondeni bolstered the local Mungiki gang in Kosovo in an attempt to maintain control inside Mathare. Prior to this, the Mungiki gang in this ghetto village had already started to support the Ruff Skwad football team, through which it had been able to establish a working relationship with the Ruff Skwad gang. Most Ruff Skwad gang members identified as Kikuyu, and even though very few of them went through the initiation rites required to become a full-blown Mungiki member, most worked closely with the Mungiki

gang during its final period of control in Mathare (November 2006-June 2007). A few Mungiki members even joined the savings group set up by the Ruff Skwad gang, and for this period the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub became the Mungiki headquarters in Mathare and where it organised its kangaroo court.

Ruff Skwad gang members found it difficult to talk about this period, and only Malik often reflected back on how many fellow gang members had felt forced to interact and work with the Mungiki gang out of fear. Malik explained:

Mungiki brought security, they killed the big thugs, then other thugs they joined them, we had fear. From Ruff Skwad, only David, and only two others, they were Mungich ('Mungiki' in Sheng) but we were not. We could not agree. When they [Mungiki] were defeated by GSU [the military police], the community beat David and other Mungich from Kosovo, but David's mother begged so her son can stay here.

Mungiki leaders who operated in Mathare ghetto villages were locally imagined to come from rural areas. These groups of young men connected with young ghetto men like David by opening up social, cultural and economic opportunities for them, such as giving them work collecting security 'taxes' inside the ghetto or in the *matatu* industry. The collaboration with local young men enabled Mungiki gangs from rural areas to gain a footing inside the ghettos. According to Malik, most Ruff Skwad gang members had cooperated with the Mungiki out of fear, whereas only a few, like David, had fully joined as members. In retrospect, most residents I talked to took Mungiki gang members to be extremely dangerous outsiders, but the local young men who had joined the Mungiki gang, or had worked with it during its rule, were regarded as 'stupid boys.' Despite the local differentiation between 'real' Mungiki members from outside and local 'boys', the Ruff Skwad gang members were eyed with suspicion long after the Mungiki had left Kosovo. Indeed, their long-term affiliation with and proximity to the Mungiki gang during its rule led to their dubious reputation and cast many of their activities in a threatening light. A barber near the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub said: "You don't know how far they work together. Maybe they were not members, but they were together with them, it was like a protection. You could not touch them. We don't know what they want to do next, after tasting that power."

When the dust settled after the June 2007 police clampdown on Mungiki gang members in Kosovo (Amnesty 2007), many young men (most of them non-Mungiki members) had been shot dead or arrested, while others had fled to Kayole and other Mungiki strongholds in the city. A few Mungiki gang members who had been born in Mathare and had lived in Kosovo since its inception had been allowed to stay after Mungiki control ended, although not without punishment; local residents had gathered and punished these young men by way of 'mob justice', but they refrained from killing them. After receiving a thorough beating by a group of shop owners (who had been coerced into paying exceptionally high 'taxes' for security to the Mungiki gang by these local Mungiki

members), David, and young men like him, had been forced to apologise publicly to the community. Unlike David, Blue and Malik shared with me that they had been relieved to see the Mungiki gang leave Mathare, as they had not agreed with its repressive regime. Blue said: "They said one thing, like you think they are true, so religious, but they also asked *hongo* ('bribe' in Sheng), and controlled business, they controlled everything, and they can just kill you, hah...we feared them." In their experience, the Mungiki gang had not operated very differently from the police, and at the same time both Malik and Blue had often been mistaken for Mungiki members and had subsequently suffered multiple arrests (and near-death experiences) by the police. In the weeks following the aforementioned crackdown, the GSU continued to patrol the village to stop the Mungiki gangs from returning, and it took a few months before young men like Malik and Blue could walk about the area and work freely again.

### **Giving back and taking away**

After a few weeks, the military presence subsided in Kosovo, and the Ruff Skwad drug dealers returned to 'Nigeria', which was where they sold heroin (see Chapter 4). The Ruff Skwad Beach Pub also became operational again and the gang positioned itself once more as a local security group. Nevertheless, its past association with the Mungiki continued to colour the image local residents had of the gang. Since then, gang members have been highly engaged in building stronger ties with the community; apart from providing security without exacting a fee, they have also dug out steps from the cliff that connects Kosovo and 'Nigeria.' This helped to create a more passable short-cut to Juja Road to allow children and the elderly to also make use of this route. The question arises as to why the Ruff Skwad gang members had a vested interest in improving their relationship with the community. Their work, namely dealing drugs, did not directly depend on this connection, and nor did a good relationship with the majority of local residents help them in terms of gaining status with regard to other gangs and youth groups. A good relationship with other residents would of course encourage the establishment of a customer base inside the village and as such help any business venture the gang wanted to initiate. All of this played a role, but there was also more to it.

