

## The Gender Dimensions of Resource Conflicts in Ghana: Deconstructing the Male-Centric and Binary Outlook of Communal Conflicts

Deborah Atobrah, Benjamin Kobina Kwansa and Dzodzi Tsikata

### Abstract

The literature on gender and conflicts in Africa is dominated by essentialised and narrow male-centric constructions of conflict and stereotypes of female victimhood which obscure alternative female-centric ideation and experiences on conflict and conflict resolution. Using interdisciplinary methodologies, and drawing in insights from anthropology and history, this article explores the nature of women's constructions of and participation in community conflicts and what drives their participation. We do this by investigating the gendered nature of community conflicts and conflict resolution in eight communities that are experiencing conflict over chieftaincy, land use and resources. We show that issues that are of concern for women – for example disputes over water use or witchcraft accusations – are largely relegated to the background. Moreover, women are excluded from most aspects of conflict and conflict resolution, at both the local and state level. We argue for a re-examination of the normative gendered constructions of conflict in Ghana to include female-centric ideas of conflict and conflict resolution.

**Keywords:** Gender, community, resource conflicts, conflict resolution, male-centric, Ghana, land use

### Résumé

La littérature sur le genre et les conflits en Afrique est dominée par des constructions essentialisées et étroites du conflit, centrées sur l'homme, et par des stéréotypes de la victimisation féminine qui occultent les idées et expériences alternatives, centrées sur la femme, en matière de conflit et de résolution des conflits. En utilisant des méthodologies interdisciplinaires, et en s'inspirant de l'anthropologie et de l'histoire, cet article explore la nature des constructions des femmes et leur participation aux conflits communautaires, ainsi que les facteurs motivant leur participation. Pour ce

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/contjas.v9i1.8>

**Deborah Atobrah** ([datobrah@ug.edu.gh](mailto:datobrah@ug.edu.gh)) is Director of the Center for Gender Studies and Advocacy, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, both at the University of Ghana. Atobrah obtained her MPhil (2003) and PhD (2010) from the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. She has two Post Graduate Certificates from the University of Bergen, Norway, in Global Health Challenges (2010) and in Global Poverty and Development (2008). Atobrah won the Rockefeller Residency Award at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in 2012, and the Duke University Provost Travel Award in 2013. In 2015, she became a fellow of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health's prestigious Takemi Program in Global Health. She is also a Catalyst Fellow at the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh. Since 2018, Atobrah has been a member of the Gender Working Group of the Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation on the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Support Programme on Climate Change. She is the treasurer of the African Studies Association of Africa.

**Benjamin Kobina Kwansa** ([bkkwansa@ug.edu.gh](mailto:bkkwansa@ug.edu.gh)) is Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies (IAS), University of Ghana, where he coordinates the undergraduate programmes and teaches both undergraduates and graduates. He is also a Catalyst Fellow at the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh. Kwansa holds a PhD in Medical Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam. He obtained his Master of Philosophy in African Studies from the IAS, where between 2002 and 2006 he worked in various capacities, including in the Family, Population and Development Unit. He also has two post-graduate certificates from the University of Bergen, Norway, in "Severe HIV Epidemics and Multidisciplinary Research Challenges in Prevention" (2010) and "Gender-based Violence: Rights as Governance Mechanisms and Political Tools" (2018). His research interests are in the areas of construction of masculinities, gender, culture and health, HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health, religion and health, and family, population and development. His publications include the book *Safety in the Midst of Stigma: Experiencing HIV/AIDS in Two Ghanaian Communities* (2013), which highlights the lived experiences of people infected with and affected by HIV from their own perspectives.

**Dzodzi Tsikata** ([dtsikata@ug.edu.gh](mailto:dtsikata@ug.edu.gh)) is Professor of Development Sociology and Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Her research in the last 30 years has been in the areas of gender and development policies and practices; agrarian change and rural livelihoods; and labour relations of the informal economy and social policy. Tsikata has authored numerous books, articles and chapters, most recently "Commercializing Agriculture/Reorganizing Gender", a Special Forum of *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.

faire, nous étudions la nature genrée des conflits communautaires et de leur résolution dans huit communautés qui connaissent des conflits liés à la chefferie, à l'utilisation des terres et aux ressources. Nous montrons que les questions qui préoccupent les femmes – par exemple les conflits sur l'utilisation de l'eau ou les accusations de sorcellerie – sont largement reléguées au second plan. En outre, les femmes sont exclues de la plupart des aspects des conflits et de leur résolution, tant au niveau local qu'au niveau national. Nous plaçons pour une réévaluation des constructions normatives genrées du conflit au Ghana afin d'inclure les idées féminines concernant les conflits et leur résolution.

**Mots clés:** genre, communauté, conflits lié aux ressources, résolution de conflits, centré sur l'homme, Ghana, utilisation des terres.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The literature on gender and conflicts in Africa is dominated by essentialised and narrow male-centric constructions, and binary stereotypes of the peace-seeking female victim and the male fighter (Baaz & Stern, 2013). Generally, female voices have not been amply reflected in the narrative on community conflicts except on a few issues such as famine, displacement and sexual abuse (Lyons, 2004; Magadla, 2015; Medie, 2017). Constructs of community conflict have usually been defined in male-centric ways which exclude female-centric ideation and experiences of conflict and conflict resolution (Baaz & Stern, 2013). Furthermore, simplistic binary depictions of how conflicts affect males and females have not only been generalised, with little attention to regional context, but have also been implied irrespective of the type or cause of the conflict.

Historical records of many African societies provide diverse accounts of the gender dynamics of community conflicts, typified by both the normative binary realities of conflict as well as alternative accounts of women's gallantry, militarism and active participation in conflicts and community warfare. In certain cases, women were seen to exude spiritual powers for warfare and were therefore accorded important statuses during such times. However, the literature on the gender dimensions of resource-related conflicts in contemporary times is scanty. And in the case of Ghana, the differences in how males and females construct, participate in, and are affected by conflict have either been trivialised or ignored (CWMG, 2004). For instance, in his detailed ethnographic anthology of northern Ghanaian conflicts, Awedoba (2010) only cursorily mentions sex (male versus female) as one of the several sources of differentiation in conflicts. The only reference to women and the gendered effects of northern conflicts is in the appendix of the 304-page book.

