



May 2025

# The Gendered Dimensions of Conflict: Impacts in the Borderlands between Tanzania and Mozambique

Anna Strachan, Albert Mulli, and Marius Calu

**XCEPT**

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS



**BODHI**  
GLOBAL ANALYSIS

# Table of contents

<b>Acronyms .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive summary.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Research design and analytical framework.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Analytical framework .....	6
Research methods and data collection .....	7
Data limitations .....	9
<b>Literature review: the conflict-gender nexus and crossborder dynamics.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Geographic and social context of the conflict.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Research findings .....</b>	<b>15</b>
The cross-border and gendered impacts of conflict in northern Mozambique .....	15
Gender and cross- border trade in conflict- affected borderlands .....	16
The impact on men .....	19
The impact on women .....	20
The impact on gender roles and norms: from reinforcement to transformation.....	23
<b>Conclusions and recommendations .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Annex .....</b>	<b>28</b>

# Acronyms

ALIGN	Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms
CSO	Civil society organisation
FGD	Focus group discussion
IDP	Internally displaced person
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IR	International relations
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
SGBV	Sexual and genderbased violence

# Executive summary

---

This paper investigates the complex interplay between the ongoing conflict in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and its impact on cross-border dynamics with Tanzania, with a particular focus on the gendered dimensions of these dynamics. The central thesis of this study posits that the conflict has exacerbated pre-existing cross-border tensions, leading to a disruption of traditional livelihoods and a transformation of gender roles. The conflict's impact is not uniform but is shaped by gendered experiences of socio-economic participation, with women facing heightened vulnerabilities and challenges.

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data. This includes in-depth interviews with stakeholders across four districts in Tanzania and Mozambique, complemented by focus group discussions and a review of relevant literature. The study first details the research design and analytical framework, outlining the methodologies and theoretical underpinnings guiding the study. It then provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, examining the intersection of conflict, gender and cross-border dynamics. The geographic and social context of the conflict is then explored, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of the research findings.

This study fills important gaps in the literature by examining the understudied cross-border and gendered dimensions of the conflict in Cabo Delgado. It provides a nuanced understanding of how the conflict has differentially impacted men and women, exacerbated cross-border tensions and led to a transformation of gender roles, with implications for both vulnerability and empowerment. Key findings reveal the conflict's profound impact on livelihoods, gender roles and opportunities for peace in the borderlands region. Specifically, the research highlights:

- **Gendered impacts on livelihoods:** Disruption of cross-border trade and differentiated impacts on men and women's economic activities. For instance, while women are increasingly burdened as primary caregivers and seek alternative livelihood strategies, men are experiencing disruptions in formal employment.
- **Shifting gender roles:** Women taking on new responsibilities and leadership positions, presenting both opportunities and challenges for empowerment.
- **Exacerbated cross-border tensions:** Increased insecurity and displacement, particularly for women and girls facing heightened risks of gender-based violence and exploitation.

The report concludes by discussing the implications of these findings and offering recommendations for policy and programmatic interventions to foster gender-just peace and development in the region. These recommendations focus on facilitating cross-border trade, supporting secure livelihoods, integrating gender-transformative approaches, engaging men and boys, and supporting women's leadership. This research provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between conflict, gender and cross-border dynamics, highlighting the need for policies and interventions that address the gendered impacts of conflict, support women's economic empowerment and promote their participation in peacebuilding processes.

# 1. Introduction

---

The border region between Tanzania and Mozambique, demarcated by the Rovuma River, has been embroiled in conflict since 2017, with significant implications for cross-border dynamics and gender relations. The conflict, primarily centred on Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province, is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including socio-economic marginalisation, religious extremism and the presence of the al-Shabaab insurgency. This group, with ties to both Mozambican and Tanzanian nationals, has exploited pre-existing cross-border tensions to fuel violence and instability. The conflict has led to widespread displacement, human rights abuses, and economic disruption, disproportionately affecting women and girls, who face heightened risks of gender-based violence, forced marriage and limited access to essential services. Understanding the cross-border dimensions of this conflict is crucial for addressing its gendered impacts and promoting sustainable peace in the region.

This paper argues that the armed conflict in northern Mozambique has profound gendered impacts that are deeply intertwined with cross-border dynamics between Mozambique and Tanzania. The conflict not only disrupts traditional gender roles and economic activities but also creates opportunities for transforming these roles, particularly in the context of cross-border interactions. By examining the gendered dimensions of the conflict, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of how men and women experience and respond to the conflict differently, and how these experiences shape and are shaped by cross-border dynamics. Key findings of this research include:

- Women, while primarily responsible for domestic roles, have also been significantly impacted economically, losing access to income-generating activities and becoming more dependent on their husbands, which has increased their vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

- The conflict has reinforced traditional gender roles in many cases, but it has also created spaces for women, particularly women heads-of-household, to take on roles traditionally reserved for men, such as income generation and community leadership.
- The conflict has led to large-scale unemployment among men, pushing many to join al-Shabaab or migrate in search of employment, thereby exacerbating household poverty and food insecurity.
- Cross-border trade, which is vital for the livelihoods of borderland communities, has been severely disrupted, affecting both men and women differently due to their distinct roles in the economy.
- The securitisation of the borderlands has compounded the drivers of insecurity, increasing both men and women's vulnerability to recruitment by al-Shabaab and other negative coping mechanisms.

This paper consists of six sections. Following the introduction, section 2 details the research design and analytical framework, including the methodologies and theoretical foundations of the study. Section 3 offers a review of relevant literature on conflict, gender and cross-border dynamics. Section 4 discusses the geographic and social context of the conflict. Section 5 presents key research findings, with an analysis of the conflict's gendered impact on cross-border communities. Section 6 concludes by discussing the implications of these findings, offering recommendations for policy and programmatic interventions that promote gender-just peace and development.



## 2. Research design and analytical framework

---

This research investigates the complex interplay between the armed conflict in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and its impact on cross-border dynamics with Tanzania, with a specific focus on the gendered dimensions of these dynamics. The study examines how the conflict has influenced and been shaped by:

- **Cross-border movement and livelihoods:** The research analyses how the conflict has affected cross-border trade, mobility, and access to resources, and how these changes have differentially impacted men and women.
- **Gender roles and norms:** The study explores the ways in which the conflict has both reinforced and challenged traditional gender roles and norms, particularly as they relate to livelihoods and opportunities for peace.
- **Women's agency and empowerment:** The research examines the ways in which women have responded to the conflict, including their engagement in peacebuilding initiatives and their efforts to support their families and communities.

By adopting a gendered lens and focusing on the cross-border dynamics, this research aims to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the conflict's impact on the lives of men and women in the borderlands of Tanzania's Mtwara and Mozambique's Cabo Delgado regions.

Specifically, the research answers two primary and two secondary research questions:

1. **Primary question 1:** How have gender norms, identities and roles among cross-border communities shaped conflict dynamics in northern Mozambique?
  - 1.a. **Secondary question 1:** How have the gendered dimensions of cross-border livelihoods shaped and been impacted by the conflict?
2. **Primary question 2:** How have the gendered and cross-border impacts of the conflict presented challenges to and opportunities for women to play a bigger role in conflict resolution and prevention, and peacebuilding?
  - 2.a. **Secondary question 2:** Has the conflict advanced or hindered opportunities for women?

### Analytical framework

To guide the research, a bespoke analytical framework was developed, structured in line with the key themes of the study's three primary research questions:

1. Gender and conflict.
2. Gender and cross-border livelihoods.
3. Women's peacebuilding opportunities.

Across each of the three themes, the framework encompasses two levels of analysis:

- An analysis of gendered and cross-border dynamics that preceded the conflict; and
- An analysis of how gendered cross-border dynamics contributed to and were transformed by the conflict.

The analytical framework draws on, and integrates elements from, two different yet complementary conceptual frameworks. The first is Saferworld's 'Gender Analysis of Conflict Toolkit,' which sets out a framework for analysing the ways in which gender norms can either drive conflict and insecurity or be resources for peace, touching on elements

of all three themes.<sup>1</sup> The second is the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)'s Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) conceptual framework on gender, power and progress,<sup>2</sup> which provides a comprehensive theoretical framing for how gender norms are maintained and/or transformed against changing contextual and societal dynamics.<sup>3</sup>

This framing was used to conceptualise and explore gender norms existing in the Mozambique-Tanzania borderlands to successively set a benchmark for how these may have changed with the conflict (Theme One). It subsequently guided our understanding of the gendered dimensions of cross-border livelihoods before and during the conflict (Theme Two); and the risks and opportunities that the conflict afforded women living in cross-border areas (Theme Three).

It must, however, be noted that these themes are interconnected and should therefore not be treated as distinct. In particular, the ALIGN-ODI framework was adopted to identify factors that solidify and transform gender norms, including:

1. Patriarchal brakes – often invisible gender-biased norms, values and stereotypes that uphold male power and privilege.
2. Systemic barriers – aspects of a person's environment and particular context that limit opportunities for norm change (e.g. economic, environmental, security, and service- and infrastructure-related factors).
3. Forces of change – including legal protection against violations of gender-based human rights, supporting social structures, engaging institutions, and implementing behaviour change programmes.
4. Norm maintainers – the processes that maintain and reproduce a norm.

5. Intersecting inequalities – refer to a focus on issues such as race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, age, geography, income and asset poverty, all of which interact with gender identities.<sup>4</sup>

## Research methods and data collection

The research adopted qualitative research methods, including a review of existing literature, key informant interviews (KIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) with relevant stakeholders on either side of the Mozambique-Tanzania border. The use of different data collection methods enabled the triangulation of multiple sources of data, ensuring the findings were accurate and reliable. The desk review drew on both academic journals and grey literature, including research reports by the UN, the World Bank, USAID, the European Commission, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) operating on either side of the Mozambique-Tanzania border.

