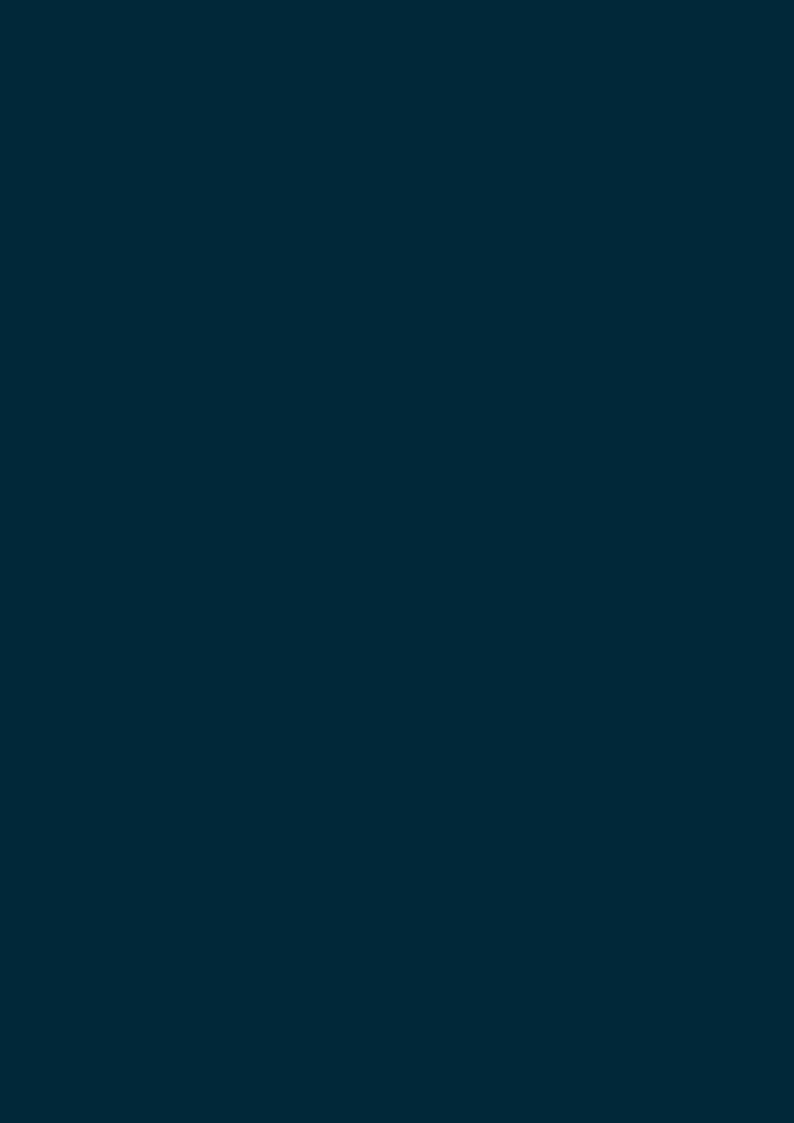# WOMEN IN PRIVATE SECURITY

Recognising the value of women's participation in the industry

Findings and recommendations

Policy Brief

WOMEN IN PRIVATE SECURITY

Recognising the value of women's participation in the industry

Findings and recommendations

Policy Brief

CONTENTS

The International Code of Conduct Association (ICoCA)

ICoCA, the Responsible Security Association, is the leading international organisation committed to improving human rights standards in the private security industry. ICoCA's mission is to promote responsible, transparent and accountable private security practices worldwide that respect human rights, international humanitarian law and the rule of law, safeguarding communities through robust oversight, collaboration and capacity building.

The Association serves as the governance and oversight body for the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (the "Code"), which articulates the responsibilities of private security companies to raise private security standards, particularly in complex environments. ICoCA's work is grounded in international frameworks, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law and the Montreux Document. It supports the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and Goals 5, 8 and 10 (human rights and labour standards).

With a global and diverse membership of governments, civil society organisations, private security providers and their clients, ICoCA mitigates risks associated with poor security practices in global supply chains and environments where abuses may occur.

INTRODUCTION

The private security sector is undergoing a significant transformation as it begins to recognise the value of women's participation in the industry.

