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Women's Voices in Civil Society Organizations: Evidence from a Civil Society Mapping Project in Mali

Jaimie Bleck, Jessica Gottlieb, Katrina Kosec, and Lindsey Boss

Tremendous optimism prevails around *bottom-up accountability* – a situation in which citizens effectively hold their government to account. This contrasts with *top-down accountability*, whereby higher tiers of governments, donors, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) fulfill this role by restraining, monitoring, and rewarding or sanctioning government. Bottom-up accountability can involve direct citizen participation (often involving efforts to provide them information, voice, and involvement in policymaking) or can be mediated through civil society organizations (CSOs) that monitor and potentially reward or sanction government. A large variety of different types of CSOs exist, distinguished both by their organizational purpose and the composition of their membership, possibly with different willingness and ability to hold government accountable.

Key messages

- Findings from our survey in Mali provide evidence on participation in civil society organizations (CSOs) that can help guide efforts to increase the role of CSOs in holding governments accountable.
- Women have substantial coordinating capacity and social capital; they are involved in both women's and mixed-gender CSOs.
- Individuals' awareness of CSOs is biased toward groups of their own gender, but both men and women are similarly aware of the broad array of CSOs.
- All-female, all-male, and mixed-gender associations tend to have different characteristics:
  - » Mixed-gender CSOs are most likely to be formal, followed by all-female CSOs, with all-male CSOs the least likely to be formal.
  - » All-male CSOs are most likely to be youth organizations, followed by mixed-gender CSOs; all-female CSOs are rarely youth-oriented.
- Organizations tend to serve different purposes:
  - » Economic-focused and public service-focused CSOs are by far the most common types; female-only CSOs are more common than male-only CSOs, though mixed-gender CSOs are most common.
  - » Women's groups predominate in manufacturing, savings groups, skilled labor, and market gardening, while men's groups are more likely to be involved in security, peace and conflict resolution, road maintenance, and agriculture.
- Lack of social capital or organizing capacity are not likely to be binding constraints on women's civic participation in Mali; instead, the biggest constraint appears to be translating women's associational membership, and the organizing capacity that underlies it, into effective civic and political engagement.

Much of the literature has focused on achieving bottom-up accountability through direct citizen participation – in part because it is easier to approach individuals than to develop a clear understanding of the operation, organization, and purpose of the multitude of CSOs that are common in such settings. But achieving bottom-up accountability via direct citizen participation has its limitations. Low levels of civic education, information, and efficacy can demotivate individuals from trying to hold government accountable (Gottlieb 2016; Khemani et al. 2016; Adida et al. 2019; Kosec and Wantchekon 2020). Possibly as a result, directly involving citizens in governance often fails to promote policymaker accountability (Olken 2007; Mansuri and Rao 2004; Buntaine, Daniels, and Devlin 2018).

Bottom-up accountability through involvement of CSOs may be equally or more promising than bottom-up accountability through direct citizen participation, motivating our focus on this mechanism. Prior research has stressed the importance of leadership in generating community engagement and shaping local government preferences (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Humphreys, Masters, and Sandbu 2006; Jack and Recalde 2015). If CSOs can provide such leadership, and overcome collective action problems that confront citizens, they may improve governance. Further, CSOs have the potential to build individual and collective efficacy, which spurs collective action (Duncan 2012).

We focus on the setting of Mali, where — like in much of Africa — CSOs play a critical role in helping citizens organize and pursue shared objectives. We define CSOs as groups or associations whose members are engaged in activities outside of the state or explicit partisan networks. This definition purposefully encompasses a broad range of groups and actors (Kasfir 2013), including NGOs, voluntary associations, ethnic organizations, religious groups, traditional authorities and their constituents, savings and loans groups, informal groups, social clubs, unions, and professional organizations. They may be organized to offer assistance to their own members or have a broader engagement with nonmembers. We anticipate that some will be more willing and able to help hold government accountable than others.