Data collection followed a hybrid approach, with data collected both in person and remotely, in line with strict research ethics principles, including informed consent/ assent, independence, confidentiality, gender-sensitivity, and conflict sensitivity. All interview questions were designed to ensure gender and context sensitivity including through a thorough quality assurance review by Bodhi's local partner.

All interviewees were told the purpose of the research and asked to provide their informed consent before proceeding. They were also informed that the interviews were confidential and voluntary, and that they could end the interview at any time and skip any questions they were not comfortable answering. Interviewers took notes, with no interviews being recorded, and respondents'

---

1 Saferworld. (2016). *Gender analysis of conflict toolkit*. Saferworld. Available at: [Link](#).

2 Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) and Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (2020). *Gender, Power, and Progress. How Norms Change*. Available at: [Link](#).

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

Country	Location	Number of KIs	Number of FGDs
Mozambique	Palma (Phase 1)	20	10
	Mueda (Phase 3)	16	14
	Remote (Phase 4)	4	-
Tanzania	Mtwara (Phase 2)	10	-
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>50</b>	<b>24</b>

**Table 1:** Data collected, per country/location

responses were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Due to access limitations in the Mtwara region of southern Tanzania, all interviews for Tanzania were conducted with representatives from locally based CSOs, which Bodhi was in contact with through previous research in the region. All interviews with Tanzanian respondents were conducted in English and remotely (using Google Meet and WhatsApp) by a UK-based Bodhi researcher. In Mozambique, most data collection was conducted in person in two highly conflict-affected borderland districts, each in the proximity of one of the border's two only formal border crossings: Mueda, in the interior, which is close to the Negomane border post, and Palma, on the coast, which is close to the Namoto border post. Only a few KIs were held remotely. All data in Mozambique was collected in local languages (Portuguese, Emacua, Chimakonde, Kimwani and Swahili), with interview transcripts translated into English for analysis.

Data collection was conducted between May and October 2024, in four iterative phases, with the tools for each phase modified to examine themes and issues raised in previous phases. Due to insecurity in the Mueda district of Cabo Delgado, the first phase of data collection in situ in Cabo Delgado took place in Palma district, between 17 June and 5 July 2024. The second phase of data collection – with stakeholders in Tanzania – occurred between 1 and 16 August 2024. An improvement in the security situation in Mueda district enabled the third phase of data collection between 2 and 17 September 2024. After a preliminary analysis of the data from Cabo Delgado, a fourth phase of data collection was added, to conduct additional remote interviews with CSOs, NGOs and UN agencies in Cabo

Delgado to explore some of the themes emerging from the field data. This was to ensure that key informants, who work in and study dynamics in the region, could help verify and unpack some responses given by local community members and authorities. This was conducted between 1 and 29 October. In total, 50 KIs and 24 FGDs were conducted across the two countries, as detailed in Table 1.

In terms of participants, we consulted a total of 228 individuals, 129 of whom were women (56%) and 99 of whom were men (44%) across several categories of respondents, including local government officials, community leaders and CSOs, as well as members of conflict-affected communities. These categories help inform the analysis by enabling us to assess the perspectives of diverse stakeholders with different interests, motivations and beliefs, and to determine where there is convergence or divergence, in turn enabling us to nuance our recommendations for policymakers. Key informants were selected based on previous stakeholder identification exercises conducted by the team for other studies in Mtwara and Cabo Delgado, and using snowball sampling, with respondents suggesting other suitable respondents. FGD respondents were selected in the communities covered by this study based on their demographic characteristics, with the aim of understanding the different experiences of individuals not only by sex, but also by age group. The table linked in [the Annexe](#) presents a sex-disaggregated breakdown of participants per country/location and data collection method.

All data was stored in the team's dedicated cloud storage. Access was restricted to relevant team members and all data was encrypted in transit using transport layer



security and at rest with using Advanced Encryption Standard 256. No data was stored or saved outside of this system.

## Data limitations

It is important to note that the research faced a few limitations, which should be considered when reading its findings and conclusions.

- **Response bias** – Informants may have formed their responses based on personal motivation rather than the most accurate information. This is often the case as respondents might feel that giving positive feedback would help international programmes to continue delivering activities. Extra care was made to probe appropriately and to encourage respondents to answer openly. Findings were also triangulated with other sources.
- **Limited sampling in Tanzania** – Due to access restrictions in Mtwara, data collection in Tanzania was fully remote and focused on CSO representatives. This means that local community members were not directly consulted, and most views were based on the lived experiences of the CSO representatives both as individuals and as actors working closely with communities affected by the conflict. While CSO representatives are themselves also members of local communities, their institutional affiliation may have created a bias in their responses, including potentially highlighting and focusing on issues of pertinence to their respective organisations' areas of work.

## 3. Literature review: the conflict-gender nexus and crossborder dynamics

The field of conflict studies did not traditionally used to consider issues related to gender. Within male-dominated scholarship, gender was not seen as a relevant variable in explaining conflict outcomes. For instance, in Waltz's seminal 1959 work, he argued that positioning gender as a cause of war reduced conflict scholarship to an individual level of analysis.<sup>5</sup> However, starting in the late 1980s, feminist international relations (IR) began to challenge these assumptions by focusing on the relationships between gender and the power structures that generate conflict violence,<sup>6</sup> and emphasising the importance of understanding gender as a social construct that shapes power dynamics in global politics and conflict. In 1989, Cynthia Enloe's groundbreaking work urged the field to deconstruct artificial distinctions between international politics and personal experience. Enloe's research pointed to clear gaps in work by IR and conflict studies scholars who had not recognised how global politics are shaped by the everyday decisions and activities of individuals, who are themselves gendered actors. Enloe's work was therefore seminal in highlighting the absence of women within the field of IR, showing how a failure to consider women's experiences has missed so much about the operation of international affairs.<sup>7</sup> Other prominent feminist scholars such as Ann Tickner and Maria Stern discussed the importance of understanding gender as a relevant analytical lens in IR, underscoring

5 Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) and Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (2020). *Gender, Power, and Progress. How Norms Change*. Available at: [Link](#).

6 Ali, I. (2023). Feminist Theorizing in the International Relations Discipline. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 25(2), Article 13. Available at: [Link](#).

7 Enloe, C. (1989). *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. University of California Press.

that because gender is socially constructed, gender identities – and how they are constructed and reinforced – determine how power is distributed and yielded in international relations.<sup>8</sup>

Segal's 1995 study exploring women's historical participation in military forces was seminal in the emerging sub-field of gender and conflict studies.<sup>9</sup> Building on Segal's work, Goldstein's 2001 book *War and Gender* is considered to have placed gender squarely in conflict and security studies. As the sub-field grew, most of the research on gender and conflict consisted of country-level and cross-national large-N statistical analyses of the correlation between gender inequality and the likelihood of intra- and inter-state conflict, conflict onset and conflict reoccurrence.<sup>10</sup> Research found that greater gender equality is correlated with lower risk of intra-state conflict.<sup>11</sup> Some studies have also theorised that gender norms, roles and identities can contribute to individuals' motivations to engage in violent conflict.<sup>12</sup> Cockburn theorised in 2013 that gender norms and relations predispose society to war, and serve as one of several intersecting drivers of war.<sup>13</sup> Further, quantitative analysis of microlevel data on gender-based violence and macro-level data on state peacefulness found a correlation between higher levels of domestic violence and a greater chance of violent conflict.<sup>14</sup> However, these studies often relied on simplistic measures of gender inequality

and failed to capture the complexity of gender dynamics in conflict.

Despite the growth and evolution of the gender and conflict studies field, Capuano in 2022 and Schneiker in 2021 suggested that the gender and conflict studies sub-field's view of women and girls has been narrowly focused on women as victims, or on women being inherent peacekeepers as political actors post-conflict, without exploring the nuances of gender roles and positioning in conflict settings.<sup>15</sup> There is, however, a growing body of literature examining women's more diverse roles in conflict settings. Examples include Weber's work that examines the victim-perpetrator dichotomy using the cases of female combatants in Colombia and Guatemala as case studies, and Cohen's research on female perpetrators of violence in the Sierra Leone conflict.<sup>16</sup> This research has challenged traditional narratives and provided a more nuanced understanding of women's agency and experiences in conflict.

