

Original Research Article

Statutory Resilience and the Roles of Socially Precarious Heads of Households in Abobo (Côte d'Ivoire): Between the Activation of Solidarity Through Strong Ties and the Mobilisation of Resources Through Weak Ties

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Abstract: This article analyzes the strategies for maintaining the roles and social statuses of household heads involved in activities that are contextually perceived as precarious, in this case, laundry, shoemaking and hairdressing in Abobo (Abidjan). Indeed, statutory resilience is observed among these social groups within and outside the household despite the professional and financial disaffiliation that characterizes their social status. Based on an essentially qualitative approach of biographical obedience, it relied on life stories, direct observation and individual interviews to collect information in three neighborhoods of Abobo from a sample of 75 people. Through a thematic content analysis, the study sheds light on the mobilization of strong and weak ties as a form of resilience. To this end, it shows respectively that the mobilization of aid and services coming from family ties, in particular fund transfers and family tontines as well as neighborhood solidarity (gifts and counter-gifts of water and electricity) are strategies of statutory resilience among socially precarious heads of household.

Keywords: Resilience, social roles, strong link, weak link, Abobo (Côte d'Ivoire).

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INTRODUCTION

According to Robert Castel (1998), social actors' precarious conditions may lead to a precarious existence, which explains their inability to fulfil their social roles. For him, job insecurity results in financial precarity, which in turn limits individuals' full participation in economic and social life. In a similar vein, Fournier, Bourassa, and Béji (2003) argue that professional precarity profoundly affects individuals and their social relationships, including those within the family. Thus, the instability induced by precarious work negatively impacts life beyond the workplace social life, family and marital relations, and relationships with children. In this regard, the authors identify precarity as a concept comprising two dimensions: professional and

financial. These dimensions are linked to the inability of social actors to sustain stable living conditions.

From an empirical perspective, an exploratory survey was conducted in the commune of Abobo in Abidjan, specifically in the neighbourhoods of Abobo Belle Cité, Avocatier, and Akeikoi, among economic actors engaged in laundry services, shoe repair, and hairdressing. Field investigations revealed that 93% of household heads are married, compared to just 2% who are single. The majority have a low level of education, with 52% having only completed primary school or never attended school at all, compared to a mere 2% with higher education qualifications. This suggests that these individuals bear significant responsibilities, and that being married entails a variety of household expenditures. Furthermore, laundry work, shoe repair,

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and hairdressing are informal sector activities characterised by poor working conditions, the absence of social protection, and limited prospects for improvement. In other words, these are precarious or vulnerable forms of labour in which the actors are embedded (Bérout & Bouffartigue, 2009).

In light of this context, the study identifies three key observations. The first relates to the involvement of household heads in economic activities, and the resulting employment precarity due to the instability of those very activities. As a result, some informal entrepreneurs have had to temporarily suspend their work. Several factors account for these interruptions. For instance, in the laundry sector, some entrepreneurs use obsolete equipment. Field observations showed that some household heads rely on outdated tools such as charcoal irons and old washing machines. In their attempts to secure funds to replace this equipment, they are often forced to suspend their activity temporarily, leading to a rupture in professional continuity. Illness is another factor that can lead to temporary cessation of work, as entrepreneurs take time to recover.

Second, the data collected from informal entrepreneurs in laundry, shoe repair, and hairdressing reveal that their incomes are unstable and generally low relative to household expenses. For example, 69% of the respondents reported earning between 10,000 and 50,000 CFA francs per month, while only 2% earn 300,000 CFA francs or more. As a laundry worker explained: *"Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. The earnings vary depending on the time of year. When it's like that, it becomes a bit difficult for us."* Daily and monthly earnings are thus often insufficient in comparison with the household's financial demands. Moreover, these incomes fluctuate depending on the season (rainy season, school period, holidays), the type of clientele, and the location of the business.

The third observation concerns the impact of professional instability and income precarity on household organisation and governance. These two indicators contribute to a breakdown in the household head's social positioning within the family unit. There is often a lack of choice regarding consumption expenditures, limited decision-making power, and persistent instability in family relations. This creates vulnerability and exposes the household to various risks, including the inability to meet healthcare costs, support children's education, and cover other responsibilities traditionally associated with the role of household head.

