

PHASE 4: Case Studies of Women’s Engagement with Community-Based Armed Groups in Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A nuanced understanding of women’s engagement with CBAGs can help to develop more effective violence reduction and peacebuilding programs. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to delineate a general conclusion on the roles that women play in conflict and security while maintaining a view of both their individual agency and diverse contexts. From an applicability perspective, it is equally unhelpful to simply list women’s functions and contributions characteristic in different contexts. This research initiative thus takes a comparative case study approach to capture the range of women’s relationships to CBAGs.

The RESOLVE Network research initiative on women, peace, and security in relation to CBAGs contributes to a rich body of knowledge by providing nuanced context and specific examples of the roles and contributions that women have in both conflict and peace. The following two case studies look at women’s engagements with CBAGs and community security mechanisms in two very different contexts: Kenya and Côte d’Ivoire. In both cases, the studies investigate the roles women play in conflict ecosystems, either as a formal member of CBAGs or through informal engagement and relationships, and their motivations behind that engagement. Within the two countries, the reports offer localized insights across a diverse range of study sites that reveal a broad range of variations, for example between urban and rural locations, depending on the local climate and geography, history and colonial heritage, social and ethnic dynamics, and economic issues.

In *Agitators and Pacifiers: Women in community-based armed groups in Kenya*, authors Phoebe Donnelly and Boglárka Bozsógi examine gender dynamics in Kenyan conflict ecosystems, including social perceptions about women. The report analyzes the drivers of women’s engagement with armed groups and the roles they play in conflict and reconciliation through their engagement. In *Women, CBAGs, and the Politics of Security Supply & Demand in Côte d’Ivoire*, Arsène Brice Bado and Brandon Kendhammer explore how women are involved in their communities by participating both formally and informally in community-based security groups through investigating and illustrating their motivations and roles, the context, and the dynamics that underpin their participation in both the supply side and demand side of security provision. Both research reports are based on extensive field work by local field researchers including original datasets of interviews and focus group discussions, engaging and enriching the academic literature.

Findings

Just like men's, women's motivations to engage with armed groups vary on an individual basis, not only by location but also socioeconomic circumstance, ethnic identity, and political affiliation. The field research was able to identify key themes of women's roles in CBAGs and the drivers of their engagement, with similarities and differences between Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, that have implications for policy and programmatic planning and implementation moving forward.

First, both studies found that economic concerns were a key motivating factor for women's involvement with CBAGs. In Kenyan urban informal settlements, poverty and ethnic and economic marginality of women amount to economic pressures, while the expectation of material benefits remains a powerful incentive for women to join or support CBAGs. Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire women joined self-defense committees or security groups because of economic vulnerability, to meet their material needs, or because they considered it a viable job opportunity. Here, some women who participate directly in, i.e., members of, CBAGs also engage in criminal activity, selling stolen goods or participating in robberies. Women's socioeconomic empowerment through education, training, and support can be a crucial tool for strengthening women's independence and mitigating the economic needs that drive CBAG participation.

Another common motivation for joining or supporting CBAGs was personal tragedies and a desire to avenge loved ones, such as husbands, fathers, and brothers killed in violence or exposed to rights violations, especially in cases where state intervention is deemed unjust. The desire for justice was found to be a driver in Côte d'Ivoire too. Bado and Kendhammer write that "women have joined CBSGs [Community-based Security Groups] or have supported armed groups because of the frustrations and injustices that they are directly subject to or have indirectly suffered through their community."¹ Improved security sector oversight and accountability, conflict- and gender sensitive interventions, and a greater inclusion of women in the formal security and justice sectors can be avenues to address and prevent injustices and tame tensions.

The studies also found that women have a high demand for security and protection especially in areas where state security provision is insufficient or absent. In Côte d'Ivoire, being a member of a CBAG was found to provide protection for self, relatives, and assets. In Kenya, government neglect and insufficient security was a key driver of violence and armed community mobilization, which influenced women's experiences of and participation in conflict. In the words of an interviewee in Marsabit county, "Women are members of society in areas where this is the situation. It's very hard for them not to be involved. It's their home."² In ethnically polarized contexts, where mistrust between the state and communities and among communities is rife, many ethnic groups in Kenya rely on CBAGs for protection. To support CBAGs, women were reported to withhold information from national authorities, use their social networks to

1 Arsène Brice Bado and Brandon Kendhammer, *Women, CBAGs, and the Politics of Security Supply & Demand in Côte d'Ivoire* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.1>, 24.

2 Prisca Kamungi, Phoebe Donnelly, and Boglárka Bozsogi, *Agitators and Pacifiers: Women in Community-based Armed Groups in Kenya* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.4>, 13.

spy for community members and warn of planned attacks, thus contributing to the protection of themselves and their communities. Insecurity and violence caused by CBAGs also led women to find ways to assert their own security and survive in the informal, often illicit, economy.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the need for protection triggered a special type of indirect participation with security groups. There are wealthy businesswomen who coopt or establish CBAGs to meet their needs for security, to have them as escorts for trips or guard their property. These women, referred to as “patrones” (bosses) or “vieilles mères” (old mothers) wield authority and influence over the group. Thus, “women’s influence in shaping the trajectory of community-based armed and security providing groups extends not just to their roles as suppliers of security (or insecurity, in the case of some groups), but as demanders of security.”³ The patronne phenomenon warrants further research as these private security entrepreneurs shape the informal security sector when the state is unable or unwilling to provide adequate services.

Finally, the research findings suggest that women’s participation in CBAGs reflects social dynamics. Some women get involved in CBAGs in a search for community and belonging. A desire to be recognized and accepted was characteristic of Ivorian women participating in CBAGs from stigmatized social groups. Women’s social identity and networks can facilitate their integration into CBAG networks, and their engagement with CBAGs may also be shaped by cultural expectations, relationships and social networks are a powerful explanation of why people join violent groups. Moreover, it was reported in Kenya that some women who joined CBAGs felt empowered, and their gendered identity changed. In the Côte d'Ivoire context, some women experience their participation as a challenge to social norms; namely, carrying a firearm challenges the state and society, which seems to drive some women and girls to join groups. Women’s participation in CBAGs was at times perceived negatively in Kenya, as if reflecting a breakdown in the gendered social order. Women’s multifaceted engagement in security supply and demand, their parallel challenges and contributions to social order and security structures necessitate complex considerations for gendered socialization trajectories.

Conclusion

The case study research on women and CBAGs in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire embodies the commitment of the RESOLVE Network to ensure that programming and policy can have a solid background in rigorous research and local perspectives. Such contextual analysis is indispensable for the implementation of the WPS agenda, and the micro-level insights from these reports prompt considerations for gender-sensitive and inclusive policy and programming.

The research reports concur that women’s and men’s motivations to engage in conflict and violence, including CBAGs, are diverse, and even similar drivers manifest differently through CBAG formation and mission, ways of engagement, activities, and levels of violence or insecurity. Policy and programming will look different depending on gender and on the causes of CBAG formation, group legitimacy, local econ-

3 Bado and Kendhammer, *Women, CBAGs, and the Politics of Security Supply & Demand in Côte d'Ivoire*, 6.

omy, contextual gender norms, legal frameworks, availability of weapons, and other conflict dynamics. Because of the diversity of conflict outcomes and plurality of security actors, efforts to mitigate violence and enhance stability should focus on the root causes of conflict at the community level in each specific case. Any intervention for stabilization, mediation, conflict management, disarmament, disengagement, and reconciliation must therefore be based on locally grounded gender analysis.

While further research is recommended, findings from the two case studies suggest some initial pathways for effective engagement. First, they find that addressing economic needs and supporting women's economic empowerment will be paramount for preventing women from resorting to illicit, violent, and dangerous livelihoods and offering pathways out of CBAG participation. Beyond the economic sphere, women's meaningful inclusion in the political and societal aspects of communities and societies is a cornerstone of the WPS agenda. Second, the findings indicate that effective disengagement and reintegration efforts must address the needs of individuals by accounting not only for gender and age, but also urban and rural locations, socioeconomic background, cultural norms, and ways of engagement and activities. Addressing stigma around women who are agents of security or conflict and whose behavior does not conform to social gender norms must also be a key component of these programs. Healing stigma and trauma and rebuilding social trust are key components of prosocial, psychosocial, and political reintegration, post-conflict reconciliation, and social cohesion. Taken together, these recommendations can help to address key gaps in existing and future programs.

RESEARCH REPORTS

Bado, Arsène Brice, and Brandon Kendhammer. *Women, CBAGs, and the Politics of Security Supply & Demand in Côte d'Ivoire*. Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.1>.

Prisca Kamungi, Phoebe Donnelly, and Boglárka Bozsogi. *Agitators and Pacifiers: Women in community-based armed groups in Kenya*. Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2022.4>.

**WOMEN, CBAGS,
AND THE POLITICS OF
SECURITY SUPPLY &
DEMAND IN
CÔTE D'IVOIRE**

Arsène Brice Bado &
Brandon Kendhammer

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INTRODUCTION

For much of Côte d'Ivoire's history, women have been excluded from direct participation in the formal and informal security sectors. Even today, women represent a vanishingly small proportion of the country's official security forces, at roughly 2% of uniformed police and military personnel in 2018.¹ In the informal sector, however, the 2002–2007 civil war² and 2010–11 post-electoral crisis³ marked a sea change in how women engaged in security and conflict. During both conflicts, women enlisted openly in armed groups and served in a diverse array of auxiliary and support positions, taking a more direct role in the provision of security and violence than ever before. According to the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), 6,105 women entered the national program for disarmament, demobilization, and reinsertion (DDR)⁴ conducted between 2012 and 2015.⁵ Not all female ex-combatants joined the DDR program, which required a public registration process with the attendant social risk of being stigmatized as a former rebel.⁶ This suggests that the number of women involved in armed groups was even higher.

Despite their lack of representation in the formal sector, in the post-war era women have continued to play important roles in Côte d'Ivoire's contemporary debates over both the supply of and demand for community-level security provision. These debates take place in a complicated and contested security environment,⁷ including the widespread illegal circulation and use of firearms,⁸ intercommunal violence,⁹

1 Kamina Diallo, "La Femme Dans Le Secteur de Sécurité Ivoirien : Représentativité et Participation," *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*:59.

2 The first civil war occurred from September 19, 2002, to March 4, 2007.

3 The second civil war, commonly known as the "post-election crisis," is a euphemism used in official language. This second war was the deadliest, with more than 3,000 deaths between November 28, 2010 and May 4, 2011.

4 Magali Chelapi-den Hamer, "Les Tribulations Du Dispositif Désarmement, Démobilisation Et Réinsertion Des Miliciens En Côte d'Ivoire (2003-2015)," *Hérodote* 158, no. 3 (2015): 200-218, <https://doi.org/10.3917/her.158.0200>.

5 "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Côte D'Ivoire," ONUCI, September 29, 2016, <https://onuci.unmissions.org/en/disarmament-demobilization-and-reintegration-ex-combatants-c%C3%B4te-d%E2%80%99ivoire>; Kamina Diallo, "La Démobilisation et La Réintégration Des Femmes Ex-Combattantes Ivoiriennes," *Bulletin du Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix* 3, no. 7 (2018).

6 Kamina Diallo, "La Cellule 39 en Côte d'Ivoire. Processus d'identification et mobilisation d'un groupe d'ex-combattants." *Afrique contemporaine* 263–264, no. 3–4 (2017): 177–96. <https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.263.0177>.

7 Maxime Ricard, "Sous Pression: Les Défis Du Secteur de La Sécurité En Côte d'Ivoire." Paris, 2021.

8 Savannah de Tessières, *Enquête Nationale Sur Les Armes Légères Et De Petit Calibre En Côte D'Ivoire: Les Défis Du Contrôle Des Armes Et De La Lutte Contre La Violence Armée Avant La Crise Post-Électorale* (Genève: Small Arms Survey, 2012).

9 "Arms Proliferation and Abuse Shatter Communities in Côte D'Ivoire" Amnesty International, June 23, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/03/arms-proliferation-and-abuse-shatter-communities-c-te-divoire/>.

polarized violent politics,¹⁰ conflicts related to land tenure issues,¹¹ organized crime groups,¹² as well as frequent terrorist attacks in the north.¹³ Despite a range of important recent security reforms¹⁴ they also take place amidst low overall levels of community trust in the police/gendarmerie and military. The 2019 Afrobarometer survey, for instance, found that not only do majorities of Ivoiriens express little or no confidence that state security forces can protect their communities, but women express lower levels of trust in these institutions than men.¹⁵

In response to this distrust and the persistent security challenges of the post-conflict era, Ivoiriens have increasingly turned to formal private security companies¹⁶ and informal private security providers to meet their needs. From vigilantes to community-based security organizations and criminal armed groups,¹⁷ non-state security actors have become increasingly central to the lives of many Ivoiriens. Despite this increasing role and the greater visibility of women in the informal security sector during the civil war era, we know relatively little about how women shape and participate in this important ecosystem and the factors and forces that drive women's participation.

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- 10 Arsene Brice Bado and Mollie Zapata, "Election Uncertainty: Preventing Atrocity Crimes in Côte d'Ivoire," *Early Warning Project*, July 29, 2019, <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/reports/election-uncertainty-preventing-atrocity-crimes-in-cote-d-ivoire>; Arsène Brice Bado, "Evaluating Practices of Civil Society Organizations in the Prevention of Electoral Violence in Côte D'Ivoire and Burkina Faso," in *The Politics of Peacebuilding in Africa*, ed. Thomas Kwasi Tiekou et al. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).
- 11 Alfred Babo and Yvan Droz, "Conflits Fonciers. De l'Ethnie à La Nation," *Cahiers D'Études Africaines* 192, no. 4 (2008): 741–764, <https://doi.org/10.4000/africanstudies.15489>; Catherine Boone et al., "Push, Pull and Push-Back to Land Certification: Regional Dynamics in Pilot Certification Projects in Côte D'Ivoire," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 59, no. 3 (August 26, 2021): pp. 247–272, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x21000124>.
- 12 Francis Akindès, in *Social Theories of Urban Violence in the Global South towards Safe and Inclusive Cities*, ed. Jennifer Erin Salahub, Markus Gottsbacher, and John de Boer (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).; Maxime Ricard and Kouamé Félix Grodji, "Fumoirs Et Relations d'Interdépendance : Négocier l'Ordre Social à Abobo, Abidjan," *Politique Africaine* 163, no. 3 (2021): pp. 23–43, <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.163.0023>.
- 13 "Côte D'Ivoire : Deuxième Attaque Djihadiste En Moins D'une Semaine à La Frontière Burkinabé," TV5MONDE, December 24, 2021, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/cote-d-ivoire-deuxieme-attaque-djihadiste-en-moins-d-une-semaine-la-frontiere-burkinabe>; "Terrorism in Côte D'Ivoire Is No Longer Just an External Threat," ISS Africa, June 15, 2021: Lassina Diarra, "Radicalisation Et Perception De La Menace Terroriste Dans l'Extrême Nord De La Côte d'Ivoire : Le Cas De Bounkani," n.d., <https://africacenter.org/fr/security-article/radicalisation-et-perception-de-la-menace-terroriste-dans-lextreme-nord-de-la-cote-divoire-le-cas-de-bounkani/>.
- 14 Alina Leboeuf, *La Réforme Du Secteur De Sécurité à L'ivoirienne* (Institut français des relations internationales, 2016). In fact, the reform of the security sector in Côte d'Ivoire after the post-electoral crisis (2010-2011) was operationalized in 108 reforms. These include the redefinition of a national defense and security policy, the creation of a new army called the Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI) by integrating the defeated army loyal to Laurent Gbagbo, the Defense and Security Forces (FDS), and the former rebels of the Armed Forces of the New Forces (FAFN) loyal to Alassane Ouattara, the reform of the police and the gendarmerie, etc. The list of security sector reforms is available at: https://www.defense.gouv.ci/ministere/role_defense.
- 15 "Résumé Des Résultats: Enquête Afrobarometer Round 8 En Côte d'Ivoire, 2019," (CREFDI, July 3, 2020), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/cdi-r8-sor_2019.pdf. The question: "How much do you trust each of the following institutions, or have you not heard enough about them to pronounce yourself: 1) the police or gendarmerie? (see results in Table1); 2) the armed forces of Côte d'Ivoire? (see results in Table 2).
- 16 According to DW, in 2016 there were more than 600 formal private security companies, a trend that DW qualified as a boom of security companies. "Le Boom Des Sociétés De Sécurité En Côte D'Ivoire" (Deutsche Welle, May 27, 2019), <https://www.dw.com/fr/le-boom-des-soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9s-de-s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9-en-c%C3%B4te-divoire/a-48894802>. The government has taken more laws to regulate the activities of formal private security companies. See the list of approved security companies in 2019: <https://news.abidjan.net/document/18779/liste-des-societes-privées-de-securite-agreées>.
- 17 Ricard, "Sous Pression"; Ricard and Grodji, "Fumoirs et relations d'interdépendance."

Based on extensive field research and an original dataset of interviews with a wide range of informal security actors, this paper aims to address this gap in our knowledge. It offers two key findings that, we suggest, should inform the work of policymakers and practitioners interested in security provision and peacebuilding. The first is while the civil war era created new and more visible roles for women in community-based armed and informal security groups, the overall role of women in this field remains highly contested in the post-conflict space. While women continue to engage directly and indirectly with these groups with a wide range of motivations—economic, a search for community belonging, a desire for justice/revenge, and even to challenge traditional gender roles—their overall place in the landscape of these groups is in flux and those who participate bear social costs for doing so.

The second finding is women’s influence in shaping the trajectory of community-based armed and security providing groups extends not just to their roles as suppliers of security (or insecurity, in the case of some groups), but as demanders of security. Throughout the interviews, we found extensive evidence that women—particularly those with business interests—experience insecurity in the absence of effective state security provision and created demand for informal security actors, shaping and even funding these actors’ actions and goals. These complex dynamics point to the fact that women’s roles as participants, organizers, and mobilizers/legitimizers in CBAGs in ostensibly post-conflict settings like Côte d’Ivoire are no less complex than in overt conflict settings.¹⁸

This study explores the drivers of participation and the roles women play within their communities in participating both formally and informally in community-based security groups. More specifically, it seeks to understand how women are involved in community-based security groups by investigating and illustrating, among other things, their motivations and roles, the context, and the dynamics that underpin their participation in both the supply side and demand side of security provision. Therefore, the main research question is *how do women influence, engage with, and participate in community-based security groups in Côte d’Ivoire?*

CBAGs and CBSGs in the Côte d’Ivoire context

As defined by Lauren Van Metre,

“Community-based armed groups are a subset of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), defined by their relationship to the state and local communities and the ways they exercise power. While NSAGs, such as insurgent or terrorist groups, seek to disrupt or undermine the state to take it over or establish an alternative political system, CBAGs can be aligned with, or complementary to, the state, or they can operate in gray areas with minimal state presence. They do not typically pursue large political ambitions and strategies; rather, they advance the local ambitions of their stakeholders.”¹⁹

18 Hilary Matfes, *Brokers of Legitimacy: Women in Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2020.1>

19 Lauren Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism: A Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), 4, <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.3>.

