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Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency

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What's new? Women form an important social base for the Islamist Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. Some help it recruit, generate funds and carry out operations. These understudied realities partly explain the insurgency's resilience.

Why does it matter? Understanding what Al-Shabaab offers Somali women, despite its brutal violence, patriarchal ethos and rigid gender norms, and, in turn, what women do for the movement could help the Somali government and its foreign partners develop policies to help sap support for the group.

What should be done? While the insurgency persists across much of Somalia, women will likely continue to play roles within it. But the government could develop a strategy against gender-based violence that would signal it is doing what it can to improve Somali women's plight, while integrating more women into the security forces.

I. Overview

Al-Shabaab's Islamist insurgency remains a formidable fighting force in Somalia despite years of operations against it. Its staying power stems from the Somali state's weakness and its own tactical flexibility and ability to generate revenue, navigate clan politics and provide some order in areas it controls. Crisis Group's interviews with women previously linked to Al-Shabaab, and verification of their statements with former militants and close observers of the movement, suggest that women also help sustain the insurgency. While Al-Shabaab imposes restrictions upon women, it can provide some security and its courts often uphold Islamic family law to their benefit. Some women recruit, fundraise, spy or smuggle arms for the group. While Al-Shabaab remains potent and controls some areas, women are likely to continue in such roles. But by developing a strategy against gender-based violence the Somali government could demonstrate that it is doing what it can to alleviate women's suffering. It can better integrate women into the security forces and study women's roles in Al-Shabaab to improve efforts against the militants.

Since African Union (AU) forces ousted Al-Shabaab from major towns across the country in 2014, Somalia's war has largely ground on in a holding pattern. The government nominally controls population centres, but has struggled to extend its presence further, deliver services or stem graft, tasks made all the harder by worsening

relations between Mogadishu and leaders in regional states. Al-Shabaab controls many rural areas, including around the capital, extorts both travellers along major routes and businesses across much of the country, and provides services that many Somalis turn to in the absence of functioning state institutions. It plays clever clan politics, avoiding too close an association with any one clan, but often backing weaker groups against stronger rivals or mediating disputes. While its attacks provoke fury, in places it offers a certain predictability amid the disorder that afflicts much of the country.

Assessing how Al-Shabaab's rule affects women and the role women play in the movement is hard. Widespread insecurity, the movement's covert presence and intelligence operations in areas nominally held by the government and the fear it inspires makes gaining access to women associated or previously associated with it difficult. In these conditions, Crisis Group was able to interview a limited number of women formerly married to fighters, as well as relatives of such women, and then verify findings with former male militants, government officials, security officers, activists and rehabilitation advisers. The picture these interviews paint is partial but offers insight into how women in Al-Shabaab-held areas regard the movement and how some actively support it.

Al-Shabaab's brutal insurgency has entailed considerable suffering and hardship for many women but its rule can bring benefits. It imposes severe limits on women's comportment and access to the public sphere, restrictions resented across much of Somali society. Where it controls territory it can, however, offer women and girls a degree of physical safety – hardly complete, but still appreciable – in a country where they are otherwise exposed to violence. Through its courts, Al-Shabaab upholds tenets of Islamic family law that, to some degree, protect women's rights in matters such as divorce and inheritance in a manner the official justice system does not. While many instances of forced marriage between militants and women and girls exist, for some families marrying daughters into Al-Shabaab may bring a degree of financial stability.

Women also appear to play more active roles in the insurgency, and are involved in activities critical to its resilience. They help recruit and proselytise. They gather intelligence that enables military operations or extortion, or ferry explosives ahead of attacks, taking advantage of the fact that security forces tend to watch women less closely than they do men. In a handful of cases, women carry out strikes themselves, though Al-Shabaab deploys far fewer women suicide bombers than, for example, the Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram. For the most part, women do not participate directly in military operations or decision-making.

Women's cooperation with Al-Shabaab does not necessarily reflect their sympathy for the movement. In areas where militants dominate or exert influence, paying extortion money, marrying into the insurgency or even actively collaborating can be a matter of survival. Militants coerce people into complying alongside offering incentives. Many who marry militants or otherwise join the movement are still young girls. Even those who voluntarily seek out the movement's courts tend to do so because the state offers no alternative. That said, some women members do express strong support for the movement and its goals and regard themselves as full-fledged members.

The policy implications of these findings are not immediately evident. While Al-Shabaab's insurgency persists, women will likely continue to play roles within it. Clearly any enhanced security procedures for women should be carried out cautiously;

further screening of women must be conducted by women, for example, lest it generate local anger. Overall, what seems important is to recognise that the militants, notwithstanding their Salafi-inspired doctrine, have a gender strategy of sorts, engage women and, in some cases, meet some of their needs. The Somali government has made some efforts: in government-controlled areas women have greater freedom of movement, an increasing number of girls have joined the school system and the number of female civil servants has risen in recent years. But it could do more. Parliament has failed to pass a sexual offences act, for example, and the government has taken few steps to address sexual violence, including by the security forces. Somalia's largely broken justice system offers women little.