Many other publications on conflicts in Ghana provide a general account of the devastating effects on society from a resource perspective, implying that power, access to and control over resources as well as political authority, being the root causes of communal conflicts, are largely vested in men (Awedoba, 2010; Tonah & Anamzoya, 2016; Abokyi, 2018; Siakwa, 2018). The conflicts are therefore seen as men fighting men, and this could be the reason why most studies on the subject do not only take a gender-neutral orientation but are masculinised and privilege male voices and perspectives (Brukum, 2000; Bogna, 2000). With some notable exceptions where women have been presented as being instrumental in the success of wars, including Nti (1998), Labi (1998), Brempong (2000) and Osei-Tutu (2000), women's voices have been marginalised in the constructions of conflict. Their perspectives and realities have not been projected, and alternative depictions of men and women in conflict issues have not been amply captured.

It is against this backdrop that this paper investigates the gendered constructions and nature of resource-related community conflicts and conflict resolution in eight communities: Bimbilla, Nabayiri, Gushiegu and Dawadawa in northern Ghana, and Donkorkrom, Kyebi, Tarkwa and Bonsawire in southern Ghana. We show the varied and diverse gender perspectives in these conflicts, which both corroborate and augment the dominant stereotypical dualism of fighting and abusive men, and passive and victimised women. We demonstrate that, although the male-centric nature of community conflict and the binary stereotypes of conflict and related matters are rooted in African traditions, these same cases also provide us with examples of alternative gender traditions. Nevertheless, conflict in Ghana remains a male-dominated space in which female perspectives continue to be minimised, excluded, or ignored.

<sup>1</sup> This article is an output from the research programme Domestic Security Implications of Peacekeeping in Ghana (D-SIP), funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supported by the Danish Fellowship Centre.

The paper begins by providing some contextual background on the way African women have been perceived in times of conflict, focusing particularly on the strong military role of women in the Asante Empire. After outlining our methodology, we then present our findings from the data we collected in our eight conflict areas. We first explore the male-centric notions of these community conflicts, which are focussed on land use and mining, areas that have typically excluded women. We show that although the male-centric nature of community conflict and the binary stereotypes of conflict are rooted in African traditions, the same provide us with examples of alternative gender traditions in community conflicts. We then present the women's conceptions of these conflicts, which tend to revolve around the issues that have had the most impact on women's lives and work: disputes over water usage, compensation, and accusations of witchcraft. Next, we look at women's involvement in the conflicts and show that even though the 'victimisation' of women – for example, with sexual assault – has been minimal, women have not played an active role in any aspect of the conflicts. The final two sections of the paper explore attempts at conflict resolution, first at the local level and then through joint police-military interventions. We find that women are almost entirely excluded from these processes, reinforcing traditional binaries and a masculinised conception of conflict and conflict resolution.

### Gender in community conflict and wars

The normative depictions of males as fighters/war-makers and females as non-combatant peacemakers and victims are deeply rooted in and given credence by universal, hegemonic gender constructions and practices. The image of the weak non-combatant woman, who is even unable to defend herself, becomes the vulnerable and innocent victim of war and conflict. Even in accounts of war that acknowledge women's agency, there is a tendency to portray them in unidimensional terms as peace-loving mothers with the courage to end wars. For example, in the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, which documents a peace movement called Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace led by social worker and later Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee, Liberian women are featured as transcending religious divides and working together to force warlords to sign an ECOWAS peace accord that led to the end of Liberia's civil war.<sup>2</sup> Such essentialised notions promote a binary outlook that seldom accommodates alternative gender constructs – for example a weaker male or a stronger female – all of which are possibilities in times of conflicts and wars (see, for instance, Ramphele, 2000).

In Africa, frontline fighting in battles is largely the preserve of men, a fact which perpetuates the ascription of traditional military cultures as masculinised. Many African societies masculinise war and conflict through institutions and rites of passage. In Ghana, socio-politico-military organisations such as the *asafo* and *kambonse* in the southern and northern territories respectively could be cited as examples (Davies, 1948; Nti, 1998; Addo-Fening, 1998; Osei-Tutu, 2000). These institutions only conscripted non-office holding men for military purposes to defend their communities. War chants and artistic expressions of *asafo* warriors often scornfully depicted their opponents as female fighters, an insult that was intended to provoke one's opponent to a fight (Labi, 1998).

Elsewhere in Africa, male initiation rites at puberty and into age-sets inculcate military virtues of valour, courage and endurance in boys so they would be astute warriors and be able to defend and protect their lineage and clan (Knight, 2015). Among the Kikuyu, Massai, Xhosa, Malinke, Amhara, Zulu, and other ethnic groups, warfarism, bravery and militarism are important markers of manhood, with the spear as a symbol of a courageous fighting spirit (Laye, 1954; Tignor, 1972; Mazrui, 1977; Knight, 2015). A man is honoured by the display of physical strength and conquest, and in certain cases, as Mazrui notes, "Eligibility for marriage is sometimes tied to experience in killing [...] the bridegroom revels in having known moments of violence and danger" (1977:70).

Entrenched patriarchy in African societies is another factor which fuels the binary conceptualisation of conflicts. Many conflicts centre on chieftaincy, rulership, power and authority. Traditional political systems are predominantly patriarchal; men contend and contest over rulership with other men. Seldom will a woman fight a man over traditional political power (Awedoba, 2010).

The fact that most conflicts emanate from litigation over resources, particularly land, which is usually owned by men or vested in men means that women would hardly be the key persons or parties involved in resource-related conflicts (Apusigah, 2009). Land, which is the most critical property, is usually transmitted through the male line, except in matrilineal and matrilocal lineage systems. Certain women in traditional political systems, however, are sometimes able to inherit land if there are no eligible males (Amadiume, 2015), and there

<sup>2</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* is a documentary film directed by Gini Reticker and produced by Abigail Disney. The film premiered at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival, where it won the award for best documentary. The film has reportedly been used as an advocacy tool in other post-conflict zones in Africa to mobilise women to petition for peace and security.

is also an option in many jurisdictions for women to access inherited land through their sons (Apusigah, 2009). Women's apparent passivity in resource-related conflicts, therefore, may stem from the fact that through marriage, many women become disenfranchised in their own lineages, and at the same time not entitled in their husband's lineages (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

The normative portrayal of women as peaceful and non-combatant is also rife in many traditional African societies. The Akan popularly say 'when a woman buys a gun, she keeps it in a man's room,' showing how women are not expected to fight but men are. A woman is expected to exude peace, altruism and be harmless, as reflected in folklore and myths (Oduyoye, 2000). Relatedly, among the Gabra nomads of East Africa, as soon as elderly men transition to *d'abella* (female men), they wear white, which is a symbol of peace, and they cease to hold the spear or any implement of war (Wood, 1999). Such examples reflect the preponderance of traditions of male fighter and female peacemakers in African societies.

