Al-Shabaab’s Gendered Economy

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**Table of Contents**

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. 2  
Acronyms ............................................................................................................................... 3  
Somali terms .......................................................................................................................... 4  
Executive Summary ............................................................................................................... 5  
Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 8  
Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 9  
Somalia and its war economy ............................................................................................... 11  
Al-Shabaab ............................................................................................................................ 12  
Al-Shabaab’s economic endeavors ....................................................................................... 13  
Al-Shabaab’s economy and women ...................................................................................... 18  
Al-Shabaab’s gendered spending ......................................................................................... 19  
Al-Shabaab’s approach to women working: Rule versus reality ....................................... 20  
Al-Shabaab using women in their business endeavors ......................................................... 23  
Al-Shabaab wives running businesses ................................................................................. 25  
Taxation .................................................................................................................................. 26  
Women donating goods to the group ................................................................................. 27  
Women engaged in fundraising ......................................................................................... 27  
Money laundering ............................................................................................................... 28  
Women’s madrassas .......................................................................................................... 29  
Cheap marriages for al-Shabaab men ................................................................................. 29  
Women’s clothing .............................................................................................................. 30  
International women and al-Shabaab’s war economy ....................................................... 31  
Trafficking of women ........................................................................................................ 32  
Analysis: Al-Shabaab’s complex relationship with women ............................................ 33  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 35  
Recommendations ............................................................................................................... 36  
Bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 37
### Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMISOM</td>
<td>African Union Mission in Somalia</td>
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<td>AS</td>
<td>Al-Shabaab</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASI</td>
<td>Adam Smith International</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRD</td>
<td>Centre for Research and Dialogue</td>
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<td>DRP</td>
<td>Defector's Rehabilitation Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation (United States)</td>
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<td>FGS</td>
<td>Federal Government of Somalia</td>
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<td>FMS</td>
<td>Federal Member State</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender Based Violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICG</td>
<td>International Crisis Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organisation for Migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State</td>
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<tr>
<td>KDF</td>
<td>Kenya Defence Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOIS</td>
<td>Ministry of Internal Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>NISA</td>
<td>National Intelligence Security Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSA</td>
<td>National Security Agency (United States)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RST</td>
<td>Rehabilitation Support Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>SN</td>
<td>Stabilisation Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNA</td>
<td>Somali National Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPF</td>
<td>Somali Police Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNWO</td>
<td>Somali National Women Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOWBA</td>
<td>Somali Women Business Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somali terms</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Amniyat</em></td>
<td>Al-Shabaab’s intelligence and operations unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Abaya</em></td>
<td>Long robe-like outfit that covers women’s clothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Da’wa</em></td>
<td>Al-Shabaab’s religious outreach department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hawala</em></td>
<td>Different types of informal money transfer systems, which do not involve the physical transfer of cash.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Infaaq</em></td>
<td>An arbitrary tax amount charged when al-Shabaab runs short on finances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Khat</em></td>
<td>A flowering plant native to Ethiopia, and commonly used in Somalia, which contains a stimulant, and is commonly used in Somalia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Madrassa</em></td>
<td>A place of religious education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Meber</em></td>
<td>Bride price.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Murted</em></td>
<td>Non-believer.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Zakab</em></td>
<td>An annual tax charged on goods.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Zakawaat</em></td>
<td>A non-monetary tax, which includes agricultural products.</td>
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Executive Summary

Somalia can be described as having a classic war economy; a country where actors vie for power, in order to secure opportunities to profit and claim rents. Islamist group al-Shabaab is a central player in Somalia’s war economy. The militant group, engaged in a long-standing fight against the Federal Government of Somalia and its Federal Member States, has funded its two-decade long insurgency through a range of means. Al-Shabaab has created a parallel system of taxation that extends across the country, in which individuals, businesses and clans are forced to pay taxes on earnings, goods and passage – with the threat of violent reprisals for those who do not comply. Al-Shabaab is also engaged in a range of business endeavors; in extortion; in money-laundering; and in earning funds from charcoal, sugar, weapons and drugs – with its tentacles spanning both the formal and illicit economies.

Al-Shabaab has an interesting relationship with women, most notably when it comes to its economy. The conservative Islamist group holds deeply patriarchal views as to women’s roles in society. Believing that a woman’s place is at home, the group formally prohibits women from working or engaging in businesses – behavior they consider ‘un-Islamic’. However, despite its formal ban on women working, research reveals that women are actively involved in al-Shabaab’s financial concerns; running businesses on behalf of the group; moving goods over the borders between al-Shabaab and government territory; and playing a leading role in the group’s fundraising operations. The roles that women play are critical to the group’s survival, helping al-Shabaab to fund – and therefore to sustain – its insurgency.

The consequences for women violating al-Shabaab’s ban on women’s work can be severe; Women caught working might be arrested, fined or have their goods confiscated. Still, many women in al-Shabaab territory – and particularly those who do not have husbands present to support them – have little option but to work. Women use a range of strategies to get around these rules; Some women cede the public facing sides of their businesses to male relatives, with women working behind the scenes. Some women operate underground – selling goods in secret, often from their homes at night. Others have to close their shops and stay indoors, while others move away from al-Shabaab territory in order to be able to work.

The rules against women working are applied inconsistently by al-Shabaab, which sometimes prohibits women’s work, and sometimes permits this – and even taxing women’s gains. In some situations, al-Shabaab uses the ban on women working as a means of extorting and bribing women.