Making headway on such issues might not do much to alter women's calculations in insurgent-controlled areas, but would at least signal that the government recognises Somali women's plight and is prepared to do what is within its power to improve it. By more effectively integrating women into the security forces, studying in closer detail the role women play in sustaining Al-Shabaab's insurgency and adapting accordingly, the government could also devise a more nuanced strategy against the insurgents.

II. A Resilient Islamist Insurgency

Al-Shabaab ("the youth", in Arabic) is in large part the product of decades of state collapse and war in Somalia. It was founded in the early 2000s by Somali Islamists, many of whom had been affiliated with al-Ittihad al-Islami, a group that sought to impose Islamist rule across the Horn of Africa.¹ It then rose to prominence as the enforcement wing of a powerful faction of the Union of Islamic Courts, a coalition of sharia courts financed by Somali businessmen that seized Mogadishu in 2005 and brought an end to the predation of feuding warlords. The Ethiopian government, fearing an Islamist government on their doorstep, ousted the Islamic Courts in 2006, with a green light and tactical support from Washington.² Most of the Courts' leaders fled abroad, leaving harder-line militias, including Al-Shabaab, to fight on. Ethiopia's invasion generated considerable local anger and a groundswell of support for the militant group.

After Ethiopian forces withdrew in 2009, Al-Shabaab seized control of large swathes of south-central Somalia, including much of Mogadishu, inhabited by an estimated three million people. Al-Shabaab was ruthless with potential enemies, but its rule, while severe, brought a semblance of order where previously chaos reigned. Its dispute resolution was quick and enforced, markets tended to be open and predictable, and roads were secure. Especially in its early years, it transcended clan divisions, drawing its leadership from a cross-section of kinship groups.³

¹ Al-Shabaab's precise origins are debated. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°99, *Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War*, 26 June 2014 and Crisis Group Africa Report N°100, *Somalia's Islamists*, 12 December 2005.

² See Crisis Group Africa Report N°147, *Somalia: To Move Beyond the Failed State*, 23 December 2008, pp. 1-2.

³ See Crisis Group Commentary, "Somalia: Why is Al-Shabaab Still a Potent Threat?", 11 February 2016; Crisis Group Briefing, *Somalia: Al-Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War*, op. cit., pp. 12-15.

In 2011, AU forces – an AU mission, AMISOM, led by Ugandan and Burundian contingents, had deployed already in 2007 – ousted Al-Shabaab from Mogadishu and surrounding areas.⁴ Meanwhile, President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a former Union of Islamic Courts leader who had come to power some years earlier through a deal between Somalia's new Transitional Federal Government and Islamic Courts leaders in Djibouti, implemented sharia across Somalia. This, combined with Al-Shabaab's increasingly indiscriminate violence and botched handling of the 2011 famine, when the movement barred aid groups from areas it controlled, leading to thousands of deaths, appears gradually to have undercut its support. An AMISOM surge in 2014 – by this time, the force included troops from neighbours Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya – recaptured other population centres.

Since then, little has fundamentally changed. The government mostly controls Mogadishu and other major towns, but has largely been unable to establish a permanent presence beyond those, improve its delivery of public services or end graft by officials. Indeed, since President Mohammed Abdullahi "Farmajo" came to power in 2017, tensions among factions in the capital and between Mogadishu and regions, known as federal states, exacerbated by foreign interference, have erected new obstacles to improving the government's performance.⁵ Most of the Somali army, despite years of foreign training, is a work in progress. Many forces are more loyal to clan strongmen than they are to the government, undercutting its cohesion and command and control.⁶

Al-Shabaab itself remains a force to be reckoned with. It controls many rural areas, often sets up checkpoints along main roads and exerts influence in nominally government-held towns and cities. It has shown tactical flexibility, stepping up attacks, disrupting supply lines, targeting military convoys, assassinating leaders who cooperate with foreign forces and conducting night raids on villages despite losing territory. It still plays clever clan politics, avoiding too close an association to any one clan, but often backing weaker groups against stronger rivals or mediating disputes. Foreigners, especially other East Africans, fight in its ranks but the movement retains its Somali identity and its top leaders are Somali.⁷

It also provides some services the government does not. Given the corrupt and slow court system, many turn to the movement to resolve disputes.⁸ It holds permanent courts, presided over by clerics who rule on a range of criminal and civil matters, in areas it controls, and mobile courts elsewhere; sometimes Somalis travel to Al-Shabaab-held regions for the sole purpose of petitioning its courts, whose decisions

⁴ AU forces were initially confined to a small base at the Mogadishu airport, where they guarded installations including a UN office and the president's official residence. The Ugandan and Burundian contingents of AMISOM, backed by Somali National Army troops, launched an offensive against Al-Shabaab in 2010. Al-Shabaab formally withdrew from the city in September 2011, though battles raged most of that year. A separate, Kenyan-led offensive in September 2012 ousted Al-Shabaab from Kismayo, its last remaining major urban stronghold.

⁵ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°260, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, 5 June 2018.

⁶ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°131, *Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack*, 20 October 2017, p. 4.

⁷ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°265, *Al-Shabaab Five Years After Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, p. 4.