Malik explained: "We dig these steps so the community sees we give back to the community." The phrase 'giving back' to the community was often evoked by young ghetto men to underscore why they volunteered for activities like communal clean-ups. Almost all of the young men I worked with regularly volunteered for local clean-ups and other community service activities. Moreover, gangs, football teams and networks of friends often registered as youth groups not only to access resources and start savings schemes, but to also become formally engaged in community service. Community service was a way to tap into resources provided by NGOs, as most of these organisations only worked with visibly active and registered youth groups. Yet, the commitment with which most groups engaged in community service reveals that there was more to it for its participants. Young men like Malik and Blue told me on many occasions that they wanted to be respected as "strong young men" who had a particular role to play with regard to socio-economic

activities and development in the community. They likewise wanted to be taken not only as a protector, but also as a provider and the head of a household who could partake in decision-making processes with regard to community events and projects. Volunteering for community service activities was thus also geared towards claiming space in a 'ghetto of women' as part of their social navigation struggles, and pursuing recognition as senior men.

In another attempt to connect with residents, a few Ruff Skwad gang members tried to set up a garbage collection project to organise regular clean-ups of a shopping street near the ground where they sold drugs. Yet, during the first such event, a crowd of shop owners gathered to stop the young men in their tracks and take away their equipment. A neighbouring grocery shop owner told me that they feared the gang members would begin by offering this service for free, but would soon start asking for a fee. "You think they do this for free? Ha ha. No, they start out as volunteers but they cannot do anything for free. How? They need to bring home something at the end of the day, right?" Getting a fee, she voiced, would undoubtedly boost the gang and strengthen its position in Kosovo, and that would be unacceptable. According to this woman and others, this was precisely how the Mungiki gang had taken control of the entire ghetto. In the end, a group of Ruff Skwad gang members had looted shops, and local policemen had arrested a few of them. Malik had taken part in the looting, but narrowly escaped arrest. He explained that they had felt frustrated, curbed. "Even if we want to ask for a fee later, we need opportunity. They [the shop owners] need to give us opportunities. We are not Mungiki." This all shows that gang members and other community residents often had ambivalent relationships riddled with tensions, especially when these young men had had some kind of affiliation to Mungiki or Taliban gangs.

### **'We don't let ourselves be used'**

The section above shows that tensions between high expectations and the minimal access these men had to economic opportunities outside the gang were acutely felt, and at times led to violent protests initiated by them against other community residents. Their anger was not only openly directed at the predominantly female business owners and managers of community development projects, but also at fellow young ghetto men who rose above the rest. Many young ghetto men told me that they constantly feared 'being used' by women, older men (especially village elders), and NGOs. Above all, they feared being used by their peers, especially if these peers managed community development projects while seemingly excluding other young men from them.

One morning in November 2010, Malik called me and frantically told me to rush to Kosovo. I was in Bondeni and walked quickly through a labyrinth of slippery alleyways to the community hall near the football field at the top of the hill in Kosovo. Inside the hall, a group of about 50 agitated young men had gathered holding hastily constructed placards stating 'don't use our name', 'we don't let ourselves be used' and 'don't use us' in Kiswahili. When I entered the room, the murmur instantly stopped, and Blue and a young man with dreadlocks called Mumo told me what was happening. Mumo and a few others had been

founding members of a local CBO (the name and other information is withheld for privacy reasons), which had a few bright blue containers on the fringe of the football field near Depot. From these containers, the CBO claimed to support children and youths (and sometimes women) with music and arts workshops, sporting activities and vocational training. I had often seen the containers, but thus far had received conflicting stories about the project's activities and had never actually met anyone from the CBO. Mumo was involved in the incident that led to the protest. He had asked Simon, the director and main founder of the CBO, if he could borrow a camera to cover a community event. Simon had flat out refused, which brought to the surface the already simmering frustrations felt by Mumo and a few other founding members with regard to Simon and 'his' resource centre (the few blue containers). Mumo explained that Simon had started the CBO with him and a few other young men from Kosovo a little over six years ago, after which Simon had obtained a scholarship to pursue a Master's degree at a university in England. According to Mumo, he and the remaining leaders, as they described themselves, continued the project's activities and Simon raised funds while in England. When Simon returned, the other leaders felt increasingly side-lined from the decision-making, and told me that they often expressed their concerns over funds and overall transparency. Simon did not return to live in Kosovo, but instead found housing in Muthaiga, one of the richest neighbourhoods in Nairobi, just across Thika Road near Mathare. Mumo explained bitterly that he and the others involved in the project did not receive any pay, and were only compensated for their time and input on a piecemeal basis. The fact that Simon drove a car, lived in a very wealthy neighbourhood and did not disclose any details about funds while they continued to volunteer at the CBO without pay had triggered their suspicions. Simon's refusal to let Mumo use the CBO resources to take pictures of a community event was evidently the last straw.

Mumo and the other leaders gathered near the containers with a steel bar cutter to cut open the large padlocks securing the container doors, and news soon spread to other young men in Kosovo. Their friends from Kosovo, most of whom were Ruff Skwad gang members, joined them, and a few suggested setting fire to the containers. Blue soon realised that the situation would quickly spin out of control, and instead proposed meeting at the community hall and summoning the deputy chief to hear their concerns. I arrived just before the deputy chief, and Mumo and Blue asked me to conduct an online search on the CBO on my Smartphone. This provided them with information on how Simon presented the CBO to the world so that they could compare it to the way they experienced the organisation's operations on the ground. We stumbled upon an interview in which Simon claimed to have helped 20,000 youths in Mathare, which caused some laughter. Indeed, when they presented their case to the deputy chief, the men stated that they could not name a single person in Mathare who had benefitted from the CBO other than by occasionally taking part in a few sporting and arts activities.

