

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of several pieces of fabric with intricate, traditional African patterns. The patterns include geometric shapes like diamonds and zig-zags, as well as organic, flowing designs. The color palette is a range of earthy browns, from light tan to deep, dark chocolate and near-black tones. The lighting creates a sense of depth and texture, highlighting the folds and details of the fabric.

RESOLVE
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Women, CBAGs, and the Politics of Security Supply & Demand in Côte d'Ivoire

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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 Chelpi-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-ivoire/>.

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.

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 : Négociant 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 Meter,

“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

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>

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

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

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>.

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.

dozos, ex-combatants, and criminal groups. In addition to Korhogo, interviews were conducted in the towns of **Bondiali** and **Ouangologodougou** which are illegal gold panning sites where small arms circulate

- **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 Duekoue (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 Ivoirien 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," *Géoeconomie* 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” (FACI). 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 Chelpi-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 Ivoirien 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 that

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

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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