⁸ See Crisis Group Commentary, "Somalia: Why is Al-Shabaab Still a Potent Threat?", op. cit.

the group mostly enforces. It has a relatively sophisticated revenue generation system, extorting transit along main routes and businesses both in areas it controls and beyond. Many Somalis compare its predictable extortion favourably with official graft.⁹

Al-Shabaab retains significant military capability. Its intelligence agency, the Amniyat, has infiltrated many of the government's security structures – allowing it to mount repeated operations in Mogadishu and other cities. For some years it has also struck neighbouring countries, exemplified most recently by the assault on Nairobi's Dusit2 compound, which includes a luxury hotel, restaurant and office buildings, in January 2019. Such attacks are primarily aimed at increasing the cost for those countries of deploying troops in Somalia.¹⁰ An increase in U.S. airstrikes on Al-Shabaab targets over the past couple of years has reduced its leaders' mobility, but, by the U.S. military's own assessment, has done little to weaken the group. Al-Shabaab still has a relatively unified command structure.¹¹ It remains arguably the largest coherent indigenous force in Somalia. Were AU forces to withdraw, it would likely again overrun Mogadishu.

III. Women's Roles in the Insurgency

Women's support, both passive and active, has contributed to Al-Shabaab's endurance. Women's roles tend to be poorly understood, in large part because their views in parts of the country held by the movement are rarely aired outside those areas. Nor do wives or former wives of Al-Shabaab fighters or women who are operationally active in the insurgency speak much about their experiences.¹² But Crisis Group interviews with some women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab, mostly as wives of commanders and fighters, along with several former fighters and administrators, government as well as security officials and civil society figures involved in women's rehabilitation, suggest that women play varied and often vital roles in the movement.¹³

⁹ A 2016 report by the UN Monitoring Group found that Al-Shabaab had a sophisticated revenue collection system that businessmen generally regard as being more efficient and less corrupt than the state authorities it opposes. "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, Pursuant to United Nations Security Council Resolution 2244 (2015)", S/2016/919, 31 October 2016. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Al-Shabaab – It Will Be a Long War*, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In testimony before the U.S. Senate's Armed Services Committee, General Thomas Waldhauser, head of U.S. Africa Command, said repeated airstrikes had failed to degrade Al-Shabaab's capabilities. "Top US general on Africa: Airstrikes not enough to defeat al-Shabaab", *The Hill*, 7 February 2019.

¹² One exception is Khadija and Stephen Harley, "Women in Al-Shabaab", in Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (eds.), *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab* (New York, 2018), pp. 251-256, which draws on a handful of interviews with women in Al-Shabaab-held areas, including women members of the movement. Also see Sahro Ahmed Koshin, "Women in Peacebuilding in Somalia", in Keating and Waldman, op. cit., pp. 265-274. Journalistic coverage of women and Al-Shabaab tends to focus on the pathways of Kenyan women from various ethnic backgrounds into the movement. See, for example, "Daughters of Al-Shabaab", video, Al Jazeera, 27 November 2018; Katharine Petrich, "Al-Shabaab's Mata Hari network", *War on the Rocks*, 14 August 2018; and "The sex slaves of Al-Shabaab", BBC, 27 May 2019. The assumption that tends to pervade such coverage is that women play no role in Al-Shabaab beyond boosting fighters' morale.

¹³ The interviews took place mostly in Mogadishu in April 2019. Crisis Group met with a small number of women formerly associated with Al-Shabaab and their family members, and with former male

Assessing the degree of support Al-Shabaab enjoys among women is difficult. From its early days battling Ethiopian forces in the aftermath of the Islamic Courts Union, Al-Shabaab brought new restrictions for women. It promulgated ultra-conservative Salafi-inspired rules imposing severe restrictions on women's comportment and access to the public sphere. It banned women from leaving the house without a *mahram*, or male guardian (usually a relative), and restricted men and women mingling in public spaces.¹⁴ It also forced women to wear black niqabs (long formless robes covering the whole body and face, with only a slit for the eyes), that formerly had no place in traditional Somali costume. While Somali women began dressing more conservatively in the 1990s, in part seeking to shield themselves from the sexual violence wrought by the war and in part due to growing Salafi influence in parts of the country, those mores had remained fluid and adaptive. Al-Shabaab physically enforced its own dress code and its control erased diversity or choice in women's outward appearance.¹⁵

On the other hand, the movement brought – and continues to offer – a measure of protection to women, who suffered particularly badly from years of lawlessness, including through heightened vulnerability to kidnapping and sexual violence. It enforces Islamic family law, ensuring, for instance, that women receive a refund of the dowry in cases of divorce or the share of an inheritance.¹⁶ The even-handedness of Al-Shabaab's judicial mechanisms should not be overstated, with women sometimes suffering cruel punishments on charges that reflect the group's patriarchal ethos. Media reports also frequently record the stoning to death of women accused of adultery.¹⁷ But with no state institution in many areas, Al-Shabaab's courts offer women the sole means of getting their just due from ex-husbands or male relatives.¹⁸ Al-Shabaab also tackles some forms of gender-based violence, punishing rapists and even intervening on behalf of women complainants in cases of domestic violence.¹⁹

militants. Their accounts were then corroborated with other close observers of the movement and actors engaged with it in different roles, including security and other officials, civil society activists and outside experts. All the women met voluntarily in secure conditions. For their own protection, Crisis Group has not revealed their identity in this briefing.