The use of sexual abuse, assault and rape as weapons of war and conquest perpetuates the binaries. In times of conflicts and wars, it is common for female hostages to be sexually abused or captured as wives in consonance with ideals of masculinity that consider men's sexual encounters as exploits. For example, studies have reported that Masai male initiates were permitted to have sex with any young female they encountered immediately after initiation (McQuail, 2002) and allowed to kill any uninitiated young man they found having sex. The history of rape in war is as long as the history of warring itself, often treated as an unfortunate by-product of war (see Seifert, 1994; Baaz & Stern, 2013). These atrocities against women in times of conflicts and war are still evident in conflict situations (Baaz & Stern, 2013). Women are often presented as passive, powerless and often servile agents who are victims of the struggle for power by men.

However, despite these entrenched tropes, there are alternative narratives on women and conflict in Africa. Both anthropological and historical accounts teach us that there are situations where women have assumed significant traditional rulership positions in their own right or by re-gendering into a male status (see for example Achebe, 2011 on King Ahebi). In terms of women's involvement in armed struggles of liberation and nationalist movements, the feminist literature on Kenya, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa makes stark assertions (Urdang, 1975; Arnfred, 1988; Tillinghast & McFadden, 1991; Lyons, 2004; Magadla, 2015). This literature has several purposes – to correct androcentric histories of liberation struggles that are silent to women's pivotal combat and non-combat roles, to highlight the gendered experiences of combatants and to account for the challenges of women ex-combatants in post-colonial societies that have an ambiguous attitude to women who do not conform to gender stereotypes of conduct in wars.

In the Ghanaian context, there is a long history of seeing women as at least somewhat powerful in times of war. At the various levels of rulership in the Asante kingdom, for example, female stools complement the male stool, and they participate in the legislative and judicial processes. In fact, a woman could ascend to and occupy a male stool and take on the "corresponding military position" (Brempong, 2000:106). The Asante's queen mother was a refuge for those convicted and sentenced to death by the king, thereby symbolising peace, but both she and her women could also play key roles in war and military activities. Asante women were neither passive nor entirely peace seeking or peace loving in times of war and conflict. They were noted to perform dances and songs to shame "potential war-dodgers" and compose songs that "could drive war-dodgers to suicide" (Brempong, 2000:106–107). As Brempong argues:

[...] the situation can be summarized by saying that the essential female military role was to give encouragement to men. Giving encouragement could, however, take a dramatic and more positive turn, if a woman of high status seized arms, or as the Asante called it, *bontoa*, as an example to the males in order to arouse their sense of honour and sharpen their martial ardour. (2000:106–107)

Evidence of Asante women's gallantry and militarism is epitomised by the legend of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, queen mother of Ejisu, who became the *sahene* (king of the Asante army) in view of her distinguished leadership qualities and keenness to defy the British. She led the Yaa Asantewaa War in 1900. There have been other legendary female warriors across Africa, such as Yennenga, warrior princess of the Mossi, Nzinga of the Mbundu people of present-day Angola, and the Minos or Amazons of Dahomey (present-day Benin).

In situations where women are seen to play passive roles in conflicts and wars, such as in the operations of Ghana's all-male *asafo* companies, women have been instrumental in their success, providing the logistics for military activities, inciting the enemies, cheering warriors on, and sometimes bearing the amulets for the battle (Nti, 1998; Labi, 1998; Osei-Tutu, 2000). Among the Guans and many other societies in northern Ghana, it is believed that women are spiritual beings possessing superior spiritual powers. They can neutralise the

spiritual protocols for battles and determine the fate of any conflict. In such societies, women are therefore revered in times of war.

### Methodology

It is against this history of gender and conflicts that we investigate women's role in community conflicts in present-day Ghana. Both primary and secondary sources of data were utilised, drawing on insights from anthropology, gender and conflict studies. Literature on gender and conflicts in Africa as discussed above helped to better appreciate the field data and its relevance to the Ghanaian context. The primary sources are interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted by a team of researchers from the Institute of African Studies under the Domestic Security Implications of UN Peacekeeping (D-SIP) project. The interviews were conducted in eight communities selected for the study because they were known sites of conflicts related to chieftaincy, small-scale mining and pastoralism as shown in Table 1: Bimbilla, Nabayiri, Gushiegu, and Dawadawa in northern Ghana, and Donkorkrom, Kyebi, Tarkwa, and Bonsawire in southern Ghana. The conflicts in these areas are primarily between: a) ethnic groups; b) sedentary farmers and pastoralists; c) small-scale miners and large-scale mining corporations and the state; and d) farmers and large-scale mining corporations. The team conducted nine FGDs, 18 in-depth interviews, and observations within a cross-section of the eight communities. In each of the communities, respondents were selected based on the type of resource-related conflict in the area, who is associated with the conflict, and the conflict resolution efforts.

**Table 1: Study sites showing the dominant source of conflicts and corresponding peacekeeping operation**

| Study site     |            | Location   | Dominant source of conflict                    | Peace keeping operation  |
|----------------|------------|--|--|--------------------------|
| NORTHERN GHANA | Bimbilla   | The capital of the Nanumba North District in the Northern Region. Mainly inhabited by the Nanumba and Konkomba, and a few other minority ethnic groups, such as the Kotokoli, Safaliba and Chokosi | – Chieftaincy<br>– Herder–farmer               | – Gong–Gong<br>– Cow Leg |
|                | Nabayiri   | A Konkomba rural community near Bimbilla in the Nanumba North District in the Northern Region  | – Chieftaincy<br>– Herder–farmer               | – Gong–Gong<br>– Cow Leg |
|                | Gushiegu   | The capital of the Gushiegu District, in the Northern Region, predominantly inhabited by the Dagomba and Konkomba  | – Chieftaincy<br>– Herder–farmer               | – Gong–Gong<br>– Cow Leg |
|                | Dawadawa   | A small town near Kintampo in the Bono–East Region   | – Herder–farmer<br>– Land use<br>– Chieftaincy | – Cow Leg                |
| SOUTHERN GHANA | Donkorkrom | The capital of Kwahu North district (Afram Plains) in the Eastern Region   | – Herder–farmer<br>– Land use                  | – Cow Leg                |
|                | Kyebi      | The capital of the East Akyem District in the Eastern Region, on the eastern slopes of the Atewa Forest Range  | – Galamsey<br>– Small-scale mining             | – Vanguard               |

|  |           |   |  |            |
|--|-----------|---|--|------------|
|  | Tarkwa    | The capital of Tarkwa-Nsuaem municipality in the Western Region | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Galamsey<sup>3</sup></li> <li>- Small-scale mining</li> </ul>               | - Vanguard |
|  | Bonsawire | A small town in Tarkwa near Nsuta in the Western Region         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Galamsey</li> <li>- Small-scale mining</li> <li>- Water resource</li> </ul> | - Vanguard |

