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## Women in Violent Extremist Groups: Desperation or Strength for the Al-Shabaab?

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### Abstract

*Women participation in Islamic violent extremism has been on the increase globally. In East Africa, Al-Shabaab has intensified the recruitment and use of women in both supportive and frontline roles. The increase in women participation has sparked debate on its symbolic meaning and potency. The rational choice theory is used in the study to explain violent extremists' groups' motivation to engage women in violent extremism. This study makes a critical analysis of the status of women in Al-Shabaab to determine their potency to the group. The findings show that Al-Shabaab treats women as expendables for sexual gratifications, reproduction, as well as tools of political statement and media attraction. While their roles have expanded from supportive to frontline, their positions and value appear subjugated and demeaned. Additionally, female recruitment into the group is largely by deception, while retention, is out of fear and threats. Al-Shabaab's commoditization of women undercuts their potency and lethality to the group. Notwithstanding, women have become a formidable force to Al-Shabaab, penetrating hard targets, carrying out suicide attacks and providing the group with tactical advantages. Notwithstanding, the increase in the use of women is occasioned by contextual pressures and is indicative of the group's resilience as opposed to its lethality. To denigrate Al-Shabaab, security and development agencies must intensify their focus on gender vulnerabilities exploited to recruit and radicalize women.*

**Keywords:** Jihadism, Al-Shabaab, Violent extremism, lethality

### Introduction

There is a general consensus amongst scholars that the number of women participating in Islamic violent extremism has grown exponentially in the last three decades. Women are increasingly being recruited by both moderates and conservative terrorist groups, as frontline combatants, propagandist, facilitators and even suicide bombers (Pearson, 2015). The Global Terrorism Index 2019 shows that between 1985 and 2013, women were part of at least 300 suicide attacks that were carried out by terrorist groups. This number increased by 450% between 2013 and

2018, with Boko Haram accounting for 80% of the suicide attacks. Female involvement in combatant roles also went up by more than 200% in the same period (Institute of Economic Peace, 2019). However, while female recruitment has increased, scholars remain indecisive on its symbolic meaning, whether it portends strength or desperation on the part of the violent extremist groups (Onuoha and Temilola, 2015).

In Eastern Africa, where Al-Shabaab remains the biggest the threat to regional security, female recruitment into the group has also been on the increase (Burdeen, 2018). Interestingly, security agencies in Somalia and Kenya, where the group's activities remain prevalent, hardly consider female extremists a significant threat to national security (Ndungu and Salifu, 2017: International Crisis Group, 2019). Cunningham (2010) attributes the increase of women involvement in terrorist groups to contextual pressures and innovations. The global war on terror has led to increased intelligence sharing and military operations that have led to deaths of many male terrorist fighters. In Eastern Africa only, the US air-drones have killed more than one thousand Al-Shabaab fighters (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2019). Inadvertently, this has forced terrorist groups to intensify female recruitment, partly as an alternative measure to build the groups' resilience and as tactical move to circumvent security detections and checkpoints (West, 2019). Notwithstanding, existing literature remains scanty and inconclusive on how women have changed the general outlook, structure and efficiency of Islamic violent extremist' groups such as Al-Shabaab. This paper seeks to analyze the context, motivations, roles and capabilities of women in Al-Shabaab, to explain their impact on the group's potency.

## **Literature Review**

Women participation in violent extremism is no novelty. Bloom (2017) asserts that history is replete with cases of women involved in violent extremism. In the Quran and hadith, as well as Muslim traditions, women Jihad has been recognized, even though, it was often sanctioned, and limited to supportive roles (Nelly, 2014). Women participation in violent extremism has undergone major changes. However, it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that women participation in violent extremism went through a paradigmatic shift from supportive to frontline roles including suicide bombing. Women also became an important part of the terrorist's groups' planning and operations, rising into leadership, as well as becoming combatants, and field operatives, ferrying weapons, driving gateway cars and setting of bombs and arson attacks. Some of the groups in which women raised to power positions include the Baader-Meinhoff gang, Red Zora, Basques separatist party (ETA) and the IRA. In these groups female combatants and compatriots were arguably treated same as their male combatants (Bloom, 2017).