¹⁴ "Harsh War, Harsh Peace: Abuses by Al-Shabaab, the Transitional Federal Government and AMISOM in Somalia", Human Rights Watch, April 2010, pp. 27-35.

¹⁵ "Somalia's al-Shabab militants impose dress code", BBC, 13 June 2014.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader that helps rehabilitate former Al-Shabaab members, and Al-Shabaab ex-wife who left the group's previous stronghold in Marka, Mogadishu, April 2019.

¹⁷ "Al-Shabaab stones mother-of-eight to death for adultery in Somalia", *The Independent*, 27 October 2017. One former Al-Shabaab fighter who subsequently escaped the group's territory said that during his time with the group, between 2016 and 2018, he witnessed several executions of women for alleged prostitution. Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wife who went to court, civil society leader who helps rehabilitate former Al-Shabaab members, Mogadishu, April 2019; telephone interview, sheikh who previously lived in Al-Shabaab stronghold in Lower Shabelle, June 2019.

¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, sheikhs and elders who previously lived in Al-Shabaab-controlled town of Qoryole, in Lower Shabelle. The elder said rape was rare in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas, due to strict enforcement of punishment for the crime, while it was "commonplace" in government-run areas. A former Al-Shabaab fighter who escaped the group's territory said cases of rape were rare in Al-Shabaab-held territory. Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019. These postulations should not be taken at face value, however, as it might also be harder for women and girls to report such cases in those areas.

Moreover, it appears to increasingly display some pragmatism in its enforcement of norms, as explored further below.

Most women living under its rule are civilians unaffiliated with the group. For them, as for men in those areas, collaborating can simply be a question of survival, given that the group exerts power through both inducements and threats of violence. Some Somalis living in government-held areas often perceive civilians, men and women alike, who live under Al-Shabaab rule as *de facto* supporters because they do not flee.²⁰ In reality, many are bound to those areas through family ties and financial constraints or are reluctant to abandon property, livestock or crops to lead a life away from their homes. Many civilian women in Al-Shabaab areas, like their male counterparts, appear to have mixed feelings toward the group, appreciating some of the services it provides while rejecting or reviling its coercion and abuses.²¹

Assessing how much even women actively involved with the movement fully support it is also hard. Some say they are or were true believers in Al-Shabaab's program.²² Others, however, take up roles within the movement simply to avoid the retribution any refusal might bring. For many, motives may be mixed, with women's involvement operating on a spectrum of willingness and coercion.²³

While militant leaders and government officials alike tend not to portray women as full-fledged Al-Shabaab members, women in the movement appear to see themselves as such and to play important roles. Al-Shabaab's leadership does not include women in its command structure, decision-making bodies or fighting force. Nor does the government view women as militants. The authorities have no strategy for addressing women's role in the group and very rarely target suspected women members for prosecution.²⁴ In contrast, however, women in the movement view themselves very much as members.²⁵ They perform tasks that bolster Al-Shabaab's rule in areas it controls, assist the movement in resisting outside pressure and even enable its expansion. Women's involvement seems to have expanded as the movement has come under pressure from AU and Somali army offensives since 2014. Their roles range from simply marrying into the group, to actively recruiting and proselytising, gathering intelligence, smuggling weapons and raising funds.

A. Marriage

Marriage is the most common path along which Somali women become affiliated with Al-Shabaab. For the movement, marriage is not just the God-ordained way of life but a tool for recruitment and advancing socio-political interests. The group promises male recruits enhanced access to wives and greater social mobility, including by abolishing customs that prevent men from minor clans from marrying women from larger or more prominent ones. It uses marriage to advance relations and pro-

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, lawyers and government and security officials, Mogadishu, April 2019.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

²² Crisis Group interview, former committed Al-Shabaab wife and associate, Mogadishu, May 2019.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

²⁴ According to one senior government official, authorities sympathise with women involved in Al-Shabaab and see them primarily as victims not perpetrators. Crisis Group interview, Mogadishu, April 2019.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

cure loyalties across a wide patchwork of clans. Many militants marry two to three wives from different clans. Levels of intermarriage between dominant and minority clans have increased under Al-Shabaab's rule.²⁶

Though reports of forced marriages exist, most unions with Al-Shabaab members appear to be voluntary, though admittedly women's choices are taken in the shadow of powerful parental pressure and clan expectations.²⁷ Against a backdrop of national economic decline, the simple fact that the movement brokers matches and offers brides-to-be a degree of financial stability is appealing to families looking to marry their daughters and even to some women themselves. Moreover, as a militant's wife, women often enjoy greater financial security than women unaffiliated with the group.²⁸ Widows whose husbands have died in battle tend to remarry quickly, hold relatively high social status in the movement and retain their widows' stipends even if they remarry, provided they do so within the group.²⁹