Of the various non-state local and community-based groups involved in Côte d'Ivoire's post-2011 informal security provision and conflict landscape, some fit the CBAG definition better than others. For instance, the traditional hunters, called “dozos,” have long “filled gaps in state security provision in remote areas by settling local disputes and protecting residents from banditry and theft,” despite an uneasy relationship with national authorities.²⁰ During the 2002–2011 conflict, the dozo became politicized, participating in the conflict on the side of northern ethnic and political interests. Today, the dozo remain a major national force (arguably more numerous than the national police), operating with considerable impunity and (allegedly) the tacit support of state security forces.²¹

Other prominent post-war community-based security groups have a more complicated relationship with the CBAG concept. Officially, the Ivorian state does not recognize or support any informal or unofficial armed groups (even the dozo), and local security committees or vigilante groups that armed themselves openly have triggered repressive government action. Across many interviews for this project, respondents were reluctant to openly acknowledge that such groups—which operate widely and publicly in both rural and urban areas—were ever armed, attributing whatever violence occurred in their communities to criminal gangs. However, it is also widely known (and quietly acknowledged in informal settings) that at least some of these groups use locally-made weapons or have recourse illegally and clandestinely to firearms, and often have complex, even contested relationships with the law and local authorities. Given these dynamics, we will refer to non-dozo groups that use or threaten violence and coercion in spaces where the state struggles to maintain security as *community-based security groups* (CBSGs).

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, first, this case study relies on an extensive literature review on women and security issues in Côte d'Ivoire. The literature review led to the identification and the selection of the northern, western, and southern regions of Côte d'Ivoire where local communities face the most security challenges such as inter-community violence, the circulation of small arms, criminality, etc. Moreover, each of these three regions poses specific security challenges for communities as described below:

- The northern region includes Korhogo and its surroundings. This region borders Burkina Faso, which struggles with violent extremist groups. Moreover, this region is also known for its high proliferation of weapons due to the high number of people who use weapons such as the dozos, ex-combatants, and criminal groups. In addition to Korhogo, interviews were conducted in the towns of Bondiali and Ouangolodougou which are illegal gold panning sites where small arms circulate.

20 Jessica Moody, *Addressing the Dozo in Côte d'Ivoire* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2020), 2, <https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2020.6.ssa>.

21 Moody, *Addressing the Dozo*, 3.

- The western region includes Man and its surroundings. This region is located at the borders of Liberia. Since the civil wars in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, this region is known for the proliferation of weapons and the presence of a high number of civilians who can use them. Moreover, this western region is often affected by land conflicts and intercommunal conflicts. Ethnic communities tend, therefore, to organize their own security. In addition to the city of Man, interviews were conducted in the towns of Duekoue and Guiglo.
- The southern region includes the cities of Abidjan, Divo, Dabou, and San Pedro. Abidjan is the largest city with its populous suburbs such as Yopougon and Abobo, which are known for crime and local insecurity. Divo is known as a mining city. Mining locations are known for the proliferation of illegal weapons, drugs, and criminal groups. Interviews were also conducted in Dabou where inter-community clashes often occurred between Adjoukrous (local population) and Malinkés (population from the northern region). Interviews were also conducted in the city of San Pedro known for drugs and illegal circulation of light weapons.

Two sampling strategies were used for data collection in the selected regions of study. First, participants were sampled purposively based on preselected categories of respondents such as civil society organizations mostly female organizations, community leaders, female police and army officers, etc., who might have information on women's participation in armed groups or community-based security groups. Second, I also used chain referral sampling (snowball sampling) to allow informants with whom contact was already made to suggest other potentially relevant informants. Interviews and focus groups were conducted between December 15, 2020, and November 13, 2021.

The sample size is 71 people. As displayed in Table 1, 36 people were interviewed in person, 22 people by phone, and 13 people participated in focus groups in Abobo (4 women), in the city of Man (5 women), and in Duekue (2 women and 2 men, all of which were ex-combatants). Participants to focus groups were selected based on their active participation in community-based security groups

Table 1. Sample by location and by type of interviews

Regions	Cities/Towns	Interviews in Person	Participants in Focus Groups	Interviews by Phone	Total	Total Male	Total Female
Northern Region	Korhogo	4	0	2	6	3	3
	Bondiali	1	0	1	2	1	1
	Ouangolodougou	0	0	2	2	0	2
Western Region	Man	10	5	4	19	6	13
	Duekoue	2	4	2	8	4	4
	Guiglo	2	-	3	5	1	4
Southern Region	Abidjan (Yopougon)	12	0	1	13	4	9
	Abidjan (Abobo)	5	4	0	9	2	7
	Divo	0	0	3	3	0	3
	Dabou	0	0	2	2	0	2
	San Pedro	0	0	2	2	0	2
	Total	36	13	22	71	21	50

Table 2 presents the sample by gender, professional occupation, and membership in a CBSG. In terms of gender, the sample includes 50 women, which represents 70% of the total sample, and 21 men, which represents 30%. In terms of professional occupation, 38% of respondents are members or leaders of civil society organizations; 18% are household wives; 13% are businesswomen; 10% are government officials (police, army, civil servants); 3% are dozos (traditional hunters' brotherhood); 3% are community leaders (local chiefs); and 7% are others. Moreover, of the 22 surveyed people (31%) who have membership in a CBSG, 14 are women (20%) and 8 are men (11%). Participation in a CBSG appears to be a part-time job as members of CBSGs tend to identify themselves with other professions.

Table 2. Sample by gender, professional occupation, and membership in a CBSG

Profession	Total Female	Total Male	Total by Profession		Female Members of a CBSG		Male Members of a CBSG		Total Members of a CBSG	
Associations, NGOs, CSO leaders	16	11	27	38%	6	8%	4	6%	10	14%
Ex-combatants	4	2	6	8%	4	6%	2	3%	6	8%
Traditional hunters (Dozo)	0	2	2	3%	0	0%	2	3%	2	3%
Government officials (police, civil servants)	4	3	7	10%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Community leaders	0	2	2	3%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Businesswomen	9	0	9	13%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Household wives	13	0	13	18%	4	6%	0	0%	4	6%
Others (3 security companies, 1 researcher, 1 businessman)	4	1	5	7%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	50	21	71	100%	14	20%	8	11%	22	31%

One of the most important limitations of the study was the sensitivity around describing the status and operation of community-based security groups. While many of the groups profiled here can be understood (at least some of the time) as CBAGs, others have only intermittent or clandestine access to firearms and other deadly weapons. More importantly, many of our interviewees were extremely reluctant to discuss the question of these groups' possession and use of weapons, given strong official government prohibition on armed informal security actors. As such, throughout the paper we have described most of these groups (and discussed them with the interviewees as community-based security groups (CBSGs), to avoid some of the reluctance to speak about their activities openly.

Finally, it is important to note that the goal of the study was not to map CBAGs/CBSGs in Côte d'Ivoire, in general, and there are likely important limits to its representativeness in this wider regard. It focuses instead on the dynamics of women's influence, engagement, and participation in the groups that we have been able to document. Further research mapping the entire terrain of post-conflict CBAG/CBSG activity can and should be seen as an important next step.

EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-BASED SECURITY GROUPS, 1960–2011

The dynamics of women's current participation in and influence on CBSGs in the post-war Ivorian landscape demonstrate both continuities with past challenges and limitations, and evidence of the conflict era's remaking of security-related gender roles and expectations. Before the 2002 civil war, women's direct participation in both the formal security sector and CBSGs was rare. Between independence in 1960 and the end of the 1970s, "the Ivorian miracle" of booming cocoa and coffee exports drove high levels of growth and state investment in infrastructure and socio-economic development. While challenges related to land use and tenure lurked under the surface, and President Félix Houphouët-Boigny presided over a one-party political system, there was relatively little communal conflict and confidence in state security authorities was relatively high during this period, providing few opportunities for women to redefine the most gendered dimensions of CBSG participation.

The most important example of these dynamics in the pre-civil war era was the role of women in the traditional hunting groups called the "dozos."²² The dozos are CBAGs most commonly found among ethnic communities of the Bambara, the Dioula, the Malinke, and the Senoufo. At that time, women were not visibly members of the dozos, and the copious scholarship on these groups makes little reference to women's engagement or participation beyond their limited roles as the wives of initiated male participants.²³ Even today, women are not allowed to join the initiatory society of the dozos. However, starting in the 1990s during the run-up to the 2002 civil war, a few wealthy women hired some dozos for the protection of their property. But since insecurity was relatively low at that time compared to the period after 2002 characterized by armed conflict, few women collaborated with dozos and other formal or informal security groups for the protection of their assets.

From the late 1970s until the late 1990s, the country fell into a phase marked by declining economic growth as well as rising social unrest and insecurity. At the end of the 1970s, the international price of cocoa collapsed and with it, the economic model of the development of Côte d'Ivoire was dependent on the export of cocoa and other cash crops.²⁴ As the state was no longer able to assume its former welfare state status, it lost the confidence of its people. On top of the fall in commodity prices, the currency,

22 Joseph Hellweg, "La Chasse à l'Instabilité : Les Dozos, l'État Et La Tentation De l'Extralégalité En Côte d'Ivoire," *Migrations Société* 144, no. 6 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.3917/migra.144.0163>; Joseph Hellweg and Nicolas Médevielle, "Zakaria Koné Et Les Transformations Des Chasseurs Dozos En Côte d'Ivoire," *Afrique Contemporaine*, 2018, pp. 41–58, <https://doi.org/10.3917/afco.263.0041>; see also: Moody, Addressing the Dozo.

23 See, for instance: Joseph Hellweg, *Hunting the Ethical State: The Benkadi Movement of Côte D'Ivoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and Thomas J. Bassett, "Dangerous Pursuits: Hunter Associations (Donzo Ton) and National Politics in Côte D'Ivoire," *Africa* 73, no. 1 (2003): pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2003.73.1.1>.

24 Anna Lipchitz and Thierry Pouch, "Les Mutations Des Marchés Mondiaux Du Café Et Du Cacao," *Géoéconomie* 44, no. 1 (2008): pp. 101–124, <https://doi.org/10.3917/geoec.044.0101>.

the FCFA, was devalued by 50% in January 1994,²⁵ and social benefits were suppressed for several social groups. This led to strikes by civil servants and secondary and university students and lasting social unrest. Capitalizing on social discontent, Laurent Gbagbo emerged as a political opponent who demanded the end of the one-party rule system inaugurated upon independence in 1960. Political unrest intensified with the death of President Houphouët-Boigny in 1993, and the battle for his succession led to the outbreak of the first civil war in 2002.

It was in this situation of socioeconomic and political turmoil with a weakening state and deteriorating security that a wider range of CBSGs gradually emerged. The rise of banditry as well as the frequent looting and destruction of property during the numerous political demonstrations and strikes increased the demand for security that the state was unable to satisfy. Communities began to organize their own security, giving rise to formal and informal security groups and companies. Women played an important role in the emergence of these security groups, as it was them who demanded more security. As the interviews carried out in Yopougon, Abobo, and in the city of Man with self-defense groups suggest, it was first and foremost the women in the neighborhoods who worked together to find a solution to issues of insecurity (robberies, assaults, thefts, etc.). For example, while residents in better-off neighborhoods called on professional private security companies for assistance, those in working-class and less well-off neighborhoods set up informal security groups.²⁶ Although in most cases women were not themselves armed (or even members of these groups), they were often responsible for generating the demand.

In addition to the emergence of numerous self-defense groups, this time witnessed a transformation of the dozos, which were set up into private militias and even parallel police forces to ensure the safety of local communities.²⁷ As Joseph Hellweg explains,

“We could, moreover, qualify the dozos as parallel police given the ‘roadblocks’ they set up everywhere on the roads of the interior of Côte d’Ivoire to curb the growing criminality that had imposed itself in the country at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s. The dozos turned into security agents because the Ivorian police were powerless in the face of growing insecurity, especially in poor urban areas and in rural areas.”²⁸

Women’s collaboration with the dozos intensified during this period as the security situation deteriorated. In this collaboration, women sometimes played the role of helpers, providing food or other ser-

25 Kako Nubukpo, “Politique Monétaire Et Servitude Volontaire,” *Politique Africaine* 105, no. 1 (2007): pp. 70–84, <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.105.0070>.

26 In fact, this is a characteristic of poor neighborhoods where the informal sector reigns. People in poor neighborhoods are used to organizing themselves with little state intervention. For example, in poor neighborhoods, most commerce is done on the streets, while in wealthy neighborhoods, residents tend to go to supermarkets and other formal shops for their purchases. This same dynamic can be observed in regard to the demand for and supply of security.

27 Thomas J. Bassett, “Containing the DONZOW : The Politics of Scale in Cote D’ivoire,” *Africa Today* 50, no. 4 (2004): pp. 31–49, <https://doi.org/10.1353/at.2004.0038>; Frederic Dorcé and Francois Cayatte, “Guerre Contre l’insecurite En Côte d’Ivoire,” *Jeune Afrique Economie* 184.

28 Joseph Hellweg, “La Chasse à l’Instabilité : Les Dozos, l’État Et La Tentation De l’Extralégalité En Côte d’Ivoire,” *Migrations Société* 144, no. 6 (2012): pp. 163–182, <https://doi.org/10.3917/migra.144.0163>.

vices. They sometimes played a more decisive role by hiring dozos to ensure the protection of their property and their businesses.²⁹ Thus, several dozos were at the service of influential women who paid them monthly, which allowed them to exercise greater influence over the dozos' daily activities.

In rural areas during this period, the contestation of the government and its inability to provide security had given rise to ethnic rivalries over control and management of land. The intensification of inter-community conflicts over land issues pushed some ethnic communities to create their own self-defense groups, as illustrated by this quotation from a young man of the Wê community of western Côte d'Ivoire:

“This land and its forests are those of our forefathers, those of the Wê people. . . For decades, and in waves, the Baoulé [another important Ivorian community] and the Burkinabe people are illegally settling in the Goin-Débé classified forest to cultivate cocoa and the state is doing nothing. While we, we respect the law and have, for a long time, deserted the classified forests. A few months ago, we organized ourselves [by creating the Wê Youth Alliance] to go get our land. We too want to work our land, to enjoy its fruits.”³⁰

The Wê Youth Alliance, which is the Wê community-based security group, was created in April 2017, and its land reclamation operation was launched three months later and resulted in seven deaths by bladed weapons and firearms.³¹ Thus, the actions of these community-based security groups sometimes went beyond self-defense to the extent that they became sources of armed conflict and attacked rival communities.³²

The role of women in self-defense groups during inter-communal conflicts is not well known.³³ The interviews provide little evidence of the armed participation of women in self-defense groups. However, women tend to show solidarity with their husbands and sons engaged in ethnic violence and provide them with various forms of logistical support, information, and moral support.³⁴ A focus group carried out in the Duékoué area in December 2020 with the Guéré community suggests that women played a role in the mobilization of men for the security of ethnic communities. As stated by one of the elderly men who had played an important role in the organization of security within the Guéré community,

29 Hellweg, *Hunting the Ethical*, 45–50.

30 Haby Niakaté, “Dans l’ouest de la Côte d’Ivoire, une terre trop convoitée,” *Le Monde*, December 7, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/12/07/dans-l-ouest-de-la-cote-d-ivoire-une-terre-trop-convoitee_5226378_3212.html.

31 Niakaté, “Dans l’ouest de la Côte d’Ivoire.”

32 Hellweg, *Hunting the Ethical*; Hellweg and Médevielle, “Zakaria Koné et les transformations.”

33 Researchers have well documented the role of women during the wars as combatants or as ex-combatants; see for example: Kamina Diallo, “When Women Take Part in the Rebellion: The Ex-Fighters from Ivory Coast,” Noria Research, February 2, 2021, <https://noria-research.com/women-fighters-ivory-coast/>; Arsene Brice Bado, “Building Peace by Supporting Post-Conflict Electoral Processes” (PhD. diss., Université Laval, 2018), <https://corpus.ulaval.ca/jspui/bitstream/20.500.11794/27103/1/32646.pdf>; a few publications also documented the roles of women in the formal security sector such as the police, the gendarmerie, and the army. See, for example: Diallo, “La Femme Dans Le Secteur.” However, we have not yet come across a scholarly publication on the role of women in self-defense groups during inter-communal conflicts. Newspaper articles tend to present women as victims of inter-communal conflicts.

34 Bado Arsène Brice, *Dynamiques Des Guerres Civiles En Afrique: Une Approche Holiste* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015); Matfess, “Brokers of Legitimacy.”

“[In 2009] My wife sent to call me while I was extracting palm wine in the bush. When I got home, she made me go to the meeting with our community leader. This is how I was chosen to be part of the group of men who should organize our security against the Dioula who were becoming more and more arrogant. (...) Even today, I can say that there is no man or young boy who is part of the protection committee of his neighborhood who does not have the support of his wife or his mother. (...) Even those who are involved in gangs and assault the people often have the support of their wives, girlfriends, and moms; otherwise, they would have reported them to the police.”³⁵

As the country slid into civil war in 2002, women’s roles in CBSGs continued to evolve—and accelerate. The rise of new armed rebel groups such as the Forces Nouvelles de Côte d’Ivoire (FNCI, New Forces of Côte d’Ivoire),³⁶ Mouvement populaire ivoirien du Grand Ouest (MPIGO, Ivorian Popular Movement of the Great West),³⁷ Movement Patriotique de Côte d’Ivoire (MPCI, Patriotic Movement of Côte d’Ivoire),³⁸ and Movement pour la Justice et la Paix (MPCI, Movement for Justice and Peace)³⁹ contributed to the proliferation of firearms across the country,⁴⁰ with many formerly unarmed or intermittently armed local CBSGs evolving effectively into CBAGs.⁴¹ In particular, a large number of the dozos joined the rebellion with modern weapons and military uniforms.⁴² Likewise, self-defense groups from certain ethnic communities also evolved into overt rebel movements, as was the case with the Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest (MPIGO) from the Dan/Yacouba communities in the West. Equally importantly, however, was that as security conditions deteriorated, new and existing local-level, community-driven security and self-defense groups (and criminal gangs) proliferated.

