

**'WE MIGHT ALL LIVE THE SAME LIFE, BUT WE ARE NOT THE SAME.'**  
**CLASS AND SOCIAL POSITION IN KINSHASA'S**  
**SECOND-HAND CLOTHING TRADE**

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## **Introduction**

A striking observation in Kinshasa's major public markets is the prevalence and the variety of their clothing sections. The main entrances to Kinshasa's Central Market (Marché central also known as Zando), are filled with several rows of stalls showing a diverse collection of clothing, shoes, and house garments that one often gets a first impression of visiting a big clothing market. Though items become more varied inside the market, the clothing trade occupies a significant space in the public market, and in the city in general. Clothes often vary from cheap Chinese and Lebanese brands to highly praised *occasions d'Europe* (Europe imports), to what is commonly known as *Tombola* (from the Lingala expression *Tombola Bwaka*, inferring the action of customers who sort out a favorite item of clothing from the pile of used clothes on the market floor) or second-hand clothes. In Kinshasa, such second-hand clothes often entail imported (re)used clothes from Europe or North America and make up a remarkably diverse and complex business sector.

Once a symbol of low social status, over the years, the second-hand clothing industry, or *la fripe*, has taken a proportional advancement to occupy an important position in Kinshasa's clothing tradition. Such a change in the social representation of second-hand clothes is said to be on the one hand a direct consequence of a deep and lasting socio-economic crisis that has plunged most of Kinshasa's inhabitants, commonly known as *Kinois*, into extreme forms of poverty in the past few decades (Ayimpam 2016). Certainly, for much of the urban population unable to afford brand-new clothes, second-hand clothes represent an affordable – and rather tempting – fashion alternative. But there is also the fact that internal as well as global changes within the second-hand clothes' value chains have led to a re-composition of the content of the imported used clothes. In this

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respect, a relative improvement in the value of second-hand clothes has inspired a variety of creative recycling and valorization processes within the industry (Ayimpam 2016). Here, a critical position is given to the reinvention of the social representation of the clothing to which has been attached new meanings to create and sustain social imaginaries (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 1995). Arguably, the emergence of the second-hand clothes, especially their valorization through the recycling process, satisfies also Kinois' – and the Congolese urban dwellers in general – marked taste for sartorial elegance (Gondola 1999) in spite of, or perhaps 'precisely because of their extreme poverty' (De Boeck & Plissart 2014: 54). For many, indeed, there is nothing more tempting than an affordable second-hand Gucci or Louis Vuitton, be it original or counterfeit. Being well-groomed, well-dressed, or strutting around in big brands clothes thus provides to many urban dwellers an opportunity to reverse their social predicament, even if it is only momentarily; just as being *à la mode* becomes tantamount to real or feigned social prestige and well-being.

As a result of such renewed social representation as well as the inability of the local economy to generate stable employment for an ever-growing populace of urban dwellers, the second-hand clothing industry has thus experienced a remarkable, unparalleled revival in recent years. Indeed, ethnographic accounts on the second-hand clothing trade in Kinshasa show a thriving economic sector with complex retail and recycling networks (Ayimpam 2016). The vast majority of traders in Kinshasa buy their products in Limete, where several containers of imported second-hand clothes are unloaded several times a week to vast depots that once were the warehouses of this former industrial district. From there, every morning, through rented taxis, mini-vans, or via public transportation, traders take bundles of imported used clothes to various points of sale all around the city. At the upper end of this pyramid of supply are the Middle Eastern and South Asian expatriates – mostly Indian, Lebanese, and Pakistani nationals. Using their networks and through important capital investment, these expatriate communities have been able to secure a prominent position in the second-hand clothing trade sector, owning to date most of the depots in Kinshasa.

In the second position come Congolese wholesalers and semi-wholesalers who use their relative access to capital to buy several high-quality bundles whose contents they can sell to shop-owners and individual resellers around the city. A particular group of resellers specialize and invest considerable resources in the recycling and valorization of second-hand clothes. Clothing of relatively high quality and value are thus washed, repaired (or sometimes even completely refashioned), and later sold as brand-new *occasions d'Europe*. The most common group remains that of semi-wholesalers and low-scale traders who buy a single bundle they sell, mostly in public markets. Because not every seller, however, can afford the price of an entire bundle of

second-hand clothes (the price of a bundle varies between 75 to 250 USD), many low-scale sellers thus resort to either combining their resources to buy a bundle together or simply becoming retailers, buying a handful of clothes from semi-wholesalers. Another typical feature of Kinshasa's second-hand clothing trade concerns the market's intermediaries, also known as *commissionaires*. These are mostly young men and women, without a starting capital, who take one or a few items from a bundle or stall and use their street-smarts and persuasive skills to 'catch' customers in the market alleys. After the usual bargaining – the price for such items would normally be higher – then the owner receives back the original price of the item, while the intermediary withholds the surplus.

Whereas many large-scale entrepreneurs who own second-hand clothes' depots and shops operate within the frame of officially recognized business activities, most medium and low-scale traders operate in the informal economic sector, with no official registration. In fact, with over three decades of a persistent crisis that has left the country's economy paralyzed, many Kinshasans thus resort to informality either as an alternative income-generating opportunity in the absence of a more stable and formal employment (Ayimpam 2014), or as subsidiary income to an underpaid occupation. For others still, informality provides a viable option to escape what is perceived as excessive government regulation and taxation. Yet, the convergence of various social groups with the subsequent socio-economic differentiation brings to light concerns on precarity, social vulnerability, and social inequality within the informal sector. The concepts of precarity and social vulnerability imply, in a more dynamic term, a 'class-in-the-making', a temporary or permanent condition characterized by labour insecurity, or the lack of any stable occupational identity (Standing 2011). However, they also reflect, to a certain extent, a common condition of ontological precarity (Han 2018), as they seem to describe a common human condition, related to embodied existence and the social change associated with such existence – in terms of upward or downward mobility. Noteworthy, however, beyond the ontological dimension of precarity and vulnerability concepts, their understanding in social and economic terms should not be dissociated from the concept of structural inequality, which explains precarity and social vulnerability as a product of social exclusion and exploitation. One should therefore ask, how are various social actors and groups differently affected in the informal sector? The difference between the enterprising 'chronic poor' and the 'successful entrepreneur,' one learns, does not lie only in their material conditions of existence, but even more in the way their life chances are differently affected by the prevailing structures that reproduce poverty and inequality. In this respect, this work aims to contribute to the theorization of social stratification and inequality in Kinshasa in particular, and by extrapolation in other urban centres in the African continent with

