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Beyond modern malls: women traders' vulnerability in new city development and market transformation in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the lived experiences of women market traders during the transformation of cities in Uganda. Although the goal is to achieve distinctive infrastructure modernisation, improve the living conditions of the fast-growing urban population, and stimulate local economies, the impacts on vulnerable women remain severe, with limited capacity for resilience. Despite the existing literature on the effects of transformation, only a few studies reveal how urban development projects intensify women's vulnerabilities. The study used a phenomenological design to capture women's lived experiences during displacement, relocation, and resettlement. Gender-insensitive policies created severe socio-economic and psychological vulnerabilities. We recommend a range of sustainable, inclusive, and favourable approaches that align with the SDG goals of no poverty, gender equality, and reduced inequalities for the wellbeing of the beneficiaries. The recommendations prioritise holistic transformation approaches and policies that integrate gender mainstreaming in urban planning.

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Introduction

The majority of long-time women traders at the central markets remained optimistic about better services after the government's commitment to modernise the city markets, despite harsh conditions during relocation. However, the reality turned out differently because the redesigned market, with its layout and space allocation, increased women's vulnerability. Women narrated:

> We are now sheltered in this modern mall, free from mud and rain. Yet we live with cramped, uncomfortable spaces where traders queue, struggle to access stalls, and can barely move. True modernisation must go "beyond modern malls." (MBR FGD-00B 2023)

The lived experiences that MBR FGD-00B shared during interviews resonate with many women in similar situations in Uganda's new cities. Their stories reveal a hidden narrative of resilience and

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vulnerability among women in Uganda's fast-developing cities, where magnificent modern malls appear to symbolise development and prosperity. This is the unsung tale of women battling for survival and striving to secure their future roles in the city amid elevated malls and profound shifts in market trade. Urban transformation processes in Uganda follow national policies as stipulated in the Markets Act of 1942 and later the amended Markets Act of 2023, both of which aim to modernise infrastructure, expand economic growth, and regulate informal trade (Ministry of Trade Industry and Cooperatives 2017–2018). These policies trace their foundation to the colonial-era Markets Act of 1942, which governed the establishment and administration of public markets. Both the 1942 and 2023 Acts emphasise protection and control through prioritised registration and revenue collection, yet they show little focus on gender-responsive provisions. The Amended Act of 2023, however, aligns with MATIP, Uganda's National Gender Policy, and the country's global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 5, and 10), as well as the New Urban Agenda for inclusive and equitable urban spaces. Despite this alignment, authorities in the new cities implement MATIP II of 2014, whose guidelines remain largely silent on gender mainstreaming. In 2014, the Government of Uganda, with support from the African Development Bank, developed a Strategic Investment Development Plan through the Ministry of Local Government to create 15 new select cities. To enhance city infrastructure and stimulate economic growth, the government prioritised modern markets to strengthen trade and livelihoods (Ministry of Local Government 2020). Masaka and Mbarara City markets benefited from the second phase of the Market and Agricultural Trade Improvement Project (MATIP II), which secured loans worth 18.06 and 21.11 billion shillings, respectively, from the African Development Bank (ADB) (ibid). Masaka Market, a three-storey facility in Masaka City, accommodates 761 stalls, 89 lockups, and over 2,000 traders. Mbarara Central Market Mall in Mbarara City houses more than 1,500 traders, with 485 stalls and 400 kiosks spread across three stories, the majority of whom are women (Independent 2023; Mbabazi and Atukunda 2020). Authorities relocated vendors to temporary markets in 2017 in Mbarara and in 2019 in Masaka, paving the way for the construction of modern infrastructure. The government, therefore, rolled out the creation of 15 new cities with modern infrastructure across three clusters in all regions. The first cluster, comprising Jinja, Mbarara, Gulu, Mbale, Arua, Fort Portal, and Masaka, took effect during the 2020/2021 financial year. The second cluster, comprising Hoima, Lira, Soroti, and Entebbe, became operational on 1 July 2021. The third and final cluster, comprising Moroto, Nakasongola, Kabale, and Wakiso, became operational on 1 July 2023 (ibid). National governments across sub-Saharan Africa have adopted neoliberal approaches to urban development and governance, transforming municipalities into cities (Bibri 2019; Muyanja et al. 2011). These policies aim to achieve modernisation, improve the living conditions of rapidly growing urban populations, and stimulate local economies (Tripathy, Chauhan, and Khambete 2021). Uganda provides a clear example of how rapid urban expansion has increased the urban population by 24.4 per cent in 2019–2024, with projections indicating that Mbarara and Masaka are currently at 27 and that 28.6 per cent may double by 2040 (World Bank 2024). As major centres of commerce and trade, these cities depend on dedicated women, who dominate small-scale food and commodity markets, operating about 80 per cent of food stalls. Whereas over 8,000 street vendors, 87.6 per cent are women (Vieitez-Cerdeño, Manzanera-Ruiz, and Namasembe 2023). This paper examines the lived experiences of women traders affected by transformations in city markets. It applies a phenomenological research design and employs in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), direct observation, and thematic analysis. These methods reveal the intersection between urban redevelopment and women's vulnerabilities. We draw on the work of feminist scholars such as Faria et al. (2021); Kinyanjui (2020); and Richmond, Myers, and Namuli (2018) to show how urban market redevelopment projects in Uganda exacerbate women's challenges and heighten their vulnerability. Although previous studies analyse the impacts of urban transformation on traders (Susser and Schneider 2020), we argue that greater attention to women, who constitute the majority of market traders, is essential in understanding the consequences of redevelopment projects. Accordingly, this paper centres on women's lived experiences