Across the board, the civil war created an exceptional situation for women, who began to participate publicly in CBSGs and CBAGs while carrying firearms. Notably, many dozo groups began to admit women, who played various roles ranging from support to combatants alongside men during both the periods of conflict, as did the MPIGO.⁴³ In local-level CBSGs, young women who carried firearms to defend their neighborhoods or their communities alongside men were socially valued as patriots; they risked everything to defend their communities, as evidenced by this interview conducted with a woman from the Dioula ethnic community in the city of Man in the West of Côte d’Ivoire:

35 Focus group conducted in Duékoué on December 18, 2020.

36 The Forces Nouvelles de Côte d’Ivoire (FNCI) was a coalition of rebel movements made up of MPIGO, MPCI and MJP whose armed elements controlled the central, northern, and western regions of Côte d’Ivoire, which represented 60% of the national territory in 2004.

37 The *Mouvement populaire ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO) was one of two rebel movements in western Côte d’Ivoire. In 2004, the MPIGO joined the rebel coalition of Forces Nouvelles led by Guillaume Soro.

38 The *Movement Patriotique de Côte d’Ivoire* (MPCI) was a rebel militia in northern Côte d’Ivoire. In 2004, the MPCI joined the rebel coalition of Forces Nouvelles.

39 The *Movement pour la Justice et la Paix* (MJP) was with the MPIGO in western Côte d’Ivoire. In 2004, it joined the rebel coalition of *Forces Nouvelles*.

40 de Tessières, “Enquête Nationale Sur Les Armes”; “Arms Proliferation and Abuse Shatter Communities”; Jean Delors Biyogue-Bi-Ntougou, *Les Politiques Africaines De Paix Et De sécurité* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010).

41 Bado, *Dynamiques des guerres civiles en Afrique*.

42 Hellweg and Médevielle, “Zakaria Koné et les transformations”; Bassett, “Containing the Donzow.”

43 Diallo, “When Women Take Part.”

“It was in 2004 that I joined the self-defense group in our neighborhood of Dioulabougou (...). On several occasions, some rebel leaders stationed here in the town of Man invited me to join the Forces Nouvelles; but I refused to join the rebellion. Because I just wanted to protect my neighborhood. People in the neighborhood looked up to me when they saw me with the men who kept our neighborhood safe. I received many donations and even the boys were jealous. (...) However, things changed when the rebels left the city and peace was restored. The same people from the neighborhood who admired me looked at me strangely. On two occasions, families have refused to let their son marry me because they think the girls who have carried guns are thugs. (...) Therefore, I find myself with two children but I cannot live with their fathers.”⁴⁴

The story of this woman illustrates how the participation of women in CBSGs evolved over the years and that during times of war the participation of women in armed groups was socially tolerated.⁴⁵ The experience of this woman is shared by several other interviewees who continue to participate in CBSGs but who feel rejected by their relatives, and who are in search of a community of belonging.⁴⁶ In addition to this direct participation in the CBSGs, women became closer to the armed men who could ensure their protection and the security of their property and businesses. Women in some neighborhoods such as Adjamé in Abidjan had to ask young people to organize themselves to strengthen the security around the market with the help of the police. They took the lead in the establishment of CBSGs where needed.⁴⁷

WOMEN AND CBSGS IN THE POST-2011 ERA

Côte d’Ivoire’s post-conflict hybrid security landscape

During the current, post-conflict period, women’s participation in CBSGs has gone through a new transformation linked to changes in the security context. The reform of the security sector after the post-electoral armed conflict of 2010-2011 significantly improved security throughout Côte d’Ivoire.⁴⁸ The integration of ex-rebels into the regular army made it possible to create a new national army called “Armed Forces of Côte d’Ivoire” (AFI). After years of training, this army has become more professional, and it is now deployed throughout the national territory. The same is true for the police and the gendarmerie. This has enabled a degree of security throughout the country. However, the defense and security forces still have to gain the trust of the population.⁴⁹

Officially, the state does not tolerate the existence of any organized non-state armed group, such as ethnic militias and armed political organizations. Similarly, other than with the case of the dozos, communi-

44 Interview, city of Man, November 11, 2020.

45 Philippe Hugon, “Armed Conflicts in Africa: Contributions, Myths, and Limits of Economic Analyses,” 2003, <https://doi.org/10.1787/aeo-2014-graph40-en>; Diallo, “La Femme Dans Le Secteur.”

46 For more information, see the section below titled “Search for a community of belonging.”

47 Interviews, Abidjan, November 2021.

48 Leboeuf, “La Réforme Du Secteur.”

49 See: “Résumé Des Résultats,” 45.

ties are reluctant to be seen as officially “sponsoring” or directly supporting CBAGs. However, some community self-defense groups possess weapons clandestinely and illegally, and some criminal gangs also provide local community security services. There is considerable uncertainty about just how widespread access to firearms is among CBSGs or precisely when they are most likely to be used. But our interviews suggest that firearms are more likely to be used during inter-communal clashes and other violent outbreaks than in the day-to-day informal security work of many local CBSGs.

The dozos have adapted to the post-conflict period. At the end of the post-electoral crisis in 2011, they had become a major force. In 2012, the Small Arms Survey estimated that there were 42,000 firearms held by dozos, 32,000 of which were shotguns and 10,000 handmade guns.⁵⁰ Despite the DDR process that ended in 2015,⁵¹ dozos still possess not only traditionally manufactured firearms but sometimes also modern automatic weapons. Since they participated, alongside the Forces Nouvelles, in the overthrow of President Laurent Gbagbo to install in power the current President, Alassane Ouattara, they are spared and tolerated by the security and defense forces.⁵² This social position makes the dozos sought-after security partners for local communities. As noted by an interviewee in Korhogo, “people have more faith in the dozo than in the government.”⁵³ The dozo are now active in many communities outside the northern region of Côte d’Ivoire. If initially, the dozo were traditional hunters, nowadays with the transformation of lifestyle in rural areas, they can no longer live from hunting. They need to have other jobs that provide them with the means of survival in an increasingly modern context. This explains why nowadays dozo are found all over the country where they often take on security guard roles.

Field-based observation and interviews suggest that women’s engagement with other kinds of community-based security groups reflects these basic dynamics. Despite the improvement in the security context in Côte d’Ivoire, the state is struggling to meet the demand for security in rural areas as well as in the poor neighborhoods of big cities. Added to this, as the data from Afrobarometer attest, only 21.2% of people “have a lot of confidence” in government security forces, while the recent history of civil war and atrocities has placed populations in need of enhanced security.⁵⁴ This explains the proliferation of informal security groups in both urban and rural areas.

In rural locations plagued by intercommunal violence over land tenure issues, communities tend to organize their own security groups, sometimes called “response committees,” where women play a secondary role either as consumers of security services or as auxiliaries to men engaged in CBSGs. This may reflect the conservatism of rural communities around gender roles and security. In rural areas, in the

50 Savannah de Tessières, *Enquête Nationale Sur Les Armes Légères Et De Petit Calibre En Côte D’Ivoire: Les Défis Du Contrôle Des Armes Et De La Lutte Contre La Violence Armée Avant La Crise Post-Électorale* (Genève: Small Arms Survey, 2012).

51 Magali Chelphi-den Hamer, “Les Tribulations Du Dispositif Désarmement, Démobilisation Et Réinsertion Des Miliciens En Côte d’Ivoire (2003–2015),” *Hérodote* 158, no. 3 (December 5, 2017): pp. 200–218, <https://doi.org/10.3917/her.158.0200>; Chrysantus Ayangafac, “Peace in Côte D’Ivoire: an Analysis of the Ouagadougou Peace Accord,” *Conflict Trends* 2007, no. 3 (January 1, 2007), <https://doi.org/10520/EJC15979>; “Atelier : Défis Liés Au Processus DDR Et RSS En Côte d’Ivoire : Quelle Contribution De La Société Civile Ivoirienne ?” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, n.d.).

52 Bado and Zapata, “Election Uncertainty”; Bado, *Dynamiques des guerres*.

53 Interview, Korhogo, November 3, 2020.

54 See: “Résumé Des Résultats”, 45.

north of the country, the dozo remain arguably the most important security provider, functioning not just as CBAGs but taking on governance functions and local conflict resolution tasks (retrieving stolen or lost cattle, collecting customs duties on cross-border trade), as well.⁵⁵ However, some female elites may have significant investments in a village that push them to use the paid services of dozo to secure their property. In this case, these women may find themselves in a position of patronage over the dozo. But this is a rare situation in the villages. Moreover, these elite women are generally settled in cities.

Unlike in rural areas, women's participation in CBSGs in urban areas tends to be more proactive. Women are often at the origin of the creation of vigilante groups to meet the need for security in business districts, marketplaces, and populous neighborhoods where crimes are frequent. Likewise, personal body-guard services are also on the rise for businesswomen. Coopting these groups of young people, women with wealth or business interests exert influence on CBSGs. They may not be members of CBSGs but they can direct their creation and functioning. Therefore, women exercise a measure of control over many CBSGs.

CBSG/state and CBSG/community relationships and the role of women

As in other contexts, relationships between CBSGs and both the state and their host communities in post-conflict Cote d'Ivoire tend to oscillate between cooperation, competition, and hostility.⁵⁶ While many of these dynamics are shaped by factors specific to Cote d'Ivoire's continued political conflicts and the difficulty of state security agents in managing violence across the country, patterns of women's engagement with CBSGs, both as demanders and suppliers of security, also play a major role.

Generally, CBSGs in Cote d'Ivoire reflect a community-based authority structure emerging upwards out of a local need for security in the absence of effective state institutions, with support from political entrepreneurs (urban vigilance committees) or the state itself (dozos, which operate with tacit state recognition) playing a secondary role. Yet the relative weakness of state security institutions and the proliferation of new kinds of internationally funded security assistance programs following the end of the civil war means there is considerable local variation in how CBSGs interact with and are shaped by local community and security service leadership.⁵⁷

Despite the state's official stance on the illegality of non-state armed groups, some CBSGs cooperate strategically with state security forces, especially in urban areas. This kind of collaboration emerges from the reform of the municipal police that created community police initiatives in many Abidjan communities in February 2015.⁵⁸ The current community policing program aims to engage with vigilante groups to

55 See: Kathrin Heitz-Tokpa, "Mande Hunters and the State: Cooperation and Contestation in Post-Conflict Côte d'Ivoire," *African Studies Review* 62, no. 1 (March 13, 2019): 148–172, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.143>.

56 Van Metre. *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism*, 15–17.

57 This is a key observation from Ricard and Grodji.

58 Leboeuf, "La Réforme Du Secteur"; Ricard, "Sous Pression."; Diallo, "La Femme Dans Le Secteur."

prevent insecurity, radicalization, and terrorism. That is why some technically illegal CBSGs nevertheless serve as auxiliaries to security forces by providing them with information and intelligence about their neighborhoods. Moreover, as interviews conducted in Yopougon and Abobo attest, CBSGs are usually the first to intervene when there is trouble in the neighborhood and then they refer the suspects to security forces.⁵⁹ Most of the leaders of CBSGs interviewed said that they have a personal phone number of a security officer whom they can call at any time if needed.⁶⁰ The police and gendarmes downplay these relationships in public (and often avoid officially tracking them on paper), but nonetheless, depend on them in many urban communities.⁶¹

Despite this semi-formal cooperation, interviews with police officers and gendarmerie officers in Yopougon reveal that there is sometimes significant competition between state security forces and CBSGs over who will provide local services.⁶² As a police officer interviewed in Yopougon-SICOGI said: “When there is a security issue here, people will first call members of vigilante groups; they will later call the police when the vigilante group could not handle the situation. . . It is the members of the vigilante groups who decide who is right and who is wrong; they even fine the people. . . This is not their job!”⁶³ Much of this competition seems to extend from the choices being made on the demand side by local community members, who wield the power of choice to engage state or CBSG forces when they need assistance.

Here, our interview data suggests that women, in particular, are a key driver of demand for CBSG services, because they often prefer to work with or engage them over the state security agencies. Indeed, it often seems to be women who call on members of CBSGs in their neighborhood when there is a security issue, not just related to their own immediate needs, but at a wider community level. Several self-defense groups confirm this. As one of the few young girls to be a member of a security committee in the Yopougon-SICOGI neighborhood attests, “Very often it is women who call us to intervene. Men tend to solve security problems by themselves until it gets past them. . . Men do not like to call for help; it is women who usually call for help.”⁶⁴ In the same perspective, interviews with the police and the gendarmerie confirm that calls to intervene when there is a problem most often come from women in working-class neighborhoods.⁶⁵ In our interviews, women in small commercial roles or housekeepers described CBSGs as more proximate and accessible and as having less red tape to work through to receive help.⁶⁶ This suggests that any efforts to improve cooperative relations between the CBSGs and the security forces by reducing competition between them must necessarily involve women.

Another underexplored vector of competition that shapes women’s participation in the security sector is that among CBSGs and CBAGs. During previous times of conflict, dozos that provided local security for

59 Interviews, Abidjan, November 2021.

60 Interviews, Abobo and Yopougon, November 2021.

61 Interviews with police and gendarmerie officers show that there are no official records of these groups.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Interview, Yopougon, November 2021.

65 Interview, Yopougon, November 2021.

66 This is attested by several interviews conducted across the country, for instance, interviews in Yopougon, Abobo, Korhogo, Man, Duékoué, etc.

private citizens were in great demand. In this post-conflict period, security has improved, and women's demand for alternative security arrangements has declined, creating a competition between individual members of the dozos' brotherhood to find a patronne (a female boss). This puts wealthy women in a dominant position, as they are the ones who hire, pay, and instruct dozos. The competition between the dozos to find a job with a patronne increases the power of the latter insofar as she can easily change guardians according to her convenience. This forces the dozos who ensure their safety to be more loyal because the dozo needs the protection and support of his patronne to keep his job. Thus, women are not only on the supply side of security but also on the demand side, leveraging competition between CBSGs to meet their security needs. This shift in the dynamics of security supply and demand is significant, even revolutionary, in the patriarchal societies of northern Côte d'Ivoire.

Women's roles in clashes between CBSGs/CBAGs and between CBSGs and the Ivoirien state are difficult to discern and require further research. It is clear that the line between CBSGs providing local security or acting as community self-defense groups and criminal gangs is sometimes blurred. Interviews with police and civil society organization leaders point to widespread suspicion of CBSG members, particularly those who are unemployed or have criminal records.⁶⁷ CBSG members are often surveilled by state agents as potential criminals and have also been occasionally arrested for possessing firearms.⁶⁸ However, they rarely commit crimes in their neighborhood where they are in charge of security; they usually operate far from their neighborhood where they think they are not known. The key exception here is in the neighborhood of Abobo, where the phenomenon of the "enfants microbes"⁶⁹, loosely organized and often temporary armed groups that operated at times as local security providers and criminal gangs operated as both security groups and gangs within their own community.⁷⁰

CBSGs also sometimes have hostile relationships with the communities they purport to protect. In urban areas, these groups sometimes compete over territories where they can control protection payments and threaten local businesses that attempt to resist. As a woman trader in Abobo said: "Even if you have hired a formal security company, you still have to give money to these vigilante groups in the neighborhood. That is a shame. Therefore, we have no choice; they are imposed on us."⁷¹ This points to the limit of the demand model of women's relationships with CBSGs, suggesting that while some influential women may indeed be able to shape CBSG priorities and behaviors, many others cannot.

67 Interviews in Abobo, Yopougon, and city of Man.

68 Ricard, "Sous Pression."

69 The phenomenon "enfants microbes" is limited to the commune of Abobo. An interview with a criminologist specializing in this phenomenon could not confirm any participation of women in the "enfants microbes." His explanation is that this gang group is too violent for women to join it.

70 Francis Akindès, "Understanding Côte d'Ivoire's 'Microbes': the Political Economy of a Youth Gang," in *Social Theories of Urban Violence in the Global South towards Safe and Inclusive Cities*, ed. Jennifer Erin Salahub, Markus Gottsbacher, and John de Boer (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 161–182.

71 Interview, Abobo, November 2021.

Women as agents of (in)security

The question of precisely how much of a direct role women play in Ivorian CBSGs is a contested one. By all accounts, women are less likely and free to engage in violence than during the 2002–2011 conflict period, but at least some of the social norms and prohibitions from the pre-war period against such participation continue to be challenged and contested. As seen in the previous section, women play both active and auxiliary roles in state/CBSG and CBSG/CBSG conflicts. Initial interview data suggests that the most violent groups tend to rely on and recruit women to a greater degree than those that stick to security provision, which may speak to their particular importance in support/logistics.⁷² There is some evidence that these groups employ women as spies and informers and for the circulation of arms and ammunition and the distribution of drugs.⁷³ Nonetheless, our interviews and field observations suggest that women are most influential not as direct CBSG participants, but through their role in shaping and even directing CBSG activity through their demand for greater security provisions in precarious communities.

DIRECT PARTICIPATION

Women who participate directly in CBSGs are diverse, but there are some basic patterns. One is that women directly involved in CBSGs tend to be (but are not universally) of a lower economic status or come from underprivileged social groups.⁷⁴ Even after joining CBSGs, these women still often live in precarious conditions. Many are child mothers who have to fight on their own to meet the needs of their families.⁷⁵

Another common characteristic of women directly involved in CBSGs is relatively low levels of educational attainment. While the research did not encounter any female members of CBSGs who were illiterate, it also did not find anyone with a college education. Many had dropped out of school for family reasons, such as the death of a parent or guardian who paid for schooling or to help their families in their economic activities of survival. Nevertheless, girls and women contribute to CBSGs with intellectual authority, strategic analysis, and decision-making. As a woman member of a self-defense group in Yopougon remarked, “Here the boys rely a lot on their muscular strength to command respect, but I stand out for my advices that help to make good decisions. My fellow boys realized that I was often right. That is why they listen to me and respect me.”⁷⁶ Interviews revealed that female members of CBSGs tend to be willing to engage with their co-members as equals, even in patriarchal cultures.⁷⁷ Women who are members of CBAGs adopt traits or behaviors that are traditionally coded as “masculine,” leading people to refer to these women as “being boys.”⁷⁸

72 Interview, Yopougon, November 2021, and cities of Duékoué and Man, December 2020.

73 See: Jakana Thomas, *Duty and Defiance: Women in Community-based Armed Groups in West Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.1>.

