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Agitators and Pacifiers:

Women in Community-
based Armed Groups
in Kenya

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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” *Kenyans.co.ke*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/56555-ales-kenyas-notorious-bold-beautiful-gangsters>.
 - 5 Mohamed Ahmed, “All-female criminal gang unleashes terror on coastal residents,” *Nairobi News*, May 6, 2018, <https://nairobinews.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 surveille 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, eth-

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).

nicity, religion, class, age, and gender—on the general experiences of individuals both in the community 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.

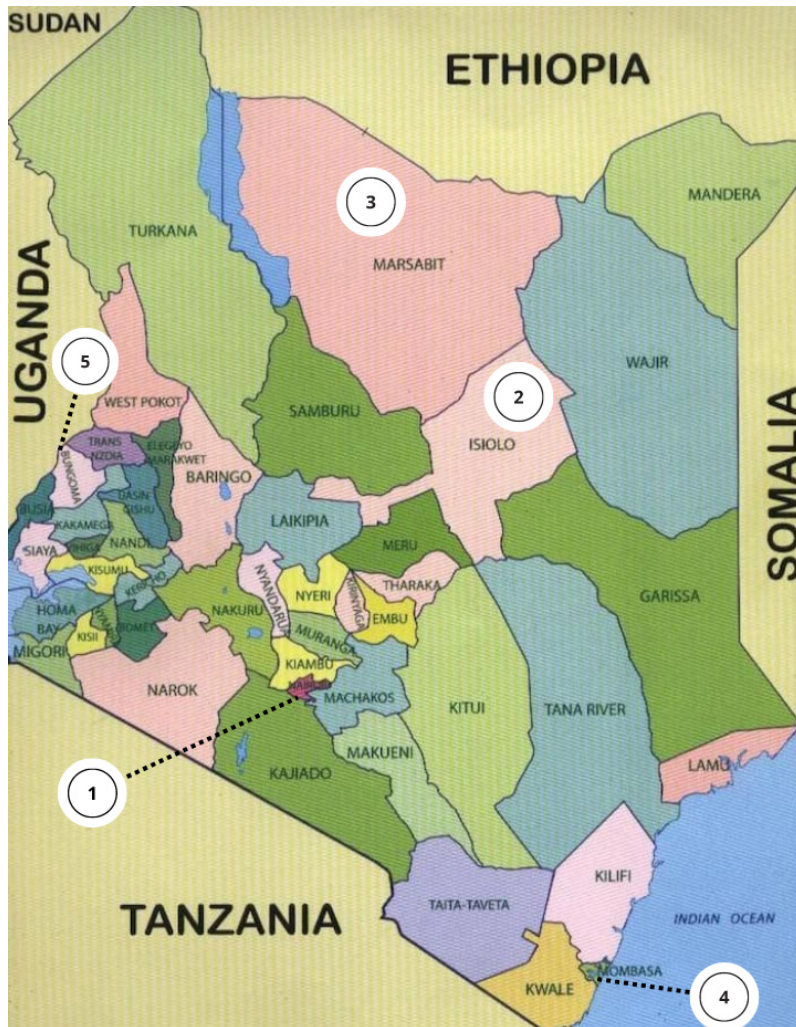
The report shines a light on the reality of women’s political agency and capacity for both violence and peacebuilding. What factors motivate women to engage with or participate in CBAGs? What roles do women fulfill both within and adjacent to CBAGs? How do their communities perceive their involvement? 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 VEOs, 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 & 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 & 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

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 & 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,

indeed able 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 secret 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

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).

narratives like revenge than men are: “the primary motivations for both men and women comes from 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 & 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 instable 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

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>.

to pursue income, build a stable home, and break out of violent environments, which, in turn, can help 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 Adelola, 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 & 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, 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 & 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

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.

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 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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