Nonetheless, despite the dual challenge of professional and financial precarity, these household heads demonstrate a form of *statutory resilience* within their families. This leads to the central research question: What are the social logics underpinning the statutory resilience of household heads within their families? This implies that they develop strategies to fulfil their various

social roles. Two related sub-questions follow: How does the mobilisation of kinship ties (e.g. remittances, family-based rotating savings schemes) enable household heads to maintain ongoing household expenditures? How does the activation of neighbourhood solidarity (e.g. reciprocal exchanges of electricity and water) help them to sustain essential domestic spending?

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 – Study Sites

The commune of Abobo is located in the northern sector of the district of Abidjan. According to the most recent census (RGPH 2021), its population is estimated at 1,340,083 inhabitants, making it the second most populous commune in Abidjan after Yopougon. The informal sector dominates economic life, accounting for over 81.82% of non-agricultural activities (UN-HABITAT, 2012, p.22). Within this commune, data collection was carried out in three neighbourhoods: Belle Cité, Avocatier, and Akéïkoi. These areas were randomly selected using a purposive sampling approach, as the primary objective of this study is to analyse strategies used by low-income families to maintain their social roles. These neighbourhoods thus offered a suitable social context for understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

1.2 – Data Collection and Analysis

This study is essentially qualitative and aims to shed light on how socially precarious heads of household manage to fulfil their social roles within and beyond the household. The primary target group comprises household heads, regardless of their biological age, who bear responsibility for managing the household and are engaged in low-income or unstable-income informal activities—specifically laundry, shoe repair, and hairdressing. The secondary target group includes the immediate environment of the household head, namely close and extended family members, neighbours, and friends. The network technique enabled us to make contact with these various actors. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, in line with the study's objectives.

Three techniques guided the data collection: on-site direct observation, biographical interviews, and ordinary individual interviews. The observation grid, used as a tool, enabled us to examine professional conditions, overcrowding, and the living environments of the households. The second tool employed was the biographical interview guide, which allowed us to collect three types of information from household heads: their social origins, moments of disruption and entry into informal entrepreneurship, and the strategies they use to maintain their social roles within and outside the household (Bertaux, D., 1980: 221). The individual interview guide enabled us to question household heads' relatives and neighbours about the types of support and solidarity they offer.

In total, 75 participants were interviewed, with data collection continuing until information saturation was reached. These included 54 household heads working in laundry, shoe repair, and hairdressing; 5 wives of household heads; and 5 individuals from the household heads' broader social circle comprising 2 close neighbours, 2 extended family members (2 uncles and 2 aunts), and 3 members from associations or religious groups. The data collected were analysed qualitatively using thematic content analysis (Blanchet, A. & Gotman, A., 1992, p.97). We aimed to identify and cross-reference discourses relating to the same themes family solidarity, neighbourhood solidarity, and associative solidarity which allowed us to structure the findings into two main sections that form the foundation of this study.

2. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon Mark Granovetter's theory of social ties (1983), particularly the concepts of *strong ties* and *weak ties*. Accordingly, the presentation of the results is aligned with a correspondence between empirical field observations and the theoretical premises of this model.

2.1. Mobilising Kinship Ties as a Resource for Sustaining Household Consumption and Associative Sociability

Kinship ties represent the expression of family solidarity through gifts, services, and assistance to the head of household. In this section, we examine monetary transfers from siblings outside the household, followed by the role of *tontines* (rotating savings and credit associations) within the family network.

2.1.1. Monetary Transfers from Siblings as a Resource for Statutory Resilience

Interview data collected from economic actors and their families show that precarious household heads benefit from the support of kinship ties in other words, family connections. Specifically, this support takes the form of money transfers from siblings living outside the household. Indeed, income from laundry, shoe repair, and hairdressing is highly unstable, fluctuating monthly or annually. Consequently, economic operators who are also household heads often experience lean periods when their earnings are insufficient to cover basic needs such as food, rent, school fees, clothing, electricity, water, and transport.

To cope with these situations, household heads turn to financial support from their brothers or sisters living elsewhere often abroad in Europe, North America, or in other African countries. Given the geographical distance, these siblings provide support through remittances. These funds enable household heads to meet their families' consumption needs. A portion of this financial support is even used to fulfil their obligations within social groups such as neighbourhood associations, religious groups, village development cooperatives, or migrant associations. This demonstrates that sibling

support enables socially precarious household heads to maintain their social roles both within and beyond the household.