Despite this ban, there is significant evidence that al-Shabaab utilizes women in its own business-endeavours, with women running a range of businesses on behalf of the group. There are many reasons that it makes sense for al-Shabaab to use women in their business operations. Women have more freedom than men to move and can cross between al-Shabaab and government-held territory more easily than men, who tend to be viewed with suspicion. Women are less likely to be stopped or searched, or to be scrutinized by other controls. As well as running businesses for al-Shabaab’s benefit, women also carry out trade that is critical to sustaining life in al-Shabaab territory, like trading in fuel and food products.

In particular, it appears that wives of prominent al-Shabaab men are involved in running businesses. Being a militant’s wife confers certain privileges useful for running a business, including greater freedom of movement than other women enjoy, useful personal connections and access to smart phones, prohibited for others. Wives combine their business activities with providing other types of support to al-Shabaab – demonstrating the links between female business involvement with the group, marriage into the group, and other types of female support for the movement.

Women contribute to al-Shabaab’s system of taxation, both as those who are taxed, and sometimes – although rarely – as those collecting taxes. Like men, women are required to pay a range of al-Shabaab taxes – paradoxical given the group’s stance on women working.
Women also engage in money laundering on behalf of al-Shabaab. Moving money in and out of al-Shabaab territory is challenging for the group – and made more difficult by counter-terror financial controls that have been put in place to hamper them. Just as women are not checked as closely as men at roadblocks, women are reportedly not subjected to the same financial checks. One method by which al-Shabaab moves money, is by buying goods at one location and selling them at another, in order to send cash there. Women are frequently used to do this; buying and selling and transporting goods as a means by which to move money for the group.

Fundraising is amongst the most important roles that women play for al-Shabaab – with the group said to be reliant on women’s fundraising and resource-mobilisation capacities. Al-Shabaab’s women are known to be skilled at convincing others to donate money, goods and jewelry. Significant pressure is put onto women in al-Shabaab territory to donate their own belongings to the group – including their jewelry and money acquired from their bride-price payments. Another source of funds from women, are mandatory Madrassa fees paid for forced schooling. Religious classes are held in al-Shabaab territory, which are compulsory for women and which women have to pay to attend.

Women from a number of countries outside of Somalia also contribute to al-Shabaab’s fundraising and economic endeavors. This is most common in Somalia’s neighboring countries, but also takes place further afield; women as far as the United States have been caught and prosecuted for fundraising for al-Shabaab.

Some women are trafficked as a resource by al-Shabaab. An area of al-Shabaab’s operations that might be classified as trafficking is al-Shabaab’s recruitment of Kenyan women, aimed at supplying sexual partners for al-Shabaab men, and women for their camps. Many of those recruiting in this scheme on behalf of al-Shabaab are women – notable again for contradicting al-Shabaab’s formal stance on women working.

A key theme demonstrated by this research, is the disjuncture between al-Shabaab’s stated beliefs about the role of women, and its actual utilization of women. Many of al-Shabaab’s economic activities feel out of sync with its ideological positions – both in its dealings with women and more broadly. One conclusion is that the group is utilitarian about the place of ideology and is willing to put aside ideological ideals where this is useful for them. This understanding should be utilized in developing messaging and strategies to counter the group. Gendered ideological messages are utilized in al-Shabaab’s recruitment and fundraising drives, yet are only adhered to a limited extent by the group – an understanding that should be highlighted in counter-messaging developed to weaken the group.

Efforts to undermine al-Shabaab’ earnings and finances will be critical in defeating the group. To date, al-Shabaab has worked around attempts to stifle its financing – with women playing a role in this. Al-Shabaab has learned that women can bypass financial controls, just as they can get through roadblocks and checkpoints, as people are simply not looking out for them. Understanding more about the parts that women play, will be critical in establishing better tailored interventions to counter the group.

In countering al-Shabaab’s war economy, gendered understandings are key – in understanding the groups’ earnings, spending, strategies and priorities, as it seeks to implement its vision of society. Those seeking to encourage defection and population dissent from al-Shabaab, should take these gendered factors into account, in order to tailor more nuanced strategies and messages to entice the population. Continuing to do this work, blind to the gendered aspects, neglects a core strategy that might significantly strengthen these efforts.
Key recommendations

1. **Degrading al-Shabaab’s income generation capacity**: Incorporate a gendered lens into efforts to degrade al-Shabaab’s income generation capacity. Consider the parts that women play in supporting various al-Shabaab income streams and ensure that interventions acknowledge and respond to these.

2. **Terrorist financing**: Terrorism financing research, and initiatives designed to limit terrorist financing, should consider the roles of women as essential in the supply, transfer and white washing chain.

3. **Security and financial controls for women**: Ensure that women are subjected to the same controls that men are – including being properly checked at checkpoints and being subjected to the same financial controls as men.

4. **Service provision as a means to win support**: To reduce population support for al-Shabaab, the government of Somalia and relevant agencies should provide services that are distributed equitably across the country, which are distributed in a non-biased way, which doesn’t favor certain clans / populations above others, and which are of a higher quality than current services are. In particular, it is important to ensure that services required by women, such as health care and education services, are adequately provided.

5. **Income generation programming for women**: Promote income generating avenues for women across the country, as a means to draw women who are unable to work or earn, away from al-Shabaab territory.