and highlights the intersections of gender, urban development, and economic resilience. It contributes to a more inclusive understanding of urban market development projects and calls for gender-sensitive approaches in future developments. Such approaches are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ending poverty (SDG 1), ensuring gender equality (SDG5), and reducing inequalities (SDG10).

Gendered market transformation and trade ecologies: theoretical frameworks

One of the dominant neoliberal urban practices in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is market transformation, which drives modernisation through infrastructure development (Bandauko and Robert 2023; Okeke 2021). Policymakers often frame this process as a catalyst for entrepreneurship growth and increased state revenues. However, the influx of capital frequently exposes low-income groups to heightened risks of impoverishment. Women from low-income backgrounds remain central to urban food systems and petty commodity trade, dominating stalls, kiosks, and street-trading spaces (Okoye 2020). Yet, as Zubarevich (2012) notes, modernised infrastructure disproportionately benefits middle- and high-income groups due to high operational costs, thereby deepening inequalities. Therefore, market redevelopment transitions frequently undermine women's trade sustainability, beginning with losing long-time customers, operating in costly spaces, and forfeiting the informal protections that had evolved within traditional markets (Amiteye 2015). Most studies, however, overlook the exclusionary nature of redevelopment planning and the urgent need to safeguard women's livelihoods. Evidence from East and West Africa suggests that women's trading activities make a significant contribution to the growth of the trade sector. Nevertheless, their networks depend heavily on social kinship and rotating credit (ROSCA) schemes rather than policy support, leaving them vulnerable to high costs and risks during transformation (Aurick et al. 2017). Studies done in Accra, Lagos, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, and Kampala link small-scale markets to higher fixed rents, service fees, stricter standards, unfavourable regulations, and the spatial displacement of low-capital traders, most of whom are women (King 2023; Simpasa 2024). Although Marire and Iqbal (2024) highlight that urban infrastructure transformation can reduce gender inequality if governments adopt gender-focused policies, Steel, Ujoranyi, and Owusu (2014) show that urban regeneration and neoliberal policies, including privatisation and market redevelopment, disproportionately threaten women traders through displacement. Studies from Ghana, Mozambique, Kenya, and Nigeria reveal that market redevelopment deepens economic insecurity through high rents, increased taxes, and unstable incomes (Mensah, Shi, and Yu 2024; Olabisi 2013). Smith (2020) further demonstrates that traders' livelihoods remain fragile, undermined by poor sanitation and frequent disruptions caused by urban planning decisions. In Nigeria and Kenya, scholars note that market transformation intensifies women's gender-specific challenges, including limited access to finance and exclusion from decision-making processes (Kinyanjui 2020; Murungu 2024; Onoshakpor, Sindani, and Irene 2024). Similarly, in Zimbabwe and Tanzania, market redevelopment has disrupted livelihoods and exacerbated poverty among informal traders (Binns et al. 2023; Muchadenyika 2020). Uganda reflects these regional patterns. Young (2021) and Nkuku and Titeca (2018) demonstrate that market modernisation in Kampala, particularly following fire outbreaks, increased women's vulnerabilities through destabilisation by relocation. Faria et al. (2020) argue that although market spaces created economic opportunities, they simultaneously devalued women's labour and denied them legal recognition, reinforced by policy imbalances. While many urban studies highlight displacement and relocation as drivers of disenfranchisement, few analyse how market transformation in newly created cities reshapes women traders' status and amplifies vulnerability. This gap calls for empirical research that foregrounds women's lived experiences. A gendered perspective on market transformation and redevelopment, grounded in gender-sensitive policy frameworks, is crucial to creating inclusive and equitable urban futures.

