

The background of the page features a network diagram with several nodes (small circles) connected by thin lines, creating a web-like structure. The nodes are arranged in a way that suggests interconnectedness and communication. The lines are a light brown color, and the nodes are a slightly darker shade of brown. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on the network theme.

RESOLVE

NETWORK

Duty and Defiance

Women in Community Based Armed Groups in West Africa

Dr. Jakana Thomas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This desk report explores how West African community-based armed groups (CBAGs)¹ 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. According to Agbiboa, CBAGs include security-oriented organizations such as hunter associations, vigilante groups, militias and gangs that *protect* communities from “petty crimes to insurgencies.”² 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.

In some CBAGs, such as Mali's Ganda Koy, women are among the formal leadership of community security organizations. In other contexts, such as in Northern Mali's Tuareg community, women are largely absent from active security roles. Women are also found in gray areas, where it is hard to assess whether their activities are formal or informal, or active or supportive. Given the ambiguity of female roles within such organizations, it is often difficult to evaluate the significance of women's activities in and to CBAGs. Indeed, women often articulate their roles as more instrumental to security provision than organization or community leaders do. This is not to suggest that women overestimate their accomplishments; instead in communities where men are typically assigned political agency while women are agents only in the domestic sphere, communities are more apt to rely on women's contributions without giving them due credit. This dynamic persists because women's participation is often offered and accepted out of necessity. Due to the ephemeral nature of these security arrangements, communities often have little interest in allowing the immediate security circumstances to upend enduring social structures, particularly gender hierarchies. Thus, CBAGs are often willing to accept women's help in a *marriage of convenience*, as long as it does not lead to long-term changes in traditional roles. This suggests a disjuncture between organizations' and women's interests, as many women who risk their lives to further community security do so for their own emancipation and for that of their nation.

Although many women hope to gain from their participation in CBAGs, most engage in community security provision for pragmatic reasons; both women and men find it important to seek out collective security arrangements when they perceive no other options. Likewise, community-based armed groups are most likely to assent to the incorporation of women when they recognize a strategic benefit to female participation. CBAGs are most likely to recruit women when they are needed as specialized labor or to fill manpower shortfalls. Women's participation in CBAGs can be beneficial to women as well. Armed groups

1 Launched in partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development Africa Bureau, the RESOLVE Network Community-Based Armed Groups research initiative in Sub-Saharan Africa aims to provide key stakeholders with contextual information on the dynamics of community-based armed groups (CBAGs) and current, prospective, and past approaches to engage, manage, and transform them. The project grapples with a complicated series of questions and decisions negotiated by stakeholders operating in conflict-affected societies across Sub-Saharan Africa.

2 Daniel Agbiboa, *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>.

offer women opportunities to advance community welfare, exercise political power and transcend their proscribed domestic roles. These benefits should not be taken as given, however. Since women’s roles in CBAGs are often dictated by local gender hierarchies,³ the prospects for meaningful gender empowerment owing from women’s participation in CBAGs during conflict is uncertain and the potential for long-term change appears to be minimal. Relatedly, this report cautions that women’s participation does not always improve the prospects for peace, nor reduce the prevalence of gender-based violence and related human rights abuses. Thus, a strategy of “add women and mix” may be ill-advised. Instead, solutions that acknowledge local gender hierarchies, recognize the diversity of women’s motives and orientations toward peace and conflict, and address root causes of male and female participation in CBAGs may contribute more to successful peacebuilding efforts.

Finally, it is important to recognize that while some CBAGs fulfill vital security and political roles in their communities, they may also undermine peace and security by exacerbating and perpetrating violence, which often inordinately affects women. Moreover, a subset of the community-based armed groups that women support openly work to subjugate and actively undermine women’s interests. Thus, any benefits women gain from participation in these groups must be weighed against the potential negative externalities these groups produce. Ultimately, there exists important heterogeneity in CBAGs that should not be overlooked when crafting policy and programmatic responses; these groups are not all helpful or harmful. They should not all be accommodated nor should they all be disbanded. Further study of these groups is necessary to parse their positive attributes from their destructive potential in order to determine whether women’s participation in CBAGs constitutes a net positive.

INTRODUCTION

Women often work toward the provision of community security during war through formal and informal membership in self-defense, paramilitary and vigilante organizations. Women fought as paramilitaries in the recent conflicts in both Ukraine and Syria. Some Ukrainian women joined the 39th Women’s Maidan, Aidar, and Azov battalions and were propelled by personal circumstances, while others saw their participation in self-defense units as an expression of their nationalist ideology or duty to protect their homeland.⁴ On the other hand, women in the Syrian Kurdish forces, particularly the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), mobilized against ISIS to protect women’s rights and advance the organization’s leftist, egalitarian vision of society.⁵ Colombian women also made up approximately 10 percent of the forces of the repressive United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).⁶

3 See Hilary Matfess, *Brokers of Legitimacy: Women in Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington DC: RESOLVE Network, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2020.1>.

4 Jessica Trisko-Darden, Alexis Henshaw, and Ora Szekely, *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 19–20.

5 Trisko-Darden et al, *Insurgent Women*, 2019.

6 Andrea Méndez, “Militarized Gender Performativity: Women and Demobilization in Colombia’s FARC and AUC” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2012).

African women have participated similarly in formal community security organizations across conflict zones, civil wars, and hyperlocal territorial disputes. Women were active in the Civil Defense Forces and, to a lesser extent, the Kamajor militia during the civil war in Sierra Leone, the pro-Gbago militias in Côte d'Ivoire and many vigilante and self-defense forces across time and space in Nigeria. This desk report, which focuses particularly on women's relationships to community-based armed groups (CBAGs) in West Africa, uses existing narratives and depictions in the literature to better understand women's work within these groups. This report draws heavily on evidence from Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria to show that women often work toward the provision of an important public good within their communities—security—often with little acknowledgement.

In this report, CBAGs are defined as non-state armed groups that are either aligned with or complementary to the state and are marked both by their local ambitions and ties to communities.⁷ According to Agbibo, CBAGs include security-oriented organizations such as hunter associations, vigilante groups, militias, and gangs that *protect* communities from “petty crimes to insurgencies.”⁸ While this report focuses mainly on CBAGs that mobilize against rebel or terrorist organizations, it also speaks to the ways in which these same groups function to fight local crime. Invariably, CBAGs emerge in contexts of pervasive insecurity, principally as a result of weak state institutions, and are particularly encouraged by insufficient, inept, malevolent, or absent state security forces.⁹

CBAGs are not always in competition with the state, however. They sometimes collaborate with the government to enhance local security.¹⁰ In Nigeria, for example, both the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and Islamic Hisba cooperate with counterinsurgency forces, as do self-defense militias in Mali.¹¹ In each of these cases, state security forces recognized that CBAGs' embeddedness in local communities offered them a distinct advantage over forces from the “outside.” These cases present the opportunity to assess whether and how women's participation plays a significant role in the “success” of CBAG efforts.

To date, few studies have examined women's participation in African community-based security organizations explicitly. Although this oversight is surprising, the intense scholarly interest in women's participation in rebellion suggests that there is a fertile research agenda to be implemented. While the explosion of research on female engagement with violent extremist organizations has been aided by advances in both theory and data, the study of gendered participation in CBAGs has been hampered by a dearth of data and a lack of theoretical inquiry. This report seeks to address at least one of these shortcomings and map a way forward for research on the gender dimensions of CBAGs.

7 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 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>.

9 Agbibo, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 6.

10 Ibid.

11 Hisba is a structure responsible for enforcing Sharia law within Islamic communities in northern Nigeria.

This report makes three primary contributions. The initial objective of this report is to review the current state of literature on women’s participation in community security and propose a set of research questions that have yet to garner scholarly attention. Second, existing scholarly accounts of recruitment into CBAGs in four West African countries—Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Mali—are examined to generate preliminary explanations of women’s integration into community armed groups. This is not an exhaustive or geographically representative set of cases. Instead, this report focuses on several prominent cases where CBAGs have been operative to examine the formal and informal roles that women have played within these movements.

This study utilizes a process-tracing approach, which relies on the description and sequencing of events, to make inferences about the causal process by which women come to participate in CBAGs. An inductive exercise suggests a number of salient explanations that can prime the further study of gender in these groups. Future researchers may use cross-national, time-series data to examine the generalizability of the relationships proposed in this report. Third, in recognition that academic research may lag behind practice, this study proposes a set of preliminary policy recommendations, informed by the selected cases, for practitioners hoping to better understand how gender dynamics affect the behavior of West African CBAGs.

Given the lack of scholarly attention to women’s contributions toward the security of their communities, a number of questions about the scope and form of female participation in formal community-based armed groups remain. For example, we still do not know how frequently women join these organizations, the motives for their participation, or the impact their involvement has on communities. Moreover, a casual glance at contemporary CBAGs within West Africa shows that women’s involvement varies across groups and geographic regions, even within a single country. What explains such variation? Finally, how does women’s participation in CBAGs differ from or accord with their activities in dissident organizations? These questions should be examined in future research.

EXISTING LITERATURE ON WOMEN’S FORMAL PARTICIPATION IN VIOLENT POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

Existing research on women in violent political organizations (VPOs) provides a useful starting point for understanding the decisions that underlie women’s recruitment into CBAGs given the shared emphasis on the use of violence as the primary means to achieve a group’s political aims; the use of violence is likely to provide similar incentives and disincentives for the enlistment of women across types of violent political organizations. This body of literature has coalesced around two main classes of explanations for women’s formal membership in violent non-state groups: women’s recruitment is a function of supply and demand. Supply-side factors explain why women are attracted to violent politics, while demand-side explanations describe an organization’s (dis)incentives for recruiting women within their ranks. Supply-side arguments assert that women join violent organizations for personal, political, and strategic reasons. Women become attracted to violent politics as a means to pursue revenge, redemption, and

retribution;¹² to advance gender equality and other political goals;¹³ for protection;¹⁴ and because they are pulled into rebellion by pre-existing network connections.¹⁵

Interestingly, with few exceptions, women's motivations, especially those centered on practical concerns like protection and other material benefits, and those focused on political affinities and vengeance largely mirror the push factors for male combatants.¹⁶ That is, supply-side explanations describe why an individual is attracted to a particular organization, movement or cause, but cannot necessarily explain if or when they become members or the roles they adopt within those groups if they do.¹⁷ Moreover, since men and women share largely similar motivations, supply-side explanations alone are insufficient for explaining the tendency for men to participate in violence more frequently than women. Therefore, to better understand why women may not participate in political violence despite strong motivations to do so, scholars have looked to group decision-making or demand-side explanations.