6. **Messaging**: Highlight the discrepancies between al-Shabaab’s stated ideologies and their actions, as a means of counter-messaging. Gendered ideological messages are utilized in al-Shabaab’s recruitment and fundraising, yet are only adhered to to a limited extent by the group. This understanding should be highlighted in counter-messaging developed to weaken the group.
Introduction

Somalia can be described as having a classic war economy; a country where actors vie for power, in order to secure opportunities to profit and to claim rents. Armed groups engage in both licit and illicit activities, to profit, and to secure the funds required to sustain their insurgencies and to hold onto territory and power – necessary in order to keep profiting. Corrupt politicians collude with armed and criminal actors, forming strategic alliances to sustain their holds. In recent years, opportunities for power and profit have eclipsed any real motivation to work towards peace and stability, with many incentivized to keep Somalia’s conflict going.

Islamist group al-Shabaab is a central player in Somalia’s war economy. The group, engaged in a long-standing fight against the Federal Government of Somalia and its Federal Member States, has funded its two-decade insurgency through a range of means. Al-Shabaab has created a parallel system of taxation that extends across the country, in which individuals, businesses and clans are forced to pay taxes on earnings, goods and passage – with the threat of violent reprisal for those who don’t comply. Al-Shabaab is also engaged in a range of businesses; in extortion; money-laundering; and in earning funds from charcoal, sugar, arms and drugs – with its tentacles spanning both the formal and illicit economies. While threatening many in the population into compliance, al-Shabaab colludes with others, including clans, militias and corrupt politicians.

The group has an interesting relationship with women, most notably when it comes to its economic endeavors. Al-Shabaab is a violent Islamist group, with views based on hardline interpretations of Sharia and the Sunnah. They hold deeply patriarchal views as to women’s roles in society. Believing that a woman’s place is at home as a wife, the group formally prohibits women from working or engaging in businesses – behavior they consider to be ‘un-Islamic’. Women are subject to a strict dress code, they are prohibited from leaving their homes without a male escort and they cannot loiter outside, further limiting their involvement in the public sphere.

As such it is surprising that despite its approach to gender, women form a key part of al-Shabaab’s war economy. Despite the formal ban on women working, women are in fact actively involved in al-Shabaab’s financial and business concerns; running businesses on behalf of the group; moving goods over the borders between al-Shabaab and government territory; and playing a leading role in the group’s fundraising operations. Rather than these being minor and insignificant inputs, these roles are critical to the group’s survival, helping al-Shabaab sustain its insurgency, and generate the funds required to support its operations and pay its fighters.

While a good deal of attention has been directed towards al-Shabaab’s (primarily-male) fighters, as the key drivers of the group, it is really the group’s financing capacity and those actors who contribute to this, which form the machine that allows al-Shabaab to keep operating. Women play a central part in this. Gardner et al note, “Al-Shabab’s rhetoric may be that a woman’s place is “in the home”, but the study found the reality is more complex. … evidence has been collected that shows al-Shabab depends on women operating in the business sector, as taxpayers, resource providers (for example, fuel) and as a clandestine channel for transmitting and moving funds and other resources, as well as generating income. Referring to the vital nature of their services, one respondent said: “Businesswomen are the backbone of al-Shabab.””

This report considers the parts that women play in al-Shabaab’s economic endeavors. It begins by describing Somalia’s war economy, and al-Shabaab’s role within this – documenting the multifaceted means by which al-Shabaab generates funds. The research goes on to explore the parts that women play in al-Shabaab’s economy, presenting evidence as to women’s roles in its diverse economic activities. The research describes the groups’ formal rules about women working, contrasted with the group’s practices, documenting the parts that women play in running businesses for al-Shabaab; in fundraising and money laundering; in its taxation system; and in its other sources of income. The role played by women outside of Somalia is discussed – including looking at the women trafficked by the group, framing women as an exploitable resource used in al-Shabaab’s economy. This study considers the apparent contradiction between the group’s ideological principles and its use of women. It assesses the ways in which the group treats different groupings of women, questioning what this tells us about al-Shabaab’s ideology and operations.

Amongst the various means by which national and international actors seek to degrade al-Shabaab, a key avenue is in targeting the group’s income generation capacity and war economy. Work on Somalia’s war economy to date has been gender-blind; unseeing of the roles that are played by women. Given how crucial al-Shabaab’s financial endeavors are to its survival, if women are playing a key role, it is vital that this be better understood. It is hoped that doing so might lead to better-informed and more holistic strategies aimed at undermining the group’s capacities.

### Methodology

The idea to study the role of women in al-Shabaab’s war economy arose while conducting research into women’s political, military and social involvement in al-Shabaab (See, The Invisible Women of al-Shabaab (2019), and Married in the Shadows: The Wives of al-Shabaab (2020). In interviews aimed at understanding women’s military participation, interviewees often spoke about women’s economic input into the group. Respondents bought this up repeatedly, suggesting that there was a story there that needed to be told.

