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## **Community Policing, “gender-based violence” and women’s vigilantism Ambiguities of women’s participation to policing in a Malawian popular township**

This communication explores women’s participation into government Community Policing scheme in Ndirande, a densely populated township of Blantyre, Malawi’s economic capital. It raises questions about the specifics of women’s contribution to policing and to the practice of “order making”<sup>1</sup>.

Since the 1990s, numerous studies have studied the impact of social and economic upheavals on the transformation of urban femininities and masculinities in many African societies<sup>2</sup>. Some focus more specifically on the production of moral models of masculinity and femininity. They recall the historical depth of such models, 'invested with imaginaries of authenticity or modernity', as their promotion and inculcation 'have been central to the process of nation-state formation, particularly in the colonial and post-colonial experiences'<sup>3</sup>. Alongside (post-)colonial political regimes and the political philosophies of their leaders<sup>4</sup>, religious institutions have been a particularly suitable object for exploring these issues. Recently, several works debate the effects of the Pentecostal movement and the proliferation of charismatic churches on the emancipation of women or, on the contrary, the strengthening of their control by male elites. Katrien Pype, for example, is interested in how Pentecostal leaders define and inculcate behavioural norms associated with 'good' and 'bad' femininity in the working-class neighbourhoods of Kinshasa<sup>5</sup>. Surprisingly, research on vigilantism has made little use of these fruitful questions on gender. Yet, one of its most robust results, despite the great diversity of case studies, refers precisely to the action of vigilant groups in the production of "moral communities" and in the inculcation of "behavioural norms", both for their members and for

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<sup>1</sup> Helene Maria Kyed and Peter Albrecht, “Introduction - Policing and the Politics of Order-Making on the Urban Margins” in Albrecht, Peter and Helene Maria Kyed (eds.) *Policing and the Politics of Order-Making*, London : Routledge, 2016, p. 1–23.

<sup>2</sup> Abbink, Jon and Ineke Van Kessel (eds.), *Vanguard Or Vandals: Youth, Politics And Conflict In Africa*, Brill Academic Publishers, coll. “African Dynamics”, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Amélie Le Renard et Élisabeth Marteu, « Introduction: Genre et Nation », *Societes contemporaines*, n° 94, 2014, p. 6. Voir notamment : Ann L. Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures”, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, n° 4, 1989, p. 634–660. Dans le cas du Nyasaland sous domination britannique et du Malawi sous la dictature de Banda, voir : Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia*, Cambridge University Press, 1985 ; Linda Semu, “Kamuzu’s Mbumba: Malawi Women’s Embeddedness to Culture in the Face of International Political Pressure and Internal Legal Change”, *Africa Today*, vol. 49, n° 2, 2002, p. 77–99.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender, and Modern Style in 1960s Dar Es Salaam*, Durham, NC : Duke University Press Books, 2011 ; Clive Gabay, “The Radical and Reactionary Politics of Malawi’s Hastings Banda: Roots, Fruit and Legacy”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 43, n° 6, 2017, p. 1119–1135

<sup>5</sup> Katrien Pype, “Blackberry Girls and Jesus’s Brides. Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and the (Im-)Moralization of Urban Femininities in Contemporary Kinshasa”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 46, n° 4, 2016, p. 390–416.

the rest of the population<sup>6</sup>. This observation, made by Ray Abrahams in 2007<sup>7</sup>, is still largely relevant, as research on the place of women in the mechanisms of citizen participation in policing and on the role of vigilante groups in the definition of gender norms remains rare<sup>8</sup>.

“Gender issues” were among the most important ones that the groups I followed from 2016 to 2019 in Ndirande had to deal with on a daily basis. Daily, their leaders were solicited to facilitate mediation between husbands and wives or parents and children. In a court like set-up, generally organised at their homes in front of a large audience, Community Policing Chairmen (now designated as Chairmen<sup>9</sup>) and the members of their Community Policing Committees (CPCs) often ruled over these conflicts that they framed themselves as “gender-based violence cases” or “GBVs”. The analysis reveals all the ambiguity of these conflict resolution spaces where women can formulate their problems and where the issue of domestic violence seems to be taken more seriously than elsewhere, but which in return allow for tighter control of the social and sexual practices of women on the one hand, and of young people on the other. This communication focuses on the role women members play within such spaces and, more generally, it questions how women’s intervention influences policing group’s repertoire of action and whether in counterbalances, or not, heteropatriarchal judgements which are locally produced.

These questions all relate to the feminisation of police work and its effects on the framing of urban masculinities and femininities. In Malawi, feminisation affects much deeper the state police, but some women, although greatly outnumbered, also tend to play a pivotal role in the CPCs they join. A few recent studies have highlighted the importance of the gendered division of police work in vigilante organisations and offer fruitful perspectives for understanding the dynamics observed in Ndirande. Lucie Revilla, for example, has recently shown that vigilant women in Khartoum and Lagos can provide specific skills to their organisation in relation to their male counterparts, or be entrusted with tasks that do not directly concern the exercise of violence (support or regulation of male practices, recruitment and maintenance of sociability networks, administrative tasks)<sup>10</sup>. Others emphasise the importance of a biographical approach to the determinants of women's mobilisation, and reveal the uncertainty and contingency of

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<sup>6</sup> Gilles Favarel-Garrigues et Laurent Gayer, « Violent la loi pour maintenir l'ordre », *Politix*, n° 115, décembre 2016, p. 7–33 ; Laurent Fourchard, « État de littérature. Le vigilantisme contemporain. Violence et légitimité d'une activité policière bon marché », *Critique internationale*, vol. 78, n° 1, mars 2018, p. 169–186 ; Guillaume Gourgues et Julie Le Mazier, « Participations à l'ordre et participations conservatrices », *Participations*, n° 29, septembre 2021, p. 7–40.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Abrahams, “Some Thoughts on the comparative study of Vigilantism” in Pratten, David and Atreyee Sen (eds.) *Global Vigilantes*, London : Hurst, 2007, p. 437.

<sup>8</sup> Parmi les exceptions notables, voir : Barbara Oomen, “Vigilantism or alternative citizenship? The rise of *Mapogo a Mathamaga*”, *African Studies*, vol. 63, n° 2, December 2004, p. 153–171 ; Atreyee Sen, “Everyday and Extraordinary Violence: Women Vigilantes and Raw Justice in the Bombay Slums” in Pratten, David and Atreyee Sen (eds.) *Global Vigilantes*, London : Hurst, 2007, p. 69–92 ; Insa Nolte, ““Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed”: Yoruba Women in The Oodua People’s Congress (OPC), Nigeria”, *Africa*, vol. 78, n° 1, 2008, p. 84–106 ; Laurent Fourchard, *Trier, exclure et policer. Vies urbaines en Afrique du Sud et au Nigéria*, Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2018 ; Lucie Revilla, *Le travail de l'ordre : Hiérarchies sociales et ancrages policiers dans les quartiers populaires de Khartoum et Lagos*, Institut d'Études Politiques de Bordeaux, mars 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Following the way social actors speak, I use the term “chairmen” instead of “chairperson”. It underlines the fact the Community Policing leaders are almost only men.

<sup>10</sup> L. Revilla, *Le travail de l'ordre*, op. cit.

"vigilante moral careers"<sup>11</sup>. Such an approach makes it possible to better understand the political ambiguity of a specific form of 'participation to order making': for example, how a conservative participation<sup>12</sup> in the maintenance of the social order can also contain elements that favour the emancipation of certain categories of women.

This communication analyses in detail the social trajectories and "moral careers" of three women who are actively involved in their local CPCs. It highlights the ambiguities of their participation to order making, combining policing practices in line with state sponsored "good participation" with a more brutal form of "women vigilantism". It draws on an ethnographic fieldwork of 15 months from 2016 to 2019 in Ndirande. "Symmetric" ethnographic approach was favoured: I followed equally the state police and local CPCs daily routine as well as I collected personal stories from different groups among the governed population. The data collected reveal that moral conceptions of femininity and masculinity and convergent between police officers and civilian members of local CP structures. But for the sake of clarity, this communication focuses on the civilian part of the local policing arena.