The FGDs were made up of groups of all women, men, youth, or specific categories, such as male and female Fulani residents in Gushiegu, Dawadawa and Donkorkrom, and traditional leaders in Kyebi. For the in-depth interviews, specific actors that were deemed important for understanding the local conflicts in each of the eight communities were purposively selected. These actors included chiefs, security personnel (mainly the military, and police), women representatives, opinion leaders (such as the municipal/district chief executive or assembly members), farmers, herders, miners, teachers, religious leaders, members of the community peace committee and Regional Peace Council, staff of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public service officers (namely the Forestry Commission, Department of Social Welfare and members of the Business Advisory Committee (BAC) in the municipal/district assemblies).

**Table 2: Breakdown of FGDs conducted in the study communities**

| No. | Community  | Type of FGD                              |
|-----|------------|--|
| 1   | Bimbilla   | Male community leaders                   |
|     |            | Male military men                        |
|     |            | Male police officers                     |
| 2   | Nabayiri   | Male traditional leaders                 |
| 3   | Gushiegu   | Male youth group                         |
|     |            | Female community members                 |
|     |            | Male Fulani community members            |
| 4   | Dawadawa   | Male community members (mixed ethnicity) |
| 5   | Donkorkrom | Female Fulani                            |
|     |            | Male Fulani                              |
|     |            | Male indigenes                           |
|     |            | Female indigenes                         |
| 6   | Kyebi      | Unisex public sector officials           |
| 7   | Tarkwa     | Male community leaders                   |
|     |            | Female community leaders                 |
|     |            | Female community members                 |

<sup>3</sup> Registered 'legal' mines are commonly referred to as 'small-scale mines' and the unregistered ones are called 'galamsey' mines.

|   |           |                          |
|---|-----------|--------------------------|
| 8 | Bonsawire | Female community members |
|   |           | Male community members   |

Source: Authors’ fieldwork

**Male-centric notions of key community conflicts**

Narratives on notions of conflict were gendered across the data, with stark differences between the perspectives of male and female respondents. In consonance with accounts in literature, media and popular discourse, the data reflects the dominance of essentialised male-centric and binary notions of the causes and effects of conflicts. Female-related sources of conflict, which become undercurrents in major conflicts, are often ignored.

In Bimbilla, where there have been the most violent clashes, narratives on the conflicts are generally constructed around men. These are centred on chieftaincy disputes, ethnic clashes over resources, and Fulani herdsmen and farmer conflicts (for more on Fulani-farmer conflicts, see Alhassan & Asante, 2022). Discussion on the drivers of conflict in Bimbilla and Gushiegu entirely centres on traditional politics of legitimacy, identity, entitlement, rights over resources and status. Despite persistent probing, the focus remained on male-centric dominant concerns. After a long discussion on the conflict, women began to feature in men’s narratives, but in the context of how women’s involvement affects the men:

This conflict has affected marriages. If you want to marry a [woman] from the other faction, your family will denounce you, or the other faction would attack you. (All-male FGD, Bimbilla, 28 Feb 2019)

Men’s concerns about the limiting effects of conflicts on their marriage prospects and choice of spouse was also expressed by both the young and the elderly. A respondent in an FGD with a male youth group in Gushiegu indicated:

Your father will call you and ask you to leave that woman or else he will disown you because the woman belongs to a different gate. He does not want such blood in his family [...] Sometimes you hear people say we will poison one another and because in our setting every woman is a wife to all her husband’s brothers and the entire family, they will disown her before you the husband will do, thereby refusing to eat her food. (FGD, male youth group, Gushiegu, 3 March 2019)

In Bimbilla and Gushiegu, the high preponderance of male-centric ideations of conflicts emerged in all FGDs and in-depth interviews conducted in the two communities. These related to fights over legitimacy, identity, rulership and encroachments. In both communities, male respondents made no mention of the effects of the conflicts on women’s lives until they were persistently prompted to do so.

In Dawadawa and Donkorkrom, the conflicts were centred mainly on encroachments by Fulani herdsmen, while in Kyebi and Tarkwa, the conflicts were related to natural resources, particularly gold mining, and farmlands and community resettlement. The clashes in these four communities were between community members and state security personnel on behalf of the nation or multinational companies. For instance, in both Kyebi and Tarkwa, *galamsey* has a ‘masculine face,’ with all the arrests and images in the media depicting males. This is likely to relate to the fact that women’s involvement in mining activities is limited to the periphery. Indeed, as municipal officials in Kyebi revealed, women are not allowed near the pits because of taboos and beliefs about the negative effects of menstruation on the productivity of mining activities:

Women [are] not allowed to go there at all. Women are not allowed on the mining sites when they are menstruating because it is believed that it is against the gods of the lands [...] They claim that women have bad luck so if they are to go with them, they will not be able to mine as much gold as they would want so only men were allowed to join the *galamsey* operation in the forest. (FGD, municipal officials, Kyebi, 7 March 2019)

The connection between women’s perceived spiritual powers and conflicts in mining communities keeps women out of any involvement in clashes. Women’s preclusion from disputes is also rooted in the fact that males take the forefront of mining-related work.

In Tarkwa and Bonsawire, there were instances where large transnational corporations, notably Ghana Rubber Estates Limited and Ghana Manganese Company Limited (GMC), had rights from the state to take over farmlands from the local farmers. This is in line with Article 257(6) of the 1992 Constitution which vests every mineral resource in its natural state in, under or upon any land in Ghana, rivers, streams, water courses throughout Ghana, as property of the Republic of Ghana. This means that the owner of land in Ghana is not the owner of any mineral in its natural state which she may find.