Between late 2018 and early 2021, a number of research visits were made to Somalia, consulting a range of actors about women’s involvement with al-Shabaab. Key informants for this research included representatives of the Federal Government of Somalia, including those from the Defector’s Rehabilitation Programme (the national programme established to encourage militants to defect from al-Shabaab), and officers from Somalia’s National Intelligence Security Agency (responsible for investigating the individual roles of al-Shabaab defectors, to determine the nature of their involvement with the group and whether they are eligible for participation in a rehabilitation programme). Representatives from Somali civil society were interviewed, including those working on gender issues and women’s economic activities, as well as those assisting former al-Shabaab members or wives of the group. A range of international actors were also interviewed, including personnel from various embassies, staff of United Nations agencies and international organizations, researchers and subject-matter experts. Interviews were conducted in person in Mogadishu and Baidoa, as well as online, where necessary.

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2 See for example, Christian Webersik, Stig Jarle Hansen and Adam Egal, Somalia: A Political Economy Analysis, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2018; or Ken Menkhaus, Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: Somalia Case Study, Stabilisation Unit, February 2018.

In addition, interviews were conducted with 32 male al-Shabaab defectors, taking part in a rehabilitation programme at the ‘Serendi’ rehabilitation facility in Mogadishu. Focus group discussions were also conducted with male al-Shabaab defectors in a rehabilitation facility in Baidoa, as well as with higher-ranked former al-Shabaab members held in a male prison facility in Baidoa. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 12 women formerly associated with al-Shabaab, taking part in a women’s rehabilitation programme in Mogadishu. Two focus group discussions were held with groups of ‘al-Shabaab wives’ in Baidoa, and family group discussions were held with male defectors and their female family members in Mogadishu, to learn more about female involvement in the group. While the above interviews also considered broader issues pertaining to women’s involvement in al-Shabaab, in this report the information specifically relating to women’s economic activity is scrutinized. Original field research findings are presented along with any existing literature available on women and their involvement in al-Shabaab’s economy.

**Research limitations**

There remain significant gaps in knowledge about al-Shabaab’s war economy. Al-Shabaab operates in the shadows, with much of its economic activities informal and illicit, meaning there is limited documented and verifiable information available on this. Al-Shabaab is engaged in an active insurgency and Somalis fear them. Across both al-Shabaab and government-occupied territory, people are afraid to speak out about the group – especially those who actually have dealings with them. Many who speak about al-Shabaab, do so based on rumors and suppositions, rather than on experiences or facts. While a small body of literature is emerging about al-Shabaab and its economy – referenced in the section below – to date this literature remains limited.

Somalia is a challenging context in which to conduct research. The country is in a state of armed conflict and remains highly insecure. For a foreign researcher, this means restricted movement and limited access. All interviews had to be pre-arranged and held in secure locations, with limited time on the ground, leaving little flexibility to follow up on research leads or to chase down contacts and evidence.

It was possible to speak to the research cohort in this study, due to the researcher’s role as an advisor at an al-Shabaab defector’s rehabilitation facility. However, this meant that those who were available to be interviewed, were primarily persons who had defected from al-Shabaab, or their female family members, lending a likely bias to the findings. Those still actively involved with, or supporting the group, would be unlikely to come to the heavily guarded locations in government-held areas that this researcher was restricted to, thereby narrowing the research sample.

Interviews were conducted with the help of Somali translators. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, recording of interviews was felt to not be advisable, as it was thought that people would not talk freely if they were being recorded. As such, handwritten interview notes were relied upon, making it impossible to test the accuracy of translations. Quotes from interview subjects are included in the text below – and italicized to mark these as quotes. These quotes represent the best possible account of the words of the translator – rather than being the exact words of interview subjects. Still, it was thought to be useful to include these approximate quotes, as they provide illustration of how research subjects see and describe these issues.

This research was carried out as part of the researcher’s role as the Human Rights and Gender Advisor on the ‘Rehabilitation Support Team’, a team of thematic experts who provide support for the Defector’s Rehabilitation Programme, as well as the Serendi Rehabilitation Facility in Mogadishu. The author thanks the staff of the Defector’s Rehabilitation Programme, the National Intelligence Security Agency, the International Organization on Migration, the Centre for Research and Dialogue, the Somali National Women’s Organization and Finn Church Aid, for facilitating the interviews in this research. She also thanks her incredible colleagues in the Rehabilitation Support Team for their ideas and inputs, for their
creativity in a challenging research context, and for continually going above and beyond the call of duty in facilitating this work.

Somalia and its war economy

Somalia is one of the poorest countries in Africa, its economy having been battered by decades of war. Within a few years of the outbreak of conflict in 1988, Somalia’s state institutions collapsed and much of the country’s economic and social infrastructure were destroyed. It is difficult to accurately gauge the size of Somalia’s economy or its levels of growth, due to poor statistics and data. The economy is largely informal, with the majority of the population relying on livestock and agriculture for their livelihoods. Somalia is classified by the United Nations Development Programme as being amongst the world’s least developed countries, exhibiting among the lowest human development indicators in the world – with these variables acting as further drivers of conflict. Inequality pervades the country. Half of the population lives under the poverty line. Youth unemployment – estimated at about 67 per cent – contributes to a range of problems, including irregular migration and recruitment by extremist groups, including al-Shabaab.

These factors, combined with war and famine, have contributed to a long-running humanitarian crisis in Somalia. The United Nations estimates that 5.2 million Somalis are in need of humanitarian assistance. As of September 2020, 4.7 million are in need of immediate food aid, while 2.6 million persons are displaced. There are significant challenges in distributing humanitarian aid in Somalia, due to continual insecurity and difficulties with access – particularly in those areas that al-Shabaab controls. In 2011, al-Shabaab banned international aid organization from operating on its territory; targeting and kidnapping humanitarian workers and raiding the local offices of aid agencies. From 2017, the group began allowing non-Western humanitarian groups to distribute aid to at-risk populations in its territory – while remaining hostile to Western aid agencies. Most people in al-Shabaab territory still cannot access humanitarian aid, despite the evident need.