Recent scholarship has also examined how gender roles shift in conflict zones beyond combatant status, particularly in the ways in which women navigate economic survival strategies, including their participation in informal trade and cross-border economic activities. As illustrated above, traditional research has often understood the nexus between conflict and gender through a narrow lens, primarily focusing on women as victims

- 
- 8 Stern, M. (2005). *Naming security –constructing identity*. Manchester University Press; Tickner, J. A. (1992). *Gender in international relations: feminist perspectives on achieving global security*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 9 Segal MW. "Women's military roles cross-nationally: Past, present, and future." *Gender and Society* 9 (6). 1995. p:757-775.
- 10 Melander, E. (2005). Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(4). Available at: [Link](#); Dahlum, S. and Wig, T. (2020). Peace Above the Glass Ceiling: The Historical Relationship between Female Political Empowerment and Civil Conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 64(4). Available at: [Link](#); Demeritt, J., Nichols, A. and Kelly, E. (2014). Female Participation and Civil War Relapse. *Civil Wars*, 16(3). Available at: [Link](#).
- 11 Caprioli, M. (2003). Gender Equality and State Aggression: The Impact of Domestic Gender Equality on State First Use of Force. *International Interactions*, 29(3). Available at: [Link](#); M Caprioli. (2005). Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(2). Available at: [Link](#).
- 12 El-Bushra, J. and Sahl, I. (2005). *Cycles of Violence: Gender Relations and Armed Conflict*. Available at: [Link](#).
- 13 Cockburn, C. (2013). *War and security, women, and gender: an overview of the issues*. *Conflict and Violence*, 21(3). Available at: [Link](#).
- 14 Hudson, V., Bailiff-Spanvill, B., Caprioli, M., and Emmett, C. (2012). Sex & World Peace. *Ethics and International Affairs*, 27(2). Available at: [Link](#).
- 15 Capuano, A. (2022). *Feminist IR Scholarship on Conflict and Women's Agency Across Time and Terrain*. Available at: [Link](#); Schneiker, A. (2021). *The UN and women's marginalisation in peace negotiations*. *International Affairs*, 97(4). Available at: [Link](#).
- 16 See: Weber, S. (2021). Defying the Victim-Perpetrator Binary: Female Ex-combatants in Colombia and Guatemala as Complex Political Perpetrators. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 15(2), pp.264-283. Available at: [Link](#); and Cohen, D. (2013). Female Combatants and the Perpetration of Violence: Wartime Rape in the Sierra Leone Civil War. *World Politics*, 65(3), pp.383-415. Available at: [Link](#).

of violence and displacement. This perspective tends to overlook the active and complex roles women play in conflict economies, such as their involvement in cross-border trade. Stern (2024) challenges this limited view by highlighting how women not only survive but also sustain their families and communities through trade in conflict zones.<sup>17</sup> It underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding that recognises women's agency, the specific threats they face and their contributions to war economies. This broader perspective calls for comprehensive research and policy interventions that address the multifaceted experiences of women in conflict settings.

In relation to Cabo Delgado, most of the studies of the conflict and its impacts to date have been produced by NGOs, CSOs and international organisations, ostensibly with the purpose of informing humanitarian, resilience and recovery responses. As Hendricks, Lucey and Sambo Macaringue highlighted in 2023, the gendered impact of violent extremism and the role of women in supporting or countering this across the African context, including in Mozambique, remains understudied.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, they posit that in Cabo Delgado the varied and nuanced role of women as survivors and actors remains largely invisible in scholarship, beyond the work produced by Feijó (2021), who theorised that women faced cross-dimensional violence in the region; for instance, through sexual violence, violence as combatants and reproductive violence.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in understanding the complex interplay between conflict, gender and cross-border relations. While existing research has highlighted the gendered dimensions of conflict and economic survival strategies in borderland regions, further study is needed to examine

how cross-border dynamics specifically shape the experiences of both men and women in conflict settings. Additionally, the impact of conflict on gender roles and relations in cross-border contexts remains underexplored, particularly regarding how borderland communities navigate shifting gender norms amidst insecurity and economic disruptions. Finally, there is a pressing need for research on the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in cross-border settings, including how their participation in informal trade networks and community governance structures influences broader conflict dynamics and stability.

A traditional focus on the geopolitical dimension of borders obfuscates efforts to gain a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the complexity of everyday cross-border interactions among ordinary people, and the role they play in shaping conflict and peace dynamics.<sup>20</sup> For instance, gendered economic roles shape how men and women engage in cross-border trade, particularly in African borderlands, where women often dominate informal trade sectors.<sup>21</sup> Conflict disrupts these dynamics, increasing women's vulnerability to economic hardship, harassment and gender-based violence in informal trading spaces.<sup>22</sup> Recent research also examines women's roles in cross-border trade during conflicts, highlighting their significant contributions and the unique challenges they face. For instance, Stern (2024), focusing on conflict settings in Africa, reveals how women navigate complex and dangerous environments, often becoming primary breadwinners and essential suppliers of goods in war-torn regions. This work calls for a deeper exploration of how gender intersects with cross-border trade, emphasising the need for policies that support and protect female traders.<sup>23</sup> By doing so, it challenges

17 Stern, O. (2024). *Evidence synthesis: Women and cross-border trade in Africa during times of conflict*. XCEPT. Available at: [Link](#).

18 Hendricks, C. Lucey, A., and Sambo Macaringue, L. (2023). *Making women's roles and experiences visible in countering and preventing violent extremism: the forgotten women of Cabo Delgado*. Available at: [Link](#).

19 Feijó, J. (2021). *The Role of Women Conflict in Cabo Delgado: Understanding Vicious Cycles of Violence*. Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR). Available at: [Link](#).

20 Johnson, C., and R. Jones. (2011). Rethinking the border in border studies. *Political Geography*, 30(1), pp.61-62. Available at: [Link](#).

21 UNCTAD. (2019). *Borderline: Women in Informal Cross-border Trade in Malawi, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia*. Available at: [Link](#).

22 Stern, O. (2024). *Evidence synthesis: Women and cross-border trade in Africa during times of conflict*. XCEPT. Available at: [Link](#).

23 Ibid.

the traditional literature to incorporate a more holistic and gender-sensitive approach to understanding cross-border relations.

This is particularly relevant in the context of Cabo Delgado, where cross-border dynamics have not only shaped economic interactions but have also played a central role in both the causes and impacts of the conflict. As this paper illustrates, these dynamics – many of which are highly gendered – have influenced patterns of displacement, economic survival strategies and broader conflict dynamics along the Mozambique-Tanzania border.

The Mozambique-Tanzania border has historically been highly porous, which has simultaneously allowed people on both sides to foster close social and economic links, which have been central to enabling communities to cope with the impacts of the conflict.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, these cross-border links have also contributed to the conflict itself, acting as a channel for radicalisation and access to conflict resources, and for recruitment.<sup>25</sup> To date, most of the existing literature has focused on the Mozambique side of the border (in part due to government restrictions on access to southern Tanzania).<sup>26</sup> However, effective policies and programmes for conflict resolution, conflict prevention and peacebuilding in northern Mozambique require a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which gendered cross-border dynamics shape both the conflict's drivers and its impacts.

This paper seeks to address gaps in the existing literature by examining the gendered and cross-border dimensions of the conflict in Cabo Delgado. Through a gendered lens and a focus on cross-border dynamics, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of how the conflict affects men and women in the borderlands of Tanzania's Mtwara and

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado regions. By providing empirical data on the intersection of gender, conflict and cross-border interactions, this study contributes to broader research on conflict, peace and security, while generating actionable insights for policymakers engaged in conflict resolution and prevention efforts.

## 4. Geographic and social context of the conflict

---

The Rovuma River, which stretches 860 kilometres from Lake Malawi in the west to the Indian Ocean in the east, acts as a natural boundary between the two countries. On the Tanzanian side of the border, the river stretches along the southern borders of Tanzania's two southernmost regions: the inland Rovuma region and the coastal region of Mtwara. On the Mozambican side, the river borders the northernmost provinces of Mozambique, Niassa and Cabo Delgado. The Cabo Delgado borderland region encompasses three districts (from west to east): Mueda and Nangade inland, and Palma on the coast. Figure 1 below presents a map of the northern Mozambique- southern Tanzania borderlands region.

According to the 2022 census, the Mtwara region of Tanzania had a population of over 1.6 million people.<sup>27</sup> In Mozambique, according to the most recent national census (2017), Cabo Delgado province had a total population of 2.3 million.<sup>28</sup> Both regions rank among the poorest and least developed in their respective countries. In Cabo Delgado, approximately

---

24 Walwa, W. J. (2022). Beyond Violence: Understanding Social Cohesion and Peace Attributes on the Tanzania-Mozambique Border. *The African Review*. Available at: [Link](#).

25 Forquilha, S. and Pereira, J. (2022). Migration Dynamics and the Making of the Jihadi Insurgency in Northern Mozambique. *Journal of Portuguese History*. Available at: [Link](#).

26 International Crisis Group. (February 2022). *Winning Peace in Mozambique's Embattled North*. Available at: [Link](#); Cardoso, F. J. (May 2021). *Cabo Delgado: Insurgents, Jihadists or Terrorists*. p. 18. Available at: [Link](#).

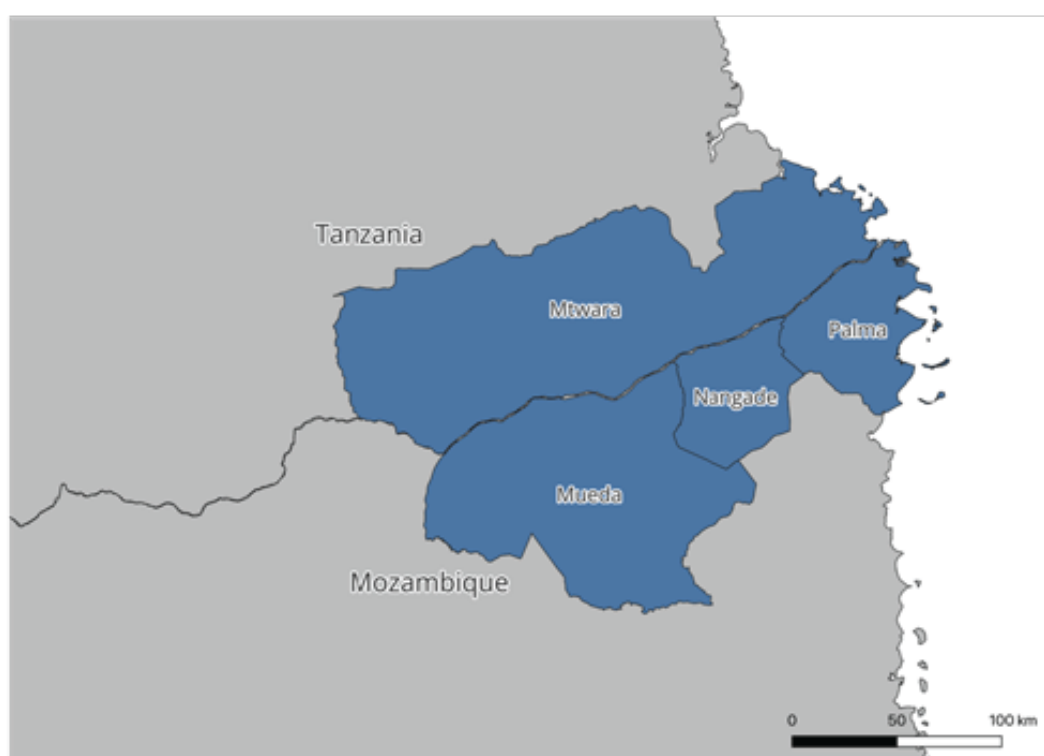
27 Ministry of Finance and Planning, Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics and President's Office – Finance and Planning, Office of the Chief Government Statistician, Zanzibar. (2022). *The 2022 Population and Housing Census: Age and Sex Distribution Report, Key Findings*. Available at: [Link](#).