The deputy chief heard the case. He seemed to be on the side of Mumo and his colleagues, and referred the matter to the chief because, as he said, he did not have the right to settle such major cases on his own. A few days later, a second meeting was held at

the 'chief's camp' (the chief's office on the fringe of Mathare near Huruma), and Simon was asked to disclose all of the information he held about past and present funds. I could not attend this meeting, because the chief had approached me a few weeks earlier and demanded a bribe, and Kingi, who knew him well, advised me to stay out of his way. Indeed, according to Kingi and others, the chief could still obstruct my research project, even if I had all the right documents. I was later told by Mumo and Blue that Simon had failed to deliver the financial records, and this had triggered a protest among the 30 or so young men present at the meeting. A few had again wanted to set fire to the containers, to which threat Simon had told them calmly to go ahead, but that they would face legal repercussions if they did. Mumo told me that they thought Simon knew the law better than them, and his remark had struck a raw nerve in terms of the fear that most young ghetto men harboured in relation to the police and the criminal justice system. I never met Simon and could not verify his side of the story, as he only attended the meeting at chief's camp, and not those held inside Kosovo. According to Mumo and Blue, Simon had bribed the chief, as he only received a warning to be more transparent in future and pay Mumo and the other leaders a salary instead of a stipend. An hour later, I met some of the men who had seemed so powerful during the first meeting. Now, they sat on an old mud-stained placard in front of the beach pub looking utterly defeated. I asked them if they would continue their protest, but they told me that they feared being arrested by the Administrative Police (AP). According to Mumo, Simon never disclosed the financial records or offered to pay more salary, and Mumo and the others gradually found other organisations to work for. I was puzzled, because on many other occasions young men had often faced the AP, and even the GSU, and had not been deterred by tear gas, guns and arrests. Blue explained that this situation differed from, for instance, the demonstration and looting spree that had followed the rejection of the garbage project by the shop owners. Simon was known to have contacts with highly-placed individuals in the government, and the young ghetto men felt intimidated by his education, national and international network, and display of confidence. They had backed off, Blue said, because they had expected certain defeat. Simon's contacts surpassed their own, and he was close to the area's MP, Bishop Wanjiru. She was the same contact that most of the young ghetto men from Kosovo would normally approach to help them get out of jail.

### **Between certain defeat and small victories**

The section above highlights that young ghetto men had to meticulously weigh potential risks against potential gain when deciding whether to openly resist 'being used' or accept defeat. Daily moments of such decision-making included nightly police checkpoints, harassment by their bosses and being ridiculed or openly obstructed by fellow residents. One incident in particular had caused great fear among the Ruff Skwad gang members, and had made them more cautious when it came to engaging in open resistance.

A few months after the protest against the CBO, Blue and a large group of about 30 Ruff Skwad gang members had violently clashed with older businessmen and women who controlled the illegal electricity business in Kosovo. The incident started when a few gang

members had secretly disconnected all of the illegal networks and removed crucial equipment. The group gathered to face the angry business owners, and demanded that the illegal electricity business be controlled by youths instead of old men and women, many of whom lived in big houses outside the ghetto. This time, Blue was the ring leader, and he later shared with me the following:

It is not good, they control these businesses and we don't have a chance. They are not ghetto, they live in *ocha* ('the rural area' in Sheng), and have big houses. We have nothing. They came from ghetto, yes, but now they are not part of the community, now they have to give us a chance to build a future.

Blue is again showing here how imaginings of ghettoness and the community were often conflated. This is illustrated by the multiple definitions of the word *mtaa* in local Sheng, which can mean neighbourhood, ghetto, community and neighbourhood area. Similar to the young men fighting over the Manoki toilet, these men regarded wealthier (former and current) ghetto residents as no longer belonging to the community and, therefore, as having lost the right to monopolise resources. The wealthier business owners called in the AP and more than 30 gang members were arrested on the spot and charged with destroying private (albeit illegal) property. One year on, this case was still going on in court, and every now and then the gang members had to attend and pool money to bribe officers in order to avoid a jail sentence. They have so far used up a major chunk of their daily resources to keep jail sentences at bay, and they are still not free of this threat. The constant anticipation and use of resources caused a lot of stress, and these men continued to feel "abused", in their words, and frustrated with the limited space they had to change situations of oppression. Incidents like these made these men very careful in choosing when to continue a protest or when to back off.

At other times, protests had the potential to turn into small victories, and were an important outlet for pent-up frustrations. In late March 2011, I was sitting with a few Ruff Skwad gang members in the beach pub when Blue entered and told a few of these young men to go with him. He told me to look out the window (a carved open square in the plywood wall) and watch the hill. He laughed mysteriously. The group went out, and minutes later I saw them climbing up the cliffs to 'Nigeria' while picking up rocks from the ground. Malik stood beside me and explained that the AP had become "greedy, and now they come every day to ask for *hongo* ('bribe' in Sheng)." The agreement between the drug bosses and the AP and other police forces denoted that these police forces would allow the dealers to sell heroin on the field in return for a weekly bribe. Two AP officers had recently breached this agreement, as they had visited the field almost every day over the past few weeks to demand money. As a result, the increased demand for bribes had reduced the daily earnings of the dealers because they had to compensate for the overall losses. Their bosses held them responsible for safeguarding the agreement on the ground. I quickly realised that the young gang members were out to punish the AP officers for their 'greed' by throwing rocks at them. Suddenly, in shock, Malik and I heard shouts and what we