Demand-side explanations, which attempt to explain when, why, and how organizations create space for female recruits, largely discuss gendered recruitment in terms of either the expected costs or benefits of women's inclusion. Violent political organizations are more amenable to women's recruitment when discord is unlikely to result from decisions to diversify. Groups with ideologies that incorporate gender egalitarian ideals, such as leftist organizations¹⁸ and those with positive gender ideologies¹⁹ will find the recruitment of women attractive and less costly. Such groups will also yield a greater number of voluntary female recruits. Similarly, organizations that are convinced of—or affirm rhetorically—women's capabilities will find female recruits more appealing.²⁰

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- 12 Miranda Alison, "Cogs in the wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Civil Wars* 6, no. 4 (2003): 37–54; Yoram Schweitzer, "Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality Vs. Myth" no. 84 Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2006; Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-national Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 13 Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Ohio University Press, 2014); Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Microprocesses of Mobilization in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Karla J. Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 3 (2003): 171–195; Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 227–54.
- 14 Dara Kay Cohen, "Dueling Incentives: Sexual Violence in Liberia and the Politics of Human Rights Advocacy," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 3 (2012): 445–458; Irma Specht, *Red Shoes: Experiences of Girls-Combatants in Liberia* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2006); Miranda, *Women and Political Violence*, 2009.
- 15 Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch, "'Like Going To A Fiesta'—The Role of Female Fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (2008): 609–634; Viterna *Women in War*, 2013; Chris Coulter, "Female Fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the Assumptions?" *Feminist Review* 88 (2008): 54–73.
- 16 Elisabeth Jean Wood, "The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 539–661; Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007); Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009).
- 17 Jakana L. Thomas and Kanisha D. Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015): 3488–506.
- 18 Reed M. Wood and Jakana L. Thomas, "Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participation in Violent Rebellion," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 1 (2017): 31–46; Reed M. Wood, *Female Fighters: Why Rebel Groups Recruit Women for War* (Columbia University Press, 2019); Alexis Leanna Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel: Understanding Women's Participation in Armed Rebel Groups* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).
- 19 Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations," 2015.
- 20 Jakana L. Thomas and Reed M. Wood, "The Social Origins of Female Combatants," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35, no. 3 (2018): 215–232.

Women's recruitment is also a function of a group's strategic and tactical decision-making.²¹ Organizations that face manpower shortages or other resource constraints will be more inclined to incorporate women.²² Organizations that rely on coercive recruitment will be more likely to draft any able bodies, including women's.²³ Groups that rely on stealth are also likelier to open membership to women to capitalize on gender stereotypes that women are more pacific, harmless, and innocent in an effort to exploit their targets.²⁴ Militants concerned about their images are expected to diversify their ranks as well, given the legitimacy boost expected from women's participation.²⁵ Additionally, groups may rely on female recruits to encourage men to take up violence and shame those who choose not to.²⁶ Finally, women's participation may be most likely when supply and demand factors intersect. Women are most attracted to organizations that offer women-specific benefits (e.g. gender equality, political power, skills) as well as autonomy and clear channels for female influence, while groups already providing women-specific benefits find it easier to embrace gender diversity in their ranks.²⁷

This literature provides a useful framework for understanding women's membership in violent rebellion. However, most of this work draws inferences from data on rebel and terrorist organizations.²⁸ The exclusive focus on groups engaged in contention with the state and the lack of systematic research on other non-state armed groups has led scholars to generalize these findings to all armed groups. Thomas and Bond, an exception, examine women's participation in a sample of African violent political organizations which includes community-based self-defense organizations.²⁹ However, even this study does not examine whether women's participation differs across groups organized for and against the state. This may be an important oversight, however, as women's motivations for engaging in anti-state contention may not correspond to those mobilized to maintain the status quo. For example, research argues that women who intend to maintain the status quo are often less attracted to rebel and terrorist organizations, which tend

21 Pheobe Donnelly, "The Interactive Relationship between Gender and Strategy," *Global Society* 32, no. 4 (2018): 457–476.

22 Wood, *Female Fighters*, 2019; Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, "Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers" Combating Terrorism Center, 2017.

23 Dara Kay Cohen and Amelia Hoover Green, "Sexual Violence in Liberia and the Politics of Human Rights Advocacy," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 3 (2012): 445–458.; Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations"; Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel*; Wood and Thomas, "Women on the Frontline"; Thomas and Wood, "The Social Origins of Female Combatants."

24 Lindsey A. O'Rourke, "What's Special About Female Suicide Terrorism?" *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 681–71; Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism"; Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations"; Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel*; Wood, *Female Fighters*.

25 Elise Barth, "Peace as Disappointment: The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-conflict Societies: A Comparative Study from Africa," International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, August 2002; Judith Steim "The Effect of Myths about Military Women on the Waging of War" in *Women and the Military System*, ed. Eva Isaksson (New York: St. Martin's, 1988); Devorah Manekin and Reed M. Wood, "Framing the Narrative: Female Fighters, External Audience Attitudes, and Transnational Support for Armed Rebellions," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, forthcoming, 2020.

26 Linda Grant De Pauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Alisa Stack, "Zombies versus Black Widows: Women as Propaganda in The Chechen Conflict" in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, eds. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Barth 2002.

27 Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution*; Shelli Israelsen, "Women in Charge: The Effect of Rebel Governance and Women's Organizations on Karen Women's Political Participation," *Civil Wars* 20, no. 3 (2018): 379–407.

28 See, for example, Wood and Thomas, "Women on the Frontline"; Thomas and Wood, "The Social Origins of Female Combatants"; and Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel*.

29 Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations."

to be subversive. Status quo-oriented women, however, may be more attracted to CBAGs that work to reinforce existing political structures and policies that sustain communities. Relatedly, although women are less likely to participate in religious rebel organizations,³⁰ religion and religious motivations may push women into CBAGs. As a result, understanding the similarities and differences between recruitment to CBAGs and subversive VPOs is consequential.

While there are likely key differences between rebel organizations and community-based armed groups, some of the motivators of women's participation are likely to be consistent across different types of armed groups, especially when considering supply-side explanations. For example, women are likely to seek protection from violence, whether that violence is used by groups armed to support or oppose the government. Revenge and retribution motivations may also explain women's desire to participate in violence against predatory rebels and states alike. On the demand-side, organizations with manpower shortages and those that generally have non-discriminatory recruitment policies are likely to draft women. Therefore, forced recruitment should explain women's participation across armed group types. Also, if CBAGs prioritize covert action, they may find the use of women to be helpful. This report examines the validity of some of these demand-side explanations for understanding patterns of female participation in CBAGs.

Focusing on the aforementioned cases in West Africa yields a number of novel insights. First, this report demonstrates that 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. Second, demand-side explanations are largely consistent with those uncovered in research on violent political organizations. In particular, 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. Where women's involvement in security provision and politics is incompatible with a community's ideology, female participation is likely to be less formal.³¹

The subsequent sections discuss women's participation in CBAGs from both supply- and demand-perspectives and offer insights on a few of the unique ways women have gendered community-based armed organizations. Finally, this report examines implications for policy and practice at the nexus of security and development and offer recommendations.

30 Women do participate in some religious organizations, but are more likely to gain membership in secular organizations. Wood and Thomas, "Women on the Frontline."

31 Dyan Mazurana, "Women, Girls and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups," in *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, ed. Carol Cohn (Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 164.

EXISTING ACCOUNTS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN WEST AFRICAN CBAGS

Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali have seen significant CBAG activity in recent years. In Mali, militias like the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GAITA) and the Ganda Koy, which have operated for decades, have become increasingly important since the crisis in Northern Mali flared up in 2011.³² The rise in Mali's self-defense militias has resulted from the lack of protection and security afforded by the Malian government.³³ Similarly, Nigerian vigilantes have long been filling the gaps left by weak policing and a decline in government services, particularly in rural areas.³⁴ These militias have been raised by communities left defenseless by absent, corrupt, or politicized security forces that have "failed to protect Nigeria's territorial integrity."³⁵ Nigerian civilians have mobilized for protection against militants and counterinsurgency forces alike.³⁶ Invariably, community defense in northeast Nigeria has been shaped by a lack of trust in the state.³⁷

The Yoruba Oodua People's Congress (OPC), an ethno-nationalist group, which emerged as a pro-democracy protest movement in Nigeria in the 1990's, transitioned into militia activity as a response to the rising corruption and repression of the security forces and burgeoning crime in Yorubaland. The Islamic Hisba, an informal security structure formed in northern Nigeria in the late 1990s, began as a community-based vigilante organization but has become more institutionalized in some Nigeria states, namely Zamfara and Kano in the northwest.³⁸ The need for such an informal policing body emerged as a reaction to the perceived ineptitude of the local state authorities in enforcing moral codes as dictated by Islamic law; hisba justice has been perceived as impartial and less corrupt than that provided by the state police.³⁹ The Pan-African Congress of Young Patriots (Young Patriots) was founded in 2001 to support Côte d'Ivoire's President Laurent Gbagbo due to the weakness of his armed forces and pervasive threats to his leadership.

In the absence of strong central institutions that exert power and provide security, communities have been forced to rely on localized security solutions, which has increased the number of armed actors and

32 Helené Lackenbauer, Helené, Magdalena Tham Lindell, and Gabriella Ingerstad, "If Our Men Won't Fight, We Will: A Gendered Analysis of the Armed Conflict in Northern Mali," FOI-R, November 2015.

33 Lackenbauer et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight"; Marc-André Boisvert, "Failing at Violence: the Longer-lasting Impact of Pro-government Militias in Northern Mali Since 2012," *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 272–298.

34 Georgia Holmer, "Nigeria's Double-Edged Front Line," *Foreign Policy*, December 2014; "Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram," International Crisis Group, no. 244, February 2017.

35 Mustapha Muhammad and Chris Kay, "Vigilantes Fight Battle for Nigeria Against Boko Haram," *The Leader-Post*, December 18, 2014.

36 "Watchmen of Lake Chad," International Crisis Group; Alexis Okeowo, "The Women Fighting Boko Haram," *The New Yorker*, December 22, 2015.

37 Oluwaseun Bamidele, "Civilian Joint Task Force'(CJTF)—A Community Security Option: A Comprehensive and Proactive Approach of Reducing Terrorism," *Journal for Deradicalization* 7 (2016): 124–144.