In this issue brief, we ask: What does the full range of active, local-level CSOs look like in Mali, and in particular, how does this vary with their gender composition? We focus on the gender dimension of CSOs for three reasons. First, women in Mali are often highly organized at the local level — frequently in self-help groups or organizations related to gendered economic activities. Second, these more economically focused groupings of Malian women frequently do not translate into civic activity or are not recognized by outside actors as viable CSOs, even though their strong networks and group infrastructure potentially offer untapped social capital. And finally, there is a known gender gap in civic knowledge and participation in Mali, as in other developing countries, that could be mitigated with more civic leadership by women's CSOs (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2011; Isaksson, Kotsadam, and Nerman 2014; Jayachandran 2015; Logan and Bratton 2006).

Despite the potential power of CSOs to hold governments accountable, and the likely importance of their membership and type in this accountability relationship, substantial knowledge gaps persist about CSOs' composition and function. Existing literature on civil society and governance has largely focused on formalized and visible CSOs such as unions, NGOs, liberation movements, ethnic associations, religious movements, and advocacy groups at the national level (Bratton 1989; Makumbe 1998; Gyimah-Boadi 1996; Brass 2016). This has included analysis of the organizing and policymaking power of women's advocacy organizations (Kang 2015; Wing 2012; Tripp 2001, 1994). However, we know much less about decentralized, informal, and local-level associations. Women's associations as agents of civil society have also been understudied, likely because their purported goals are often economic in nature. However, economic organizations can be key pressure groups in civic and political spheres, especially when a clear relationship exists between their economic prospects and the civic or political environment in which they operate.

Study Context and Methodology

We analyze a survey of male and female respondents spread across rural and urban Mali that was conducted with the sole purpose of mapping the wide range of CSOs that exist at the local level. This decentralized, crowdsourced exercise was aimed at identifying the CSOs active at the local level and cataloguing some basic characteristics of these groups, including their membership and type. This bottom-up approach is important — particularly to identify small and informal groups that might not be visible to outside observers but play salient roles in the community. Our findings provide substantial insight into the ways in which women may influence decision-making beyond the household.

Mali provides a useful setting in which to consider the dynamics of gender and CSOs. As Gottlieb (2016) shows, women in Mali are a marginalized social group; both the law and societal norms disadvantage women relative to men (Wing 2012), and the gender gap in civic participation in Mali is one of the highest in Africa (Logan and Bratton 2006). Women are confronted with strong patriarchal norms and also lag behind their male peers in their political knowledge and ability to provide a political opinion (Bleck and Michelitch 2018).

In such a setting, women may be unlikely to influence government or hold it to account without a group structure — such as that provided by a CSO — that offers the information and collective agency required to fulfill this role. Indeed, Tripp (2001) notes that gendered divisions of labor, gendered organizational modes, and exclusion of women from political life mean that women have a different relationship with the state, its power, and patronage; because of this, women's organizations are uniquely situated to challenge state patronage practices. Mali has had a rich and diverse associational life since the transition to multiparty politics in the early 1990s, including a multitude of women's associations.

We identified 40 rural and 18 urban communes in Mali (from 18 *cercles*, the administrative unit above the commune but below the region, much like a county) using a list of communes the World Bank randomized into treatment for a government accountability intervention set to take place *after* our mapping of CSOs. The selected communes span regions in the north, south, and center of the country, including Gao, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, Sikasso, and Timbuktu. These areas exhibit variation in state infrastructure and political competition, as well as past and current exposure to violence from insurgent groups, militias, intercommunal conflict, and the state.

The selection process for respondents varied slightly between rural and urban areas. For rural areas, we sent enumerators to the *chef-lieu* (the administrative seat — typically the largest municipality) of each *cercle* in our sample and asked them to identify eight respondents from the commune(s) of interest. These eight respondents should live in the *chef-lieu* but hail originally from one of the two most politically or economically influential villages in the commune (typically, the commune seat and/or another economic center). The enumerators then interviewed four respondents from each of these two villages. For urban areas, we had the enumerators divide the city into four geographic parts, or neighborhoods, and select four people from each neighborhood. For each village (for rural areas) or neighborhood (for urban areas), the four respondents identified by the enumerators were to be from different sectors of society. The enumerators were asked to include at least one woman and at least one youth. Further, if the village (neighborhood) was characterized by a significant cleavage (for example, ethnic or religious), they were asked to select one respondent from each side of the cleavage. Finally, selected respondents must have visited the village (neighborhood) at least two times in the last six months.