Somalia’s war has led to changes in the society and family dynamics. It is estimated that 70 percent of Somalia’s households are female headed, in part due to the large numbers of men who have died through conflict or who have enlisted to fight. Women have stepped into the roles of income-earners and decision-makers, taking up economic activities that in the past were reserved for men. Sectors of the economy that were historically male-dominated, such as livestock, agriculture and retail, have seen increased numbers of women. For the most part though, men continue to dominate the top levels of the economy, while women tend to work at the lower levels. As an interviewee explained; while men hold powerful positions in business or government, tea and tomato sellers are more likely to be women.

The Somali state is predatory, with Transparency International ranking Somalia the most corrupt country in the world. An interviewee explained that, “There is corruption everywhere you go. You won’t get anything without paying. For men and women, it’s the same.” Somalia’s government, paralyzed by years of infighting, provides

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4 Country Re-engagement Note: Somalia, UNDP Somalia/World Bank.
few public goods or services to its population. The dearth of functioning state institutions has, over time, led to the privatization of public goods. Informal gate keepers, known by Somalis as ‘black cats’, have stepped in to provide services and protection that the state does not provide. While filling a gap, they lack accountability – and profit heavily from the lawlessness and state failure. Al-Shabaab fulfills a similar role in the areas it holds.

Somalia displays all the characteristics of a classic war economy. Holding political control – at various levels; from national to local – provides opportunities for profit, and as such, a range of actors compete for power and for rents. Having power – whether this be by formally holding office, or informally manning a roadblock – provides access to assets, and hence is vehemently competed for. As Menkhaus explains, “The true windfall profits in Somalia are generated by control of rent-producing institutions and structures. Control of the federal government is obviously the top prize, but control over regional member-state governments, municipalities, well-positioned ministries, seaports, and airports are all the objects of fierce elite inter-clan and intra-clan competition.”

The country’s elites have negotiated a settlement, whereby the country’s spoils are divided amongst them. Their continued bargaining over this settlement has led to long-term political paralysis as well as violence. Those in power, are incentivized to prevent effective governance, which would stand in the way of continued gain. Webersik notes, “The agents holding power in Somalia are not opposed to government institutions per se; they are opposed to government institutions that are strong and accountable, able to enforce law and order.”

Competition for spoils has also been the cause for the clans partitioning the country into autonomous states – each of which can claim their own rents in their territories. Each of the Federal Member States acts as a separate country; taxing and charging their own licensing and other fees – with this exacerbating the challenges in progressing towards policy, regulation, business or peace. The result: a group of corrupt leaders, politicians, warlords, militia leaders and criminals, who, while in power, care little about human development or about putting in place economic and political processes that might lead in stability in Somalia. The population’s discontent with this enduring situation, have contributed to its widespread support for al-Shabaab.

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**Al-Shabaab**

Al-Shabaab is a central player in Somalia’s war economy. Islamist group *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujaideen*, or al-Shabaab (translated as, “the youth”), is fighting an insurgency against the Federal Government of Somalia, Somalia’s Federal Member States, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the Somali people, and all who they declare to be “enemies of Islam”. Formed in 2006, as a radical offshoot of the

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13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Union of Islamic Courts, the group is fighting to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state in Somalia and across the Horn of Africa. The group is estimated to have between 6,000 – 10,000 fighters.  

Through its years of insurgency, al-Shabaab has occupied large tracts of the country, which it governs and controls, using its own extreme interpretation of Shari’ah law. The group imposes strict rules on the population, including dress codes for men and women, compulsory prayer and study, a ban on women working or leaving the house with unrelated men, and a myriad of other restrictions. Those who do not abide by these rules are harshly punished, including through stonings, amputations and beheadings.

In the areas it occupies, al-Shabaab runs its own parallel government; administering, governing, collecting taxes, running courts, schools and religious institutes, engaging in clan outreach and providing food, medical and agricultural support to some in its population.

Between 2012 – 2015, the Somali National Army (SNA), the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and a range of clan militias, with international backing, pushed al-Shabaab back from much of the urban territory it had occupied, leaving the group relegated to largely rural parts of the country. Since 2015, these gains have been somewhat diminished, as the SNA and AMISOM struggled to hold onto territory they had cleared. Today Al-Shabaab controls large parts of rural south and central Somalia, as well as major roadways running through the country.

However, the group’s reach goes further than these areas. In pushing al-Shabaab out, AMISOM and the SNA sometimes failed to capture territory permanently, instead just sending patrols into these areas. Rather than being entirely banished, al-Shabaab waits for patrols to return to their bases, before returning to villages and roads, where they are able to demand support – and taxation – from populations. The group has economic capacity in other parts of the country too – where it runs businesses, demands taxes and engages in other profit-making activities. It retains operational capacity to strike in parts of the country that it does not occupy, where the group conducts frequent attacks, bombings and assassinations – including in Mogadishu, the country’s capital.