realised were gun shots. Then we saw a few gang members running down the hill, kicking up dust in their trail. Blue and two others entered the dimly-lit pub out of breath and with a twinkle in their eyes, and they talked all at once to describe what had happened. Amidst laughter, they explained that they had thrown stones at the two policemen who had responded by shooting at them. Blue told me that the young men had quickly found refuge in the labyrinth of alleyways behind Nigeria after they had hit one of the police officers on the head with one of the rocks. All of them felt satisfied with the outcome, and were certain that this would teach the two AP officers to keep to their side of the agreement.

Then, out of the blue, panic erupted inside the bar: news had reached the group of men that the two AP officers had arrested one of the gang members. A commotion ensued until an hour later the allegedly arrested man walked in triumphantly showing his handcuffed wrists to the cheering crowd inside the pub. Apparently, he had jumped from the cliff and escaped using the same route as the others, with the police getting hopelessly lost in the alleyways. A sigh of relief echoed through the bar. Yet, I was still worried and asked how they would remove the handcuffs. Blue laughed at my naivety and took his keychain from his pocket before casually using a key to click open the restraints. I later discovered that many gang members carried a master key to open handcuffs, as well as a padlock master key, because they never knew when these would come in handy. The AP policemen did, however, occasionally continue to ask for higher bribes and clash with the drug dealers. Sometimes, the young men won, while on other occasions they were arrested or even killed. Unfortunately, stray bullets also now and again hit other residents by accident (Star Reporter 2013; Mukinda 2014), which demonstrates that the risks involved in resisting oppressive structures extended to include all of the residents in Mathare, and did not just affect protestors. Such accidental deaths greatly influenced the already tense relationship between gangs and the community, and the gang members thus carefully assessed which situations called for resistance and would potentially lead to small victories. This all demonstrates that despite such high risks, these young men at times found creative and humorous ways to engage in overt resistance. The ghetto set-up (for instance through its labyrinthine alleyways) to some extent provided these men (and other ghetto residents) with a safety-net against external and oppressive forces. They skilfully used the means they had to, at times, resist oppression and claim power, even if fleetingly and in face of highly restrictive contexts.

### **Playing 'thugs for hire'**

Considering the high risks involved in overt resistance, it is not difficult to understand why most young ghetto men were more often engaged in covertly trying to manipulate power structures to their own end as part of their social navigation struggles. Blue's life story (see previous chapter) has already revealed that such strategies can eventually lead to positions of power in the long-run, and thus often proved to be far more effective than overt resistance. One of these strategies was a practice I call 'playing thugs for hire', and which denotes young men who pretended to be hired by a particular politician, whereas in reality they managed to work for four or five candidates at once. These men played with the

dominant label of 'ghetto boys' to hoodwink politicians and lead them to believe that it was the youths who were being duped and were hired by them alone. Having observed several elections in Mathare over the past decade, it was remarkable to see how young men, some of whom did not even have voting cards, navigated the campaign period with pockets full of cash. Kingi explained:

For many, it is like *vibarua* ('day labour' in Kiswahili). No, it is not about this candidate or that candidate. Yes, they have their own candidate, in their heart, but it does not matter for money. You see them give security in Kosovo to one candidate, and handover to Taliban gang members in 4B, for the same, same candidate. They are rivals, but in campaign they can work together. The next day they work for another candidate, ha ha. I did that, all men do that. It is a time to make good money.

Particularly during campaign season, relationships of power were under constant negotiation, and navigating current power plays between different authorities was a skill that all social groups learned quickly in order to survive in the ghetto. How did young ghetto men navigate these perilous but potentially advantageous political relationships to their own end?

One sunny and lazy Thursday afternoon in August 2010, Blue and I were sitting outside the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub when he received a call. He spoke rapidly in Kikuyu, and almost shouted in agreement before he hung up. He looked at me excitedly: "Okay it was the councillor, Franko, so he is asking me to send some youth, because he has some work for them." He gave me details of an upgrading project the city council was currently undertaking in Eastleigh, which sounded very similar to Kazi kwa Vijana, a government-initiated youth employment scheme (*see also* Majiwa 2011; Kasarani Youth Congress 2009). "Yah, it is like Kazi kwa Vijana, he has some work for some youth there, for a few days." This was a different set-up to Kazi kwa Vijana, which project generally hired youths for a period of three months. I asked him why the councillor had called him specifically, and not a village elder or a youth group leader. Blue boasted that he knew most young men in Kosovo, and that they listened to him. According to Blue, Councillor Frank was well aware of his pull among Kosovo's young men. The councillor must have had a specific interest in strengthening his ties to the Ruff Skwad gang, and to Blue in particular, and I began to see Blue in a different light. Indeed, I had known him for four years and had only now found out that he was connected to highly-placed officials, some of whom, like Frank, even had his cell phone number on speed dial. I realised that this gave Blue powers beyond those of the Ruff Skwad gang, as he was able to connect with both gang and non-gang members from Kosovo through these high-ranking politicians and to the myriad of opportunities they usually had to offer. Blue was paid a commission, a "broker's fee" as he dubbed it, for mobilising youths, and in passing mentioned that he sometimes also did a different kind of work for the councillor, without elaborating further. In the run-up to the by-elections for

the Starehe MP, which were held on 20 September 2010 (Nation Team 2010), I learned even more about Blue's talents in navigating the political process to his own advantage.