similar social problems. Truly, any attempt to design a comprehensive social development programme in the region must also address social inequality in its multidimensional forms.

Existing literature (De Herdt & Marysse 1996; Herderschee *et al.* 2011; Adoho & Doumbia 2018) has identified three types of entrepreneurs in the DRC's informal sector: namely the top performers, constrained gazelles, and survivalists. While the top performer category – which is a very growth-oriented entrepreneurial sub-group – enjoys greater access to capital and returns, poverty and income inequality are more common among firms and individuals in the constrained gazelle and survivalist sub-groups, being respectively medium and lower-tier entrepreneurial ventures (Adoho & Doumbia 2018). What is more, within each category of informal economic activities, gender as well as educational disparities in capital and returns are also highlighted (Vanek *et al.* 2019; Adoho & Doumbia 2018; MacGaffey 1987). Ethnic or regional linkages are also said to be very important, as they may make up power networks in Kinshasa's urban governance (Nkuku & Titeca 2018). These various findings can be appreciated in parallel with other quantitative data (De Herdt & Marivoet 2018) contending that while differentiation along the social cleavages of gender and age has lost much of its profiling power, other stratifying markers such as education and geography still play an essential role in structuring inequality in Kinshasa's informal sector. Neither of those approaches, however, seem to analyse the complex ways through which such cleavages intersect as they place social actors in a unique position to privilege and marginalization, nor how they affect access to different capitals. Hence, this chapter argues that differential access to economic resources, gender, and ethnic identity can lead to structural inequality as such social cleavages may provide opportunities to a particular group at the expense of others. In this respect, recent scholarship (Camfield & Monteith 2018; Noret 2019; Rubbers 2019) has been contending that class and social position can be a crucial factor in understanding social inequality and im/mobility within the continent. By affecting access to capital (whether financial, human, material or social), social position leads to a differentiated outcome of informal economic activities.

The chapter draws from field research conducted in Kinshasa in 2019. This is a social anthropological study, but it draws on other disciplines such as sociology, history, and economics as well. Hence, to theorize class and social position in the informal sector, the chapter begins by presenting the general sociology of Kinshasa and that of its social stratification, drawing essentially from both historical and sociological sources. Empirical data further complements the analysis as it expands or nuances existing theorizations. The field research, on the other hand, adopted a qualitative methodology with ethnographic underpinnings. Empirical data was collected through in-depth/semi-structured interviews as well as observation patterns

through prolonged social immersion in the research environment. A case study of informal second-hand clothing trade in Kinshasa was developed to capture the social trajectories of informal sector actors, and the dynamics of social inequality associated with them. Indeed, second-hand clothing trade presents a suitable illustration of the supply chain within the informal sector as it entails an interaction between various categories of firms. Because the second-hand clothing trade is often associated with a wide variety of actors – from the supply to the start-up, to the marketing networks – this analysis hopes to bring to light a different perspective in investigating the impact of social position in access to capital. Within this specific type of informal economic activity, interviews were conducted with second-hand clothing traders operating in three of Kinshasa's main public markets: Zando, Marché de la Liberté, and Marché de Matete. The need to study informal vendors in their natural environments partly motivated this choice. This was also inspired by the necessity to investigate the vendors in an environment that offers heightened possibilities of social intercourse. About 25 second-hand clothes traders and shop-owners were purposely selected and interviewed in 2019. To empirically capture diverse social positions and class (to a lesser extent) respondents were selected among the different categories of second-hand clothes trade, namely shop-owners, wholesalers, semi-wholesalers, resellers, and market intermediaries. To generate more complex research data for analysis, the selected respondents were chosen in a representative manner, taking into account diversities in the firm's size and status as well as demographic data on the respondent's gender, education, ethnic background, age, marital status, and business experience among others.

## 1. Theorizing class and social position

The very concept of class remains a contentious subject in African studies. This may be partially explained by the fact that, because they tend to be ethnocentric, theoretical underpinnings provided by classical social theories often prove inadequate to fully capture the reality of social stratification in African societies (Kroecker *et al.* 2018). Along this line, a particular scholarship on the continent has been inclined to dismiss the concept of class altogether, perceived as inadequate in analyzing social structures in the African context; nor would it agree on the use of the expression such as 'middle classes' – termed as ideological and elusive (Darbon & Toulabor 2014). This dismissal of class as a sociological concept in African studies traces its origin back to social sciences literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due also in part to the urban and industrial fragility of colonial regimes (Copans 2020). It is argued that the failure of a real industrial revolution in the African continent, as well as the current persistent socio-economic instability, does not allow a conceptualization of social class in

many Sub-Saharan African societies. At the outset, this chapter disengages from a certain objectivist perspective on class, as seen in Marxists' emphasis on the relation of production and economic powers in determining social relations and social change (Marx & Engels 1845; Weber 2018; Goldthorpe 1996; Marshall 1997). An approach that is also, to some extent, mirrored through a certain economic reductionism in stratification research that explains class solely based on income, expenditure, or consumption patterns, and the implicit socio-economic, political, and ideological assumptions attached to it (Melber 2017; Kroeker *et al.* 2018).