### *From security work to family mediation*

In Ndirande, Community Policing Committees and their Neighbourhood Watch (NW) have multiple origins. The large majority come from extra-legal vigilant groups which emerged in the 1990s and 2000s to fill up the police vacuum left by the dismantling of state militias at the end of the dictatorship. Concerned by the rise of breakings, burglaries and killings in the township and by the absence of state response, groups of neighbours, predominantly males, gathered and started to patrol the streets around their houses. These groups relation to state police was ambiguous. First, despite being an answer to police inability to tackle insecurity, their members saw themselves rather as palliatives to state police's action than fundamentally anti-police. Although illegal, they took people whom they identified as strangers and/or criminals to the police station, provided support to police intervention in their areas. Second, they developed as alternatives to a first wave of state sponsored NW which attracted many unemployed youths attracted by the financial opportunities offered by security work in times of job scarcity. Left uncontrolled by police officers, who perceived them as threats to their position, many of these NW turned to predatory practices, assaulting those who dared walking at night and committing burglaries. According to the testimonies I gathered from founding members of these vigilant groups – all middle-aged men, heads of households, businessmen or employees – they firstly intended to remain distinct from these government schemes, not so much because they were officially connected to the police but because they were filled by thugs. Thus, the effect of state's injunction for citizen participation in policing in their formation

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<sup>11</sup> Laurent Fourchard, « Engagements sécuritaires et féminisation du vigilantisme en Afrique du Sud », *Politix*, n° 115, 2016, p. 57–78. Voir aussi : Dennis Rodgers, "When Vigilantes Turn Bad: Gangs, Violence, and Social Change in Urban Nicaragua" in Pratten, David and Atreyee Sen (eds.) *Global Vigilantes*, London : Hurst, 2007, p. 349–370.

<sup>12</sup> See G. Gourgues et J. Le Mazier, « Participations à l'ordre et participations conservatrices », *art. cit.*. The term was coined from Eric Agrikolianski and Annie Collovald concept of 'conservative mobilisation': a mobilisation that aims at safeguarding social order. Éric Agrikoliansky et Annie Collovald, « Mobilisations conservatrices : comment les dominants contestent ? », *Politix*, n° 106, décembre 2014, p. 7–29.

remain unclear. Some leaders told me that they had already attended meetings organized by police officers who called for their participation, before creating their groups. This ambiguous relation to state police helps to understand how such groups positively welcomed new attempts by the police to revamp local Community Policing structures and extend its control on citizen participation to policing in the early 2010s. Their leaders accepted to be officially integrated into the Community Policing scheme, to register to the police station and to strengthen day to day collaboration with police officers<sup>13</sup>.

Despite the ambiguities of their initial formation, these vigilant groups emerged from residents concerned with their own security. Their main activity was to patrol the streets at night. But very soon, their leaders started to be solicited by neighbours to help them settle their disputes. As crime declined, conflict resolution, especially between husbands and wives or parents and children, became their main activity. Many reasons can explain this shift from security work to family mediation. From pre-colonial times, family disputes have been handled, through mediation, by the *bwalo wa mfumu* (village chief's court). This juridical responsibility of chiefs or headmen, has been institutionalized under British domination in the 1930s and has remained almost unchanged until recently<sup>14</sup>. Vigilant groups that emerged in the late 1990s and all along the 2000s actively collaborated with the headmen and were perceived by many as a sort of police branch of the chieftaincy. Traditional authority contributed to their consolidation and they greatly relied on traditional legitimacy to be recognized as valuable and trustable authorities. The *bwalo wa mfumu* being overwhelmed with family issues in a context of rapid social and economic transformations following the political and economic liberalisation, vigilant groups started to take the surplus of cases. In the mediations they organise, generally at the home of their chairmen, they mimic *bwalo wa mfumu* procedures and request the same type of respect as the chief's representatives (see case below). The name they give to these sessions of mediation, *mlandu* (pl. *milandu*), is directly taken from the traditional mediation which take place at the *bwalo*. The rise of family disputes resolution in vigilant groups' repertoire can also be understood as a consequence of their new proximity with the state police in the years 2010s. Included within "gender mainstreaming" policies from the 2000s onward, the police became officially responsible to fight against "gender-based violence". With the financial support of UKaid, Victim Support Units were created in almost all local police stations. According to the billboard in Ndirande VSU, their purpose is to offer a shelter and counsel "to victims of gender and domestic violence". Community Policing department's boss in Ndirande summed up for me the purpose of the VSU: "Our role is to look after cases of gender-based violence. We do mediation and counselling to solve family disputes without recording cases and proceeding them to the prosecutions."<sup>15</sup> Slowly, women have thus become one of the main target populations for the police. In terms of people's solicitation, VSUs are a great success. In Ndirande, days are filled by mediations between couples. Five to ten cases can

<sup>13</sup> For longer developments on the trajectories of vigilant groups until their Paul Grassin, « Policiers vigilants et vigilants policiers. Community policing et division du travail policier en milieu urbain au Malawi », *Participations*, n° 29, septembre 2021, p. 157–187.

<sup>14</sup> M. Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order*, op. cit. ; Jessica Johnson, *In Search of Gender Justice: Rights and Relationships in Matrilineal Malawi*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Notes from fieldwork, Ndirande Police Station, Victim Support Unit, September 22 2017.

be heard within one single day. After their integration into Community Policing schemes, the chairmen play an active role at the VSU. Peter, founder of Malaysia NW and Secretary for the Community Policing Forum (CPF) which oversees the activities of all CPCs in Ndirande, is often found there, assisting police officers, providing his own advice to the complainants and the accused. His role within the VSU contributed to his recognition by the population as a person who can deal with such matters. **He explained to me that the number of women coming to file a complaint against their husbands directly at his home has been on the rise since the official recognition of his group by the police as a CPC.**

+ idea that their integration into CP has contributed to the reduction on their work self in punishing criminals and their increased involvement on other type of policing work

Ambiguity also defines chairmen's position towards this transformation of their activity. During one of our interviews, Redson Kunhango, founder of the Makata NW and Chairman for the CPF, regretted to be "overwhelmed" by "family and gender-based cases" which are supposed to be handled by the village chiefs. He denounced a trend which diverted them from their main purpose: "security work". But he also admitted that the handling, free of charge, of such disputes, normally handled by village chiefs' courts in exchange of a fee, directly contributes to his group legitimacy:

**Redson:** Instead of crime, we now have to handle gender-based violence... it's like every day someone has to come with a gender-based violence... On that issue, we have decided to talk to the chief... because this issue of gender-based violence is not the issue of the neighbourhood watch, but that is the issue of the chief. ... remember about the issue I told you... this money you are supposed to take to the chief before you can raise up your complaint. We call it *chapabwalo*. I wanted to talk about that with our chief. Because this money is just too much... you know there are so many families which are so poor they cannot afford to buy bread. They cannot afford to buy soap to bath... or wash their cloths. And now the chief is saying that they have to pay 3000... that's too much! So instead of them going to the chief, they will say "what if I go to neighbourhood guys?" Because we don't charge anything. And actually, we help them the same way the chief does help them! So, we need to talk about that... so that some of these issues should go on their table. Because it's like we are having a lot of issues to work rather than on the security issues. We spend our days solving family matters, gender-based issues... and we are overseeing the whole security issues because let's say if I go home right now... maybe I'll have... I'll find that there are three or four issues I have to sort out... do you think I can go on patrol? Every day like that.