74 Interviews across the country from December 2020 to November 2021.

75 The average remuneration of the members of security committees in the neighborhoods is around 30,000 FCFA (52 USD) per month. Therefore, it is not a full-time job.

76 Interview, Yopougon, November 3, 2021.

77 Interviews across the country from December 2020 to November 2021.

78 They are called in French “filles-garçons.” See interviews in Yopougon, November 2021, and in the city of Man, December 2020.

A more complex phenomenon is that of women who participate directly in CBSGs that also engage in criminal activity. Several women members of this type of CBSG have already served in prison or are known to the security forces. A security officer (Gendarme) interviewed in Duékoué confirmed that a few young girls (children under 18) who worked with vigilante groups in the neighborhoods have been arrested and jailed because of their participation in armed robberies. As he said: “There are girls who cooperate with groups of bandits who carry out armed robberies. We apprehended and put some girls in jail. However, the number of girls involved in the robberies is still relatively low. It is still a somewhat rare phenomenon.”⁷⁹ Two women interviewed in the cities of Man and Duékoué (western region) said that they personally knew a relative, a young woman who is in prison for armed robbery and who was a member of the security committee of their neighborhood.⁸⁰ None of the people interviewed confirmed the existence of an all-female armed group.

Another way women engage in armed CBSGs or those that also operate as criminal gangs is by acting as intermediaries between these armed groups and the rest of the population. As a female member of a women’s association (Fédération des Associations Féminines) interviewed in the city of Divo explains: “When [members of neighborhood security groups turned into] bandits carry out armed attacks, it is women who sell the stolen goods. . . These women are generally the friends of the robbers; in the market, they are easily recognized by their indecent dress and behavior;⁸¹ they always sell a variety of second-hand items.”⁸²

In the city of Man, a leader of a women’s organization who was interviewed suggested speaking to another woman who sells fruit at the marketplace but was also selling ammunition as a secondary and hidden activity.⁸³ The ammunitions belonged to the “boss”—she did not dare give more information about his identity. We heard similar stories from women selling pills and food (and also drugs) for artisanal miners in Divo and Bondiali.⁸⁴ As a researcher from a think tank who conducted fieldwork in Bondiali on violent extremism explains: “In Bondiali, like in other artisanal mining towns in Côte d’Ivoire, dealers of drugs and light weapons use women to distribute their products. These are usually young or middle-aged women. They are poorly dressed and live in difficult social conditions. Therefore, these women do not profit much from this trade around arms and drugs.”⁸⁵

INDIRECT INFLUENCE

This research suggests that there are at least two ways of engagement for women who are linked to CBSGs but are not members. First, there are businesswomen who act as godmothers of CBAGs and CBSGs (vigilante groups, dozos). They are wealthy women who, to meet their needs for security and protection of their property, initiate security groups that may or may not be armed. The members of these security

79 Interview, Duékoué, January 4, 2021.

80 Interview, city of Man, December 21, 2020.

81 The interviewee means that the dress and behavior of these women are sexually deviant or inappropriate.

82 Interview conducted by phone on January 19, 2021, in Divo, with a member of the *Fédération des Associations Féminines*.

83 Interviews, city of Man, December 16, 2020.

84 Interviews conducted by phone in the cities of Divo and Bondiali on January 4 and 7, 2021.

85 Interview conducted with ARK in the city of Korhogo on December 15, 2020.

groups can act either as an escort to accompany these wealthy women from afar (especially during long trips) or as a vigilante group to guard the neighborhoods where the women's businesses and properties are located. The members of CBSGs recognize the authority of these women whom they commonly call "patrones" (bosses) or "vieilles mères" (old mothers).⁸⁶ The quote from the interview below describes this type of CBSG's "godmother" profile:

"I am a trader. I have a shop where I sell foodstuffs. So, here in town, I know the young thugs who can attack me. In fact, I have already been attacked one night when I was leaving my store. When I later learned the identity of the young people who attacked me, I did not call the police because I knew it was not going to be effective. So, I approached them to tell them: what can we do so that it will not happen again? They said to me that they were hungry and that I must give them food. . . That is how I started giving them something every month. . . You know, you cannot be a trader in the region here without having protectors. If the young people ask for weapons to protect you, you must find them weapons. Now, if they are going to do something else with these weapons, that is their problem. . . I also give them advice so that they don't use drugs that will lead them to do stupid things."⁸⁷

These women who coopt or help establish CBSGs exercise significant power over their functioning and activities. As the quotation above demonstrates, this businesswoman has transformed this group of young people into a group that ensures the safety of herself and her property, she provides them with weapons they were not able to get on their own in their small town of Odienné, and she gives them advice. In short, this woman controls this group of young armed men.

Second, middle-class housewives in the neighborhoods may feel the need for greater security and often initiate the creation of security committees to protect the neighborhood. It is also these women who are in contact with the CBSGs for their remuneration or to respond to their grievances. Even if the money comes from their husbands, it is the wives who handed the money to the neighborhood security committee.⁸⁸ Therefore, in the end, women are more in touch with the neighborhood security committees than men. Sometimes, in certain neighborhoods, it is a woman who is responsible for collecting the amount needed to pay the security committee. Thus, these middle-class women participate indirectly in the functioning of the CBSGs and exert direct influence. As with businesswomen, their role is important in setting up CBSGs.

86 This expression "*vieilles mères*" (old mothers) is not related to the age of the women, but to their authority. This is colloquial language used by young people on the street. Its meaning is similar to "patronne" or "godmother." All these terms express the idea of authority in a patron-client relationship.

87 Interview, city of Odienne, December 16, 2020.

88 This practice is attested to by several interviews conducted across the country.

Drivers and motivations for women's engagement with CBSGs

Just as men's motivations for supporting non-state armed groups vary and are often highly contextual, our fieldwork finds considerable variation in the drivers and motivations of women's participation in CBSGs. However, a few key themes dominated the interviews, including economic motivations, the desire for justice and revenge, the need for protection, the search for a community of acceptance, the choice to belong to a group that carries arms, or the desire to challenge social norms on gender.

ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS

The second category of women who participate in CBSGs for economic motivation are women who are of lower socioeconomic class. As the analysis of women members of CBSGs uncovers, they come from underprivileged families. When asked why they joined the neighborhood self-defense committees or armed groups, they often respond that it is to meet their needs and those of their families.⁸⁹ It is usually a part-time job because these women often have other small informal jobs,⁹⁰ except for the few and rare women who are full-time in CBSGs.⁹¹ Economic motives also drive several female ex-combatants. Before enrolling in armed groups during wartime, female combatants were economically vulnerable. They were either unemployed or self-employed. Some of them enrolled in armed groups because they received the promise of a job and to be incorporated in the army or to receive a reward at the end of the war.⁹²

We also found that women who choose to participate in CBSGs that sometimes slide into criminal activity are similarly motivated by economic opportunity. As one of the ex-combatants stated during a focus group in the city of Duekoue: "Sometimes they are young unwed mothers, and with the difficult situation in the village, they do it to find something to eat. We can see in the region of Guemon, the unmarried mothers, the minor mothers are numerous. And that makes girls go into anything, it reinforces insecurity, because it is difficult for them to take care of themselves and their child. So, very often they are involved in robberies."⁹³ Interviews also suggest that some women who do not directly participate in criminally active CBSGs benefit from them by receiving and concealing the spoils that the armed men were able to obtain.⁹⁴ They are also sometimes responsible for facilitating these groups' trade in illicit goods. The trafficking of weapons is considered particularly lucrative by women food traders who can easily conceal them in loads.⁹⁵

89 This is attested by several interviews conducted across the country, for instance, interviews in Yopougon, Abobo, Korhogo, Man, Duékoué, Divo, and Korhogo conducted between December 2020 and November 2021.

90 Interview, city of Man, October 23, 2021.

91 There was no female research participant who is full-time in a CBSG. Though some interviewees referred some women who were said to be full-time in a CBSG to the researcher, they later denied that they were in CBSGs full-time. Therefore, if there are women who are involved in CBSGs full-time, these women are certainly rare.

92 Diallo, "When Women Take Part."

93 See interview conducted on December 18, 2020, with the association of ex-combatants named *Génération Consciente* (Geco-CI) in Duekoue.

94 See interviews conducted between December 2020 and November 2021 in the cities of Man, Odienne, Duekoue, and Divo.

95 See interview in market above.

Anecdotally, many of the women participating in CBSGs and CBAGs interviewed for this project did not seem to be satisfied with the economic benefits of their engagement. While money certainly changed hands, most seemed to have other jobs or other money-making projects as well, and we found little evidence of CBSG participation serving as a path out of poverty for women.⁹⁶ A question then arises: if their participation in CBSGs does not allow them a decent economic situation, what keeps them in these CBSGs? Is it out of resignation—like many others who work in the informal sector that barely help them survive from day to day? Interviews show that most women see their participation in CBSGs as a job or a service like any other to their neighborhood. As an indication, at least three women surveyed in Yopougon, Duékoué, and Divo asked insistently if I knew someone who was looking for a woman as a security guard because they were interested in working full time.⁹⁷

DESIRE FOR JUSTICE AND REVENGE

Another motive that drives women to participate in CBSGs is the desire for justice and/or revenge. As with the civil war period when some women enrolled in the rebellion because they were subject to injustice,⁹⁸ interviews suggest that women have joined CBSGs or have supported armed groups because of the frustrations and injustices that they are directly subject to or have indirectly suffered through their community. “Some women have felt frustrated. They have seen their husbands being murdered; others saw their homes or fields occupied by foreigners. So, it was all the frustration, the injustice that drove them to voluntarily enlist in armed groups,” explains a female officer of the Conseil Regional (Regional Council) of Duekoue, a public administration that was involved in the reintegration of ex-combatants.⁹⁹ Even today, some women are part of the neighborhood security committees because they were tired of being victims of various violence against their communities.¹⁰⁰

This desire for justice and revenge is higher within women’s associations in rural and agricultural areas plagued by conflicts over land ownership,¹⁰¹ which often induce intercommunal violence, displacement, and destruction of property.¹⁰² Interviews in the towns of Western Côte d’Ivoire such as Goin-Débé and Guiglo confirmed the participation of young girls alongside boys in armed CBSGs against rival communities. Anger and discontentment may nourish a feeling of revenge, which drives women in CBSGs against rival communities or the state,¹⁰³ especially in polarized ethnic and political contexts.

96 See interview, city of Man, October 23, 2021, and in Yopougon, November 3, 2021.

97 Interviews in Duékoué, December 18, 2020; in Divo, January 4, 2021, and in Yopougon, November 8, 2021.

98 Diallo, “When Women Take Part”; Bado, *Dynamiques des guerres civiles*.”

99 Interview conducted by phone on January 5, 2021.

100 Interview conducted on January 4, 2021 in the city of Duekoue.

101 See: Babo and Droz, “Conflits fonciers, ethnicité politique”; see also: Jean-Pierre Chauveau and Paul Richards, “Les racines agraires des insurrections ouest-africaines: Une comparaison Côte d’Ivoire-Sierra Leone,” *Politique africaine* 111, no. 3 (2008): 131–167, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2008-3-page-131.htm>.

102 Alfred Babo, “L’Étranger à travers le prisme de l’ivoirité en Côte d’Ivoire: retour sur des regards nouveaux,” *Migrations Société* 144, 6 (2012): 99–120.

103 Often symbols of the state, such as police stations and prefectures, are set on fire during inter-community conflicts by communities who think the state is more sympathetic to the rival community.

NEED FOR PROTECTION

Women have a high demand for security for themselves, their families, and their economic assets.¹⁰⁴ The need for protection in areas where the provision of security by state security forces is insufficient is a driver for women to participate in CBSGs. However, this need for protection triggers two different types of women's participation in CBSGs.

First, being a member of a CBSG provides protection for self and relatives. As a female ex-combatant said: "Women came on their own. . . for a survival issue, for a security issue as well. Because [during the war period 2010-2011] when we see you with a soldier, or if you yourself have joined an armed group, we know that your family is safe."¹⁰⁵ In Abobo, a young woman who joined the neighborhood's security committee a year ago also said: "I joined this security committee to protect my relative. . . To be honest, the people who can bring trouble in the neighborhood are the same who can secure the neighborhood. Now that I am part of the group, they respect my family, my friends, and me. . . There are many young girls and other people who come easily to me to expose their grievances who would be afraid to meet with some of my colleagues."¹⁰⁶

The second is the previously discussed role of wealthy businesswomen who participate in CBSGs, not as members, but as security entrepreneurs who initiate the establishment of CBSGs as their "godmothers."¹⁰⁷ Notably, this dynamic appears especially important in western Côte d'Ivoire (Man and Guiglo), where there are intercommunal conflicts with the destruction of properties and women acquire the support of CBSGs for the protection of their properties, when state security forces are unable to provide proper security.¹⁰⁸

SEARCH FOR A COMMUNITY OF BELONGING

The search for a community where one is recognized and accepted is a motivation for some women to get involved in CBSGs. Interviews suggest that many of the women who join CBSGs do so at least in part out of a desire to be recognized and accepted and come from stigmatized social groups (unwed mothers, sex workers or low-level criminals, or young women who adopt traditionally masculine traits and are referred to by other Ivoirians as "girls-boys"). As a young mother and member of the security committee for her neighborhood in Guiglo affirms: "I'm happy with these guys because we look alike and we like the same things. . . I play football with them, I do weight training, I like to go for a walk at night to do my work. . . You see, ordinary girls don't do like me, so I don't have any female friends. Some girls are even afraid of me. My mother considers me a failed boy. . . In any case, I am at peace with these guys who look rogue but are good people."¹⁰⁹

104 This has been attested by several interviews conducted in all the selected regions of study.

105 Interview, city of Man, January 5, 2021.

106 Interview, Abobo, November 2021.

107 Interview, Odienne, December 16, 2020. See also interviews in Yopougon on October and November 2021.

108 See: Jean-Pierre Chauveau and Samuel Koffi Bobo, "Crise Foncière, Crise De La Ruralité Et Relations Entre Autochtones Et Migrants Sahéliens En Côte D'ivoire Forestière," *Outre-Terre* 11, no. 2 (2005): pp. 247–264, <https://doi.org/10.3917/oute.011.0247>.

109 Interview, Guiglo, October 22, 2021.

CHALLENGING SOCIAL NORMS ON GENDER

If some women unconsciously defy social norms by their membership in CBSGs, others experience their participation as a more deliberate challenge to social norms. This is often specifically linked to carrying firearms. Carrying a firearm is generally illegal unless one navigates a difficult administrative process to obtain a clearance. Moreover, ordinarily, Ivoirien women do not tend to carry firearms. Therefore, the choice to carry a firearm challenges the state and society. This challenge seems to drive some women and girls to join CBSGs. The only girl of a CBSG in the city of Man who agreed to admit that she owns a gun said,

“It’s about defying society. Here, everyone knows that I have my gun. . . Even the police officers and the gendarmes know it. With my clothing style, it is easy for everyone to see that I have a gun. . . I’m happy to scare everyone here. You know, for once, there is a girl who scares men. . . Even within the neighborhood security committee, my fellows who are boys respect me. Everyone is a leader for a week; when my turn comes, I command the whole group and everyone obeys me. . . With my black belt in taekwondo, I train the group in the evening on the school grounds, and people come to watch. . . Things have to change, and people should see women differently. . . My gun has changed my life and I would always be with a group that carries arms. However, I do not want to join the police or the gendarmerie because over there, it will be the leaders who will give me orders. I do not want to receive orders that I do not like!”¹¹⁰

Although it is difficult to generalize from this, women in CBSGs may also be motivated by the desire to challenge existing social norms on gender that tend to devalue women. There is a desire for emancipation to free oneself from certain social norms by claiming functions and territories culturally reserved for men, such as authority in the security sector and carrying firearms. Women’s membership in CBSGs has made it impossible to think about community safety initiatives without taking into account the contribution of women. They play an important role in both the security and the insecurity of communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research report has mapped women’s different forms of participation in CBSGs in Côte d’Ivoire. It sought to explain why women are involved in community-based security groups by investigating and illustrating their motivations, their roles, the historical context, and the dynamics that underpin their participation in community-based security groups. Thematically, the most significant finding is that women play key roles in shaping the CBSG landscape not simply as direct or auxiliary participants in these groups but as engines of demand for security provision in the absence of effective state institutions. The nature of these demands varies across the country’s landscape—in rural areas, insecurity is shaped by post-conflict land tenure and communal tensions, while in urban areas, crime and the needs of business owners and entrepreneurs to protect their property are key drivers. But across the interviews, the theme

¹¹⁰ Interview, city of Man, October 19, 2021.

that women who needed security and brought that need to their community then came to shape the resulting organizations was a reoccurring theme.

A second important theme is that the conflict period of 2002–2011 reshaped social norms and expectations around women’s participation in security provision and violence but in uneven and impermanent ways. By any measure, women are more involved now—in both formal and informal ways, actively and more indirectly—in security provision and violence than in the years before the decline of state security capacity in the 1990s. Some are even openly motivated by a desire for justice or revenge, outgrowths of the social costs of a decade of conflict, and another of continued community tensions amidst a weak state security response. Yet strong stigmas and social norms that challenge women’s legitimacy in these arenas remain, and at least some women involved in the more violent aspects of CBSG participation frame their personal stories of engagement in terms of challenging these norms or finding a new kind of community that accepts them. Nevertheless, women are more likely to be indirect or auxiliary participants—handling logistics, spying or reporting, and trafficking drugs or arms—than to be bearing arms.

A third key theme is that among the women who have encouraged the emergence and consolidation of CBSGs in their community to provide needed security, a small but influential subset has achieved a level of operational and strategic control over these groups. As “patronnes” or “godmothers,” these women have effectively structured CBSGs around their private security needs, an alternative to professional private security or relationships with state authorities that have downstream consequences for the wider communities in which they operate. While we can identify and describe this trend here, in brief, it merits considerably more future attention from researchers and practitioners.

