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Gender and the Everyday Politics of Informality in African Cities

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Abstract

This paper explores how gender shapes the everyday politics of informality in African cities. It argues that informality is not a sign of disorder or economic failure but the central organizing logic of urban life, where survival, labor, and power are negotiated outside formal governance. Within this terrain, gender operates as a key determinant of access, visibility, and belonging. Women's participation in informal economies through trading, domestic work, and neighborhood organization reveals how they sustain urban livelihoods while navigating moral regulation, spatial exclusion, and economic precarity. The paper conceptualizes these practices as a *politics of survival*: subtle, embodied acts through which women claim space, security, and recognition in contexts of structural inequality. Their informal labor functions as both social infrastructure and political expression, reconfiguring the meanings of citizenship beyond legality or formal rights. By examining informality through a gendered lens, the paper rethinks African urban politics as a field of everyday negotiation, where care, reciprocity, and endurance form the foundations of city life and governance.

Keywords: everyday politics, citizenship, embodiment, survival

1. Introduction

Across African cities, informality is often understood as the pulse of urban life — a vast constellation of practices, relationships, and spatial improvisations that sustain millions of people. It has long ceased to be a marginal or residual feature of development; instead, it forms the foundation of what some scholars have described as "the actually existing city" (Roy, 2005). The informal sector is not a parallel economy running beside the formal one, nor a symptom of failure or underdevelopment. It is a social and political formation that structures how urban residents produce, exchange, and inhabit space. Within this formation, gender emerges as a constitutive dimension rather than a secondary variable. To understand informality without gender is to miss the everyday negotiations that define who belongs, who labors, and who governs within the uneven terrain of African urban modernity.

The entanglement of gender and informality is evident in the texture of daily life. Women constitute a significant portion of those working in informal economies, from street vendors in Accra and market traders in Lagos to domestic workers in Johannesburg. Yet their labor remains systematically undervalued and precarious. The informality of their work reflects the broader feminization of survival in African

cities, where the retreat of the welfare state and the expansion of neoliberal urban policies push women into self-reliance and entrepreneurial improvisation. In many contexts, women's economic agency is celebrated rhetorically as resilience or innovation, but in reality it often masks structural exclusion from property ownership, credit, and formal employment (Chen, 2012). Informality, in this sense, becomes a space of both empowerment and constraint, a domain where women forge livelihoods through ingenuity while navigating deep-rooted gender hierarchies.

Gender also mediates how informality is perceived and governed. The labeling of certain urban activities as "informal" or "illegal" is not neutral; it reflects moral and political judgments about whose practices are legitimate. The female street hawker or market trader is often seen not only as an economic actor but as a moral subject whose respectability, cleanliness, and comportment are publicly scrutinized. In cities such as Kampala or Nairobi, regulations around vending and public hygiene often function as tools for disciplining gendered bodies in space (Lindell, 2010). The spatial politics of informality thus reproduce colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in which women's presence in public space is tolerated only under conditions of docility and invisibility. At the same time, women appropriate these spaces to claim recognition and autonomy, challenging dominant spatial orders through their daily practices of presence and persistence.

To speak of the "everyday politics" of informality is to acknowledge that power in African cities operates through diffuse, mundane interactions rather than through formal institutions alone. Political theorists such as Partha Chatterjee (2004) have shown how marginalized urban residents engage in what he terms "political society," a realm of negotiation and accommodation outside the liberal ideal of citizenship. In African contexts, these informal politics take on distinctly gendered forms. Women traders organize collective savings groups, negotiate with local officials, and establish systems of mutual protection that function as micro-governments. These practices embody an alternative mode of urban citizenship rooted in relationality and care rather than in legal recognition. The politics of informality are therefore not only about evading the state but also about reshaping it from below through the quotidian labor of survival.

Urban informality also provides a lens for rethinking the relationship between visibility and power. For many women, the ability to occupy public space and conduct informal business is a form of political visibility. Yet this visibility carries ambivalence. The woman who sells fruit by the roadside is visible as an economic agent, but that same visibility exposes her to police harassment, gendered violence, and social stigma. The body becomes a site where political and moral orders intersect, marked by mobility, risk, and surveillance. Feminist geographers have noted that women's bodily presence in urban public spaces often destabilizes normative boundaries between the domestic and the civic (Nagar, 2014). In African cities, this destabilization is both a source of empowerment and a trigger for regulatory backlash, revealing how gendered bodies mediate the moral geography of urban space.

The gendered dynamics of informality are also inseparable from broader histories of urban governance and colonial legacies. Colonial administrations in Africa categorized populations according to race, class, and gender, defining who could inhabit the "planned" city and who was relegated to peripheral zones of informality. Postcolonial states inherited and reconfigured these logics of control, often treating informal settlements and economies as problems to be managed rather than as expressions of urban citizenship. The persistence of gendered inequality in informal economies thus reflects deeper continuities in the spatial organization of power. Women's informal labor is not merely an outcome of contemporary economic restructuring but part of a longer historical pattern in which their productive and reproductive roles have been spatially segregated and politically devalued.

At a theoretical level, examining gender within the everyday politics of informality challenges dominant narratives of urban development that privilege formal institutions and infrastructural projects as the engines of progress. The African city, viewed through this lens, is a space of improvisation, where social reproduction and collective survival depend on flexible arrangements that defy formal categorizations. Women's informal activities exemplify this improvisational politics. They reveal how urban residents create alternative infrastructures, of care, exchange, and information that sustain the

city when formal systems falter (Simone, 2004). These infrastructures are not only material but also affective, woven through trust, reciprocity, and shared vulnerability.