At the height of Al-Shabaab's power, women themselves sometimes sought out marriage to a fighter. A former male Al-Shabaab fighter told Crisis Group:

When I was a teenager, I wasn't well off and was called all kinds of names ... especially by girls my age [because I was poor]. But when I joined Al-Shabaab, I had to clean myself up. I owned a gun and looked powerful. I earned a decent income. The girls who used to look down upon me would now send messages through ... relatives that they wanted to marry me. Some would even ask me to hook them up with another good Al-Shabaab member.³⁰

Neither women's agency in marrying into Al-Shabaab nor the benefits of such unions should be exaggerated. First, many Al-Shabaab brides are under eighteen, and marry under strong parental pressure. Indeed, some of the girls recruited for marriage are as young as twelve, a practice widespread in impoverished rural Somalia and not restricted to Al-Shabaab.³¹ Even older women may feel constrained in their choice because they or their parents fear persecution should they oppose a match to

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019 and senior security official who was previously an Al-Shabaab commander, Mogadishu, April 2019.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives and woman who previously lived in Al-Shabaab-controlled Marka, Mogadishu, April 2019. One former wife said most unions were voluntary but that young women still succumbed to pressure from parents and relatives. She said she left the Al-Shabaab-controlled area because she could not bear the difficult conditions in a remote, rural area, having grown up in the city.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019 and telephone interviews, elders and sheikhs previously based in Lower Shabelle, an Al-Shabaab stronghold and now living in Mogadishu, June 2019. In general, wider economic decline has led to a reduction in the number of men able to take wives, meaning that Al-Shabaab fighters, who enjoy a regular income, can be attractive suitors.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, former male Al-Shabaab fighter, Mogadishu, April 2019.

³¹ In many more conservative societies across the Horn, girls can marry legally as soon as they attain puberty, and are considered young women. According to Somali civil law, the legal age for marriage for girls is fifteen. See "Somalia: Sexual Offences Bill", Legal Action Worldwide, May 2018. A recent anti-sexual offences bill that proposed raising this age to eighteen drew strong opposition from Somalia's religious establishment. This briefing refers most often to women, rather than women and girls, but in many instances this category can include post-pubescent girls under eighteen.

an Al-Shabaab commander or fighter. Some clans may also pressure, or even compel, women to marry militants in order to curry favour with Al-Shabaab or because the movement demands it of them.³² Militants' widows face strong pressure to remarry within the movement; partly this is driven by the group's ethos of collective responsibility to wives of fallen fighters, and partly to avoid widows, especially of commanders, from sharing intelligence with the government.³³

Nor is marriage within Al-Shabaab always a ticket to prosperity. Fighters often struggle to sustain multiple families, and marriages are strained by the men's constant redeployment.³⁴ According to one former Al-Shabaab wife, in addition to the general precariousness of life within a militant group at war, "the majority [of husbands] are absent ... and when they are around they don't treat their wives with respect".³⁵

Divorce is permitted and facilitated by Al-Shabaab. Clerics allow women to initiate divorce in courts and tend to grant divorces on the grounds of a man's failure to provide for his wife and family or abandonment.³⁶ Indeed, the divorce rate is reportedly high within the movement.³⁷ That said, it can be as consequential for women as marriage itself unless women marry again within the movement or otherwise demonstrate loyalty. As another former wife said, "when a woman defects, she's not only defecting from the movement, but also has a broken marriage".³⁸ There are other incentives for divorcees to remarry within Al-Shabaab or stay in its territory: militants' former wives face acute stigma when re-entering society outside the group's fold.³⁹

In the past, Al-Shabaab tried to attract foreign men to Somalia by promising a wife upon arrival. It pressured clans to offer young women and girls to foreign combatants.⁴⁰ This practice met fierce resistance from Somali families as it tore at the fabric of Somali society, which traditionally views marriage as a rite that cements or upgrades relations between or among clans. Some families refused to give daughters to foreigners because they feared children from such unions would face stigma from their mother's clan.⁴¹ Still, some girls were married off to fighters from Britain, Canada, the U.S., Australia and several Arab and Central Asian countries, particularly during Al-Shabaab's peak years from early 2007 to 2012. Their children, many of whom are identifiable as non-indigenous Somalis due to their pale skin, have often struggled to integrate. Boys among them have typically become Al-Shabaab fighters

³² Crisis Group interview, former al-Shabaab fighter, Mogadishu, May 2019.

³³ Crisis group interviews, former Al-Shabaab fighter, Mogadishu, May 2019; long-time observer of the group, Nairobi, June 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wife, civil society leader who helps rehabilitate former Al-Shabaab members, Mogadishu, April 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab wife, Mogadishu, April 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab wife, Mogadishu, April 2019.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Somalia attorney general, civil society member and lawyer who has represented former Al-Shabaab members, Mogadishu, April 2019. The lawyer said the absence of a formal mechanism for reintegrating former Al-Shabaab members in society was a major problem.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader who helps rehabilitate former Al-Shabaab members, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁴¹ Ibid.

at a very young age.⁴² The tension between the movement and clans over such marriages has waned, however, as the influx of foreign recruits has diminished.