**Paul:** And this is not the job of the neighbourhood watch?

**Redson:** Neighbourhood watch is coming in if people have been beaten... if... I think when it's only exchanging of words, the chief has to handle that. But if somebody has been beaten or blood has been split out, it's now the time for neighbourhood to come in. It's now being a police case. But with family cases... it's different. Let me give you an example. There is this this guy who beat his wife on the head... with a stick... When I get there, the people told me that the women suspects that the husband has another wife who came in the house while she was at the village. The neighbours had seen this other woman coming to the house and told the wife... so when she came back, she accused the husband of cheating on her... they quarrelled and the husband started beating the woman with that big stick. So, I told her: "Ok the issue has now happened, you need to go to the hospital. But I must also warn you that if you go to the police your husband will be locked up. Because of what happened..." She said "Ok let's go to the police". So, I told her "Don't come to my house tomorrow saying 'I need my husband back'. Because otherwise I will not be following that issue... for your husband to be released." She said "I know, I will not do that." Ok. "So, let's just go to the police first thing in the morning tomorrow". But when I went there in the morning, I found that now the woman had changed her mind. "I think that it is just a family issue so we will try to sort it out here today." "Ok fine, if you feel you are not succeeding you will just call me." I left and she is still there now. The family is reunited, so it



means she was not ready to divorce and send the husband to jail. So, it means that I did the right choice. Now she always greets me when I pass by there. “Muli bwanji? Muli bwanji? Muli bwanji?”

**Paul:** So, you did not have to go to the police?

**Redson:** We did not. Since they said they will sort it out in the family. You know... I was afraid that I would take the woman to the police, they guy will be locked up and the next day the woman will start saying “I need my husband, please sort it out”. That's what happens... out of experience, I have noticed that. You even find that the relatives of the man are putting pressure on the woman... they are there before she even goes to the police and threaten her... “make sure you come back with him”. If she doesn't, they say: “one of us has been arrested because of you”... So, if the man is taken to prison, the woman will suffer because he is not there to put food on the table... and his family will keep on pressurizing her... it can go far... they can use charms... So, if you take them to the police and the police arrest the husband you will find that the woman is coming to your door saying she wants her husband back. “Can you please go there and ask them to release him?” And we look like fools coming back to them and beg for the release of that man!<sup>16</sup>

Most of the complaints concerning family disputed are raised by women against their husbands. As observed elsewhere in Malawi and in South Africa in the case of complaints filed at local police stations<sup>17</sup>, women instrumentalize police formal authority to settle conflicts with their husbands but very rarely wish to see them put behind bars, even though them have been physically abusing them. As Julia Horneberger puts it in the case of South African state police: ‘The function of police intervention is to give the perpetrator a warning, to gain a few days’ respite or to prevent a violent act from being repeated<sup>18</sup>’. Very often, abused women file a complain and come back after one or two days to have their husband released, hoping that their time in police cell was enough of a lesson. Many of them cannot afford to lose the main cash provider for the household for a longer period of time. As their South African colleagues, Malawian police officers do not like being instrumentalized like that by women. They generally take it as an example of women “inconsistency” and as a proof of the lower importance of family disputes and domestic violence. **They thus show more disdain for women complains against their husbands and often refuse to treat cases of physical abuse as criminal cases, arguing that women will refuse to appear before court.** As appears clearly in Redson discourse, police officers’ attitude towards this type of complaint has direct consequences on the way the chairmen perceive women complainant. They push for a local handling of these cases, without referring it to the police, even in cases of physical domestic violence.

Vigilant groups turned into state sponsored Community Policing Committees has thus become central forum for the mediation and judgement of family cases, sometimes involving domestic violence. As such, they play a great role into the production and the inculcation of moral models of femininity and masculinity.

### ***The family order***

As indicated by the words of Mr Kunhango above, who congratulated himself on having ruled out the possibility of imprisoning the husband and having 'reunited the family', the

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mister Kunhango, Ndirande, Makata Primary School, October 15 2019.

<sup>17</sup> J. Johnson, *In Search of Gender Justice*, op. cit. ; Julia Hornberger, « «Maman bat papa». La loi sur la violence domestique à Sophiatown, Johannesburg », *Politique africaine*, n° 91, 2003, p. 83–99.

<sup>18</sup> J. Hornberger, « «Maman bat papa» », art. cit., p. 89.

challenge of mediation is to ensure above all that couples do not divorce. Family dispute resolutions that take place at the chairmen's house can thus be conceived as a social practice aiming at maintaining a social order articulated around the stability of marital union, despite female complainants who can sometimes seek help to leave their husbands. Members of the CPCs see themselves as couple advisors. Their role is to educate husbands and wives to ensure the stability of their union. After a *mlandu* taking place at the Group Village Headman Matope court between a woman and a man about to divorce, Mercy, a woman who is very active in the local PC structures in her area (see below) planned to visit the woman at her woman to convince her 'not to give in to her husband who wants a divorce': 'our role as community police is to make sure that there is peace within families. If people get divorce. It means that there is no peace. [...] People should not divorce. It's bad', she explained to me<sup>19</sup>. Let's now analyse in depth one of these mediations to understand better the type of moral femininity and masculinity that are promoted in these forums.

#### Ensure marriage stability through mediation

In the vast living room where the mediations take place, Mr Makololo, the chairman, accompanied by Mr Gomani, founder of the committee and treasurer of the Community Policing Forum, and three other members, Miss Chatambala, Mercy and her husband Precious, are seated on an imposing sofa and armchairs along the back wall. I sit next to the latter so that he can translate for me. A low table is placed in front of them. It separates them from another small sofa where the people whose business is being discussed sit. Several religious posters adorn the walls of the room: one shows a child in a Christian prayer position, another contains the words "God Loves You". Above the chairman sitting in the centre of the sofa, a poster with the 'Ten Commandments of Love' is taped to the wall, urging the reader to 'love God above all else'.

A large number of people crowd around the house and into the room. They have come out of curiosity, for entertainment, or, for a handful of them, to shed light on the cases. Before the session begins, the chairman says a prayer and everyone is invited to reflect. A couple (Suzane and Thomson) sit on the sofa facing the chairman. They are accompanied by a second woman (Gladys) who sits on a chair between them and the committee members. They greeted the people present one by one, addressing the chairman by his title - "achairman" - and the committee members by the expression "a polici".

The chairman begins by explaining the rules of *mlandu*: 'Ok, you are very welcome. Please feel free. It is important to speak only the truth, no lies, no additions because that will complicate the story. Please stick to facts so we can resolve the issue in time. First, we will hear from the complainant; then the defendant will be allowed to ask questions and then state their case to which the complainant will also pose questions. If either one of you feels that we have not resolved your case satisfactorily, you are free to take your case to another court. But we hope that we can understand and help each other.' Mercy continues, highlighting the similarities between this court and the village headman's *bwalo*: "Here it is like in the court of the chief, when someone speaks, no one is allowed to cut him off. If you have a question or comment to make, you must do so at the end of each speech. If someone persists in interrupting others, they will be fined. We are not here to argue but to solve problems. Simply listen and afterwards you will be given a chance to point out the lies and the facts. We will listen to both sides. Who is the complainant?"

Suzanne stands up and explains the reasons for her complaint: 'I came with a complaint to say that my husband is cheating on me with this woman here. I have been hearing it from many people but I wanted to find out for myself. After some time, I caught them and I even collected some evidence. I was angry and wanted to hit her but instead I grabbed her *chitenje* (cloth), here it is. So, I have come here to seek your help as the Area Chairman.' She puts the *chitenje* on the

<sup>19</sup> Notes from fieldwork, Ndirande Matope, October 26 2019.



table before continuing. She explains that she has children with Thomson and does not accept that he has girlfriends because he does not care about her and her children and does not leave them enough money. She also confirms to the chairman that her marriage to Thomson was done in accordance with the *chinkhoswe*\*, i.e. the traditional ceremony of assigning 'marriage counselors' (*nkhoswe*).

The chairman then turns to Gladys: "If the *chitenje* is yours, say so. Next question. If there are no other questions then explain why you were found in public with this woman's husband. What happened? What were you two doing?"

Gladys: 'I have known this man for a month. We talk. He greets me and I greet him back. On this day, I met this woman at the borehole and she just started saying that "my husband is cheating on me with you. Things are not right at home because of you. My children are suffering because of you." I told her that she was wrong. Is it a crime to greet her husband? Then she said, "my husband's behaviour at home has changed. I have been observing him and now I have caught him out." Then she started shouting and I did not back down and shouted back till the fight turned physical.'

