

Policy Brief

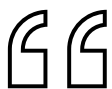
From Stateless to Citizens: the journey of the Shona community in Kenya

Preliminary results from a socioeconomic study on the impact of citizenship on socioeconomic and living conditions.



"Getting a national ID has really helped me. I can now move freely without fear of getting arrested. I have access to better job opportunities too because of the access the ID has been able to give me. My kids can now pursue their education comfortably because I know I can support them with access to more work opportunities." - Azariah Samuel, 27-year-old father of two during a follow-up socioeconomic study on the Shona community in Kenya. © UNHCR/Charity Nzomo.

Statelessness today



A stateless person is someone who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.

– 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (Article 1).



Globally, an estimated 4.4 million people lack a nationality, leaving them stateless, according to statistics published by UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).^[1] In the East, Horn, and Great Lakes of Africa (EHAGL) region, this includes 97,591 stateless persons or persons of undetermined nationality, of whom 9,800 live in Kenya. Given the lack of universal reporting and other gaps in statelessness data, these figures are likely to be an underestimate. Stateless people often live on the margins of society and remain invisible in national statistics and other government population databases due to the complexities of accurate registration and data collection.

Lack of identifying documents confirming nationality frequently precludes stateless persons from working in the formal economy, owning property, accessing basic services such as health and education, moving freely or accessing financial services, leaving them at an elevated risk of poverty.^[2] Children may face restrictions on attending school, while exclusion from public health services imposes costs on families and creates risks for surrounding communities.^{[3], [4]} Acquiring citizenship, brings the promise of improved employment and earnings,^[5] especially among women and the poorest,^[6] while also offering broader social and economic benefits, as increases in talent, skills and taxation accompany legalization.

Since 2014, more than 500,000 stateless people have acquired a nationality globally. Statelessness for many others has been prevented as a result of efforts to improve birth registration and issuance of nationality documents to populations at risk of statelessness and legislative changes, including those that eliminate discrimination on the basis of gender, allowing women to pass on nationality to their children on an equal basis as men. However, acceleration of efforts is needed to ensure that everyone can enjoy the fundamental right to a nationality, which often enables the enjoyment of other rights and full participation in the society.

Kenya has emerged as a global leader in the eradication of statelessness, setting an example for other nations through its continued efforts to reduce the number of stateless persons within its borders. The country has made significant strides, beginning with the recognition of 1,496 members of the Makonde community as nationals of Kenya in 2016, followed by the provision of nationality to 1,659 Shona in 2020-21, and most recently, the recognition as nationals of approximately 7,000 Pemba in 2023. These milestones underscore Kenya's commitment to addressing statelessness, a commitment reaffirmed at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2023 through four strategic pledges aimed at the progressive eradication of statelessness. Despite these achievements, an estimated 9,800 individuals in Kenya remain stateless today, highlighting the need for sustained efforts to fully resolve this issue. Gaps in law continue to be a contributing cause of statelessness, due to Section 15(1) of the Citizenship and Immigration Act, which limits the scope of the definition of a stateless person to those who were in Kenya when it gained independence on 12 December 1963, excluding many individuals who arrived later, as well as their descendants. In addition, neither the Constitution nor the Citizenship and Immigration Act contain a legal safeguard to ensure that a child born on the territory who would otherwise be stateless is granted Kenyan nationality.

Who are the Shona?

The Shona originally came from Zimbabwe and migrated to Kenya as missionaries majorly between the 1950s and 1970s, settling in the Greater Nairobi area. According to community elders, the Shona were issued certificates of registration under the Alien Restriction Act upon arrival. However, a change in the Registration of Persons Act of 1978 prevented them from accessing identity cards. As a result, most of those who were among the first wave of arrivals do not hold valid legal identity documents. At the same time, Zimbabwe and Zambia do not consider them as nationals since many of those who were born there did not have their births registered and lost all traces of their ancestry since they never returned, hence rendering them stateless.^[8] Subsequently, they settled and assimilated with the local Kikuyu community which welcomed them. Since their arrival, they have practiced wood carving for men and basket weaving for women as their primary economic activity outside of preaching activities. Ten individuals from the Shona community were granted Kenyan citizenship on 12 December 2020 and a further 1,649 were recognized as Kenyan citizens and issued with registration certificates on 29 July 2021.

► Box 1: Data Sources

The primary data for this report come from a comprehensive 2024 socioeconomic survey conducted by UNHCR which recontacted households which were initially surveyed in 2019, prior to the Shona acquiring nationality. The follow-up survey aimed to capture the transformative impact of citizenship on the Shona community in terms of employment, education, income, and access to essential services, while also incorporating new modules on social cohesion, community engagement, and civic participation to better understand the broader integration of the Shona into Kenyan society. The 2024 survey provides rich insights into the Shona's post-citizenship journey and the challenges and opportunities they face as newly recognized citizens of Kenya.