A fourth significant theme is that much as in the wider literature on participation in violent extremist groups and CBAGs generally, women’s participation and engagement with Ivoirien CBSGs is driven by a complex mix of forces and factors. In particular, we note that among women who emphasized their economic reasons for direct participation, few seemed satisfied with the outcome. CBSG engagement among poor women does not seem to function as an enrichment scheme, but often instead simply helps them to keep afloat during difficult times while leaving them vulnerable and (at least sometimes) stigmatized.

Recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars:

- » **Greater inclusion of women in the formal security sector:** Despite their lack of representation in the formal sector (0.66% in the armed forces in 2016), in the post-war era women have continued to play important roles in Côte d’Ivoire over both the supply and demand for community-level security provision. Therefore, the government should incorporate more female personnel within the armed and security forces to mitigate women’s membership in armed groups and in informal community-based security groups, including a more intersectional lens to show how people’s social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination.

- » **More research/assessment of the patronne phenomenon and its consequences:** Some wealthy businesswomen have become security entrepreneurs who initiate the establishment of vigilante groups or local community-based security groups for the protection of their properties when state security forces are unable to provide proper security. These women shape the informal security sector. Therefore, it is critical for researcher to assess their influence and for policymakers to involve them in program interventions that aim at the transformation of the informal security sector.
- » **Addressing economic needs as pathways out of CBSG participation:** Women who are of lower socioeconomic class are more inclined to participate in CBSGs for economic motivation. Therefore, to mitigate women's participation in CBSGs, it is important to support programs that aim at improving women's economic conditions, especially in locations affected by frequent intercommunal violence and in underprivileged urban neighborhoods.
- » **Addressing stigma as pathways out of CBSG participation:** The search for a community where one is recognized and accepted is a motivation for some stigmatized women to get involved in CBSGs. Young women whose behavior does not correspond to social gender norms and who are engaged in the security sector are stigmatized as abnormal women who behave like men. This social stigma pushes these women to join CBSGs where they find a welcoming community. It is therefore important for policymakers to initiate awareness programs to fight the stigmatization of women whose proportion will increase over the years as social norms change under the influence of modernity. It is therefore urgent to take this challenge seriously to strengthen social cohesion and peace.
- » **Mitigate women's participation in gun-related activities within their communities:** Despite preliminary evidence that women are playing increased roles in CBAG-related arms trafficking, we still know relatively little about their overall relationship with weapons in the context of informal security provision. Despite the visible role of women as armed actors in the civil war period, there is still a considerable social stigma around acknowledging that women can be and are engaged in armed violence, and this serves as a potential barrier to engaging in peacebuilding efforts that seek to better assess and prevent women from becoming more involved in these activities. Support for programs that examine these dynamics in culturally sensitive ways and avoid activating stigmas that may make it more difficult for women to choose off-ramps from participation in CBAG-related arms trafficking is an important next step.
- » **Working to bring armed CBSGs out of the shadows as a mechanism for disarmament and rebuilding trust at the community-level security:** Since in Côte d'Ivoire any suspicion of the existence of an armed group within a community will trigger government repression, therefore, armed CBSGs will evolve under the radar. This situation can undermine the state's security as terrorist networks that are active in neighboring countries Mali and Burkina Faso could take advantage of these clandestine armed CBSGs to expand in Côte d'Ivoire. It is therefore urgent for policymakers to initiate programs targeting women that aim at bringing armed CBSGs out of the shadows as a mechanism for disarmament and rebuilding trust at the community-level security.

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AGITATORS AND PACIFIERS

Women in Community-Based
Armed Groups in Kenya

Prisca Kamungi, Phoebe Donnelly,
and Boglárka Bozsogi

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report is a case study of women's participation in community-based armed groups (CBAGs) in Kenya. It examines:

1. the diversity of women's motivations to participate in community-based armed groups in Kenya;
2. women's roles and agency within community-based armed groups, communal conflicts, as well as community security and peacebuilding structures; and
3. gender dynamics in conflict ecosystems, including social perceptions about women's engagement in conflict.

This case study contributes to the literature on women and CBAGs by examining the variations in their engagement across a single country, based on diverse local contexts. Data collection sites for the study included 1) the capital city, Nairobi; 2) Isiolo County; 3) Marsabit County; 4) Mombasa County; and 5) Bungoma County. Together, these sites provide insight into local conflict dynamics in rural and urban areas; on country borders and on the coast; and in communities with ethnic polarization, land conflicts, criminal gangs, and histories of violent extremism and secessionist movements. The Kenyan research team employed a qualitative approach to data collection through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and the use of secondary source data.

The findings show that there is no single template for understanding women's engagement with CBAGs; instead, women's motivations and roles within these groups are varied and highly contextual, just as with the motivations and roles of men. This study demonstrates the utility of context-specific analyses at the sub-national level to capture the range of women's participation in and engagement with CBAGs and their greater contributions to the local security landscape.

A common theme across the study sites in Kenya was that personal tragedies and the desire to avenge loved ones remains one of the main motivations for joining or supporting CBAGs. The effects of worsening poverty and the unique ethnic and economic marginality of women also played a key role in women's support of CBAGs. Expectation of material benefits remains a powerful incentive for women to join CBAGs. Women's support of CBAGs was also found to respond to complex societal pressures within their communities. In pastoralist communities, data showed that cultural expectations to support men in cattle raiding were part of the motivation for women to then support CBAGs by providing food to raiders, serving as spies, providing surveillance information, and/or transporting weapons. In ethnically polarized contexts where many ethnic groups look to CBAGs for protection, women supported CBAGs by withholding information from national security agencies and authorities that could lead to the arrest or prosecution of fellow community members.

Beyond their material support to CBAGs, women's active roles within these groups were as diverse as their motivations. One of their key roles is motivating fighters and inciting violence through interpersonal ties and communal rituals and rites. Women also hold operational roles in recruitment, intelligence, networking, and planning. For example, in certain groups women obtaining and conveying information about security threats were considered particularly valuable. Armed groups also exploit female stereotypes in two ways. First, groups use women for operational tasks, such as messengers or traffickers, because they are less likely to raise suspicion and be searched. Second, women also perform traditionally feminine tasks such as emotional support and cooking and cleaning.

Some groups were composed entirely of women, meaning that women not only participate in violent groups, they *are* the groups. While women's integration into CBAGs may *challenge* stereotypes, it might not alter gender norms at large. Communities may resent CBAGs' integration of women into their ranks as a reflection of a breakdown of community traditions and cultural, gendered norms and hierarchies.

Community perceptions of these women differed: while some viewed them as transgressive, others saw them as essential to community security. Women in CBAGs were seen as providing useful information and advanced warning to community members regarding security concerns such as planned robberies and extrajudicial executions planned by other groups or secret security units, and generally contributing to the protection of their neighbors. Other community members saw women's engagement with CBAGs as symbolic of a breakdown of social order. This was especially true for women's engagement with CBAGs in urban areas where CBAGs engage in drug dealing, illicit alcohol brewing, and prostitution. The tension between these two perceptions is a key finding from this research.

In addition to their roles within CBAGs, women contributed to other types of community security mechanisms, including peace committees, community policing committees, and neighborhood security efforts known as *Nyumba Kumi*.¹ While the inclusion of women in peace committees is largely applauded, interviews with community members showed their inclusion is not always welcome because of perceived interference in community traditions, cultural norms, and practices.

The field research indicated important considerations for the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda and improving the gender sensitivity of broader peacebuilding strategies. Data suggest that policy and practice should tailor interventions—including disengagement, rehabilitation, and violence prevention—to the contextual needs of both women and men. Stakeholders should also support the economic empowerment of women and promote the inclusion of women in community security mechanisms and sociopolitical decision-making fora. The research suggests that further peace and stability considerations should include the broad provision of support, education, and counseling to protect and strengthen women's rights across rural and urban locales in Kenya, and buttressing women's networks and organizing for long-term and meaningful social and political transformation. Further research would benefit

1 *Nyumba Kumi* translates to ten households in Swahili. *Nyumba Kumi* was launched as a government initiative to guarantee local-level peace and security. It aims to bring together Kenyan residents in clusters defined by their physical locations with the vision of a neighborhood where residents know each other and look out for each other.

from situating these recommendations in the existing academic literature and comparing the findings across different contexts. Additional future research could explore the aspects of potential empowerment in women's participation in violence.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies, including two RESOLVE research reports,² show that women provide logistical support to community-based armed groups (CBAGs), participate in violence and clandestine operations, and legitimize the groups' activities to the civilian population. Women also lend support to CBAGs to advance their economic, social, or personal interests. This study fills a gap in the gender and conflict literature by examining women's active participation and agency in CBAGs through microlevel analysis across different socioeconomic and geographical settings in Kenya.

CBAGs are prevalent in Kenya, driven by evolving conflict dynamics, political mobilization, and criminal violence. They usually emerge as a response to a perceived threat against the community.³ Public roles for women in CBAGs have challenged the stereotype that they are only composed of men; female gangsters especially have featured in national headlines and are often portrayed using gendered stereotypes.⁴ Moreover, reported attacks by "girls only" gangs in Mombasa County are a sharp departure from stereotypes of all-male CBAGs.⁵

This report begins by reviewing the existing literature on CBAGs and its applicability to the Kenya context, and then outlines the methodology for its field research and data analysis. As a part of this section, the report discusses key aspects of the local context in each of the five study sites, which represent a diverse set of security needs, challenges, and opportunities. Findings from the field data give insight into women's motivations or incentives to engage with CBAGs, their roles and agency in conflict and violence, and their participation in local reconciliation or dispute settlement processes.

This research contributes to the gender and conflict literature and WPS policy framework by examining women's active participation and agency across CBAGs in urban and rural settings in Kenya. The discussion of recommendations drawn from field data offers insightful and practical suggestions for future research, policy, and practice to inform approaches to Kenyan security governance, including CBAGs, in a

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- 2 Jakana Thomas, *Duty and Defiance: Women in Community-based Armed Groups in West Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.1>; Hilary Matfess, *Brokers of Legitimacy: Women in Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2020.1>.
 - 3 H. N. Nyabola, "The Legal Challenge of Civil Militia Groups in Kenya" *ISS African Security Review* 18, no. 3, (2009): 90–102, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/the-legal-challenge-of-civil-militia-groups-in-kenya/>.
 - 4 Eddy Mwanza, "Tales of Kenya's Notorious, Bold & Beautiful Gangsters" *Kenya.co.ke*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.kenya.co.ke/news/56555-1-kenya-notorious-bold-beautiful-gangsters>.
 - 5 Mohamed Ahmed, "All-female criminal gang unleashes terror on coastal residents," *Nairobi News*, May 6, 2018, <https://nairobi.news.nation.africa/all-female-criminal-gang-unleashes-terror/>; and Major SD Mwachinalo, *Nexus between Organized Criminal Gangs and Terrorist Groups: Case of Mombasa County* (Karen, Kenya: International Peace Support Training Centre IPSTC, 2019), 43, <https://ipstc.org/index.php/downloads-publications/publications/category/56-2019?download=191:occasional-paper-10-2-2019>.

conflict- and gender-sensitive manner. The recommendations focus on viewing women as political actors whose inclusion is key to policy and programming in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Programs and policy should focus on setting women up for success in obtaining social, economic, and political power within their communities. Further research is encouraged to draw comparative lessons across contexts and to further develop understandings of women's relationships to violence and armed groups.

Community-based armed groups

Community-based armed groups are a subset of nonstate armed groups that can be aligned with or complementary to the state or operate in gray areas with minimal state presence. According to Moritz Schuberth, "CBAGs are embedded within their communities, whose delineation can be defined by territory, blood ties, or shared identities."⁶ According to Daniel Agbibo, CBAGs can be "viewed as entities that define boundaries and protect communities encompassed within these boundaries; they surveil and act against any threat to these communities."⁷ Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) do not constitute CBAGs, as defined in this study, but instead are defined as nonstate armed groups more broadly. VEOs interact, align, or fight with CBAGs and are significant actors in conflicts in which CBAGs operate and thus cannot be separated from the discussion of nonstate armed groups in Kenya.

Schuberth argues that while CBAGs typically fulfill different functions simultaneously, three main ideal types of CBAGs can be discerned depending on their primary function at a given point:

1. vigilantes providing security for their communities;
2. militias working at the behest of political sponsors; or
3. criminal gangs pursuing the economic self-interest of their members.⁸

CBAGs in Kenya mostly correspond with these three ideal typical functions but may carry the overlapping characteristics of more or all of them and can be mobilized by a variety of drivers and actors.

The conduct and behavior of CBAGs, as in any social grouping, is greatly influenced and shaped by the intersection of various identities and status of its members.⁹ A comprehensive understanding of these groups appreciates the relationships and effect of structural and contextual factors—such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, age, and gender—on the general experiences of individuals both in the community

6 Moritz Schuberth, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned & Measures of Success* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.1>.

7 Daniel Agbibo, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.2>. See also Lauren Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism: A Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.3>.

8 Schuberth, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 4.

9 Crenshaw, K, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." (University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989:139-167).

and the group.¹⁰ The contestations, negotiations, and rejection of these identities greatly influence the dynamics and power relations within the groups and perceptions in society. At an individual level, these reflect how individuals, including women and girls, navigate their agency within the group structure.¹¹

In Kenya, a key part of understanding CBAGs relates to ethnic division and the way CBAGs claim to support certain ethnic groups. The emergence and activities of CBAGs in Kenya are closely tied to politics and the electoral calendar. Inadequate presence of the state, impunity in conflict-affected contexts, and protracted marginalization provide incentives for vulnerable community members to seek out alternative means of ensuring community security amid intercommunal violence and exclusion.¹² CBAGs exist because they are seen to serve a legitimate purpose, i.e., to augment security for the in-group.

Due to strong popular support and social endorsement of their activities, the groups not only form relationships with local communities and formal government security forces but also challenge state authority.¹³ On one hand, the Kenyan legal system is supposed to prosecute illegal groups and ethnic militias, as they threaten security, terrorize communities, and can gain control of entire neighborhoods, undermining the credibility of the state security and judicial systems. In October 2010, the government of Kenya enacted the Prevention of Organized Crimes Act.¹⁴ This act declared thirty-three organized criminal groups illegal—including the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), the Sabaot Land Defense Force (SLDF), Forty-Two Brothers, and the Taliban¹⁵—and accused them of criminal activities that elicited fear in society. On the other hand, relations between the government and armed groups are ambiguous and inconsistent, as the complicity of the national elite and the apparent toleration of civil militias cast doubt on the willingness and ability of the judicial system to address the security concerns posed by these groups.¹⁶

The social and political dynamics that facilitate CBAGs in Kenya affect the entire population, which of course includes women. Engaging with CBAGs is a political act, and women, like men, boys, girls, and other gender and sexual minorities in society, are involved in shaping the political landscape of their societies. This study aims to better understand their relationships to and engagements with CBAGs in different parts of the country in order to capture the range of their experiences and impacts.

10 Potter, Hillary. "Intersectional criminology: Interrogating identity and power in criminological research and theory." *Critical Criminology* 21, no. 3 (2013): 305; See also Lynch, M. J., & Michaelowski, R. (2006). *Primer in radical criminology: Critical perspectives on crime, power & identity*. (4th ed.). Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 131.

11 Nagel, Joane. "Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture." *Social problems* 41, no. 1 (1994): 152–176.; See also Bakewell, Oliver. "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory." *Journal of ethnic and migration studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1689–1708.

12 The number of these groups were said to have increased to 108 by 2016, and to over 326 by 2021, a trend attributed to political mobilization. Mombasa and Bungoma counties have the highest numbers of such groups.

13 Nyabola, "The Legal Challenge of Civil Militia Groups in Kenya."

14 Prevention of Organised Crimes Act No. 6 of 2010. Revised Edition 2012 [2010] by the National Council for Law Reporting with the Authority of the Attorney-General, http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/Acts/Prevention_of_Organised_Crimes_Act_No._6_of_2010.pdf

15 Note that this group is distinct from the well-known Taliban in Afghanistan.

16 Nyabola, "The Legal Challenge of Civil Militia Groups in Kenya."

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

This case study of women's participation in community-based armed groups (CBAGs) in Kenya examines:

1. the diversity of women's motivations to participate in community-based armed groups in Kenya;
2. women's roles and agency within community-based armed groups, communal conflicts, as well as community security and peacebuilding structures; and
3. gender dynamics in conflict ecosystems, including social perceptions about women's engagement in conflict.

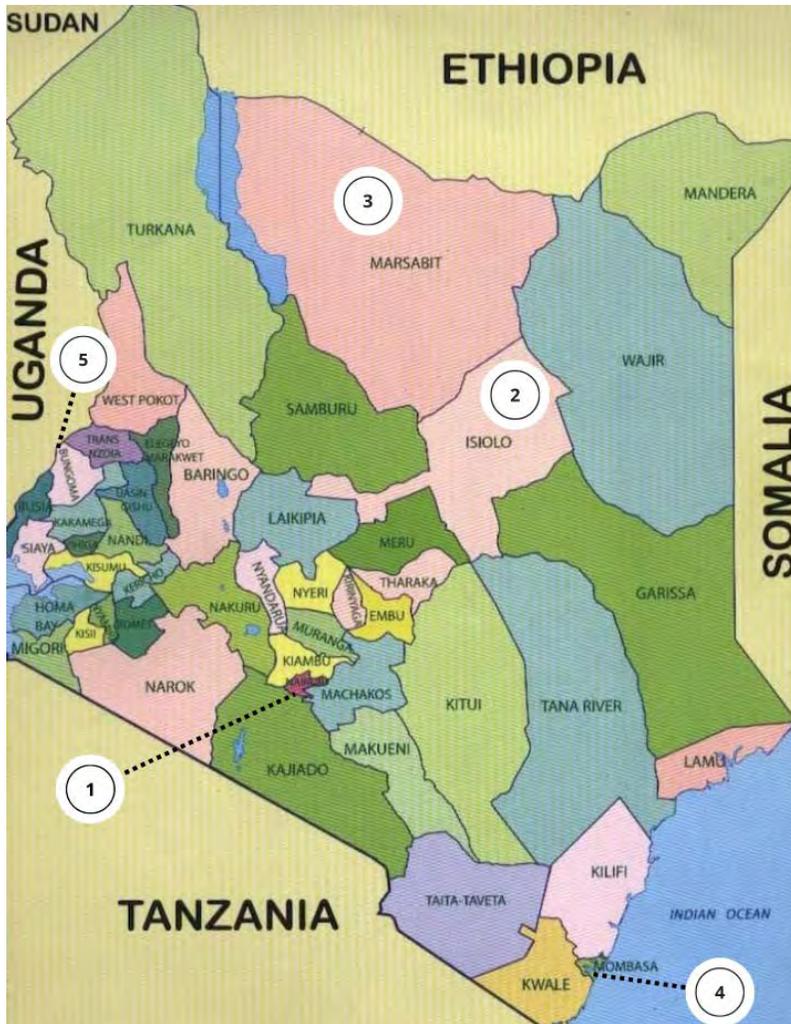
The report shines a light on the reality of women's political agency and capacity for both violence and peacebuilding. What factors motivate women to engage with or participate in CBAGs? What roles do women fulfill both within and adjacent to CBAGs? How do their communities perceive their involvement? What roles are available to them in community peace and security? By examining these questions in the diverse contexts of the study sites, this report provides insight into not only the range of women's engagement and agency in CBAGs, but also the challenges and opportunities presented by their inclusion in local peace and security efforts.