Thomson, after being questioned by the chairman, confesses that Gladys is his mistress and that he offered her the *chitenje*. Seeing Gladys smiling at Suzanne's emotional reaction to her husband's confession, Mercy becomes indignant and accuses her of making the situation worse. The chairman continues to question Thomson: 'What do you want to tell the court? These two women are fighting because of you. The accused apologised.'

When asked by Mercy, Gladys says that she is married and has two children. Mercy then turns to Thomson: 'Do you hear that? She was married but she's dating other men'. He then replies that he knew about it but agreed. Hearing that, Suzanne gets up and pretends to put her baby in Gladys' arms: 'I actually came here to drop off this baby with my husband's new wife.' This provokes indignation in the room. She is called to order by Mercy: 'No, no, no. Please don't be hasty. It won't help to act in haste. What you want to do would be harmful to the baby. How do you think this lady will feed your baby? Your child can fall ill, a fever or a temperature. Would this woman take care of your baby? What you need to do is to fix your marriage.'

Mercy then talks to Thomson at length. She asks him to think and not to do stupid things. She explains that Gladys is behaving 'like a whore', that she is a bad woman who is putting her marriage at risk by agreeing to sleep with other men: 'A reasonable man must know that what she has done to a man, she will also do it to you if you leave your wife to go and live with her.' Pointing to Suzanne: 'This one is your wife, you must stay with her. You have children with her. You people think you can change wives and husbands like that but God said that marriage should not be broken.' Thomson admits that he has four children with Suzanne and that his behaviour is jeopardising the safety of his family. He therefore declares that he will take care of his wife and children and not his mistress.

Mercy then asks Gladys to acknowledge Thomson's choice: 'You hear that? He says he almost destroyed his family because of you!' Gladys then explains that she accepted Thomson into her bed because he gave her a lot of money: 'Who's going to pay my rent now? My husband gives me nothing but scraps!' Her words provoke a new outcry in the room. Precious whispers his indignation in my ear: 'She was just doing that because he was paying her!' Suzanne screams and gets up to hit Gladys but Mr Gomani and Miss Chatambala stop her. The chairman gets up and gets angry: 'Order!! This is the chairman's court!' Once the situation has calmed down, the chairman explains that if they fight, they will have to take them to the police. So he asks Suzanne not to behave in a "stupid" way and to settle it by talking. "I said she was a prostitute. She is an evil woman ('wochimwa')". Mercy says about Gladys. She turns to her: "If you behave like this you have no right to wear this rosary around your neck. You can't claim to be a Catholic. Gladys replies that she needs the money because she likes to dress up, but the chairman asks her to be quiet. People in the audience laugh.

Mercy speaks to Thomson again at length: 'So you take money from your house and give another man's wife. Your wife should wear old clothes yet your mistress wears new ones. When she

wears good clothes, who do you think people will say is buying her good clothes? Her husband. Not you. Now your wife and children wearing rags and going to school on an empty stomach, who do you think people will say is making them wear rags? Who is poor there? You. [...] So instead of saving the money for your children, you want your children to be a laughing stock. Your children should curse your bones. Suffering to pay rent every month, while you splash money to a different family. Your children should suffer to pay school fees, perhaps their mother will manage to hunt for rent, but they should fail to pay school fees while you could have been saving the money in the bank, so even after you die, they should be able to pay secondary school fees. I want that your apology should come with sense in your head. Please think hard. What do I want to achieve in life? When you live among people with no sense you have poverty of the mind. You have no ambitions. Ambitions are important. There are people who have a car and have ambitions to have a bus. One with a bus has ambitions to have a plane. To have one house and desire to have several plots. Don't you have ambitions rather than wasting money on her? Imagine she is even challenging that you give her a lot of money. She is simply saying that to make your wife bitter. How much money do you even give her? How much is your monthly salary? Is it even close to K100, 000?'

Thomson: 'No'

Mercy: 'If you were hospitalised today, yes your salary can still be paid, but do you know how exorbitant the medical expenses are? With your wife caring for you, her charcoal business will die. Will you be able to take care of hospital bills and the children? Consider this. What if you saved the money, you give this woman into your bank account monthly? How would that help you? It would even be better if it was your wife who was cheating around because she would be bringing money into your house rather than you who takes money out of the house. Subtraction maths is always painful. Think deep. Those are my words.'

Precious adds: 'If you were just a neighbour who had no money and no job, do you think she would have accepted you as her boyfriend?' Thomson says no. 'You see, this woman is not in love with you but she is just after your money. She has no family. There is no future with this woman. She wears nice clothes and tries to seduce men but if you buy nice clothes for your wife, she will be beautiful too. Isn't that something that would make you proud?' Thomson nods. Gladys retorts that she has a family. Miss Chatambala cuts her off: 'Madam, you say you are a married woman. When a woman is married, she must behave well. If this is the behaviour you choose, then the chairman's committee will tell your husband the whole truth. From now on, we will monitor your movements and your relationships with other men. If you do it again, we will not wait for another woman to find you but will deal directly with your punishment.' 'And if we catch you, Mercy adds, you will be whipped.'

Mr. Gomani concludes. He thanks Suzanne for 'not having taken the law into her own hands' but for coming to consult them to settle the problem in 'peace'. He then addresses the whole assembly: 'We must all realise that it is not acceptable to take justice into one's own hands in this kind of case. If you hurt or kill your husband's mistress, then you will go to jail.' He turns to Thomson: 'The most important thing is that your marriage is repaired and that you take advantage of the advice you have received today to realise your mistakes and take care of your family. You said you would never go back to this woman, your words are remembered by my committee, you must now live up to them in action. The money you spent on your mistress, use it to buy your wife jewellery.' Mercy cuts him off, 'Better give her money to buy herself what she wants!' The chairman nods. The committee members exchange some thoughts aloud about why this married man might have slept with another woman. The chairman suggests that "perhaps [Gladys] moans pleasurably". All wonder.

Mr Gomani finally turns to Gladys: 'Madam, perhaps you wanted to find a new husband, but it is not acceptable for a married woman to behave as you do. If your husband had found you, he might have wanted to kill that man. You have put your own marriage and that woman's marriage at risk and you are jeopardising the peace in our community. This kind of story can lead to crimes being committed. [...] He may have promised to marry you but it was all lies. He just wants to sleep with

you. You could have become pregnant and then no one would have taken care of your child. You are learning a lesson here. By exchanging your love for money, you only get cursed money.' Miss Chatambla intervenes by addressing all the women in the audience: 'You see what happens when a woman accepts favours from a married man?'

The chairman thanks everyone and shares his hope that the family will be reunited. Gladys stands up and speaks to the assembly: 'I must also admit that I have learned a lesson. Ladies here who behave like me, please stop. See how I have been humiliated. The man I love left with his wife. This is not the way I will find a husband and a stable family. I will not do it again.' The chairman finally dismisses them, reminding them that they must not argue, let alone fight, once they have crossed the threshold of the room: 'Your marriage must begin again as it did on the first day. Gladys thanks them for their 'advice' and asks to stay and listen to the next case to 'learn more'.

Mercy turns to me and points toward Gladys: 'She is a prostitute. These women are a problem in our community'. I then ask her how she thinks this story will end: 'The husband will come back with his wife because he has understood that this one is a prostitute. He will never go back to her place'.<sup>20</sup>

As this case illustrates, specific conception of social order of which the nuclear family constitutes one of the principal pillars are produced in these forums. It must be protected, by violence if necessary. The status and social respectability of individuals are interpreted in terms of their situation vis-à-vis the matrimonial institution. Gladys, for example, claimed to be a married woman, but the status was denied to her by committee members because of her behaviour. Although she had children, she also had several relations with men from whom she received gifts and money and was therefore considered a 'prostitute'. Besides single women like her, who are a historical antagonist in these urban spaces<sup>21</sup>, young women and men who have not yet reached the status of mother or father, wife or married man, are not given the same consideration by the members of the CPCs. The other two cases discussed at the chairman's house that evening concerned, for example, the moral redress of two young teenage girls. The first concerned a mother's complaint against her 15-year-old daughter, whom she accused of frequenting the home of a group of young boys in the evening. Mr Gomani, who had conducted a small investigation, described them as 'thugs' and 'thieves' because he had learned that they were selling alcohol in a shabeen and consuming cannabis. He ordered the watch to go back the next day to 'do a show of force': arrest all the youths there and teach them a lesson before taking them to the police station and taking the girl back to her mother. They would then both return to the chairman's home for a 'counselling' session. In the last case, a teenager accused of giving false information to her neighbours who were looking to buy a house in the neighbourhood was severely reprimanded by Mercy and the chairman. They contrasted her age 'which did not even give her the right to marry' with her neighbours' status as 'elders' and threatened her with lashes if she made fun of them again. Taken together, these three cases illustrate the central role of community policing committees, alongside the police institution, in the affirmation of a social order structured around family, age and gender.

