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WHEN WOMEN TAKE PART IN THE REBELLION:

THE EX-FIGHTERS FROM IVORY COAST



Abidjan, 2002 © Rights reserved

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This article illustrates the complexity of women’s engagement in armed groups, through the example of women involved in the rebellion in Ivory Coast between 2002 and 2011. It provides an analysis of the trajectories of women enrolled in the conflict in Ivory Coast in various regions and during various periods of the rebellion.

How were women involved in the conflict in Ivory Coast? What motives led them to become involved in the rebellion and, once they had become involved, what activities did they engage in? How might one compare their experience in the rebellion to that of men?

“I’m telling you, don’t only look at those who were fighting at our side, but also those who prepared [the food] they were fighting like that, because if us, we didn’t eat, no way we can go to the front. Some other women, it’s while bringing us water that they fell.”

This excerpt from an interview with the President of an organization of Ivorian ex-fighters testifies to the diversity of profiles among women described as ex-fighters² in the context of the Ivorian conflict. In Ivory Coast, women ex-fighters³, especially fighters within the rebellion, are distinct from fighters in other conflicts in which women in charge of “auxiliary” activities (cooking, cleaning...) are considered as “associates”⁴, and not as fully-fledged fighters. This article, based on life histories of women collected in Ivory Coast between 2014 and 2015, seeks to shed light on the various logics according to which Ivorian women fighters got involved in the rebellion between 2002 and 2011, by contrasting these with those of men.

Ivory Coast fell into the throes of socio-political troubles from the early 1990s. It gradually fell into a cycle that saw violence insinuate itself into the heart of social, economic and political relations. Over the course of more than a decade, the country endured a series of politico-military crises, against the background of a deep challenge to national identity and citizenship. The early 1990s were marked, first by a succession of crises, then by the change in power following the death of Félix Houphouët Boigny in 1993. The President of the National Assembly, Henry Konan Bédié, the constitutional successor, then introduced the concept of *ivoirité* (Ivoirity, Ivorian-ness),⁵ bringing about a debate over identity

1. Interview with the President of the Association for the Demobilized in Ivory Coast, 11 September 2014, Abidjan.

2. “Ex-fighters” (ex-combattants) is, in the Ivorian context, the accepted term to refer to those who fought during the Ivorian crisis of 2002-2011.

3. According to the Authority for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (ADDR), women made up approximately 10% of the total number of Ivorian fighters.

4. See the definition by the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion (CONADER) in the framework of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

5. See « L’ivoirité, ou l’esprit du nouveau contrat social du Président H. K. Bédié ». (extraits) », *Politique africaine*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2000, pp. 65-69. DOZON, Jean-Pierre. « La Côte d’Ivoire entre démocratie, nationalisme et ethnonationalisme », *Politique africaine*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2000, pp. 45-62. DEMBELE, Ousmane. « Côte d’Ivoire : la fracture communautaire », *Politique africaine*,



On September 19th, 2002, an attempted coup led by sections of the military who refused the demobilization process⁷ became a rebellion and led to the country's split into two distinct entities: a Northern zone controlled by the “rebels”, who were dubbed Forces Nouvelles (“New Forces”), and a zone in the South and West that remained under the control of Laurent Gbagbo’s government. The rebellion included the members of the various insurgent movements founded in 2002 (Mouvement Patriotique de Côte d’Ivoire (Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast,) Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest (Popular Movement of the Greater West,) and Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix (Movement for Justice and Peace)). These united to form the Forces Nouvelles de Côte d’Ivoire and in particular its armed wing, the Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles (FAFN).

This period was marked by several attempts to resolve the crisis. In 2007, the Ouagadougou Political Agreement enabled the resumption of political dialogue between the two belligerent

parties. The armed groups on each side then began the process of disarming and demobilizing their fighters. In 2010, the presidential election that saw Alassane Ouattara⁸

centred upon questions of nationality and citizenship. The concept of *ivoirité* was especially directed at Alassane Ouattara, Henry Konan Bédié’s potential political rival for the presidential elections of 1995. Alassane Ouattara came from the North of the country. He was suspected of being of “dubious nationality”; his father was accused of being of *Voltaic* (*burkinabé*) origin. The questions of identity and *ivoirité* were set at the heart of social and political relations in Ivory Coast. This led to stigmatizing and marginalizing inhabitants of the North. These became considered foreigners and/or second-class Ivoirians by Ivoirians from the South, purported to be “real” Ivoirians. In 1999, a first coup led by General Gueï put an end to a period of stability. Laurent Gbagbo, who came to power in 2000 following an electoral process from which Alassane Ouattara was again excluded⁶, continued and intensified the politics of *ivoirité*.