Notwithstanding, many Islamic extremist groups remained conservative in engaging women in violence and in many instances, either bypassed women recruits or strictly confined them to supportive roles. However, the change and desire for apocalyptic effect by terrorists' groups in the late 1960s gave impetus to the development of new tactics and strategy: suicide terrorism, that essentially endeared terrorists' groups to the use of women as female suicide bombers (Bloom, 2017). The use of female suicide bombers gradually gained traction amongst religious and secular terrorist groups. The demand and need for women recruits in terror groups also grew many fold. Religious leaders that had previously expressed their reservation over women involvement in frontline combat were quick to change their mind. For example, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas in 2004 recanted his pronouncement two years before, denouncing the use of female suicide bombers. Many other Palestinian groups that had not fathomed the use of women in the first *Intifiada* had a change of mind on using women in the

frontline (Raghavan and Balasubramanian, 2014). These events essentially demonstrated the expanding role of women in terrorist groups.

Farhana (2012) asserts that the roles of women in violent extremist groups has not significantly changed nor altered the status of women within and outside the group. She denotes that the role of women operatives in extremist groups have largely remained supportive: to nurture the family, teach the children and encourage the fighter to remain true to the course, besides fundraising, recruiting and spreading the group's propaganda. This view is shared by Ndungu and Salifu (2017) who describe women's roles as largely non-combative. Indeed, scholars have argued that the status of Muslim women, even in politics remains subservient. Ali (2006) asserts that regardless to their participation in nationalist and liberation movements, the status of Muslim women is hardly elevated. In Algeria, women who fought and helped their male counterparts in the Battle of Algiers against the French, were left to their *domestic sphere* after independence. In Somalia, while women played a fundamental role in the trampling of the dictatorial government of Said Barre, they lost all the legal status and equal rights that had been accorded to them, with the collapse of the State (Safia, 2011).

Notwithstanding, women have become a powerful symbol, obliged and weaponized by Islamic violent extremist groups to execute their missions and purposes (Bloom and Malfess, 2016). Not surprisingly, both moderate and conservative Islamic violent extremists' groups such as the Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda together with their affiliates have invested a lot of resources in attracting and retaining female recruits into their rankings. These group have established websites, bloggers, magazines, and online support systems for female recruits, as well as social media platforms for 'sisters' wishing to join the mujahedeen and female magazines to teach female jihadists on how to treat their husbands (Economist, 2018).

In the twenty first century, the status of women in violent extremists group have largely been influenced by various factors including the group's ideology, decrees, historical practices as well as affiliation status. This is to say that different groups have adopted different rules to affect women's behaviour, roles, positions, and commitment to the group. For example, while Hamas has commissioned a female battalion, Al-Qaeda has remained restrictive on the role of women, limiting them to care of the family and their husbands. The Islamic State on the other hand has puts more restrictions on women involvement in direct combat, making exceptions when *fatwas* are issued by Imam (Ahmadi and Lakhani, 2016). Conversely, Boko Haram holds no reservation in using women and goes on record for the highest number of female suicide bombings than any other terrorists group in history, surpassing the Tamil Tigers (Warner and Matfess, 2017).

### **The Rational Choice Theory**

The rational choice theory is an admixture of models that seek to explain social phenomena as outcomes of individuals' actions considered to be rational. Being rational means choosing the most efficient choice that will accord the greatest benefits. Essentially this theory assumes decision makers, whether groups or individuals, are rational actors (Yoshimichi, 2013). Rational Choice theorists identify three key elements that influences decision making; preferences, beliefs and constraints. Preferences refer to the evaluations that individuals attach to possible outcomes, while beliefs are the perceived as cause-effect relations, constraints are defined as the limits or capabilities (Yoshimichi, 2013). Therefore, when actors are faced with several cause of actions, they often choose the option that has the best overall advantages with the least cost (Michael, 2013). According to rational theorists, decision makers are always concerned and guided entirely by their own welfare or interest and that decisions made are always optimizing; meaning, given

the preferences, opportunity and constraints envisaged, the decision made are sufficient and not necessarily the best decision (Abell, 2003). This theory presupposes that Al-Shabaab is a rational actor who makes rational decisions. It further denotes that Al-Shabaab's decision to intensify women participation in the group is for the group's wellbeing and may not be the best decision but nonetheless, suffices.

The theory also denotes that women's decision to join violent extremism is a rational one based on the preferences, beliefs and constraints. Women are attracted by the notion of living under *shariah*, which presumably protects their rights and guides their spirituality, besides endearing them to the spiritual rewards of this life and the life after. Their preference for joining violent extremist groups is a conscious decision whose outcomes are deemed fulfilling. This also forms the basis of their beliefs that their actions or decisions made shall lead to outcomes which are empowering to their individual self. Conversely, the decision to participate in violent extremist groups: the roles to undertaken or form of support to be given to the group, is also guided by the individuals' capabilities as well as the known restrictions or limitations. Essentially, known women assumption of supportive and frontline roles in violent extremist groups is also premised on known constraints.