Al-Shabaab enjoys significant levels of population support. Despite the group’s strict and often punitive approach, it delivers a level of order, justice and administration in the areas it controls. Al-Shabaab provides services and distributes some levels of assistance to vulnerable populations in rural Somalia – in doing so, gaining support, while also highlighting the government’s inability to provide such services, thereby further undermining government legitimacy. Many value the justice and relative security provided by al-Shabaab, when compared to the lawlessness that existed before the group’s arrival – or which exists in some other parts of Somalia. Population support has been critical to the group’s enduring success.

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**Al-Shabaab’s economic endeavors**

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20 The group’s ideology is a brand of Salafism and Wahhabism, supporting takfir, or excommunication of non-believers, *Al-Shabab, Counter Extremism Project*, https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabab.
Critical to the group’s endurance, has been its ability to generate resources. As with all armed insurgencies, al-Shabaab requires resources to pay its fighters and personnel, to cover its operational costs, to buy goods and equipment, and to carry out attacks and missions. Al-Shabaab spends significant time and manpower generating revenue.

When it comes to self-funding, al-Shabaab has been one of the most successful armed groups around. According to a United Nations monitoring group, at its peak around 2011, al-Shabaab generated an annual revenue of around USD $70 – 100 million a year. As a basis for comparison, in 2020 the Somalia’s Federal Government’s total spending was $495 million – of which $296 million was provided by international partners.

Al-Shabaab uses a range of means to generate finance, employing a combination of both licit and illicit trades. While comparable militant groups might rely heavily on local natural resources, like diamonds, oil or drugs, al-Shabaab has no such resources to draw upon. As such, it has created a diversified approach to financing, generating funds through a range of means. These have included the taxation of goods, services and domestic produce; imposing customs duties at ports, borders and airports; taxing movement through checkpoints; engaging in business and trade; smuggling contraband; extortion; sugar smuggling and charcoal exports. Al-Shabaab also earn money through diaspora support, external assistance, as well as ‘jihad contributions’ – appealing to funders abroad, including from al-Qaeda and its supporters. Al-Shabaab also make money off of international aid; diverting resources intended for humanitarian relief and ‘taxing’ international organizations for the right to operate on its territory. Sophisticated financial management is central to al-Shabaab’s capabilities, with much of the group’s financing and fundraising capabilities ‘imported’ from abroad, or held by actors with international experience.

Al-Shabaab’s engagement with crime has shifted during the group’s lifespan. In its early days, al-Shabaab positioned itself as a ‘provider of justice’. It created a narrative of lawfulness and order for those living on its territory – framed in juxtaposition to the government, which was seen as corrupt and incapable of providing order. When the group occupied new areas, one of the first things it would do would be to establish local courts to hear criminal and civil cases. As such, the group was careful about its public association with crime. Over the years however, the group has begun to engage more heavily in criminal activities. Petrich notes that there are interesting differences in the ways that al-Shabaab engages with crime within Somalia and outside the country. She explains, “… the group has been careful to limit its public association with criminality within Somalia in the interests of maintaining an image of legitimacy. Outside of Somalia and in non-Somali communities, al-Shabaab seems much less concerned about linkages between itself and illicit activity.”

Al-Shabaab’s increased involvement in illicit activity has reportedly changed the group. Petrich argues that as al-Shabaab have become more involved with crime, organizational priorities and patterns of behavior have become more “driven by self-perpetuation”. She notes, “In doing so, they evolve from a purely political entity to a more hybrid model with different goals, strategic vision, and methodology, but do not relinquish their larger ideological or political goals.” This move, she says, is consistent with that seen in

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28 mof.gov.so/fiscal
33 Ibid, at 8.
34 Ibid, at 2.
other comparable terrorist groups. Notably, Petrich explains, ‘hybrid’ organizations – which blend criminality with political goals – tend to be strengthened by this, having greater longevity and durability, becoming more resilient to traditional counterterrorism efforts.

Al-Shabaab’s operating costs are high, as it makes regular payments to officials and local influencers, many of who are formally in charge of areas that the group does not control. The Hiraal Institute notes that while al-Shabaab has at times had to raise emergency funds to keep afloat, it normally manages to pay its fighters, workers and administrators – again in contrast to its government counterparts. Petrich explains, “Creating institutions and professional bureaucracy makes the group significantly more resilient to losing core ideologues. It also has significantly higher levels of employee integrity, particularly among tax collectors and auditors, who are both exceptionally well compensated and watched incessantly by the security services. This combination of carrots and sticks has resulted in only a single reported case of an al-Shabaab tax auditor successfully embezzling and escaping.”

Joining or affiliating with al-Shabaab, offers individuals opportunities for personal gain, access to business opportunities and cheaper prices on goods and contracts – with evidence that women associated with the group benefit from these too, discussed below.

Some key facets of al-Shabaab’s war economy and income generation are now discussed.

**Taxation:** Al-Shabaab has established a predatory taxation system that spreads across Somalia. This operates both in areas that the group controls, and across other parts of the country. Al-Shabaab demands a variety of taxes from individuals, businesses and clans, using threats and violence to enforce these.

