Gendered constructions of citizenship: young Kenyans’ negotiations of rights discourses

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the study of citizenship by interrogating how young people in Nairobi (Chege and Arnot 2012) perceive their rights of citizenship. It builds on previous analyses of the connections between gender, education and poverty’s poor urban settlements by focusing on the political dimensions of the young people’s lives. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with 24 young men and women (mainly siblings aged 16–25) from 18 urban households which explored how they define their national identity and citizenship rights and their expectations of the Kenyan government. All youth felt a connection with the Kenyan nation and actively engaged with rights discourses, but secondary schooled youth demonstrated a noticeably more reflexive and challenging approach to the norms and responsibilities of citizenship. Young men focused on the public sphere, emphasising voting rights, political corruption and their role in leading community change, whilst secondary educated young women recognised the importance of ‘freedoms’ associated with national membership, their rights to choose within cultural traditions and the need to support their families. Gender is shown to play an important role in framing their understanding of themselves as citizens.