

REIMAGINING EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES, ARTS-BASED RESISTANCE, AND DECOLONIAL ORGANIZING IN RURAL KENYA

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Overview

This project explores how women in Kambirwa village, Kenya created a self-led Women's Collective to support one another through bead-making, knitting, and mutual care. It is based on my experience working with them during a Laidlaw Scholarship project, in partnership with the KULE Foundation. Instead of following formal or Western ideas of "empowerment," the collective builds strength in their own way, through friendship, creativity, and cultural pride.

Research Question

How do women create their own support systems in ways that do not fit Western ideas of "development" and "mental health support", by touching upon the social determinants of health?

Methodology

- ◆ Method: Autoethnography
That means I was both a participant and researcher - living, crafting, and reflecting alongside the women.
- ◆ Why this method?
It allowed me to connect my personal experience with bigger social questions, using C. Wright Mills' idea of the sociological imagination.
- ◆ Limitations:
 - Deeply personal and subjective
 - Doesn't aim for "universal" results
 - Requires constant reflection on bias

Findings

- The women built and sustained a system of care and support without outside aid or hierarchy
- Their "lack of structure" in the way the group met, or these meetings' agenda, is a strength, not a weakness
- This model resists Western development models, which often focus on productivity, not relationships
- There's little research on grassroots women's organizing that centers cultural care and mutual aid - this study fills that gap

◆ Most Surprising Finding:
That what some would call "informal" or "disorganized" was actually deeply intentional and effective.

- ◆ Challenges I Faced
 - Navigating my own identity and power as an outsider
 - Balancing participation with observation
 - Knowing when to step back and let the women lead
 - Translating emotional, everyday experiences into academic language



Significance

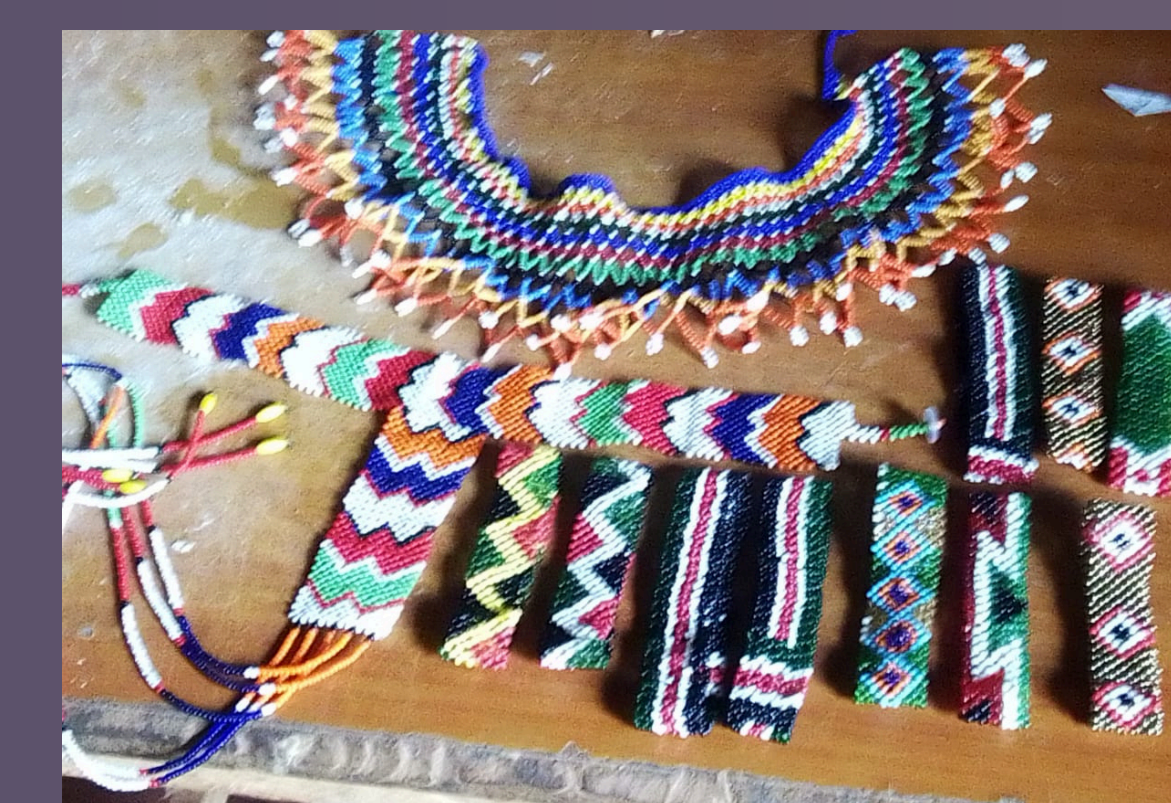
This research asks us to rethink:

- What empowerment looks like
- Who gets to define development
- How care and culture can be tools for survival

It reminds us that people already have the answers, they just need space and respect.

What Next?

- ◆ Sharing findings with NGOs, funders, and community organizers
- ◆ Collaborating with the women on future storytelling and funding opportunities
- ◆ Expanding the study to look at similar collectives across other villages in Kenya, such as Mukangu



Supporting Works

- Mills, C. W. (1959). The Sociological Imagination
- Smith, L. T. (2012). Decolonizing Methodologies
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). Feminism Without Borders