Theoretical frameworks and urban gendered transformation debates

This paper is interdisciplinary, drawing on four core theoretical frameworks: Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), Urban Political Ecology (UPE), the Asset Vulnerability Framework (AVFW), and Agency Theory. Feminist Political Ecology situates the intersection of gender, power, and socio-economic change. It provides a lens for analysing how market redevelopment redistributes risks, resources, and fundamental rights across gendered bodies and spaces (Elmhirst 2015; Leitner, Sheppard, and Colven 2022). FPE aligns with Urban Political Ecology, which calls for gender-responsive, just, and sustainable redevelopment. UPE challenges patriarchal traditions in urban design and argues for inclusive and equitable planning (Haas and Mehaffy 2024) The Asset Vulnerability Framework, developed by Moser (1998), demonstrates how poor management of assets and infrastructure intensifies vulnerability among the urban poor. It translates impoverishment into operational practice by advocating for mainstreamed resources, expanded opportunities for inclusion, and the removal of structural barriers (Proag 2014). It is on this basis that vulnerability is understood as socio-economic and psychological marginalisation, evidenced by loss of access to services and civil rights, factors that limit women's capacity to cope with urban transformation. Agency theory positions women not as passive victims but as active agents who develop resilience strategies in the face of impoverishment. Agency is understood under three dimensions of capability, empowerment, and collective action collectively described as transformative agency (Kabeer 2021). Women's ability to secure livelihoods, freedoms, and human rights requires constant debate, negotiation, and struggle (Briones 2017). Their empowerment stems from acting on set goals and resisting restrictive market conditions (Oliver-Smith 2010). To fully grasp these dynamics, the paper situates the theoretical debates within Uganda's National Urban Policy framework (Ministry of Lands 2017), urban planning feminism frameworks, and international gender mainstreaming guidelines for equitable policy formulation (De Madariaga and Neuman 2016; Peake and Rieker 2013). The findings will contribute to evidence-based planning for future urban market transformation in Uganda and other developing countries undergoing neoliberal urban changes.

Methodology: empirical research with women market traders in new cities

The study was conducted in two newly established cities in Uganda: Mbarara and Masaka. Mbarara, located in southwestern Uganda, has a population of 264,425, while Masaka, situated in the central Buganda region, has a population of 294,166 (UBOS 2024). These cities were selected for their geographical diversity and different stages of market infrastructure development. Mbarara represents completed modernisation while Masaka is undergoing relocation. Together, they illustrate the vulnerabilities of women traders during dispossession, relocation, and resettlement in Uganda's emerging cities. Data collection was guided by evidence that women dominate trading in central markets across urban Uganda (King 2022). During the consenting process, participants' confidentiality was ensured. Vulnerability data were assessed based on risks experienced during displacement, relocation, and resettlement (Table 1). A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of women traders under city market transformation and redevelopment programs. Purposive sampling categorised women by trading status, displacement, and relocation experiences, yielding 20 commodity traders, 20 retail traders, and 10 women who had exited business. To enrich these perspectives, 15 key informants including, four local leaders, four city leaders, and one ministry representative, were engaged to provide contextual insights into women's vulnerabilities and the transformation process (Table 2). We conducted in-depth interviews with individual participants and key informants to capture personal narratives and contextual insights. Based on the women's trading categories, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were organised: two in Mbarara City and one in Masaka, each with an average of eight purposively selected participants to explore collective experiences. Equal participation was ensured, and discussions were documented through detailed notes and audio recordings. To complement purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used to

Table 1. Women market vendors' vulnerability analysis.