<sup>20</sup> Revised notes from fieldwork, mlandu at the house of the CPC chairman from Ndirande Safarao, November 3 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Joey Power, "'Eating the Property': Gender Roles and Economic Change in Urban Malawi, Blantyre-Limbe, 1907-1953", *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, vol. 29, n° 1, 1995, p. 79-107.

The following sections now turn to women activism within Community Policing structures. It reaches far beyond the scope of this communication to analyse the type of attitude that the middle-age men, fathers and husbands who are dominating these local structures, adopt towards accused husbands in the milandu. Let's just state that evidences from the fieldwork reveal that a significant fraction of the chairmen belong to a male middle class composed of heads of families, employees or businessmen, who are concerned about the moral control of women and young people. These chairmen tend to show empathy for the accused men who occupy similar social positions as them. These findings suggest to look deeper into the consequences of the feminisation of civilian participation to order making, as regard to the type of patriarchal judgements that are pronounced in these forums.

### ***Community Policing: mobilising mothers and married women***

Considering the high level of women's participation in local social and political activity in Malawi's working-class neighbourhoods<sup>22</sup>, their involvement in local PC structures remains remarkably low. Of the two committees I followed in Ndirande, the Malaisia committee founded and chaired by Peter had no women members, while only two participated in the Safarao committee led by Mr Gomani. Similarly, in a country where women are known to be more present than men at public meetings, of the 38 members of the various local committees present at the police station for the introduction of the new Officer in Charge, only 13 were women. Of these, five did not belong directly to a CPC but were representatives of the Adventist Church Women's Association, and only four had a seat on their committee's executive. These figures suggest that, in contrast to a highly feminised police profession, citizen participation in policing remains, in Malawi as elsewhere, a predominantly male activity<sup>23</sup>. They should not, however, lead us to underestimate the singularities of the particularly intense commitment of some women, such as Mercy and Miss Chatambala playing a particularly central role in the Safarao committee or Joyce Zalewa heading the Ndirande CPF between 2012 and 2015.

### ***Singularities of woman commitment***

In many ways, their participation is not radically different from that of men. Like their counterparts in the South African townships followed by Laurent Fourchard, and unlike, for example, the women of the Oodua People's Congress in Nigeria followed by Insa Nolte, these women do not have specific skills to offer and do not really play a complementary role to that of men<sup>24</sup>. While most Malawian local and national political organisations have an autonomous 'women's wing' that coordinates the specific work of women activists, men and women are mixed within the structures of Community Policing. This contributes to the indistinguishability of their practices and their relationship to vigilante action. In fact, the initial commitment of the

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Grassin, « Pagnes partisans, fabrique des partis et participation politique des femmes des classes populaires au Malawi », *Politique africaine*, n° 144, 2017, p. 95–113

<sup>23</sup> Voir en France : Eleonora Elguezabal, « Quand la gendarmerie devient participative : l'engagement des voisins dans les réseaux officiels de vigilance en France », *Participations*, n° 29, septembre 2021, p. 73–96 ; Matthijs Gardenier, « La surveillance a-t-elle une couleur politique ? Cercles de vigilance, capital social et compétition municipale dans des espaces périurbains en France », *Participations*, n° 29, septembre 2021, p. 97–122.

<sup>24</sup> L. Fourchard, « Engagements sécuritaires et féminisation... », *art. cit.*, p. 74–75 ; I. Nolte, “Without Women, Nothing Can Succeed”, *art. cit.*

women we met follow the same logics as for the men: it is part of the same biographical availability, the same relationship to the territory as plot owners, and the same concern for the safety of their living space. None of them however initiated a watch. Their entry was more individual and came later, in the form of recruitment by the male leaders in their area. Originally from Zomba, Mercy Kapoloka came to Ndirande at the age of two, in 1985, with her widowed mother and her four brothers and sisters. At the time of our meeting, she was still living in the Safarao area, in the compound her mother had bought at the time she was employed in the house of an American religious expatriate at the Henry Henderson Institute (HHI). Her mother's death in 1998 put an end to her education at the end of primary school. She was then fifteen. She and her siblings inherited her house as well as her sewing machine. She then started sewing dolls which she sold at the exit of the city's nurseries. She also took advantage of her mother's former contacts in HHI to get a job as a housekeeper for the expatriate families where she lived with her husband, a plumber, and her four children. She lost her job in 2014 when the Canadian family she worked for left. She moved back to the family home in Safarao and started a small business selling imported goods from South Africa where her brother had settled. Barely five months after her return to the neighbourhood, she first joined the neighbourhood patrol alone. She was followed by her husband a few months later:

**Mercy:** I joined the neighbourhood patrol soon after coming back to Safarao. By that time there was a lot of thieves... you could hear about breakings almost two to three times a week, just in the neighbourhood. So sometimes I woke up at night to patrol around my house... I did not have a job by then... so I could stay awake up to 4 o'clock and then sleep in the morning up to 10. [...] My husband is a plumber; he was doing piecework and I was doing small business... like selling mandasi or sometimes my brother would send some stuff from South Africa and I sell them here. But mainly I was just staying.

**Paul:** You were patrolling around your house, you mean, with the neighbourhood watch?

**Mercy:** No, at first, I was doing it alone. I used to take a stick for protection and I was staying outside in case I would see criminals passing by. When I heard quarrels, I went there and... I helped the people... so it started like that... Then mister Gomani came to me. He said that he had heard about me and he asked "why are you doing this alone? I am a chairman for that." So, I said "I am just helping people, so I don't have people fighting and stealing around my house. I don't like that so; I just help them." That's how he recruited me in the neighbourhood watch.<sup>25</sup>

Joyce Zalewa (b. 1957) joined the Makata sector patrol in 2008, where she is a landowner, following the death of her husband, the loss of her job and the departure from the family home of most of her grown-up children. Her initial commitment into security voluntary work follows similar logics as Mercy's. For her as for Miss Chatambula (born in 1960), also a widow and mother of grown-up and relatively independent children, the relief from the constraints of motherhood and conjugality played a central role in her mobilisation. Apart from an active role as secretary and then chairperson of her sector group in the Catholic Church of Ndirande, joining the NW was her first voluntary commitment. In an interview, she described her new availability, after several decades of 'getting up early in the morning to work and coming home late at night', and her great concern for crime in her area, as decisive factors in her involvement. But her military training with the state's militia, the Malawi Young Pioneers, in the 1970s, which included a trip to China for specific security training, also played a role in her choice for security engagement:

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Mercy Kapoloka, at her home in Ndirande Safarao, October 14 2019.

**Joyce:** My first voluntary work was this Community Policing... At first, I was working with the Blantyre Water Board. That's how I managed to buy this place. Then, after I quit my job and my husband passed away, that's how I joined this group... [...] You know there were so many criminals in the area. So, it touched me... I wanted to do something on that.

**Paul:** When you say it touched you... were you a victim of robbery or other crime?

**Joyce:** No but other people... what I was doing was that if at least there were robbers, thieves or criminals here at my place, I was giving them information. "Come at this place, there is such such, such illegal activities". If you know about some criminal activities around your house, you have to report because if you don't you are killing yourself, next day they will come to rob you... if you just look. But if you report, you will save your life and other people's lives.