A few days before the elections were held, we climbed the cliffs to Nigeria and crossed Juja Road near Al Badr. Blue and Malik walked side by side and talked to each other in the Kikuyu language, not to purposely shut me out, but because this was the tongue they normally used with each other. In this they stood out, as most young men preferred to talk Sheng, although Blue liked to talk either the Kikuyu language or 'pure' Kiswahili (Swahili sanifu or mufti). We entered Eastleigh and went into a building near St. Theresa's Church, where the curried aroma of Enjera, an Ethiopian dish, guided us to a small restaurant on the first floor. Our mouths watered. We shared one big plate between the three of us, and I asked Blue and Malik to talk in Sheng so I could follow their conversation. They laughed and apologised. Blue was sharing a story on how he had signed up with the local team of Bishop Wanjiru, but had also registered as an official for some of the other candidates. "I am for Mama (Bishop Wanjiru), that is my personal vote, but I work for other politicians as well. They don't compare lists, so they don't know and it is good money." In the weeks before the election, Blue organised security for the different candidates when they visited Kosovo. He also assisted when their local representatives organised the distribution of packages of food or held other events that were geared towards bolstering the reputation of a particular candidate. At other times, he was given money to distribute among youths to persuade them to vote for a particular candidate or was asked to organise and pay a group of young men to attend political gatherings outside the ghetto. Today, he was very excited, because one candidate had given him 10,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 100 Euros) to disperse among potential young voters, but he had kept the money himself. He shared with us what he would do with this money: "Ha ha, this to boost my business, to have something for a rainy day." I asked him whether it was dangerous to keep the money, and he waved away my concerns by explaining that close to election day most candidates were throwing money around and stopped keeping proper records. He had done this before, but Malik looked concerned and told us that he would never do it, because politicians had connections with highly-placed police officers. As a consequence, if they suspected you of misusing their money they could have you arrested and jailed instantly. Blue was unmoved by his words, which surprised Malik. He later told me that even though Blue was his best friend, he knew very little about him and at times suspected that he was more connected to powerful people than he normally let on.

Early in 2011, in the years before the general elections in 2013, the Ruff Skwad gang revived its youth group and began to meet every Thursday evening to discuss and plan new income-generating activities. It did not take long before politicians began to approach the group. The elections were postponed three times (from August 2012 to December 2012 to, finally, 3 March 2013) following political debates about the legal period of office for the coalition government of Raila and Kibaki. As a result, the campaigns stretched out over three years, and groups in Mathare took advantage by strengthening their relationships with different politicians. Several politicians established a connection with the Ruff Skwad gang members by giving sums of money (varying from 10,000 to 50,000 Kenyan Shillings –

from approx. 100 to 500 Euros) to its savings scheme. Most of these donations were made behind the scenes, but one of the politicians who openly associated with the Ruff Skwad gang was Kariuki (nicknamed K1), the son of the incumbent Starehe MP, Bishop Wanjiru. Apart from a substantial donation to the savings group, K1 regularly gave gang members tickets to reggae concerts and football matches. His mother was competing for the Nairobi Governor's seat, which was later changed to the senate seat due to her lack of adequate educational credentials (Ng'etich 2013). Accordingly, K1's path was clear to use his mother's support base in Mathare in his campaign to become the MP. At the same time, Mathare became its own constituency (Muiriru 2014), and this markedly upped the stakes for local groups in terms of building relationships with politicians. Ferdinand Waititu, the MP for Embakasi, was another politician who overtly developed a link with the Ruff Skwad gang. He was a controversial political figure who was rumoured to have connections with the Mungiki gangs in Kayole (which was located in Embakasi), and this sat uneasily with many local residents in Kosovo. Waititu (nicknamed Tito or YT2 by the Ruff Skwad gang members) was competing to become the Governor of Nairobi, but for a party other than that of Bishop Wanjiru. He not only gave the Ruff Skwad gang large sums of money for a new poultry project, but also invited gang members and, interestingly, also their mothers to his house for parties or to use his private gym.

It did not stop there. In June 2012, the bridge that connected Kosovo with the rest of Mathare collapsed, killing one pedestrian and wounding three children who had been playing near to the scene. For weeks, people struggled to move back and forth, carrying water, groceries and children on their backs while dangerously balancing on the broken railings or wading through the dirty water. In the popular discourse, the collapsed bridge soon became the epitome of the basic neglect of Mathare by government institutions. The bridge was next to the pub, and the Ruff Skwad gang saw an opportunity to 'give back' to the community, approaching Waititu who then funded the construction of a new bridge in August 2012. Building a new bridge was a symbolic way for MP Waititu to differentiate himself from other politicians such as John Kamande, the former Starehe MP, who had started projects (such as bridges), but had left constructions unfinished after being elected. It also helped Waititu to compare himself with Bishop Wanjiru, who had built several public toilets in her time as MP, and show local residents that he too had their interests at heart and was capable of allocating government funds to upgrading local facilities. Building the bridge thus became a useful metaphor for illustrating his line of politics, in which he positioned himself as a man of the ghettos who represented the 'street' in national politics. Waititu declared that he aimed to connect (bridging) the marginalised ghetto with the booming city where decisions were made and where the 'national cake' was divided. Interestingly, during her failed bid for the senate, Bishop Wanjiru also worked closely with the Ruff Skwad gang. Moreover, she too constructed another bridge in Kosovo, right next to the one built by Waititu, using government funds to mobilise her support base in this part of Mathare.