6. In 1995, Alassane Ouattara had been excluded following a revision of the Electoral Code that stipulated that candidates for the presidential election had to be “born to a mother and father who were both Ivoirian at birth.” In 2000, the revision of Article 35 of the Constitution on this same point was approved by a referendum. See also Human Rights Watch, « Le Nouveau Racisme, La manipulation politique de l’ethnicité en Côte d’Ivoire », August 28, 2001 (<https://www.hrw.org/fr/report/2001/08/28/le-nouveau-racisme/la-manipulation-politique-de-lethnicite-en-cote-divoire>).

7. See Banégas, Richard, and Bruno Losch. « La Côte d’Ivoire au bord de l’implosion », *Politique africaine*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2002, p. 142. The authors emit various hypotheses concerning the origins of the mutiny: “In this eminently complex situation, among the most plausible hypotheses are that various interest groups and political factions exploited structural discontent among the military, or that simultaneous and rival plots collided. In other words, this was a coup whose spark was dual, if not triple.”

8. Following the Marcoussis Accords and Accra III, the National Assembly voted to revise Article 35 of the Constitution. In order to be eligible for the presidential election, candidates now had to be “born to either a father or a mother who was born Ivoirian.”

vol. 89, no. 1, 2003, pp. 34-48.

6. In 1995, Alassane Ouattara had been excluded following a revision of the Electoral Code that stipulated that candidates for the presiden-

compete with Laurent Gbagbo was followed by a violent post-election crisis, after the announced results were challenged by both sides. During this crisis, the protagonists again took up arms. The rebels of the FAFN were supported by young men and women from Abidjan of Northern origin, who lent their support to Alassane Ouattara to fight the loyalist forces that supported Laurent Gbagbo. After over five months of fighting, Gbagbo was arrested and transferred to the International Criminal Court, and Alassane Ouattara was sworn in as head of state. Throughout the crisis, both sides clashed violently, leading to over 3,000 deaths.

WOMEN'S LIFE-TRAJECTORIES BEFORE JOINING THE REBELLION

What place did women fighters in the rebel camp hold in this long-term conflict? Even while the ex-fighters interviewed had diverse social trajectories prior to the conflict, a certain homogeneity emerges from their personal histories according to the period, the group and the region in which they became involved.

Seven women whom I encountered in Bouaké— the stronghold of the rebellion—dubbed themselves the “Amazons”⁹. These were aged between 35 and 52 at the outset of the crisis in 2002, were mainly housewives, had little schooling (primary school), and exercised various trade activities. They all belonged to the Dioula community, from the Mandé ethnic group, a trading community¹⁰ highly active in the region. They also had in common that at least one member of their families (primarily men) had joined the rebellion before they did.

In Abidjan, the second group that I met was made up of four women who were involved during the post-election crisis of 2011. These were between 25 and 30 when they enrolled, and all of them had at least a BEPC (middle school degree), or even a Baccalaureate (high school degree). Three of them were university students before they joined the group; the fourth was a trader. All were unmarried before they joined;

9. This refers to the “Amazons” of the Kingdom of Dahomey, renowned as valiant warriors.

10. See N. Ouattara, *Les commerçants dyula en Côte d'Ivoire, permanences et ruptures d'un milieu socio-professionnel*, École normale supérieure d'Abidjan, Abidjan, 1987.

one is now a widow, and another separated from her partner after and because she joined the rebellion.

As for the male component of the rebellion, according to an ADDR officer “many of them worked in informal trading, small traders, that kind of things. There weren't many who had degrees. Those are more the ones who joined the movement in 2011 during the post-election crisis. Right: it's then that urban youth who had a BEPC or the bac [Baccalaureate] took up arms”¹¹. These differences are notably explained by the fact that the youth who joined the rebellion from 2002 hailed primarily from rural areas with low schooling rates. During the post-election crisis, however, those who joined the rebellion lived in Abidjan, the economic capital of Ivory Coast, which gathers most of the country's students in both schools and universities.

DIVERSE MOTIVES FOR JOINING, FROM “AN COMMITMENT TO PEACE” TO HOPES OF REWARDS

Among both men and women, justifications for joining the rebellion were articulated around three broad axes: identity, material needs and security¹². From 2002, the enrolment of youth in the rebel-held zone was broad and volunteer-based. Both women and men primarily put forward arguments invoking defence of the nation and the homeland, as well as a return to peace. During the 1990s, communities in the North had been excluded and stigmatized, in the framework of the nationalist policy of *ivoirité* set up by the various governments of the time. In response to various attempts to evict them that they had to confront, these communities developed a relationship of mistrust towards the nation and the homeland. Hence, as the “Amazons” explained: “OK, so we fought for peace and freedom... Because at that time Ivory Coast was divided in two, where it was said that the Northerners were *Burkinabés* and that the Southerners were the real Ivorians... So I think that that's what led people to take

11. Interview with an ADDR officer, July 2nd, 2014, Abidjan.

12. See Moussa FOFANA, *Les déterminants de l'enrôlement des jeunes combattants de la rébellion du Nord de la Côte d'Ivoire*, Oxford, Crise Working Paper, February 2008

up arms¹³". This also illustrates women's appropriation of the rebels' discourse in order to legitimate their becoming involved within the movement.