*Zakah* is an annual tax charged on goods. Al-Shabaab keeps a list of businesses around the country. The group visits shops and warehouses, checking inventories and assessing the goods belonging to traders, estimating their worth and demanding 2.5% of their value as tax. At year’s end, businesses must pay *Zakah* in cash to al-Shabaab’s Finance Office. *Zakah* is charged throughout al-Shabaab territory, and to some extent, in government-held parts of the country. The group’s ability to tax in Mogadishu, where it can tax the country’s most profitable businesses, is said to be growing. Al-Shabaab provides a religious justification for its *Zakah* tax, as *Zakah* is a “Muslim religious duty to purify the soul through giving alms”. While al-Shabaab claims to be acting on the basis of the Quran when charging it, they only give a fraction of *Zakah* to the poor. Al-Shabaab are also said to charge so much *Zakah*, that many are left struggling to survive financially.

Al-Shabaab also imposes customs duties – leveled far beyond the territory it holds. Manifests and bills of lading of arriving shipping containers are leaked to al-Shabaab, who demand duties from owners –

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calculated based on their prior knowledge of what’s inside containers." Al-Shabaab also tax cargo trucks which use the roads the group controls. The Hiraal Institute reports that each truck is taxed $555 USD, every time they use the road, with larger trucks taxed $1150 for road use. The group taxes farm produce (taxed at 10%); a heavy-duty tractors' operating license (taxed at $750); a water well drilling rig registration fee ($3000); a Toyota minivan registration fee ($200); a personal car registration fee ($200); and a fee to bring a camel ($5) or a cow ($2) to market." The group also charges Zakawat, a non-monetary tax – which includes taxes on agricultural products. When al-Shabaab runs short of finances, traders and clans are forced to pay Infaaq, an arbitrary amount that can range from thousands, to tens of thousands of dollars for clans, and to hundreds of thousands for traders. Infaaq is said to be one of al-Shabaab’s most disliked practices. As opposed to Zakab, which at least has some religious basis, Infaaq is purely predatory."

The Amniyat, al-Shabaab’s intelligence wing, plays a key role in tax enforcement, by monitoring and targeting those who refuse to pay the group’s taxes – notable due to the significant role that women play in the Amniyat." The Washington Post tells of a Mogadishu businessman and outspoken opponent of al-Shabaab’s taxation system, who each year had his hotel bombed or attacked, until he eventually gave up running hotels." The Somali government is reportedly considering a law that would make it illegal for people to pay taxes to al-Shabaab. Traders argue that criminalizing these payments, would make their burden even worse and would risk their lives, given the government’s failures to keep them safe."  

**Extortion:** Threats and extortion are a core part of al-Shabaab’s operating tactics. Individuals and businesses are forced to comply with al-Shabaab’s demands and are punished harshly if they don’t. Several of the deadly attacks on Mogadishu’s restaurants and hotels are said to have been due to owners refusing to comply with demands made of them. As an example, telecom company Hormuud lost millions when al-Shabaab banned mobile internet services across the country. In 2013, following Edward Snowden’s revelations about the American National Security Agency’s (NSA) monitoring of internet-enabled devices, al-Shabaab banned mobile internet in Somalia. At that time Hormuud was the only mobile internet provider operating across south and central Somalia. Hormuud complied with al-Shabaab’s demands by switching off mobile internet in the regions, yet it kept Mogadishu online. Al-Shabaab ordered Hormuud to switch off the internet in the capital, which they were forced to do at substantial business loss. In 2013, al-Shabaab reportedly demanded that Hormuud provide it with phone records of a former al-Shabaab member. When Hormuud refused, it was ordered to shut down 57 antennas in southern Somalia. Hormuud bought back mobile Wi-Fi to Mogadishu in 2015."

**Sugar and charcoal:** Al-Shabaab earns funds from the passage of charcoal and sugar. An Institute for Security Studies report explains, “… ships laden with sugar enter the port of Kismayo, and leave it with a cargo of coal. The KDF [Kenya Defence Forces] levies a US$2 tax on every bag of sugar, while al-Shabaab collects US$1 050 per truck that departs the port. Each truck is taxed again on its way through Somalia by the Jubaland administration (Jubaland is a semi-autonomous region of Somalia), and then again by other

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46 Ibid.


49 Ibid.


KDF elements as it crosses the Kenyan border. For charcoal, the same process works in reverse. Al-Shabaab collaborates with both Kenyan and Somali authorities in this trade – with the various actors taking cuts at different points in the process. This collaboration takes place despite the fact that these groups are officially at war with each other. Forged authorizations, facilitated by corrupt officials, ease the passage of goods at various stages of the journey.

Al-Shabaab is said to have made significant amounts from both charcoal and sugar. One report notes that at a single roadblock in Somalia’s Badhaadhe District bordering on Kenya, al-Shabaab makes between $8–18 million USD a year from taxing passing charcoal. The group is said to retain about a third of the revenue from charcoal exported from Kismayo and Baraawe Ports – with exports valued at about US$38–56 million per year. Realizing how important a revenue stream this was for al-Shabaab, in 2012 the United Nations Somalia Sanctions Committee prohibited the export of charcoal from Somalia. This appears to have had some impact, with interviewees noting that charcoal is less of an earner for al-Shabaab now than it was in the past. In its 2018 report, the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea estimated that Somalia’s charcoal exports had declined by 25%.

Some analysts believe that al-Shabaab no longer trades in charcoal.

There are differences of opinion as to whether al-Shabaab is actively involved in sugar smuggling, or whether it merely taxes sugar smugglers who operate on its territory. Raw sugar is shipped from Brazil into ports controlled by al-Shabaab, where it is placed on trucks and moved towards the Kenyan border and smuggled into Kenya. This trade is estimated at being worth between $200 and $400 million annually. Al-Shabaab uses this trade as a propaganda tool in Kenya, pointing out the Kenyan Defence Forces’ corruption for engaging in this.