38 Fatima L. Adamu, "Gender, Hisba and the Enforcement of Morality in Northern Nigeria," *Africa* 78, no. 1 (2008): 136–152.

39 Adamu 2008; Ernest Ogbozor, "Understanding the Informal Security Sector in Nigeria," Special Report 391. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2016.

fanned the flames of conflict in Mali, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire. Yet despite these negative externalities, state forces have recognized the value of civilian defense. Mali has become reliant on local militias to repel the separatist Tuareg (MNLA) and Islamist rebel groups (e.g., Ansar Dine, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)) operating with impunity in Mali, while Borno State's CJTF has been deemed essential in the Nigerian government's counterterrorism efforts against Boko Haram. In both cases, the CBAGs were able to leverage their connections with local communities to provide superior security, which has been largely tolerated and sometimes exploited by the state. This suggests negotiated relationships with both states, according to Van Metre's typology.⁴⁰ The OPC, on the other hand, provides a variety of local governance functions, including combating crime, taking on criminalized state institutions, and resolving local disputes.⁴¹ Though noted for its challenges to and contention with the Nigerian state and local security forces, the OPC has also engaged in national politics, which has, in some ways, legitimized the state.⁴² Thus, the OPC can be considered a CBAG with both a coerced and negotiated relationship with the Nigerian state consistent with Van Metre's typology.

HOW HAVE WOMEN PARTICIPATED IN CBAGS?

When their communities were forced to mobilize for security provision, Malian, Nigerian, and Ivoirian women were present. West African women have made clear contributions to CBAGs; yet, the form and frequency of their participation has varied significantly across communities, cultures, and regions. Across West Africa, women have taken on formal and informal roles in CBAGs with the intention of both waging war and sowing peace. They have been inducted as formal members in some CBAGs, while attaining status as only supporters or associates in others. In the Malian conflict, 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.⁴³ Women have also acted as suppliers of material goods and economic services and have supported the conflict by marrying fighters.⁴⁴ Women from across the country have participated formally as well. Women in the center of Mali were most likely to hold formal membership in militias and violent dissident movements, while Northern women were least likely to do so.⁴⁵

40 See Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism*.

41 Insa Nolte, "'Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed': Yoruba Women in the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Nigeria," *Africa* 78, no. 1 (2008):84–106.

42 Nolte, "'Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed.'"

43 Zoe Gorman and Grégory Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand': A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali," *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security*, 2019/6.

44 While some Malian women were forced into these relationships with combatants, others were consensual (Gorman and Chauzal 2019). Likewise, in Nigeria, betrothed women were often forced into marriage by Boko Haram, although in some cases families opted to give their daughters to be married in exchange for generous dowries. Some girls choose to marry fighters themselves for financial gain.

45 Gorman and Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand.'"

Women's participation in the Ganda Koy militia in Northern Mali, for example, was significant, even if infrequent.⁴⁶ Some women gained military training which enabled them to serve in combat, while others were among the militia's leadership, which afforded them the means to transcend their domestic roles.⁴⁷ Despite any equality of opportunity, however, women were still expected to do much of the support work for the militia, including cooking and cleaning.⁴⁸ Malian women also served in the self-defense oriented Patriotic Resistance Forces (FPR), a coalition of half a dozen militias including the Front for the Liberation of the Northern Regions (FLN), which formed in 2012 to combat the armed insurgents in the north.⁴⁹ FLN's female recruits receive military training and are expected to engage in combat against the insurgents terrorizing the north. While Tuareg women also contributed to security provision in Northern Mali, they did so in different ways. Women figured prominently in the propaganda of Tuareg rebel organizations, which suggests they may have participated as combatants in those groups.⁵⁰ They also offered logistical support to rebels, largely in the form of information gathering.⁵¹ It appears, however, they were generally less active in self-defense militias, at least as formal members.

Nigerian women have also participated in a number of community-based armed groups across multiple conflicts and time-periods. Anioma women volunteered for the Biafran civil defense militia in the late 1960's to help maintain local security during the Nigerian-Biafran War and were generally viewed as indispensable to the war effort.⁵² According to Amadiume, "women formed a strong core of the militia" but also ensured that the entire nation was fed and that the Biafran economy remained solvent.⁵³ Thus, while women held formal membership within the militia, their support work was equally vital. Nigerian women have also been active in the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and Islamic Hisba. Women have been among the founding members and leaders of the OPC; they are believed to constitute up to 20 percent of the organization's 3 million members.⁵⁴ Though female OPC members are typically discouraged from active participation in violent vigilante activities,⁵⁵ they still play a prominent role in the organization's

46 Andrew Hernandez, "The Ganda Koy Militia: Ethnicity, Politics and Mobilisation in Northern Mali," *Identités sahéliennes en temps de crise: Histoires, enjeux et perspectives* eds. Baz Lecoq and Amy Niang, LIT Verlag Münster, 2019.

47 Lackenbauer et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight, We Will," 46; Hernandez, "The Ganda Koy Militia."

48 Starkey, "Women are Bent on Revenge Against Tuareg Rebels in Mali."

49 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Mali: The Front for the Liberation of the Northern Regions (Front de libération des régions du Nord, FLN) [also called Forces for the Liberation of the Northern Regions (Forces de libération des régions du Nord), Front for the Liberation of the North (Front de libération du Nord) and National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale)], including activities; links to the Songhai; treatment of group members and of people of Songhai origin by the state (2014-July 2016), 5 July 2016, MLI105562. FE, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/598c71074.html>, accessed 14 April 2020.

50 Lackenbauer et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight."

51 Gorman and Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand'"; Lackenbauer et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight."

52 Ifi Amadiume, "Women's Political History," *West Africa 1839–1838* (1984) 10; Egodi Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey, "Militarism, Conflict and Women's Activism in the Global Era: Challenges and Prospects for Women in Three West African Contexts.," *Feminist Review* 101, no. 1 (2012): 97–123; Judith Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War? Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6, no. 1 (1975): 11–39. Jane Bryce, "What is the Country? Reimagining National Space in Women's Writing on the Biafran War" in *Writing the Nigeria-Biafra War*, eds., Toyin Falola and Ogechukwu Ezekwem, Boydell and Brewer, 2016.

53 Amadiume, "Women's Political History"; Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?"

54 Nolte, "'Without Women, Nothin Can Succeed'"; Guichaou (2010) suggests that only around 10 percent of the organization is made up of women.

55 Nolte, "'Without Women'"; Guichaoua 2010.

security functions.⁵⁶ In hisba, women's roles have been largely confined to the enforcement of morality within Muslim communities.

In recent years, scores of Nigerian women have also joined CBAGs to combat Boko Haram's insurgency in northeast Nigeria. In 2017, more than one hundred female militia members were registered in the CJTF, though many more women are believed to maintain informal ties with the group.⁵⁷ Other estimates suggest that the CJTF may have double that number of women among its ranks.⁵⁸ Women serve in both support and active military capacities. In addition to their combat participation, women have been employed to guard camps for internally displaced persons (IDP) and have been used frequently to frisk female suspects at checkpoints. This latter role is particularly important in light of the large number of women used by Boko Haram as suicide bombers. Women have also engaged in formal intelligence gathering and worked unofficially as informants.⁵⁹ Kungiyar marhaba, a longstanding multiethnic, mixed-gender militia in Nigeria's Borno State, also counts women among its ranks. Kungiyar marhaba has for generations been charged with securing food for community consumption as well as protecting traditional political leaders and borders from outside incursions. In this group, female militia members are assigned similar duties as men, including those related to hunting and community defense.

Finally, women have participated in both the Ivorian pro-government militias (i.e., Young Patriots)⁶⁰ and rebel organizations (i.e., the army of the New Forces (FAFN)),⁶¹ though significantly less is known about their participation in Côte d'Ivoire's CBAGs. Existing studies have been clear, however, that Ivorian women's contributions to both conflict and security have been important.

WHEN DO WOMEN PARTICIPATE IN CBAGS?

It is evident that women were formal and informal participants in many Nigerian, Malian, and Ivorian CBAGs, but what explains the degree and form of their involvement? Overall, variation in women's participation across CBAGs appears to have been motivated by several salient supply- and demand-side factors. On the supply side, desires for protection, retribution, gender parity, and the attempt to defend one's homeland are particularly important explanations. On the demand-side, strategic concerns as well as gender norms and participatory institutions at the community and group levels help explain women's presence and roles in CBAGs. Each of these explanations are discussed in turn.

56 Nolte, "Without Women."

57 "Watchmen of Lake Chad," International Crisis Group; Orji Sunday, "The Brave Women Fighting Boko Haram in Nigeria," *Al Jazeera*, July 10, 2019.

58 Sally Hayden, "Nigeria's self-styled Warriors: Meet the Vigilante Army Taking on the World's Deadliest Terror Group," *Vice News*, April 28, 2016; "Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency," International Crisis Group, no. 242, December 2016.

59 "Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency," International Crisis Group; Warner and Matfess 2017.

60 Ofeibe Quist-Arcton, "Ivory Coast's 'Young Patriots' Volunteer To Fight," NPR, 2011.

61 Kamina Diallo, "When Women Take Part in the Rebellion: The Ex-Fighters from Ivory Coast," 2017.

Supply-side explanations

Consistent with existing cross-national research on women's participation in violent political organizations, female militia members appear to be motivated by similar factors as their male comrades, even though they do not always do the same work or face the same barriers to participating.⁶² Few uniquely female reasons for seeking membership in CBAGs are apparent, with the pursuit of gender equity as one notable exception. For instance, a sense of responsibility for one's community or duty to one's homeland has motivated many men and women to join CBAGs. In Côte d'Ivoire, men and women joined both rebel organizations and pro-government militia organizations in a bid to defend their homeland.⁶³ One pro-Gbagbo recruit, Jo Nicole rationalized her participation in the Young Patriots militia by arguing that "Our country has been attacked by rebels and terrorists. We need to free this country. I'm not afraid. I'm going to carry a Kalashnikov and liberate my country." This outlook is consistent with the rallying cry ("let's free our country") of the Young Patriots who vowed to "die for their motherland."⁶⁴ Female (and male) rebels in the Forces Nouvelles (New Forces) have similarly invoked ideals of nationalism and claimed to be acting in defense of their country.⁶⁵ This is unsurprising given that the current running through the Ivorian crises since the 1990's has been issues of citizenship and national identity, often referred to as Ivoirité; politicians and their supporters on both sides of the conflicts have claimed to be fighting for the nation.