Categories of vulnerable women	Sources of shocks/risks	Susceptibility vulnerabilities
The elderly	Amount of time taken to normalise in the new area (temporary markets)	Changes in the routine lifestyle and failure to meet daily responsibilities
Young women of reproductive age	Changes in income inflow	Decrease in income inflow through poor sales and increase in levels of expenditure on taxes and other services.
Young women of reproductive age omen with special needs and medical Issues Women not resettled in the central market with stalls officially	Changes in income inflow	Decrease in income inflow through poor sales and increase in levels of expenditure on taxes and other services
Women not resettled and selling labour (casual labour)	Failure to cope with the transition levels of dropout	High levels of women dropouts and changes to the other sectors. The capacity and capability to succeed in the new business sector.
	Women resettled and failed to cope with the new market mall conditions	Failure to meet the basic needs of life such as medical care, subsistence food, and personal responsibilities. Expected changes in household income and consumption patterns
	Women who were not resettled officially in the new central market mall	Increased number of women in casual labour or illegal street vending for subsistence survival. The degree of sustainability of the new vending approaches coupled with the risks of social–economic disintegration and susceptible impacts beyond their economic status.
	Size of the workspace in the new market mall in relation to the minimum capital of the women	No storage space, enough space for display or seating space. The desirable and undesirable conditions from the nature of the space provided may be a source of severe health and psychological effects.
	Existing services e.g. passage space, sanitation facilities, Day-care rooms and parking spaces for customers	How much are the facilities manageable in relation to the average income of vendors? The decision made based on the experienced impacts determines the levels of continuity or vice versa
	Zoning and allocation of space for different documents	Which zone has been sustained, unsustained, and which ones did women occupy in particular? The result is the nature of the social and psychological state of the vendors
	The capacity and capability of women to deal with shocks and risks	Individual women and resilience level; for instance, some can recover from shock, while others support or fail to support one another, and they have the capacity to use the existing shock to innovate opportunities for bettering themselves or nothing at all.
	Policy and implementation process	How much is the policy gender-sensitive, allocation of space, distribution, and maintenance of services, allocation of market fees, and consideration of human rights and the effectiveness of zoning of market departments

Source: Field data 2023.

identify women who had been resettled or had dropped out during relocation to modern malls. Data saturation was reached at 20 respondents in Mbarara and 21 in Masaka, as no new insights emerged from subsequent interviews and FGDs. We used Luganda in Masaka and Runyankore in Mbarara to allow participants to express themselves freely in their everyday languages, ensuring accuracy and cultural sensitivity. This approach enhanced trust, minimised misinterpretation, and deepened narratives. All interviews were later translated and transcribed into English for consistency and broader scholarly engagement. To ensure confidentiality and facilitate easy identification, we assigned codes to participants (see Table 3): MBR for Mbarara and MSKA for Masaka, with FGD denoting focus group

Table 2. Grey literature.

Document Title	Authors	Publication date/year	Summary/Key Points
Markets And Agricultural Trade Improvement Project (MATIP-2)	African Development Bank	2014	Improving poorly managed, dilapidated, overcrowded, and overwhelmed market infrastructure
Gender and Development (GAD) Women in Development (WID) Women And Development (WAD)	Training kit World Bank Reports 1998–2018	2004	Calls for attention for women in development policy and practice and integrate them in development processes
World Survey on the role of women in development. *Gender Equality*	UN WOMEN	2014	The interconnected challenges of sustainable development and gender equality
MATIP	Ministry of Local Government	2020	Reference guide for management, operation, and maintenance of newly reconstructed markets
MATIP	Ministry of local government	2020	Reference guide for vendors' registration and resettlement