According to our respondents, these takeovers were forcefully done, with no consultations with local people and the compensation was arbitrarily determined by the companies. Cocoa and food crop farms which had been cultivated for decades were destroyed overnight despite resistance from farmers, who often found the compensation inadequate. Violent conflicts have usually ensued between farmers and the demolition staff, with the military brought in by the mining companies to arrest farmers resisting land takeovers. These takeovers affect both male and female farmers, but men were more likely to resist the forceful takeover of farmlands by mining or rubber companies in both Tarkwa and Bonsawire. Accordingly, clashes with the security forces also involved mainly men.

Female farmers<sup>4</sup> usually yielded, though unwillingly. Respondents did not know of any instances of female farmers being brutalised. However, the women expressed concern about intimidation by the military and the brutalisation and arrests of their husbands and the takeover of their lands. As a respondent in Bonsawire noted:

All we know is that they were military personnel working in favour of the Ghana Rubber Export Limited [an Indian company]. One gentleman was even shot in the leg by the military men. Another man was also abused by these military men with cutlasses. It is a very serious issue of conflict in this area. There have even been demonstrations by the farmers. (Interview, female farmer, Bonsawire, 15 March 2019)

Although most of the men fought to retain their own lands, some also got into clashes to retain the farmlands of their wives. No woman in our study got personally involved in any such clashes but several of them indicated their husbands got arrested for such clashes for which reason they saw the conflicts as men's.

### **Women's conceptions of key community conflicts**

The variations between men and women in their conceptions about conflicts were clear in our data. Without much probing, the women articulated communal conflicts mostly in terms of their gendered roles, expectations and livelihoods within their communities, some of which escalated to conflicts between communities. These narratives were spontaneously conveyed at the very first inquest of conflicts in the community, acknowledging the more general conflict like chieftaincy and ethnic clashes, and moving on quickly to other matters that directly affect them. Women's narratives of conflict centred on water scarcity, witchcraft accusation and loss of compensation for destroyed food crops or confiscation of farmland. These are expounded below.

#### ***Water-related conflicts***

Acute water shortages in rural and peri-urban communities have been noted to create much stress for women in managing their households and domestic work responsibilities (Yussif, 2006, 2010). Very little has, however, been documented on community conflicts relating to water scarcity. In our study areas, water-related conflicts were of great concern among the women because they sometime escalated into community conflicts. Cases cited included the encroachment of streams from which they fetched water by cattle of Fulani herdsmen, pollution from small-scale miners, unwholesome water provided as a substitute for water from contaminated water bodies, and fights among women around community water sources – some of which escalated into ethnic fights recorded in both Nabayiri and Dawadawa. There were also cases of inter-communal conflicts in relation to water. A former assembly woman in Bimbilla explains:

In this Bimbilla community, we are in a water crisis. I was in the next community solving a water-related problem this morning. When we got there, they told me I am fortunate to be part of the team there because I am related to them in some way, otherwise it would have resulted in a different case altogether [ie, conflict]. Our water system broke down so there were tankers in town [that] normally go to the dam here to bring us water but unfortunately they have pegged the prices very high, making it difficult for women to purchase water. Over here, men do not buy water. It is the responsibility of the women to look for water for the household. They now

<sup>4</sup> In Ghana, both men and women farm; separately most of the time. According to the Ghana Living Standard Survey, men will generally own land and make management decisions on the land (GSS, 2014). While spouses provide substantial contributions on their husbands' private farms, women and younger men do not have the same access to other members' labour. The women get their separate lands, cultivate and make management decisions on a separate though complementary plot (see for instance Naylor, 1999). In Dawadawa for example, some of the women had come together to get their farmlands directly from the chief.



sell a drum of water at GHC 3 [about USD 0.50 for 25 litres] and the women were complaining that the prices were too high for them.

You know, women going to the dam to fetch water is difficult. It [...] seems the municipal chief executive requested the tanker drivers to fetch water from the other village, Kpabli, to supply this community without seeking permission from the village chief. When the pump-house manager in Kpabli refused to let the driver fetch the water, the driver insulted them saying that whether they voted for the current party or not, it doesn't make a difference [...] so it turned into a political issue and became a problem [...]

This morning I was asked to join a delegation to apologise to the Kpabli authorities, so it does not escalate. So, we pleaded with them to allow our tanker driver to fetch the water and now it has been partially resolved. It would have resulted in an inter-party conflict or even a conflict between Bimbilla and Kpabli. (Interview, female assembly member, Bimbilla, 1 March 2019)

Women's daily realities, challenges and activities therefore highly shape how they construct conflict. Water also features in narratives on types of conflicts in Nabayiri and Tarkwa. Conflicts between the Konkomba and Fulani herdsmen have often ensued in Nabayiri when the cattle have polluted the river bodies or drunk all the water and the Konkomba women have been left with no water to do their laundry or cooking. Female respondents in Bonsawire also identified water scarcity as one of the key sources of conflict in the community, and between the community and GMC. The community members complained desperately about a water system provided by GMC which was not in use because of the bad taste, unwholesomeness and non-potable nature of the water.

In Nabayiri, the indigenes had several violent clashes with Fulani herdsmen because the latter's cattle drank from and dirtied the stream which was a major source of water for household use. It is therefore an exceptional case that this was the only community where males also listed water scarcity as a source of conflict.

### *Compensation issues*

In Gushiegu, Dawadawa, Donkorkrom and Tarkwa, issues of compensation featured very prominently in women's account of conflict. In the case of Tarkwa, compensation was provided by the big mining companies for resettling communities because their houses were affected by their mining activities. In other instances, individual farmers had their farms taken over by the mining firms for mining purposes which called for compensation. There were several complaints about the inadequacy of compensation, lack of consultation with farmers to settle on the amount for compensation, and the abrupt way farms were cleared without notice. Female farmers indicated that although their farms might not have been necessarily targeted, the kind of crops they grew made them easy targets for takeover. As one respondent noted:

Rubber is more valuable than cocoa now. For instance, GMC would pay GHC 550 for each rubber tree and GHC 23 for a cocoa tree cut down to make way for mining activities. As a result, GMC does not usually go near rubber plantations. I learned the rubber company has a lawyer who works on the behalf of the farmers in case GMC cut down rubber trees. (Interview, 55-year-old female farmer, Bonsawire, 15 March 2019)

Although some female farmers had started rubber farming, many cocoa farmers in the area were females, as most of the men had moved into rubber farming. Thus, women had become the main victims of land dispossession.