More recently, Bourdieu's concept of *social space* has been revisited and suggested as a plausible way to explore inequality dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa (Noret 2017; 2019; Rubbers 2019). Indeed, Bourdieu's (1985) transcendence of the fundamental antinomy between the objectivist and subjectivist views on class in his conceptualization of the social space appears to present a different lens for capturing the intersection of different properties that shape the contours of class and social position (Swartz 2012). The social world is therefore a highly stratified space, defined by the 'mutual exclusion of positions which constitute it' (Bourdieu 2018: 106), and marked by the structure of the juxtaposition of such positions (Swartz 2012; Reed-Dahanay 2019). Notably, classes and social position – to be understood here in terms of a similar position and condition of existence (Bourdieu 1987: 6) – take into account the combination of several social properties and stratifying factors such as gender, ethnicity, place of residence, and age among others. Yet, the intersection of those various social properties raises issues on social inequality, as the social space is structured by unequal distribution of various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) which are attached to stratifying factors such as social origin, gender, and ethnicity (Swartz 2012). In contrast to the objectivist approach to class, this 'structural constructionism' – an approach that includes both 'actor perceptions of objective reality and measures of aggregate behaviour' (Swartz 2012: 145) – thus advocates for a class analysis that leaves room not only for vertical but also diagonal and horizontal moves in a multidimensional social space (Noret 2017).

Certainly, the urban space can be constructed as a 'field', a social space where various agents – located in different positions to one another – engage in relations of privilege and exclusion (Bourdieu 1985). However, because Bourdieu's theorization of the *structural distinction* (especially as presented in the book 'Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste') is fundamentally elitist and refers exclusively to the dominant class (Glevarec 2020); this empirical investigation on social stratification in the lower classes conversely favours a broader approach to differentiation, resulting from a broader diversification of social relations. Against this backdrop, a perspective that takes into account empirical evidence in different

social realities in its theorization of social stratification would seem more appealing (Daloz 2020). It follows that an empirical investigation that also pays attention to the historical evolution of different priority vectors of differentiation within a society may provide a critical path for theorizing social stratification and differentiation in said society.

Hence, more than differentiation between classes, variation in social positions within the social class has emerged as a distinct stratification marker among the small-scale, second-hand clothes traders. Specifically, variables such as economic resources (mostly from family and professional background), gender, and ethnicity (or more so migration status) have emerged as important stratifying properties with intersecting power. Whereas these variables already place traders in different (and unequal) social positions to one another within their social space, they may lead to further exclusion as they intersect and intertwine. However, unlike class theorization, the relationship between the position occupied within the social space and the corresponding dispositions and practices is not mechanical, as differences in practices and political opinions among people occupying an identical position can attest to it (Bourdieu 1975). Nonetheless, the second-hand clothing trade environment should not be apprehended as a social space without class. Although not very common, a few wholesalers and shop-owners could arguably be considered as belonging to a different class than the common resellers and market intermediaries. In the intersection of gender and class, for instance, a notable difference can be observed between a married woman from the so-called 'fragile middle class' who engages in the trade as a subsidiary to household income and a woman whose petty trade is the main or only source of household income. Differences in their education, social capital, and economic resources may indeed be remarkable.

## **2. Class, social position, and social inequality in Kinshasa: a historical perspective**

Because one of the major impacts of colonization in Sub-Saharan Africa was the breakdown of the traditional social order in the process of constructing the new colonial identity, most researchers (Capelle 1947; MacGaffey 1987; Pain 1984; De Boeck & Plissart 2014; Bernard 2018) take colonial institutions as the starting point in social class and inequality research in the continent. In this respect, the Belgian colonial establishment did not just dismantle the traditional Congolese social system and replace it with a western, capitalist social stratification; to this was added a crude particularism of the Belgian colonial stratification and class inequality built around the social constructs of race – and gender to some extent (Pain 1984; De Boeck & Plissart 2014). The trajectory of Kinshasa, as the headquarters

of the colonial administration, and the capital city of the current DRC can best illustrate this.

Founded as a trading post by the British explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley in 1881, Kinshasa became a few decades later an important transit centre for export goods, and the main business district and headquarter of the Belgian political institutions by 1923 (Bernard 2018). As the major centre of economic and political institutions, Kinshasa saw its population grow exponentially from 18,000 inhabitants in 1923 to 37,000 in 1929, to around 400,000 by the eve of the country's independence in 1960, and to over a million by 1970 (De Boeck & Plissart 2014). Yet, social stratification in Kinshasa – as in the rest of the Congo – was first and foremost racially structured in the Colonial era. The Congolese society was divided between two main poles: The White, Colonialist class on the one hand, and the indigenous, Congolese class on the other. The Colonialist class, comprising the Belgians living in Congo, made the bourgeoisie class owners of the forces and means of production (MacGaffey 1987). The Congolese class, conversely, was divided into two sub-groups: the *évolués* and the autochthons. The *'évolués'*, translated from French as 'civilized', represented a tiny portion of the Congolese population, with basic education, and who were believed to have assimilated European 'values' and lifestyle (De Boeck & Plissart 2014). They, therefore, occupied an advantageous status and benefited from certain social considerations from the colonial administration compared to their autochthon counterparts. They could, for instance, take some bureaucratic positions, albeit at the lowest level of the colonial administration (Pain 1984; De Maximy 1984).