B. *Recruitment and Indoctrination*

From the outset, Al-Shabaab has used women to propel its recruitment, indoctrination and outreach efforts. Not only do the marriage prospects the group offers make women crucial to its ability to enlist fighters, but women also seem to be integral to other aspects of the movement's outreach.

Women proselytise on the movement's behalf. Across much of south-central Somalia, Al-Shabaab operates shadow subnational administrative units known as *waliyats*, or provinces. The *wali*, or shadow governor, establishes committees responsible for drumming up recruits and resources. These committees often comprise wives of high-ranking officers or other engaged women supporters. The women go door to door to educate neighbourhood women and organise lectures and discussions for women at madrasas or other sites, in which they cultivate women's support for the movement's values and aims, and encourage women who have married fighters to themselves become active and involved.⁴³ On occasion, Al-Shabaab leaders attend sessions to give lectures or to imbue the talk with greater authority. A number of Al-Shabaab women report that women from these committees work as marital counsellors of sorts, attempting to keep troubled marriages within the movement stable.⁴⁴

A number of them also report that they were recruited to the movement by female members in this way.⁴⁵ Indeed, women who report joining the movement voluntarily but not through marriage most commonly appear to do so after meeting a female recruiter at Islamic lessons provided at a mosque or learning centre. One former Al-Shabaab wife said recruiters in the movement taught her to draw other girls into the movement when she was just thirteen.⁴⁶ Most women who join through this route are single and subsequently tend to marry Al-Shabaab militants, though reportedly women married to non-Shabaab members have also signed up and supported the movement even while their husbands do not.⁴⁷

C. *Fundraising*

Al-Shabaab also reportedly relies on women for fundraising. This happens, first, through the movement's taxation or extortion of small businesses. The decades-long conflict in Somalia, its toll on the male population, high rates of divorce and the prevalence of *qat* addiction have meant women are more active in historically male-

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wives, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab wife, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁴⁷ A senior official said most women arrested in areas not under full Al-Shabaab control had been recruited to play roles such as surveilling strategically important installations or tracking the movements of officials targeted for assassination, as further explored below. These women were not necessarily a part of the movement nor were their families formally affiliated with Al-Shabaab. Crisis Group interview, Mogadishu, April 2019.

dominated sectors of the formal and informal economies – livestock, agriculture and retail, for example.

In principle, Al-Shabaab espouses strict Salafi norms that prohibit women from playing such roles, preaches against women leaving the house without a *mahram*, or male relative, and bans interaction between men and women who are not close family. But despite its official stances, the movement displays some pragmatism in recognising that women are often now primary breadwinners. Even in places it controls directly, it tends to allow women to run businesses.⁴⁸ It tolerates *suuqley*, or market women, who sell their wares to both men and women. In fact, its position on this traditional aspect of Somali public life seems to have evolved, given that it initially sought to restrict these women from sitting outside in markets.

In some places, Al-Shabaab appears to go a step further, exploiting women-owned businesses for money laundering and smuggling.⁴⁹ One common method is to convert commodities into cash via the daily business operations of local female entrepreneurs.⁵⁰ Al-Shabaab asks women to ferry its goods between markets along with their regular wares. Once they reach the destination, the women either sell the goods themselves, then return the proceeds to Al-Shabaab, or hand them over to the movement's business contacts.⁵¹ Women traders' motives for cooperating in such schemes are complex. The movement may offer one businesswoman a share of the profits, while coercing another into complying.⁵² Widows and divorcees who are sole breadwinners are especially vulnerable to the latter type of pressure.⁵³

Another funding source that women help militants tap is charity. Male Al-Shabaab officials are responsible for collecting *zakat*, the alms obligatory for all Muslims who are not indigent. But the movement depends on women's extensive social networks to generate community donations for special fundraising initiatives. Often women married to high-ranking officials or older women spearhead campaigns for the movement's social welfare programs.⁵⁴ In some places, such campaigns are continuous, in others they are specific to Ramadan or other significant occasions, or triggered by socio-economic shocks such as droughts and floods.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, prominent civil society actor, Somali researcher, mother of former Al-Shabaab wife and Nairobi-based British researcher, March-April 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior security official who previously served as an Al-Shabaab commander, June 2019. He said increasing efforts to squeeze Al-Shabaab's traditional sources of income, including by monitoring money transfer systems, had forced Al-Shabaab to adapt. This information tallied with the observations of a Nairobi-based researcher who has conducted extensive research in Al-Shabaab's south-central Somalia stronghold. Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, March 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ In reality, Al-Shabaab's rule entails little in terms of basic services beyond dispute resolution and some degree of security. That said, it does sometimes distribute funds to poor Somalis in areas it controls. Although it initially banned the delivery of humanitarian aid and services including health and education in areas it controls, it has since changed tack and now allows aid groups to operate. Crisis Group interview, Somali researcher, March 2019. See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°125, *Instruments of Pain (III): Conflict and Famine in Somalia*, 9 May 2017.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former al-Shabaab wives and rehabilitation adviser, Mogadishu, April 2019.