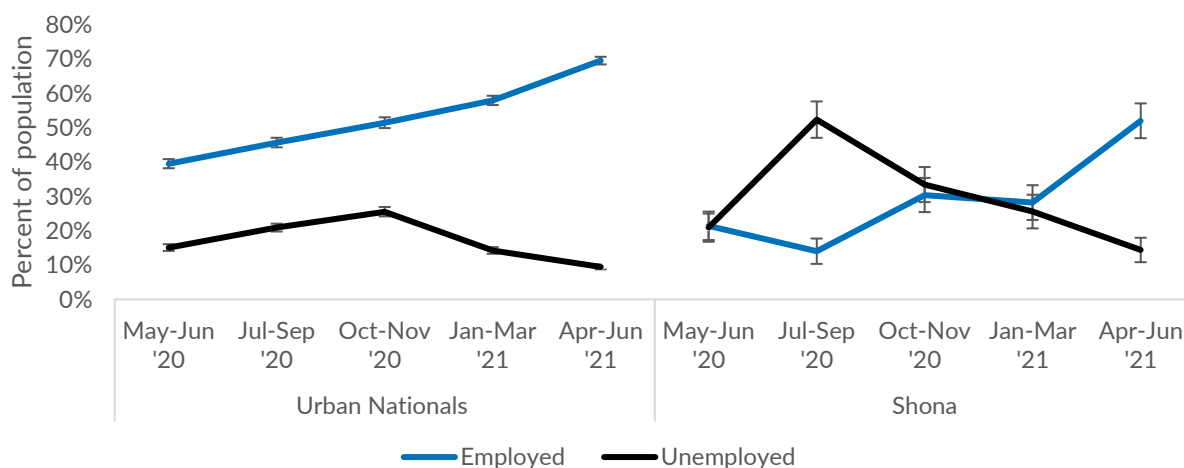
The findings are complemented by the 2019 household survey of the Shona community, conducted jointly by UNHCR and the World Bank^[8] establishing a baseline of the Shona community's socioeconomic conditions while they were still stateless. This study revealed significant disparities in access to services and opportunities compared to Kenyan nationals, highlighting the detrimental effects of statelessness on employment, financial inclusion, and educational attainment. These findings informed policy recommendations that ultimately contributed to the recognition of the Shona as Kenyan citizens in 2020-21, providing a crucial foundation for evaluating their post-citizenship outcomes.

Additionally, insights were drawn from the Kenya COVID-19 Rapid Response Phone Surveys (RRPS),^[9] conducted between 2020 and 2022, which included the Shona as a distinct stratum. The RRPS monitored the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, capturing critical data on employment disruptions, income losses, and food insecurity during the crisis.

The Shona community in Kenya has faced significant socioeconomic challenges, exacerbated by their stateless status and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before acquiring citizenship, Shona households faced a 24 percent higher likelihood of living in poverty compared to the urban Kenyan population and were more likely to reside in larger, overcrowded households. Although primary school enrollment rates were similar to those of their Kenyan counterparts, many Shona children struggled to transition to secondary education. Limited access to formal employment, driven by a lack of legal documentation, has forced many Shona individuals into self-employment or informal work. Even with high employment rates within the community, this does not translate into reduced poverty, as most of the employment is low-income and lacks stability.^[8]

The labor market situation for the Shona community deteriorated sharply during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employment rates plummeted from 73 percent to just 21 percent, while the share of unemployed individuals actively seeking work surged from 4 percent to 20 percent. During this period, food insecurity was widespread among Shona households, and access to external support was minimal. Although employment levels began to recover a year later, they remained below pre-pandemic levels, underscoring the prolonged adverse impact of the pandemic on this already vulnerable community.^[9]

Figure 1: Labor force status after the COVID-19 outbreak (18-64 years)



Source: Kenya COVID-19 Rapid Response Phone Surveys (RRPS) ^[9]

Two rounds of household surveys taking place over five years before and after the transition of the Shona in Kenya from statelessness to citizenship help us to understand this community – and present one of the first socioeconomic pictures of the impact of citizenship on the welfare of stateless persons. Between 2019 and 2024, the median age of Shona household members remained unchanged at 18 years, underscoring a predominantly youth demographic profile. Gender distribution is even, showing only a marginal change, with the female population increasing slightly from 49 percent to 50 percent. Average household size has risen modestly from 4.9 to 5.4 members, which may reflect greater household consolidation or socio-economic stability following their naturalization. The most notable shift is the significant reduction in the proportion of female-headed households, dropping from 33 percent to 21 percent. The literacy rate has remained constant at 93 percent, reflecting sustained access to education. Overall, the Shona community's demographic profile suggests stability and gradual socio-economic integration following their acquisition of citizenship.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of Shona community in Kenya.