Compensation matters in Gushiegu, Dawadawa and Donkorkrom were mainly related to the destruction of farm produce by cattle of itinerant Fulani herdsmen. In all three communities, there were complaints that despite the herdsmen agreeing in prior consultations to compensate farmers for any destruction caused by their cattle, the herders had defaulted in compensating the female farmers. Conflicts between farmers and herders were rampant until arrangements were made in each of the three communities for the systematisation and collection of compensation. Conflicts ensued mainly because farmers found the compensation offered inadequate, unduly delayed, or not paid at all.

In Gushiegu, the members of the municipal assembly and the police were sometimes involved in compensation settlement and collection while in Dawadawa, it was the chiefs. Donkorkrom had a more formal system of compensation where agricultural officers were involved in evaluating the extent of destruction and mediating in disputes between Fulani herdsmen and farmers. Female farmers felt undermined, unfairly compensated, or denied compensation entirely:

The only problem I have faced in this town is the Fulani herdsmen who lead their cattle to graze on our farms. [...] Last week for instance, they [the cattle] consumed my husband's crops on the farm. When they come to your farm, they will consume all your farm produce. It is intentional, the herdsmen bring them there to destroy the crops. The only way to stop this is to sleep in your farm, so that when they come, you can sack them.

When the cattle destroyed my farm produce, I reported the matter to the owner of the cattle, and he agreed to pay me, but he has not paid yet. He was to pay to the chief. We had not harvested the crops before the destruction, so they said they would pay for it. When we go there, they inform us that the Fulani herdsmen have not brought the money. They said they would pay GHS 800 [about USD 130]. We are about six women whose farms were destroyed. They would have at least made part payment if we were men. (Interview, elderly female farmer, Dawadawa, 5 March 2019)

In the instance above, where the respondent was also a Konkomba migrant settled in Dawadawa, there seems to be a conflation of ethnicity and gender, resulting in apathy and reluctance on the part of the chief and the Fulani herdsman in question. The Konkomba women in Dawadawa have therefore strategised to farm close to each other, so they can keep an eye on each other's farm. The women also arranged for their husbands to sleep on the farm so they could drive away cattle which strayed onto the farms at night and avoid the loss of their crops. Fighting is seldom the first option for them. Unlike female farmers in Donkorkrom, the informalisation with compensation claims negatively affected Dawadawa farmers, who were also noted to be more passive with their claims because they were not considered indigenes of the town.

### ***Witchcraft allegations***

In Bimbilla and Gushiegu, witchcraft accusations are a common cause of conflicts among community members, particularly women, with many accused 'witches' banished to the so-called witches' camp.<sup>5</sup> A case in point was when a man whose debt was due after borrowing money from a wealthy woman in the community, screamed in his sleep one night and claimed to have seen his creditor in his dream, attempting to kill him. The next morning, the woman was beaten up by some community members and sent to the witches' camp at Kukom. According to a respondent, serious conflicts often ensue from witchcraft accusations:

If the woman being accused of witchcraft has strong sons and the sons resist and prevent the people from taking their mother away, it leads to conflicts between the accused and the alleged families. If it is a mild case, the alleged victim's family could prevent the accused from being taken to the camp but if the whole community has turned against an accused woman, there is nothing [she] can do. Not even the police or the chief can do anything. (Interview, female opinion leader, Bimbilla, 1 March 2020)

Witchcraft accusations are known to have caused serious conflicts between lineages and communities as they result in the stigmatisation not only of the alleged witch, but of her family members also.

### **Women's involvement and victimisation in conflicts**

We identified a pattern of women's involvement in conflicts, albeit moderate, only in cases that affected them directly. In Donkorkrom, female farmers were involved in conflicts with Fulani herdsmen over the destruction of their farms, for which they relentlessly claimed compensation from the herders. The fact that it was taboo for women to go to the mining sites, whether by the river or in the forests, meant there was not much opportunity for them to be directly involved in mining conflicts. Moreover, the mining-related conflicts have usually been between miners and state institutions and security operations, and have often taken the form of arrests instead of fights. There were, however, instances where unidentified thugs harassed and seized mining equipment from licensed small-scale and *galamsey* miners. Again, women were not involved in such conflicts

<sup>5</sup> Witch camps are settlements for 'safety' for individuals who have been accused of witchcraft in their communities, many of whom have been exiled or fled their homes to avoid violence (including lynching) being meted out on them (Badoe, 2005; Azongo et al, 2020). These camps are mainly informal structures built within or on the margins of villages that have been identified as spiritually significant sites. For example, in the case of Gambaga, local history suggests that the camp began when an imam offered refuge to an accused witch. The imam was able to 'cleanse' the accused witch of witchcraft and this ability has been believed to be passed on through the chiefs of Gambaga (Roxburgh, 2018).

except to recount how these affected their husbands, and by extension their families. In all the communities studied, frontline fighters were predominantly males, with no instances of females in combat mentioned, in keeping with the dominant thrust of the literature.

In relation to victimisation, respondents gave historical accounts of the victimhood of women during wars, but they were not as one-sided as has been the pattern in the literature on conflicts elsewhere. Research participants recounted that women were never attacked in ethnic wars:

Traditionally, women, old men and female children were spared in times of war, but even an infant boy would be killed. In those days, the war would never end if you killed a woman because the other faction would be most agitated. (All-male FGD, Bimbilla, 28 Feb 2019)

Additionally, men who hurt women during wars were castigated and emasculated as cowards who ought to have fought and killed their fellow men, not women. In the same vein, there was no evidence provided of sexual offences committed against women in times of war. Respondents disclosed that the amulets and other protective mechanisms used during war abhorred sexual intercourse and thus sexual encounters were not entertained. Indeed, participants confirmed that there has never been any known war-related sexual offence in Bimbilla's long history of armed conflict. However, respondents in Gushiegu stated that in the case of inter-tribal wars, traditional norms allowed the capture of women as wives:

When you see a woman that you are interested in, you can bring her home and marry her, you do not kill her. But you cannot bring a woman home during intra-tribal war. That was also abhorred. (Interview, male, Gushiegu, 3 March 2019)

Data from Bimbilla on women's role in wars and conflicts mirror historical accounts of Asante women, as presented by Brempong (2000). In recent conflicts in the area, women have been popularly acclaimed to 'fight the war with their mouths' as they instigated their men to fight, intensifying tensions and deepening volatility. A participant in the all-male FGD in Bimbilla said:

Participation in conflict includes the way you talk and most often that is the contribution of the women. Sometimes, what they say can trigger conflict. Sometimes they would insult a man and that man may act and do what is unexpected of him. (All-male FGD, Bimbilla, 28 March 2019)

Women challenged the manliness of their male relatives if they failed to respond to any provocation from the opposite faction in an acceptable measure. It was said that such verbal instigations had become so rife that contrary to the traditional tenets of war, women became direct targets of the past two wars in Bimbilla.