Importantly, the household of a socially precarious economic actor extends beyond their spouse and dependent children to include siblings who, while physically absent, are symbolically present through the reciprocal duty of solidarity. This reinforces the household head's authority and social influence within the family. In this respect, family solidarity reflects a cohesion in which members of a social group (here, the extended family or kinship network) remain mutually invested in one another's well-being.

This is illustrated by the words of a 47-year-old laundry worker, O.P., from Belle Cité in Abobo:

"The laundry work I do here in Abobo doesn't allow me to make a decent living. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But that's all I know and all I can do. Finding another job is hard. This laundry business lets me earn 5 francs, 10 francs but what can I do with that? If my brothers in Canada and France didn't support me financially, I wouldn't know what to do. Thanks to their help, I manage. It's not that I'm a burden to them I don't ask all the time. But at the end of the month, when I see that I've earned nothing from the laundry, that's when they step in."

2.1.2. Tontines within the Family Network as a Driver of Statutory Resilience among Household Heads

Following the analysis of remittances, this section explores another form of family solidarity rooted in kinship ties: the practice of *tontines* initiated by the household head's family network. Interview data with several household heads in Abobo revealed that monetary *tontines* among relatives provide a critical resource for covering family and extra-household expenses. This practice is common both among migrant and Ivorian households, particularly in low-income areas where families have many dependents.

A *tontine* is an informal savings and credit scheme based on a rotating fund collected from equal contributions. Disbursement occurs either by random draw, by need, by bidding, or by mutual agreement. In this study's context, a sister or aunt within the household head's family typically initiates the scheme and invites participation from extended relatives nieces, nephews, cousins, uncles, aunts, siblings, and sometimes grandparents. Such a group may consist of 15 to 20 people, pooling together significant amounts of money to meet monthly household needs.

The system operates such that every two weeks or at the end of each month, each family member contributes a fixed amount, typically 10,000 CFA francs. In a group of 15 members, this yields 150,000 CFA

francs per cycle; in a group of 20, 200,000 francs. One family member is designated as the *controller*, responsible for ensuring that all members comply with the rules and values of the *tontine* including timely payments, fair access to funds, and commitment to the group. Key values underpinning the scheme include family solidarity, reciprocity, compassion, mutual assistance, and trust. These values ensure that members can access funds smoothly, without dispute.

The money is used to cover both household and extra-household expenditures. Heads of household often face essential expenses such as food and rent, as well as secondary costs like school fees. Interview data indicate that *tontine* funds are most often used for children's healthcare and education. Others use them to contribute to social obligations funerals, weddings, births, baptisms or to participate in religious celebrations, whether in Christian or Muslim communities.

As B.C., a 34-year-old head of household in Avocatier, explains:

"Honestly, the family tontine has really helped me. My laundry business has slowed down. My machines are broken, and on top of that, the town council comes and demands payments from us, so we hardly earn anything. The little we make goes straight to rent and food. That's it. When things are tight, we rely on the family tontine to pay for school supplies and fees when the new term starts. Sometimes it helps with unexpected health costs too. Whatever's left, we use it for community events whether in the neighbourhood or at church."

2.2. Neighbourhood Solidarity as a Driver of Statutory Resilience: Reciprocity in Access to Water and Electricity

Analysis of the data reveals that solidarity also operates through neighbourly ties. The head of household's immediate environment serves as a social space where values of brotherhood and mutual aid flourish. Neighbourhood solidarity develops over time its strength grows with shared experiences and daily cohabitation. These practices are governed by reciprocity, functioning within a system of *gift and counter-gift*, where the return gesture is grounded in shared living conditions and common challenges.

In observing the socio-spatial dynamics of neighbourhoods such as Belle Cité, Avocatier, and Akeïkoi in Abobo, we noted poor living conditions, overcrowding, and irregular infrastructure particularly with regard to water meters (SODECI) and electricity installations (CIE), often set up outside formal regulatory frameworks. In these cases, some heads of households benefit from access to water and electricity thanks to the generosity of their neighbours who possess formal connections.

These so-called "illegal" connections often involve parallel hook-ups to formally registered meters. In practice, this constitutes a form of neighbourly solidarity, whereby those with legal utility access allow others lacking formal registration to connect and benefit. This allows households to meet their basic needs in water and electricity. In exchange, the recipients offer symbolic *counter-gifts*, such as availability, helpfulness, or readiness to assist their benefactor when needed.