	2019	2024
Median age (in years)	18	18
Gender (Female, in percent)	49%	50%
Mean household size	4.9	5.4
Female headed households	33%	21%
Literacy rate (can read and write in any language, aged 15+)	93%	93%

Source: 2019 Shona socioeconomic survey^[8] and the authors' calculation of 2024 survey data.

Life before and after citizenship

Access to services

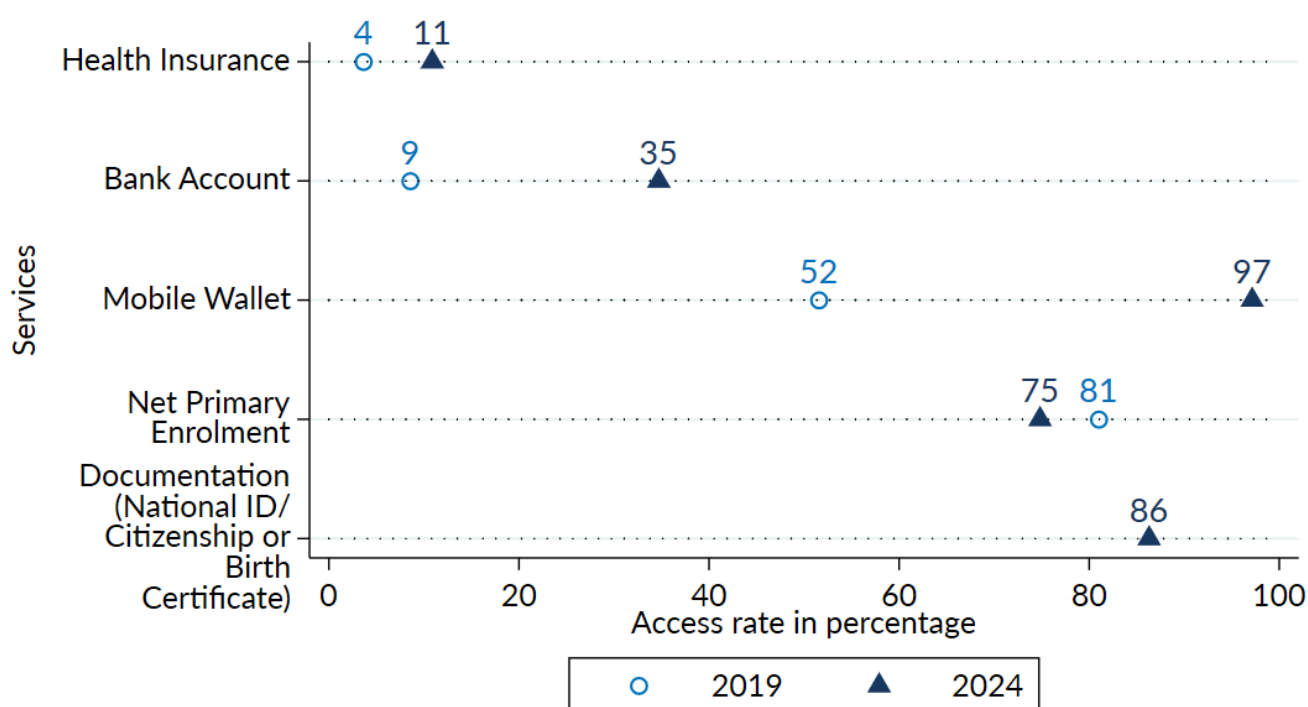
Since 2020, the Shona community has made significant strides in the enjoyment of rights and access to essential services and social, economic, and financial opportunities. The acquisition of citizenship has enabled the community to access critical documentation, with 86 percent of individuals now holding a national ID, citizenship, or birth certificate. This remarkable progress has facilitated their inclusion in various social and economic opportunities.

Access to financial services has also improved significantly. The proportion of community members with bank accounts increased from 9 percent in 2019 to 35 percent in 2024, while mobile wallet usage saw a surge from 52 percent to an impressive 97 percent. This suggests that the community has leveraged citizenship to integrate more fully into the formal financial system, enhancing their economic participation.

Health insurance coverage has nearly tripled over the past five years. The percentage of Shona individuals with health insurance rose from 4 percent in 2019 to 11 percent in 2024, compared to 24 percent nationally.^[10] Although the current coverage rate remains low, this growth indicates an increasing awareness and ability to access healthcare services, possibly due to better employment prospects and social benefits associated with citizenship.

Net primary school enrolment shows a slight decline but is attributed to changes in the education system rather than reduced access. The enrolment rate decreased from 81 percent in 2019 to 75 percent in 2024. However, this is likely due to the adjustment in the age bracket for primary school in Kenya under national education reforms launched in 2022, which has led to a temporary underestimation of the enrollment rate. Despite this, the Shona community's access to primary education remains strong and stable.