Malian women also joined militias out of a sense of duty. Aminata, a member of Mali's Ganda Koy militia asserted that she was compelled to join the group after witnessing the treatment of her people and the army's unwillingness to do anything about it.⁶⁶ Another recruit, Mariam, offered the following explanation for her presence in the Ganda Koy: "My family is from the north. It was my duty to join. Here, I am not a woman. I am a man. There is no woman here."⁶⁷ Her claims suggest that responsibility for one's country may be gender-blind. Another potential female recruit asserted she was "ready to go and fight" because Mali was her country and she had nowhere else to go.⁶⁸ FLN member Fatoumata Toura from Niafunke took up arms against Ansar Dine out of a duty to her country and in rejection of the oppressive customs thrust upon the areas under its control.⁶⁹ Finally, "Mrs. A," an OPC vigilante in Nigeria, suggested that participation in vigilantism is part of a women's obligation since "[a] mother is responsible for her children. If one of them goes astray, she has to punish him."⁷⁰

A desire to avenge loss and protect oneself from future violence is also a common supply-side factor motivating women to join militias. Barka Dicko joined the Ganda Koy after witnessing her niece's rape

62 Hernandez, "The Ganda Koy Militia," 169; Diallo, "When Women Take Part in the Rebellion."

63 Diallo, "When Women Take Part in the Rebellion"; Quist-Arcton, "Ivory Coast's 'Young Patriots' Volunteer To Fight."

64 Quist-Arcton, "Ivory Coast's 'Young Patriots' Volunteer To Fight."

65 Diallo questions the sincerity of these motives, proposing that combatants are merely adopting rebel discourse to justify their participation in violence.

66 Hernandez, "The Ganda Koy Militia," 169.

67 Boisvert, "Failing at Violence," 282.

68 Tamasin Ford and Bonnie Allen, "Mali Civilians Vow to Take Up Arms Against Islamist Extremists," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2012.

69 Adam Nossiter, "Saying Mali 'Is Our Country,' Militias Train to Oust Islamists," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2012.

70 Nolte, "Without Women," 98.

at the hands of the Tuareg MNLA rebels.⁷¹ Another female Ganda Koy member confessed to joining only after her brother had been killed by rebels.⁷² Among the most cited reasons for female participation in Nigeria's CJTF has been the pursuit of revenge and the search for personal protection. Lami, a female CJTF member in Borno, offered up her reason for joining the civilian defense force explaining, "We decided to join this fight to end [Boko Haram] because our relations, brothers, sisters and parents are being killed by [Boko Haram]. Peace has eluded us and we are fed up. We want to sanitize our city to what it used to be."⁷³ Another, Fatima Muhammed, joined the militia in Maiduguri to protect herself from Boko Haram's violence as she explained that "they will kill you, they will kill everyone you know."⁷⁴ Her initial decision to work against Boko Haram came after a close family member was killed by militants. Similar to Muhammed, Komi Kaje joined CJTF after both her brother and boyfriend were killed by Boko Haram in quick succession, while Aisha Bakari Gombi was motivated to join the militia by Boko Haram's attack on her village.⁷⁵ In Aleita, a village outside of Abuja, Janet Oyebade, took part in community defense for her own protection, explaining that her husband lived far away and therefore could not make sure she was safe.⁷⁶ Notably, protection and revenge are also common justifications proffered by rebel recruits. Badmus finds that many of the Ivoirian women that volunteered for rebellion did so "as a matter of kill or be killed."⁷⁷ A displaced Malian living in Bamako indicated she might join the liberation movement to hasten her return to her home in Gao.⁷⁸

Many Malian women also viewed participation in ongoing hostilities as a way to boost the country's defense and ensure their own personal security. Security is viewed as a more encompassing issue than just the severity of violence in their communities though.⁷⁹ As Mackenzie notes, "'security' always already depends on the construction and reconstruction of normal, domestic and peaceful politics."⁸⁰ As such, some Northern women noted that if the Malian government continued to fail at providing key public services it would push more women into violence, with one affirming that "[she] will personally take up arms if nothing changes."⁸¹ In Northern Mali, food security and employment were also seen as priorities.⁸² This is largely consistent with research showing that material inducements help mobilize reluctant individuals for violence.⁸³

71 Jerome Starkey, "Women are Bent on Revenge Against Tuareg Rebels in Mali," *The Times*, November 23, 2012.

72 Starkey, "Women are Bent on Revenge Against Tuareg Rebels in Mali."

73 "Civilian Vigilante Groups Increase Dangers in Northeastern Nigeria," *IRIN Africa Service*, December 12, 2013.

74 Okeowo, "The Women Fighting Boko Haram."

75 Rosie Collyer, "Aisha: Boko Haram Huntress," *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2018.

76 "Nigeria; Women Join Vigilante Groups in Aleita."

77 Isiaka Badmus, "Explaining Women's Roles in the West African Tragic Triplet," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 1, no. 3 (2009): 823.

78 Ford and Allen, "Mali Civilians Vow to Take Up Arms Against Islamist Extremists."

79 Lackenbuger et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight"; Gorman and Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand.'"

80 Megan MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-conflict Development* (NYU Press, 2015), 8.

81 Lackenbauer et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight," 56.

82 Gorman and Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand.'"

83 Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Kocher, Matthew, "How 'Free' is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 177–216; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): 436–455.

Like with rebellions, a range of practical concerns have spurred women's participation in militias. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the main factors encouraging both male and female participation in the crises were "identity, material needs and security" along with social ties.⁸⁴ In the aftermath of the contested 2010 Ivorian elections, important motivators for both male and female supporters of Alassane Ouattara's presidential bid were the prospect of a career in the new government, including in the security forces, and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) benefits.⁸⁵ Participation in violence appears to have been driven by opportunism as well; some women who joined pro-Ouattara forces had previously fought for the pro-Gbagbo self-defense groups, while others switched their loyalty from Ouattara to Gbagbo. The importance of material inducements and the fluidity of membership across violent organizations suggests it is not always possible to separate the types of women who join rebellions from those who enlist in self-defense militias.

There is also evidence that women join CBAGs to transcend their traditional roles. While this does not appear to be a primary impetus for male participation in CBAGs, it is a reason that many women have joined rebellions. For instance, many Biafran women joined militias for personal emancipation, and though their participation was accepted, they were commonly considered "stubborn girls who rebelled against the norm by doing what they were not asked to do."⁸⁶ According to Uchendu, the exceptional actions of militia women flouted traditional gendered expectations of women in Igboland and challenged ideas of what women were capable of.⁸⁷ Similarly, a female Ganda Koy member noted more recently that the militiawomen's participation showed that "a woman can do anything a man can do, while another reveled in the notion that they do in fact "do everything the men do."⁸⁸

While female participants offer the search for gender equality as a primary motivator for their recruitment,⁸⁹ it is also evident that local and group gender norms have a substantial effect on whether organizations create space and extend opportunities for women's formal participation in CBAGs. That is, CBAG norms, which are often informed by local rules and traditions, determine whether women are *able* to participate if they wanted to. For instance, Gorman and Chauzal's survey indicates that nearly three-quarters of Malian women expressed a deep interest in being included in community security provision, a much larger proportion than male respondents.⁹⁰ Yet, women participate in Mali's CBAGs far less frequently than their male counterparts, suggesting that women's lack of involvement may result from suppression rather than disinterest.

84 Diallo, "When Women Take Part in the Rebellion."

85 Ibid.

86 Egodi Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 121; It is likely that Igbo women were not prevented from participating in the infantry despite being discouraged by Biafran men since traditional Igbo culture did not bestow any institution the power to issue commands. Instead, "only within a family compound could an individual demand obedience to orders." See Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?" 18.

87 Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War*.

88 Anne Look, "Malian Militias Train to Retake the North," *Voice of America*, October 8, 2012; Starkey, "Women are Bent on Revenge Against Tuareg Rebels in Mali."

89 In some cases a search for gender equality is on an individual basis, and about personal emancipation. In others women participate in effort to change perceptions and policies about women's capabilities and rights.

90 Gorman and Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand,'" 20.

Women throughout Mali have practical incentives to concern themselves with the security realm given their increased vulnerability during conflict; most Malians have named young girls as the most likely to be victimized by rebel groups and jihadists, followed closely by older women.⁹¹ Malians have also noted that women are the group most prone to domestic and gender-based violence.⁹² This increased risk of victimization constitutes a pathway by which women are recruited into armed groups, as Gorman and Chauzal found that the need for physical protection was the most significant driver of women’s recruitment into Mali’s rebel organizations.⁹³ Despite these pragmatic reasons for women to join, the path to formal CBAG membership is harder for some women, namely those from Northern communities, given the immutability of women’s roles and the strength of gender hierarchies. Northern women have been most engaged, however, when their communities created inclusive participation structures to facilitate their participation.⁹⁴

Demand-side explanations

Among the most important demand-side factors determining women’s work in community-based armed groups is a community’s gender relationships, which can either facilitate or hamper women’s roles in security matters. Local gender norms have an outsized effect on the scope and structure of women’s engagement with CBAGs. In contrast to rebel organizations, which do not often shy away from subverting status quo norms and dictates, CBAGs tend to adhere more closely to the ideals and values of the localities in which they are embedded. This makes sense given CBAGs’ often-extensive ties to local political structures, which frequently mobilize, sanction, and legitimize these armed groups. Thus, malleable local gender norms allow women to participate in security matters formally, while more rigid traditions can limit women’s roles in public life, politics, and security, leading them to adopt less overtly security-oriented roles. Where local traditions already make space for women’s participation, CBAGs are more apt to recruit women. Moreover, when women are already involved in local security provision, CBAGs are also likely to employ women in security roles. On the other hand, CBAGs tend to adopt more restrictive membership requirements in societies that are more restrictive. This rarely leads to the wholesale absence of female participants, though it does suggest less formalized, and possibly less overtly violent, female participation. Importantly, local institutions and values—not state-wide norms—appear to undergird this process.

In Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, alignment with traditional all-male or all-female initiation societies or hunter societies, for example, shape women’s participation in CBAGs given their pervasive political salience. Women are less likely to participate in CBAGs when a group’s membership is aligned strongly with all-male associations.⁹⁵ By contrast, when armed groups have drawn from or maintain strong relationships with women’s organizations, CBAGs are more permissive of female members. Women’s wings

91 Gorman and Chauzal, “Hand in Hand.”

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., 15.