**Paul:** Report to whom? To the police?

**Joyce:** Yes. To the neighbourhood police, that's how they told me to join them. Because I was so active in reporting crime. It's a matter of... I was doing it for myself. There were many thieves. You have to understand. They were many. This time it's alright you can walk at night, there are no such things. Of course, they cannot all finish, all of them... but at least.

**Paul:** So, you never had any personal experience that made you think that you should join this group.

**Joyce:** Well... I've worked for Malawi Young Pioneers, at first. I was a member there. I was at Nasawa Training Base as a Pioneer. And after training there I was sent to China for further training. So, from there I came back.

**Paul:** You trained in what?

**Joyce:** As a Pioneer you know, about security. We learned everything. How to handle a weapon, how to do patrols... how to handle a thief. How to catch a thief. We trained.

**Paul:** And then after, you did not work for security?

**Joyce:** No, I was just a secretary... I took up security work with the Community Policing.<sup>26</sup>

Joyce was the only female CPF chairperson I heard of in Ndirande and one of the few to have run for official positions in the local Community Policing structures. A few months after joining her area group, she was elected chairperson of the Makata committee. She then rose to the position of chairperson of the Ndirande CPF, which she held between 2012 and 2016 before losing the election to her rival, Redson Kunhango, who accused her of corruption. Indeed, it is widely assumed that her rapid rise through the Community Policing structures to the position of Chairperson of the Ndirande CPF is based less on specific qualities associated with her identity as a woman than, as with the majority of chairmen, on her mastery of policing techniques, her ability to use coercion, and her bureaucratic and organisational skills, largely inherited from her professional training and experience. After completing her schooling and training with the MYP, she was employed as chief protocol officer at the single Party headquarters in Lilongwe and later as secretary to Gwanda Chakuamba, then Minister of Youth Affairs and MYP commander. After moving to Ndirande in the 1980s, she was employed at the Malawi Post Office headquarters and then at the Blantyre Water Board, the public water management body in the town.

Although most of them remain simple members of local committees, the few women I have followed on a daily basis are particularly committed to their groups. Unlike her husband, who goes more occasionally, Mercy does not miss any patrol, mlandu or committee meeting. She is recognised as a point of reference for all the members and even for the chairman or Mr Gomani who are less assiduous than her, to the point of being unofficially designated as 'chairlady'

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Joyce Zalewa, at her home in Ndirande Makata, October 22 2019.



alongside the chairman. Her central position was particularly evident in the mediation between Suzanne, Thomson and Gladys, discussed earlier, which she largely led.

*'Exemplary' mothers and 'delinquent' youth*

Although the security issue around their homes, and in particular the fight against burglaries, is a central element in the initial mobilisation of these women, their long-term commitment is based on the same moral to relationship with the social order as for the majority of men who have been involved in Community Policing for a long time. They thus belong to the same 'community of parents'<sup>27</sup>, characterised by a high degree of availability for voluntary work, sharing similar conceptions of order and justice, and concerned above all with the control and protection of children and young people from the dangers of the street and the consumption of alcohol and drugs. Although the number of patrols has largely decreased with the drop in burglaries in the area after 2015, and has risen episodically depending on the crime situation in each sector, the action of these women has remained constant because, according to them, the problem of unemployed young people hanging around in the streets and in the *shabeens* (local taverns) has not been resolved. In Malawi, as Laurent Fourchard observed in the South African case, 'the participation of these mothers in patrols thus perpetuates a practice [...] that closely associates delinquency and youth'<sup>28</sup>.

On this point, the commitment of these women seems to be more consistent than that of their male counterparts and draws on a set of social representations associated with the figure of the 'mother' and her responsibilities. In contrast to the chairmen, who expressed their weariness with the handling of gender issues, which would divert them from purely security-related work, these women make the supervision of young people, as well as the handling of family and marital problems, the core of their work. Their voluntary work in the neighbourhood is not limited to community policing, but includes various social work groups and organisations that they all joined later on, all of which are geared towards solving family problems and supporting young people. Because of her commitment, Joyce Zalewa is known throughout Ndirande as 'Amayi Zalewa' (lit. 'Maman Zalewa'). Not a day goes by without her being busy representing the chiefdom at a funeral, attending a workshop on girls' sexuality, a meeting of the local school committee, the health centre or one of the many organisations where she holds official positions. Like Mercy Kapoloka, who is also called 'mama' or 'amay'i' by the unemployed young men in her neighbourhood, she spends much of her free time walking the streets of the neighbourhood to lecture the young men she catches hanging around, playing games or drinking alcohol:

**Joyce:** You know, I am a busy woman. I do so many voluntary works. I was selected at the chief's group there. I do work as a chief advisor for all the area here. At school I'm a chair for Mothers Support Group, I look after girls, and boys in fact. Because that committee needs a role model lady, that's why I was selected to that group. I do saw pads, or uniforms for students. And at the church again I am a secretary for our area group. I worked also with the Malaria project. I deal with those who are take HIV drugs. We counsel them, how to take the drugs, we follow up on their health... We make sure they stay away from drinking and from bad behaviours. I am also secretary for Malabada Health Center.

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<sup>27</sup> L. Fourchard, « Engagements sécuritaires et féminisation... », *art. cit.*, p. 75

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

**Paul:** What happened for you to change like that? From doing nothing in the community to doing all these things.

**Joyce:** You know, I don't like staying. I'm just used to that... It's just that before I could not do so many things because I was working. But I prefer doing small business and I like to do voluntary works. To help other people. To show them how to live. This is what I do. And what I like. Because of the youth... they need role models. So, I tell the learners that if they leave school, they will fail. If they leave school, what are they going to do? They have to start business but they need to know sawing, they need to know handwork. These things will help them for surviving and to earn their living.

**Paul:** These youth... I've seen that they call you "mum" when we meet them together. They tell me "Paul, this is our mum"? What do they mean?

**Joyce:** (sighs) It's because I do counsel those boys, that drinking and smoking is not good. Because as a young child you have to look for your life, where your life is going. You shouldn't start drinking early in the morning... Early in the morning you find them drunk. We are losing so many youths because of that. Some of them they just drink without taking anything in their stomach. I go in shabene to tell them... or when I'm walking in the street and I find a young boy drunk I stop him and talk to him. It's not like I say that I will call him no! Eeeeeee, I do talk there, if needed I can beat him! "Iwe! What are you doing? Being drunk like that!?" I talk, I talk, I talk... so that's why when they see me, they say that I'm their mum. Eithu, I talk to them. You can see that place? (*elle montre à travers la fenêtre un groupe de jeunes hommes entre 15 et 20 ans assis sous un petit préau au bout de la cour à une vingtaine mètres de sa maison, ils se font passer une bouteille de kachasu*) That group. It's Premier Bet. They are betting money there, and drinking. This is not good. There are some young children. I go there when I have got time.<sup>29</sup>

These various commitments reflect the ambiguity of the approach of these mothers to the social problems that they see as underlying the criminal issue. They combine sometimes extreme forms of coercion with more social and counselling work with young people and their parents over the long term. Amayi Zalewa, for example, defines herself as a 'role model' for young people and, in an interview, spoke of her 'responsibility' as an exemplary woman and mother in the education of young girls and boys. In this capacity, she goes to places as diverse as the streets, schools and bars of the neighbourhood to give lessons to pupils and the youth. But in addition to talking to these young people on a daily basis, whom they do not consider to be solely responsible for their fate, these women also regularly visit their parents at homes. They advise them on how to better plan their budget, free up money to send their children back to school instead of sending them to the streets and the market in search of odd jobs. As Mercy Kapoloka's lesson in life and parenting to Thomson and also to his wife Suzanne, whom she reproached for wanting to abandon her child to Thomson's mistress, perfectly illustrated, these women promote and seek to exemplify exemplary parenting and do not hesitate to hound and lecture those they identify as bad parents (see box below).

#### Tracking down 'bad mothers'

This afternoon, I accompany Mercy to the heights of Ndirande to the home of a man who shelters five orphans. He welcomes us in a bare room. He sits in the centre behind a sewing machine and piles of old clothes that he mends for a living. Seven children aged between one and ten years old sit on the floor in front of an old television set. Three women, including two neighbours, are also present, sitting on plastic chairs at the back of the room.