Overall, 757 respondents were interviewed, of whom 34 percent were female and 66 percent male. Respondents were asked to list up to eight of the most active CSOs currently operating in their commune. The enumerators explained that by active, we mean groups that regularly lobby for the needs of their members or the larger community, organize activities and events, provide public goods for the community (such as labor for construction, guidance and counseling, or defense), or provide support to the most vulnerable in the village (for example, paying school fees or health or transport costs). Respondents were prompted to consider informal CSOs that may serve the same role as more formal CSOs — for example, *grinw* (informal discussion groups, usually of young men), *musotonw* (women's groups), religious groups, associations (*youth, returned migrants*), unions, and prominent business families. For each reported group, enumerators then gathered key details about their membership and group purpose.

A few notes on data quality are warranted. Given that the same CSOs were sometimes mentioned by multiple interviewees, we omitted duplicate CSOs when analyzing groups.[1] We did not attempt to validate the existence of

[1] One exception is that when we analyzed at the respondent level how often they mentioned male, female, or mixed-gender groups, we retained duplicates to capture more accurately the respondent's emphasis on different types of groups. This affects Table 2. However, duplicates were omitted for all other analyses.

groups for the purposes of this exercise – though we will do so subsequently for a sample of them. When there is an umbrella group with confederations of associations, each association is allowed to count as its own CSO – consistent with our interest in less visible, less powerful, smaller, or localized groups in addition to powerful, formal, centralized, and well-known groups.

Gender Composition of CSOs

The 757 respondents named a total of 4,893 CSOs – an average of 6.5 CSOs per respondent. As Figure 1 shows, 1,179 of these were women's CSOs (comprising entirely female members), 738 were men's CSOs (comprising entirely male members), and 2,144 were mixed-gender CSOs (comprising male and female members, and led by either gender).

That women's CSOs are so plentiful – indeed, more plentiful than men's – is consistent with women having substantial coordinating capacity and social capital. Of course the question remains of whether women can translate that into effective civic and political engagement; our survey captures the former, but not the latter. Additionally, our CSO mapping exercise did not indicate, for mixed-gender CSOs, the share of membership that was female, or whether the organization was woman-led. To the extent that men dominate mixed-gender organizations, it may be the case that men dominate CSO activity. Nonetheless, it is clear that women have tangible capacity in civil society in Mali – both through their own CSOs and through mixed-gender associations.

A natural question is whether respondents were more likely to identify CSOs matching their own gender. Our procedure for selecting respondents mandated that at least 25 percent were female and our final sample was 34 percent female. Respondents were then asked to list up to eight total CSOs. To the extent that respondents' social networks include more individuals of their own gender, they may be more aware of civil groups dominated by members of their own gender. Further, individuals' relatively greater knowledge of the activities of groups sharing their gender may lead them to prioritize listing those organizations over groups of the other gender about whose activities they are less aware.

We indeed find that women are relatively more likely to list women's CSOs, while men are relatively more likely to list men's CSOs (Figure 2). Specifically, women's CSOs comprise 37 percent of the CSOs mentioned by female respondents, but only 24 percent of those mentioned by male respondents. Likewise, men's CSOs comprise 26 percent of the CSOs mentioned by male respondents, but only 22 percent of those mentioned by female respondents. Men are also relatively more likely to list mixed-gender CSOs, which comprise a full 50 percent of those they listed, compared to only 41 percent for women. We do note the possibility that there are organizations that women consider men's groups, while men consider them mixed-gender groups due to greater awareness of their activities and membership – possibly involving a few women. Overall, however, it is somewhat remarkable that there is not *more* bias in identifying CSOs; men seem aware of women's groups, and women seem aware of men's groups.