The gendered politics of informality also invite a reconsideration of what counts as "political" in the first place. Traditional political theory associates politics with the visible realm of the state, parties, and laws. Yet the daily negotiations of market women, the collective savings schemes of domestic workers, and the informal childcare networks in urban neighborhoods all constitute forms of political practice. They embody what Asef Bayat (2010) terms "the politics of the ordinary," where people enact citizenship through acts of endurance, cooperation, and quiet resistance. These practices challenge the binary between public and private, showing that the home, the market stall, and the street corner are all arenas of political life.

To deepen the understanding of informality's gendered dimensions, it is crucial to situate these practices within the moral economies that regulate urban belonging. Informality in African cities is sustained not only by economic necessity but also by social expectations around kinship, respectability, and care. Women's informal labor often carries the moral weight of sustaining households and communities, which in turn legitimizes their presence in public space even as it confines them to certain roles. The everyday politics of informality are thus embedded in a moral economy of gendered obligation, where survival and virtue are intertwined.

In sum, the informal city is a gendered city. It is a space where inequalities of labor, visibility, and authority are produced and contested through everyday interactions. Gender shapes not only who participates in informal economies but also how informality itself is understood, governed, and lived. The study of African urban informality must therefore move beyond questions of legality or regulation to examine the intimate politics of gender that animate the city's informal lifeworlds. This essay approaches informality as both a structure of constraint and a field of creative possibility, arguing that within the precarious spaces of African cities, women's everyday practices of survival and negotiation constitute a deeply political reimagining of urban life.

2. Informality as a Gendered Terrain

2.1 The Gendered Logic of Urban Informality

Urban informality in African cities operates as a complex mode of life and governance rather than as a space of simple absence. The informal economy is woven into the texture of the city, shaping how labor, space, and survival are organized. Yet this informality is not neutral. It is profoundly gendered in its logic and operation, structuring the possibilities available to women and men differently. Women often enter informal economic activities not through choice but through structural exclusion from formal employment, access to capital, or property ownership. Informality becomes both a constraint and a strategy, a means of survival that simultaneously reproduces gendered inequalities.

Scholars such as Sylvia Chant (2008) have described the feminization of poverty and informality in urban Africa, where the decline of formal job opportunities and the retrenchment of public welfare have disproportionately affected women. Informal work offers flexibility that accommodates the reproductive labor women are expected to perform in the household, yet this same flexibility becomes a mechanism of exploitation, erasing the boundaries between domestic and economic labor. A woman who sells cooked food in Accra's Makola market often does so while caring for children, negotiating with suppliers, and maintaining kinship obligations. Her productivity is sustained by invisible labor that remains unrecognized within economic statistics and policy frameworks (Chen, 2012).

The gendering of informality thus lies not only in who participates in informal economies but also in how the value of labor is perceived. Men engaged in informal activities such as artisanal work or transport services are often framed as entrepreneurs, while women in similar precarious settings are seen as supplementary earners. This gendered discourse shapes the social legitimacy of informal livelihoods and determines whose activities are tolerated or criminalized. In cities like Lagos or Harare, street vending by women is subject to more moral policing than comparable male-dominated forms of informality, revealing the intersection of gender, class, and urban regulation (Lindell, 2010).

2.2 Gendered Space and Everyday Urban Geography

The spatial organization of African cities reflects deep-seated gender hierarchies. Public space, formal employment zones, and political arenas have historically been masculinized domains, while the household and community spaces are feminized. Informality disrupts these spatial boundaries by inserting women into public and semi-public spheres through markets, roadside vending, and neighborhood-based production. Yet the visibility of women in these spaces often provokes anxiety within patriarchal cultures that associate femininity with privacy, modesty, and domestic containment.

In marketplaces across West and East Africa, women navigate complex codes of conduct that regulate how they speak, dress, and move. The moral discourses that surround women's economic participation frequently cast them as both necessary and dangerous: they are the lifeblood of local commerce yet also potential transgressors of gender norms. The Ghanaian scholar Akosua Adomako Ampofo (2007) notes that market women in Accra are often portrayed in public discourse as loud, assertive, and unruly, traits that simultaneously earn them respect as successful traders and condemnation for stepping beyond prescribed gender roles. The informal market, then, becomes a stage for the performance of contested femininities.

Urban planning and state regulation reinforce these gendered spatialities. The eviction of informal traders under the guise of modernization projects disproportionately affects women, as they rely on small-scale trading for daily subsistence. The "beautification" of city centers, as seen in Nairobi's 2010 urban renewal campaigns, often targets female vendors while leaving male-dominated transport or construction informality largely unchallenged. These interventions expose the gendered selectivity of urban order-making. The informal city is tolerated only when it conforms to gendered and aesthetic ideals that align with middle-class and masculine visions of modernity.

2.3 Moral Economies and the Discipline of Respectability

The politics of respectability plays a crucial role in shaping women's participation in informal economies. Respectability, as theorized by scholars like Lynn Thomas (2003), refers to a moral framework through which African women negotiate public identity, sexual propriety, and social legitimacy. Within informal urban contexts, this framework manifests in the regulation of women's behavior by both community norms and state authorities. Women traders often face scrutiny not only for their business practices but also for their personal conduct. Their economic agency must be carefully balanced with moral propriety to avoid being labeled as wayward or immoral.

This moral surveillance functions as a form of governance that supplements formal regulation. In some Nigerian cities, for example, female hawkers are routinely harassed by local officials under accusations of indecency or obstruction, even though male traders occupy similar spaces. Such policing reflects deeper anxieties about female mobility and autonomy in urban space. The informal economy thus becomes a moral economy, where compliance with gendered expectations determines access to legitimacy, safety, and economic opportunity.

At the same time, women subvert these moral regimes through subtle strategies of negotiation. Market women cultivate networks of solidarity, draw upon kinship ties, and invoke maternal authority to legitimize their economic activities. By framing their labor as an extension of their duty to provide for their families, they reposition themselves as moral citizens rather than deviant actors. These rhetorical strategies reveal how moral discourses are not only restrictive but also generative, providing cultural resources for women to claim agency within constrained circumstances.