Furthermore, the colonial institution brought into the Congolese society another dimension of social stratification, based on the intersection of race and gender. Indeed, the colonial institutions reinforced and introduced new gender relations in the Congolese society, which situated Congolese women in a unique position to their male counterparts in the colonial era (Faray-Kele & Matundu 2010). A major venue of this construction of gender identity was the Colonial education system. Indeed, the education system built by Catholic missionaries in Congo was segregationist, based on race and gender. Such institutions did not just separate Europeans from natives, but also women from men, based on gender stereotypes and ideologies (Geiger *et al.* 2002). To illustrate, Congolese men were the first to receive education in French, thus having access to a prestigious social status, whereas women's education – offered mainly in native languages – focused mostly on the acquisition of homemaking skills, and the reinforcement of what was defined as feminine characteristics (Pain 1984).

Corollary to social stratification based on race and gender, class in Kinshasa colonial era was also spatially segregated. The city was segregated into two major partitions: the *'Cité indigène'* (indigenous town) and the



European town (De Boeck & Plissart 2014). The European town was composed of the administration headquarter neighbourhoods in the banks of the Congo River, the Kalima commune (known today as Gombe), where most of the public and diplomatic offices were located, Ngaliema, the residential quarter, and later near the industrial agglomeration in Limete (Pain 1984). This part of the city was in a certain way a replica of European cities, with most of the comfort and urban infrastructure found in the Western world of that time. The indigenous towns were built on the opposite side of Kalima, in the hinterlands (De Boeck & Plissart 2014). This part of the city comprised new quarters of smaller prefabricated or traditional houses, with basic infrastructure (there was running water in most houses, but some houses did not have access to electricity) built by the colonial administration and rented to indigenous workers (Pain 1984). As the urban population increased through the years, with new arrivals from the rural exodus, the indigenous towns expanded, with more improvised constructions and rudimentary infrastructure mushrooming in the peripheries (Trefon 2004). Such subdivision reproduced social inequality as people from different neighbourhoods had access to different resources and social infrastructure. It also constrained possibilities of social mobilities as it did not allow flexible social intercourse, especially between Europeans and the Congolese natives, thus restricting access to a more diverse social capital (De Boeck & Plissart 2014).

The general sociology of Kinshasa and that of its social stratification cannot be fully appreciated without considering the major crises the city has gone through since the country's independence (De Villers 2016). Firstly, for urban geographers (Pain 1984; De Maximy 1984), the exponential growth in urban density that the city experienced a few decades before independence could not have happened without creating a significant social, political, and economic crisis. To these were added two major political crises in the 1960s and 1990s, and subsequent economic crises between and after the two periods (De Villers 2016). As a direct result of such crises, the social life of most Congolese would be significantly altered, with ever increasing impoverished masses. Particularly the 1970s and 1990s the impacts of economic crises were so devastating and widespread that questions arose whether social distinction along classical categories was still appropriate for most Congolese (Yoka 1995). Indeed, in a context where everyone seems to have become poor (Trefon 2004), it is difficult to conceptualize social differentiation or distinction in more concrete or objective terms. To illustrate, college degrees, once a marker of social distinction and venue of social mobility, became a synonym for a chimerical prestige during the crisis (Tsakala & Bongo-Pasi 2004). At the opposite end of the spectrum, a

less educated, successful mineworker can climb the social ladder through quick financial gain (Trefon 2004).

Faced with widespread poverty, inequality, and the resulting violence, Kinshasa thus resort to a certain inventiveness in addressing the crisis through the re-invention and reconfiguration of social norms. This, undoubtedly, has resulted in several social changes: a shift in class and gender formations as well as in the roles of ethnicity and solidarity (Trefon 2004). With the crisis, new patterns of exclusion also emerged. For instance, poor orphans or children from separated parents are increasingly relegated to sites of exclusion, as some are being accused of witchcraft (De Boeck 2004). Another venue of polarization and exclusion concerns new immigrants. Parallel to the shift in traditional norms of kinship solidarity because of the socio-economic crisis (De Herdt 2004), a sharp cleavage between Kinshasa and those who are not has also emerged. New immigrants with few family ties in the city thus have to face not only difficulties related to adaptation in the new environment (De Maximy 1984), but also various forms of social exclusion. Despite such empirical difficulties in conceptualizing class differentiation during the crisis, some authors (MacGaffey 1987; Pain 1984; Vansina 1982) reject the idea of a society without class, or a simplified dualist polarization of class in DRC, and in Kinshasa in particular. Even among the lower classes – those engaging in informal economic activities – a distinct social stratification can still be observed. By 1980, for instance, though most university students were certainly not wealthy, nor did they have assurance of a future salaried work, it would nonetheless be misleading to assume that they belonged to the same class as a farmer in the countryside or an uneducated and unemployed person (Vansina 1982). Then – just as today – degrees still constituted an important human and social capital. In a sense, this can explain that today, despite the current economic hardship and the low probability of a salaried job prospect in Kinshasa, many families still nurture the dream of a university diploma for their children (Tsakala & Bongo-Pasi 2004).

Pain (1984) thus distinguished 3 major classes in Kinshasa. At the bottom end of the pyramid is the lower class, made of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. The upper end of the pyramid pertains to the privileged class, which is divided between a few dozen of *grandes familles* (big families) at the top and a number of *Bourgeois* families with considerable financial income. The privileged class owns its position mainly from businesses and political functions and affiliations. The middle class – made of the *évolués*, skilled workers, and intellectuals – remains very unstable and vulnerable to economic fluctuations and political crisis (Pain 1984). Over the years, an additional element to social stratification in DRC and Kinshasa became apparent: besides the educational and occupational components, social

classification among the political elite class also became built around ethnicity, regional identity, and political affiliations. Through political favouritism, a select group of individuals – most of whom belong to the region or village and political party of the political leader – occupy high public functions and make the ruling class. This was certainly the case with Mobutu's *Nbgandi* group and an inner circle of some *Katangais* around the two Kabilas (De Villers & Omasombo 2002). The ruling class thus benefits from material resources and a privileged social status that are inaccessible to the rest of the population. This practice has also resulted in the emergence of ethnicity and regional affiliation as important power networks in Kinshasa's informal governance (Nkuku & Titeca 2018).