94 Ibid.

95 Ama Mazama, “Ogboni Society,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, eds. M. K. Asante & A. Mazama (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2009), 479.

and associations promote female participation in CBAGs and communities more broadly. For example, institutionalized women's associations (i.e., ogbo and inyemedi/mikiri) facilitated women's political roles in the Biafran community by organizing their demands and enabling collective action. These traditional associations gave women the ability to craft community legislation that affected men and women alike.⁹⁶ Similarly, women's participation in the OPC was facilitated by the organization's Women's League,⁹⁷ while the Sande and Poro initiation societies enabled women in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone to influence local politics and traditional institutions. These dynamics emphasize the intersections between traditional and CBAG politics.

In both the Nigerian Biafran militia and Odua People's Congress, gender norms were permissive of women's active contributions in security functions, while local gender norms suppressed women's formal participation in the Tuareg militias in Mali and in Hisba and some CJTF sectors in Nigeria. The significant variation in women's participation and roles across CJTF and OPC chapters shows that group recruitment patterns are not necessarily determined endogenously. For example, despite substantial female participation in CJTF overall, women were considered supporters but not formal members in some sectors despite performing essential duties for the militia, including frisking, disarming and interrogating female terror suspects. In other sectors, however, they attained full membership.⁹⁸ This appeared to be motivated by differences in community norms. Similarly, the depth of women's participation and the roles that they adopted within the OPC were circumscribed by local gender norms and hierarchies.⁹⁹ While OPC women play a prominent role in security institutions in Lagos and Ibadan, they are largely sidelined in some Ijebu and Remo communities in Nigeria's Ogun state. In the latter communities, security is viewed as the purview of men because OPC militia operations overlay with the activities of the traditional all-male Oró associations.¹⁰⁰ Given women's inability to participate in Oró activities, their involvement in vigilantism is proscribed.¹⁰¹ This can be juxtaposed with women's activities in Ibadan where tradition accords reverence to participation in war and thus encourages militancy, even among women.¹⁰²

In Biafra, Igbo women were traditionally politically active, with strong delineations between male and female roles in the community. While this demarcation often left women with less overt political power, Igbo women were not considered subordinate to men. Instead, the existence of separate roles for men and women bestowed by tradition, afforded women an "autonomous sphere of authority" that facil-

96 Women's associations were instrumental in the organization of the so-called Aba riots that the Igbo women staged against the British colonial administration in the early twentieth century. This example of women-led collective action generate significant reforms in the colonial administration, although they were primarily enjoyed by Igbo men (Van Allen 1975).

97 Nolte, "Without Women."

98 Wale Odunsi, "Women Civilian JTF Emerges in Borno, Targets Female Boko Haram members," *Daily Post*, August 24, 2013.

99 Nolte, "Without Women."

100 The Oró is a secret all-male group within the mixed-gender Ogboni secret society, which is prevalent among the Yoruba across West Africa. Ogboni, which dates back to pre-colonial times, has acts as councilor to traditional rulers, protects the community from the excesses of political leadership and upholds law and order in society. The Oró acts as Ogboni's enforcer (Mazama, "Ogboni Society," 479).

101 Nolte, "Without Women."

102 Nolte, "Without Women"; Watson (1999) offers that women held vital roles in the militarized civic society of pre-colonial Ibadan. Masculinized women directed and supported the city's war economy. Moreover, she argues that political ascendancy for both men and women was based on participation in battle.

itated their political engagement.¹⁰³ For instance, Igbo tradition considered women significant players in community conflict resolution efforts. As such, they were typically consulted as informal arbitrators and charged with promoting order in their communities.¹⁰⁴ Though traditionally, women used non-violent means of coercion, including demonstrations and strikes, singing and dancing, and ridicule to wield power and influence over their villages, the existence of a set of customs that provided for women's influence in politics enabled them to also have a deeper role in the Biafran war.¹⁰⁵ This is similar to the types of power and structures embedded in Yoruba culture, which likely explains their active roles within the OPC.

Like Igbo women, Yoruba women had a reserved seat in political institutions, even if their traditional roles were not clearly related to performing security functions.¹⁰⁶ It is important to note, however, that even though Yoruba convention provided a clear pathway for women's participation in politics, it sometimes also restricted their roles. This was especially so in places where security was more strongly associated with male power. Again, in communities where militia activity aligned with the all-male hunting societies, women's formal participation in security activities was rare. Here, parallels can also be seen with women's relationships to the traditionally all-male Kamajor militia in Sierra Leone.

Although it is accepted that women participated in the Sierra Leonean Civil Defense Forces (CDF) umbrella group to repel the Revolutionary United Front (RUF),¹⁰⁷ few women were associated with the Kamajor militia, which formed the backbone of CDF military operations.¹⁰⁸ Though a small number of women engaged with the group both formally and informally,¹⁰⁹ they participated less in this group than in other CDF militias because of the strong link between membership in the Kamajors and Mende male tradition.¹¹⁰ Traditionally, a kamajor (*kamajoi*) is an elite *male* hunter charged with protecting his community.¹¹¹ According to Hoffman, [t]he kamajoi as hunter operates in an expressly male domain. The gun in the kamajoi hunter's hand is both linguistically and symbolically phallic.¹¹² Thus, it is unsurprising that a militia that recruited among the kamajoi would not actively encourage female participation. This point is further underscored by a militiaman who asserted that "Kamajor business is for men and I have never

103 Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?" 19.

104 Ibid.

105 Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?"; Matfess (2020) argues informal and symbolic displays of power by women are frequently performed to influence the behavior of East African CBAGs as well.

106 Nolte, "Without Women."

107 Dyan Mazurana Khristopher Carlson, *From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone* (Washington, DC: Hunt Alternatives Fund, 2004).

108 Cohen suggests that only 2 percent of CDF members were women; Ned Dalby, "In Search of the Kamajors, Sierra Leone's Civilian Counter-insurgents," *International Crisis Group*, March 2017.

109 Mazurana and Carlson, *From Combat to Community*; MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone*.

110 Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia."

111 According to both Hoffman and Muana, in Mende tradition a Kamajoi is most closely charged with establishing new Mende communities. Ferme and Hoffman (2004) and Muana (1997) suggest that most of the Kamajor's recruits during the war had no prior experience with hunting. Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Duke University Press, 2011); Dalby, "In Search of the Kamajors."

112 Hoffman, *The War Machines*, 64.

seen a woman.”¹¹³ Despite this rhetoric, the militia did ultimately incorporate a small number of women into their ranks, but only after experiencing significant manpower constraints due to the ongoing war.¹¹⁴ Similar to the Biafran case, the Kamajor leadership never tacitly acknowledged their female recruits.¹¹⁵ In fact, one former cadre noted that the Kamajors prevented her from participating in the formal demobilization process due to a “taboo that they do not touch or come close to a woman,” which in her account was a “lie to fake self-praise.”¹¹⁶ She added “[a]ll of us were combatants but treated as housewives and sex slaves.”¹¹⁷ The disregard of women’s participation is a recurrent theme among CBAGs and other non-state groups and is not exclusive to formal participation in violence.

The Kamajor illustration shows that many CBAGs encourage women’s direct participation only reluctantly. Across almost every case examined, women’s participation was encouraged or tolerated only after CBAGs recognized the potential for tactical or strategic gains. In CJTF, many women joined the militia after Boko Haram shifted their strategy toward using female militants. Since it was controversial for men to search women’s bodies or their homes, female militia members were genuinely needed. Nagarajan proffers that CBAGs that have incorporated women have been more effective against insurgents because of the unique benefits female members can provide, including their ability to search and interrogate suspected female militants and the ease in which they are able to extract information from other civilian women.¹¹⁸ In many cases, women were encouraged to seek information or transport and smuggle contraband because they were less likely to be suspected of complicity with CBAGs. The Biafran militia also exploited stereotypes of female innocence to secure food rations from the Nigerian federation, which were later distributed to other militia members. In the OPC, women engaged in violent vigilante activities as a “second line of defense” only when men were unable to fulfill their duties, suggesting that women are mainly deployed for violence to fill manpower shortfalls.¹¹⁹ In other instances, OPC women are used to encourage men’s violence and help to inspire their bravery.

These examples suggest that demand-side factors drive gender diversity within CBAGs. Groups employ female recruits when strategic, tactical, or material concerns dictate they open their membership to women. However, the reluctant inclusion of women has consequences for demobilization and reintegration as well as the potential for long-term transformation of women’s roles and advancement of their interests. If CBAGs are only willing to incorporate women reluctantly, they may be less inclined to promote women’s needs. If groups fail to acknowledge female participants officially during conflicts, they may also be unlikely to encourage their enrollment in demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs, which often connotes tacit acknowledgment of their activities. Consequently, exclusion

113 “Sierra Leone: Presidential Spokesman Refute Claims that Kabbah’s Late Wife Transported Arms to Kamajors,” *Africa News*, October 3, 2003.

114 Pressure from the RUF rebellion also caused another Sierra Leonean militia, the Gbethis, to recruit women into their self-defense organization (Mazurana and Carlson, “From Combat to Community”).

115 Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War*. Individual Biafran soldiers did commend the achievements of women militia members, though the organization refused to publicly recognize their activities.

116 Mackenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, 94.

117 Ibid.

118 Chitra Nagarajan, “To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria, Center for Civilians in Conflict,” April 2020.

119 Nolte, “Without Women.”

from DDR programs can mean that women are not extended the same post-conflict opportunities as men, which leaves open the possibility that women will remain vulnerable to the recruitment appeals of armed actors.

Among the most universal and significant civic associations across West Africa are the all-female Sande, sometimes referred to as Bondo/Bundu, and generally all-male Poro masquerade societies that are particularly active in the Upper Guinea Coast region, which covers parts of Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Liberia.¹²⁰ These societies may offer us key insight into gendered participation in CBAGs across West Africa given their command of local political power, especially in rural areas and their influence on community gender relations. Both the male and female variants are inextricably linked to traditional political power, where initiation into one can be required for ascension to high-level political positions, such as chieftancies.¹²¹ The institution of female chieftancy, in particular, has strong links to initiation societies.¹²²

While some politically savvy women have used their participation in all-female societies to amass political power and influence, often through brokering politically expedient marriages of Sande women,¹²³ others have pursued political clout through all-male societies. In Sierra Leone's Mende communities, for example, female (and male) aspirants needed to first attain the support of the all-male initiation society to ascend to the position of chief, which often meant pursuing formal membership. Where there were strong prohibitions on female members, women could be barred from achieving this important position of power. Conversely, female chiefs were installed in places where the male initiation societies were more tolerant toward female members.¹²⁴ While Poro sometimes inducted women, the Wunde association, which held currency among Sierra Leone's Kpaa Mende, barred women's initiation entirely which disqualified women as chiefs. As Wunde lost influence over local politics however, women had greater access to local power.¹²⁵

Like other women's wings and associations tied to West African CBAGS such as the Yoruba OPC, the various initiation societies such as Poro and Sande have been built around and work

120 Since these societies operate across different ethnic groups and countries, the names of the groups vary from community to community with the all-female association being most often referred to as Sande/Sandogo or Bondo/Bundu, but also sometimes Poro. The all-male society is typically known as Poro, though it is also called Ragbenle; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

121 Lynda Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone: Women Chiefs of the Last Two Centuries* (Springer, 2012); Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*.