2.4 Gendered Infrastructures of Care and Exchange

AbdouMaliq Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" (2004) captures how informal networks constitute the social fabric of African cities. When viewed through a gendered lens, these infrastructures are sustained by women's labor of care, mediation, and relationship-building. Informal economies depend on trust, reciprocity, and reputation, qualities often cultivated through affective labor traditionally associated with femininity. Women organize rotating savings groups, manage neighborhood credit schemes, and coordinate supply chains that link rural producers with urban consumers. Their relational labor enables the circulation of goods and services that formal institutions fail to deliver.

The gendered nature of these infrastructures extends beyond economics into the realm of

social reproduction. Women's informal labor sustains not only households but also the wider urban system. They feed workers, provide childcare, and maintain social cohesion in neighborhoods characterized by instability. This dual role as economic actors and caregivers situates women at the heart of urban resilience. Yet their contribution remains undervalued precisely because it blurs the boundary between productive and reproductive work. The invisibility of this labor in policy discourses perpetuates a cycle where women bear the cost of maintaining the informal city without receiving commensurate recognition or protection.

The interdependence between informal economies and social reproduction suggests that informality cannot be analyzed solely through market logics. It must be understood as a social infrastructure shaped by gendered obligations and affective economies. This perspective aligns with feminist urban theory, which emphasizes care and interdependence as central to the functioning of cities (Tronto, 2013). The gendered infrastructures of informality reveal that survival in African cities depends not only on market exchange but also on the intimate labor of sustaining relationships and communities.

2.5 The Political Economy of Gendered Informality

The gendered terrain of informality is also embedded in broader political economies of neoliberal urbanism. Structural adjustment policies and market-oriented reforms have deepened the reliance on informal labor, particularly among women. State withdrawal from welfare provision has shifted the burden of social reproduction onto households and informal networks, reinforcing gendered inequalities. Women have become both shock absorbers of economic crises and engines of informal growth.

This dynamic produces a paradox. Development discourse often celebrates women as entrepreneurs and agents of empowerment while overlooking the systemic conditions that make informality their only viable option. Microfinance programs and "women's empowerment" initiatives frequently valorize small-scale entrepreneurship without addressing structural issues such as wage inequality, lack of childcare, or insecure tenure (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). The neoliberal city thus instrumentalizes women's resilience as a substitute for social policy, turning survival strategies into symbols of empowerment.

Gender also shapes the political relations that underlie informality. Women's associations and market cooperatives often mediate between informal workers and local authorities. These organizations provide platforms for collective bargaining and social support, yet they also reproduce hierarchies based on age, ethnicity, and class. Senior women, or "market queens," in cities like Accra wield considerable power in mediating market governance, but their authority can marginalize younger or migrant women traders. The gendered terrain of informality is therefore not uniformly emancipatory. It is a contested field where power circulates unevenly within and across gendered lines.

To conceptualize informality as a gendered terrain is to recognize that gender operates not as an external factor but as an organizing principle of urban life. The informal city is sustained by gendered labor, regulated through moral and spatial hierarchies, and politicized through everyday practices of negotiation and resistance. Women's participation in informal economies illuminates how urban citizenship in Africa is enacted not through legal status but through embodied presence, relational labor, and the management of risk. This perspective invites a rethinking of urban theory itself. The gendered politics of informality challenges developmentalist narratives that privilege formality, order, and state-centered governance. It reveals that the vitality of African cities lies precisely in the improvisational and relational practices that women sustain. By centering gender in the analysis of informality, scholars and policymakers can move beyond reductive binaries of legality versus illegality to engage with the lived realities that produce urban life. The gendered terrain of informality thus embodies both the inequalities and the creativity of African urbanism. It is within these informal spaces — markets, streets, and neighborhoods — that new forms of citizenship, solidarity, and political imagination emerge. Recognizing this terrain not as a site of deficiency but as a locus of social production transforms how the city itself is understood.

3. The Everyday Politics of Survival

3.1 Survival as a Political Condition

In African cities, survival is not simply a biological imperative but a political condition that defines the daily experience of millions of urban residents. The persistence of informality across the continent reflects not a lack of development but the normalization of precariousness as an enduring mode of urban life. For many, particularly women, survival in the city requires continuous negotiation with state authorities, market forces, and social hierarchies. These negotiations take the form of small, often invisible acts that sustain livelihoods, create networks of dependency, and redefine what it means to be a citizen in the city.

Feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Srilatha Batliwala (2011) argue that women's everyday acts of endurance and adaptation constitute a politics of survival, a set of practices that simultaneously reproduce and challenge existing power structures. In African urban contexts, this politics is not enacted through formal protest or organized mobilization but through ordinary acts of persistence that allow the poor to claim a foothold in the city. These acts are political because they intervene in the distribution of space, resources, and recognition, even when they are not articulated as political demands.

The capacity to survive amid structural marginalization requires improvisation and relational intelligence. A market trader in Harare must read the moods of local officials to anticipate crackdowns, adjust her prices according to fluctuating currency values, and maintain social ties that guarantee credit and protection. These acts of calibration are part of a repertoire of survival that produces its own form of governance. The urban poor, through their daily negotiations, generate informal systems of order that operate parallel to or in the absence of formal state institutions (Simone, 2004).

3.2 Negotiating State Power and Informal Authority

The relationship between the state and the informal economy in African cities is characterized by oscillation between repression and tolerance. State authorities depend on informal economies to absorb surplus labor and sustain urban livelihoods, yet they also seek to control and extract from them. This ambiguous relationship creates a space for continuous negotiation, in which women informal workers become both subjects of regulation and agents of self-governance.

Street traders in Nairobi, Accra, or Dar es Salaam routinely encounter municipal police who enforce by-laws through fines, confiscations, or eviction. These encounters reveal the gendered dimensions of urban power. Women are often targeted not only for violating trading regulations but also for transgressing moral codes associated with female propriety in public space (Lindell, 2010). Yet these same interactions also generate opportunities for informal compromise, where traders use humor, persuasion, or small bribes to negotiate temporary tolerance.