To my surprise, this time round it was not just Blue, but also Malik, who was at the forefront of arranging short- and long-term partnerships between the Ruff Skwad group

and these and other politicians and authorities. Malik told me that he hoped to help the Ruff Skwad youth group to develop several collective business projects together. With the money from the various candidates, the group had built its own chicken farm next to Blue's private chicken farm behind the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub. Yet, like all other previous ventures, this business earned nowhere enough for members to leave the gang. After the elections, the attention and concomitant money flows from the political candidates came to an abrupt halt, and the commitment of the members gradually dissipated. A few continued to look after the chickens, but none really believed that the farm would ever help them substantially. This all shows that during certain junctures of heightened uncertainty, such as in the run-up to elections, young ghetto men were able to fleetingly navigate the power relations that were in flux to their own advantage. These periods could last from a few months to even several years, but they always ended. As soon as their services were no longer needed to further the agenda of political candidates or other authority figures, these young men lost the space to manipulate these relationships. A few, like Blue, continued to play a major role, but others depended on key figures like him to access resources during periods of low intensity. This begs the question as to whether groups of young men could build more lasting ties with NGOs. However, in my 16 years of research, I have only come across one group of young ghetto men that has been able to overtly resist a powerful NGO and thrive as a group irrespective of political support.

### **The monopolising power of an international NGO**

The reach for resisting powerful NGOs and the limited chances of achieving this are well illustrated by the case of a group of young ghetto men from Bondeni who were successful in setting up their own vibrant CBO. These young men, and many other community residents, considered this to be the ultimate form of resistance against the alleged exploitation of Mathare residents by this and other large, foreign-led NGOs. I will first provide a background to the NGO at issue, before analysing how and why this particular group of young men became successful in resisting it over the long term.

The Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) was founded by Bob Munro, a Canadian national, in 1987 to engage youths from the Mathare ghetto villages in sporting activities and ghetto clean-ups. From the mid 1990s onwards, hundreds of girls, boys and young men (young women were mostly absent in the different MYSA leagues) in Mathare played in MYSA teams that were organised according to age and gender. Junior teams were comprised of individual members from different ghetto villages. In contrast, the senior ('under-18' and 'over-18') teams within the MYSA leagues were mainly based around existing formal and informal youth groups and gangs. Initially, a third of the junior teams were comprised of girls, but girls rarely made it to more senior teams and the number of these teams has been declining in Mathare following a cut in funds from international sponsors. Conversely, the junior boys teams thrived and led to the formation of circles of friends in specific ghetto villages such as Kosovo and Bondeni that gradually evolved into *bazes* (of both youth groups and gangs), or vice versa, around which most senior teams were later established.

During the football season, 'under-18' and 'over-18' teams of young men from all over Mathare competed against each other almost every weekend in the different MYSA leagues. Most games were organised at the Police Depot football field near Kosovo. Malik often explained to me that football was an important space for groups of young men (gangs, youth groups) to build their reputations in relation to each other. During the frequently organised league games, tournaments and friendly matches, teams from all of the ghetto villages in Mathare interacted regularly at the football field. During such encounters, players commented loudly on other teams' strips, their physical state (being drunk, hung-over or having pot-bellies) and performance. The atmosphere was almost always friendly, albeit with an edge. Emotions ran high because a lot was at stake, and frustration, anger and rejoicing rapidly replaced each other. Mostly, it was just great fun for players and spectators alike, an important outlet for pent-up stress, and a unique opportunity to demonstrate skills and forge new bonds of brotherhood.

Over the years, MYSA expanded its football leagues to encompass 15 other zones in Nairobi in addition to the long-existing Mathare zone. This allowed the winning teams from the Mathare zone to compete with winning teams from other neighbourhoods. The expansion of the MYSA leagues had both negative and positive effects on local teams in Mathare. It drastically reduced the opportunities for local players to make it to the teams that visited the Netherlands and Norway annually to train and compete with local football teams. Furthermore, MYSA began to concentrate more on developing facilities such as libraries in zones other than Mathare in order to build a rapport with local groups there. What is more, it now had to divide its sponsorships and other rewards for participation and leadership among a growing number of contenders. The fact that MYSA continued using the word Mathare in its name (that is Mathare Youth Sports Association – MYSA), even though its attention seemed to have shifted to other zones, offended many Mathare residents and has led to multiple demonstrations over the years. Nevertheless, a positive impact of all of these changes within the MYSA Leagues was that the players from winning teams played against and interacted with teams from other zones. As might be expected, this added to their status with respect to other Mathare teams.