FIGURE 1 Number of CSOs named by gender composition of members

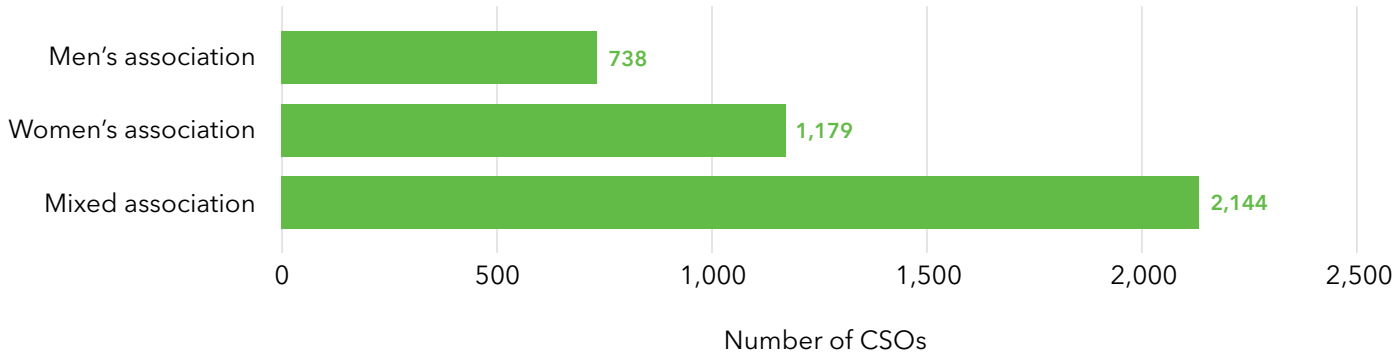
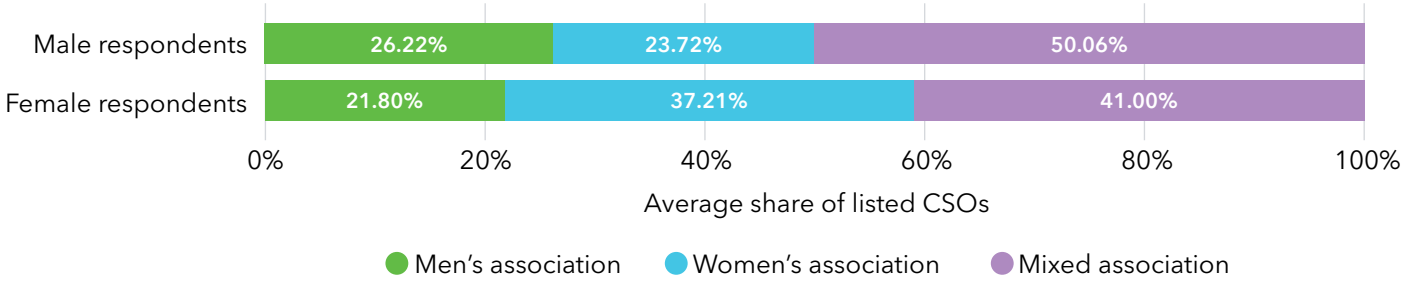