122 Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

123 Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué, *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (University of Michigan Press, 2019).

124 Although several instances of women taking part in all-male societies are recorded, much allure, secrecy and skepticism still surrounds the discussion of women's participation in these traditional male prerogatives, not unlike other organizations.

125 Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

to advance ideas of gender complementarity in societal and political affairs.¹²⁶ Sande and Poro organizations maintain separate authority structures and functions, with responsibilities delegated along gender lines. Despite the near-perfect gender divide, the female unit is not necessarily subordinate; on the contrary, it has been suggested that Sande is, at times, more powerful than the male-only society.¹²⁷ While Poro enforces and instills within its initiates the traditional responsibilities of a male member of his community, Sande defines what it means to be a woman in society.¹²⁸ Both generally seek to advance traditional values but, depending on the specific community's value-set, chapters could offer flexibility with respect to gender norms, allowing women to step out of their circumscribed roles.¹²⁹ Poro's female initiates are considered gender-ambiguous and socially men, which accords them with the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of any other male Poro initiate at their rank. Thus, future research might investigate further whether there is a correlation between female membership in all-male initiation societies and women's formal participation in violence and matters of security.

The importance of these cultural institutions to communal security cannot be overstated. Among Sierra Leone's Mende, for example, Poro was the "primary arbiter of civil and political relations ... and the key institution supporting chieftancy."¹³⁰ The organization also dominated issues of public welfare and security, with the reach of Poro transcending specific chiefdoms. An injunction issued by Poro, for example, would be considered binding across chapters, while a call to war by a Poro chapter would generate inter-community alliances that would mobilize across communities, ethnic, and language groups.¹³¹ Most relevant is the fact that Poro exercises dominance over matters of war and peace and initiates are charged with serving as warriors and protectors of their communities.¹³² In fact, historically, in order to enter into the warrior society in Liberia, one first needed to be initiated into Poro, as the latter stood as a gatekeeper.¹³³

Sande also maintains an important role in West African society and commands a great deal of respect. Among the matrilineal Senufo, for example, Sande unites the various households and kinship groups of the entire village and is responsible for setting social controls.¹³⁴ Senufo

126 Rosalind Hackett, "Women in African Religions," in *Religion and Women*, ed., Avind Sharma (SUNY Press, 1994); Laura S. Grillo, *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in West Africa* (Duke University Press, 2018). Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

127 Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Grillo, *An Intimate Rebuke*.

128 Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

129 Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*. Also see Donnelly (2018) on how armed groups use traditional gender norms instrumentally, applying their rules selectively.

130 Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*, 38.

131 Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

132 Ibid.

133 Utas, Mats. 2003. *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War*. Uppsala University Dissertations in Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University (Sweden), 115.

134 Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 96.

women are also essential to the formation of a new male Poro society, as the ritual that governs that process requires both a man and a woman.¹³⁵ Sande also provides individual female members with a path for political attainment. Most apparently, women are able to mobilize widespread support among their Sande networks for their political pursuits. The institutional structure also delegates clear roles for women in traditional politics. For instance, among the Mende, Sande is consulted on all local matters requiring the consensus of community, with the head of a Sande chapter earning a particular pride of place. Among the Senufo, she was responsible for maintaining harmony between the human and spirit worlds.¹³⁶ Mende Sande leaders are considered to be high-priestesses and warriors and are accorded both the same respect as male warriors and the privileges of a chief.¹³⁷ This suggests an alternative pathway for women's influence in security matters outside of joining Poro directly. Women's roles in Sande tend to be largely spiritual and ritual, but these roles are not unimportant for the conduct of war and peace. According to Hackett, Sande was vested with the power to "apprehend and punish transgressors" even if the offending behavior was done in secret."¹³⁸ Additionally, although women are generally prevented from attaining formal membership in Wunde, they are accorded an important role. While Wunde men are considered the warriors, women are delegated the public role of peacemaker. This is consistent with their traditional roles in many West African societies.

HOW DO WOMEN INFLUENCE CBAGS INDIRECTLY?

Despite tactical or strategic benefits that may accrue from women's integration, a subset of CBAGs actively proscribe women's direct participation in violence. This does not imply that women will have no impact on security-related matters or that they do not influence the execution of violence or the establishment of peace in their communities. Instead, women may influence these processes in less direct ways. Even the most gender-restrictive societies provide opportunities for women's activism, even if informally. Matfess argues that women's informal participation within CBAGs can be construed as an attempt to gain legitimacy by appealing to traditional gender norms, as women play important roles in upholding cultural values.¹³⁹ Thus, in groups where tradition is central to a CBAGs legitimacy and identity, women may be more likely to adopt supportive and symbolic roles. In the cases examined for this report, women have used traditional sources of influence to compel younger generations into action or constrain their use of violence. They have leveraged long-established gendered norms regarding gerontocracy and "matrifocal morality," and traditional institutions, including civic associations and customary societies, to indirectly influence CBAG behavior.

135 Ibid.

136 Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*.

137 Day, *Gender and Power in Sierra Leone*.

138 Hackett. "Women in African Religions."

139 Matfess, *Brokers of Legitimacy*.

Across West Africa, women have utilized their traditional roles as arbiters of morality to influence the conduct of conflict. Elder women in West Africa hold great weight in domestic affairs and are believed to exercise substantial power over their households. This has important consequences for security. For example, Tuareg women, especially older ones, have used their traditional roles as elders to encourage the younger generations within their families to either further the cause of war or work toward peace.¹⁴⁰ According to Poulton and ag Youssouf, Tuareg “women may not be visible at public meetings, but no decision may be taken, let alone implemented, without their consent.”¹⁴¹ This reverence allows women immense influence over both domestic and communal decision-making. Thus, it is erroneous to conclude women play a marginal role in CBAGs business when they lack formal affiliations.

In Mali, Northern women have been most active in peacebuilding activities, but have also stoked tensions between communities.¹⁴² Some women have mobilized young men to engage in both violent and nonviolent contention, when older men were reluctant.¹⁴³ Tuareg, Songhai, and Fulani women have also engaged in repeated physical altercations within the UN-sponsored Women’s Peace Huts and during peace conferences—spaces for women to unite across ethnic lines and foster peace between groups. Women have also mobilized in opposition to the various policies implemented by Islamist groups that have taken control in areas such as Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, within the confines of their traditional roles;¹⁴⁴ in some cases they expressed their dissent through poetry and song. Malian women have also acted as focal points where allegations of sexual and gender-based violence could be reported and potentially relayed for judicial review.¹⁴⁵

In Côte d’Ivoire, women have engaged in genital cursing or acts of defiant disrobing to express anger and desperation at the violence plaguing their communities.¹⁴⁶ Grillo considers these acts of contention an appeal to *Female Genital Power (FGP)*, a spiritual power believed to be possessed by elder women in traditional African societies that can be used to issue a collective “rebuke of immoral and injudicious governance” or to check abuses of political power.¹⁴⁷ Here, authority is vested in older women in societies structured around ideas of gerontocracy, or the elders’ right to rule over younger generations. Ivorian women are believed to be endowed with “matrifocal morality,” the authority to legitimize political leadership, punish societal threats on traditional values and norms, and intercede in violent conflict.¹⁴⁸ This power has been embodied in several traditional rituals that appeal to distinctly female sources of

140 Lackenbauer et al., “If Our Men Won’t Fight, We Will.”

141 Robin Edward Poulton and Ibrahim ag Youssouf, *A Peace of Timbuktu: Democratic Governance, Development and African Peacemaking* (NY: United Nations, 1998).

142 Poulton and ag Youssouf, *A Peace of Timbuktu*; Gorman and Chauzal 2019.

143 Many West African communities function as gerontocracies, including in Mali. That is, power is delegated by age. Thus, older women often have more influence and power over younger women and even younger men.

144 Lackenbauer et al., “If Our Men Won’t Fight, We Will.”

145 Gorman and Chauzal, “‘Hand in Hand.’”

146 According to Naminata Diabate, genital cursing refers to the belief that the power in women’s bodies can cause harm to those to whom it is exposed. Insurgent nakedness and defiant disrobing refer to instances where women exploit the taboo of the nude female body as a form of political protest. See Diabate, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Duke University Press, 2020).

147 Grillo, *An Intimate Rebuke*.

148 Ibid.

power. Invocations of female genital power, which draws on the mysticism of (nude) female bodies, can be seen in the Egbiki ritual of the Abidji and Adiokrou, the Adajanou ritual of the Baoulé, and the Gbona Api (fokwé) ceremony among Akyé communities of Côte d’Ivoire.¹⁴⁹ In these explications of traditional power, women weaponize their nakedness as a “curse” against opponents and as an amulet that extends protection to their communities. Since older women’s nakedness is considered taboo, female participants are able to demonstrate the seriousness of the perils they face when they disrobe. These rituals have also been held to protect and boost the morale of male fighters. Notably, female genital power has also been the centerpiece of customary rituals that initiate a community’s youth into full citizenship and induct a new generation of “patriot warriors.”¹⁵⁰ Women’s centrality to the initiation of a community’s new political leadership and new cadre of protectors demonstrates their weight in traditional politics.

Given the belief that female power can help end conflict, Ivoirian women performed Adajanou at the outset of the 2002 rebellion after being implored by the leader of the Young Patriots militia, Charles Blé Goudé, to resist attacks against then-President Laurent Gbagbo.¹⁵¹ After performing the “genital cursing” ceremony to stave off upheaval, rebels kidnapped and murdered the elderly female performers, which has only deepened the belief in the potency of these interventions for some Ivoirians. Ivoirian women also made appeals to female genital power in 2008 to protest living conditions and again in 2010 to register their displeasure with Gbagbo during the post-election crisis. The 2010 women’s revolt denounced the government’s attacks on their children and the rape of their women.¹⁵² Unfortunately, like women’s naked protest in 2002, this campaign ended in violence, as pro-Gbagbo forces intentionally fired upon the crowds of peaceful female protestors, killing a number of them.¹⁵³

COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN CBAGS

The overall effect of CBAG participation on female participants is not straightforward. While some women have experienced long- and short-term benefits of their activities with CBAGs, this is far from a universal experience. Some women have been able to realize their individual goals for liberation, yet it is not obvious that this outcome is representative or can be generalized to the broader female population. Plainly, women’s participation in CBAGs appears to have failed in producing large-scale, sweeping changes for women, writ large.