D. *Gathering Intelligence and Transporting Weapons*

Al-Shabaab has long relied on its intelligence agency, Amniyat, to monitor threats and carry out attacks. Women have gathered information for the Amniyat since the movement's inception, but their role is more vital today.

One of women's functions is to garner intelligence on government facilities and Somali and foreign troops' bases.⁵⁶ Some do business with government and African Union soldiers, selling milk, tea, vegetables and fruit, and glean information on their military capabilities and other matters. Those troops often supply villages with water and medical services as part of counter-insurgency campaigns, which also brings them into contact with women working undercover for Al-Shabaab.⁵⁷ Women tend to have greater access to government-held areas than male counterparts because such trading activities give them natural cover.⁵⁸

Women also spy on individuals of interest for the Amniyat. Women traders appear to obtain intelligence on businesspeople's commerce, thus helping Al-Shabaab identify targets for extortion in areas outside its direct control.⁵⁹ Women sometimes help facilitate Al-Shabaab assassinations; they give male operatives cover and provide critical information, such as the target's daily routines.⁶⁰ According to one former wife of an Al-Shabaab fighter: "They identify locations and guide perpetrators to those locations".⁶¹ Government and foreign troops are increasingly aware of such activity, and have adjusted their security procedures, attempting to deploy more female security personnel at checkpoints.⁶² Six women are reportedly serving jail terms after being convicted for offering operational support to Al-Shabaab assassination squads and attackers.⁶³

Women support military operations not only by providing intelligence, but also by ferrying around weapons. Somali society traditionally does not perceive women as threats and, until recently, government-run checkpoints, which often had no female security personnel, rarely searched women.⁶⁴ Even now, male security officials staff most checkpoints outside cities. According to one former Al-Shabaab wife, as the federal government's security procedures have tightened and restricted male operatives' movement, women are indispensable to transporting explosive devices and their components.⁶⁵ A woman activist from Marka, the largest town in Somalia's Lower Shabelle region, which though nominally government-held has a heavy Al-Shabaab presence, with militants dominating surrounding areas, added that while

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior government official, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group, interview, security official, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab wife, April 2019.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior security official who previously served as an Al-Shabaab commander, June 2019.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Somalia government officials and former Al-Shabaab wives, March-April 2019. Numerous interviewees confirmed women's role ahead of assassinations.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab wife, April 2019.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, security official, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Ali Dahir, Somali attorney general, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, former director of NGO that provides rehabilitation support to Al-Shabaab female defectors, April 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former Al-Shabaab wife, former director of NGO that provides rehabilitation support to Al-Shabaab female defectors, April 2019.

women transport weapons of all sorts, it is the “smuggling of parts, especially hand grenades and other small components to be assembled for an attack” that is more common.⁶⁶

Al-Shabaab also appears to rely on a network of trusted women to provide secure hiding places where fighters can organise operations. According to one former militant, such women tend to be older, based in major towns and paid for their work.⁶⁷ Older women tend to elicit even less suspicion from government security forces. Al-Shabaab's use of such women for this role reflects the militants' ability to exploit stereotypical gender norms to operational advantage.

E. *Combat*

Although women's intelligence gathering and logistics support are crucial to the movement's military resilience, Al-Shabaab generally does not involve women in combat. This choice is reportedly due partly to Somali norms that ascribe the fighting role to men and partly to religious prohibitions against women's participation in war-making.⁶⁸

Nor, in contrast to some other African militants, does Al-Shabaab tend to deploy women and girls as suicide bombers. For example, Boko Haram, the jihadist insurgency operating in north-eastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin area, for years used women more than men as suicide bombers (though it has moderated that practice over the past year).⁶⁹ In contrast, according to one tally, Al-Shabaab has deployed only ten women and girls as suicide bombers since 2006, representing less than 5 per cent of the total number, though the precise number of Al-Shabaab attacks perpetrated by women is disputed.⁷⁰ A senior AMISOM official said their own tallies showed that attacks perpetrated by female Al-Shabaab suicide bombers were “in the single digits”.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, female activist, Marka, April 2019.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab fighter, April 2019.

⁶⁸ According to one former Somali Islamist: “a Somali community that deploys women would be ridiculed as being weak and lacking men of fighting age”. Crisis group interview, Mogadishu, June 2019. In the past, Al-Shabaab has trained women in basic combat skills and supplied them with rifles, but only as a temporary measure intended to allow women to “defend their children”, under the Islamic principle of *zarura*, or exceptional circumstances. Crisis Group telephone interviews, elder and sheikh who previously lived in areas under Al-Shabaab rule in Lower Shabelle, June 2019.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group Africa Report N°242, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, 5 December 2016. The report found that, with the group increasingly pressed for manpower amid government crackdowns from mid-2014, Boko Haram increasingly turned to female suicide bombers. As of November 2017, at least 288 but as many as 422 of Boko Haram's bombers, well over half the total, were women. Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, “Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers”, Combating Terrorism Center, 2017.