28 National Institute of Statistics, Mozambique. (2017). *IV General Census of Population and Housing, 2017*. Available at: [Link](#).

77 percent of the population lived below the poverty line in 2020, the third highest rate in the entire country. Similarly, the Mtwara region ranks among the poorest in Tanzania, with nearly 32 percent of the population living in poverty according to data from 2018, with some districts such as Nanyumbu and Newala reaching rates closer to 67 percent.<sup>29</sup> The populations on the two sides of the border share deep-rooted social, cultural, linguistic and economic ties, which predate and have withstood the establishment of the international border dividing Mozambique and Tanzania during the colonial period.<sup>30</sup> For example, communities often cross the border for cultural events and individuals continue to marry

members of their community on the other side of the border.<sup>31</sup> The main ethnic groups in the borderlands region are the Makonde, the Makua and the Yao. The Christian/animist-majority Makonde are the largest ethnic group in Cabo Delgado and in Mtwara,<sup>32</sup> but in Mozambique they are mostly concentrated in the interior of the borderlands region, while the Muslim-majority Makua communities are dominant in coastal areas.<sup>33</sup> All three groups' populations transcend the international border,<sup>34</sup> resulting in cross-border identities – anchored in a shared cultural, linguistic and religious heritage – which have been fostered by enduring cross-border familial ties and close economic links.<sup>35</sup>

**Figure 1:** Map of the northern Mozambique-southern Tanzania borderlands region



29 Carta de Moçambique. (2023). *3 Milhões de Moçambicanos Foram Empurrados para a pobreza em 2020, diz o Banco Mundial*. Available at: [Link](#); World Bank. (2020) *Tanzania Mainland Poverty Assessment: Tanzania's Path to Poverty Reduction and Pro-Poor Growth Part 1*. The World Bank Group. Available at: [Link](#).

30 Bonate, L. J. K. (2010). Islam in Northern Mozambique: A Historical Overview. *History Compass*, 8(7): PP.573-593. Available at: [Link](#).

31 Ibid.

32 National Bureau of Statistics and Mtwara Regional Commissioner's Office (2018). *Mtwara Region Socio-Economic Profile, 2015*. Available at: [Link](#).

33 Feijó, J. (2023). Return of the Populations and Reconstruction of the Northeast of Cabo Delgado: From the Weakening of the State to the Emergence of Totaland. *Destaque Rural*, 211. Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR). Available at: [Link](#); Mapfumo, L. (2019). The Nexus Between Violent Extremism and the Illicit Economy in Northern Mozambique: Is Mozambique Under Siege from International Organised Crime? *Extremisms in Africa*, 104. Available at: [Link](#).

34 Israel, P. (2024). *The History of the Makonde of Mozambique*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Available at: [Link](#).

35 Walwa, W. J. (2022). Beyond Violence: Understanding Social Cohesion and Peace Attributes on the Tanzania-Mozambique Border. *The African Review*. Available at: [Link](#).



“ Our life is constantly cross-border...it was intense, continuous.

*Women CSO representative, Mtwara region, Tanzania*

Against this backdrop of interconnected communities and shared livelihoods, the eruption of conflict in Cabo Delgado has had profound implications for the entire border region. Most of the conflict has been concentrated in Mozambique but has been shaped by factors that proliferate across the Mozambique-Tanzania border. Previous research shows that while al-Shabaab was initially established in Cabo Delgado in 2014, its founders were both Mozambican and Tanzanian adherents of fundamentalist ‘scripturist’ interpretations of Islam which originated in Tanzania.<sup>36</sup> Three specific Tanzanian sheiks reportedly played a significant role in helping to create, expand and eventually militarise al-Shabaab, establishing mosques and madrassas to teach their fundamentalist interpretations of Islam to local communities in Mocímboa da Praia from 2014.<sup>37</sup> Tanzanians – such as a local trader known as the ‘Great Commander’ or ‘Chief Hassan’ – who had links to extremist religious leaders in Tanzania, also contributed to al-Shabaab’s expansion by distributing audio-visual material from radical Islamic leaders in communities in northern Mozambique.<sup>38</sup> These developments were made possible by the close cultural and religious ties between Tanzania and communities in northern Mozambique, where Muslim communities in coastal borderland areas had a long history of accepting religious clerics and leaders from Tanzania who sermonised them in Swahili, a common language along the Tanzanian and

Mozambican coast. It was largely thanks to these established links that al-Shabaab’s founders and adherents were able to gain a foothold in northern Mozambique.<sup>39</sup>

The armed conflict in the province of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique has had a devastating impact on local communities. Between the start of the conflict in October 2017 and October 2024, more than 1.3 million internal displacements had been reported,<sup>40</sup> and as of 30 September 2024, 541,000 people remained displaced.<sup>41</sup> The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report for October 2024 to April 2025 projects a rise in acute food insecurity from 2.79 million to 3.3 million people over the period, including 335,545 in IPC Phase 4 (Emergency) in Cabo Delgado, mostly due to the impact of the conflict.<sup>42</sup> The conflict’s deep and enduring impacts on northern Mozambique spurred an increase in research on the conflict’s underlying causes and its impacts on local populations, particularly on their security, health, livelihoods and access to key services.

The conflict has been characterised by its complex interplay of factors, including socioeconomic marginalisation, religious extremism and the presence of the al-Shabaab insurgency, with ties to both Mozambican and Tanzanian nationals. This group has exploited pre-existing cross-border tensions to fuel violence and instability, leading to widespread displacement, human rights abuses and economic disruption. Moreover, the conflict’s cross-border nature is rooted in the shared religious and cultural ties between communities in Tanzania and Mozambique, particularly the influence of Tanzanian religious figures who promote fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

36 Habibe, S., Forquilha, S. and Pereira, J. (2019). Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique: The Case of Mocímboa da Praia. *Cadernos IESE*, No. 17. Available at: [Link](#).

37 Cardoso, F. J. (May 2021). *Cabo Delgado: Insurgents, Jihadists or Terrorists*. p. 18. Available at: [Link](#).

38 Habibe, S., Forquilha, S., and Pereira, J. (2019). Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique: The Case of Mocímboa da Praia. *Cadernos IESE*, No. 17. Available at: [Link](#).

39 Ibid.

40 De Almeida, T. (2024). *7 years into the conflict, solutions to displacement in Cabo Delgado remain elusive*. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). Available at: [Link](#).

41 OCHA. (2024). *Mozambique: Access Snapshot - Cabo Delgado Province, as of 30 September 2024*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Available at: [Link](#).

42 IPC (2024). *Mozambique: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for April - September 2024 and Projection for October 2024 - March 2025*. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. Available at: [Link](#).

However, there has been limited research on the conflict's cross-border dimensions, despite the recognition that many of the factors driving the conflict in Mozambique have been shaped by social, political and economic dynamics that link communities across the Mozambique-Tanzania border. In addition, most of the existing research on the gendered dimensions of the conflict has focused mostly on the impact of conflict on women as static subjects with immutable roles. This is partly because this work has been undertaken primarily by practitioners such as international NGOs and Mozambican CSOs, which have sought to inform humanitarian interventions. As a result, there remains a limited understanding of both the cross-border dimensions of the conflict, and how they affect men and women of different characteristics on both sides of the border within Mtwara (in Tanzania) and Cabo Delgado (in Mozambique). Furthermore, there is also limited research on how the conflict and its impacts are shaping gender roles and norms on both sides of the border.

As discussed in the next part of this paper, the armed conflict that began in northern Mozambique in 2017 was shaped by historical cross-border dynamics in the Tanzania-Mozambique borderlands region. The conflict, primarily driven by socio-economic disparities, religious extremism and political marginalisation, has deeply affected local communities on both sides of the border. This research also shows how the conflict's impact has, in turn, been influenced by the cross-border nature of the economy in the region, and how prevailing gender roles and norms have played a central role in determining key differences in how men and women have experienced these impacts. More precisely, men have predominantly been involved as combatants and providers, while women have faced increased domestic burdens and vulnerabilities, including SGBV.

## 5. Research findings

### The cross-border and gendered impacts of conflict in northern Mozambique

Men and women's involvement in, and contribution to, the conflict in northern Mozambique has largely – but not strictly – aligned with prevailing gender norms and roles. Most al-Shabaab leaders and fighters have been men (and boys), following and reifying traditional local patriarchal notions which cast men in the role of leaders, providers and protectors in their communities and homes.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, most decisions are made by men, attacks are mostly carried out by men, and young men are disproportionately targeted for recruitment into al-Shabaab on both sides of the border.<sup>44</sup> While there is evidence that some men, especially young boys, have been forcibly recruited by al-Shabaab, most have joined voluntarily. Partly driven by gender-based expectations around men needing to provide for their families, in a context of high levels of poverty and limited economic opportunities, joining al-Shabaab has allowed men to fulfil their gender-based obligations.<sup>45</sup>

While most al-Shabaab members are men, women are also part of the group. Respondents reported that many of these women have been forcibly recruited into al-Shabaab, primarily through abductions, to serve as the wives of al-Shabaab fighters

43 USAID. (2022). *O Impacto dos Conflitos Violentos em Cabo Delgado, por uma Abordagem de Gênero, com Foco para as Mulheres e Meninas. Tuko Pamoja–Mozambique Community Resilience Programme Grantee Final Report, PEM Zone: Assessing the Impacts of VE on Women in Cabo Delgado*. Available at: [Link](#).

