

A dark, worn, long-sleeved shirt hangs on a wire hanger in the foreground. The background shows a slum setting with people and buildings. The shirt is dark and has some lighter, worn patches. The hanger is a simple wire. The background is slightly out of focus, showing people and buildings in a slum setting.

THE PAPER PROMISE

Bridging the Gap Between the Degree and the Daily Grind



By **LIZA NDURUHU**

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INTRODUCTION

*For decades, the African narrative has been built on a specific equation: **Education = Employment**. Families sell land to pay tuition, and students spend four years memorizing theories, all for the promise of the "paper" the degree that is supposed to unlock the corporate door.*

But for the Class of 2024 and beyond, the locks have changed.

With formal unemployment rates rising, the paper promise has fractured. This essay explores what happens when the degree doesn't work, but the graduate must. It is a visual journey into the lives of three young Kenyans who have traded their certificates for survival skills, finding dignity in the "hustle" when the office remained out of reach.

THE PIVOT

Maina, 24 **Qualification:**

B.Sc. in Supply Chain Management

Maina spent six months "tarmacking" in Nairobi's business district. Today, he manages a different kind of supply chain.

Operating from a stall in the city outskirts, he sources vintage clothing and distributes it to a network of clients. His certificate sits in a cardboard box by his feet, a silent reminder of the journey that brought him here. "I use my degree every day," he says, handing a customer a shirt. "I calculate margins, I manage logistics, and I forecast demand. The location has changed, but the math is the same."



THE OVERQUALIFIED MILE

Brian, 26 **Qualification:** Civil Engineering

The construction industry slowed down, but the movement of people did not. Brian represents a growing demographic in the transport sector: the overqualified rider.

While his peers wait for government tenders that rarely come, Brian turned to the gig economy. The motorbike allows him autonomy. "The road doesn't care about your papers," he notes. "It only cares if you can deliver." It is a grueling shift, physically demanding and risky, far removed from the safety of the engineering office he trained for.



THE INVISIBLE OFFICE

Sarah, 23 **Qualification:** Bachelor of Education (Arts)

Sarah is part of the "Hidden Workforce." When the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) number didn't come through, she didn't stop working she just went virtual.

The local coffee shop has become her boardroom. While her peers clock into 9-to-5 jobs, Sarah logs into a global marketplace. She works as a transcriptionist and content writer for clients in time zones she has never visited. With a laptop and a strong Wi-Fi connection, she has bypassed the local unemployment crisis entirely. She is proof that the census often misses the point—young people are working, but they have moved to spaces the government doesn't count.



Sarah, 23

THE NEW REALITY

The photos above are not images of failure. They are portraits of adaptation.

The "Paper Promise" may have been broken by the economy, but these graduates kept a promise to themselves: to keep moving. They have redefined success, stripping away the prestige of job titles to find the core value of work. While we advocate for better policies and more jobs, we must also honor the resilience of those who didn't wait to be saved. The degree is in the drawer, but the work is in their hands.

FOOTNOTES

About the Author: **Liza Nduru** is a final-year student pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Information Technology. Beyond her technical studies, she is a passionate content creator interested in how digital media can be used to tell human stories. This project represents the intersection of her academic discipline and her creative vision, exploring how modern youth navigate the economy.

Project Context : This photographic essay was produced as a **Capstone Project** for the 2026 Academic Year. The objective was to move beyond the statistics of unemployment and visually document the resilience of the Kenyan workforce.

Nairobi, Kenya

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Story Told With



Exposure

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