In 2000, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 introduced the international Women, Peace and Security agenda. For nearly 25 years, this framework has recognised the need for women's engagement in peace and security processes and has urged the security sector to promote their meaningful participation. However, as of today, the agenda misses a direct reference to the private security industry. Even though initiatives are growing, the lack of specific reference to the private security industry in these efforts has resulted in limited pressure to improve conditions and develop research and accountability measures. The goal of this policy brief is therefore to address this gap from a practical perspective, providing findings and recommendations for the industry in dealing with the inclusion of women.

In recent years, ICoCA has documented the poor working conditions that millions of security guards endure across the world. We found that issues of discrimination and workplace stratification by factors such as sex, race and nationality affect recruitment practices and working conditions. The research also revealed that working conditions directly impact the performance of security guards, their integrity and respect for the law. The working conditions and composition of the workforce are thus transformative factors. Among the many issues we explored, the role of women in security emerged as one of the least documented. This policy paper draws from the findings of previous ICoCA research on working conditions in this sector and expands the discussion towards the broader issues of women's representation, meaningful participation and potential contribution to the provision of responsible security. The study is interested not only with women's experiences in security, but also with the broader contextual factors that shape those experiences. Our findings are based on recent ICoCA surveys and research on working conditions among security guards, as well as ICoCA's observations in the field and consultations with Member companies. We also conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with industry experts (security managers and members of security trade associations) from Africa, Europe, the Middle East and North America in spring 2024. The aim of this paper is to gain practical and nuanced insights into the current state of women's inclusion in the private security industry and to identify potential pathways to achieve meaningful transformation.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Incremental progress in women's representation

Main Takeaway

- Overall, women remain under-represented in top-level positions.

- Women are generally employed in operational roles, senior intelligence positions and lower-level leadership roles.

- In six countries surveyed, women were far less represented in the security set-up of the extractive industries compared to the overall rate of women in the private security sector.

- There is a growing acceptance of women in the industry, especially when male leaders actively advocate for women's inclusion.

- Looking at the Global South, international clients tend to be more supportive of including women while local clients are often less open to female security personnel.

- In complex environments, there is a demand for female foreign contractors in close protection (bodyguard) roles. As a result, foreign women are sometimes deployed in frontline security assignments, while local women are more often employed in administrative or care-related positions.

The private security industry is experiencing a shift as more women enter the field. This change is met with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance from different stakeholders, creating a tension that affects how companies recruit and retain women.

Overall, the industry is becoming more welcoming to women, with an increasing emphasis on competence rather than sex. However, progress remains uneven across different areas and levels of the industry. Regional disparities intersect with the complexities of specific roles, such as management or guarding positions, as well as the distinction between international and local hiring. How women are included

is thus highly dependent on the given context.

Our research demonstrates that women often face scepticism or resentment from male colleagues within security teams, particularly when placed in high-level positions. Women remain a minority in top-level management, COO and CEO positions. As explained by our interviewees, this is due to the private security industry being dominated by men with military backgrounds, especially in management. Women in decision-making positions were most frequently referenced in North American or European contexts. Some African countries, such as Nigeria or Kenya, have reportedly begun to accept or even embrace women at an equal or higher
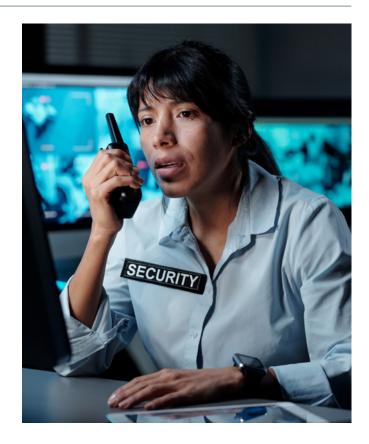
rate than in Europe or North America. Uganda has perhaps the highest rate of women in senior positions that ICoCA ever observed. However, other countries in Africa have not been as welcoming and women remain in lower-paid roles, partly due to cultural specificities.

Rather than top-level positions, we have found that women are more frequently represented in operational roles (guards, close protection officers, chief operations officers, etc.), senior intelligence positions and lower-level leadership roles. As such, our research indicates an overall tendency towards gradual acceptance of women in the private security industry. This acceptance is fuelled and thrives when male leaders actively advocate for women's inclusion. Interviewees also reported the need to further advance women's participation and continue increasing female representation at various levels. Notably, women are receiving more rewards and recognition, such as the *Women in Security Awards*[1].