44 KII 15. CSO representative. Maputo, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024; KII 7. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; ICG. (2021). *Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado*. International Crisis Group. Available at: [Link](#).

45 Monzani, B. and Sustersic, M. S. (2023). *Conflict analysis of Cabo Delgado Province in Mozambique*. Research Report. Agency for Peacebuilding. Available at: [Link](#); Habibe, S., Forquilha, S., and Pereira, J. (2019). *Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique: The Case of Mocimboa da Praia*. *Cadernos IESE*, No. 17. Available at: [Link](#).

or to fulfil gender-confirming support roles such as cooking for al-Shabaab fighters.<sup>46</sup> In some cases, young women in poor households have been forced by their families to marry al-Shabaab fighters as a means to secure protection and income – a practice exacerbated by the conflict itself, as explored further below.<sup>47</sup> But not all women in al-Shabaab have been forcibly recruited. Many have joined voluntarily, citing several different reasons, including the need for protection, access to income (from selling goods and services, or renting homes to and hiding weapons for al-Shabaab fighters), and solidarity with their male friends and family members involved in the group.<sup>48</sup> Respondents reported that women who joined voluntarily have played a wide range of roles. Women have acted as spies for the group, gathering and sharing information relevant to the group's operations, they have transported money and weapons across the border (given the fact that they are less likely to be stopped and searched by security forces), and they have led recruitment of other women.<sup>49</sup> Beyond support roles, anecdotal evidence from 2020 shows that some women members have also taken on combat roles, directly participating in military operations, indicating a subversion of established gender norms and roles within the context of the conflict.<sup>50</sup> Although not explicit, several respondents reported that women were susceptible to radicalisation and to joining al-Shabaab as a means to gain agency in a context where women have limited opportunities to do so.<sup>51</sup> While more research with women members of al-Shabaab would be required to verify this claim, it implies that for those women who join voluntarily, participating

in the group could be seen as a means of both economic and socio-political empowerment. This indicates a need to rethink approaches to policy and programming on women in conflict, to account for their diverse roles, and to address the drivers behind their active support of, and participation in, armed groups.

## Gender and cross-border trade in conflict-affected borderlands

Cross-border trade plays a significant role in the livelihoods of communities in the Tanzania-Mozambique borderlands, and its disruption has been both a cause and a consequence of the ongoing conflict. The conflict in Cabo Delgado has significantly disrupted traditional cross-border trade dynamics, particularly affecting informal trade routes that many local communities, especially women, rely upon for their economic survival. The closure of official border posts, such as the Kilambo-Namoto crossing following insurgent attacks, has forced traders to seek alternative, often informal, routes to continue their economic activities.<sup>52</sup> This shift has not only increased the risks associated with cross-border trade but has also exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women traders, who now face heightened exposure to exploitation and violence in these unregulated pathways.

The broader economic ramifications of this disruption have intensified hardship, contributing to the conflict by deepening

46 KII 6. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; Feijó, J. (2021). *The Role of Women Conflict in Cabo Delgado: Understanding Vicious Cycles of Violence*. Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR) and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: [Link](#).

47 KII 6. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 7. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

48 Hendricks, C., Lucey, A. and Macaringue, L. D. G. (2023). *Making women's roles and experiences visible in countering and preventing violent extremism: the forgotten women of Cabo Delgado*. Policy Paper. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: [Link](#); Feijó, J. (2021). *The Role of Women Conflict in Cabo Delgado: Understanding Vicious Cycles of Violence*. Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR) and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: [Link](#).

49 KII 1. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 6. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 15. CSO representative. Maputo, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024.

50 Feijó, J. (2021). *The Role of Women Conflict in Cabo Delgado: Understanding Vicious Cycles of Violence*. p.20. Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR) and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: [Link](#).

51 FGD 8. Adult women. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; KII 6. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 7. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

52 Zitamar News. (2024). *The dynamics of informal cross-border trade between Cabo Delgado and Mtwara*. Available at: [Link](#).

poverty and unemployment, which in turn fuels further instability. Increased insecurity has severely restricted movement across the border, limiting access to markets and essential resources. This has had a disproportionate impact on women, who traditionally have played a less prominent role in cross-border trade and now face additional barriers due to the conflict. Women traders have reported increased harassment and extortion at checkpoints, as well as heightened risks of gender-based violence. Additionally, the conflict has led to the closure of certain border crossings, further constraining women's ability to access markets and generate income. The Tanzanian government's ban on the export of food products to Mozambique has also forced local merchants in Cabo Delgado to source manufactured goods from Tanzania while relying on domestic markets, such as Pemba, for food supplies.<sup>53</sup> This reconfiguration of trade patterns underscores the complex interplay between conflict, cross-border trade and gendered economic roles. Given the heightened risks and economic precarity faced by women traders, it is essential to develop policies that ensure their protection and empowerment, as they play a critical role in sustaining livelihoods in these conflict-affected borderlands.

The disruption of cross-border trade has not only exacerbated economic precarity but has also reinforced and, in some cases, reshaped gender roles within the borderland economy. Gender norms and roles have traditionally played a central role in determining how individuals engage in cross-border trade, with key differences between men and women. Men and women's different roles in cross-border trade reflect the gendered ways in which men and women participate in the broader economy in the borderlands region.

Traditionally, men on both sides have been the primary providers for their families, earning income mainly through commercial activities outside the home, including through farming, fishing, and formal and informal employment, particularly casual labour in agriculture and construction.<sup>54</sup> The lack of restrictions on men's movement outside their households and communities has enabled men to engage in productive economic activities across the border, including cross-border trade and the provision of cross-border services such as transport via motorcycle taxis, boats and buses.<sup>55</sup> Study respondents confirmed that cross-border trade is indeed dominated by men, who are the primary agents involved in the wholesale purchase, transport and sale of goods on both sides of the border.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike men, whose role as the breadwinners was ubiquitous, there is significant variation in women's roles, with differences reported across different families and households. A number of women respondents reported that women's roles in their families are primarily domestic, with responsibilities such as child and elderly care, collection of water and firewood, purchasing of food and cooking, among others. However, many also reported that women also engage in income-generating activities, including small-scale horticulture on their families' *machambas* (cultivated plots of land) or, for communities near the Rovuma River, along the riverbanks on either side of the border. Women on the coast also participate in the fishing value chain by engaging in intertidal octopus harvesting and the selling of dried fish which their male family members fish.<sup>57</sup> Women were also reported to run small informal businesses, selling surplus from their horticultural production, cakes, charcoal, fabrics and clothing, among other things.<sup>58</sup> These variations in women's roles demonstrate

53 Ibid.

54 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; KII 2. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 12. Community leader (woman). Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

55 KII 1. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 16. CSO representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024.

56 KII 16. CSO representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

57 FAO. (2023). *Fishery and Aquaculture Country Profiles: Mozambique*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Available at: [Link](#); FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

58 FGD 5. Young women. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; FGD 8. Adult women. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.



that women's roles in their communities are more fluid and conditional, governed by social norms but also their own respective family's distinct needs and views. As a woman activist in Palma explained, "the social norms established by each family directly impact what is expected of women. In some families, there may be stricter rules that limit women's participation in certain activities, while others may be more permissive. This results in a diversity of expectations and constraints within the same community."<sup>59</sup>

Any income-generating activities women participate in are in addition to their hefty household responsibilities. As one respondent underlined, women's engagement in income generation offers "some independence", but "they depended on men and were given a lot of domestic activities. Women carry a lot of weight. Everything in the family is the responsibility of the woman."<sup>60</sup> Women's domestic role and their limited participation in income-generating activities limits their engagement in the cross-border economy. Nevertheless, respondents on both sides of the border reported that many women did indeed engage in cross-border trade, albeit on a smaller scale. They reported that women in Tanzania cross the border to sell clothing items and agricultural products to Mozambicans, while others set up food and clothing shops near border crossings, with some even setting up their shops on the Mozambican side of the border.<sup>61</sup> On the Mozambican side, too, women set up stalls to sell food, fabrics and clothing, and travel across the border primarily to sell cashews, octopus, dried fish and clothing.<sup>62</sup> Cross-border trade is central to women's ability to fulfil their gender-based roles and responsibilities, including women who do not themselves directly engage in cross-border trading. Women on both sides of the border depend on cross-border trade to access

essential goods for household consumption, their children's education and healthcare.<sup>63</sup>

The economic impacts of the conflict in northern Mozambique in the Tanzania-Mozambique borderlands have affected men and women differently, shaped primarily by their gendered experiences of socio-economic participation prior to the start of the conflict. As seen above, men are the primary providers at the household level, with families relying on men's incomes from (in)formal employment, agriculture and trade to meet household needs. While women's roles are primarily domestic, this research has shed light on the ways that women on both sides of the border have also engaged in economic activity outside the household, primarily through small-scale agriculture – at much higher rates on the Tanzanian side of the border – and informal business and trading. This differentiation in the nature and magnitude of men's and women's participation in the local economy prior to the start of the conflict has determines, in turn, how they have been affected by the conflict's economic impacts.

**“ Men have found themselves without employment options due to the collapse of local industries and insecurity, while women have been affected by reduced opportunities in informal trade and small businesses.**

*Female community member in Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique*

59 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

60 KII 7. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

61 KII 4. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 7. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 10. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

62 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; FGD 3. Adults mixed. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. July 2024; KII 8. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 16. CSO representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024.