Further, the crisis provoked an economic slowdown and prompted a rise in criminality, especially in the rebel-held zone, which directly affected the trading that was the primary means of subsistence for these unmarried women or isolated housewives. The loss of income was also a key motive for some of them to become involved in the rebellion. The same economic argument was put forward by men to justify their involvement in the crisis that broke out in 2002.

As for men and women who were involved in the post-election crisis, among the primary reasons for their involvement was the hope of finding stable employment in government administration, quasi-public services, security forces, the army or paramilitary bodies when the crisis ended. The same perspective motivated a certain number of women, as the following testimony from an ex-fighter confirms: "When we enrolled, we were told that we were going to be in the army, that we would get military IDs". The hope of acquiring employment through the rebellion derived from the concrete promises of warlords, the precedent of the promotion and integration of rebels within the army following the Ouagadougou Political Agreement of 2007, and/or, more generally, the prospect of programs to reintegrate ex-fighters set up within the framework of DDR programs. Such strategies generally relied upon a swift outcome to the post-election crisis.

Finally, it must be specified that some women who joined the rebels previously belonged to pro-Gbagbo groups, in particular to self-defence groups, while others made the reverse transition. Those were mostly cooks who joined these groups for motives more economic than ideological. They went wherever work, living and pay conditions were most advantageous.

All women ex-fighters also put forward a security-based argument. Enrolment in an armed group guaranteed them a significant means of protection in a context where danger was omnipresent.

Finally, a social mimetic effect was also witnessed, whereby men and women joined the rebellion voluntarily after they saw those close to them join the movement, whether these were friends, family members, neighbours or partners.

BEING A WOMAN IN THE REBELLION

Women who joined the rebellion generally did so for reasons similar to those of men. Their experience and their position within the rebellion, however, distinguish them from their male counterparts. Like them, they took up various positions. Indeed, the rebels were proud to lay claim to the presence of women among them. As opposed to men, however, all the women who were interviewed stated that they had primarily occupied auxiliary positions: as cooks and nurses, or hiding weapons and food and smuggling them between the loyalist and the rebel zones. None of them had held a command position, and only one stated that she had handled weapons and taken part in clashes—an Amazon whose companions dubbed her "the warrior". Such statements should, however, be taken cautiously, since these women, by characterizing themselves as "auxiliaries", may have been seeking to avoid becoming implicated in potential crimes, and/or falling prey to reprisals. This may also have been a tactic that enabled them to remain within the role ascribed them by society. Even if, by joining a violent male milieu, they had deviated from the traditional path assigned to them, remaining in the kitchen—for example—allowed them to show that this deviation had been only partial. Their participation in the conflict did not therefore lead to a true transformation of social gender relations, and, for most of them, the return to peace involved a return to the *status quo*. Worse still, their status as ex-fighters inflicted on some of these women a stigma derived from their deviance. The benefits derived from their engagement in the rebellion (financial autonomy, and a partial emancipation from socio-cultural codes) do not appear to have become translated into political or social power, or into a means of social change at all.

Finally, the development of conflict dynamics between 2002 and 2011 influenced the experience of women within the rebellion. The experiences of women within the rebellion differ according to the time and place when they joined. Women who fought in Abidjan during the post-election crisis lived in the camp, and had separate quarters. They were subject to the same military rules as men were, in particular to monitoring of their movements between the camp and the outside that required exit permits, and had been given basic military training alongside men. By contrast, the Bouaké "Amazons" did not live in the camps, and returned home after their day's work. This difference illustrates the rebellion's adaptation to the changing dynamics of the conflict, from a period in which the rebels controlled the conflict zone and could let women move freely between

13. Interview with a Bouaké Amazon, July 14th, 2014, Bouaké.

the camp and their homes, to a post-election crisis period during which they did not control the territory (Abidjan) and therefore had to limit movements between the camp and the outside.

REBEL MEN, REBEL WOMEN: A COMMON CAUSE?

The individual life histories of women fighters, and their motives for joining the rebellion, are, then, ultimately very similar to those of men who joined the rebellion. As such, the differences between ex-fighters appear to rest more upon the time and place at which they joined than upon gender. Women who joined from 2002 had very distinct trajectories from those who joined during the post-election crisis, whether in terms of age-group, educational level or professional activity.

Furthermore, the participation of Ivorian women in the conflict provides data concerning the various dynamics that spanned the conflict and the Ivorian rebellion. This participation cannot, however, be considered as an indicator of social change with respect to women. Even though some were able to challenge their condition by virtue of their involvement in the rebel movement, the positions which they occupied during the conflict were auxiliary ones, identical to those which they generally occupied in society (cooking, cleaning...). Their involvement therefore falls under the rubric of a kind of partial emancipation, since the sexual division of labour within the various groups was sustained. In the Ivorian post-conflict context, these women, no less so than men, felt stigmatized due to their involvement in an armed group.