⁷⁰ Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin, “Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab”, Combating Terrorism Center, February 2018. The numbers appear to contradict a 2017 UN report, which suggested that “women are often recruited [to Al-Shabaab] because they may attract less attention and can thus more easily carry out suicide bombings”. “Countering al-Shabaab Propaganda and Recruitment Mechanisms in South Central Somalia”, UNSOM, 2017. Except on a few occasions, such as the June 2011 killing of the interior minister (apparently by his own niece who had been recruited by the group), Al-Shabaab rarely acknowledges dispatching female attackers.

⁷¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, June 2019.

Women are involved, however, in psychologically preparing husbands for suicide operations. According to one former Al-Shabaab fighter: “a wife is instructed to keep her husband [suicide bomb designate] both preoccupied and focused on the task ahead”.⁷² A former Al-Shabaab wife adds, “women are encouraged to get pregnant in the final days of her husband’s life ... in order for him to leave a soldier behind for the cause”.⁷³

IV. Options for the Somali Authorities

As women navigate a terrain where the state is either absent or predatory and insurgent rule often harsh and violent, they make choices that reflect their need to survive but also personal, religious and socio-political aspirations. Some abide by the group’s inducements to supply intelligence and turn over business revenue simply to protect their or their families’ physical security and avoid leaving their home areas. Others genuinely support the group and its cause. The ways women interact with the insurgency reveal how women’s needs and choices help sustain it.

The Somali federal government, whose writ does not extend far beyond Mogadishu, and its partners in loosely autonomous regional states, are constrained in their ability to respond. In principle, if the choices women make help propel the conflict, they could also eventually play a role in resolving it. In reality, it appears unlikely the government can do much to win over women absent an approach to ending the war that shifts the incentives of the population more broadly. While the insurgency continues, and Al-Shabaab dominates much of the countryside and exerts influence and instils fear in areas even beyond its control, women and men alike will continue to be compelled to cooperate with it.

That said, the government could take steps that at least signal that it recognises women’s plight across the country and is prepared to do whatever it can to meet their needs. First would be to simply acknowledge and seek to better understand women’s roles in the insurgency. It could help women who defect from the group to better reintegrate into society, for example, while seeking to understand their motives for joining Al-Shabaab or the circumstances that impelled them to work with the movement. Secondly, if it tightens security protocols in recognition of the potential danger posed by women insurgents, it should do so sensitively, with women security officials conducting screening of other women and procedures to protect against potential abuses of security forces. Increasing the number of women officials in the security forces would help and would require ensuring better protection for those who deploy away from their homes.⁷⁴

⁷² Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab fighter, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, former Al-Shabaab wife, Mogadishu, April 2019.

⁷⁴ Women make up only 10 per cent of the total number of police officers in Mogadishu. The percentage is much lower in rural areas. They report facing significant constraints from more conservative segments of society, including being pressured to leave their posts. They also report facing harassment and threats for pursuing sexual offenders and general security risks. See “Assessment Study on Female Police Officers in Somalia”, SIDRA, November 2017; “The women trying to keep Somalia safe”, BBC, 4 May 2017.

Beyond that, the government could develop a strategy to combat gender-based violence and exploitation. This strategy should involve pushing through parliament the Sexual Offences Bill, which criminalises a wide range of sexual offences, outlines ways to support survivors and lays out clear procedures for prosecution of suspects.⁷⁵ Legislatures in Puntland regional state and Somaliland have both endorsed tough sexual offences laws, in 2016 and 2018, respectively. While these laws have not eliminated gender-based violence, they at least offer a basis for offenders' prosecution. In March, following mass demonstrations by women protesting the gang rape and murder of a twelve-year-old, a court in Puntland sentenced five men to death for the crime.⁷⁶ Across other parts of Somalia, the UN reports that a culture of impunity reigns, with sexual offences typically resolved through negotiations between the clan of the victim and that of the rapist.⁷⁷

More onerous than passing laws will be actually enforcing them. While a credible justice system appears a long way off, the government could show more resolve, potentially by establishing modest civil dispute mechanisms or family law courts. Women should be closely involved in such processes. Even small steps like creating women-only desks at police stations, where women and girls might feel more comfortable reaching out for justice than in the current male-dominated setup, would help.

V. Conclusion

For women, supporters or civilians alike, life under Al-Shabaab rule offers a degree of predictability and opportunities for justice that are often absent in areas administered by the federal government. While the insurgents coerce and exploit women to pursue their aims, what they offer across parts of the country nonetheless often remains better than the alternatives. Al-Shabaab's gender strategy is no great mystery: within a fragile social environment it makes some aspects of women's lives less of a struggle. It also benefits from the federal government's blinkered assumption that women do not energise the insurgency, and are either irrelevant to it or its passive victims. While the government's hand is weak, it can start by recognising the challenge and by taking those steps that are within its power to improve women's lives.

Nairobi/Brussels, 27 June 2019

⁷⁵ "By balancing sharia law and the new Sexual Offences Bill, Somalia is legislating for the 21st century", Women, Peace and Security Blog, LSE, 14 June 2018.

⁷⁶ "Five men sentenced to death in Somalia gang rape", VOA, 12 March 2019.

⁷⁷ "Report of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence and Conflict", S/2019/280, 29 March 2019.



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