The anthropologist Janet Roitman (2005) conceptualizes such practices as "fiscal disobedience," where informal actors engage with state institutions in ways that blur the line between compliance and resistance. For women, these negotiations are rarely confrontational; they operate through subtle forms of accommodation that allow survival without open defiance. In this way, the everyday politics of survival is neither purely oppositional nor submissive. It is a pragmatic engagement with power that allows continuity amid uncertainty.

Within informal economies, authority is not limited to the state. Local market associations, neighborhood committees, and informal leaders often regulate activities and mediate conflicts. In Ghana, for example, market "queens" oversee the allocation of stalls, enforce pricing norms, and act as intermediaries between traders and municipal officials (Clark, 1994). These roles illustrate how women exercise authority within the informal sector, transforming spaces of economic vulnerability into sites of social governance. Yet this authority is also hierarchical. Senior women who have accumulated capital and connections may reproduce inequalities within the informal sphere, showing that survival politics is embedded in complex power relations.

3.3 Gendered Networks of Solidarity and Reciprocity

The informal economy thrives on social networks that provide mutual support in the absence of formal security. For women, these networks often take the form of rotating savings associations, neighborhood cooperatives, or religious groups that double as welfare systems. They function as both economic and emotional infrastructures, offering credit, information, and protection against crisis.

These networks embody what feminist economists have called the "social reproduction of the informal city" (Elson, 1999). Through them, women sustain not only their households but also the moral and economic fabric of urban life. A street vendor's ability to maintain her business depends as much on social trust as on market demand. Relationships with other traders, customers, and local officials determine her access to credit, safety, and information about inspections or price changes.

These gendered networks constitute an informal public sphere where women collectively deliberate and act, though often outside the language of formal politics. In cities like Maputo or Lusaka, women's cooperatives have evolved into powerful social actors that can mobilize resources for housing, sanitation, and education. Their activities challenge the conventional boundaries of citizenship, situating women as active producers of urban infrastructure rather than passive beneficiaries of state development.

The solidarity cultivated through informal networks also has an affective dimension. Shared experiences of vulnerability foster empathy and collective identity. Women who gather daily in markets or transport hubs develop a sense of communal belonging that counters the fragmentation of urban life. These affective bonds transform spaces of marginality into spaces of collective agency, where survival becomes a shared endeavor rather than an individual struggle.

3.4 The Moral and Symbolic Dimensions of Everyday Politics

The politics of survival is not only material but also moral and symbolic. Women's everyday activities in informal economies engage with dominant cultural narratives about respectability, motherhood, and citizenship. By sustaining households through informal labor, women enact forms of moral agency that legitimize their presence in public space. Their survival work becomes a claim to moral worth and social contribution, even when it defies state legality.

In many African societies, the figure of the market woman occupies an ambivalent position. She embodies industriousness and community service, yet she also represents disorder and unruliness. Public authorities invoke this ambivalence to justify periodic crackdowns on street trading under the pretext of restoring order or modernizing the city. These moral discourses shape how women navigate visibility and invisibility in urban life. They must remain visible enough to attract customers and invisible enough to avoid persecution. This delicate balance between exposure and discretion reflects the embodied politics of survival that structures their daily existence (Lindsay, 2003).

The moral dimension of survival politics extends to the household, where women's economic activities often intersect with patriarchal expectations. Women who earn income in the informal sector may face resistance from male partners or kin who view their independence as a threat to domestic authority. To sustain their legitimacy, many women frame their labor as an extension of maternal duty rather than as individual ambition. This strategic moral positioning allows them to claim economic agency within socially acceptable boundaries, revealing how moral narratives become tools of political navigation.

3.5 Everyday Resistance and the Limits of Visibility

While the everyday politics of survival emphasizes negotiation and adaptation, it also contains elements of resistance. Acts such as refusing to pay inflated market fees, organizing collective boycotts, or reoccupying cleared vending sites constitute subtle forms of defiance that challenge urban governance. These actions are rarely recognized as political because they do not conform to conventional models of protest. Yet they reshape the city by altering the balance of power between informal workers and authorities.

Asef Bayat (2010) describes these practices as "quiet encroachment," a form of non-movement through which marginalized groups gradually claim space and rights. Women's informal activities exemplify this mode of politics. By occupying pavements, transforming residential courtyards into workshops, or converting informal savings into micro-capital, they expand the boundaries of what is possible within the city. Their resistance is not dramatic but accumulative, producing slow transformations in the social and spatial order.

However, the politics of survival also has limits. The same strategies that enable endurance can entrench dependency and reproduce inequality. Negotiating with corrupt officials may secure temporary safety but reinforce systems of arbitrary power. Relying on kinship networks can provide stability yet exclude migrants or

outsiders who lack local connections. These contradictions underscore the ambivalence of survival politics: it is both a means of empowerment and a mechanism of containment.

3.6 Reframing Citizenship through the Everyday

The everyday politics of survival redefines citizenship as a lived practice rather than a legal status. For the urban poor, especially women, citizenship is enacted through participation in informal systems of exchange, mutual aid, and governance. It is a relational form of belonging grounded in contribution rather than entitlement.

Partha Chatterjee's notion of "political society" (2004) captures this transformation. Women who organize market associations or negotiate with municipal authorities act as citizens even without formal recognition. Their interactions with the state are characterized by tactical negotiation rather than rights-based claims, yet these engagements cumulatively reshape urban governance. In many African cities, local officials depend on informal women's organizations to maintain order and collect fees, blurring the line between formal and informal authority.