Scholars have argued that war has the potential to transform gender relations.¹⁵⁴ When women participate directly in war, they have the ability to experience roles they were never before exposed to

149 Ibid., 36.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid; Diabate, *Naked Agency*.

152 Grillo, *An Intimate Rebuke*.

153 Diabate, *Naked Agency*.

154 Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimiro, Joy Kwesiga, and Alice Mungwa, “African Women’s Movements,” in *Changing Political Landscapes* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Aili Mari Tripp, *Women and Power in Post-Conflict Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

and become aware of their own political agency. Existing literature asserts that war can alter women's positions in society even when they do not take on active positions within violent organizations. This is because women often adopt new responsibilities in their households and are sometimes thrust into the formal labor market for the first time.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, war can create new opportunities for women. Scholars are careful to note, however, that post-war reversions to the status quo are common. For instance, at the conclusion of the Biafran conflict, there was a return to "community politics in which everyone knew... their appropriate status."¹⁵⁶ This caused women to largely fade into the background after the war. According to Van Allen, "women will end up where they have always been: invisible except when men, for their own purposes, whether personal or political, look for female bodies."¹⁵⁷ In this vein, the post-conflict period in Côte d'Ivoire has also been marked by a return to the status quo for women, as their participation in conflict did little to overturn gender roles and norms.¹⁵⁸

Not only has female participation often failed to yield meaningful social and political change for women at the society level, individual participants have struggled to gain acknowledgement for their activities. The discount of women's contributions appears to be a consistent theme across West and East African CBAGs.¹⁵⁹ Mazurana suggests this is because "some armed opposition groups' religious, cultural and social identities are so militarized and masculinized that the existence of females inside their ranks has to be handled in ways that do not destabilize a central component of their ideology, recruitment, organization and identity—that of the male fighter/warrior/martyr, the male who is powerful and in control."¹⁶⁰ Subsequent research should examine two related questions: First, why is women's work acknowledged in some cases, but consistently downplayed in others? Second, why does women's participation so often fail to materialize into post-conflict rewards for women when it is recognized?

There are reasons to believe that reversions to the status quo may be particularly common for women involved in community-based armed groups. Rebels, especially those with revolutionary aims, often work against the status quo and encourage women to circumvent traditional gender expectations. Conversely, CBAGs, by definition, work within existing community structures and are shaped by local or traditional norms. Thus, women's potential for transformation within CBAGs is bounded by a community's gender norms. As Lackenbauer et al., argue, women's influence within CBAGs is often episodic; when the needs that prompted their recruitment evaporate, opportunities for expanded gender roles and responsibilities are also likely to dissipate. Donnelly contends, however, that armed groups are not just shaped by local gender hierarchies but may also shape them. Thus, researchers should pay closer attention to the ways in which women's participation in CBAGs restructures a community's gender norms as well as the mechanisms by which women are able to cement gains that allow them greater participation in post-conflict

155 T. David Mason, "Women's Participation in Central American Revolutions: A Theoretical Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (1992): 63–89.

156 Amadiume, "Women's Political History," 1839.

157 Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?" 30.

158 Diallo, "When Women Take Part in Rebellion."

159 See Matfess (2020) for a discussion of women's roles in East African CBAGs.

160 Mazurana, "Women, Girls and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups," 166.

politics. For example, displaced Tuareg women have noted they have already experienced significant transformations in their roles and have had to become more independent. In being dislodged from their homes, Tuareg women have been exposed to other cultures, which has encouraged them to consider ways in which their political roles might be expanded in the future.¹⁶¹ This begs the question: will Tuareg women be able to retain these gains in peace time? If so, by what means?

It is crucial to note that even if positive changes emanate from war, CBAG participation will not always constitute a net benefit for female participants or the broader community. First, women assume substantial risks by joining CBAGs. While Tuareg women in Mali risk their social standing by participating in security provision formally, other women compromise their physical security and well-being.¹⁶² Many female vigilantes have died or been injured while conducting their duties for CBAGs. In the CJTF in particular, a non-trivial number of female vigilantes have been killed by female suicide bombers during the course of their operations.¹⁶³ Additionally, many female providers of local security have been chided by neighbors and/or threatened by armed groups. Female OPC members have been targeted by the state, arrested, and imprisoned, in connection with the group's activities.¹⁶⁴ On at least one occasion, female OPC cadres were killed because of their affiliation with the organization.¹⁶⁵ Even women exercising peaceful resistance to violence have been subject to retribution, as seen in Côte d'Ivoire.

Additionally, some CBAGs are vehicles for women's subjugation.¹⁶⁶ Bagayoko et al. suggest that security organs affiliated with traditional political institutions do not always work to benefit women and can be regressive.¹⁶⁷ Posel argues that the South African Mapogo has emerged to re-establish men's traditional authority over women in response to pervasive calls for female empowerment,¹⁶⁸ while Hisba has actively sought to retract women's freedoms. Thus, it is unclear how adding women to a CBAG with such an agenda would yield progressive outcomes for women. Further, women in both Ganda Koy and CJTF have made clear that expanding their political roles has not necessarily transformed their everyday lives. Many militia women struggle to balance their CBAGs activities with their care responsibilities at home.¹⁶⁹ Finally, the notion that some former female combatants have tried to cast their behavior and roles within

161 Lackenbauer et al., "If Our Men Won't Fight, We Will," 58.

162 Gorman and Chauzal, "'Hand in Hand.'"

163 "Suicide Bomber Kills 15 in Yobe," *The Nation (Nigeria)*, July 25, 2015 Saturday; "Nigeria; 12 Killed in Suicide Attacks in Yobe, Borno," *Africa News*, February 18, 2015; "Two Killed in Boko Haram Raid on Army Chief's Village: Residents," *Agence France Presse – English*, July 22, 2015.

164 "Nigeria: Reports of Women Being Arrested in Connection with the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) (January 2000–February 2001)," Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 14 February 2001.

165 "Nigeria: The O'odua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch* 15, no. 4, February 2003.

166 Given the dearth of data on women's participation in CBAG-type groups, this paper does not discuss prevalence of sexual violence perpetrated on women who are part of these groups. However, there is evidence of civilian women being violated by CBAGs.

167 Niagale Bagayoko, Eboe Hutchful, and Robin Luckham, "Hybrid Security Governance in Africa: Rethinking the Foundations of Security, Justice and Legitimate Public Authority," *Conflict, Security & Development* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–32.

168 Deborah Posel, "Afterword: Vigilantism and the Burden of Rights: Reflections on the Paradoxes of Freedom in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Africa Studies* 63, no. 2 (2004): 231–236.

169 Hernandez, "The Ganda Koy Militia," 170; Collyer, "Aisha: Boko Haram Huntress."

violent organizations as largely conforming to gendered expectations to avoid stigma from their communities suggests that wartime transformations can actually hurt women during times of peace.

There is also overwhelming evidence that militia activity can actually exacerbate violence in communities, which inordinately affects women. According to Strauss, the Ganda Koy has been implicated in some of the worst massacres against civilians.¹⁷⁰ In Nigeria, it is widely reported that the security forces, including the state military, CJTF, and Bakassi Boys militias have all worsened violence. Although the CJTF has done much to combat militants' violence, they have also invited reprisal attacks from the insurgents and been implicated in their own human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and the rape and abuse of women and children.¹⁷¹ Task force members have also been accused of forcing transactional sex on those detained unlawfully.¹⁷²

Yet, there may be some cause to be (cautiously) optimistic that CBAG women could play a role in quelling human rights violations. Nagarajan argues that militiawomen can play a direct role in preventing sexual exploitation and abuse of civilian women.¹⁷³ To wit, in 2017 over two thousand women involved with Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), a semi-official community policing organization, were trained to detect and report abuse against women and children, including sexual violence and human trafficking.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, some female CJTF members report that their presence and vigilance has led to a reduction in sexual exploitation and abuse by military officers in the IDP camps where they were stationed.¹⁷⁵ If more women within militias received such training, they could potentially prevent some atrocities, though it is unclear if it would avert more violations than are caused by the groups themselves. Additionally, if CBAGs encouraged women to use their connections and influence within communities to convince latent violent actors to turn away from violence, they could foster peace in their communities. The evidence shows, however, that women do not all have such power or more importantly, such a disposition.

The assumption that women will always play a pacific role in conflicts is perhaps too strong, as available evidence does not support this contention. Mature Tuareg women in Mali and OPC women in Nigeria, for example, have instigated violence in their communities directly. Matfess details similar roles among the Turkana women of Kenya and the Ugandan Karamojong.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, incidents among Malian women in the context of UN brokered peacebuilding events demonstrates that women sometimes carry on inter-ethnic feuds, advance grudges and actively work against peace even when there is infrastructure in place. While women within these communities have the capacity and leverage to promote peace in their

170 Scott Strauss, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

171 "2017 Trafficking in Persons," U.S. Department of State; Holmer, "Nigeria's Double-Edged Front Line."

172 Adbulkareem Haruna, "Soldiers, CJTF Make Us Give Sex for Food – Wives of Detained Boko Haram Suspects Write Buhari," *Premium Times*, March 12, 2018.

173 Nagajaran, "To Defend or Harm?"

174 "Vigilantes Empower Members Against Rape," *Weekly Trust*, April 8, 2017; Jan Beek, Mirco Göpfert, Olly Owen, and Jonny Steinberg, Jonny, *Police in Africa: The Street Level View* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

175 Ene Osang, "Zainab: Female CJTF That Protects Girls, Women From Rape," *Global Sentinel*, April 22, 2019.

176 Matfess, *Brokers of Legitimacy*.

communities,¹⁷⁷ it is important that their potential for aggravating violence is not overlooked. If one considers women’s dual predilection for supporting both conflict and peace, it is obvious that a “add women and mix” approach to peacebuilding cannot not always yield peace. Instead, understanding women’s orientations toward peace or conflict is vital for understanding their impact and requires policymakers to consider women’s incentives for joining CBAGs in the first place.