FIGURE 2 Gender composition of CSOs named by respondents' gender



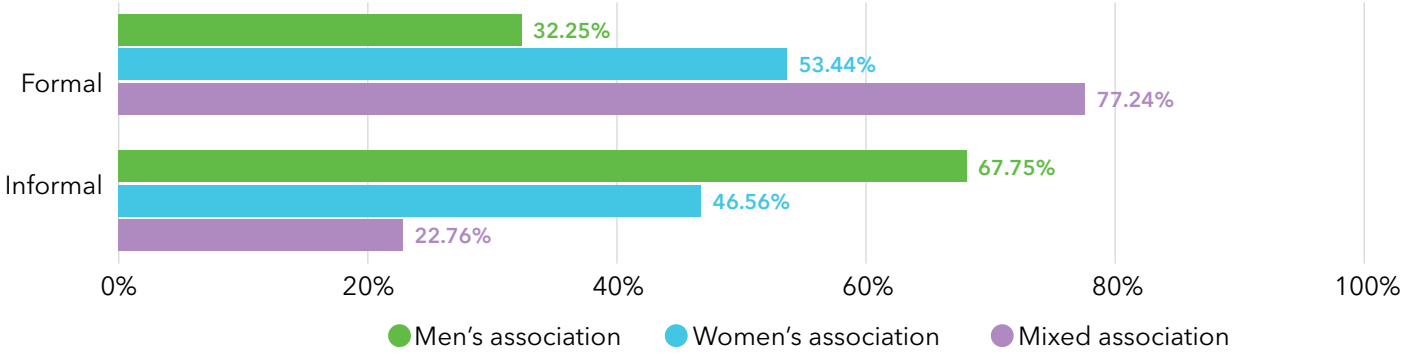
Formality and Age Orientation of CSOs

Considering CSOs of varying gender compositions, we next looked at the degree of formality of the CSO, and whether it was oriented toward youth members or had a more mixed or older membership. We consider groups as formal when they are registered with the state (such as the case with unions, NGOs, and other official groups). Group formality can be important for visibility to others as well as group organization; formal CSOs are those with which government, NGOs, and donors often collaborate, and they might have access to more funds and opportunities to engage with these actors. Further, information about informal CSOs and their activities may be less available to citizens. Informal groups may nonetheless play important roles for their members or society and have significant influence over certain segments of society. For instance, surveys of informal, tea-drinking clubs (*grinw*) and their members in Bamako and Mopti found that 45 percent of members claimed to have found a job or business opportunity through membership and 69 percent of these organizations claimed to engage in public goods provision for their communities (Bleck et al. 2017). Due to their informality and fewer formal engagements with government, NGOs, and donors, informal groups may be more autonomous and independent, making them better poised to defend individual citizens' interests.

We find that all-female CSOs are more likely to be formal than are all-male CSOs (Figure 3). Specifically, while all-female CSOs are relatively evenly split between formal (53 percent) and informal (47 percent), all-male CSOs are over twice as likely to be informal (68 percent) than formal (32 percent). Further, mixed-gender associations are the most likely to be formal (over 77 percent).

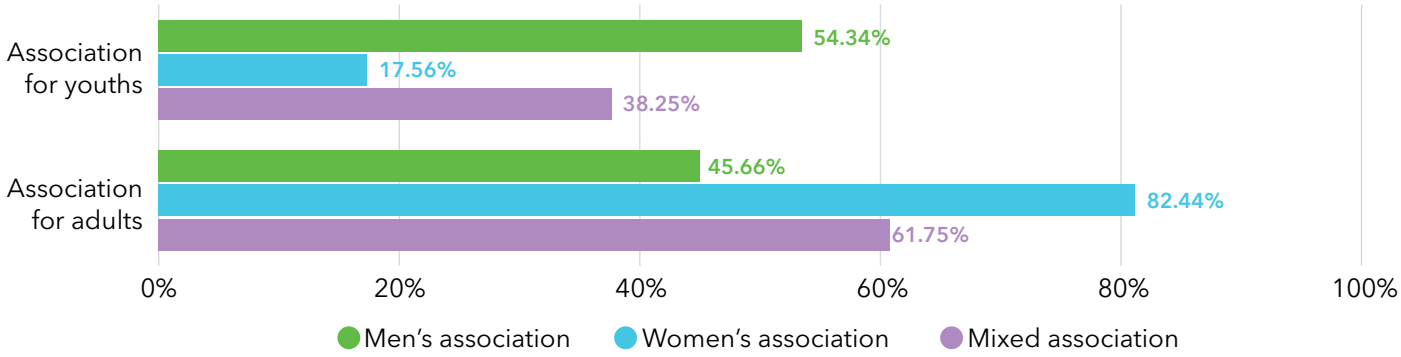
While one might expect women's groups to be more likely to be informal relative to men's groups, two features of the Malian context can help explain the inverse pattern we see in the data. First, a common type of group in our data, *grinw*, primarily comprises young men and is almost always informal. Second, Mali has maintained very high levels of freedom of association and openness with respect to the creation of civil society groups since democratization in 1991, so the barrier to creating formal groups is not high, and we do not have reason to believe barriers would be higher for women. Instead, gender norms are more likely to apply to the activities these groups would undertake, or what would be seen as socially acceptable, as we will see in the next section.

FIGURE 3 Formality of CSOs by gender composition of members



Another key characteristic of CSOs is their age orientation. Specifically, we considered whether they are youth-oriented or not (Figure 4). We find that all-male CSOs are the most likely to be youth organizations (54 percent), followed by mixed-gender CSOs (38 percent); all-female CSOs are much less commonly youth-focused (only 18 percent). Male youth, in contrast, have substantial opportunities for civic engagement, both through mixed-gender and all-male groups.