Source: Organised by the author.

discussions (e.g. MBR FGD, MSKA FGD) and KI for key informants (e.g. MBRKI, MSKAKI). We employed an inductive data analysis approach, generating themes directly from the raw data and linking them to relevant scholarly evidence. These themes reflected the core dimensions of women's lived experiences, with responses systematically arranged according to the assigned codes. The first author led the development of the research idea, while the co-authors contributed to data collection, analysis, and writing. The research team was interdisciplinary, consisting of scholars from various disciplines such as development studies (authors a* and a), business studies (author c), a GIS expert (author d), an information technologist (author e), and a psychologist (author b). This mix of expertise strengthened triangulation by producing policy briefs that addressed multiple dimensions of urban market transformation and offered practical interventions from varied perspectives. We supplemented the primary evidence with secondary sources, including archival and grey literature on city development, relocation, and resettlement (see Table 2).

New city development in Uganda

Ugandan cities urgently require transformation through the modernisation of physical infrastructure, especially market centres that function as food baskets for urban residents. Uganda's National Urban Development Policy (2019) aligns with international development gender mainstreaming guidelines and the Urban Feminism framework (Haas and Mehaffy 2024). However, it inadequately addresses the gendered vulnerabilities that arise from induced displacement and resettlement. The socio-economic and demographic characteristics presented in this paper highlight the critical areas that require attention during infrastructure transformation (see Figures 3, 4, and 8). Specifically, 53 per cent of women did not progress beyond basic education, and 78 per cent depend on foodstuffs trading as their main source of income. In Masaka City, the proportion of women aged 60 and above is higher than in Mbarara City, indicating greater vulnerability among older women. Unmarried individuals, including the single, widowed, and separated, constitute more than 60 per cent of the population in both cities (Figure 1). Vulnerability also emerges in the age distribution: women aged 60 years and above dominate trading activities, more than 50 per cent have traded for over 25 years, and fewer than 30 per cent have alternative sources of income (Figures 2, 5, and 6).

Women market traders' transition process and vulnerabilities

The Investment Strategic Plan under the Markets and Agricultural Trade Improvement Program (MATIP) was certainly intended to benefit both men and women. Of the 1200 occupants of

Table 3. Focus group discussions, in-depth and key informant interviews.

Masaka (MSKA) city			Masaka (MSKA) city Focus Group Discussion (FDG) & Key Informants' (KI)		
Respondent ID	Sex	Age	Comment	FGD	SEX
MSKA-001	woman	49	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA FGD 00A	
MSKA-002	woman	41	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA (KI)	
MSKA-003	Woman	31	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 001 C	Man
MSKA-004	Woman	25	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 002 M	Woman
MSKA-005	Woman	44	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 003 P	Man
MSKA-006	Woman	62	Missing on the list of those to be resettled in the new market structure	MSKA KI 004 CO	Man
MSKA-007	Woman	36	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 005 CD	Man
MSKA-008	Woman	44	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 006 ML	Man
MSKA-009	Woman	53	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 007ML	Man
Woman	Woman	60	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 008ML	Man
MSKA-011	Woman	36	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKAKI 0009 LL	Man
MSKA-012	Woman	61	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKAKI 0010 LL	Man
MSKA-013	Woman	55	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)		
MSKA-014	Woman	34	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)		
MSKA-015	Woman	58	Missing on the list of those to be resettled.	MSKA KI 011M R	Man
MSKA-016	Woman	68	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)	MSKA KI 012MR	Man
MSKA-017	Woman	50	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)		
MSKA-018	Woman	64	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)		
MSKA-019	Woman	56	Not on the list to be resettled		
MSKA-020	Woman	63	Still in makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)		
MSKA-021 Female		57	Still in the makeshift (Awaiting resettlement)		
Mbarara (MR) City					
Respondent ID	Sex	Age	Comment	Mbarara (MBR) City	
MBR 001	Woman	20	Not resettled officially	MBR FDG 00B	
				MBR KI	
MBR002	Woman	40	Not resettled officially	MBR KI 013 MR	Man
MBRA 003	Woman	74	Not resettled officially	MBR KI 014MR	Man
MBR004	Woman	41	Not resettled officially	MBR KI 015 LL	Man
MBRA 005	Woman	30	Not resettled officially	MBR KI 016 LL	Man
MBR006	Woman	61	Relocated and resettled officially	MBR KI 017MN	Man
MBRA 007	Woman	36	Relocated and resettled officially	MBR KI 018 CL	woman
MBR008	Woman	40	Relocated and resettled officially	MBR KI 019 ML	Man
MBRA 009	Woman	38	Relocated and resettled officially	MLLG/UG001	Man
MBR010	Woman	41	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBRA 011	Woman	42	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBR012	Woman	33	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBRA 013	Woman	24	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBR014	Woman	53	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBRA 015	Female	38	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBR0016	Woman	56	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBRA 017	Woman	55	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBR018	Woman	62	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBRA 019	Woman	48	Relocated and resettled officially		
MBR020	Woman	33	Relocated and resettled officially		