In this report, revenge and retribution was found to be a common supply-side motivator of female recruits. If women are frequently motivated by vengeance, peacebuilding efforts that do not include measures to alleviate conflict-induced grievances are likely to be ineffective. For instance, one militiawoman with the Ganda Koy asserted that “even if there are negotiations, even if everybody agrees to peace, if I get my hands on one of [the rebels] I won’t just slit their throat, I will chop their heads off.”¹⁷⁸ Ideas of retribution are not necessarily specific to women. This concern is largely consistent with historian Gregory Mann’s contention that “there was a risk that militias would pursue their own objectives and ‘open the Pandora’s box of conflict; a set of grudges and grievances that have been difficult to contain in the past.”¹⁷⁹ Therefore, policymakers should consider integrating peace and justice mechanisms that may alleviate such concerns and facilitate the rehabilitation of society.

Additionally, as noted above, 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; some women’s activities may be labeled as informal even if identical tasks are assigned to formal members. These labels diminish the importance of women’s work to CBAGs, but more importantly cast doubt on whether they qualify as combatants worthy of resources, support and accolades. The policy community has embraced the term *women associated with armed groups* (WAAGS) to identify informal participants within armed groups. Yet, there are unintended consequences of such a delineation, especially for peace. In the CJTF, for example, spouses of male CJTF members are not considered members in their own right despite being deployed to the front lines. They are instead considered “wives,” which carries the connotation that they engage in these actions to support their husbands. It is important to consider whether being married to a CJTF member makes women any less involved, invested in the outcome, or central to an organization’s efforts? Additionally, if women’s blessings are required for men to go off to battle or to sit at the peace table, do women not constitute important veto players that should be included in the resolution process?

Finally, this report shows that practitioners should not always place great stock in claims that women do not participate formally—even if from armed group leaders—given their strong impulse to overlook, belittle and render invisible, women’s contributions to security.

177 Matfess, *Brokers of Legitimacy*.

178 Starkey, “Women are Bent on Revenge Against Tuareg Rebels in Mali.”

179 Ford and Allen, “Mali Civilians Vow to Take Up Arms Against Islamist Extremists.”

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This report examines women’s participation in community-based armed groups and finds that across West Africa, women play a number of vital roles that sustain CBAGs and influence important conflict processes. The key findings from this report are that women participate formally and informally in CBAGs for many of the same reasons they participate in rebellion and often express similar motivations as men. The report also proposes a number of fruitful avenues for scholarly research and offered a number of key policy prescriptions.

This manuscript dialogues with the “EMT” framework, which proposes strategies for responding to the emergence of CBAGs, emphasizing the *engagement*, *management*, and *transformation* of such groups.¹⁸⁰ With regard to *engagement* and *management*, stakeholders should consider whether incorporating women could blunt an armed organization’s edges. Women are often seen as bridges to their communities and can help CBAGs build trust and gain legitimacy from the wider community. In this regard, their recruitment can have important consequences for a community’s relationship with armed groups and violence, more broadly. In the short-term, women may have the ability and will to prevent atrocities against other women as well as election-related violence. Thus, promoting women may mitigate the effect of CBAG violence on community members and outside actors.

The *transformation* of CBAGs is likely to be more difficult, however, especially if recommendations propose the decommissioning of armed groups. Since many of the CBAGs examined here are rooted in local traditions with seemingly inseparable connections to preexisting cultural and political institutions, it may not be possible to retire CBAGs without severe damage to communities themselves. The West African initiation societies provide one example of the firm connection between traditional and security politics, while hunter associations provide another. While hunters have fought on the front lines of conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Nigeria, their organizations have enjoyed broader political, social, and moral standing in their societies.¹⁸¹ According to Leach they have “always done much more than just hunt;” they have informed society of “the governance of proper conduct between people, and between people and animals, plants and other forces of the ‘bush’.”¹⁸² Thus, disbanding such groups to improve security outcomes would likely deprive communities of their moral and social grounding as well as the informal mechanisms for conflict resolution that these groups promote. Such a policy would also deprive women of important sources of political legitimacy and influence. Work on hybrid-security governance in Africa suggests it is possible for states to coexist and interact with security producing non-state actors. Moreover, research finds that such arrangements can provide both safety and public services to hard-to-reach

180 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>.

181 Melissa Leach, “Introduction to Special Issue: Security, Socio-ecology, and Polity: Mande Hunters, Civil Society and Nation-States in Contemporary West Africa,” *Africa Today* 50, no. 4 (2004): VII-XVI. <https://doi.org/10.1353/at.2004.0052>.

182 Leach 2004, VIII.

populations that have been historically neglected by the state.¹⁸³ While these efforts are likely to be most germane to rural areas on the periphery, they may also matter to centrally located communities as well.¹⁸⁴ In this context, policymakers and practitioners must consider the following in any efforts to prevent or reduce violence in areas where gender diverse CBAGs are active.

LOCAL NORMS DETERMINE PATTERNS OF WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION

The findings of this report suggest that, in contrast to rebel organizations, recruitment practices of CBAGs are often prompted and informed by local norms. This report, however, was unable to determine which specific sources of local norms were most relevant across cases. Agbiboa argues that CBAGs may be legitimized by different, sometimes competing, local institutions including traditional, communal, religious, and political bodies. Thus, a first recommendation from this report is that *policies should be crafted around specific communities, taking into account local dynamics, rather than being formulated at the country-level. Interventions should identify and target CBAGs’ local sources of political legitimacy and power.*

NOT ALL WOMEN ARE OR CAN BE PEACEMAKERS

Women’s participation in CBAGs may produce both positive and negative outcomes. Where women are working for peace both formally and informally and position themselves as protectors of their communities, they may be able to curb group violence. When women are working against peace, they have the potential to add further instability to already volatile situations. In Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali, women are revered in most communities; they carry with them legitimacy and the ability to persuade their fellow community members. Thus, they have the potential to be important veto-players that can either support or destroy the prospects for peace. Policymakers should avoid relying on essentialist notions of women’s preferences and avoid assumptions that all women have incentives to work toward peace. *Practitioners should recognize that women may at different times work toward both peace and conflict with equal fervor. Practitioners should identify and elevate specific women in communities with known predilections for peace. Since women’s roles, centrality, and importance to their communities vary by age cohort, policymakers should carefully consider age when formulating recommendations on how to engage with and manage CBAGs.* In gerontocratic societies such as Mali, older women have more influence than younger women, and certainly more biographical availability. In the Ganda Koy, for instance, older, financially secure women with the means to balance domestic responsibilities and outside activities were most likely to participate in CBAG activities.¹⁸⁵ This carries with it the potential for elder women to impact matters of peace and conflict in different ways than their younger counterparts. *Paying attention to the intersection of age and gender is all the more important given that efforts to quell violence are often focused on younger males.*

183 Bagayoko et al., “Hybrid Security Governance in Africa.”

184 Ibid.

185 Hernandez, “The Ganda Koy Militia,” 169.

ADDRESSING CONFLICT-INDUCED GRIEVANCES MAY MATTER

Since so many female CBAG members appear to be motivated by the desire for retribution, it is important that mechanisms are in place to alleviate some of the individual-level grievances that promote recruitment. Without such efforts, women have the potential to undermine community security. In Sierra Leone, for example, women actively engaged in spoiling activities in an attempt to stoke violence between the RUF/AFRC and Kamajor factions by spreading false stories of the armed groups' intentions to break ceasefires and engage in sneak attacks during the demobilization stage of the Lome peace process.¹⁸⁶ Not attending to the preferences and interests of such women during the peace process could have real consequences for peace and stability.

It is also crucially important to consider and address the fact that the root causes of CBAG recruitment may be peripheral to the conflicts themselves. This often requires the state to step up social service provision, including but certainly not limited to protection. Additionally, feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment have been potent drivers of women's interest in violence. Therefore, efforts to address the grievances that prompt such feelings may go a long way in reducing the appeal of violence as well as attempts at spoiling peace. Short of boosting state capacity, *policymakers should make efforts to address conflict-induced grievances by promoting and supporting relevant transitional justice mechanisms.*¹⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

Women's participation in CBAGs is complex. There is not a common pathway for women's involvement nor is there a single way in which women participate in community-based armed groups. Women interact with CBAGs through both formal and informal channels, yet the overall consequence of their engagement does not appear to rest upon this distinction; women may impact peace and security through their support roles as well as through formal membership ties. Further, women's formal participation should not be considered more efficacious automatically. While in some cases women's active roles in security organizations challenge conventions about women's capabilities and deepen female political engagement, in others, women see no long-term, broad changes in their own statuses or the standing of women in their communities after conflict. At the same time, women are able to act as agenda setters and veto-players without wielding weapons or attaining official standing within an armed group. As a consequence, 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 .

Relatedly, the report suggests that enduring gendered social changes rarely emanate from women's participation in CBAGS. However, 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

186 Sulaiman Momodu, "Sierra Leone: Woman War-Monger Executed in Panguma," Africa News, January 7, 2000.

187 Cyanne Loyle and Benjamin Appel, "Conflict Recurrence and Postconflict Justice: Addressing Motivations and Opportunities for Sustainable Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017): 690–703.

be expected. Further, although many scholars argue that conflict can create windows of opportunity to produce sweeping changes in women's rights and freedoms, these arguments have not considered the heterogeneity in women's interests and how the type of violent groups women support influence what they are able to get out of conflict. Many West African CBAGs are associated with traditional political institutions and maintain symbiotic or cooperative relationships with the state. If armed groups are not revisionist and work to preserve the status quo, should their activities be expected to facilitate changes to existing political and social orders? Scholars should examine the circumstances under which CBAGs are able, interested and willing to be socially progressive. 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.

Finally, questions about whether CBAGs are "good" or "bad" and whether they should be supported or disbanded continuously emerge. The preliminary evidence suggests that there is no simple answer. CBAGs often have laudable aims and produce positive public goods. They also 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, 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 heterogenous. For instance, the Benkadi, raised by the dozos in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, appear to maintain benevolent and productive relationships with their communities, while Burkina Faso's Mossi dozo militia, the koglwéogo, are viewed as both defending and menacing the communities in which they operate.¹⁸⁸

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. Moreover, 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 constrain. 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.

188 Margaret Ariotti and Kevin Friday, *Informal Governance as a Force Multiplier in Counterterrorism: Evidence for Burkina Faso*, JSOU Report 20-3, Joint Special Operations University, 2020.

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