There are also important differences in terms of women's representation within a country depending on the location, such as urban or rural environments, and the clients' requests. Recent ICoCA surveys among security guards in extractive industries in five African countries showed that very few women are employed as security guards in these settings.[2] For instance, while the Tanzania country survey found that there were 27% female guards across the country, there were only 2% in the extractive sites surveyed. Additionally, women's positions are often limited to certain roles spanning across unarmed positions[3] and customer service-oriented roles. Particularly in static guarding positions in locations that are less hostile, such as Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi, women are increasingly taking up unarmed positions. However, across the industry, men consistently outnumber women.

Looking at the Global South, we found that international clients, particularly from the public and diplomatic sectors, tend to be more supportive of including women, sometimes even requiring female representation in security teams. Local clients, but also international ones from certain regions like the Middle East, are often less open to female security personnel. We also noticed a stark difference between environments such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, and less complex locations. In hostile environments, female foreign contractors are in high demand for close protection

in diplomatic assignments. Yet, the high turn-over of expatriate personnel on such missions and the few female contractors interested in working abroad make it difficult for private security companies to fill such positions. We also observed an important difference here: in such environments, it is more common to engage female foreign contractors in frontline security roles, while the employment of local women is often restricted due to cultural factors. In said environments, local women are typically employed in roles such as cleaning, cooking or administrative tasks, with limited opportunities for frontline engagement.

Overall, our research suggests that even though there is a slight improvement of women's representation in the private security industry, the issue of tokenism remains. Women tend to be included in small numbers merely to fulfil a check-list requirement, to ensure companies appear diverse in the eyes of clients and meet minimal quotas. Albeit being part of a company, their ability to exercise any real influence or make decisions remain minimal. To achieve women's full participation, a change of mindset is necessary. Having a closer look at the pervasive gender stereotypes is hereby key to understand how we can achieve broader acceptance.

---

1. The Women in Security Awards are attributed on an annual basis to acknowledge the achievements and contributions of individuals in their markets, in various countries. For instance, the Australian Women in Security Awards states that its goal "is to highlight these exceptional professionals, showcasing them as role models for others to admire and emulate" (https://womeninsecurityawards.com.au/).

2. 0% in Egypt, 1% in Madagascar, 2% in Tanzania, 15% in Ghana and Zimbabwe.

3. Where applicable: in some countries, private security guards are not allowed to carry firearms.

Finding 2: Pervasive stereotypes: Two sides of a coin
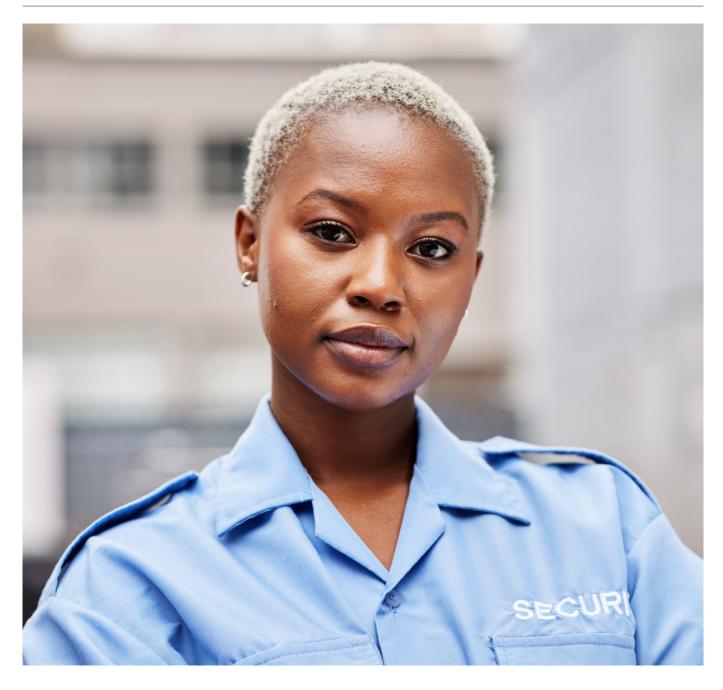
Main Takeaway

- There is a tendency to argue for women's inclusion based on pervasive stereotypes.

- While this can lead to greater representation of women, it also tends to confine them to certain roles within the industry.