## **Methodology**

This study uses descriptive analysis to evaluate the status and symbolic meaning of women to Al-Shabaab's potency. The study makes two hypotheses; that, increased women participation in Al-Shabaab has increased the group's potency and that expanded roles of women in Al-Shabaab have increased the group's resiliency. A dataset on women activities in Al-Shabaab was created and any information on women involvement in Al-Shabaab activities from 2006 to 2019 was accumulated to form a baseline. The data was largely retrieved from academic journals, government bulletins and books, conferences reports, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, websites, blogs and reports from research institutes. The researcher also conducted interviews and focused groups' discussions (FGD) to complement the information received from the dataset. Purposive and Snowball sampling technique were used to identify the respondents.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Increased Women Recruitment and Al-Shabaab's potency**

The study's first hypothesis avers that increased women participation in Al-Shabaab has increased the group's lethality. To answer this hypothesis, the study examined the contextual background, status and motivation of women in Al-Shabaab. Understanding the contextual environment within which women get engaged in terrorism is critical in determining their potency to the group (Matfess and Bloom, 2019). The study's findings revealed that contextual environment is instrumental in explaining women recruitment and involvement in Al-Shabaab terrorists group. This view is shared by the international Crisis Group that links the civil war in Somalia with the increased women participation in Al-Shabaab. Women provide the social base for the insurgency but are also the first causality of the war and are often meted with gender based violence including rape, physical abuse, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and abusive marriages. (International Crisis Group, 2019; Attawood, 2017). The violence meted against women has a tendency of breaking the social bonds and trust in community, leaving them vulnerable and weak (International Crisis Group, 2019). Terrorist groups exploit these vulnerabilities to enlist women into their ranking (United Nations, 2018). The continued civil war in Somalia has enabled Al-Shabaab to intensify female recruitment with a lot of ease. Al-

Shabaab operates as some form of government, imposing its rules: *shariah* and taxes in territory under its control, as well as forcefully paying dowry for women to whom it marries to its fighters. Women have little option if any, than to abide by the demands of the group. Neither clan militias nor the Federal government is able to guarantee women's protection against Al-Shabaab (Barnes, 2016). Indeed, the atrocities of the civil war have limited their choices, inadvertently pushing them to Al-Shabaab for their security and survival as well as that of their families.

Al-Shabaab engagement of female operatives in Somalia is also happening against a backdrop of mounting gender based violence against women, particularly from smaller clans. In 2015 the United Nation (UN) released a report that raised concern over the wide spread sexual violence meted against women in Al-Shabaab-controlled territories (United Nations, 2018). Accounts of some Al-Shabaab *returnees* also indicate that women continue to be used for sexual gratification, forced into marriages or offered as rewards to the commanders. Ndung'u, Salifu and Sigsworth (2017) infer to the cruelty exposed to women as deliberate and aimed to strip them of their identity and humanity, essentially so that they can accept their new way of life or dissuade them from returning to their normal lives.

The status of women in Al-Shabaab has also been subjugated by men's leadership. The findings of the study demonstrate that female agency in Al-Shabaab is greatly undermined. The patriarchal nature of Al-Shabaab, which is largely informed by the cultural and political orientations of the Somali community, is not only limiting to female agency but oppressive. In Islamic violent extremist groups, whatever roles women undertake, are either planned, conceived or under the directive and command of men (Berko and Erez, 2006). The study shows that despite increased women participation in the group, Al-Shabaab has not appointed any woman to any leadership position, nor used the poster images of women to run its campaigns, nor accord martyr status to any of its female suicide bombers. In fact, some women in Al-Shabaab camps are treated as expendable tools, their bodies offered as rewards and gifts to men for their pious and brevity. (Burdeen, 2018). The commoditization of women and girls has become part of Al-Shabaab *modus operandi*.