Remarkably, some of these stratification elements align with what we know today as social stratification in contemporary Kinshasa. Hitherto, this kaleidoscope of social stratification in DRC and Kinshasa makes questionable recourse to Marxist literature on historical materialism and economic reductionism in stratification research. Since some markers of social position – especially for the ruling class and the 'fragile middle class' – are situational and can change with a shift in political power and economic conjuncture, a rigid social classification becomes even more problematic. In line with this, Schatzberg (1980) already suggested a more flexible and adapted system of social stratification in DRC to capture class hybridity.

### **3. Class and social position affecting access to capital and business development in Kinshasa's second-hand clothing trade**

Because class is linked to relations of power and subordination, it becomes a sensitive topic for empirical research. Quite understandably, when asked about the subjective representation of their social positioning, people adopt a 'defensive', 'hesitant', 'ambivalent', or 'ambiguous' attitude (Rubbers 2019; Bottero 2004). This is more difficult in Kinshasa, where social identity and representation are continuously contested, negotiated, and reformulated; and where bluff or feigned social privilege is very common (De Boeck & Plissart 2014). Likewise, external markers of social distinction (especially though clothing) are also not reliable in this context. In such dynamic identity formation, social agents may inadvertently or intentionally misrepresent their objective social position within their social space (Bourdieu 1975). While this is certainly true for the social position, it may also apply to the differentiation between classes in the context of Kinshasa.

To determine class differentiation, the researcher therefore paid attention to both an individual's subjective perception of social position within the social hierarchy as well as objective measures such as the size of the economic activity, the volume of the capital, educational background, household's

main income source, and house and assets owned, among others. A small group of shop-owners, wholesalers, and semi-wholesalers emerged in a very distinct social position that could arguably be considered as a distinct class in its own right. Unlike small-scale resellers who can afford only one bundle at a time, and those unable to afford even a single bundle, most shop-owners, wholesalers, and semi-wholesalers can buy several bundles of clothes every day, which can make their business quite lucrative. This particular group can be distinguished from the rest through a relatively higher financial capital and a diversified household income source. This may be the case, for instance, of some married women whose husbands occupy a relatively stable employment position, and whose involvement in the trade is a supplement to their husbands' income. The following story can illustrate this.

Astrid is a 57-year-old married woman. She never went to college, though she completed the secondary level and had training as an elementary school teacher. Formerly, she taught at an elementary school for nearly 10 years. But a few years ago, she resigned from her job, citing stress and low salary as the reason. Her husband is an engineer in the local electricity company. She has 4 children, two of whom are university graduates and are already working; the remaining two are still studying at the university. The family owns a house in a nice neighbourhood in Lemba, and she considers herself to live a good life compared to other market resellers. She started the second-hand clothing business to help support her children through college. It is her husband who provided her with the starting capital. She continuously relies on her husband's income and sometimes her working children's in case of business loss. Today, 6 years into the business, she says she is satisfied with the business outcome, despite the 'conjuncture'. She is a semi-wholesaler, buying one or two bundles of second-hand dresses a day. Nearly half of her products are sold to other retailers before noon. The remaining items are sold in her stall in *Marché de la Liberté*. Some lucky days, when she finds a really good dress from her second-hand bundle, she brings it home, where she may either keep it for herself, or give it to her daughters, or even sell it at a higher price. She works alone in the business. Once in a while, when she has other commissions, her niece who lives with her helps. So far, she does not intend to stop the business activities even after all her children graduate from university. She states that the little the business adds to household income is necessary.

Cases like this are not uncommon in Kinshasa's informal sector. Astrid's family might not be wealthy in an objective sense of the term, and their financial situation and relative sense of stability may still be vulnerable to intermittent economic fluctuations that affect most people in Kinshasa, yet they certainly do not lead the life of a poor farmer nor that of many market retailers and intermediaries in Kinshasa. Differences in education, lifestyle

(housing, assets, food), and income, among others are remarkable. Arguably, this may illustrate the development of objective class formation within certain categories of social positions within the informal economy. While such social agents might not by themselves exploit or exclude the most destitute group, their different social positioning suggests unequal access to resources at a structural level. Differences in access (and differences in quality) to financial capital, education, and social capital do, indeed, reproduce social inequality.

In most cases, therefore, a person's social origin, or – as sometimes – a person's class, plays a crucial role in providing access to start-up capital. Respondents with a history of stable wage employment before joining the informal sector use their savings as start-up capital in the new business. Conversely, previously unemployed people report having a hard time gathering a start-up capital when they want to engage in forms of income-generating activities. Because financial stability often implies financial reliability, entrepreneurs who engage in the business with enough savings or a more diversified source of income might mirror a sense of security that is crucial for building trust, creating, and establishing useful social ties for the business. This can be captured by the story of Mathieu. He is 55 years old, married, and a father of 5 children. Before joining his wife in a small-scale second-hand clothes business, he used to work in a construction company, and it is he who provided his wife with the start-up capital to set up the business. Today, nearly 17 years into the business, Mathieu says that he has benefited a lot from it. He does not regret resigning from his former job in the construction company to join forces with his wife in the second-hand clothes trade. Asked about what useful relations have helped him in the success of his business, he mentioned his wife and friends and colleagues to whom he could run to ask for help or a loan in times of crisis. In fact, after resigning from his work, Mathieu invested an important amount from his savings to the second-hand business. The remaining savings were invested in two different activities that could provide the family with a certain financial stability. He built two studio rooms for rent near their home in the outskirts of Kinshasa and started a small piggery in the backyard. Arguably, Mathieu's case suggests that, because he had a successful career and stable employment before engaging in the business with his wife, he could secure some degree of financial stability which allowed him to invest in the business with more assurance. Such assurance becomes very crucial for establishing useful economic ties, even in the informal sector. In the informal as in the formal sector, a person's financial trustworthiness is crucial for determining whether one could take the risk of providing credit to that person.