The words of G.V., a 49-year-old head of household from Akeïkoi, illustrate this practice:

"In this neighbourhood, the neighbours are really supportive. Times are hard everything is expensive and the laundry business doesn't pay much. You see, when both my irons were broken and a strong wind damaged the roof of my workspace, I had to stop working temporarily to find funds to get back on my feet. During that time, things were tough I couldn't afford to pay my water and electricity bills. They even cut off the water. It was my neighbour who helped me. He let me connect to his meter and that's how my family and I got water to wash, clean our clothes, and cook. He did it for free until I could resume work. He told me, 'Don't worry, we don't sell water.' God will bless him. I'm always available to help him with anything he needs."

3. DISCUSSION

The results highlight the forms of *statutory resilience* demonstrated by household heads. These forms of resilience reflect a desire to maintain social authority and are rooted in mechanisms of reciprocal exchange (*gift and counter-gift*). The discussion will therefore focus on these three key aspects.

3.1. The Statutory Resilience of Household Heads: A Strategy for Maintaining Authority and Social Power within the Household

The findings show that precariously positioned household heads benefit from the support of kinship ties. In this context, family solidarity is expressed through financial transfers from siblings or children living outside the household, and monetary *tontines* among kin serve as a resource enabling household heads to cover both internal and external family expenses.

These results corroborate earlier findings by A. Adjamagbo (1997), who argues that familial mutual aid, or solidarity, is a key pillar in maintaining social cohesion in sub-Saharan African societies. This solidarity can take multiple forms monetary transfers, provision of food, or credit—which are common practices (Eloundou, 1992, cited by Adjamagbo, 1997). The author further expands on our results by analysing family solidarity as a strategy for preserving social power and authority within the household (Antoine & Guillaume, 1986; Vimard & Guillaume, 1991;

Guillaume & Vimard, 1995; all cited by Adjmagbo, 1997).

Moreover, our findings go beyond those of M. Lelart (1989), who studied family mutual aid through savings in the context of Benin. While Lelart's analysis acknowledges savings as a fundamental necessity especially in subsistence economies and rural societies with mismatched production-consumption cycles and environmental uncertainty his approach does not fully address the broader implications tied to the maintenance of social roles and authority.

3.2. The Statutory Resilience of Household Heads as a Product of Reciprocal Exchange within the Neighbourhood

A cross-analysis of our data reveals that *elective participation ties* from the neighbourhood are characterised by another form of support: the provision of water and electricity. These practices, while appearing as gestures of mutual aid, are in fact strategies for adjusting household governance trajectories.

This finding surpasses those of S. Botton (2004) and T. Gahié (2019), whose work explores negotiations and proximity-based relationships between tenants and landlords, or between residents and informal distributors of electricity, water, television, and internet. Their analyses show that such relationships enable precarious actors to access these services at reduced costs.

Our findings are nonetheless consistent with Botton's (2004) argument that, in informal neighbourhoods not connected to the water grid, residents access water in varied ways, often depending on the specific type of settlement (shanty town, precarious quarter, large housing estate) and its integration within the city. In such areas, water access often occurs through unauthorised connections to nearby infrastructure, using salvaged materials (pipes, wrenches, etc.) to link to neighbours' formal installations.

In contrast, our findings also align with those of S. Kando and S. N'gouan (2020), who studied female-headed single-parent households in Yopougon, Abidjan. Their research reveals that household consumption practices serve as a site of statutory resilience, notably through the construction and affirmation of female leadership within the domestic space.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study demonstrates that socially precarious household heads rely on socio-familial solidarity as a strategy for statutory resilience both within and beyond their households. Socio-familial solidarity, in this case, refers to the capacity of household heads to mobilise assistance and services from kinship ties and *elective ties* within their personal networks that is, from family, friends, co-workers, and neighbours.

This mobilisation reflects a broader effort to preserve social authority within the household.

In light of these findings, it is important to note that this study contributes to a relatively new research context by aiming to understand the resilience strategies of socially precarious groups facing instability in their household roles. Finally, further investigation is warranted into the social transaction of roles between spouses, and between fathers and children, in order to deepen our understanding of these diverse resilience strategies.

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Cite This Article: ASSIÉ Deborah Karell, TCHAN BI Sylvestre, Kando Amédée SOUMAHORO (2025). Statutory Resilience and the Roles of Socially Precarious Heads of Households in Abobo (Côte d'Ivoire): Between the Activation of Solidarity Through Strong Ties and the Mobilisation of Resources Through Weak Ties. *East African Scholars Multidiscip Bull*, 8(4), 88-93.