By centering survival as a political condition, this framework challenges liberal theories that equate citizenship with legality and institutional participation. It foregrounds the lived realities of those who make the city function through informal labor and social reproduction. Their agency lies not in overt resistance but in the capacity to endure, adapt, and create spaces of possibility within constraint.

4. Embodied Space and the Politics of Visibility

4.1 The Gendered City and the Production of Embodied Space

African cities are not neutral terrains. They are historically and socially produced spaces inscribed with hierarchies of gender, class, and power. The experience of the city is lived through the body, and this embodiment is shaped by the material and symbolic organization of urban space. Women's movements, gestures, and occupations of public space are constrained by expectations about femininity, morality, and propriety. The informal economy brings these dynamics into sharp relief because it requires women to occupy spaces not designed for them. The street, the marketplace, and the transport hub become arenas where gendered bodies are made visible, regulated, and politicized.

The concept of "embodied space" captures how power operates through the physical and sensory experience of the city. The urban environment disciplines bodies through architecture, policing, and social norms, but bodies also produce space through their everyday practices (Low, 2017). In African cities, women's bodies carry the burden of spatial contradiction: they are central to the functioning of the informal economy yet frequently treated as out of place within the modernist aesthetic of urban order. Their visibility in streets and markets signals economic vitality while simultaneously provoking anxiety about disorder, sexuality, and respectability.

Colonial planning practices reinforced these contradictions by producing spatial segregation that mirrored racial and gender hierarchies. The "planned" city was masculinized and Europeanized, while the "unplanned" or "native" quarters were feminized, associated with domesticity, reproduction, and informality (Mabin, 1998). Postcolonial urban governance inherited these binaries, perpetuating an aesthetic of control that continues to marginalize women in public spaces. The persistence of these spatial orders means that women's informal economic participation always involves negotiating visibility within landscapes shaped by historical exclusion.

4.2 The Female Body as a Site of Surveillance and Control

The gendered body in African cities is subject to intense forms of surveillance that regulate its presence and movement. Surveillance is not limited to the state; it operates through everyday gazes, gossip, and moral judgment. Women who work in public spaces are often scrutinized for their comportment, dress, and demeanor. A street vendor in Nairobi may face harassment from city officials who accuse her of littering, while also encountering moral criticism from passersby who associate her visibility with sexual impropriety. These layered forms of surveillance reflect how power is dispersed across institutional and social domains (Foucault, 1979).

The policing of women's bodies in informal economies extends beyond the enforcement of

by-laws. It functions as a broader mechanism for maintaining patriarchal order. Public visibility exposes women to harassment, arrest, and sometimes violence, particularly when their activities are framed as disruptive to urban aesthetics or morality. In Lagos, for example, municipal campaigns against street trading are often justified in terms of cleanliness or modernization, but they also serve to reassert control over women's presence in the city (Agunbiade, 2015). These interventions regulate not only space but also the moral boundaries of femininity, defining who has the right to be seen and under what conditions.

Yet the body is not only an object of regulation; it is also a medium of resistance. Women develop embodied tactics to navigate hostile environments: adjusting their dress to convey respectability, modulating their speech to command authority, or adopting protective postures that minimize exposure to harassment. These tactics reveal how embodiment becomes a form of urban intelligence. Through the body, women learn to sense, anticipate, and manage the shifting boundaries between visibility and vulnerability.

4.3 Visibility, Respectability, and the Performance of Gender

Visibility in the informal economy carries both power and danger. To be visible is to attract customers, assert presence, and claim legitimacy in public life. At the same time, visibility invites scrutiny and control. This ambivalence produces a politics of appearance, where women must continually negotiate how they present themselves in public spaces. The performance of respectability becomes a strategy for managing risk and asserting dignity in contexts where female visibility is morally charged.

The sociologist Florence Bénit-Gbaffou (2016) describes how women street traders in Johannesburg use dress and bodily comportment to craft respectability and distinction. By maintaining cleanliness, wearing modest clothing, and invoking maternal identities, they resist stigmatization and signal their belonging to the moral community of the city. Respectability, in this sense, is not passive conformity but an active performance that enables women to inhabit public space without being reduced to stereotypes of disorder or promiscuity.

In many African contexts, respectability is intertwined with the politics of class and age. Older women, especially those with established market reputations, can claim moral authority that shields them from some forms of harassment. Younger women, migrants, or unmarried traders, however, often occupy more precarious positions, their bodies read as morally ambiguous or threatening. These hierarchies within informality reproduce broader gendered and generational inequalities, showing that visibility is mediated not only by gender but by the intersection of multiple identities (Lindsay, 2003).

The performance of respectability also has a collective dimension. Market women often organize to defend their public image through rituals of cleanliness, religious expression, or charitable activities that frame their work as socially virtuous. These collective performances transform informal spaces into moral spaces, rearticulating the meanings of femininity and public service within the city.

4.4 Fear, Mobility, and the Spatial Politics of Risk

The experience of urban space is deeply embodied through the emotion of fear. Women's mobility in African cities is shaped by the anticipation of harassment, theft, or violence, which produces gendered geographies of safety and danger. Nighttime markets, bus stations, and deserted streets are often perceived as unsafe, compelling women to develop spatial routines that minimize exposure to risk. These embodied geographies of fear influence not only where women work but also how they move and occupy space.

Fear functions as both a constraint and a form of knowledge. It teaches women to read the city tactically, to identify safe routes, trustworthy officials, and protective alliances. Yet this constant vigilance exacts a physical and emotional toll, reinforcing gendered boundaries of mobility. In cities like Kampala or Lusaka, women often restrict their working hours or limit their range of activity to avoid danger, sacrificing potential income for safety (Porter, 2011). The politics of visibility thus intertwines with the politics of fear, producing a cityscape in which women's bodies are simultaneously central and constrained.