Even within the lower-class group, differences in social origin place actors in different position to one another. Hence, while a certain group of resellers can afford at least one bundle at a time, the most destitute group,

unable to establish a relatively stable business income, resort to either an unending credit cycle or are obliged to join business with others. The latter group, in particular, is the most vulnerable to business shocks. Similarly, younger men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are unable to buy a bundle of second-hand clothes, use a certain inventiveness and their connections with some semi-wholesalers and retailers to offer their service as *commissionaires*, or street vendors, for a markup of the original price. Others, more enterprising, position themselves in front of the stalls or the alleys of the market while trying to 'catch' or 'fish' customers (though these euphemisms may be somehow taken literally given their somewhat annoying insistence in convincing potential customers) for a specific retailer as they bargain on the price beforehand. Like the previous group, they also are paid through a small surplus in the original price of the item.

Other than affecting access to start-up capital, a person's origin also significantly affects access to social capital, as it determines the quality of networks an entrepreneur can tap. Through diverse channels, social networks also affect entrepreneurs' access to the various types of capital and business ideas that are crucial for the creation and development of their informal economic activities. Specifically, social networks affect access to start-up capital, business ideas, and physical capital through either weak or strong ties. Strong ties – referring here to a group of people within a close circle of family and friends – are remarkably important in providing access to start-up capital. As indicated by most respondents, in the absence of a stable income or access to financial services, entrepreneurs resort to personal family ties for the start-up capital. It is further showed that such start-up networks are even preferred over conventional financial services such as microfinance or a formal banking system. Most times, a rationale for this is that receiving start-up capital from relatives or close friends represents protection over potential harassment or lawsuits in case of a delay in payment or even in case of default of payment. Particularly, the preferential use of strong ties as start-up networks suggests that an entrepreneur coming from a well-to-do social group would have privileged access to social networks while an entrepreneur's poor family background might not be very useful in the creation and development of the informal economic activity. Here the very contacts – family or friendship relationships – constitute differentiated networks. This is evidenced by several accounts of traders contending that their poor family backgrounds were a constraint in the development of their business activities.

'We might all live the same reality, but we are not the same... A person coming from a higher position will have more advantages. He or she would have the *possibility* to buy more often a variety of second-hand clothes bundles to sell. But a poor person like me will depend on sales only. Like

now, I bought one bundle. I need to wait till I sell everything, then I can look for possibilities to go buy a new bundle to sell' (Bijoux, entrepreneur).

Social networks provide the knowledge needed for the creation of informal economic activities. A business idea or training can come from a variety of sources: from relatives, close friends, or even acquaintances. A common occurrence suggests that entrepreneurs from families with a history in second-hand clothing businesses use knowledgeable relatives as initiators. Likewise, people who are successful in the second-hand clothing business tend to progressively involve their younger relatives in the same business. However, while most respondents often use strong ties for accessing start-up capital, they often resort to weak ties when it comes to business ideas or training. Indeed, whereas financial matters such as a start-up capital might require a level of trust and security that strong ties can provide, a business idea and training can come from various relationships, including casual friends and acquaintances.

'For me, it's my friend who brought me to buy second-hand clothes in Limete... That was my first day. We bought it in Africom shop. After buying it, we came here to the market and she explained to me everything. She taught me how to sell: "here, for this, you need to do this, this should be done this way, alright? You should sell this kind of clothing at this price; you see?"' (Bibiche, entrepreneur).

Though rare, a few cases have also highlighted a scenario where an entrepreneur who is connected to a local accountant of a big shop can receive a loan to buy the merchandise or be allowed to take credit on the merchandise.

'The only person who can help you there can be the accountant. But they can do it only if they trust you, they can give you their money so that you buy the bundle there and go *to sell* in the morning. And you must pay them back before they report to the white men by the end of the day. That is the only occasion where you can receive some help there. Even for me, only with the help of God, I was once helped by the accountant from the place where we buy clothes, he gave me money to buy clothes from their shop. After I sold my products, I am to go immediately to repay him. This has to be done the same day before they close the shop' (Lucie, entrepreneur).

Furthermore, social position also affects business development through support networks. The data collected show a strong connection pattern between business development, sustenance network, strong ties, weak ties, and informal saving mechanisms. Resorting to both strong and weak ties is presented as the most common strategy that entrepreneurs use to overcome business-related difficulties. Because informal second-hand trade is marked

by many fluctuations, informal entrepreneurs often need to continuously reinvest their financial capital in the business. Thus, for many entrepreneurs, ploughing money from other sources into the business can help overcome business constraints. Three different sources are listed as potential business support networks. These are informal saving mechanisms, loans from close friends or relatives, and loans from acquaintances. Eventually, such support networks are equally defined and shaped by a person's class and social position.

#### **4. Social position and the intersection of identity markers**

Bourdieu's (1987) idea that different social properties shape social position can be a very useful contribution here to understand the social position and the intersection of identity markers. The social position takes into account the combination of various stratifying factors that often intersect as they shape the dynamics of social inequality. Identity categories such as social origin (or socio-economic situation), gender, and ethnicity, among others – by themselves as well as when associated with economic resources – place people in a different position to resources. These research findings have thus indicated that identity categories such as gender, ethnic identity (or more so migration status) affect access to capital in various degrees in the second-hand clothes trade, and in the informal sector in general.