Study sites

The local research team conducted the study in five selected counties that represent Kenya's pastoral, urban, and rural clusters, each with unique conflict types and actors.¹⁷ The range of conflicts in these five sites provides ample opportunity to understand the diversity of CBAG composition and behaviors including women's varying roles in and relationships to violence and reconciliation across these contexts.

¹⁷ B. Rohwerder, *Conflict Analysis of Kenya Birmingham* (UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2015), <https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/KenyaConflictAnalysis.pdf> <https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/KenyaConflictAnalysis.pdf>

Image 1: Counties in Kenya¹⁸



1. In *Nairobi*, the capital of Kenya, the study focused on urban gangs that provide security and, in many cases, services such as water, garbage collection, and electricity in informal settlements, particularly Mathare.¹⁹ These groups retain distinct ethnic identities and mutate over time throughout the electoral calendar, with some participating in political and ethnic violence around elections.²⁰ Informal settlements are largely unplanned and lack adequate formal structures for public service delivery, creating gaps in security provision that non-state actors may step in to fill.

2. *Isiolo County* is home to a multi-ethnic, predominantly pastoralist population. The main ethnic groups are the Borana, Turkana, Samburu, Somali, and Meru, and tensions exist over boundary disputes, historical injustices, and land access issues. Described as “a hub for the small arms

trade from Kenya’s northern neighbors,”²¹ Isiolo experiences recurrent cattle raiding and resource-based conflicts as groups clash over water and pastureland. In such rural areas, given the prominence of land-based conflict and cattle rustling, ethnic grievances, and strong tribal structures, ethnic-based CBAGs organized as a community militia are the most common conflict actors filling the gap in security provision.²²

18 Image adapted from: maps-kenya.ke.com Source: UGC. Read more in “Counties in Kenya: Their governors and headquarters,” <https://www.tuko.co.ke/261970-kenya-counties-know-47-counties-governors.html>

19 For more on the role of gangs in informal settlements and crime in Kenya, see: Simone Haysom and Ken Opala, *The Politics of Crime: Kenya’s Gang Phenomenon* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime, 2020), 21, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-politics-of-crime-Kenyas-Gang-Phenomenon_GITOCESAObs.pdf.

20 See also: “Kill Those Criminals”: Security Forces Violations in Kenya’s August 2017 Elections (Human Rights Watch, 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/10/15/kill-those-criminals/security-forces-violations-kenyas-august-2017-elections>.

21 Kennedy Mkutu Agade and Abdullahi Boru Halakhe, *Isiolo County, Kenya - Rapid Assessment of the Institutional Architecture for Conflict Mitigation : Rapid Assessment on Institutional Architecture for Conflict Mitigation Isiolo* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/ar/131951587730959660/pdf/Rapid-Assessment-on-Institutional-Architecture-for-Conflict-Mitigation-Isiolo.pdf>.

22 Focus group discussion with mixed community members, Isiolo, July 19, 2021; Interview with local cleric, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

3. *Marsabit County* is a neighbor of Isiolo county that sometimes gets drawn into their local conflicts, as well as conflicts on the Kenya and Ethiopia border. Marsabit experiences cattle rustling as well as resource-based and political, ethnic, or clan-based conflicts that also play out across the border with Ethiopia. Deep-seated tribalism, ethnicized politics, competition for the distribution of power and resources, and high levels of violence have eroded trust in state security to restore security or promote justice and social cohesion. Residents have experienced recurrent massacres, communal raids, and armed robberies. In this context, ethnic militias may be perceived by communities as a means to ensure self-defense and maintain hard boundaries between the conflicting Borana and Gabbra communities.²³

4. In *Mombasa County* the study concentrated on the Kenyan coastal counties of Mombasa and Kwale, which are hotbeds of criminal gangs, militias, and violent extremist organizations such as al-Shabab. Mombasa County has experienced political violence, radicalization to violent extremism and human rights violations from government counter-terrorism efforts. The Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) operates in Mombasa and neighboring counties, agitating for secession from Kenya, arguing that the coastal region is not part of Kenya (*Pwani si Kenya*).²⁴ The MRC also agitates for land ownership by the native community, claiming that “non-locals” have dispossessed the indigenous people of their natural land rights.²⁵

5. *Bungoma County* is the home of the Sabaot Land Defense Forces, a violent ethnic militia originally aiming to recover ancestral land from later migrants.²⁶ In the Mt. Elgon constituency, violence between the Soy and Ndorobo clans of the Sabaot community at the center of these land disputes was perpetrated by the SLDF, comprised of Soy fighters. There have been multiple accounts of SLDF killings and abductions, displacement, mutilation (particularly of women), rape and sexual violence, and forced recruitment of young men and women.²⁷ The government military operation that ultimately defeated the militia left residents of the region deeply traumatized as a result of human rights abuses by both sides.²⁸ Today, clan disputes among the Bukusu, Tachonyi, Teso, Luhya, and Kikuyu groups, among others, exist, but the area is more cosmopolitan, and the previously common interethnic conflict has given way to crime-related violence.²⁹

23 For further information on these dynamics, see: Marsabit County: Rapid Conflict Assessment (Interpeace, 2022), <https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Marsabit-Report.pdf>.

24 The MRC was declared illegal by the Kenyan government in 2010, but in 2012, a court overturned that declaration. See: Joseph Akwiri, “Kenya Arrests Leader of Separatist Coastal Movement,” Reuters, October 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-kenya-politics-idCAKCN0I41WX20141015>; Winnie Atieno, “Kenya: Why Government Wants MRC Members to Surrender,” AllAfrica, July 29, 2021, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202107290991.html>.

25 Emmanuel Kisigani and Masha Lewela, “Mombasa Republican Council is demanding secession and campaigning to mobilise inhabitants not to participate in the forthcoming general elections, what can the state do?” Institute for Security Studies, June 27, 2012, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/kenyas-mombasa-republican-council-liberators-or-nascent-radical-fanatics>.

26 “Submission to 41st Session of the United Nations Committee Against Torture on Kenya,” Human Rights Watch, September 15, 2008, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CAT/Shared%20Documents/KEN/INT_CAT_NGO_KEN_41_9383_E.pdf.

27 For further information, see, for example: “All the Men Have Gone”: War Crimes in Kenya’s Mt. Elgon Conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2008), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/07/27/all-men-have-gone/war-crimes-kenyas-mt-elgon-conflict>.

28 Ibid.

29 Interview, Cheptais, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

Data collection and limitations

The findings from this study come from primary qualitative data. The local research team, led by principal investigator Prisca Kamungi, collected qualitative data through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary source data. KIIs were held with government officials, including chiefs and county commissioners, independent experts working on CBAGs, representatives of civil society and nongovernmental organizations, religious leaders, community-based organizations and community elders, youth leaders, at-risk persons, and active, inactive, and convicted members of CBAGs, their relatives, friends, and victims. FGDs were held with only a few women, men, youth, and community members working to promote cohesion, reconciliation, and reintegration. The study targeted only respondents above the age of eighteen, acquiring their informed consent to participate.

Data collection began in the summer of 2021 after passing ethical clearance processes in both Kenya and the United States. The principal investigator drafted the data collection instruments (interview guide and focus group discussion guide) in a consultative process and then translated them into the national language (Kiswahili). A team of local researchers³⁰ conducted the data collection, which took place through face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and virtual meetings respecting local COVID-19 safety regulations. A risk assessment process guided the project to ensure the safety, security, and health of researchers and participants and guarantee data security and anonymity.

Table 1: Type and location of data collection

County	Face-to-face Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	Telephone Interviews	Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
Nairobi	21	42	2 (men and women)
Mombasa	18	11	1 (men)
Isiolo	9	15	2 (men and women)
Marsabit	12	31	2 (men and women)
Bungoma	7	22	2 (men and women)
Total	67	121	9

30 Special thanks to the local researchers Peter Mwamachi, Brian Kimari, Symphorosa Oundo, and Jamal Abdalla, with the leadership of Prisca Kamungi.

Participants were identified through purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and convenience sampling. There are acknowledged biases in the sample, and it does not reflect the whole population of these countries. The interviews were semi-structured, with the talks directed by the respondents' circumstances and their willingness to address specific topics. Consequently, not all respondents discussed all the topics addressed in the study.

Further, due to COVID-19, the team revised the data collection methodology to focus more on KIIs and online methods than on FGDs. This affected the sample size, while phone interviews for such a sensitive topic may have affected data quality. The research team also dealt with their own health challenges during the process yet were committed to continuing the field research. In the end, data gathered by the research team was incredibly rich and insightful but, given health and safety concerns there were limited opportunities to analyze the data collaboratively. A broad literature review and secondary source data supported primary data to develop further analysis and the discussion and recommendations of this report.

FINDINGS: WOMEN IN CBAGS IN KENYA

The comparative, microlevel findings from the field data give insight into the diversity of women's motivations or incentives to engage with CBAGs, their roles and agency in conflict and violence, gender dynamics including community pressures and perceptions of women's engagement with conflict, and their participation in local reconciliation or dispute settlement processes. These insights, taken together, demonstrate a central premise of the WPS agenda: that women are complex political actors whose motivations and roles cannot be simplified.

Women's motivations for participation and engagement with armed groups

Insecurity, impunity, lack of effective policing, and political polarization are key drivers of CBAG formation in different regions in Kenya, as well as sources of legitimacy within communities. Impunity for violence, ineffective political and security structures, commercialization of cattle raids, and emerging bandit economies in urban informal settlements are key contextual factors for understanding the conditions that lead to the formation of CBAGs and can help explain their appeal to some women in Kenya.

INSECURITY AND GRIEVANCE

In conflict-affected places such as Marsabit, women were seen as joining or supporting CBAGs for pragmatic reasons: lack of choice. The importance of the security context in understanding women's engagement with CBAGs was summarized by an interviewee: "Women are members of society in areas where this is the situation. It's very hard for them not to be involved. It's their home."³¹ In Bungoma, focus group

31 Interview with CSO representative, Marsabit, July 23, 2021.

participants reiterated this theme: “Women are just as involved as the boys. They have the same challenges in the society, so even they can commit crime.”³²

In Isiolo, focus group participants noted, “Our patriarchal systems mean that it’s the mother handling the problem. Polygamy also means that the men can easily just take off. Conflict for women is usually quite personal. Men might have interests. Women have revenge ideas because they’ve been very affected.”³³ The data showed that personal tragedies and the desire to avenge loved ones killed in violence or exposed to rights violations were the main motivations for joining or supporting CBAGs, especially in areas where state response to conflict is deemed unjust.

In the Coast region [Mombasa] and Isiolo, seeking security in the absence of murdered or disappeared loved ones and revenge against security agencies for human rights violations may contribute to women’s support for and engagement in CBAGs.³⁴ In the absence of effective state security, the sense of responsibility to protect their people and support formations tasked with protecting the community was thought to propel young men and women to join or support the activities of CBAGs.³⁵

In Mombasa, CBAGs were thought to have some support from the population, and were described as an outlet for retribution against abuses perpetrated by the Kenyan security forces against communities.³⁶ As a result of reports of unjustified detentions, harsh police practices, and extrajudicial killings and disappearances by Kenyan security forces, individuals in communities sympathize with CBAGs, gangs, and violent extremist organizations.³⁷ Interviewees noted that the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) had received increased support from the population in the Coast region following perceived intimidation and human rights abuses in the context of countering violent extremism³⁸ as well as accusations of the Kenyan government of marginalization, discrimination, and neglect.³⁹

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

A common explanation for women’s support of CBAGs across Kenya was the perceived financial benefit or security from associating with CBAGs. In Mombasa, poverty and a lack of sustainable livelihoods to support themselves or their families were the most frequently discussed reasons for women joining CBAGs.⁴⁰ In Nairobi’s informal settlements, irregular sources of income, such as monetary handouts from

32 Focus group discussion with women, Tongaren Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

33 Focus group discussion with community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

34 “Conflict for women is usually quite personal. men might have interests. Women have revenge ideas because they’ve been very affected.” Focus group with community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021. “Due to their extensive networks and connections in the community, women push community members, particularly men, to join in vengeance, leading to some girls idolizing young men in armed gangs because they feel safe in their company.” Analysis by field researcher, Mombasa.

35 Analysis by field researcher, Mombasa.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Kisgani and Lewela, “The Mombasa Republican Council is demanding secession and campaigning to mobilise inhabitants not to participate in the forthcoming general elections, what can the state do?”

40 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

politicians or political agents; criminal activities, including political violence and extortion; and illegal taxation for providing security to the community, are legitimized in everyday discourse as livelihood options for poor women.⁴¹

The appeal of the expected financial security from CBAGs is heavily influenced by changing gender and household dynamics across Kenya. As stated by one interviewee, “Men have shirked their responsibilities [as bread earners], so women have all the obligations” and are in a “constant state of stress and worry.”⁴² Financial pressures are amplified by women’s inability to own land, access titles and deeds, and being disinherited as widows, according to a community chief in Bungoma.⁴³

In areas where cattle raiding was common and a predominant form of pastoralist conflict, such as Marsabit and Isiolo, previous research has suggested that rites of passage for men, like the acquisition of livestock to pay the bride price, may be linked to security dynamics.⁴⁴ An interviewee in Isiolo specifically noted that “in some communities, men can’t marry women if they don’t raid.”⁴⁵ Other interviewees in both Marsabit and Isiolo frequently referred to women as “inciting” violence and raids (as discussed further below). An interviewee in Isiolo suggested, while not involved in direct combat “women mainly just encourage raids,”⁴⁶ while another in Marsabit explained women “also will incite their men to fight when they feel as though they are not doing enough. They know how to do this. Immediately you call the man a woman, he will do what you want to prove otherwise.”⁴⁷ This introduces the possibility that young, unmarried women may encourage cattle raiding and support members of CBAGs in cattle raiding because having the animals for their dowries increases prospects of marriage and prestige, although the extent to which this is the case remains unclear.

In addition to economic considerations, relationships and social networks are one of the most powerful explanatory factors as to why individuals join violent groups.⁴⁸ Data from Mombasa indicated that CBAGs stemmed from criminal gangs that fulfilled social gathering roles. Some social networks that started as non-security providing groups like *chamas*⁴⁹ or football teams later become CBAG networks. If women were already a part of these social networks, this could translate into their integration into CBAG networks. When women’s social networks fail to give appropriate emotional, financial, and economic support, they turn to *maskanis*.⁵⁰

41 According to the principal investigator’s research, Nairobi, 2021.

42 Interview with Chief, Mbakalo location, Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

43 Ibid.

44 See, for example: Kennedy Mkutu, Pastoralists, Politics and Development Projects: Understanding the Layers of Armed Conflict in Isiolo County, Kenya (BICC Working Paper, 7/2019) (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)), <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-68074-7>.

45 Interview with District Peace Committee chair, Isiolo, July 18, 2021.

46 Interview, NGO Director, Isiolo, July 18, 2021.

47 Interview with former army member, Marsabit, July 22, 2021.

48 See, for example, “Turning Point: A Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (November 2016), <https://www.csis.org/features/turning-point>.

49 Groups with economic goals, they save money and support each other.

50 Maskanis are “bases” where young men in slums meet up to socialize.

Women's roles in armed groups and conflict

It is often difficult to assess whether women's relationships with and activities in CBAGs are formal or informal, active or supportive and whether these labels are even relevant.⁵¹ Women's supportive role in these formations extends to protecting members of their own community by withholding information that could lead to their arrest or other forms of punishment and accountability. Conversely, testifying against a community member attracts social censure and potential reprisals by CBAGs for the perceived betrayal of community, values, and interests.

INCITEMENT AND SUPPORT FOR VIOLENCE

Women were commonly seen supporting CBAGs across field locations through inciting and motivating violence. Women draw on gendered norms and encourage their men to fight by emasculating men who fail to fight.⁵² One participant explained that men are motivated to fight "because they don't want to be regarded as women."⁵³ Masculinities play a key role in inciting men to fight, as men perform masculinity to gain approval from women.⁵⁴ In Kenya, as elsewhere, it seems women support CBAGs by recruiting, mobilizing resources, spying, or serving in more organizational roles as messengers, legal representatives, treasurers, and secretaries.

Community rituals such as songs and praise from women are powerful and "push the men to plan more for violence so that they get the praise."⁵⁵ A group of elders in Isiolo noted that women's rituals around fighting give men the spirit to fight.⁵⁶ "The power in song is very important. If a woman sings a prayer, the men won't even fear death at that point."⁵⁷

Women were involved in inciting conflict in a variety of ways across field locations, for example by engaging in illicit or illegal activities as part of their role in inciting violence between CBAGs. In Bungoma, a focus group noted, "Women make the illegal brews and cannabis for the young men. This is important because the men use it to get courage for fighting."⁵⁸

51 Jakana Thomas, *Duty and Defiance: Women in Community-based Armed Groups in West Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.1>.

52 An interviewee in Marsabit noted, "They will incite their men to fight when they feel as though they are not doing enough. They know how to do this. Immediately you call the man a woman; he will do what you want to prove otherwise. They'll call for men to take their dresses and the men are quick to plan the next raid." In Isiolo, the role of masculinity in women's support of CBAGs was reiterated by an interview participant noting women provide "powerful incitement based on emasculation of young men not willing to fight." Interview with former army and FBO member, Male, Marsabit, July 22, 2021; Interview with security consultant, Isiolo, July 18, 2021; Focus group discussion with Community members, Isiolo, July 2021.

