

DUTY & DEFIANCE: WOMEN IN COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS IN WEST AFRICA

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of conclusions from the RESOLVE Network's Community-Based Armed Groups Research Initiative focusing on women's roles in conflict and security and their participation in armed groups. This fact sheet explores how West African community-based armed groups (CBAGs) facilitate women's engagement with politics, create avenues for female expressions of anger, commitment to community values and national identity, and enable women to push for change in their communities by opening spaces for female participation. Assessing the formal and informal contributions women make to armed community mobilization and hybrid security reveals opportunities for gender-specific engagement and cautions that unidimensional considerations of where and how women intersect with conflict and security have the potential to undermine violence reduction and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. Armed groups offer women opportunities to advance community welfare, exercise political power, and transcend tier proscribed roles. To learn more about the research methodology and findings, please refer to this fact sheet's companion RESOLVE Research Report by Jakana Thomas: [*Duty and Defiance: Women in Community-based Armed Groups in West Africa*](#).

EXISTING LITERATURE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CBAGS

- Women are often motivated to participate in community-based security organizations for many of the same reasons that women join rebel organizations. Personal motivations often intersect with practical and political incentives to determine the supply of women to CBAGs. Women in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Sierra Leone joined community-based organizations to ensure their own protection as well as that of their communities. For some women, revenge and retribution were as potent a driver as politics.
- Community-based vigilante and paramilitary groups recruit women to fill manpower shortages, to score unique tactical advantages, and when women's participation is largely compatible with community norms.
- For example, Malian, Nigerian, and Ivorian women were present when their communities were forced to mobilize for security provision. West African women have made clear contributions to CBAGs; yet the form and frequency of their participation have varied significantly across communities, cultures, and regions.
- In Mali, women have most frequently participated as informants; they helped pass on information to rebels and have secured their communities by outing suspected criminals to militia members. Women have also acted as suppliers of material goods and economic services and have supported the conflict by marrying fighters.

WHEN DO WOMEN PARTICIPATE?

Supply-side Explanations

- The pursuit of gender equity and obtaining a sense of responsibility for one's community or duty to one's homeland has motivated many men and women to join CBAGs.
- Women are often motivated by a desire to avenge loss and protect oneself from future violence.
- The path to formal CBAGs membership is harder for some women, namely those from Northern Mali communities, given the immutability of women's roles and the strength of gender hierarchies.

Demand-side Explanations

- Malleable local gender norms allow women to formally participate in security matters, while more rigid traditions can limit women's roles in public life, politics, and security. Where local traditions already make space for women's participation, CBAGs are more apt to recruit women.
- Groups open their membership to women when strategic, tactical, or material concerns arise, which cultivates gender diversity within CBAGs. However, the reluctant inclusion of women has consequences for demobilization and reintegration, with the potential for long-term transformation of women's roles and advancement of their interests.

COST AND CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CBAGS

- Women's participation in CBAGs appears to have failed in producing large-scale, sweeping changes for women. While some women have realized their individual goals for liberation, this outcome can not be generalized to the broader female population.
- The leadership of armed groups are apt to devalue women's participation within CBAGs. There is an impulse to label women's work within security organizations as supportive or informal, even if the tasks are identical to male members. These labels diminish the importance of women's work to CBAGs.

MOVING FORWARD



No. 01 –

Future research should attempt to better understand the differential impact of women's participation and how it relates to the ways in which they interact with CBAGs. When one considers that several of the primary drivers of female participation are practical and personal (e.g., protection, revenge, material) and not necessarily aimed at broader social change, it raises the question of whether significant revisions to the status quo should be expected.



No. 02 –

While the report uncovered many similarities between rebel groups and CBAGs in terms of supply and demand for women participants, these different types of armed movements are notably dissimilar when it comes to their aims and interests. These deviations are nontrivial, as they likely influence a group's orientation toward broad social change.



No. 03 –

CBAGs offer women important opportunities for political engagement and can facilitate community building and cohesion. Some CBAGs also work hard to establish peace with women at the forefront. However, in their quest to "secure" their communities, some CBAGs also work extrajudicially, to mete out gross abuses on civilians and exacerbate tensions with other non-state actors. Interpreting their impact requires nuance and a recognition that CBAGs, like women, are heterogeneous.



No. 04–

Future research should focus not on how to rid states of all CBAGs entirely but how to manage them at the conclusion of these conflicts. Since West African women have played important roles as moral arbiters and peacemakers in many conflicts, one must ask what role women could play in helping to mitigate CBAG violence. Preliminary evidence suggests their participation can constrain violent actors. However, this should only be expected when participating women have the will to do so.



No. 05–

Scholars should attempt to uncover when and why women make the choice to advocate for peace over violence. In this vein, peace and conflict can be viewed as instruments; when it is considered necessary to achieve a desired outcome, women are likely to promote violence. When conflict has reached its productive limits, women may pursue peace with equal fervor. Identifying when one strategy is viewed as superior to the other is crucial.

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RESOLVE is housed at the U.S. Institute of Peace, building upon the Institute's decade-long legacy of deep engagement in conflict affected communities



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