While the norms on sexual conduct associated with war had not changed, attacks on the lives of women were recorded in the 2017 conflict, a phenomenon attributed to women's provocative utterances. About ten females, including an 80-year-old who was recovering from a stroke and her teenage granddaughter were murdered. As a result of the incident, the women of Bimbilla mobilised and protested against conflicts and the murder of women. According to a female opinion leader:

The women's group came together and organised a demonstration. In the demonstration we went to all the palaces of the chiefs, crying to them to stop murdering the women because we do not have any part to play in the conflict. (Interview, female opinion leader, Bimbilla, 1 March 2019)

After the demonstration, several female leaders were targeted, and one of them was murdered in cold blood soon after the demonstration, according to a respondent. This heightened fear among the women in the community, many of whom resolved not to participate in any future protests. It was thus apparent that gender norms on conflict were changing in keeping with women's instigations, and some men were resorting to attacking women. Regarding sexual harassment and rape, however, respondents insisted that this only happened in other communities, perpetuated by others:

There have been instances of rape involving the nomads and the locals, but those ones are in the other district. We have not experienced it in our district. With the nomads when they are walking in the fields and they meet a female alone, that is what they do because afterwards you would never find them anywhere to arrest them. They just defile/rape them and leave, but here we have not recorded such cases. (Interview, male traditional leader, Nabayiri, 2 March 2019)

Although it may be possible for sexual offences to go unreported because of the stigma sometimes imputed on the victims, it seems clear from the data that incidences of sexual assault during conflicts in these areas is relatively uncommon.

### Women and localised conflict resolution strategies

While conflict resolution strategies in the study communities varied in relation to the cause of conflict, women's involvement in conflict resolution was minimal – even for issues that women perceived as most important to them – as they were mostly represented by their male relatives in resolution processes. At the local level, traditional authorities, and associations such as Fulani cattle herders' associations and youth groups were involved in conflict resolution (see Alhassan & Asante, 2022). Experts, such as agricultural officers, were also involved as necessary. We observed variations in conflict resolution procedures for the four main types of conflicts: communities–chieftaincy, farmer–herder, farmland takeovers, and artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM).

ASM conflicts and conflicts involving land takeovers by large scale mining and commercial agriculture companies were usually dealt with in a highly militarised fashion, characterised by arrests by the security forces and the destruction and confiscation of mining equipment with no avenues for hearing and dialogue. The fact that women are not allowed direct involvement in mining meant they were kept out of direct involvement in the conflict, as well as conflict resolution on ASM matters. Females were not involved in the arrests.

Chieftaincy conflicts were the most complicated and complex to resolve. The respondents mentioned that the resolution of these conflicts did not involve women. They are mainly handled among the elders, imams, and the state through the judiciary. In Bimbilla, for instance, although women were involved with conflicts over water, witchcraft accusations and farmer–herder related issues, they were not involved in the resolution of chieftaincy-related conflict matters. In an all-female FGD in Bimbilla, respondents unanimously agreed that “the men are those who are spearheading the conflict resolution process.” One respondent explained:

[...] Because the religious leaders and the traditional leaders are those who are leading the crusade to see to it that the dispute is resolved, they meet men, women, youth, and various interested groups. But they sometimes find it very difficult to call the youth to order due to differing interests. In addition, there have been many stakeholder organisations that have come into Bimbilla to help us resolve this conflict. They hold meetings with the youth and the women to educate us on the need to uphold peace and unity without which we cannot get any happiness and better lives. We pray that we get people to come out to help us resolve this dispute like what happened in Dagbon for Nanum to regain its dignity and for us to work in prosperity. (All-female FGD, Bimbilla, 1 March 2019)

Although much of the governmental and traditional conflict resolution processes in Bimbilla did not target women, respondents pointed to some NGOs such as ActionAid which are sensitising women on the effects of conflicts, and educating them on how women could promote peace in conflict prone areas. Women in the FGDs acknowledged the important role of women's involvement in conflict resolution.

Farmer–herder conflicts were rampant in Bimbilla, Nabayiri, Gushiegu, Dawadawa and Donkorkrom, although there were isolated cases in Kyebi, Tarkwa and Bonsawire. Generally, those whose farms had been destroyed by cattle complained to the chief or assembly member who might invite the herdsman or the owner of the cattle for a settlement of the dispute. In cases where the victim was a migrant who had been given the farmland with the consent of the chief, the farmer had to first report to the landowner before reporting to the chief. Another channel for resolution was the police, who worked with the agricultural officer in the district or municipal agricultural office to assess the extent of damage caused on the farm for the cattle owner to pay. The agriculture officer worked with the police to ensure the settlement was duly paid to avoid any tensions. If an amicable solution could not be reached, the case was referred to the Municipal Security Committee (MUSEC) or District Security Committee (DISEC) for mediation and settlement. In Muslim communities, the imam could be involved in the mediation. We observed that in Donkorkrom and Gushiegu, where there were established communities of Fulani herdsmen, the leaders of the Fulani community were engaged in the process for the settlement of such conflicts.

The key people in the resolution of farmer–herder conflicts – the chief, imam, police officer, agricultural extension officer and assembly member – were all male or very likely to be male, reflecting the patriarchal nature of Ghanaian society. A female respondent in Dawadawa, a migrant who had been given farmland by the chief, indicated undue delays with her compensation claim. She found it unusual that the chief had not given attention to her issue considering that the case had been pending for several months. Both she and other respondents in the Dawadawa community indicated that it usually did not take the male farmers that long to receive compensation from herdsmen. While a pattern of gender biases in case adjudication was not established, this case could be indicative of such a situation.