The study's also sought to understand the motivation of women joining Al-Shabaab to determine their commitment to the group. The findings reveal that women join Al-Shabaab for various reasons. For some women, particularly those in Al-Shabaab controlled territories, marrying into the group or colluding with its members is a survival tactic. Many of the women in Somalia who join Al-Shabaab or choose to marry the fighters are often relatively young girls with little education if any and may have limited or no alternative other than to serve the group. Al-Shabaab has also presented itself as an advocate for women rights particularly in issues including divorce, dowry refund and inheritance (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In Kenya, many of the women who have sought to join the group, have done so as *Jihadi brides*. Ali concedes that the desire for romance and marriage amongst young Muslim women, including those pursuing university education, is so strong and easily manipulated by Al-Shabaab recruiters to lure women into the group (Ali, 2018). Burdeen (2018) affirms that some women join Al-Shabaab because of intimidation and threats by their spouses who are members of the groups. Shauri (2018) also avers that the desire for vengeance particularly amongst Al-Shabaab widows has motivated women to fight for the group. However, there is a significant number of cases of women deceived, forced or kidnapped and taken to join the group. Some women are also lured by the promise of employment particularly from Kenya.

Evidently, there are many doubts as to whether; the women of Al-Shabaab are genuinely part of the insurgency. The context from which they come from, circumstances under which they are recruited or radicalized into the group, their belief in the group's ideology as well as their goals and purpose suggests fear, intimidation and deceit, as informing their decision, as opposed to devotion and commitment. Looking at the contextual background, it is apparent that many women joining Al-Shabaab have limited options and remain in the group because of the security guarantees it provides. It is therefore presumptuous to assume that women in Al-Shabaab have a shared commitment and determination. The violence meted against women, as well as the suppressed female agency reflect the denigrated status of women. It is therefore simplistic to assume that women's motivation and commitment to Al-Shabaab remain the same. Reflecting on the aforementioned factors, it is apparent that the female power in Al-Shabaab is greatly undermined. The next section examines contributions of women to the group's potency

### **Expanded women roles and Al-Shabaab potency**

The second hypothesis of the study sought to establish whether expanded women roles have increased Al-Shabaab potency. The findings reveal that Al-Shabaab has become more receptive to the idea of incorporating women in their planning, recruitment, fundraising and frontline roles. This dramatic shift has prompted scholars such as Donnelley (2018) to call for renewed appreciation of women's roles in terrorist groups. Noteworthy, the widening female roles in Al-Shabaab is part of a global trend extolled by global terrorist groups including the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, that have increasingly made women part of their modus operandi. This trend is also part of a wider strategy by terrorists' groups to create some sense of communal consciousness and acceptance to their course; the more women get involved in the course the more the group gains legitimacy.

The findings reveal that women in Al-Shabaab continue to play an important role in the logistics, planning and execution of attacks. This was evident in the last major attack carried out by Al-Shabaab operatives in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, on January 15, 2019, where 21 people were killed and another 28 seriously injured (Bryden and Bahra, 2019). In the attack, Mariam Abdi, an Al-Shabaab operative, is believed to have trafficked the weapons that were used in the attack, while Violent Kemunto, alias *Khadija*, wife to the mastermind, Salim Gichunge, is believed to have played a fundamental role in the planning, and staging of the attack (West, 2019). Women's roles in recruitment, intelligence collection and ferrying of explosives and weapons have also increased tremendously. Within Al-Shabaab administrative units the *Wilayat*, the group has established committees which comprises of wives of senior ranking fighters and women supporters who are used to conduct door-to-door campaigns and recruitment for Al-Shabaab. Women are also known to collect intelligence for *Amniyat operatives* on government forces and community members particularly in restricted areas (West, 2019).

Al-Shabaab has also renewed its determination to use female suicide bombers in their attacks. The group has lifted its moratorium that suspended the use of women in suicide bombing (International Crisis Group, 2019). Moreover, an increasing number of women who find themselves in Al-Shabaab camps and training centers are now being trained as suicide bombers (Siobhan, 2019). Al-Shabaab has also endeared to use women to infiltrate and carry out attacks against *hard targets*. Beňová, Hořková-Mayerová, Navrátil (2019) define hard targets as persons or places that have high levels of security, essentially, making any attempt against the said targets, a very difficult task. Example of hard targets include security establishments such as

military bases and high ranking political figures, guarded with considerable security (Dugdale-Pointon, 2005).