FIGURE 4 Youth focus of CSOs by gender composition of members



CSO Purpose

Beyond formality and age orientation, the intended function or purpose of a CSO greatly influences its activities and engagement with government, NGOs, and donors. We asked an open-ended question about the primary activity of each CSO and were able to group CSOs according to five purposes: economic, public services, civic-political, social, and other. Overall, economic groups dominate, comprising over 40 percent of total groups, followed by public service groups, which comprise about 30 percent (Figure 5). Both male and female respondents named similar numbers of groups with different purposes, suggesting similar familiarity with groups across domains. Women mentioned economic and social groups slightly more often than did men, while men mentioned civic-political and public service groups slightly more often than did women.

For each of the five purpose categories, there are more all-female CSOs with that purpose than all-male CSOs, with one exception: for civic-political groups, 32 percent are men's CSOs, while only 18 percent are women's CSOs, and the remaining half are mixed-gender CSOs (Figure 6). Women's groups are less likely to engage in politics, which mirrors other findings that point to a pervasive gender gap in nearly all forms of political participation (Logan and Bratton 2006), political knowledge, and political opinions (Bleck and Michelitch 2018). For every group purpose, however, at least 49 percent of CSOs are mixed-gender (mixed-gender CSOs are most common in the public service category). Again, we find strong evidence that women have substantial coordinating capacity and social capital — and this spans groups of all purposes.

FIGURE 5 Number of CSOs of different purposes

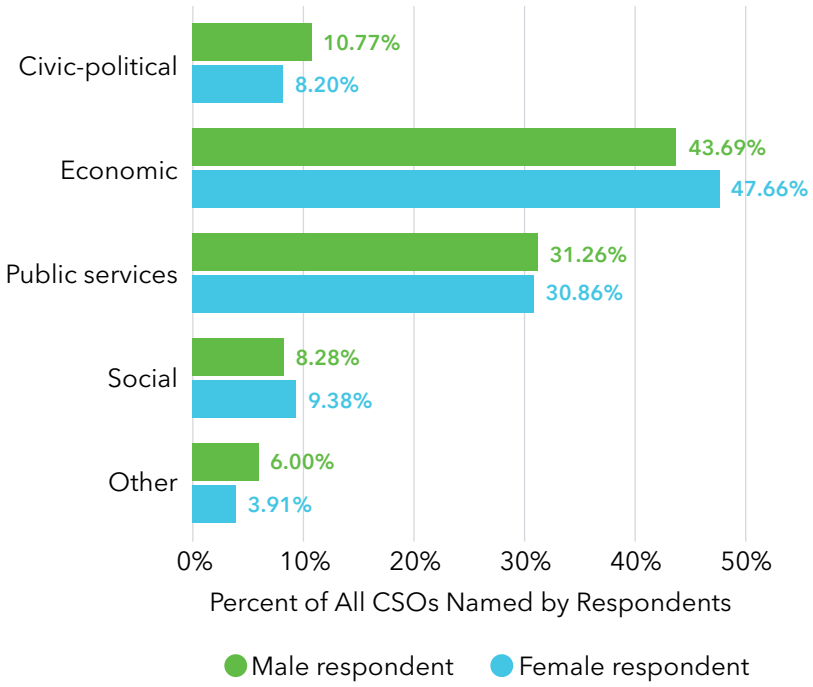
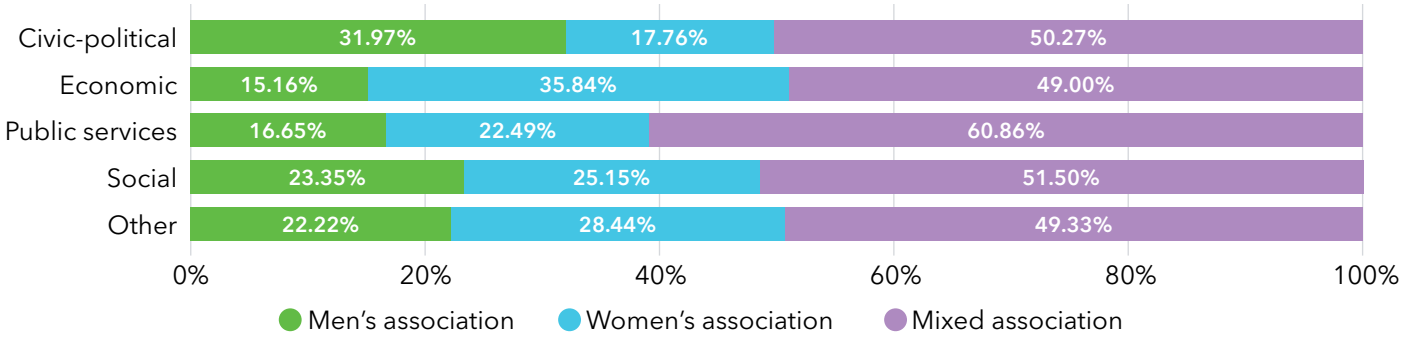