### Masculinisation of state–security conflict resolution machineries

In view of the security threat posed by both low intensity and high intensity local conflicts, the state has responded with a gamut of interventions including task forces; regional, district and municipal security committees; and the reinforcement of internal security operations (Albrecht, 2022a). In the study communities, the activities of three joint military–police operations were notable (see Table 1). These were Operation Vanguard, specifically designated to eradicate all artisanal and small–scale mining activity in the country (Hilson & Maconachie 2020; Alhassan & Asante, 2022; Edu–Afful, 2022), Operation Gong–Gong, to strengthen community policing in chieftaincy–related conflict areas and Operation Cow Leg, to enforce security among farmers and pastoralist–herders (Agyeman, 2019; Alhassan & Asante, 2022). A fourth, Operation Calm Life, which was to combat armed robbery due to the limited capacity of the police to fight crime in the country (Asante, 2020; Edu–Afful, 2022), was also said to have been present in some of the communities studied.

Just as the frontline fighters in all communities were male, the members of the joint military–police operations were predominantly male. None of the community members interviewed mentioned seeing a female officer involved in community security and peace enforcement. The police officers who handled the farmer–herder as well as artisanal and small–scale mining conflicts were also all males. Secondly, the interventions by the security forces, particularly the joint military–police operations received very positive reviews from community members. Female respondents were particularly positive about security interventions principally because they (the respondents) felt most vulnerable in conflict situations. As two women respondents noted:

Yes, they are working very well for our sake. Sometimes the police even escort us, the market women, to our various homes safely whenever we are hit with curfew on our return from the nearby markets. May the Almighty God bless their efforts. (Interview, woman, Bimbilla, 1 March 2019).

Truly speaking, the presence of the military and the police force is better because whenever there are disturbances in any part of Bimbilla they quickly go to bring it under control without taking sides. The state brought them to protect us and that is what they are doing here. We are happy anytime we see them maintaining peace, especially during times of conflicts. (Interview, female opinion leader, Bimbilla, 1 March 2019)

The frequent patrolling by the security forces in the communities was also very well appreciated by the female respondents in Tarkwa and Bonsawire, although a few talked about how their husbands got arrested by the military. Other negative remarks and sentiments about the security forces include accusations of corruption and sluggishness in responses to violence, abuses and crime. In Tarkwa and Bonsawire, for instance, respondents suspected connivance between the mining companies and the police to arrest farmers who resisted takeovers and the small–scale miners who flouted the ban.

The respondents also rationalised the formation and operation of the joint military–police interventions, finding it necessary that non–locals or people who had not been living in the town were responsible for their security. They believed that it could be more difficult for culprits to influence such security operatives. The operations staff were seen to work with integrity without fear or favour:

If a police officer has been working here and he knows the *galamseyers*, the likelihood that you can intervene if your friend is getting arrested is high. So, it is good that they do not deploy them to areas where they have worked before; I think it is a very good arrangement. (Youth FGD, Gushiegu, 3 March 2019)

Several allegations were also levelled at the military who were accused of assault, robbery, harassment and rape. As one respondent said:

The GMC security personnel arrested and assaulted them [the local people (mainly men) who the company accused of encroaching their concession]. My husband was a victim of the assault and he even sustained injuries. They arrested them for three days and when we went there to visited them, we were not permitted to see them. (Interview, middle–aged woman, Bonsawire, 14 March 2019)

In Donkorkrom, several community members spoke about a case of a policeman who dressed like a Fulani man to rob travellers. In Bimbilla, there were allegations of military officers harassing women when they were returning from market by demanding sexual favours to allow them to get home during curfew hours. In the same community, there was also an often–cited case of a security officer raping a young woman who was hurrying home during curfew. This was narrated by almost every community member we interviewed.

These negative perceptions were not limited to military personnel. Allegations were also made about unprofessional conduct by some police officers. In Kyebi and Bimbilla for instance, respondents said:

The police officers cannot dare come into this community [Kyebi]. The community people suspect that the police officers work together with the thugs who come here to bully, abuse and confiscate their property so if they should come, the people will retaliate.

There is a new police commander, and he was the one who made sure that the thugs were arrested recently. There is a community called Akyem where these thugs went to carry out their usual operation, but the people resisted and one of them died. They dumped the dead body on the railway line to make it look as though the person was killed by a train. (FGD, municipal office staff, Kyebi, 14 March 2019)

These assertions corroborate the claims by military officers in Bimbilla that the police were less effective at managing peace and stability in conflict areas because their reputation has been compromised greatly and only few communities still had faith in them (for more on the police's reputation, see Aubyn, 2022; Abdallah & Aning, 2022; Albrecht, 2022b). So, although the mainly male military-police operatives that have been deployed altogether have managed the conflict situations in the study areas, their activities have not been without challenges, and more significantly they have not prioritised the needs of women in conflict situations and conflict resolution, just like the local and traditional leaders.

## Conclusion

Discourses on conflict and conflict resolution in Africa have been dominated by essentialised male-centric constructions and stereotypes of female victimhood which often relegate any other alternative (female-centric) ideation and practices to the background. They have seldom included female perspectives of what causes or drives conflict. The dominant literature has also not taken on board the connections between community conflict and gender roles. In this article, we have explored the nature of women's constructions of and participation in community conflicts, using their experiences of inter-ethnic conflicts, and conflicts between sedentary farmers and pastoralists, and licensed small-scale miners and large-scale mining corporations and the state. We have also observed the conflation of gender, ethnicity and belonging in women's experience of conflict and conflict resolution. Although in the study communities there were identifiable major conflicts such as chieftaincy and farmer-herder conflicts, the women's construction of conflict centred around their needs and domestic issues such as witchcraft accusations, water and compensation for their crop losses, which had the potential to escalate into conflicts within and between communities. Community conflicts were thus deeply gendered in conception. At the same time, women's victimhood during conflicts were almost never through sexual offenses.

Unlike the historical accounts portraying the frontline roles women played in conflicts and resolution of conflicts in Ghana and other parts of Africa, we found that women in the study communities were less involved in violent conflicts. They would rather strategise to prevent a potentially conflicting situation than to fight. While women might incite flare-ups in conflicts, they were not at the forefront. Rather than an increase in female involvement, we argue that the norms on conflict and warfarism have become more male-centric; women are less protected (and can now be targeted by opposing factions), conflict resolution processes are controlled by people in authority (placing it in the hands of males), military-police operatives that are employed to manage the conflicts are mainly males, and the needs of women are less likely to be prioritised by the people in authority (mainly males).

We argue for a re-examination of the normative gendered constructions of conflict in Ghana to include female-centric ideas of conflict and conflict resolution, and to consciously incorporate this in the training of the military and the police engaged in domestic peacekeeping. This would be essential for fostering positive changes in the activities and the gender sensibilities of community leaders and security personnel in contexts of conflicts and in conflict resolution efforts.

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