Urban infrastructure amplifies these dynamics. The absence of adequate lighting, sanitation, and transport services increases the vulnerability of women in informal economies. Their bodies

become exposed not only to social risk but also to environmental precarity. A trader who spends long hours under the sun or in polluted air internalizes the material inequalities of the city through her body. The health consequences of such exposure highlight how gendered embodiment is not merely symbolic but deeply material, rooted in the uneven distribution of infrastructure and care (Beall, 2002).

4.5 The Body as a Medium of Political Expression

The body's visibility in the informal city can also become a form of political expression. Women's physical presence in markets and streets asserts their right to the city in Henri Lefebvre's sense, the right to inhabit, produce, and define urban space. This right is not articulated through legal claims but through embodied occupation. By working, resting, and socializing in public spaces, women transform them into zones of belonging and livelihood.

Moments of collective action often emerge from the embodied proximity of informal workers. In Accra or Lagos, when authorities attempt to evict traders, women's bodies become instruments of protest as they physically block access to markets or stage sit-ins to prevent demolition. These actions dramatize the centrality of the body to urban politics. Visibility here is not vulnerability but presence, a refusal to be erased from the city's moral and spatial order.

At the same time, everyday bodily acts such as sitting, speaking, or carrying goods acquire political meaning within contexts of exclusion. The feminist geographer Gillian Rose (1993) argues that space is produced through embodied difference; women's bodies, by occupying and transforming urban space, challenge dominant spatial narratives. In African informal economies, these embodied practices constitute a vernacular form of politics that does not rely on formal representation but on the sheer persistence of presence.

The intersection between visibility and political agency also emerges in digital and media representations of informal women workers. Images of market women, often circulated in news and political campaigns, oscillate between tropes of resilience and disorder. By framing women's bodies as symbols of both tradition and chaos, these representations reproduce ambivalent attitudes toward informality. Yet women increasingly appropriate visual media to narrate their own experiences, using photography, radio, or social media to assert visibility on their own terms (Kruger, 2019). The politics of embodiment thus extends into visual culture, where the struggle over representation becomes an extension of the struggle over space.

4.6 Embodied Citizenship and Urban Belonging

The politics of visibility in informal economies reveals that citizenship in African cities is enacted through the body. Legal documentation or formal employment are not the primary markers of belonging; presence and participation in the urban lifeworld are. Women's embodied labor, the act of showing up daily in markets, providing food, care, and services, constitutes a form of civic contribution that sustains the city. Their bodies perform citizenship through action rather than recognition.

This embodied citizenship challenges the liberal conception of the urban subject as a disembodied, rational actor. It foregrounds affect, physical endurance, and social reproduction as central to the making of urban life. In doing so, it exposes the gendered blind spots of urban governance, which privileges infrastructure over bodies and policy over lived experience. Recognizing women's embodied presence as a form of political participation requires rethinking what counts as public, who constitutes the public, and whose visibility is protected or punished.

The informal city thus becomes a stage for the redefinition of urban belonging. Through their daily negotiations of visibility, women expand the boundaries of what is seen as legitimate participation in city life. Their bodies write alternative geographies of citizenship that privilege care, resilience, and adaptability over formality and control.

Embodiment and visibility lie at the heart of the gendered politics of African urban informality. Women's bodies are not passive recipients of regulation but active agents in the production of urban space. Their visibility is double-edged: it exposes them to risk while enabling them to claim presence and dignity. Through their physical and symbolic occupation of streets and markets, they transform exclusion into participation, vulnerability into endurance, and everyday survival into a form of politics. The city's moral and spatial orders are constantly rewritten through these embodied practices.

Informal women workers do not merely adapt to the city; they create it through their movements, interactions, and bodily resilience. Their visibility unsettles the boundaries between private and public, legality and informality, respectability and resistance. In their embodied negotiation of space, the everyday politics of African cities finds its most vivid expression.

5. Informality, Citizenship, and the Gendered City

5.1 Rethinking Citizenship Through Informality

In African cities, citizenship cannot be understood solely as a matter of legal membership or formal rights. It is lived, negotiated, and embodied within the porous boundaries between legality and informality. Where formal state capacity is uneven and bureaucratic authority fragmented, everyday practices of survival and exchange become the means through which people enact belonging. Informality thus constitutes a vital infrastructure of citizenship, one that is deeply gendered in both structure and meaning.

For many urban residents, particularly women, access to livelihood, housing, and social support depends on informal networks rather than state provision. In the markets of Kumasi, the settlements of Nairobi, or the neighborhoods of Kinshasa, citizenship is measured less by documentation than by participation in systems of reciprocity and community regulation. The informal economy becomes a site of social membership where individuals gain recognition and support through their labor, trustworthiness, and contribution to collective welfare (Simone 2004). This form of belonging, grounded in practice rather than legal status, constitutes what anthropologists call *vernacular citizenship*—an everyday negotiation of rights and obligations outside formal institutions (Isin, 2008).

Women's central role in these informal structures challenges the conventional public-private divide that underpins liberal notions of citizenship. By organizing markets, rotating credit groups, and neighborhood associations, women provide governance functions that states often fail to deliver. These institutions regulate economic behavior, mediate conflicts, and manage shared resources. In the absence of formal welfare systems, they act as micro-governments, ensuring community cohesion and survival. Yet these same formations also reveal how gender mediates authority, legitimacy, and participation within the informal sphere.

5.2 Gendered Forms of Urban Belonging

The gendered city is not only a spatial but also a political construction. The norms that define who counts as a legitimate urban subject are tied to gendered expectations about productivity, respectability, and domesticity. Women's participation in informal economies often situates them at the margins of official citizenship, where their economic contributions are essential yet undervalued. Their presence in public spaces such as markets or transport hubs is tolerated as long as it remains framed as an extension of domestic responsibility—feeding families, educating children, or supplementing household income. Once women's activities appear to threaten the patriarchal order or urban aesthetics, their citizenship becomes precarious.