Figure 2: Access to essential services, pre- and post-citizenship

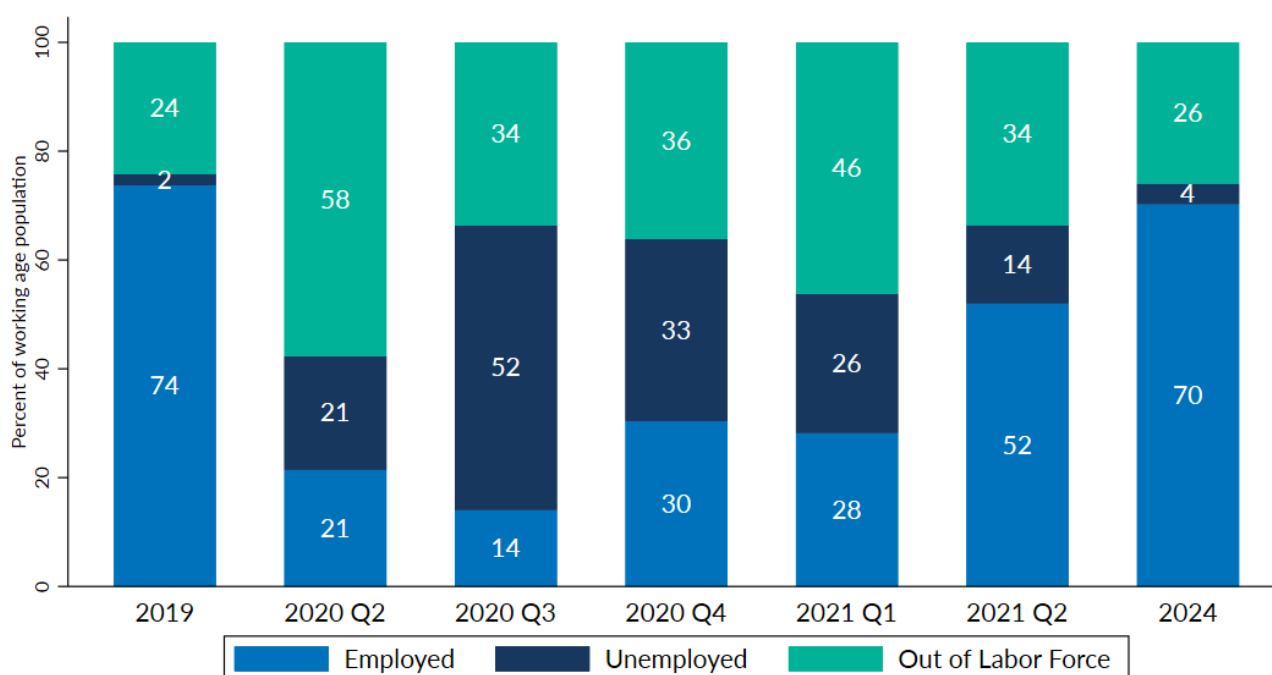


Source: 2019 Shona socioeconomic survey^[8] and the authors' calculation of 2024 survey data.

Economic opportunities

The Shona community's employment rates in 2024 are still recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, regional drought, inflation crisis and continuing global economic turbulence. According to data from the Kenya COVID-19 Rapid Response Phone Survey (RRPS), the Shona community experienced significant job losses during the pandemic, particularly between July and September 2020, when unemployment increased dramatically.^[9] This period of economic disruption caused by the pandemic led to fluctuating employment rates, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 3: Labor force participation as a percentage of working age population, between 2019 and 2024



Source: 2019 Shona socioeconomic survey,^[8] Kenya COVID-19 Rapid Response Phone Surveys (RRPS),^[9] and the authors' calculation of 2024 survey data.