53 Interview with member of Samburu Council of Elders, Female, Isiolo, July 20, 2021.

54 The way in which women have used ideas about gender identities to shame men to participate in violence was also documented in a study in Kismayo, Somalia. See: Life & Peace Institute, Peace Direct, and Somali Women Solidarity Organization, "Learning from Kismayo: A Study Report," April 2018, <http://life-peace.org/resource/learning-from-kismayo/>.

55 Focus group discussion with community members, Isiolo, July 2021.

56 Interview, Gabra Council of Elders, Isiolo, July 20, 2021.

57 Interview with member of Samburu Council of Elders, Female, Isiolo, July 20, 2021.

58 Focus group discussion with men, Tongaren Bungoma, August 24, 2021.

NETWORKS AND INTELLIGENCE

Women were also described as key recruiters, especially in recruiting their children and relatives to join CBAGs. In Mombasa, interview participants saw women as ideal recruiters because of their large networks and the communities' trust in them. Female recruiters have higher network linkage than male recruiters; they are more effective in distributing the group's message than their male counterparts. For instance, in Bungoma, one interview participant explained that women would "trick boda boda⁵⁹ riders to lure them to gangs."⁶⁰

Women's roles in intelligence and harboring information were discussed across study contexts. In Isiolo, a male security consultant explained that "Women provide a lot of intelligence. They spread information, especially where there is intermarriage between communities."⁶¹ He gave the example of a Borana woman married to a Somali man. In Bungoma, one interview participant explained that women hold much information in the community and some contributed to conflict by supplying intelligence to men. She noted that while the men might lead the operational aspect, the women are heavily involved in the planning [of CBAGs activities] because they are the ones with the intelligence.⁶² In Mombasa, the women who are linked to armed groups are usually informers, part of the armed groups' intelligence gathering mechanisms in the community.⁶³

EXPLOITING STEREOTYPES AND TRADITIONALLY FEMININE ROLES

While many women broke with feminized roles through their participation in CBAGs, they also leveraged stereotypes to support CBAGs in other ways. "Women are utilized by men because it's not easy to identify that they are criminals. The perception is that they can't be involved," according to a Bungoma focus group.⁶⁴ In Mombasa and Isiolo, women were being used by CBAGs, as well as violent extremism organizations, possibly because they were less likely to be suspected of being armed and thought to be able to access information more easily than men.⁶⁵

Women in CBAGs in Kenya also perform more stereotypical feminine tasks, including emotional labor. For example, an interviewee in Isiolo explained that women provide "solace to fighters."⁶⁶ In addition to emotional support, women were discussed to varying degrees across research sites, including in Isiolo,

59 Boda bodas are motorcycle taxis, a common feature of the Kenyan transportation sector. See Douglas Lucas Kivoi, "Boda bodas are critical to Kenya's transport system. But they've gone rogue," *The Conversation*, March 17, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/boda-bodas-are-critical-to-kenyas-transport-system-but-theyve-gone-rogue-179234>.

60 Focus group discussion with men, Tongaren Bungoma, August 24, 2021.

61 Interview with security consultant, Isiolo, July 18, 2021.

62 Interview, Chief Cheptais location, Female, Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

63 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

64 Focus Group with Women, Tongaren Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

65 This suggestion is based on repeated suggestions from respondents that women are used to store and conceal weapons and provide intelligence, primarily in Isiolo and Bungoma.

66 Interview with security consultant, Isiolo, July 18, 2021.

Bungoma, Marsabit, and Mombasa, as key to CBAGs in their support in terms of cooking, medical support, storing arms, and cleaning.⁶⁷

PARTICIPATION IN VIOLENCE AND WOMEN-ONLY GROUPS

A topic that emerged across field locations was women's roles in the violent aspect of CBAGs. Gangs composed entirely of women seem particularly noteworthy because in certain contexts not only do women participate directly in violent groups, but they *are* the only members of the groups. In Mathare, Nairobi County, *the Queens* are known to be a group of violent women who fight to protect fellow women from violence by men and provide support to male members of both criminal gangs and informal security arrangements.⁶⁸ Other research has documented the presence of women-led prostitution rings in the informal settlements of Nairobi.⁶⁹

When women-only gangs were discussed in interviews, their violence was often compared to men's or seen as a result of men. For example, in Mombasa, interviewees described women gangs as "just as violent as men's and more aggressive in the pursuit of their agenda."⁷⁰ The accuracy of this statement is unknown—women's violence is often viewed as more notable than men's.⁷¹

WOMEN IN COMMUNITY SECURITY AND PEACEBUILDING

The range of expressions of agency indicates that women do not only support CBAGs or incite conflict, but they also soothe tensions and attempt violence prevention between CBAGs. For example, one female interviewee in Bungoma explained that "women also leaked information to their friends when they knew about plans to kill people in that area. The women are most affected by conflict, so they'll try hard not to have fights, especially when they think their side will lose."⁷²

In addition to their (mis)alignment with CBAGs, women may also pursue peaceful outcomes through other types of community associations, including peace committees, community policing committees, and *Nyumba Kumi*.⁷³ Those consulted in the research suggested that, in some cases, women were seen to

67 Focus group with men, Tongaren Bungoma, August 24, 2021; Interview with male security consultant, Isiolo, July 18, 2021; Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022; Interview with Chief, Male, Marsabit, July 21, 2022; Focus group with local government and local organization members, Kapsokwon Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, August 25, 2021; Focus group with women, Tongaren Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

68 According to the principal investigator's research, Nairobi, 2021.

69 Katharine Petrich and Phoebe Donnelly, "Worth Many Sins: Al-Shabaab's Shifting Relationship with Kenyan Women" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30, no. 6-7 (2019): 1169–1192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2019.1649814>.

70 Interview with a community elder, Mombasa.

71 Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

72 Interview with Chief, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

73 Translated as ten households in Swahili, Nyumba Kumi was launched as a government initiative to guarantee local-level peace and security. It aims to bring together Kenyan residents in clusters defined by their physical locations with the vision of a neighborhood where residents know each other and look out for each other. Clusters are made up of at least ten households within a given location, be it a number of houses, a street, a village, a gated community, or flats in a residential neighborhood. The initiative is associated with preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE). It was premised on the idea that citizens know their areas and are indeed able

be at the forefront of peacebuilding initiatives,⁷⁴ but further opportunities to support women’s involvement in peace committees and economic activities were needed.⁷⁵ Based on an interview in Marsabit, women’s inclusion in peace committees may not always be welcome due to perceived interference in community traditions, cultural norms, and practices.⁷⁶ Moving forward, communities and supporters of peace efforts should be careful to avoid only a tokenistic inclusion of women in hitherto male-dominated structures.⁷⁷ Structural changes in gender relations and power dynamics should be explored as opposed to an “add women and stir” approach in which just the inclusion of women is regarded as the endpoint in the process of institutional change.

Perceptions of women’s engagement with armed groups and conflict

Despite the recognition that women, like men, were embroiled in conflict dynamics, the perception of women’s participation in CBAGs was sometimes negative and seen as a reflection of the breakdown of the gendered social order. At the same time, communities also relied on women as a key resource for CBAGs.

THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIAL ORDER

The increased visibility of women in CBAGs may be reflective of shifts in conflict dynamics; worsening poverty; and the unique ethnic, economic marginality, and social pressures affecting women—especially those with weaker social networks from broken or homeless families.⁷⁸ Gender dynamics, including violence by male members of CBAGs, leave women to ensure their own security and survival in the informal,

to report suspicious or unusual activities, hence contributing to efforts to counter crime and violent extremism. See: Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism*, and Nyumba Kumi Initiative, *A Critical Analysis*.

74 Focus group participants in Isiolo specifically mentioned the important role women already played in grassroots and peacebuilding efforts, highlighting women’s leadership in doing so. Focus group with civil society organizations, other organizations, and community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021; –Focus group with community members, mixed, Mombasa, July 19, 2021; Interview with female peace ambassador, Marsabit, July 22, 2021.

75 The importance of empowering women was noted in terms of access, resources, engagement in peace efforts, and economic support in the following consultations, among others: Focus group discussion with women, Bungoma Town, August 26, 2021; Interview with Samburu Council of Elders, female, July 20, 2021; Interview with female NGO employee Isiolo, July 18, 2021; Interview with NGO representative, male, Isiolo, July 20, 2021; Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022; Interview with peace ambassador, female, Marsabit, July 21, 2021; Interview with CSO representative, male, Marsabit, July 23, 2022.

76 A member of a peace committee in Marsabit observed, “Let us be careful to protect our culture; not everything from outside is good for us. In our community, security is a man’s role; what are you bringing women into? There are things we cannot talk [about] in their presence because they have not undergone certain rituals that are for men only. Some views about women persist and make it difficult for us to make them core members of our committee; we include them because we are forced to.”

77 PeaceRep, Political Settlements Research Database, <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/publications-database/>.

78 Respondents in Mombasa and Kwale noted that “When women’s social network fails to give appropriate emotional, financial, and economic support, they turn to maskani’s that are at times chamas, football teams, that later end up being CBAGs networks which fill the need...Because of their allegedly weaker social networks, orphans, ex-gang members, and recent converts, for example, have been portrayed as more solitary and vulnerable to VE as well.” Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

often illicit, economy of the informal settlements.⁷⁹ The links between CBAGs and drug dealing, illicit alcohol trade, and prostitution may additionally influence or stigmatize the perception of women who were involved in these groups.⁸⁰

Community attitudes towards women's support for or participation in CBAGs exist in tandem with an understanding that women's support for CBAGs may be a symptom of a declining social order, to varying extents depending on the context. For example, in Bungoma county, women associated with armed groups are "viewed as being just as culpable as the men who actually went to fight. It took some time for them to be accepted in the community."⁸¹ In Mt. Elgon, study participants noted that women members of SLDF were both offenders and victims, an overlap caused by the harsh treatment they faced at the hands of male members, including beatings, degrading verbal abuse, and sexual violence.⁸² In Mathare, interviewees noted that some women had to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) to be allowed to join the Mungiki,⁸³ a banned criminal gang/organization in Kenya.⁸⁴ The data from across Kenya illustrated that the line between perpetrator and victim is blurred during political violence, and women, like most individuals, inhabit both roles.⁸⁵

HEROISM

Communities often rely on women's participation in CBAGs for providing intelligence to community members, such as information on planned robberies and extrajudicial executions or security units, thus contributing to the protection of their neighbors. Community leaders in Isiolo discussed the respect given to women who support CBAGs. One community leader said that women in CBAGs are seen as heroines by their community and praised for the support they give to CBAGs (specifically through giving information and keeping secrets).⁸⁶ In Marsabit, a man interviewed described women as "heroes" and noted, "they are supporting the cause of the community through motivating the warriors. It's important

79 For example, in a focus group in Isiolo, participants noted that "the women are also often neglected by their husbands often and left to engage in illegal businesses e.g., selling drugs." Participants noted that "a lot of people have gotten into criminal activities because of unemployment and the rising cost of food and services. Women have been forced into prostitution and alcoholism, others have started robbing people and they are so desperate they will kill if need be." Focus group with women, Bungoma Town, August 26, 2021. Focus group with community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021. In Marsabit, an interviewee noted that women "do a lot of incitement because they suffer. Interview with CSO representative, male, Marsabit, July 23, 2021.

80 In a focus group in Isiolo, for example, participants noted that "the violent extremist ones are usually recruited because of drug abuse. They are seen as people who've abused drugs although we know they don't" and "people have a lot of disdain/disregard for women who join VEOs- they seem uncultured, rejected by the communities really." Focus group with community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

81 Further, "after some time people realised that it's the environment they were in and pressure they were under that made them do that. You get sucked in. the culture requires women not to move from stressful environments, they had to stay there." Focus group with men, Tongaren Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

82 "They had to endure so much suffering, like being beaten, denied food, or even raped, to prove themselves tough and loyal to the cause. I believe some would have wanted to escape but could not do so for fear of being killed or the knowledge that the community would not embrace them after what that group did to people." Interview with member of peace committee, Bungoma county.

83 According to the lead author's research.

84 "Mungiki is a violent youth movement that purports to represent the Kikuyu, a demographically, politically, and historically significant ethnic group in Kenya" and assumed a variety of CBAG roles. Hilary Matfess, p. 18.

85 For further discussion, see: Erin Baines, "Gender, Responsibility and the Grey Zone: Considerations for Transitional Justice," *Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2011.619405>.

86 Focus group discussion with CSOs, FBOs, community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

to have this . . . motivating them is equally important because warriors need confidence, and [women’s] songs will make you feel unbeatable.”⁸⁷

GENDERED STEREOTYPES

Some CBAGs seem to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of gender norms and stereotypes and exploit social constructions of masculinity and femininity to tap into various vulnerabilities among men and women in specific local contexts in order to attract, recruit, and retain adherents.⁸⁸ In Mombasa, there was the sense that men and women participated in CBAGs for different reasons. Loyalty was seen as particularly important for men participating in CBAGs, and they were expected to pledge allegiance to their group. In contrast, women were seen as more self-motivated in their engagement with CBAGs—working with them for tactical reasons. However, when women joined CBAGs, they seemed changed and felt empowered, and “gendered identities have been altered.”⁸⁹ New ideas about women’s gender roles were thought to cause tension in Mombasa upon return to their home environments from CBAGs.⁹⁰ Understanding how men and women use ideas about masculine and feminine roles is an essential part of gender analysis and key to the WPS agenda moving forward.

The comparison between men and women in CBAGs reveals aspects of how femininity and masculinity operate in perceptions of gangs. Women in gangs are seen to be fulfilling men’s roles in gangs in Bungoma, where women are armed with guns and occupy the vacuum left by men, participating in violence because, “They need to not to be seen as weak. They can be just as violent as the men.”⁹¹

Gendered stereotypes framed popular perceptions around women’s roles in intelligence in Isiolo: “Women distort information—because of the nature, it can be seen as a call to violence. They just talk that way, loud.”⁹² Women’s incitement or support of CBAGs was viewed negatively at times, for example by a male politician in Marsabit: “Emotive speeches on their suffering can poison the air. The men listen to them and want to protect them, especially through revenge.”⁹³

To conclude, while women’s integration into CBAGs may challenge stereotypes, it may not alter gender norms at large. While research demonstrates incorporation of women into CBAG membership, it is unclear if the goal of this behavior was to challenge gender norms more broadly. CBAGs occasionally faced resistance from communities for integrating women into their ranks, as this was seen as breaking community traditions, cultural values, and norms that dictate gender roles and hierarchies. However, women’s presence in CBAGs does not necessarily reduce gender stereotypes or violence against women,

87 Interview with former army and FBO member, Male, Marsabit, July 22, 2021.

88 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

89 Ibid.

90 “Disengagement from a radical political community, on the other hand, can be extremely stressful, especially when it involves settling in a local community where others, such as mothers and other elderly female relatives who act as moral gatekeepers, are still committed to the old feudal and gender-biased order.” Analysis by field researcher, Mombasa.

91 Focus group discussion with local government, CSO, CBO, FBO members, Kapsokwon Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

92 Focus group discussion with community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

93 Interview with county officer, Marsabit, July 21, 2021.

including inside the groups. In certain CBAGs, women experience violence by male members, especially in internal struggles for power and control of rent.⁹⁴

DISCUSSION: DIVERSITY OF AGENCY

The literature on gender and conflict, and specifically on women in conflict, has sought to capture the diversity of women's roles and motivations in conflict. However, this study is unique in its revelation of this diversity within a single country through its use of micro-level analysis. This theory-building from the ground by examining local contexts is an attempt to respond to criticisms of the WPS's reproduction of colonial hierarchies, with scholarship and analysis erasing the perspectives of those from the Global South.⁹⁵ Since space and location inform claims to ownership and authority over the agenda, centering the local as the site of knowledge production remains key⁹⁶ to recognizing knowledge transfers from the ground up.⁹⁷

A key theme that emerged from this grassroots knowledge production under this research project was not only about women's agency but the diversity of said agency. This analysis fits well in feminist security studies literature yet is a unique, context-specific contribution from Kenyan study sites. The data in this study is an important step to building a database of individual micro-level analyses about the perceptions and experiences of women in CBAGs.

Feminist literature on women's engagement in armed groups and social movements cautions against the overgeneralization of women's motivations, as women are a diverse component of all societies.⁹⁸ The experiences and roles of women in CBAGs and polarized societies are often narrated as that of victims, mothers, lovers, wives, or persons defined by their relationship to men and boys. While the data identified personal tragedies and grievances as the main motivations for joining or supporting CBAGs, it is important to not overgeneralize such personal motivations for women. To compare, in the literature on women's engagement in violent extremism, some scholars have focused on personal motivations for women's participation in violence,⁹⁹ while others argue that women are no more motivated by personal narratives like revenge than men are: "the primary motivations for both men and women comes from

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- 94 The use of different forms of gender-based violence against women members of different types of armed groups has been well-documented, see for example, Phoebe Donnelly, "The Interactive Relationship between Gender and Strategy," *Global Society* (June 27, 2018): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2018.1490252>; Megan Mackenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); and Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El-Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 95 Soumita Basu, "The Global South Writes 1325 (Too)," *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 362–374, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0192512116642616>.
- 96 Laura J. Shepherd, "Situating Women, Peace and Security: Theorizing from 'The Local,'" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 4 (2020): 456–461, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1796262>.
- 97 Miriam Mona Müller and Ambika Varma, "Advancing the WPS Agenda through Regional Governance in, for or by the Global South?" OurGenforInclusivePeace, December 8, 2020, <https://ogiporg.wixsite.com/home/post/advancing-the-wps-agenda-through-regional-governance-in-for-or-by-the-global-south>.
- 98 Viterna, *Women in War*.
- 99 Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

a loyalty to their community.”¹⁰⁰ Our research confirms both cases in Kenya: while personal grievance motivates some women to engage with CBAGs, community ties and socioeconomic networks were also strong pulls for women to participate in armed or violent groups in Kenya.