Source: Fieldwork and sampling frame 2023.

central markets in the selected two cities, Mbarara Central Market comprises 75 per cent, while Masaka has 80 per cent of women traders who have undergone the transformation process. As narrated below:

> After moving here, we built makeshift stalls and sheltered under tarpaulins when it rained. One storm nearly suffocated us, and a colleague's baby was swept away by floodwater, spending a week in the hospital. She has never returned to her stall since. (MSKA KI002M 2023)

> When we were relocated to Independence Park (the temporary market in Mbarara), we suffered; we lacked proper shelter, and toilet facilities, and it always rained on us. Our commodities would rot because of a lack of customers. We renamed it "Nalufenya.[1]" (MBR 002 2023)

Women identified these undesirable conditions as major drivers of shifts in their social, economic, and psychological well-being during the early stages of the transition process. At the onset, such life experiences often produced negative consequences that intensified vulnerability (Simon and Dooling 2016).

The predominant modern mall resettlement vulnerabilities

The new market malls bear witness to modern amenities. Vendors have access to modern, well-installed stalls, and kiosks (as shown in Figure 8), washrooms, day-care facilities, and ample in-house parking. Masaka has more facilities including gazetted stores and a health centre within the market mall, a significant departure from makeshift structures in the former markets, which urban feminist frameworks call mainstreaming gender in cities (De Madariaga and Neuman 2016). Nonetheless, a deeper examination of the well-being of vulnerable groups, particularly women, revealed several factors that contributed to heightened vulnerabilities in the modern market malls, as detailed in the subsequent sub-sections.

Susceptibility to high dropouts

Findings indicate the majority of women left the market trading business in both cities. The most affected were women in the early stages of reproduction, older women, those with pre-existing health conditions, and women with limited capital. For instance, 20 women dropped out during the transformation and relocation process because of poor conditions in the new market. Of those who dropped out because of small and non-accommodative spaces, three cited health and physical disability, two cited old age, four were still in their reproductive years, while the other four lacked the necessary capital to adapt to the dynamics of relocation and resettlement (MSKA KI 002 M 2023). Another four felt inadequate in the allocated trading space, while the zoning program affected four others (MBRK1013 2023). Such a significant dropout rate was deeply rooted in imbalanced policies, limited personal knowledge, and ineffective implementation of the guidelines (Hay, Skinner, and Norton 2019). Leaders in the central market stated:

> The dropout rate among women in this beautiful market mall is high. Most women who have been with us for more than 15 years have opted out because of unfavourable conditions and rules that violate their rights. Every week that passes, one woman leaves the market. (MBR KI0018 2023)

These dynamics carry far-reaching social and economic consequences, including widening gender disparities, reduced household incomes, and diminished women's representation in market leadership, as explained by Feminist Political Ecology (Alberts, Pfeffer, and Baud 2016). Coupled with the constant pressure to find new means of livelihood, the situation overwhelms vulnerable women.