Nonetheless, the distraught relationship between MYSA and residents in Mathare worsened over the years and culminated in several volatile demonstrations and strikes. Ever since MYSA started its work, but especially after the expansion of zones, Mathare has been rife with rumours about corruption and sex scandals in connection to this NGO. Strikes were often organised in response, and entailed the refusal to participate in MYSA league games and preventing MYSA officials, visitors and donors from gaining access to the ghetto. In general, these strikes could last for more than three months. They usually ended after a while, because people just really missed playing football. In the meantime, the MYSA officials tried to sooth the protestors with promises that were never kept, and so these assurances did little to resolve the standoffs. On the contrary, the meetings between MYSA officials, football players and volunteer coaches during the strikes were more often than not tense and unproductive. The direct reason for Mathare players and volunteer coaches going on strike was often the unreasonably high bribes they had to pay MYSA officials to

access annual trips to Europe and other opportunities. As a consequence, it was unlikely that the officials who posed the problem, according to the protestors, would be part of the solution. The tensions between MYSA and Mathare's residents also emanated from a deeper problem that had more to do with unmet expectations than with alleged corruption. Most organisations in Mathare were permeated with corruption, and sex scandals were not uncommon. To explain this underlying layer of tension, I now turn to describing the origins of the group of young ghetto men who founded their own CBO as a mode of resistance to the monopolistic powers of MYSA.

### **True ghetto: fashioning access through styling the body**

The Destiny club started out as a MYSA football team that was founded by a group of teenage friends from the Manoki area of Bondeni Village in the early 2000s. The young boys went to school, but were also engaged in youth groups, illegal alcohol distilling, petty theft and other hustle practices. Most of them fended for themselves, even if they were all still below the age of 15. The Destiny football team registered as a youth group in March 2006. The bordering on celebrity status that Destiny's leaders enjoyed in Mathare derived from the success of the football team in the MYSA league, and from the fact that the youth group operated from a brightly painted office in a stone building on the Eastleigh-side (and not the ghetto-side) of Juja Road. This marked these young men out as being of a different class to most youth group leaders who operated from small and dark iron sheet offices inside Mathare. Their status was also based on the different projects they ran inside the ghetto (varying from clean-ups to educational programmes). Yet, it was their mode of dress, sense of fashion and personal conduct that particularly triggered widespread admiration, envy and sometimes contempt among many young men (and women) in Mathare. Many Ruff Skwad gang members, for instance, told me that Destiny's leaders displayed a level of *swag* that cast a shadow over all other groups, including them, and as such they were ranked the highest of all *majanja* ('street wise hustlers' in Sheng). This also shows that gangs and youth groups were not considered to be that different from each other, especially in relation to group rankings (see Chapter 4).

Destiny profited from changing times in NGO involvement in Mathare in unexpected ways. Over the past decade, more and more educational and socio-economic opportunities opened up for youths in Mathare as a result of the work of MYSA and other NGOs (such as NairobiBits) that often started operating through MYSA. Destiny was one of the first groups to benefit from this widening network of international organisations and volunteers working inside the ghetto. Destiny's football players successfully navigated the rapidly-changing social landscape in Mathare, using their styled bodies to connect with the growing number of international volunteers visiting the ghetto. Like many other local MYSA league players, they volunteered as referees for younger teams or as coordinators of clean-ups. MYSA staff members increasingly noticed the Destiny players because of their ability to connect with the international volunteers who regularly came to work at MYSA. As a result, they were almost always appointed to help newly-arrived volunteers from outside Kenya in terms of getting acquainted with the MYSA projects in Mathare and with the ghetto itself.

One of the Destiny 'tour guides' was even jokingly called King Mswati (after the infamous King of Swaziland who married a new and additional wife each year), because he could often be seen walking in Mathare with a string of predominantly young, blonde female visitors and volunteers (mostly from Norway) in his trail. In 2005, Destiny widened its network among its international contacts when an American volunteer/photographer invited a few of its players to a party organised by UN interns. From then on, Destiny's players became frequent visitors to these parties, and developed romantic relationships and friendships with several of these interns.

These young men were considered (by men and women in Mathare and by international volunteers/UN interns) to be very handsome, and they knew it. Indeed, from the moment they became part of the UN-intern network of friends in Nairobi, some of them visibly started to tweak their good looks to increase their appeal to their new friends by growing fashionable dreadlocks and wearing stylish apparel from upscale brands that showed off their muscular bodies. Through their friendships and romantic relationships with UN interns and MYSA volunteers, the Destiny players established a solid support network in various Western countries. This enabled them to found their own youth group in 2006 that they also named Destiny after the football team. Since then, several Destiny youth group leaders have travelled to and worked in Europe and Canada. Many have had long-term relationships with white women, and a few even married their white girlfriends and eventually migrated to Europe and Canada. Walking through the ghetto, the Destiny youth group leaders oozed confidence, and their level of *swag* had even bestowed on them the title 'celebs'; they were taken as the true embodiment of ghetto celebrities.