63 KII 10. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.



## The impact on men

According to respondents, the closure of the border, the introduction of stricter border security measures, and the sense of insecurity driven both by the conflict and by the securitisation of the borderlands have led to large-scale unemployment among men in the borderlands. The introduction of stricter border security measures has significantly affected men, particularly those who rely on cross-border trade, casual labour or seasonal migration for employment. Increased surveillance, tighter restrictions on movement and the militarisation of the border have made it more difficult for men to access income-generating opportunities across the border. In some cases, men have been prevented from crossing altogether, forcing them to seek precarious employment locally, often in low-paying and exploitative conditions. Others, unable to find alternative livelihoods, have been pushed into negative coping mechanisms, including recruitment into armed groups such as al-Shabaab. Furthermore, heightened security measures have led to an increase in arbitrary detentions and harassment, as men are often viewed with suspicion by security forces, particularly in areas with known insurgent activity.

These dynamics have compounded economic insecurity, deepened frustrations and, in some cases, reinforced traditional gender expectations that men must provide for their families despite shrinking opportunities. A female respondent in Palma reported that “many men are now unemployed, whereas before the conflict many were employed and life was progressing well”, with another confirming this by adding that “men were affected in the practice of cutting wood, fishing, commerce, and others who were formally employed, lost their jobs.”<sup>64</sup> There was a widespread view that due to men’s role as the

primary breadwinners, their loss of income has resulted in greater food insecurity and poverty for their entire household. As a female community member in Mueda expressed, unemployment among men “made life difficult for their families, as they had no resources for food”,<sup>65</sup> a concern echoed by a female local leader, who stated that “men...may face difficulties related to job loss and security, affecting their ability to provide for their families and participate in community life.”<sup>66</sup>

The main coping mechanism reported by respondents in Mozambique for dealing with these economic challenges was that men have been forced to accept jobs as casual labourers in businesses and on farms, which are exploiting their precarious situation by paying them very low wages. As a respondent in Palma explained, “in some areas, men are forced to work in cultivation, loading and other activities, often through informal agreements or unfavourable negotiations. These jobs are carried out in precarious conditions, with low wages or without adequate remuneration. Workers accept these conditions because they need to support their families and have no viable alternatives.”<sup>67</sup> A male respondent in Mueda confirmed this, recounting that “with the insurgency, people are desperate to obtain sources of income and therefore often do not consider the amount or danger of the work or the pay, which has been lower.”<sup>68</sup>

In Tanzania, however, the two main coping mechanisms reported as being adopted by men were recruitment into al-Shabaab and migration. A number of respondents highlighted that the loss of employment opportunities has pushed many young men to seek income by joining al-Shabaab.<sup>69</sup> Others reported that many men who have lost their jobs in trading or agriculture have chosen to migrate in search of employment, moving further north, away from their border, often leaving their families behind. A CSO representative in Mtwara explained

64 FGD 3. Adults mixed. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. July 2024.

65 Ibid.

66 KII 14. Local leader (female). Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024.

67 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

68 FGD 6. Adults men. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024.

69 KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 4. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

that “before the crisis, men were the primary providers for their families (from agriculture and business). After the crisis, there was a separation of families. There is no longer the possibility to cultivate, most of the men moved to town to search for jobs to support their families.”<sup>70</sup> Another confirmed that “there are many cases of men abandoning their wives” to seek employment in urban centres far from their homes.<sup>71</sup> Several respondents framed this phenomenon in more negative terms, reporting that men have “escaped” or simply “run away”, leaving their wives and children behind without sending them any financial support afterwards.<sup>72</sup> The absence of similar reporting on the Mozambique side of the border is likely an indicator of the higher levels of insecurity in Cabo Delgado relative to Mtwara – al-Shabaab is much more present and operational in Cabo Delgado – and that there are fewer economic opportunities on the Mozambican side as well, including as a result of insecurity.

## The impact on women

While recognising the economic impact on men, it is evident that women have also been deeply impacted, albeit in different ways, due to the social restrictions and responsibilities imposed on women, the negative coping mechanisms women have had to engage in to meet their responsibilities and women’s increased vulnerability to risks. As seen above, while women’s roles are primarily domestic, many used to supplement their family incomes through small-scale agricultural and informal business activities. Like men, these women’s economic activities have been highly impacted by insecurity and securitisation in the borderlands.

A woman respondent in Palma recounted how “women were affected more substantially,

because women...were prohibited from engaging in clam collecting, crab collecting or selling cakes, charcoal, rice cultivation, or other activities that they had been doing before conflict, for fear of being in unsafe areas.”<sup>73</sup> In Palma, too, women’s economic activities have been disrupted, as one woman respondent explained, “women, who often relied on petty trading and the sale of agricultural produce, have also been affected by the lack of security and difficulty in accessing markets.”<sup>74</sup>

According to respondents in Mtwara, the same has occurred to women on the Tanzanian side of the border. As one respondent reported, “in Mtwara, economic activities for women are trading and doing small businesses, and food vendors. Now those activities have been shut down completely.”<sup>75</sup> This was confirmed by another respondent in Mtwara, who added that “women had their business activities: they were mainly food vendors. Some had shops along the borders, others were trading with Mozambique. They have been affected because their activities have been closed.”<sup>76</sup> The result of this, as one respondent articulated, is that “now the women are more at home. They do not know what to do”, and that “women were left without a source of income.”<sup>77</sup>

**“ The role of women has been impacted, with an increase in domestic responsibilities and a reduction in opportunities for economic and social participation.**

*Woman community leader in Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique*

Most women consulted as part of the study underlined that the disruptions to their economic activities presented a particular,

70 KII 2. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

71 KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

72 KIIs 3, 9, 10. CSO representatives. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

73 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; FGD 3. Adults mixed. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. July 2024; KII 8. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 9. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

74 FGD 8. Adult women. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024.

75 KII 4. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

76 KII 7. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

77 KII 9. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

additional burden relative to men because of women's domestic and care responsibilities. One respondent succinctly captured the categorical difference in how men and women have been impacted, explaining that while "men face similar [economic] obstacles, women may be more impacted due to additional restrictions related to security and their social status", adding that "women often face additional challenges due to domestic responsibilities, limited access to resources and increased risk of violence."<sup>78</sup> Prior to the conflict's disruptions, women who engaged in economic activity were able to use their income to supplement their husbands' incomes, using their own income order to meet responsibilities which their husbands did not prioritise, particularly providing care to their children and the elderly. It also gave them some influence over decision-making over the use of household income.<sup>79</sup>

However, after the start of the conflict, women were not able to adapt to the new economic reality as well as men due to gender norms which pushed them back and circumscribed them into their traditionally domestic roles. This shows the limit to women's agency and how it is ultimately shaped by gendered power relations. Before the conflict, women's participation in economic activities outside their households was not ubiquitous; as seen above, it varied across families. Where this was allowed, the conflict has demonstrated that it was largely contingent on factors such as security, family need and the husband's approval, not on any evolution of gender norms. The dissonance between gender roles and norms thus becomes apparent, as women may be able to take on roles that are not traditionally women's roles, but only in certain conditions. And even when this

happens, it is not an indicator of, or necessarily a precondition for, a shift in prevailing gender norms.

With the decrease in women's economic activities, they now depend almost exclusively on the income of their husbands, limiting their ability to contribute to decision-making on the use of household income. As a CSO representative summarised, "if women do not make money they cannot choose how to spend their money. So, for example, they might not be able to spend it on healthy food for their children. We know that women make the best decision in terms of spending but now they do not have power."<sup>80</sup> Fewer resources at the household level have also increased the burden on women, who are expected to continue meeting their domestic responsibilities regardless of the decreasing income available to them. As one respondent explained, "whatever happens, women are responsible for taking care of their families", placing a burden on them to find a way to do so, including exposing women and girls to insecurity risks to continue to be able to, for example, fetch water and firewood for household consumption.<sup>81</sup> Both men and women respondents, on both sides of the border, reported that there has been a marked rise in SGBV against women, with attacks against women occurring mainly when women leave their homes to collect water and firewood, or to buy food and goods for their families.<sup>82</sup> Despite this risk, the burden of household tasks has remained with women. The other main form of SGBV reported was domestic violence, with a number of respondents explaining that this is due to the fact that as men are now spending more time at home due to unemployment and a lack of economic activities, they have become more frustrated and aggressive.<sup>83</sup>

78 KII 14. Local leader (female). Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024.

79 Pinto, M. (2022). *Conflict Sensitive Rapid Gender Analysis Cabo Delgado, Mozambique*. CARE International. Available at: link.

80 KII 1. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024

81 FGD 3. Adults mixed. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. July 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

82 FGD 6. Adult men. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; FGD 8. Adult women. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 6. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 14. Local leader (female). Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

83 FGD 6. Adult men. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 10. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 14. Local leader (female). Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024.