Increased marginalisation and vulnerabilities

The heightened socio-economic marginalisation of women stemmed from their significant underrepresentation in resettlement procedures. Authorities excluded many long-serving women from the official resettlement list and allocated others to zones with irregular access, which reduced their capacity to restart and innovate in business. Equally important, several women traders who had duly registered their kiosks and stalls with the authorities under MATIP II (2022) were denied resettlement due to what officials described as "technical errors." The results show that more than 20 per cent of the women relocated to temporary markets never secured space in the new market malls. City officials consistently confirmed women's exclusion but dismissed it as an oversight during implementation.

> Our focus was to improve the infrastructure generally for all men and women. Nobody thought about particular groups of people like women. I started hearing complaints in one of the meetings that women are having difficulty continuing to trade in the new mall. We will think about it in the upcoming developments. (MBR KI 015 LL 2023)

In another interview with an official from the Ministry of Local Government, gender mainstreaming was key, and he affirms:

> Yes, gender mainstreaming is key in our city transformation guidelines, which is why you see all those facilities, such as day care, put in place to support women traders in this modern mall. However, it is for those who can afford. (MLLG-UG001 2023)

Consequently, new forms of women-led casual labour emerged, including tasks such as sorting and manually winnowing groceries for other vendors within the central market. Although men have traditionally dominated casual labour through the sale and hiring of services, an estimated 10% of women now engage in such work to secure a basic livelihood after resettlement failures (MBRKI 019ML 2023). During crises, affected women often adopt sub-optimal coping mechanisms that push them deeper into impoverishment under the guise of resilience, as Lopez-Gonzaga (2020) observes. Kotzé, Adelman, and Dube (2023) further argue that financial deprivation reinforces unequal distribution of development benefits, directly contradicting the stated goals of development projects and the principles of urban feminist frameworks.

High exposure to physical discomfort and health consequences

Elderly and pregnant women faced the highest levels of vulnerability to physical discomfort and health risks, primarily because of the limited workspace available to traders. Walkways and seating areas around stalls remain too narrow, making it difficult for customers to move easily between vendors. As a result, many traders must stand throughout the entire workday, exposing themselves to serious health risks, especially older women and those with pre-existing medical conditions. Although the urban feminism framework emphasises gender and space as essentials in city planning (Haas and Mehaffy 2024), the findings show that current redevelopment processes continue to impoverish vulnerable groups of women. About 35% of the women interviewed were aged 50 and above (see Figure 2), underscoring the urgent need for tailored physical and structural planning that accounts for the distinct needs of different demographic groups.

> Since I'm on my feet all day, every week, my legs swell, and I get backache. I decided to work 3 days a week and spend the rest of the days at home to recharge. I always ask my neighbour to attend to my customers during my absence, but she finds it challenging to manage multiple stalls. This market was not designed for us, weak and aged people. (MBR006 2023)

In practice, only financially able women can use the day-care facilities in the modern mall, despite these services being designed to support all market traders. Empirical findings indicate that the average monthly income for these women is 300,000 shillings ($83), yet they must pay 100,000 shillings ($27.7) per child for day-care. Beyond this, they also cover expenses such as rent, restroom access, security, and, in some cases, electricity and meals, all of which are deducted from their limited income. A female leader described these circumstances as everyday struggles faced by many young women:

> Young women who are still giving birth are more affected because no one can afford to pay for daycare, yet no space for keeping the babies. I have already seen some women disappearing one by one because they cannot afford the daycare costs. (MBR KI0014MR 2023)

Regardless of the costs, any action or policy that separates children from their mothers' care deprives them of emotional nurturing and hinders their physical development (Harding 2014). Respondents such as MBR0013, MBR0015, and MBR005, whose plans ranged from dropping out of business to relocating upcountry to meet their motherhood needs, called for inclusive and

gender-responsive modernity. They advocated a pro-people, people-first, and leave-no-one-behind principle in public development projects. This principle prioritises mothers' caregiving responsibilities while protecting their economic and social empowerment within development initiatives.