For most respondents, however, an entrepreneur's gender is said to have no significance in accessing capital within the informal sector. This seems to validate claims that, in DRC's informal sector, gender and age have lost much of their profiling power in recent years (De Herdt & Marivoet 2018). However, gender disparities on access to or deprivation of goods – whether financial, material, economic, physical, or social goods – need not be seen as a random occurrence. Often, a woman's access – or lack thereof – to capital does not depend solely on her or her partner's will. Gender inequality needs to be viewed as a structural constraint. Rather than asking whether someone denies women access to capital, one should ask: what are the structures that constrain women's access to capital in the informal sector? Hence, gender disparity in access to start-up networks is remarkable. Women entrepreneurs' over-dependence on their husbands for start-up capital is intriguing, and indicates, in a sense, perpetuation of the stratification of pre-colonial and colonial institutions. Indeed, nearly all married female entrepreneurs interviewed have indicated that they received the start-up capital from their husbands.

Conversely, married male respondents often point to their savings from previous work or credit from other male relatives as key sources of start-up capital. This can be perceived as a random fact, that married women tend to depend on their husbands in various ways. However, this implies unequal



social position at various levels. An explanatory factor might be that women have less access to formal or other forms of employment compared to their male counterparts (MacGaffey 1984). This, by itself, may also be related to other factors constraining women's access to other forms of economic activities: education and/or cultural gender norms and socio-cultural values which define women's traditional roles as mothers, housewives, and general family caretakers while men are viewed essentially as breadwinners. Concomitantly, because financial stability often implies financial reliability, a male entrepreneur who engages in the business with enough savings or a more diversified source of income might mirror a sense of security that is crucial for building trust, creating, and establishing useful social ties for the business.

Although traditionally men tend to have more opportunities than women to accumulate venture capital, women's historical position in the informal sector has also provided some women with a good opportunity to accumulate important financial capital, experience, and social capital for successful business development (MacGaffey 1984). Indeed, despite the persistent socio-economic crisis, there are situations where some women traders have been able to earn a decent living from their informal economic activities. However, even in such cases, differences in financial situation or social origin among women is remarkable. While women from a relatively better financial position may easily gain greater access to resources and thus have greater returns in the business, the same cannot be said of women from very modest origins. A glaring income disparity between women wholesalers, semi-wholesalers, and those at the very bottom with very low-scale economic activities can attest to this intersection of gender and socio-economic positions.

Admittedly, investigating the impact of ethnicity on social relations is a very sensitive topic as it runs the risk of being perceived as casting a judgment on a respondent's character or accusing someone of tribalism. Such observations are very relevant in the specific case of this research. When asked whether a person's ethnicity, a region of origin, or – in a more nuanced tone – mother tongue can place people in a different position to one another and resources, many respondents displayed some unease in expressing their opinions. A few respondents opted to not provide a specific answer to the question, arguing that a person's ethnicity or mother tongue should not matter.

Nonetheless, the research shows that ethnicity – understood here as belongingness to a group that shares a common cultural trait, tradition, or language – can impact access to effective social networks. This aligns with previous studies contending that ethnic, tribal, or regional linkages are very important as they can constitute power networks in Kinshasa's urban governance (Nkuku & Titeca 2018). Some respondents thus agree that

ethnic or regional ties can facilitate access to useful networks. It follows that linkages with public servants or people in powers are specifically highlighted here. Undeniably, sharing tribal or regional ties with a person in an authority position, in general, might help in the long run.

'We know stories saying that to advance in some circles, you need to speak the same language as the chief. The same can also happen in our case. Like, to get quickly some authorizations from some office, it can help to speak the language of the chief...so, language or ethnicity can be a constraint, but it can also be an opportunity if you speak the right language. For example, if you are not *Muswahili* and the chief and the staff are *baswahili* it might not help you...or if you are *muswahili*, the person in the office is *mukongo*, or *mungala*, or *mongo*, or *muluba*, there are many ethnic groups...if you bring your Swahili, it might not work for you' (Monique, entrepreneur).

However, ethnicity does not necessarily constrain social interaction among sellers or limit access to important ties. Although ethnic, tribal, or regional ties – especially when it is expressed in terms of the languages spoken other than Kinshasa's lingua franca, Lingala – can facilitate interaction as some people might feel more at ease with those who speak their mother tongue, agency still plays a crucial role in determining whether one would allow ethnic background or regionalism to constrain their interaction with others. For example, speaking another language – different from one's mother tongue – can prove very useful in overcoming social barriers based on ethnicity or language. The interview transcript below can illustrate this better:

'I can speak many national languages. So, for me, a person's mother tongue, tribe, or ethnicity, does not really prevent me *from* dealing with him or her. Even if you speak English, I will find a way to communicate with you. I have no complex. You can speak any language you want; it does not mean anything to me. Sometimes when people are buying, they might speak a different language, I will speak that language too. If you shift to a different language, I will shift too' (Nicole, entrepreneur).

This finding seems also to validate Trefon's (2004) observation about a certain fluidity in Kinshasa identity. Indeed, in this urban space marked by the need to survive (De Boeck & Plissart 2014), a person's identity may easily shift based on perceived social advantage. A person may therefore present themselves as belonging to one group one day and shift to another group another day.

Alongside ethnicity (or even more than ethnicity), migration status also emerged in this research as a factor that might affect access to capital. Since migration from the countryside or a different town to Kinshasa often implies venturing into new territories with little to no social ties, new migrants face

limited access to capital when they engage in the business. It is indicated that migration status (especially for new arrivals) can accentuate the impact of ethnicity on access to social capital. It is further reported that regional, tribal, or ethnic prejudices coupled with a language barrier (sometimes because of an accent) can affect a person's access to greater social capital.