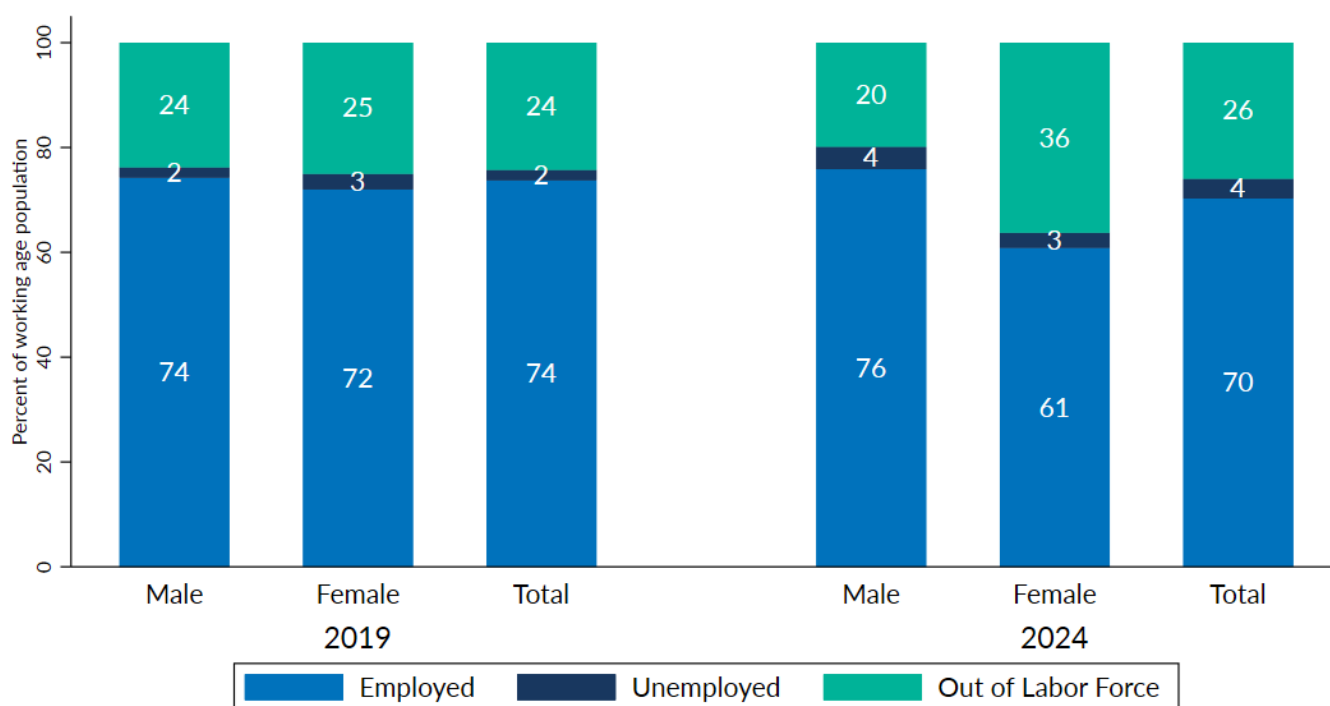
While employment has started to improve, it has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, especially for women. The employment rate for women decreased from 72 percent in 2019 to 61 percent in 2024, which can largely be attributed to the job losses incurred during the pandemic and slower recovery in female-dominated sectors that were further setback by the food price crisis and global economic headwinds. Meanwhile, male employment increased slightly from 74 percent to 76 percent during the same period, reflecting a quicker rebound in male-dominated occupations.

The overall decline in total employment from 74 percent in 2019 to 70 percent in 2024 is indicative of the sum of these shocks. Although men have re-entered the labor force at a faster rate, the community as a whole is still in the process of economic recovery. The proportion of unemployed individuals has remained relatively low, suggesting that many are still re-entering the labor market or seeking labor market opportunities. Only 13 percent of the Shona working wage-earners have some form of employment contract, demonstrating a high prevalence of informal work arrangements.

The increase in the number of individuals out of the labor force, especially among women, underscores the difficulties of returning to the labor market and securing timely employment. The pandemic's effects have pushed

more women out of the workforce, increasing the rate of women out of the labor force from 25 percent in 2019 to 36 percent in 2024. This is consistent with global trends, where women have faced more severe disruptions in employment due to caregiving responsibilities and other socio-economic factors.

Figure 4: Labor force participation by gender as a percentage of working age population across 2019 and 2024



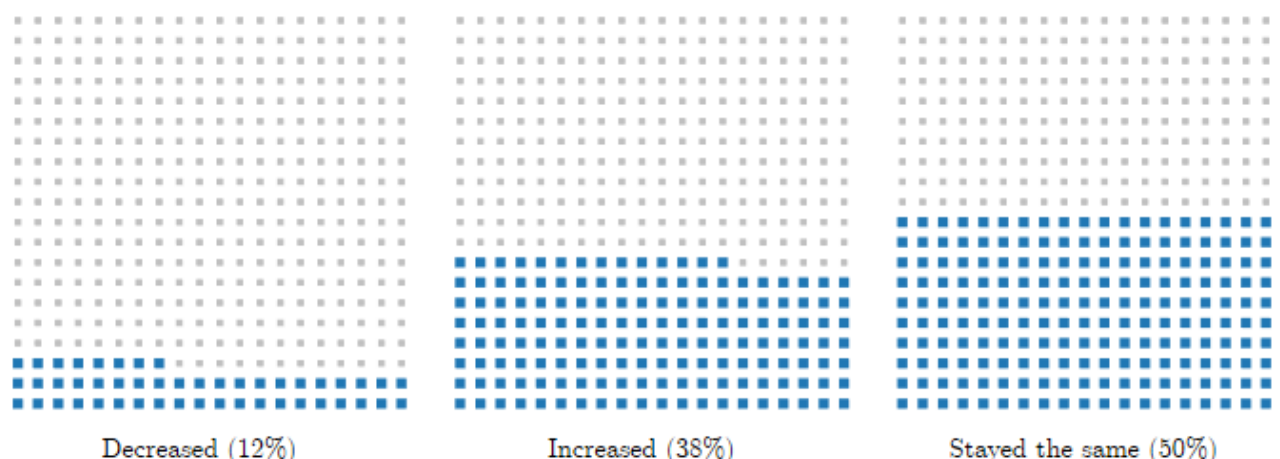
Source: 2019 Shona socioeconomic survey^[8] and the authors' calculation of 2024 survey data.