The burden of household responsibilities has been even more pronounced for women heads-of-household. Several respondents reported the number of women-headed households in the borderlands has increased since the start of the conflict in 2017. In Tanzania, as seen above, this has been mainly due to the economic impacts of insecurity and the securitisation of the borderlands, which have pushed men to either abandon their families or leave them in search for employment elsewhere. In Mozambique, however, the main reason cited was the abduction and death of male heads-of-household due to the conflict.<sup>84</sup> This underlines the stark difference in how communities on the Mozambican side of the border – which has seen the brunt of the violence – have experienced the impacts of the conflict relative to communities in Mtwara. According to respondents on both sides of the border, women heads-of-household have faced the double burden of having to provide income to support their families while still meeting their household obligations. As one respondent explained, there are many cases of men abandoning their wives, leaving them with the economic burden.<sup>85</sup> To meet their responsibilities, women heads-of-household have had to resort to different strategies because “now that the men have left...several [women] are left alone and need to find ways to sustain themselves.”<sup>86</sup>

On the Tanzanian side of the border, where cultivation is banned, some women have resorted to growing vegetables in certain poorly patrolled areas in secret, risking interdiction and even arrest by the security forces.<sup>87</sup> With limited access to markets, some

of these women have resorted to selling the food they produce to extremists linked to al-Shabaab, demonstrating that in situations of deprivation and insecurity, communities are less likely to be discerning about the coping mechanisms they engage in.<sup>88</sup> In fact, this is not the only link to al-Shabaab. According to respondents, several women on the Tanzanian side of the border have resorted to al-Shabaab through other means, including either by marrying al-Shabaab fighters themselves or by giving away their daughters in marriage.<sup>89</sup>

Forced marriage was also reported on the Mozambican side of the border as a common negative coping mechanism. A number of respondents underscored how increased poverty has driven a rise in forced child marriage as families seek to relieve the burden on the household to receive money or food and other assets as a bride price.<sup>90</sup> This was confirmed by research undertaken by Save the Children in 2024, which found that, while child marriage is normalised as common practice in the region, there has been a rise in cases since the start of the conflict.<sup>91</sup> Between 2022 and 2023, for example, there was an increase of 10 percent in recorded cases of child marriage in the province.<sup>92</sup>

The report highlights that, like in Tanzania, marrying girls to “dangerous individuals” has become an accepted practice as a means to keep families safe.<sup>93</sup> In addition to forced marriage, there has also been a rise in transactional sex as a coping mechanism, particularly among women heads-of-household who resort to transactional sex to receive income to feed their families.

84 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; FGD 3. Adults mixed. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. July 2024.

85 KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

86 KII 2. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

87 Ibid; KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 8. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 10. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

88 KII 8. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

89 KII 6. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 9. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

90 KII 14. Local leader (female). Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024; KII 15. CSO representative. Maputo, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024; KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

91 Save the Children. (2024). *Mozambique: Rising violence driving up child marriage in Cabo Delgado province*. Available at: [Link](#).

92 Ibid.

93 Save the Children. (2024). *Gender and Power analysis of Child Marriage in Cabo Delgado Province June 2024*. Available at: [Link](#).



Respondents on both sides of the border reported how economic hardship and the absence of viable alternatives has forced many women to rely on transactional sex.<sup>94</sup> In Tanzania, for example, one respondent explained that as “women are not able to cultivate their land, because the government prohibited them to cultivate in the most fertile areas [the ones along the river]...you can find that a mum of a girl does not have a way to support them so what do they do is commercial sex. It is a violence”,<sup>95</sup> with another adding that “women are forced to perform sex in exchange of money because they cannot provide for themselves and their families.”<sup>96</sup> This further highlights how the securitisation of communities in the borderlands has compounded, rather than lowered, insecurity among community members. The impact of hard security measures has indeed increased women and girl’s vulnerability and their exposure to protection and security risks, underlining the unintended consequences of securitisation.

## The impact on gender roles and norms: from reinforcement to transformation

In addition to being a determining factor in how communities experience the impacts of the conflict in the borderlands region, gender roles have been impacted in diverse ways. There was considerable variation among study respondents regarding the issue of how gender roles and norms have been impacted by the economic and livelihood disruptions caused by the conflict. Most respondents shared a view that the impacts of the conflict had not changed gender roles or norms, with

many adding that in fact it had reinforced and deepened gender roles as women were more burdened with household responsibilities.<sup>97</sup> This is reportedly largely due to the increase in women-headed households and a rise in care needs due to the impact of the conflict, as more orphans and elderly who have lost family members need care.<sup>98</sup> The increased presence of men has also further constrained women’s agency, by removing the already-limited space they had to make decisions within the domestic domain. This again reinforces the finding reported above, that while women’s roles may be fluid, allowing them to break out of traditional roles under the right conditions – for example, by engaging in income-generating activities outside the household – gender norms are more fixed. Gender norms constrain women’s agency by enforcing gendered power relations that prioritise male needs and decisions above women’s, no matter what the conditions are.

The impact of the conflict on gender roles and norms in the borderland of Cabo Delgado has been complex, encompassing both reinforcement of traditional roles and moments of transformation. While the conflict has deepened certain gendered expectations – particularly around men as providers and women as caregivers – it has also catalysed shifts in these norms, often driven by necessity and resilience. For instance, in the absence of male breadwinners, women heads-of-household have increasingly taken on economic responsibilities that traditionally have been male dominated, such as income generation and decision-making. These shifts have not been without resistance, as entrenched patriarchal norms continue to influence community dynamics. However, women’s new roles have also given them the agency to challenge traditional gender expectations and access spaces previously reserved for men, such as community

94 KII 2. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024; KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

95 KII 2. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

96 KII 3. CSO representative. Mtwara, Tanzania (remotely). August 2024.

97 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; FGD 4. Young women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

98 FGD 4. Young women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.



leadership and conflict resolution. This transformation is particularly evident in the involvement of women in rebuilding efforts, both within households and in public infrastructure. Women have become key actors in reconstruction projects, even taking on leadership roles within these initiatives.

Despite these gains, the intersection of traditional gender norms and the ongoing conflict has meant that such transformations remain fragile. The pressure of increased domestic and economic responsibilities on women, combined with heightened insecurity and limited access to resources, underscores the resilience of gendered power structures that resist change. Yet, in these difficult circumstances, women are not only adapting to new roles but also redefining them, showing how conflict can act as a catalyst for changing gender dynamics. This resilience is evident in the increasing participation of women in peacebuilding efforts, where they have taken on active roles in mediation, conflict resolution and community cohesion. Thus, while the conflict in Cabo Delgado has certainly reinforced many gender norms, it has also created opportunities for their transformation. The gendered experiences of this conflict highlight both the constraints women face and their ability to leverage adversity to challenge and transform traditional gender roles, contributing to longterm resilience and potential shifts in social structures.

As explained before, most men in the borderlands have lost their primary sources of income and have struggled to find alternatives, driving them to spend more time idly at home. This has challenged prevailing notions of masculinity and driven men to engage in negative coping mechanisms such as alcoholism, which in turn has contributed to the rise in domestic violence described above.<sup>99</sup> This has reportedly also contributed to men compensating by taking more direct

control over household-level decision-making, which was often in women's purview, while not actually contributing to household tasks.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, there are reportedly cases in which the men have indeed contributed to household responsibilities, supporting their wives by taking on tasks usually assigned to women. As one woman respondent explained, "traditional social norms often dictate that women should take on specific roles, such as taking care of the home and family, while men are seen as the main providers. These expectations ended up not happening with the conflict, where men and women began to perform the same tasks."<sup>101</sup> Men, too, echoed this view, as exemplified by a male respondent in Mueda, who shared that "nowadays, men and women have the same functions [in the household], which is different from before."<sup>102</sup> This, however, was a minority view, indicating that while it does happen, it is not common.

A key insight is that despite men's unemployment leading to a rise in domestic violence, as recognised by a plurality of respondents, there is a general sense of sympathy and even pity for men among women respondents. Despite the increasing burden on women, and the fact that many women are losing their independence and decision-making power within their households, the general sense among women is that men are suffering most for not being able to fulfil their traditional roles as providers for their families. The impact of this prevailing attitude is that men have in many ways escaped accountability for violence, which is primarily perpetrated by men. As one respondent noted, "men have been the main agents of violence, but this general sense of 'pity' against men has left them off the hook for taking responsibility to build peace and social cohesion, and to support the processes for caring for communities."<sup>103</sup> This reinforces the 'stickiness' of gender norms in the region, which have remained resilient to

99 KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

100 KII 16. CSO representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024; Pinto, M. (2022). *Conflict Sensitive Rapid Gender Analysis Cabo Delgado, Mozambique*. CARE International. Available at: [Link](#).

101 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

102 FGD 6. Adult men. Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. August 2024.

103 KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

the socioeconomic shocks introduced by the conflict. Even when men engage in certain roles and behaviours that are harmful, the relational power of men drives even women to forgive and even victimise men rather than hold them accountable, underlining men's agency and women's enduring subordination.

While in many cases, women's domestic roles have been reinforced by the impacts of conflict, there are cases in which women, particularly women heads-of-household, have been forced to take on roles traditionally reserved for men – and the research indicates that some have used this as an opportunity for empowerment. As seen above, one key traditional male role women have taken on is income generation, principally women heads- of-household, who have become the primary breadwinners for their families and those in their care. Another male-dominated area women have stepped into is (re)construction, particularly in areas of returns of internally displaced peoples where they have organised themselves to pressure local authorities on reconstruction priorities and, in some cases, engaged in construction themselves. Some respondents reported that despite being burdened with household responsibilities and, in the case of women heads-of-household, income generation, many women have contributed to the rebuilding of their homes.<sup>104</sup> Others have mobilised to rebuild public infrastructure, such as a school in Palma, which one respondent reported was fully rebuilt through the initiative of a group of local women, who themselves participated in the construction process.<sup>105</sup>

Respondents also reported that, while still rare, women, particularly women heads-of- household, have increasingly become involved in community governance, taking on community leadership roles previously reserved for men.<sup>106</sup> Women have increasingly joined local councils, advised men in conflict

resolution, and played a key role in mediating and resolving conflict among women or involving women victims.<sup>107</sup> As one young woman in Palma reported, “some women are involved in resolving conflicts within the community, contributing to social cohesion and helping to build bridges between different groups”, explaining that this is because “women often have a keen ability to identify problems and secrets, whether from people with more interest or underlying issues. This ability allows them to bring these problems to light and discuss them openly, helping to find consensual solutions.”<sup>108</sup> A community leader in Palma confirmed this, recounting that women have been involved in “mobilisation of the community in consolidating peace, resolving conflicts and ensuring social cohesion.”<sup>109</sup> One key example of women involved in conflict resolution are the *matronas* – traditional birth attendants – who, due to their role, have often become activists for women's rights, including by joining community governance and justice structures. Nevertheless, even when they join, they have a limited voice, as most of the decision-making power remains with traditional male elders and local government authorities, which are mostly men.<sup>110</sup>