Pervasive stereotypes shape the industry and impede women's all-encompassing participation in private security. 'Machismo' attitudes can create an unwelcoming environment for women. Perceptions of a security officer's identity and associated traits often reinforce stereotypes that hinder women's opportunities in the industry. While physicality is important in many security roles and some positions may remain predominantly occupied by men, employers and clients often default to traditional, male-dominated images of security personnel. This, in turn, restricts women's participation and perpetuates biases in hiring and deployment decisions. Even when present in the industry, women often struggle to be heard and respected, particularly in decision-making roles. One interviewee in Kenya reported that women sometimes struggle to be seen and heard, and that some women lack confidence due to being a minority in security spaces. Additionally, because most women are not in decision-making positions, their visibility in the industry may be low, so they may be overlooked as a valuable and important actor in these spaces. In Nigeria, one interviewee stated that even women in high-level positions may be dismissed when making suggestions, undermining their ability to shape security operations and outcomes. However, some interviewees reported that these biases are beginning to dissipate and give way to more openness and new representations of security.

The stereotypes also became visible when talking about the reasoning behind including women in the private security industry. Very often, the arguments referenced women's innate attention to detail, greater loyalty to their work compared to their male counterparts, conflict de-escalation and crisis intervention skills, higher professionalism and emotional intelligence, better awareness, superior intellect and cleverness, caring attitudes and friendly dispositions, trustworthiness and general customer service skills. For example, one interviewee reported that some employers prefer female security officers in customer-service-oriented roles and environments. Another posited that female representation in Finland, for instance, is high partly because many security officer roles are oriented towards reception duties. Such argumentation has proven to be effective to convince security institutions to hire women, as there is a clear economic and institutional benefit. Often, women respond to the above listed stereotypes – not because of their sex, but due to the influence of education, culture or social relations.

However, our interviewees also suggested a mere practical side to considering the sex of employees. Interviewees reported that female personnel can sometimes screen women in ways that male personnel are unable to due to cultural norms. Another interviewee

reported that in some parts of the Middle East, men cannot be sent to talk to a woman, so including female representation on guard forces opens the ability to talk with the local population. Others addressed the ways which female personnel are viewed from a community perspective and how this can assist operations in certain situations. One interviewee in Latin America indicated that because of the ways communities perceive female personnel, including women in guard forces immediately reduces tensions. Another interviewee highlighted that because women are often not seen as a threat, integrating female personnel can reduce the likelihood of conflict and assist in de-escalation. In Nigeria, women are said to be more approachable and accessible from a community perspective, while

in Kenya, some women reportedly prefer female bodyguards because they evoke feelings of safety.

As our research suggests, framing a woman's utility rather than her rights as the basis for her inclusion is crucial for improving women's representation in the industry. However, it is important to note that such arguments can help promote women in private security, but they also reinforce stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. The idea of what is needed to work in security is still tied to these stereotypes, rather than actual capabilities. As a result, while the overall number of women in security is increasing, they are more often found in roles traditionally seen as feminine, while frontline and management positions remain dominated by men.

Finding 3: Cultural norms and practices as barriers

Main Takeaway

- Norms and practices based on stereotypes are perpetuated by the industry itself, as evidenced by the lack of women being hired and/or the failure to provide supportive conditions.

- The main barriers for women entering or remaining in the private security industry are sexual harassment, abuse, gender-based violence, as well as cultural expectations and the challenge of balancing family and work responsibilities.

Cultural norms present substantial barriers, often limiting women's access to the industry or disincentivising them to remain in it. Such barriers vary across different contexts and regions, and stem from a mix of cultural, social and institutional factors, which may not be unique to the private security sector. However, it is worth noting that the main reason for women's underrepresentation in the private security industry seems to be universal: the stereotypical idea that this profession is inherently a 'man's job' requiring particular physical requirements.

Our research suggests that such perspectives are perpetuated by the industry itself. Private security companies often fail to meaningfully abide by international standards and principles for the provision of responsible security, which are in place to ensure accountability and enhance the inclusion of women. Findings also indicate that where equal treatment is implemented with good intentions, systemic barriers are often ignored and continue to persist for women to fully realise their potential within the industry. Some interviewees, for instance, reported that the industry itself can do more to actively recruit and retain women, as well as create awareness of opportunities in the industry. Military experience and firearms training is usually a requirement and women who

do not have such experience are not considered for recruitment. Providing additional on-the-job training or re-evaluating such job requirements for office postings are options usually not considered. There is also a lack of awareness of the industry among women. This limits participation by failing to generate interest in security roles among women in the country. Interviewees from Nigeria and other countries reported that the industry is "just not attracting" women. They referenced the perceived inappropriateness of women in high-risk environments, as well as the long working hours and shift patterns in the industry which make it difficult to fulfil societal family obligations. However, one client in Latin America mentioned that while women may not be interested in applying due to the male-dominated nature of the industry, they receive a lot of interest when proactively trying to recruit local women.