Household income

Income from business is the primary source of livelihood for the Shona community, followed by wages and other minor sources. 73 percent of household income in the Shona community comes from business activities like carpentry, weaving baskets and hawking on the streets, indicating a strong reliance on entrepreneurship and self-employment. Wages from employment and daily labor activities constitute 25 percent of the income, while other sources like asset earnings or assistance contribute a mere total of 2 percent, showing limited diversification in income streams. This heavy dependence on business shows that the Shona community still relies on their traditional income sources and suggests that the community might face heightened vulnerability to market fluctuations and economic shocks affecting their businesses.

A majority of households report that their income has remained stable since gaining citizenship, but a notable proportion has experienced an increase. Half of the households indicated their income stayed the same, while 38 percent reported an increase, and 12 percent experienced a decrease since December 2020. This distribution suggests that while citizenship has had a stabilizing effect for many households, it has not yet resulted in broad-based economic gains. However, the increase in income for nearly 4 out of every 10 households is a positive sign of economic progress and potential for further growth as the community continues to integrate more fully into the Kenyan economy.

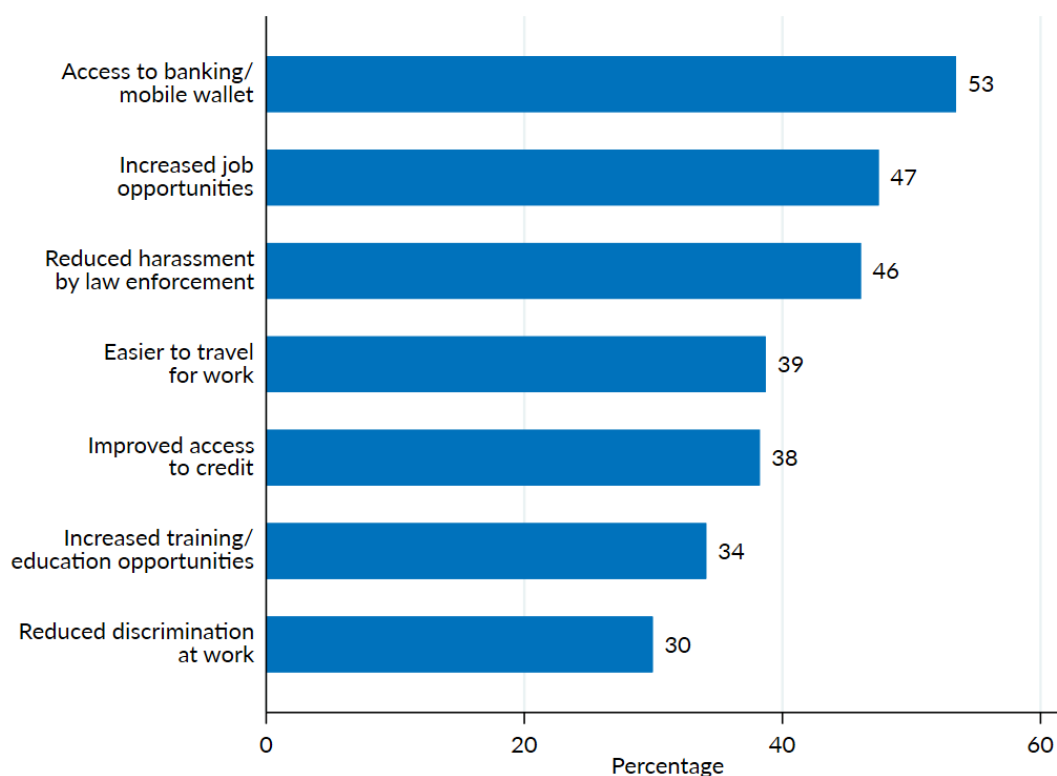
Figure 5: Perceived change in household income since gaining citizenship



Source: Authors' calculation of 2024 survey data.