The link between informality and citizenship thus exposes a paradox. Women's informal labor sustains the economic and social life of cities, yet it does not grant them political recognition. Their contributions are often celebrated rhetorically as expressions of resilience, entrepreneurialism, or empowerment, while their rights to space, security, and resources remain unprotected. This selective recognition reflects what James Ferguson (2015) terms the "distributional politics of neoliberalism," where inclusion is conditional and depoliticized. Women are valued as flexible workers or self-reliant citizens, but only insofar as they reduce the state's responsibility for welfare and infrastructure.

In many African contexts, access to urban citizenship is mediated by social networks and local authorities rather than formal law. Women rely on market leaders, neighborhood chiefs, or political patrons to secure trading spaces and protection from harassment. These intermediaries function as brokers of belonging, translating informal relationships into semi-recognized forms of citizenship. Yet this brokerage system is gendered in its operation. Male intermediaries often control access to state officials, while senior women leaders, such as "market queens" in Ghana, regulate female traders through hierarchical systems that mirror patriarchal governance (Clark, 1994). Citizenship within informality is thus uneven, stratified by gender, class, and age.

5.3 Informality as Governance

Informality in African cities is not a void of regulation but an alternative regime of governance. It encompasses a dense web of rules, norms, and negotiations through which authority is produced and exercised. Women's associations, market committees, and savings cooperatives play crucial roles in this system. They maintain order, enforce collective decisions, and mobilize resources for social services such as funerals, health care, or schooling. These organizations function as what Foucault (1991) might call "technologies of governmentality", mechanisms through which people govern themselves in the absence of state provision.

The gendered character of these institutions is central to their legitimacy. Women often invoke maternal identities and moral authority to claim leadership positions. Their governance is built on notions of care, reciprocity, and communal obligation, contrasting with the bureaucratic rationality of formal politics. This moral economy of care grants women both influence and constraint. On one hand, it legitimizes their authority as nurturers of the community. On the other, it confines their political agency within the boundaries of self-sacrifice and domestic morality.

The relationship between informal governance and the state is not simply oppositional. It is characterized by mutual dependence and negotiation. Municipal authorities rely on informal associations to mediate urban management, collect market fees, and maintain social order. In return, these associations gain limited recognition and protection. This arrangement creates what Ananya Roy (2009) describes as *graduated sovereignty*, where citizenship and rights are distributed unevenly across different groups. For women, this means partial inclusion in the urban polity—visible enough to be governed, yet rarely secure enough to claim full citizenship.

5.4 The Neoliberal City and the Feminization of Citizenship

The neoliberal transformation of African cities has intensified the gendered contradictions of informality. Structural adjustment programs and urban privatization policies have reduced state welfare and shifted responsibility for survival onto individuals and households. Women, as primary managers of domestic economies, have absorbed the burden of this restructuring. They have become the invisible welfare providers of the neoliberal city, filling the gaps left by the retreating state through unpaid and underpaid labor (Chant, 2008).

This process has produced what scholars term the *feminization of citizenship*. Women are increasingly celebrated as ideal neoliberal subjects, self-reliant, adaptable, and community-oriented while being denied access to social rights and protections. Development agencies and NGOs often frame women's informal activities as evidence of empowerment, yet this discourse obscures the structural inequalities that force women into precarious livelihoods (Cornwall et al., 2007). The rhetoric of "women's entrepreneurship" becomes a substitute for genuine social justice, shifting attention from collective rights to individual responsibility.

At the same time, women's collective practices in informal economies resist complete incorporation into neoliberal logic. Their networks of mutual aid, rotating savings, and communal welfare challenge the commodification of social life by foregrounding values of solidarity and reciprocity. These practices represent alternative forms of citizenship rooted in care rather than competition. They demonstrate that informality, though shaped by economic necessity, can also generate counter-publics that redefine the meaning of civic participation.

5.5 Embodied Citizenship and the Everyday City

Citizenship in the gendered city is not only institutional but embodied. Women's daily presence in markets, streets, and neighborhoods enacts belonging through physical occupation and social contribution. Their bodies bear the material and symbolic marks of citizenship: the strain of long working hours, the negotiation with officials, the cultivation of customer relationships, and the moral labor of respectability. Through these embodied practices, women transform informal spaces into arenas of civic participation.

This form of citizenship operates through visibility and endurance rather than through rights and representation. A market trader's ability to return to her stall each morning, to rebuild after eviction, or to sustain her family through unstable economies is itself an act of political presence. It asserts her right to inhabit and reproduce the city. These acts do not fit

within the conventional language of citizenship, yet they constitute what Asef Bayat (2010) calls "the politics of the ordinary", incremental acts that reshape urban life from below.

Embodied citizenship also reveals the intersection of gender and spatial justice. Access to urban space—where to trade, where to live, where to move—becomes a key dimension of citizenship. Women's struggles against eviction or harassment are thus not merely economic but civic, asserting their entitlement to the city as producers and caretakers. The urban body, marked by labor and endurance, becomes a living claim to citizenship.

5.6 Citizenship Beyond the State

The relationship between informality and citizenship in African cities challenges the state-centered model of political membership. For many women, the state appears not as a provider of rights but as an unpredictable actor oscillating between neglect and coercion. Citizenship must therefore be secured through alternative channels: social networks, religious affiliations, market organizations, and neighborhood solidarities. These non-state spaces of belonging form what Holston (2008) calls *insurgent citizenship* practices that arise from the margins but redefine the terms of urban life.

Women's informal collectives often function as such insurgent spaces. Through savings groups, they mobilize resources, enforce accountability, and advocate for better working conditions. Their negotiations with municipal authorities over vending rights or sanitation infrastructure create hybrid forms of governance that blend informality with civic engagement. These practices demonstrate that the boundaries of citizenship are not fixed but continually remade through negotiation.