This demonstrates that while the conflict has created a space for women and some have sought to claim agency through engagement in those spaces, prevailing gender norms remain a central barrier. International and national CSOs and NGOs have played a key role in enabling women's participation, including through training on conflict management and community-based development, which has afforded women the skills and confidence to seek opportunities to become agents for change in their communities, including by establishing and supporting community structures such as the *clubes da paz* (peace clubs), cooperatives, and village savings

104 FGD 2. Adult women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024; FGD 4. Young women. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

105 KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

106 KII 16. CSO representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024.

107 KII 15. CSO representative. Maputo, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024.

108 FGD 3. Adults mixed. Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. July 2024.

109 KII 12. Community leader (woman). Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. June 2024.

110 KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

and loans associations.<sup>111</sup> Some NGO/CSO programmes have also sought to transform harmful local gender norms and imposed quotas on women's participation in their programmes, which has contributed to creating spaces for women to claim some degree of agency in processes that have an impact on community peace and development.

While not a dominant trend, these cases demonstrate that the impacts of the conflict have created spaces for women to take on greater agency and shift their perceptions of their capabilities and the roles that they can play even in the face of deep challenges. Albeit in a limited capacity, women in the borderlands have shown that they can seize spaces and opportunities to drive small changes, which gradually and increasingly challenge traditional, discriminatory gender roles and norms. These small changes have the potential to further strengthen women's agency and empower them to create more spaces for change. This is a process that will take time, but external programming has the potential to support these changes and to help create opportunities for shifting gender norms.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

This research shows how the armed conflict that began in northern Mozambique in 2017 has been shaped by historical cross-border dynamics in the Tanzania-Mozambique borderlands region. It has also analysed the conflict's impact in relation to the cross-border nature of the economy in the region, and it highlighted how prevailing gender roles and norms have played a central role in determining key differences in how men and women have experienced these impacts. This paper's empirical findings contribute to research on the conflict-gender nexus that challenges the strict gender-based division of labour between men and women in armed

conflict. While most women have participated in the conflict indirectly, and many involuntarily, we have shown how women in northern Mozambique and southern Tanzania have participated in the conflict voluntarily as well, and have played both support and combat roles. The analytical framework emphasises the potential for conflict to both reinforce and transform gender roles and norms. This is clearly reflected in the findings of this research, which demonstrate how women have taken on new responsibilities and leadership positions within their communities, challenging traditional expectations. However, the research also highlights the persistence of certain gender norms and the challenges women face in navigating these shifting dynamics.

Examining the impacts of the conflict on cross-border trade and the borderland economy, this paper has shown how different gendered norms and behaviours for men and women have enabled and constrained their respective participation in the cross-border economy. This study has also investigated the different gendered economic impacts between men and women in relation to the conflict. Men, as primary providers, have lost their jobs and economic opportunities, with many joining al-Shabaab, others migrating, and many becoming more idle and spending more time at home dealing with the frustration of not meeting their gender-based expectations as breadwinners. On the other hand, women have lost access to important income streams derived from their own smaller-scale economic activities, while retaining the burden of household responsibilities, which in many cases have increased due to the conflict. This has made women more dependent on their husbands and increased women and girls' vulnerability to SGBV in and outside the household, including domestic violence and forced child marriage. As a result, gender norms have not been able to evolve and remain resistant to change. For women heads-of-household, whose numbers have risen due to the conflict, the burden of household obligations has been exacerbated by the need to generate income,

111 KII 15. CSO representative. Maputo, Mozambique (remotely). September 2024; KII 17. CSO representative. Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024; KII 18. International organisation representative. Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remotely). October 2024.

often driving them to take on harmful coping strategies such as transactional sex and engagement with al-Shabaab. The analysis shows how securitisation of communities has undermined both the state and communities' security objectives by compounding the drivers of insecurity and increasing both men and women's vulnerability to al-Shabaab recruitment.

Lastly, this paper has interrogated how, if at all, the impacts of the conflict on men and women's livelihoods have contributed to shifts in gender roles and norms. Research findings show that unemployment among men has challenged traditional conceptions of masculinity based around men being providers, but gender norms remain largely intact. Nevertheless, the findings also confirm that, while minimal, there are instances of women taking on traditionally male roles and leveraging spaces created by the conflict – including through the operations of internationally funded programmes – to claim agency, which can help create further space for women's empowerment and gender equality, especially if supported by gender-sensitive external programmes.

Based on these findings, below are some recommendations to inform the development and implementation of policies and programmes aimed at enhancing gender-just sustainable development and peace in conflict-affected borderland regions.

- 1. Reduce border security barriers:** The Governments of Mozambique and Tanzania should ease border controls by lowering fees and eliminating bribery, which continue to hinder trade. Making cross-border trade more accessible will enable economic recovery, especially for women, who are disproportionately affected by high costs and restricted movement.
- 2. Support secure farming practices:** The Government of Tanzania should review its policy on border cultivation bans. Introducing secure farming areas with appropriate protection will allow communities, particularly women, to maintain food production and livelihoods, contributing to food security and economic resilience.
- 3. Integrate livelihoods and job creation in humanitarian aid:** Donors and development organisations should prioritise programmes that create jobs and strengthen cross-border value chains. This will ensure that both men and women have equal opportunities to contribute to economic recovery, with a focus on the sustainable integration of gender-sensitive livelihoods.
- 4. Address both men and women's needs in economic programming:** Humanitarian and development organisations should target both men and women in their interventions, recognising that addressing only women's needs in isolation may contribute to men's alienation and negative coping mechanisms. Integrating men in gender-transformative economic opportunities will improve livelihoods for all and reduce SGBV.
- 5. Adopt gender-transformative approaches:** Programmes should move beyond token inclusion of women to challenge harmful gender norms. A gendertransformative approach should empower both women and men champions to redefine gender roles, ensuring that women can confidently engage in decision-making, without fear of backlash, while promoting men's support for women's agency. This should include efforts to leverage the influence and spaces created by *matronas* and women heads-of-household to give them and other women more confidence and agency. This will also require working with men and broader communities to ensure that women are adequately supported and not put at risk for being assertive or positioned in spaces that are not traditionally allocated to women.
- 6. Engage men as allies in challenging gender norms:** Humanitarian and development organisations should work with influential men to address harmful gender norms that limit women's participation in peacebuilding and community governance. Engaging male champions will promote the recognition of women's contributions and support their greater role in decision-making and social cohesion.

# Annex

## Overview of participants, per country/location and data collection method

District	Respondent category	No. of KIs	No. of FGDs	No. of respondents	Total male	Total female
	In person					
Palma	Young women (13-18)	-	3	29	-	29
	Mixed adults (18+)	-	2	21	10	11
	Adult women (18+)	-	4	18	-	18
	Adult men (18+)	-	1	8	8	-
	Government authorities	1	-	1	1	-
	Community leaders	19	-	19	18	1
Mueda	Young women (13-18)	-	4	30	-	30
	Mixed adults (18+)	-	4	29	16	13
	Adult women (18+)	-	3	22	-	22
	Adult men (18+)	-	3	19	19	-
	Government authorities	1	-	1	1	-
	Community leaders	15	-	15	13	2
Cabo Delgado (remote)	NGOs	4	-	4	1	3
Mtwara	CSOs	10	-	12	12	-
TOTAL		50	24	228	99	129



## About XCEPT

This publication is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace.

This research is part of XCEPT's workstream on how conflicts connect across borders. It is one of several awards supported by the XCEPT Research Fund to investigate multi-actor interventions in cross-border conflict settings.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government.

For more information, visit [www.xcept-research.org](http://www.xcept-research.org) or contact us at [info@xcept-research.org](mailto:info@xcept-research.org).

This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.

This research paper was funded by the XCEPT Programme.

Cover image: Mozambican women in traditional dresses carrying their luggage on their heads.

Photo credit: Ecophoto (ID 1105353)

## About the authors

Albert Mulli is former Head of Conflict and Peacebuilding at Bodhi, with over 13 years' experience in conflict analysis, stabilisation and peacebuilding. He has held senior roles at Interpeace and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & development Office/Department for International Development, and specialises in political economy analysis and conflict-sensitive programming.

Dr Anna Strachan is a Nairobi-based conflict and gender expert, and Managing Director at Bodhi, with over 15 years' experience in conflict analysis and gender-sensitive peacebuilding. She has authored key resources for international agencies and regularly advises on gender mainstreaming.

Marius Calu is Senior Conflict Researcher at Bodhi, with extensive experience in conflict prevention, governance and peacebuilding, including with UNDP Kosovo. He has published widely on governance and peacebuilding in multi-ethnic societies.

## About Bodhi

Bodhi Global Analysis is an international development consultancy specialising in political economy analysis and conflict analysis. Bodhi produces in-depth research and evaluations to support the development of informed international development strategies and interventions. Their research mainstreams the consideration of minorities, ensuring gender sensitivity, and affords significant attention to local expertise and knowledge through their participatory research approaches.

## About SCDS

Data collection in Mozambique was led by SCDS – Consultoria em Desenvolvimento Social, a reputable Mozambican provider of professional social development and environmental services to clients across diverse sectors both locally and internationally. SCDS has a deep understanding of the economic, social and political realities of Mozambique and other countries in the region.