Livelihood opportunities for the Shona community have improved significantly since gaining citizenship, particularly in terms of financial access and job prospects – as well as protection outcomes, such as reduction in harassment by law enforcement. According to the survey data, over half of the Shona community reported that citizenship has enhanced their access to banking and mobile wallet services, making it easier for them to save, invest, and manage their finances. Increased job opportunities were cited by 47 percent of respondents, reflecting how the ability to present formal identification has opened new avenues for employment and economic participation. Importantly, 46 percent of the Shona noted a reduction in harassment by law enforcement, which had previously hindered their movement and limited their economic activities. This improvement has enabled more individuals to seek employment and conduct business without fear of arbitrary detentions or fines.

Figure 6: Impacts on receiving citizenship on livelihood opportunities



Source: Authors' calculation of 2024 survey data.

Other key benefits of citizenship include greater mobility and access to credit, facilitating more stable and productive livelihoods. About 39 percent of respondents mentioned that it is now easier to travel for work, allowing them to explore job opportunities in broader geographic areas. Furthermore, 38 percent reported improved access to credit, which is critical for expanding small businesses or starting new ventures. These changes underscore the transformative role of citizenship in enabling the Shona community to overcome previous barriers to economic participation and build sustainable livelihoods.

Moreover, citizenship has also led to increased access to training and educational opportunities, while reducing discrimination in the workplace. Over a third of the Shona noted that they have had more opportunities for training or education since becoming citizens, helping them to build skills and enhance their employability. Another 30 percent reported experiencing less discrimination at work, which has contributed to more positive employment outcomes and a more inclusive work environment. Overall, these improvements indicate that legal recognition has been pivotal in unlocking the economic potential of the Shona community, setting the stage for greater socioeconomic mobility and long-term development.

► Box 2: Findings from focus group discussions

Many of the survey results are consistent with findings from qualitative focus group discussions, including challenges associated with securing economic opportunities. The Shona community faces challenges predominantly stemming from low education levels and the absence of formal qualifications to which the lack of nationality and documentation has been a major contributor. The acquisition of citizenship has provided some new avenues, especially for the youth, such as working in the hospitality industry and the ability to obtain driving licenses, which has opened job opportunities in the transportation sector. However, most of the community still relies on traditional trades such as carpentry and basket weaving. The competitive nature of these trades, coupled with a lack of diversification in skills and economic opportunities, is prompting members to explore new economic avenues. This situation highlights the need for economic development initiatives that are tailored to the community's unique needs and skills, offering sustainable and diversified economic opportunities.

The youth within the Shona community demonstrate a keen interest in enhancing their skills and seeking opportunities beyond conventional trades. The improvement in access to education is a positive development, yet the challenge of transitioning into the formal labor market remains significant. Citizenship has facilitated easier mobility and enabled traditional vending activities, but it has not led to substantial changes in long-term career prospects. This underscores the need for targeted youth development programs focusing on vocational training, career counseling, and job placement services to help bridge the gap between education and employment.

The primary needs identified within the Shona community include access to affordable housing, better integration into the labor market, financial support for business development, and political representation. External support in these areas, such as land allocation advocacy, education and skills training programs, and inclusion in national safety programs, is essential for providing a foundation for sustained community growth and prosperity. Partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations could be instrumental in addressing these needs, ensuring that the Shona community has the necessary resources and support to thrive in a post-citizenship era.

Nationality as a tool for development

Inclusive national identification systems are recognized as key enablers for development. Allowing people to establish and verify their identity is often a prerequisite for access to services and economic opportunities and exercising a range of rights, such as property ownership and public participation. For governments and businesses,

identity systems can serve as a platform for more effective and efficient service delivery by enabling the unique identification and verification of persons. Importantly, proof of legal identity can promote greater inclusion by de-risking and reducing the costs of service delivery. Well-designed and universally accessible foundational ID systems can promote reconciliation and a sense of national unity and identity.^[11]

Acquiring Kenyan citizenship has significantly improved the socioeconomic conditions of the Shona community, enabling them to access essential services, economic opportunities, and social benefits. Before gaining citizenship in 2020, the Shona faced numerous barriers due to their stateless status, which excluded them from formal employment, financial services, and government programs. Following the acquisition of nationality, the Shona now enjoy access to legal identity documents, increased livelihood opportunities, better health insurance access, and financial inclusion. These positive changes align with findings in the academic literature, which highlight the importance of citizenship in reducing poverty and enhancing human capital by allowing individuals to leverage government services, engage in formal employment, and contribute more productively to society.