Space constraints and occupational vulnerability

Although MATIP emphasised that modernising central markets would boost traders' incomes, create jobs, and increase urban council revenues (African Development Bank Report 2014), these goals depend on adequate space and a conducive working environment. Beneficiaries reported stress from overcrowding, unfavourable zoning, limited display and storage areas, and narrow customer pathways. As a result, some vendors abandoned trading and began privately renting out their stalls and kiosks. One-woman vendor predicted;

> The zones people are abandoning will soon become places to collect waste. Reason being, most of us use buckets instead of paying for toilet services, 500shs ($0.134), which is high on our side because those are almost our profits. (MBR009 2023)

This undermines the unfulfilled intended purpose, affecting more women who are vulnerable and leading to broader economic and social vulnerabilities for the affected women and other beneficiaries in the sector.

Women's collective agency

In many cases, beneficiaries of development projects confronted with impoverishment due to displacement and dispossession respond with agency, improvising according to their capacities (Oliver-Smith 2010). During resettlement, most women traders formed groups based on social and financial commitments. Examples include the Twaja Baseka group, CBS, and PEWOSA in Masaka and Mbarara. These groups rely on revolving credit and cash transactions to sustain businesses, while also serving as platforms for capacity development and information exchange. Over time, they have become vital mechanisms for helping women absorb and manage shocks (Mahajan et al. 2022). The individual respondent narrated:

> I am a member of the PEWOSA group. After resettling in the new mall, many of us struggled to adjust to paying for everything, including toilet use, while already burdened by losses from displacement. To cope, we reorganised into a cash round system: every month, 30 members each contribute 5,000 shillings, allowing three people to receive 100,000 (about USD 25) each as business capital or emergency loans. (MBR012 2023)

Although the women traders applied critical mechanisms of resilience through informal support systems and mutual support structures with tangible options, as per Kabeer (2018) and Oliver-Smith (2010), the resilience exposes a paradox. While women's agency helps them endure the pressures of market transformation, the mechanisms remain fragile and heavily dependent on members' limited resources. In effect, women's resilience conceals systemic gaps: development interventions continue to neglect gender-responsive safety nets and sustainable compensation frameworks.

Conclusions

This paper operationalises vulnerability as socio-economic and psychological marginalisation, alongside the loss of access to services and women's rights, all of which limit women's capacity to cope with the pressures of market transformation. Women responded to these vulnerabilities with limited strategies, such as forming support groups. However, these groups primarily included only those who had secured space in the modern malls. Although modern malls in new cities project a positive image of development, they have also intensified women's socio-economic marginalisation, exposed them to health risks, and triggered significant dropout due to policies that neglect gender-specific concerns. Market transformation is frequently framed as progress, yet it shifts the burden of

survival onto women, rendering resilience less an expression of empowerment and more a reflection of structural failure. We argue that sustainable and inclusive policies can make desirable transformations that go beyond modern malls to consider the well-being of vulnerable women and enhance their levels of agency.

The study's analysis anticipates long-term, substantial adverse consequences resulting from shocks to the financial stability of most women traders. This is compounded by existing economic challenges, which involve income reductions, the potential for business closure, a decline in their socio-economic and psychological well-being, and gender-based violations of their fundamental rights. These conditions further impoverish women, limit their agency, and restrict their ability to meet their families' basic needs. The findings hold particular relevance for emerging cities in Uganda, where market malls are yet to be redeveloped, and they extend to other public development projects in developing countries where vulnerability assessments remain critical. The empirical results enrich the literature on public development projects by highlighting the vulnerabilities of women traders and emphasising the need for gender-sensitive guidelines and practices. Such knowledge is vital for guiding inclusive and progressive urban development in Uganda and across other African countries facing comparable challenges. We recommend several strategies to strengthen gender-responsive market transformation. First, planners should conduct baseline studies to identify potential vulnerabilities before redevelopment begins. Protective measures must include prevention, detection, interruption, and response, with active stakeholder involvement to create alternative empowerment avenues. To address current challenges, authorities should re-evaluate policies that limit women's resilience. This requires reconfiguring zoning regulations, supporting displaced traders, and subsidising essential services such as day-care so that young women can fully exercise their rights. Finally, bottom-up approaches should be embraced to ensure equal participation by both men and women.

Note

1. Nalufenya is a famous prison located in Eastern Uganda (Jinja district), known as a torture chamber for political prisoners, likened to the conditions in the temporary market.

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