The 2019 attack on the Mogadishu Mayor's office, deemed one of the most secure premises in Mogadishu, was conducted by a blind female Al-Shabaab operative (Siobhan, 2019). As a woman she drew less attention from the security personnel and the fact that she was blind, made it easy for the security to discount her from posing any threat. Bloom contends that women offer terrorists groups both tactical and strategic advantages. (Bloom, 2017) Al-Shabaab has also exploited the cultural stereotypes that regard women as peaceful and not a threat to security, to have their operatives conduct surveillance and collect intelligence. The group has also leveraged on the status of women in society as mothers, wives, sisters and community members' to recruit new members. Apart from logistical and operational advantages, Al-Shabaab has also intensified female recruitment for the purposes of breeding the next generation of fighters. Women's reproductive system and perceived natural role of raising a family is deemed central to the group survival. Consequently, the group has encouraged all its fighters to enter into marriages of children. Ndungu and Salifu (2017) therefore argue that women's prominence in Al-Shabaab is in supportive roles rather than combat: They are expected to raise families and indoctrinate their children with the group's ideologies, to follow on their father's *course* or avenge their death when they grow up.

Notwithstanding, the potency of female expanded roles in Al-Shabaab is been questioned. Khelghat-Doost claims that though the number and role of women in global jihadist groups have grown exponentially, it is hardly in frontline combat (Khelghat-Doost, 2017). Women continue to be relegated to supportive roles which include wifely duties, fundraising, spreading propaganda, recruitment, as well as collecting intelligence for the terrorist's groups. The findings of the study also reveal that some women may be trained in skills at arm, however, only in few cases are they allowed to join their male counterparts in combative roles, and it's often as suicide bombers; which essentially mean they are expended, since their memory or actions are hardly treasured. The utility and effect of increasing women engagement in supportive roles has raised more questions than answers on Al-Shabaab potency. The expanding women participation in supportive roles as opposed to frontline combative roles can be interpreted as an indication of the subservient status of women in the group; that women are under the expressive authority of men and that women agency is less likely encouraged, unless deemed as part of tactical strategy. Moreover, it also means that women may never rise to significant position of leadership, which often for violent extremists' groups like Al-Shabaab, one must have the combative experience. Women limited to supportive role also suggests the group conservative nature and perspectives on women. This is also partly because Islamic extremist ideologies remain prohibitive to women engagement in combative roles. Women are contemplated to have a sacred role in raising the family and should not be diverted to roles that would incapacitate their abilities and duties as wives and mothers (Farahnaz, 2016).

The limitation of women participation in supportive roles for groups like Al-Shabaab is not without any strength to the group. On the contrary, women, supportive roles are a central part of the terrorists' groups operations and contribute to the group's potency. Ferrying of weapons, providing the group with the next generation of fighters, as well as propagating the groups propaganda are but some of the way in which women's activities have strengthened the resilience of the group. However, these roles in all their form undermine the woman agency in the group for they define boundaries of what women can be to the group. The finding of the study also reveals that the tactical and operational advantages of using women is waning, as

security agencies including intelligence organizations, the military and joint missions like the AMISOM have become more cognizant of the widened role of women in Al-Shabaab. Moreover, while Al-Shabaab appears to be widening women tasks, they are largely limited within the 'supportive sphere.' This essentially suggests the groups' reluctance to fully embrace the potential of women, thereby implying the low or subjugated status of women.

## **CONCLUSION**

The increased participation of women in Al-Shabaab continues to elicit mixed reactions amongst scholars. Indeed, there is need for more empirical studies to ascertain the status of women, their motivations, roles and potency to terrorists' groups like Al-Shabaab. This study has made an attempt to illustrate the potency of women in Al-Shabaab. The findings demonstrate that women remain an important part of the group's operations and resiliency. However, Al-Shabaab continues to denigrate women's agency and status in the group. Women are treated as expendables and despite their training they are largely limited to supportive roles. In instances where roles have been widened, it is partly to fill in the dwindling number of male fighters and hardly as fighters. Al-Shabaab also continues to use deception, fear and threats to retain women in their ranking, further undercutting the growth, belief and their commitment to the group's course. It is therefore simplistic to presume that increased women participation in Al-Shabaab signifies strength. To avert increased women participation in Al-Shabaab activities, development and security agencies must (i) invest in creating rescue and amnesty programs where female defectors together with their families can be reformed and assured security (ii) invest on women empowerment with the view of exposing the patriarchal structures that continue to endear women exploitation (iii) and finally, emphasize on an empowerment that is within the confines of Islam, so as to increase its likelihood of acceptance, as well as build the women's knowledge on their religion, to make them less vulnerable to terrorist recruiters.

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