From the interviews, we have found that barriers for women to enter or stay within the private security industry include sexual harassment, abuse and gender-based violence, as well as cultural expectations and the challenge of balancing family and work responsibilities. Sexual harassment, abuse and gender-based violence have a significant impact, causing harm and creating long-lasting effects on women, while also exacerbating
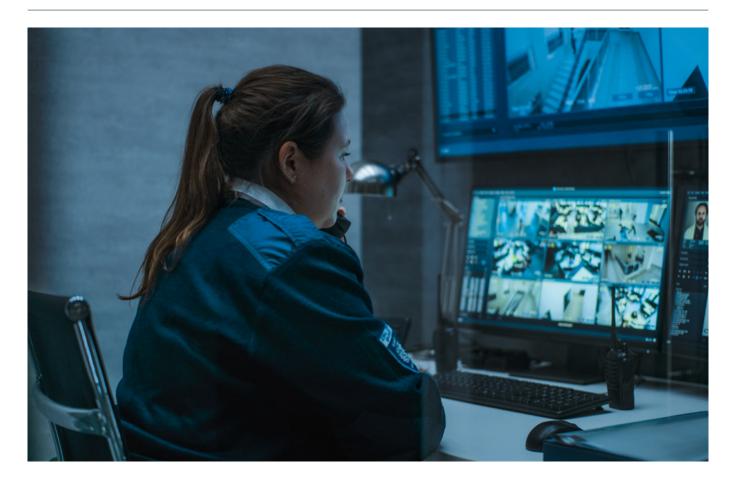
existing vulnerabilities. Data from the recent country surveys on working conditions conducted by ICoCA in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda illustrate the prevalence of these risks for security guards. In Uganda, 19% of female guards experienced sexual harassment at work, 11% in Kenya and 10% in Tanzania. A closer look at the findings suggests that in 73% cases, female guards were harassed by their supervisor or male colleagues for sexual favours. But there are also many instances where female guards are harassed by clients or members of the public. Reports of such incidents span various geographical contexts, with some companies failing to adequately address these issues, prioritising client relationships over employee safety. The risk of violence and harassment seems particularly high in frontline guarding roles.

Furthermore, women in private security may face challenges in balancing work and family obligations. We found that such barriers are prevalent in societies that consider women as the primary caretakers within the domestic sphere, as these expectations to manage household responsibilities often take a toll on their performance and productivity. The challenges to work-life balance are manifold and vary depending on the positions women hold in the industry. Generally, maternity leave is universal; yet, the logistical and financial costs associated with it lead employers to refrain from hiring women in the first place. In the guarding sector and for frontline positions, we found that long working hours and the distance of postings from their homes hinder women from balancing their caretaking responsibilities with work. Our research suggests that the industry has yet to introduce initiatives that accommodate the needs of women with family obligations. Even for women in management or other office positions, the industry has yet to fully adapt to address work-family balance. For instance, breastfeeding facilities are usually unavailable, which can either prevent women from returning to work after maternity leave or create an additional hardship for those who must find a space to nurse or pump. Moreover, flexibility in working hours, part-time positions or job-sharing models are largely absent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women's participation in the private security sector, while growing and generally supported, continues to increase incrementally and unevenly across the world, with some contexts and actors more openly embracing women than others.

Women continue to face barriers to entry into the industry and challenges once within it, but all stakeholders can collectively establish intentional mechanisms to increase women's participation and support their advancement in security, advocating for more meaningful and holistic participation. In fact, women's contributions are diverse. Women assume a wide range of roles and influence operations in various ways, depending on individual circumstances and contexts: a multi-dimensional, context-specific analysis of how to integrate a gender-transformative approach is therefore key. Importantly, we believe that transformation is not only the responsibility of private security companies but should be seen as a collective effort between companies, clients, governments and civil society organisations.