As brought out by Malik in the above section, football was a key space for groups of young ghetto men to interact and perform *swag*. It was also a political space where young men like the Destiny leaders claimed power in relation to MYSA. Over the years, a few Destiny players had been recruited by MYSA to play for its professional team Mathare United, which played in the Kenya Premier League. Most young football players in Mathare longed to play professionally, as this was perceived to be one of the few pathways out of the ghetto. As a consequence, the recruitment of Destiny players to the professional team further underpinned their celebrity status in the ghetto. Yet, these young men increasingly felt taken advantage of by MYSA; according to them, MYSA took their photos and stories to raise funds for the professional team and for the training and community service activities within the different MYSA zones. However, the majority of the professional players in Mathare United did not come from Mathare, and those that did, such as the Destiny players, were only selected to play in professional games on a piecemeal basis. Fed up with the empty promises made by MYSA, the Destiny players eventually left Mathare United, pulled the Destiny football team out of the MYSA leagues and founded a new professional football team in 2009, which they dubbed True Ghetto.

From its onset, this team clearly positioned itself separately from MYSA by organising its own events and by demonstratively recruiting players only from Mathare. It initially used the name of an old team that most of the selected players used to play for to enable it to enter the Kenya Premier League at the first level (the Nairobi League). It then

changed its name to True Ghetto. The many residents I spoke to supported True Ghetto and perceived it to be a viable and promising alternative to the, in their eyes, corrupt ways that MYSA had used to operate in Mathare for the past ten years, which was a judgement that was later supported by the main donor organisation of MYSA (Strømme Foundation 2012). Malik and a few other Ruff Skwad players were chosen to play for the True Ghetto team. I sometimes accompanied them to Depot Field for the daily practice starting at 5PM and ending at sundown, mostly around 7PM. Malik's father had been a known MYSA coach in the Mathare zone, and had always aspired to personally guide teams to the Netherlands and Norway, but he never had been selected by MYSA staff members. He attributed this to the alleged corrupt nature of the selection processes (of both coaches and players) at MYSA that disproportionately affected Mathare more than other (more affluent) zones. He explained that, unlike contenders from more affluent zones, most candidates from Mathare could not afford the required bribes. As a result, he had never been able to build a career as a football coach despite volunteering at MYSA for more than a decade. He explained to me that his bitterness over lost opportunities at MYSA became his driving force to train True Ghetto for free, and hoped to guide this team to greater heights than the, in his eyes, fake Mathare United team promoted by MYSA. True Ghetto struggled to provide players with strips, lunch and transport, but despite its disadvantages compared to other teams in the same professional league they performed moderately well and got better as time went by.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter highlighted why groups of young men engaged in violent confrontations with groups of other ghetto residents. It also explained when and how such confrontations at times enabled these men to claim power in their own ways. There are many different reasons why young men shifted back and forth between enacting the roles of the provider (at home) or diligent worker (in relation to gang bosses) and the violent contestant. Many of these motives were tied to their desire to achieve senior manhood and emanated from a deep fear of becoming redundant in relation to women. This chapter showed that when young men felt that the navigation strategy of performing the provider and employee roles did not seem to lead to them attaining a higher social status as men, they charted other and commonly more violent strategies. In addition, their wives and mothers were more often than not economically more stable than them. Accordingly, even when men were able to achieve senior manhood, this position remained highly contingent and necessitated a continuous struggle on their part to maintain this role. The chapter also revealed again how it was almost impossible for these men to develop collective income-generating activities outside the gang structures.

On the one hand, groups of young men were locally taken as security, day labourers and helping hands, yet on the other the history of the Mungiki groups had made the majority of residents suspicious. It was a catch-22 situation. To most, allowing groups of young men to develop would diminish the powers of gang bosses, local business people and village elders, whereas curbing these groups led to recurrent conflicts. Within these highly restrictive contexts, young men occasionally claimed power in their own ways by

navigating political relationships during election campaigns to their own advantage, yet this chapter also showed that only a few have been successful in the long-term. Furthermore, groups of young men carefully assessed when and how to claim space and resist oppression by the police, peers, bosses, NGOs and community residents. Met with direct acts of violence in everyday encounters, groups of young men too often responded with their own direct acts of violence, but on the whole only managed to sporadically gain small victories in the process. On a rare occasion, a group of young men has been able to move beyond the realm of small victories and establish itself as a CBO while resisting one of the most powerful NGOs in Mathare. Unique about this group was that its members skilfully navigated their social relationships with UN interns to their own benefit by performing *swag*, and without resorting to violence.

As it happened, the Manoki clash did not occur in direct relation to elections. Nevertheless, this incident was tied to changing power dynamics and, as such, to local politics, albeit less obviously so. All of the tensions and conflicts described in this chapter came from feelings of exclusion based on specific intersecting gender, age and class identifications. Remarkably, ethnicity was not at the fore of these conflicts, and this gives important nuances to the dominant use of ethnicity as the sole trope with which to understand violence in this ghetto. The majority of young, male challengers identified as Kikuyu, and fought the women who managed the public toilet, the majority of whom also identified as Kikuyu. Other axes of identification were clearly at play, such as gender, locality, socio-economic status and age. The question thus remains, however, as to how standoffs, clashes and conflicts between gangs and other social groups would be framed if they had taken place during election times. Probably, the dominant media representations would have explained these junctures of violence through a trope that was most familiar to them, notably ethnicity. The question I take up in the next chapter is: from the perspectives of the local residents involved, when, why and how did ethnicity play a role in conflicts between residents and groups in Mathare that arose in relation to political events?