Citizenship has also enhanced the Shona community's labor market potential, though employment rates are still recovering from the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Legal identity has granted many Shona individuals the ability to seek formal employment and broaden their economic activities beyond informal self-employment. This has enabled the community to slowly rebuild their livelihoods post-pandemic. Nevertheless, employment levels remain below pre-pandemic rates, especially for women, reflecting challenges in labor market reintegration. The employment rate for women dropped from 72 percent in 2019 to 61 percent in 2024, suggesting a slower recovery in sectors traditionally dominated by women. Overall, the Shona community's gradual employment recovery indicates the value of citizenship in building economic resilience and highlights the need for continued support to ensure inclusive recovery for all members of the community.

The Shona experience provides valuable lessons for addressing statelessness and promoting inclusive development for other stateless communities globally. Gaining citizenship has been transformative for the Shona, granting them access to a range of socioeconomic benefits and reducing their vulnerability to poverty and exclusion. This case underscores the importance of grant of nationality to stateless populations and its potential to unlock economic and social opportunities that drive sustainable development. As more countries around the world seek to address statelessness through legislative changes and the expansion of citizenship rights, the Kenyan experience with the Shona can serve as a model. By providing legal identity and addressing structural barriers, policymakers can empower stateless communities to participate more fully in their economies and societies, leading to improved livelihoods, social cohesion, and economic growth. These findings have broader implications for the many stateless individuals in the East, Horn, and Great Lakes of Africa region, as well as the millions of stateless people globally, demonstrating that resolving statelessness is not only a matter of human rights but also of inclusive economic development.

Recommendations

1. Develop holistic, long-term policy frameworks that address the socioeconomic and human rights dimensions of statelessness.

National governments and international stakeholders should adopt inclusive development policies that go beyond legal recognition to ensure the full social and economic integration of stateless and formerly stateless populations. This entails ensuring equitable access to education, healthcare, employment, and social protection services for newly recognized citizens. Governments should be encouraged to introduce targeted social safety nets and employment support programs to reduce poverty and promote resilience among stateless and formerly stateless groups. UNHCR and the World Bank, in partnership with national governments and NGOs, can provide technical

assistance in designing and implementing these frameworks, fostering environments that allow all individuals to contribute to and benefit from national development.

2. Support economic integration and empowerment of the Shona community through targeted financial inclusion programs and skills development initiatives.

The Government of Kenya, in collaboration with development partners, is encouraged to implement tailored financial inclusion strategies to help the newly recognized Shona citizens access credit, savings, and insurance products that are crucial for business growth and household resilience. Establishing entrepreneurship training programs, mentorship networks, and providing access to capital for small and medium-sized enterprises would empower the Shona community to leverage their skills in wood carving, basket weaving, and other economic activities. Additionally, promoting employment opportunities in the formal sector for Shona individuals through job placement services and partnerships with the private sector will ensure that the community's transition to full citizenship is accompanied by tangible improvements in income and welfare.

3. Reaffirm and expand Kenya's commitment to eradicating statelessness by adopting a comprehensive national strategy.

Building on the success of granting citizenship to the Makonde, Shona, and Pemba communities, a National Action Plan to identify and resolve remaining cases of statelessness, including the estimated 9,800 individuals who remain stateless, offers many benefits. This strategy should include amending the relevant Sections of the Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act to remove the time-limitation for registration of stateless persons and align the definition of a stateless person with the definition in the 1954 Convention; acceding to the two UN statelessness conventions and ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa; enhancing birth registration systems to prevent future statelessness; simplifying procedures for nationality application and documentation; and implementing community outreach programs to raise awareness about the rights and entitlements of citizenship. The Kenyan government is also encouraged to continue its leadership on this issue by advocating for regional and international cooperation to address statelessness, including sharing best practices and lessons learned from its national experience.

4. Promote international collaboration and investment to support stateless populations in gaining nationality and legal identity and accessing essential services.

Governments, international organizations, and development agencies should work together to ensure stateless individuals receive the support needed to obtain nationality and legal documentation. This includes nationality law and policy changes enabling stateless people to acquire nationality, investing in robust and inclusive civil registration systems, conducting community-based identification campaigns, and facilitating cross-border collaboration to address statelessness among migrant populations. Providing technical and financial assistance to countries with high numbers of stateless individuals would further enable the implementation of comprehensive registration and citizenship programs. The new Global Alliance to End Statelessness provides a multi-stakeholder platform to strengthen these joint efforts.

5. Expand efforts to generate evidence on the impacts of statelessness and post-citizenship integration globally, with a focus on Kenya.

Stakeholders should invest in continued, longitudinal studies to track the Shona community's socioeconomic progress over time and take advantage of the pre- and post-citizenship data that is already available, enabling a better understanding of post-citizenship outcomes. Additionally, research should be expanded to include the Makonde, Pemba, Rundi and other communities alongside the national population, providing comparative insights

on the long-term effects of citizenship on diverse (formerly) stateless groups. Enhanced data collection and analysis will support evidence-based policymaking and targeted interventions for stateless populations.

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