Eight months ago, the children's mother, a neighbour who had been raising them on her own since her divorce, had taken refuge in the home of his wife after her house collapsed. A few days later she disappeared without warning, leaving the children in their care. Since then, she has come back about once a month to see her children and leave some money if she can. The man tells Mercy

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Joyce Zalewa, at her home in Ndirande Makata, October 22 2019.

that he can no longer look after them. He gets pressure from his wife and relatives who can't bear to see him spend the little money he earns on children who aren't his when he already has two children to raise. But he admits that he does not know how to force their mother to take them back either. One of them is very ill and he is afraid of getting into trouble if he dies.

Alerted by another neighbour who is here with us today, Mercy has already done her own investigation. She says that the mother in question is a 'prostitute' who hangs out in bars for a living: 'This woman is a very bad mother. Look how she left her kids... they are wearing rags, they are sick. A mother cannot leave her children to stay with another woman thinking that she will take care of them as if they were her own children', she confided in me. She then set herself the task of finding the mother, lecturing her and then taking her to the police so that she could be counselled and punished and the children could be taken to an orphanage.<sup>30</sup>

After a meeting on the street with a group of young men, Mercy explained to me that she saw her social work with some of the young people in her neighbourhood and the fight against crime as closely linked, insofar as the good relations she developed with them became a means of acquiring privileged informants in the fight against criminal networks:

**Paul:** You seem to be very well respected by these youth...

**Mercy:** Yes, I used to chat with them so they tell me their problems... sometimes when we want to catch a thief, we use these people so... they tell us "That guy is stealing somethings..." Sometimes if our group wants to beat them, I just say "no leave them... just tell them what is happening. So, they will tell us where to go..."

**Paul:** Because your group sometimes want to beat those youth?

**Mercy:** Yes.

**Paul:** Why?

**Mercy:** They just want to fight them... because they are staying around and drinking beers... They look like thieves so if there are thefts in the neighbourhood, we go for them...

**Paul:** And you don't agree with that?

**Mercy:** No... I prefer to chat with them. Because sometimes... for example, that guy is looking like a thief so if somebody says "he is stealing something from me". But sometimes it's not real... and they tell "No I did not steal anything but I know who did" and they can take you to the real person. Then we go with them to catch the thieves. After some time, some of them even decide to join our patrols. So, it's good to have good relations with these youth.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, contrary to what Mercy's words suggest, observation of the practices of the various neighbourhood patrols reveals more of a consensus around the need for the repressive approach than a debate about it. None of the women members objected to the punitive practices employed by the patrols to forcibly close down *shabeens*, to control 'suspicious' people they came across in the street or to punish young boys and girls whose behaviour was deemed immoral. As we have seen, for example, Mercy herself did not hesitate to threaten a young teenage girl with whippings if she was accused of ripping off her neighbour by arranging a fake house visit (see above). Nor did she react to the heavy-handed checks and interrogations of many passers-by during night patrols. Similarly, Joyce Zalewa, who emphasised her social work with young men in the neighbourhood, also described to me in an interview one of the punitive interventions she herself carried out with the patrols in her sector against a young teenager who had turned up drunk at his father's funeral:

<sup>30</sup> Revised notes from fieldwork, Ndirande Safarao, with Mercy Kapoloka, October 16 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Revised notes from fieldwork, Ndirande Safarao, with Mercy Kapoloka, October 29 2019.

We had a young child the other day. At a funeral. The one who has passed away is his father. But instead of going at the funeral... to be there, feeling sympathy with other people for the death of his father, he was dancing, chanting and talking nonsense... because he had taken beers. So, I counselled the child but eish... that was tough for him to understand. So, I had to slap him and then I went to tell the chairman for the neighbourhood that when the funeral is over, we need to tie him to the tree and teach him a lesson. That's what we did. We tied him and slapped him. We do that to give a lesson to the other small boys, that they should not behave like that... If you tie him in public, some will see that and they will be afraid.<sup>32</sup>

Their participation in the watches does not seem to have a real impact on the level of violence they use: it is more the complementarity of social work and the use of force that characterises their approach to maintaining social order.

### *Married women vigilantism*

The example of Mercy and Miss Chatambala reveals one last, particularly singular, dimension of female mobilisation within local community policing structures: the centrality of gender issues. While these issues were alien to her entry into her neighbourhood patrol in 2015, Mercy saw them as structuring her engagement when I met her in 2018. As this lengthy extract of our interview shows, she was particularly attentive to women's 'specific problems' and devoted a significant amount of her time to trying to solve them; sometimes using punitive techniques against abusive husbands that they employ against other types of offenders during the NW patrols:

**Paul:** What are the main security issues you face in the neighbourhood.

**Mercy:** Now Ndirande is more quiet than the time I joined the neighbourhood watch... breakings have gone down. The main problem now are family matters. Because... so many women are staying with family problems... sometimes they even kill themselves... so I used to... I chat with them... to change the mindset...

**Paul:** And what are the problems that they face to end up killing themselves?

**Mercy:** If they hear that their husband has another wife.... they can kill themselves.

**Paul:** That is the main issue? There are other issues that women face?

**Mercy:** Sometimes they are failing to feed their children... failing to pay the rent... because the husband is not providing anything for them... or because they are alone if their husband has gone with another wife. So, they just... they think that "If I'm dead... it's fair". They think so...

**Paul:** So, what do you do? You mentioned the other day that you have a group...

**Mercy:** Yes... this group. We help the women to protect their families yes.

**Paul:** What do you do?

**Mercy:** We go door by door and talk with the women to hear their problems... and others tell us "My husband is doing this doing that...". And so... we help them... when she meets her friend with the same problem, she then tell her "go to miss Kapoloka".

**Paul:** You do that with the neighbourhood watch?

**Mercy:** No, it's different. I created it with Miss Chatambala.

**Paul:** Miss Chatambala from the neighbourhood watch?

**Mercy:** Yes.

**Paul:** So, it's a bit connected to the neighbourhood watch...

**Mercy:** No... It's just that me and Miss Chatambala we saw that so many women had problems and we thought that we should assist them.

**Paul:** How did you see that women had problems? You did not know it before?

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Joyce Zalewa, at her home in Ndirande Makata, October 22 2019.

**Mercy:** Maybe... But with the neighbourhood watch we saw. You came to the mlandu. You saw... so many family problems... and many women are helpless.

**Paul:** But they can go to the chief or to the police... they don't receive help there?

**Mercy:** Sometimes they do... but the chief is expensive. It's 3000 kwachas. Many women cannot pay... so, we send them to the police... but most of the time they are not satisfied.

**Paul:** What makes them unsatisfied?

**Mercy:** Because they are accused... because they... the man... they have advantage at the police... they can do anything.

**Paul:** Why?

**Mercy:** They tell the police: "she does not want to sleep with me... she does not cook well... chan chan... so I use to take other women". So, the police say that if they take another woman, they have to treat both the same way. "If you give this woman 5000 and that other woman 5000; then it's ok". But many women are not satisfied with that.

**Paul:** And are police women more assisting women? Or they are all the same?

**Mercy:** All the same...

**Paul:** Why is that so?

**Mercy:** Sometimes... other women are not good to women... sometimes the police use that... they consider how a woman is looking like and they judge her according to that... looking like a prostitute... or looking like a bad woman... they say that they are villagers... that they don't know how to behave. Even police women. [...]

**Paul:** You never go to the police to tell them that they have mistreated a woman?

**Mercy:** No. I cannot do that... They tell us that we are not educated. They know the law so we are just villagers... So, we are powerless...

**Paul:** Ok. So, when a woman comes to you saying that her husband is beating her or is cheating... what do you do with your group?

**Mercy:** We go to chat with the husband.

**Paul:** What do you tell them?

**Mercy:** I tell them... I just chat like... one another... we greet them.... "I want to chat with you." And we tell "Why is your wife looking like that?" Sometimes they tell us... "Ah she is a crazy woman so and so..." So, I used to chat with them, if they agree to chat with me. Sometimes others don't want to talk with me... they chase us.