FIGURE 6 Gender composition by broad purpose of CSOs



The most common types of associations are economic and public service CSOs. For each of these main types, however, CSOs engage in a variety of different activities. For economic CSOs, these include agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, market gardening, savings groups, skilled labor, and vocational training. All-female CSOs are more common than all-male CSOs in certain key areas like manufacturing, savings groups, skilled labor, and market gardening (Figure 7). Agriculture is the only area where men's groups are more common than women's groups.

FIGURE 7 Gender composition of economic-related CSOs

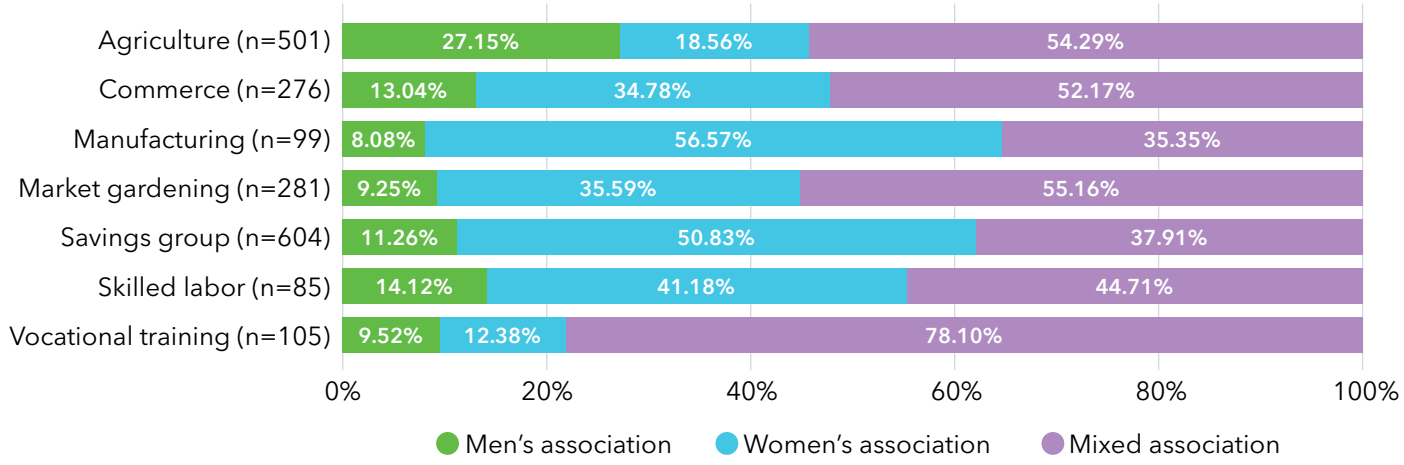
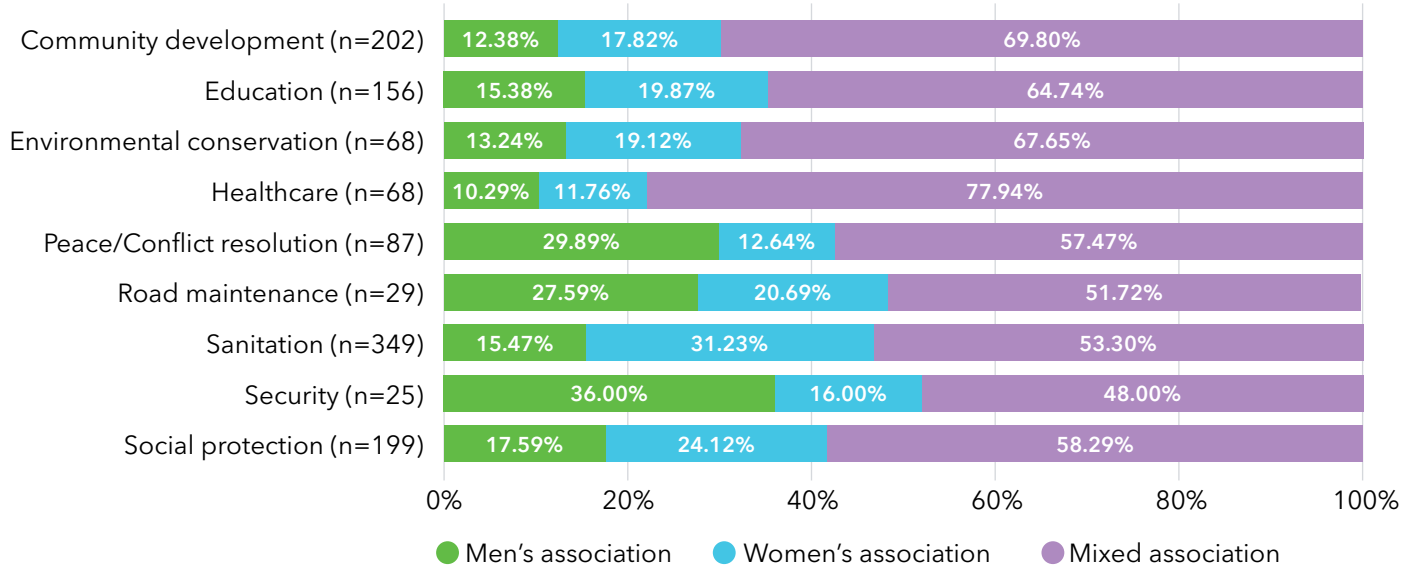