In some of the deeply polarized communities in Kenya, while women might not technically join because of coercive enlistment, engaging with CBAGs might not be viewed as a choice. Jakana Thomas and Kanisha Bond explore the contextual factors at the group level that can explain women’s participation in violent organizations. They conclude that the most salient variables are group size, positive gender ideology, and the use of terrorist tactics, notably, “violent organizations that use coercive enlistment are much more likely to have women participants than groups that rely on volunteers.”¹⁰¹ Although coercion does occur, women are not always forced into CBAGs, nor do they always pursue peaceful outcomes in the process of restoring stability and rehabilitation. Gendered assumptions of women’s powerlessness or peaceful nature obscure their agency and anger. As partisan individuals in polarized political contexts, women reinforce polarities through the everyday discourse of difference and memory of violence or discrimination.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The micro-level insights that follow hope to fortify gender-sensitive and inclusive policy and programming considerations and inform grassroots initiatives for peace and security in Kenya. The recommendations are directly drawn from interviews and focus group discussions in the study sites, based on what research participants see as security challenges and opportunities in their communities, and are buttressed with analysis from the gender and peacebuilding literature. Given the focus of this study on women’s engagement with CBAGs, these considerations concentrate on women and their motivations, empowerment, and impacts on community security, with the objective of conveying local perspectives. Further research is encouraged to situate these grassroots recommendations from this research in Kenya in the existing academic literature and compare them across different contexts in Kenya and sub-Saharan Africa. Future research could explore whether women’s involvement in CBAGs promotes gender equality and women’s empowerment goals, recognizing that not all women pursue peace agendas.

Support women’s economic security in unstable environments

Across the study sites, respondents stressed the need for women’s economic security. Providing education and training, raising literacy levels, and enabling women to learn business skills will offer alternatives to pursue income, build a stable home, and break out of violent environments, which, in turn, can help

100 Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “What’s Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?” *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 2, 2009): 681–718, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903369084>.

101 Jakana L. Thomas and Kanisha D. Bond, “Women’s Participation in Violent Political Organizations,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 03 (August 2015): 488–506, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000313>.

forgo turning to violence or illegal dealings for self-sustenance.¹⁰² Education for more girls, especially in pastoralist areas, is crucial to providing opportunities in decision-making positions in patriarchal societies.¹⁰³ Some interview participants suggested “training of trainers” and knowledge exchanges: “There are women here who have done tremendous jobs. They need to be exposed to other places so that they can learn even more and exchange ideas with other communities.”¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, an equal education system will be central to “dismantling the patriarchal nature of Kenyan society and in the process increasing the chances that women will play a more active and recognized role in Kenyan society.”¹⁰⁵

Participants agreed that women should receive more support and business opportunities¹⁰⁶ despite existing efforts. According to a respondent in Marsabit, local organizations do a lot to provide education and training for women on savings and loan schemes. Financial inclusion, when appropriately applied, can be a tool for women’s empowerment, as it reduces poverty for financially disadvantaged people. With the ability to save and manage their money, women can gain financial stability and resiliency against economic shocks and changing circumstances.¹⁰⁷

Ensuring that women can earn a living outside of conflict is crucial to overcoming cultures of conflict.¹⁰⁸ In Bungoma, local organizations mobilize women to participate in budgeting processes and to apply good farming practices.¹⁰⁹ Other research found self-help groups can increase confidence in financial decision-making, promote income-generating activities, and expand credit access to vulnerable women.¹¹⁰ Addressing problems inherent in patriarchal societies—for example, around property ownership—could serve as a springboard for economic independence and encourage women to safeguard their property.¹¹¹ While economic stability cannot on its own resolve conflict dynamics, it can provide women with increased independence and ability to take care of their needs and enjoy their rights.¹¹²

102 Interview, Samburu Council of Elders, Isiolo, July 20, 2021; Interview with female representative, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 28, 2021; Focus Group Discussion with women, Tongaren Bungoma, August 25, 2021; Interview with NGO representative, Marsabit, July 23, 2021.

103 Focus group discussion, CSOs, FBOs, community leaders, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

104 Focus group discussion with local government, CSO, CBO, FBO members, Kapsokwon Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

105 Peter Nordström, *Gender and Reconciliation in the New Kenya: Equality at the Heart*, Policy Brief no. 3., Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, (July 2013); and USAID, Kenya Gender Equality & Female Empowerment Fact Sheet, 2020, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Gender_Fact_Sheet_for_Kenya.pdf

106 Focus group discussion, Tongaren Bungoma, August 24, 2021.

107 B. M. Mulili, “Financial Inclusion as a Tool for Women’s Economic Empowerment in Africa: Achieving UN’s 2030 SDG,” in Adeola, O. (eds) *Empowering African Women for Sustainable Development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59102-1_12.

108 Interview with former army member, Marsabit, July 22, 2021.

109 Focus group discussion with local government, CSO, CBO, FBO members, Kapsokwon Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, August 28, 2021.

110 Philip Onyango Were and Sarah Wairimu Kimaru-Muchai, “Evaluation of Self-Help Groups in Promoting Women Socio-Economic Empowerment in Kibra Sub-County, Nairobi County, Kenya,” *Journal of Global Awareness* 2, no. 1 (2021), <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/jga/vol2/iss1/6>.

111 Interview with NGO representative, Marsabit, July 23, 2021.

112 Wanga Patrick Wambunya, Ndung’u J. B. Ikenye, and Enos Mukadi Barasa, “Effect of Women Economic Empowerment on Family Stability in Imenti North Sub-County, Kenya,” *Journal of Psychology, Guidance, & Counseling* 1, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjpgc.v1i3.94>.

Include women in political and economic leadership

Education and economic independence link closely with social and political inclusion and participation in decision-making. Political openness and strong leadership are necessary to include all relevant actors and alter the structures and practices that discriminate against women,¹¹³ thus enhancing the efficiency of peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Bringing women into different decision-making, community-building, and local political fora is indispensable to ensuring women as conflict actors are invested in peacebuilding goals.¹¹⁴ To be effective agents of peace and security, women should be involved in decision-making from the family to the wider community level and have access to government and community programs, e.g., Nyumba Kumi, as well as resources and services.¹¹⁵

Already, the research found that the inclusion of women in a largely male-dominated peace and security structure has given them the space to take part in decision-making, local dispute resolution, and peace negotiations. According to the Kenya National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace, and Security, efforts to integrate women into Kenyan peace and security architecture have led to a two-fold increase in the number of women in peace committees, from 14 percent in 2013 to 29 percent in 2018, enhancing women's "ability to influence decision-making processes related to the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict."¹¹⁶ However, integrating women into peace and security institutions does not mean that their ideas will be heard.

An NGO worker in Isiolo suggested there should be more efforts to popularize UNSCR 1325¹¹⁷ to ensure women are protected from conflict and involved in prevention and response.¹¹⁸ In reality, "the full and meaningful participation of women in the political, economic and social aspects of states and societies" is a prerequisite for the full implementation of the WPS agenda. The inclusion of women in traditional institutions, or just the popularization of the agenda itself, alone will not help the uneven implementation of WPS principles.¹¹⁹ But women's transformative leadership in the different sectors and at different levels can challenge social perceptions about women's leadership and agency.¹²⁰

113 Nordström, *Gender and Reconciliation in the New Kenya*.

114 "When we talk about conflict, we have to bring everybody on board. We need to have all stakeholders on board around the mountain. We need to know how far they've come and find out the challenges they faced, so we can learn from them." Interview with elder, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

115 Interview with elder, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 25, 2021; Focus Group Discussion with women, Bungoma Town, August 26, 2021.

116 Kenya National Action Plan on UNSC Resolution 1325, 4, <https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/sites/www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/files/kenya-2nd-1325-national-action-plan-knapii-2020-2024.pdf>.

117 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 was adopted on October 31, 2000, to formalize what we now know as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda. The resolution seeks to recognize the contributions of and better integrate women into peace and security processes. More information is available at <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

118 Interview, NGO employee, Isiolo, July 18, 2021.

119 Vanessa F. Newby and Alanna O'Malley, "Introduction: WPS 20 Years On: Where Are the Women Now?" *Global Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (September 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab017>.

120 REINVENT, Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development (CCGD) and African Women Study Centre (AWSC), *Expanding Women's territory in Leadership and Nurturing the Nation. A Guide to Women's Leadership*, A PROJECT OF Women in Leadership and Decision Making Committee, October 5, 2020, <https://ccgdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EXPANDING-WOMENS-TERRITORY-Approval-4thnov.pdf>.

Crucially, men must be involved in addressing gender inequality. Including men in discussions around gender is a way to avoid othering women, especially in the security sector, and to embrace a human security perspective that sees threats to women’s security as a priority.¹²¹ Men must understand women’s issues as community issues to champion women’s rights. There is a need to bring boys and men to the table and educate them to be empowered beyond the patriarchal systems in which they have lived.¹²²

Tailor programming to gendered needs

Since women are an integral part of CBAGs and other communal security mechanisms, they must be stakeholders of any effort to engage, manage, or transform CBAGs and build lasting peace.¹²³ Gender considerations must form the cornerstone of reconciliation processes including disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and resocialization programs.¹²⁴ New research on DDR-related activities for women, more focused on the context of violent extremism, recommends that even within countries, women need specifically tailored reintegration programs and benefits.¹²⁵ It is also important to differentiate the needs of rural and urban locations in terms of gender programming, as well as community security issues from criminal and armed gang activity.¹²⁶

Fieldwork in Mombasa County found that women who joined armed organizations as children or young adults and therefore entered a militarized social-relational world—as many women do in armed conflict contexts—are socialized through the norms and values of that context. During demobilization and reintegration, they encounter a world where the military frameworks they have grown accustomed to may no longer apply or be relevant. Masculinity plays a significant role in gang formation, as gangs are partially the product of gendered socialization processes occurring in the context of violence to which young males are exposed.¹²⁷ These trajectories related to gendered socialization must be considered when designing disengagement programs.

The pattern of women’s engagement in CBAGs, like in other social movements, reflects patriarchal systems. In particular, when women are demobilized from armed groups, tension arises in attempts to return to traditional gender roles after engaging in armed group activities. Women’s post-war economic and political success after demobilizing also varies depending on their specific positions and locations during the war.¹²⁸

121 Newby and O’Malley, “Introduction: WPS 20 Years On.”

122 Interview, elder, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 25, 2021; Focus Group discussion with local government, CSO, CBO, FBO members, Kapsokwon Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

123 Moritz Schuberth, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned & Measures of Success* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.1>.

124 Nordström, *Gender and Reconciliation in the New Kenya*.

125 Orly Maya Stern and Catherine Peterson, “Assisting Women Formerly Associated with Al-Shabaab: A proposed approach to programming,” *Adam Smith International*, June 2022, 49.

126 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

127 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

128 Viterna, *Women in War*, 9–10.

Ex-armed group members, particularly women, face dangers to their safety and lack of acceptance into the community. As with violent extremist disengagement, reconciliation and restorative justice have to lower barriers to prosocial behavior in the individual and open spaces for engagement in affected communities to reduce stigma, heal trauma, and offer a feasible alternative.¹²⁹ Attitude shifts and prosocial skills can contribute to continued social, psychosocial, and political reintegration and should be prepared and presented in a gender-sensitive manner in order to reach both female and male former gang members and contribute to the equity of the process.¹³⁰

Disarmament efforts should create strategic operational guidelines that address the needs of both men and women and integrate gender equality advocates and (women's) civil society organizations to develop a common reconciliation agenda and action plan. For instance, women who had escaped armed organizations and returned to their families did not want to be associated with these groups again through engagement with civil society organizations. Disengagement programs should empower women's groups with technical skills, entrepreneurship, business management, and life skills through training sessions to address gaps in economic opportunities for women.¹³¹

Recognize women's influence in violence prevention

Women's potential influence in reducing violence is often overlooked and underutilized, not just as wives, partners, and mothers of ex-members of gangs, CBAGs, or violent extremist groups, but also as community members with their own complex relationships to violence, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. Our research found that women hold sway over the timing, ferocity, and outcome of violent raids and have the ability to prevent violence. Women, in many contexts across Kenya, were seen as custodians of cultural events and rites and thus in the position to address the culture of livestock raiding.¹³²

Women are often the most affected by conflict, and it has been proven that peace negotiations that include women are more likely to result in a final agreement that is sustainable and upholds gender provisions.¹³³ Programs seeking to address violence and insecurity therefore should consider women's diverse, complex experiences as valuable sources of knowledge and influence. As returnees or recruiters,

129 Chris Bosley, *Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation: A Peacebuilding Approach* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2020), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/07/violent-extremist-disengagement-and-reconciliation-peacebuilding-approach>.

130 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022. See also: Hollie Nyseth Brehm, *Identity, Rituals, and Narratives: Lessons from Reentry and Reintegration after Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.37805/pn2020.8.vedr>.

131 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

132 Interview with local woman leader, Isiolo, July 2021.

133 Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Kathleen Kuehnast, "The Women, Peace and Security Agenda at 20: Setbacks, Progress, and the Way Forward," *Just Security*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/73120/the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-at-20-setbacks-progress-and-the-way-forward/>.

women can help others defect and reintegrate; as first targets, they can detect recruitment; as interlocutors, they can shape policies and programming.¹³⁴

Interventions on intercommunity violence must begin at the household level and integrate women's views, perceptions, and experiences of conflict effects: loss of their children, property destruction, discrimination, inability to marry once widowed, etc.¹³⁵ This recommendation is aligned with international policy work on community violence reduction (CVR) programs and the need to integrate women as beneficiaries and targets in these programs.¹³⁶ Household-level interventions can also be effective in preventing recruitment into violent extremism.

In Kenya, there are opportunities for initiatives to work with women leaders to demobilize former conflict actors and promote community disarmament. Strong, existing cross-county social networks can be essential for regional peacebuilding interventions. "Women need to be empowered because they are the ones that can reach the youth. The youth need to learn peace from them."¹³⁷

Support women's networks to transform society and policy

The research showed that social networks are a serious pull factor to violent groups, and CBAGs' allure in fulfilling social gathering roles can attract women supporters if their support systems are lacking. Therefore, strengthening interpersonal social relationships and women's organizations can mitigate alienation, offer constructive, gender-sensitive socialization avenues, and advocate for women's empowerment and sustainable livelihoods. Kenyan women have a high level of experience in organizing around a common agenda, transcending divisions of class, qualifications, professional background, and ethnicity, which enables them to mobilize for women's leadership at various levels of politics.¹³⁸

Civic education can play an important role in women's empowerment to advocate for and protect women's rights. It is the responsibility of local leadership to sensitize the community about gender balance and equality.¹³⁹ A female elder in Bungoma concluded, "there is a need to lift them from the poverty they have existed in. Women need to be treated with dignity, and they need to know their rights."¹⁴⁰ In Bungoma, participants said they needed "more NGOs in the region to educate and help address some of the issues in the area."¹⁴¹

134 K4D, "K4D Factsheet: Gender, Countering Violent Extremism and Women, Peace and Security in Kenya" (November 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/k4d-factsheet-gender-countering-violent-extremism-and-women-peace-and-security-kenya>.

135 Interview with local peace committee member, Isiolo, July 21, 2021.

136 See UN IDDRS Module 2.30 on Community Violence Reduction available at <https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-2.30-Community-Violence-Reduction.pdf>.

137 Interview, elder, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

138 REINVENT, "Expanding Women's territory in Leadership and Nurturing the Nation."

139 Focus Group discussion with local government, CSO, CBO, FBO members, Kapsokwon Mt. Elgon, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

140 Interview, elder, Cheptais location, Bungoma, August 25, 2021.

141 Focus Group discussion, Tongaren Bungoma, August 24, 2021.

Women’s organizations, particularly those focused on violence prevention and peacebuilding, have been found to be effective in allowing women more say in conflict prevention programs.¹⁴² Women’s groups should be supported to lead in intercommunal relations, prevent violent extremism, and conduct needs assessments for at-risk individuals.¹⁴³ Civil society organizations have been the engine of the WPS agenda at the local level, and listening to their expertise is critical.¹⁴⁴ Civil society continues to play a pivotal role in pushing for reforms moving towards reconciliation, social cohesion, and empowering women in their roles in society, politics, and the economy.¹⁴⁵

In Mombasa, research participants called for interventions that develop and enhance social networks, particularly carefully designed family-based interventions and mentorship programs that point youth in the direction of alternate paths and give them access to role models who have overcome comparable challenges. Support groups and counseling with other women whose families have also been impacted by the conflict or recruited into armed groups show them that they are not alone and that they should not blame themselves.¹⁴⁶ One focus group thought that there is power in building new norms at the family level to avoid resorting to tribalism and vengeance by focusing instead on treating all community members with respect, dignity, and patience.¹⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Community-based armed groups in Kenya have proliferated in urban informal settlements, such as Nairobi and Mombasa, conflict-prone pastoral areas, such as Marsabit and Isiolo, and rural contexts, such as Bungoma, where land disputes have sustained high levels of insecurity, entrenched intercommunal tensions, and eroded trust in formal security provision. Insecurity, impunity, lack of effective policing, and political polarization remain the main factors for contributing to CBAG formation, membership, activities, and legitimacy within communities.

Women join or support CBAG activities directly or indirectly, motivated by political agendas of their group or personal economic and social interests. Common perceptions of women in conflict see them as extensions of men in their lives or as inherently peaceful and nonviolent. However, this research demonstrates the complexity of women as political actors operating in challenging contexts. As members of societies afflicted by violence or political polarization, women are not bystanders seeking only peaceful outcomes; they also can use or support the use of violence, and their actions or inactions can contribute to cycles of violence and impunity. While their contribution to and participation in peace and security mechanisms was regarded by research participants as important, both in terms of their potential and actual involvement, women’s agency and influence in these efforts remain tenuous, and in some cases, were regarded as contrary to desired social norms based on location. This underscores that women’s

142 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

143 Interview with security consultant, Isiolo, July 18, 2021; Interview with local cleric and CVE expert, Isiolo, July 19, 2021.

144 de Jonge Oudraat and Kuehnast, “The Women, Peace and Security Agenda at 20.”

145 Nordström, *Gender and Reconciliation in the New Kenya*.

146 Data analysis report from Mombasa field researcher, February 2022.

147 Focus Group Discussion with women, Bungoma Town, August 26, 2021.

presence alone, either within peaceful security structures or within CBAGs, does not necessarily reduce gender stereotypes or violence that impact women's lives, self-sufficiency, and ability to contribute to decision making structures.

Policymakers and practitioners are recommended to consider local, micro-level analysis on the diversity of gendered motivations, roles, and perceptions around women's participation in CBAGs in order to craft more efficient approaches to engaging, managing, and transforming violent groups. Addressing conflict must ultimately transform gender dynamics and promote women's socioeconomic inclusion and empowerment.

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