**Paul:** In that case what do you do?

**Mercy:** We chat with the lady to advise her... then if they change, they come to me and say "my husband has changed".

**Paul:** And if the husband keeps beating or cheating her?

**Mercy:** Sometimes we decide... when the man don't want to agree what we tell him, we choose to panic him ourself.

**Paul:** What do you mean by "we panic him"?

**Mercy:** We tie the man and beat him. Then they agree to do what we tell them.

**Paul:** And that you do it with your group of women? With your friend miss Chatambala?

**Mercy:** Yes... and sometimes we also threaten him to take him to the police.

**Paul:** So, this thing of tying and beating... you do that when? Before taking him to the police?

**Mercy:** Yes. Sometimes... if he agrees to talk with us, we are just talking... we ask him to change. If he agrees, we leave him. But if he beat the woman again, we panic him. And then we take him to police. Sometimes before we take him to police if we panic him, he says that "no don't take me to police I will change".

**Paul:** So... what are the cases... the type of cases where you would decide to "panic" the man?

**Mercy:** If they cheat their wives... the police will do nothing... so we have to beat them to make them change. Or sometimes... as I said, the police sometimes, they are not assisting the woman. So it's difficult to us because when they go to police or to the chief... hummm... now after the husband come

to me and say “They said that she is not a good wife. So why are you telling me that? Why are you bothering me?” So, now if he refuses to change, we can only use force.<sup>33</sup>

Although Mercy clearly distinguishes her work in accompanying the women of the neighbourhood and her involvement in the NW, the two are in fact closely linked. First of all, it was her participation in the NW that enabled her to take action in 2016. At the time, her contacts with the police were still tenuous, she had no other associative or voluntary commitment in the neighbourhood and did not participate in any workshops. Thus, the reasons for her awareness of the specific problems experienced by women in the neighbourhood do not seem to lie so much in her exposure to discourses on ‘gender’ and ‘gender-based violence’ as in her regular participation in the *milandu* where marital and family problems were by far the most recurrent. During the mediation presented earlier, she takes the responsibility to teach a lesson to Thomson on how to behave as a “good husband”, how to plan his budget, provide food and money for his wife and children. She accuses him of spending his money on his mistress instead of focusing on his own family. She stands by the cheated wife and takes the unfaithful husband responsible for the troubles their marriage is facing. The following extract also clearly reveals Mercy's identification with Suzanne's suffering: ‘I am also married and when I hear certain stories about my husband, I suffer a lot. I can't stand your behaviour because it brings back bad memories. So, no matter what happens here, I will go to your mistress' husband tomorrow and tell him everything. These two women could be hurt because of you. You would have their blood on your hands. So, I ask you now, what do you intend to do with this woman?’ The sequence reveals the influence of the stories of adultery and violence that unfold in the chairman's home and their resonances with her personal life, on her perception of the situation of women in general. The empathy she feels for cheated or beaten wives fuel her commitment in giving support to them.

Secondly, both practices are marked by a similar relationship to the state police. The necessity to filling a police vacuum seems to be just as decisive in this type of commitment as it was in the mobilisation against crime in her neighbourhood: it is the unsatisfactory treatment of marital conflicts at the police station, and especially the guilt put by police officers on abused women when they go to the police station, that is presented as one of main the causes of her action. Interestingly, this conflictual relation toward police action is framed in terms of class distinction rather than gender solidarity. Although she confesses that she prefers referring victims of domestic violence to female officers she personally knows, Mercy considers that female officers in general are as repressive against married women who launch a complaint against their husband than their male colleagues. According to her, this behaviour comes from the class distinction police officers maintain with their fellow working-class woman. Thus, despite enjoying a better access to police officers because of her action in the local CP structures, she feels that she cannot raise the issue with female police officers because they would tell her that she is “just villager” who “understands nothing”.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Mercy Kapoloka, at her home in Ndirande Safarao, October 14 2019.



Thirdly, the encounter with Miss Chatambala at the watch, an older woman whom she admires for her ‘strength’ and ‘determination’ and who soon became a close friend, is also decisive. Together they decided, based on their experience in the patrol, to go meet the women of their area to collect their problems. Finally, the continuity between security work in the NW and her action against violent husbands can also be seen in the punitive practices employed. Indeed the *modus operandi* she describes during our interview is similar to that presented by Joyce Zalewa when she recounted the punishment inflicted on a young drunken boy by her NW (see above).

This type of practice would require a more in-depth study than the fieldwork carried out, which only briefly approached it. I only learned about this specific modality of Mercy's involvement at the end of my last fieldwork and therefore did not have the opportunity to observe these tough interviews with unfaithful or violent husbands that she recounted for me. The obvious parallels in her words between action within CP structures and this more autonomous and illegal form of women's vigilantism suggest, however, that a conservative and reactionary mobilisation in defence of a social order centred around patriarchal values can be accompanied by emancipatory practices and forms of women's self-defence. Describing the practices of women's of the Shiv Sena, a far-right Hindu nationalist movement in Bombay, Atreyee Sen comes to similar conclusions. She describes vigilante practices designed to “serve and protect the interests of women that they had helped to develop over time”, and to meet certain “demands for gender justice<sup>34</sup>”. It should be noted, however, that these forms of female solidarity that develop through the involvement of these women in local community policing structures in Ndirande remain restricted to ‘good’ mothers and wives. This point distinguishes them from the Sena women of Bombay, who recruit mainly from among women who are ‘partially emancipated from the guardianship of men [...] and often single mothers’ and whose selection criteria are less linked to considerations of marital status than to ethno-nationalist principles of division. If, as we have seen in the cases of Joyce and Miss Chatambala, emancipation from the guardianship of a husband and the constraints of motherhood play a decisive role in their availability for voluntary action within the neighbourhood patrols, the single woman, generally young, is a repulsive figure for these married or widowed mothers. Perceived as being in perpetual search of a husband who will contribute financially to the household or as a ‘prostitute’ earning a living through paid sexual relations with married men, she constitutes a permanent threat to the balance of their own families. This partly explains Mercy's eagerness to find the mother of the five orphans and bring her to the police station. It also explains the energy she and Miss Chatambala used to lecture Gladys about making a living by having sex and love with married men, even threatening to hunt her down and whip her if they caught her again. The long-term mobilisation of these women in local community policing structures therefore also contributes to the promotion of a moral model of femininity articulated around values of motherhood and the figure of the ‘good wife’. This is to the detriment of young single women whose sexual practices are placed under control and who find themselves

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<sup>34</sup> A. Sen, “Everyday and Extraordinary Violence”, *op. cit.*, p. 75. It should be noted, however, that the Sena women's mobilisation referred to in Sen's work is more of a conservative and reactionary political project of national scope than a local mobilisation as in our case.

excluded from the modes of feminine solidarity that the women of the neighbourhood committees are developing elsewhere.

### ***Concluding remarks***

Vigilant groups which first emerged “at the edges of the state<sup>35</sup>” before being integrated within government Community Policing schemes have become one the main forums where marital and family conflicts are debated and judged. These spaces are therefore places where a patriarchal order is produced, where female and juvenile social and sexual practices are stigmatised and tightly controlled, and where the historical position of domination of a small male middle class, of which the chairmen are the contemporary representatives, is reaffirmed.

The very limited effects of the feminisation of police work on the formulation of patriarchal judgements underlines the permanence of this social order despite the recent transformations in the police arena and the generalisation of discourses on gender. Nonetheless the analysis of the trajectories, discourses and practices of women who get involved in the daily activities of neighbourhood watches reveals the contradictory ways in which they deal with gender issues. Their commitment in the Community Policing structures serves as a basis for the development of a ‘female vigilantism’ that is both emancipatory for a category of women corresponding to the model of femineity they promote and embody, but also conservative insofar as it promotes tighter control of women who are set up as a counter-model.

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<sup>35</sup> Philippe Aldrin et Marie Vannetzel, « Dans les lisières. Une sociologie des acteurs secondaires de la politique dans deux petites villes françaises », *Politix*, vol. n° 128, n° 4, 2019, p. 31–63.