FIGURE 8 Gender composition of public service-related CSOs



For public service-related CSOs, activities include community development, education, environmental conservation, healthcare, peace and conflict resolution, road maintenance, sanitation, security, and social protection. All-women's groups are more plentiful than are all-men's groups in most of these areas, with the exception of peace and conflict resolution, road maintenance, and security (Figure 8). For CSOs of all purposes, at least 48 percent are mixed-gender, with mixed-gender groups most plentiful in the areas of healthcare and community development.

Conclusions and Policy Lessons

Our data suggest that lack of social capital or organizing capacity are not likely to be binding constraints on women's civic participation in Mali. Indeed, such efforts often fail to close the gender gap in civic participation, and can even exacerbate it (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013; Cornwall 2003; Gottlieb 2016; Mabsout and Van Staveren 2010). Instead, the biggest constraint appears to be translating women's group participation, and the organizing capacity that underlies it, into effective civic and political engagement.

Lessons in existing literature can inform this challenge of translating organizing capacity into civic and political engagement. For example, Ndlovu and Mutale (2013) cite factors that have led to increased women's political participation in Africa, such as the proliferation of women's movement groups, educational opportunities, economic empowerment, and civil society advocacy. Relatedly, Bleck and Michelitch (2018) find that greater socioeconomic empowerment, measured as mobility outside the village and participation in household decision-making, is correlated with greater political knowledge, political opinions, and support for pro-women policies among rural women. Chawla et al. (2017) agree that investing in women's movements is key: they find that encouraging women's diverse organizing and mobilization leads to more successful civic and political participation. Investments in women's movements should also take into account existing findings on the structural features of organizations that make them more successful, such as the existence of a board, whether decisions are made by general assembly, or having a system of accountability (Wouterse and Faye 2020).

More research is needed about which strategies for converting women's organizational capacity into civic and political engagement will work best – and with which groups and environments. For example, one can imagine that the challenges are distinct within formal compared to informal groups (which may face distinct challenges in interfacing with and challenging the state). They may also be distinct for groups focused on community development versus education, for example. Case studies of particularly successful women-led CSOs would be especially useful in revealing what factors give those groups agency and voice. Finally, more work is needed, broadly, on drivers of women's collective agency – and to develop rigorous methods and tools for measuring that collective agency.

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Jaimie Bleck is an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. **Jessica Gottlieb** is an associate professor in the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, College Station. **Katrina Kosec** is a senior research fellow in the Development Strategy and Governance Division of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, DC. **Lindsey Boss** is a graduate research assistant at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, College Station.

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1201 Eye St, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA | T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | Email: ifpri@cgiar.org | www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info
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