We recommend **companies** to:

- actively reach out to hire women across all sectors and positions within the industry, focusing particularly on women in leadership positions;

- encourage senior women to mentor junior female colleagues in the industry, and where applicable, extend this support to other disadvantaged groups;

- ensure women's meaningful participation by not holding them only in certain roles that conform to traditional stereotypes and tokenism;

- encourage men in leadership positions to advocate for greater participation and contribution of women in security;

- address the industry's image and stereotypes by promoting female role models and changing the language by showcasing success stories of women's participation;

- establish family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours, part-time positions, job sharing as well as specific accommodations for pregnant women and those with caretaking duties;

- develop comprehensive anti-harassment and safety protocols as well as accountability mechanisms to protect women against sexual harassment, abuse and violence in the workplace (see ICoCA Guidelines for Private Security Providers on Preventing and Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse);

- undertake an analysis of the benefits and challenges of increasing the participation and contribution of women in the workforce. If possible, create a targeted action plan based on the findings;

- provide equal training opportunities regardless of sex;

- develop community outreach programmes in partnership with local civil society organisations and women's organisations to encourage bottom-up approaches to transformative initiatives;

- establish advisory boards consisting of members that offer diverse backgrounds from different sectors.

We recommend **clients** to:

- ensure that women's inclusion requirements in procurement processes and contracts become an industry standard;

- regularly monitor and evaluate policies of private security companies to ensure they promote genuine equity.

We recommend **civil society organisations** to:

- challenge stereotypes rooted in society through workshops, trainings and awareness-raising campaigns;

- partner with private security companies to advocate for increased participation of women in the workforce, for instance, by engaging directly in training.

We recommend **governments** to:

- include the private security industry in the National Action Plan on UNSC 1325;

- fund research or programme-specific projects which encourage greater female employment and participation in the private security industry.
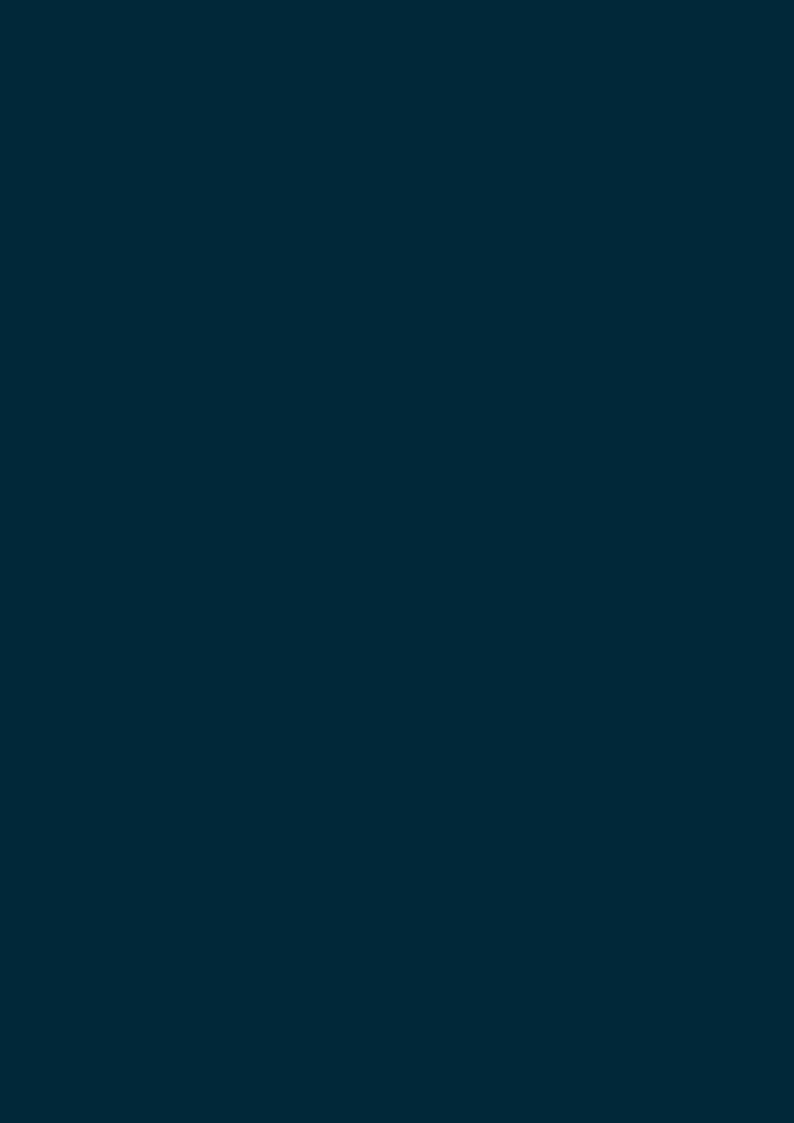
Acknowledgments

The
Responsible
Security
Association

ICoCA