Conversely, the research shows that, because they often have limited networks in their new environment, migrants may replace weak ties with strong ties to overcome that social constraint of being a newcomer. It is not unheard of for a person to make use of family connections or friends in his first days in the new town. A respondent's history can better illustrate this paradox. Moise is a 33-year-old male small-scale trader of second-hand clothes. He is married and the father of 4 children. He left his native Bandundu two years ago to look for better life prospects in Kinshasa. Leaving behind his wife and children, he came to Kinshasa to live with his cousin. Through his cousin's help, he was able to start the business of buying and selling second-hand clothes in *Marché de la Liberté*. Today, he collaborates with his cousin and some of his high school friends who are now settled in Kinshasa.

Not everyone, however, can creatively make use of strong ties in a new environment. This is the case of Monique, who is a 45-year-old divorced woman, with two children. Monique arrived in Kinshasa from Kisangani, with her husband who had a work contract with a local company. Two years after arriving in Kinshasa, she found herself divorced, alone, with no relatives or strong connections in Kinshasa. She nevertheless decided to venture into micro business and invested most of her savings in the second-hand clothing trade. She cites the lack of connections in Kinshasa as a major difficulty in her business.

Ultimately, material conditions that determine social classes intersect with other stratifying factors such as ethnicity (migration status) and gender which can all affect access to capital at various levels, notably in access to the start-up and sustenance networks. This is in line with Meagher's (2010) argument that ties of communal identity, class, and gender may lead to uneven access to effective strong and weak ties. Undeniably, such interplay of different social properties positions women (and men) in differing relations of privilege and marginality to one another (Chant & Pedwell 2008). A multidimensional social position would, therefore, suggest that the different properties intersect in a way that might disadvantage groups of people on different levels. Indeed, we could not agree more with Pompper (2014) that social identities are intersectional. Attention should be given here to how different social identity dimensions overlap in dynamic ways to disenfranchise some people while empowering others. A person might be disadvantaged in various levels at once. Conversely, another person

might be disadvantaged in one category and yet have advantages in another category. A female small-scale second-hand clothes trader might not just face constraints to accessing effective ties because of her gender. Her financial status and her migration status (whether she is an immigrant in Kinshasa) might also affect her access to capital at different levels. It follows that a woman originating from a poor family or who married into a lower social group would face stringent constraints in accessing important capitals – especially for the start-up capital and subsequent need for financial supports – compared to her counterparts from better financial origins.

It should be noted, however, that the above variables do not just intersect, they also overlap. They could also be intertwined in a very complex dynamic that makes some of them interdependent. This is very apparent in the case of gender and class. Indeed, as central to the root cause of inequality in a capitalist society (Murray & Öchsner 2017) class is empirically interrelated to gender. Gender norms and gender relations may be lived differently across classes in diverse social contexts (Bryant & Hoon 2006). Henceforth, in lower social classes, women might be more discriminated against in accessing higher education compared to men – which can have broader consequences in their access to the labour market or in establishing a corporate glass ceiling later (Soleymanpour Omran *et al.* 2015). In this sense, this research's findings seem to validate the claim that the multidimensionality of lived experiences of privilege and exclusion needs to be explored in researching social inequality (Meagher 2010; Pompper 2014).

## Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse and broaden existing understanding of social inequality within the informal sector by investigating the role that class and unequal social positions play in access to capital and social development among second-hand clothes traders. Change in social representation of second-hand clothes and the DRC's persistent deep economic crisis have led to an unparalleled revival of the second-hand clothes trade in Kinshasa (Ayimpam 2016). However, this thriving economic sector often entails a complex recycling process and involves different social actors at various levels. In a way, this corroborates recent scholarship on the African informal sector, indicating the convergence of various social groups engaging in a range of income-generating activities (Dasgupta & Lloyd-Jones 2018). However, the socio-economic differentiation that results from this heterogeneity gives rise to concerns on social precarity, vulnerability, and inequality within the informal sector. Because, as a sociological category, precarity or vulnerability signals an unfavourable labour condition (Han 2018), it necessarily raises issues on structures that reproduce such conditions. How are different social actors and groups differently affected in the informal sector? Unequal social

positions and class – to a certain extent – arise as categories that reproduce poverty and inequality among second-hand clothes traders.

Disengaging from an objectivist philosophy that apprehends social classification solely on economic terms, this work suggests the convergence of various social properties, notably economic resources, gender, and ethnic identity, among others, in shaping social position. While these different variables by themselves place social agents in a unique position to one another and resources, they also intersect as they create relations of exclusion. This ultimately reinforces social inequality and constrains social mobility. Nonetheless, social mobility ought not to be understood along vertical lines alone, as social trajectories can still be marked by incremental changes without significant alteration of life chances.

Ultimately, this research has further practical implications for policy relevance for the informal sector and urban inequality in Kinshasa, in particular; but also, in similar environments in the region. Despite rising inequalities in a largely informal-sector-dominated urban Sub-Saharan Africa, very little is known about the complex structures that constrain people's access to strategic resources. In this respect, the multidimensional analysis of social inequality in Kinshasa's informal sector provides critical information to apprise development scholarships and policies for more inclusive and focused poverty alleviation strategies. In particular, the multidimensional lens in access to capital – a less-explored category in the informal sector – opens promising horizons for policymakers to substantially extend existing knowledge on how identity markers intersect in determining social position and privileged access to resources or exclusion. At times, this can be very crucial for designing development strategies that aim to address social inequality and im/mobility in Kinshasa and the African informal sector.

The establishment of the intersection between social origin (education, economic resources, social capital), gender, and migration status in this research, indicates that to address rising inequalities in Kinshasa's largely informal-sector-dominated economy, a mere provision of resources (such as access to financial services) without a proper contextual understanding of different structures of exclusions cannot be enough. Conversely, policies that target unequal distribution of resources within categories such as class, gender, and migration status could be expected to yield more effects in reducing social inequality within the informal sector. There is undeniably a need for a multidimensional approach to social inequality within Africa's informal sector. In a sense, these research findings point in that direction.

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