At the same time, these informal modes of citizenship carry internal hierarchies and exclusions. Migrant women, younger traders, and those without kinship ties often face marginalization within community structures. The challenge is not only to recognize the political agency of informality but to confront its inequalities. A feminist reading of citizenship insists that belonging must be measured not only by participation but by justice, by the capacity to claim rights and dignity within both formal and informal orders.

The intersection of informality, gender, and citizenship reveals the African city as a political frontier where belonging is continuously negotiated. Women's informal labor sustains the urban economy and provides governance where the state falters, yet it also exposes the limitations of existing citizenship frameworks. The city's vitality depends on practices that remain unrecognized, unprotected, and undervalued. To speak of the gendered city is to acknowledge that urban citizenship is neither universal nor evenly distributed. It is shaped by moral economies, spatial hierarchies, and embodied experiences that privilege certain forms of presence over others. Women's engagement with informality challenges these hierarchies, showing that citizenship can emerge from the everyday labor of care, cooperation, and endurance. Informality, when seen through a gendered lens, reveals the political imagination embedded in ordinary life. It exposes the city as a site not only of exclusion but of creation, a space where new forms of belonging are forged through struggle, adaptation, and shared survival.

6. Conclusion

The study of African cities has often been dominated by frameworks that privilege formal governance, state planning, and economic modernization. Yet the lived reality of urban life across the continent unfolds within spaces and practices that defy these formal structures. Informality, long dismissed as a symptom of underdevelopment, has emerged as the dominant condition of African urbanism. It organizes economies, shapes political relations, and sustains social life. Within this informal order, gender plays a central and constitutive role. The everyday experiences of women in markets, streets, and neighborhoods illuminate how informality is not a peripheral or temporary domain but the primary arena in which urban citizenship is enacted, contested, and reimagined.

To rethink urban politics through gendered informality is to shift the analytical gaze from institutions to practices, from formal governance to everyday negotiation. Women's participation in informal economies reveals that power in African cities operates through relational and moral economies rather than through legal frameworks alone. Their labor sustains the material and affective infrastructure of the city. The preparation of food, the management of small-scale trade, the organization of savings

groups, and the care of households all constitute forms of urban production that remain unrecognized within dominant paradigms of development. Yet these activities are indispensable to the functioning of the city. They reveal that informality is not simply an economic category but a mode of social reproduction.

The gendered nature of this reproduction is both enabling and constraining. Women's participation in informal economies offers flexibility, autonomy, and opportunities for collective organization. At the same time, it exposes them to exploitation, insecurity, and moral regulation. The gendered politics of informality therefore resides in the tension between survival and subversion. Women's everyday practices of negotiation whether through informal alliances, strategic compliance, or subtle resistance, constitute a form of political agency that challenges the boundaries of the formal political sphere. These acts may not take the shape of organized protest or legal advocacy, yet they transform the social and spatial order of the city from below (Bayat, 2010).

This rethinking of politics also demands an expanded understanding of citizenship. In many African contexts, citizenship is not secured through legal documentation or formal employment but through participation in networks of exchange, care, and mutual aid. Women's informal labor and community organization embody a vernacular form of citizenship grounded in contribution rather than entitlement. Their presence in the city, their capacity to sustain others, and their visibility in public life are acts of belonging that claim recognition beyond formal law. The city itself becomes a moral and relational space, where citizenship is lived through shared vulnerability and interdependence (Simone, 2004).

At the same time, the gendered dimensions of informality expose the exclusions embedded in these alternative forms of citizenship. Informal governance often reproduces patriarchal hierarchies and social inequalities, granting authority to those who conform to dominant moral orders. Senior market women may wield considerable influence, while younger or migrant women remain marginalized. The challenge, therefore, is to recognize women's agency without romanticizing informality as an inherently emancipatory sphere. Gendered informality must be understood as a terrain of power where domination and resistance coexist in constant negotiation.

Rethinking urban politics through gender also requires attention to embodiment and space. The informal city is not an abstract system but a lived geography of bodies, movements, and emotions. Women's daily navigation of markets, transport routes, and domestic spaces reveals how urban power is inscribed on the body. Visibility in public space carries both political and personal risks, yet it is through this visibility that women assert presence and legitimacy. Their bodies become sites of negotiation between the demands of survival and the expectations of respectability. This embodied politics challenges the masculinist bias of urban theory, which often treats space as neutral and politics as disembodied. The gendered body, with its rhythms of labor, care, and endurance, is central to understanding how the informal city functions (Low, 2017).

The reconfiguration of urban politics through gendered informality also speaks to broader questions of justice. Development discourse often celebrates women's resilience in informal economies without addressing the structural conditions that make resilience necessary. Recognition of women's contributions must therefore be accompanied by a critique of the economic and spatial arrangements that perpetuate inequality. Policies that seek to formalize informal economies or "clean up" urban space frequently undermine the very systems of survival they depend on. A feminist approach to urban governance must begin by valuing care, reciprocity, and social reproduction as legitimate foundations of the urban order.

The gendered perspective on informality invites a more inclusive understanding of the African city—not as a failed imitation of Western urban modernity, but as a dynamic space of invention, where citizens continually negotiate the terms of life and belonging. Women's informal labor, social organization, and embodied presence are central to this negotiation. Their everyday practices illuminate a politics that is not located in institutions or policies but in the minute acts that make the city liveable. This politics is both pragmatic and visionary. It builds the city from below while imagining forms of justice that exceed the limits of formal citizenship.

In rethinking urban politics through gendered informality, scholars and policymakers must

recognize that African cities are not deficient but differently organized. Their apparent disorder masks intricate systems of cooperation, regulation, and mutual care. To take gender seriously in this context is to uncover the invisible labor that sustains these systems and to acknowledge the political intelligence embedded in everyday survival. The informal city is not an exception to modernity; it is its most vital expression. Within it, women's embodied and relational practices point toward alternative urban futures, futures grounded in solidarity, dignity, and the politics of the ordinary.

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