Drugs and weapons: Al-Shabaab has a foothold in some of the more obviously illicit trades, such as drugs – like cocaine and heroin – and weapons. As with licit goods, al-Shabaab taxes illegal products. Petrich notes that, “…both law enforcement and policymakers rejected the idea that al-Shabaab was involved in the illegal drugs market, citing their Islamist beliefs and the group’s campaign against quat during the group’s early years of activity. Several of the dealers I interviewed, however, described how al-Shabaab essentially treated drugs as another commodity to be taxed, collecting both “per bag” taxes as well as taxing the trucks moving the supply.” While not illegal in Somalia, in many areas it controls, al-Shabaab has banned the sale of khat, often sold by women. Still, it is also said that al-Shabaab taxes the domestic khat trade, and also taxes its exports. Guns are trafficked into Somalia primarily from Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United States, with a large proportion trafficked to al-Shabaab via the coastal ports – and then moved between Somalia, Eritrea and Kenya. Not all guns that make their way to al-Shabaab are smuggled into the country; many come from the FGS or AMISOM, with soldiers known to sell their weapons to al-Shabaab, claiming to have lost these in ambushes. In Somalia, one can buy an AK-47 for the price of a cow (between $50–$100).

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54 Anton Cronie, How Charcoal Fuels Al-Shabaab’s Terror Campaign, Africa Geographic Stories.
58 Ibid
59 Ibid, at 12.
61 Ibid.
Livestock: As one of its forms of taxation, al-Shabaab taxes Zakawat on livestock, demanding farmers – male and female – give a percentage of their livestock to the group. Al-Shabaab are said to charge one camel per twenty-five camels a person owns, and one goat per forty. These cattle are sold to businessmen – selling for between $400 – 600 per camel and $30 per goat – with profits going to the group. Livestock is shipped to the Gulf States, particularly the United Arab Emirates. According to the United Nations, Somalia sent 5 million heads of cattle to the Gulf in 2016, netting around $360 million. Al-Shabaab also charges a fee for farmers selling livestock internally – charging around $3 per cow and $5 per camel. Livestock is used as a way to launder money; When the Kenyan government began to enforce building taxes, al-Shabaab moved its money into cattle, selling cattle illicitly to local butchers as a way to launder cash.

Piracy: Al-Shabaab is said to have links with maritime piracy, although these links are not well understood. It appears that rather than having direct control over piracy operations, al-Shabaab treats piracy in much the same way that it treats other business activities; by taxing those involved. Al-Shabaab is said to determine the amounts to tax, based on figures calculated by foreign insurance companies who insure ships. It is suggested that pirates are taxed between 15–20% of their ransom revenue by al-Shabaab. Inland, al-Shabaab also engages in kidnap for ransom as another income generator.

Business ventures: Al-Shabaab as an organization, as well as its individual members, run businesses across the country. Some of these businesses are old and well established, created around the time of the group’s formation and are still operating profitably today. Women play a key role in running these businesses for al-Shabaab, described below.

Al-Shabaab’s economy and women

While al-Shabaab collaborators benefit economically from their association with the group, many others in the population feel the group’s effects more negatively; subjected to continual extortion, threats and violence. Women interviewed for this study described the pressures that al-Shabaab’s system of taxation and extortion created for them. “We could do farming, but when the crops grow, al-Shabaab visited to ask for money for tax. They took $30, two times per year from each family. Everyone living there paid $30, regardless of what they did. $30 for each family.” Women described an alternative to paying tax, “You have to give up your sons to al-Shabaab. You must pay them eight dollars each three months, and money every week if you do not give up your boys.”

Despite the extortion, al-Shabaab enjoys widespread support. Al-Shabaab’s system of self-financing allows it to provide a level of services and welfare to its subjects. This in turn creates the impression that the group is financially competent and less corrupt than Somalia’s government. As Keatinge notes that, “Money talks, and from a purely financial perspective Al-Shabaab has been talking to the local people more forcibly, more convincingly and more effectively for many years despite life in Al-Shabaab-controlled territory being far from democratic …” He argues, “For all the efforts of sympathetic Western governments, aid agencies and regional military powers, until there is a demonstrably better financial alternative, Al-Shabaab is likely to continue to command sufficient support to prosecute its insurgency by

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62 Ibid.
recruiting and paying fighters and providing welfare and support to inhabitants within its areas of control.”

The services that al-Shabaab provides should not be overstated. Recent defectors from the group, questioned about the services al-Shabaab provides to the population in the areas it rules, said, “When they collected Zakawat, after they collect it, 15% of it they return to the society for the vulnerable people – nothing more. There were no other public services provided.” Another defector said, “I’ve never seen that they give any services to society – they are always taking many things from the society and not giving anything back.” Another added, “Never. They never do any public service in the areas they control.”

Women interviewed for this study described harsh economic conditions in al-Shabaab territory and lives of significant poverty. A female interviewee recalled, “There was never enough for food, or medical expenses.” Another woman, whose husband was a member of the group, said, “There was not enough food to eat. ... Most of the time our husbands were on mission and were not around. They could not provide for the family.”

Compounding the problem, is that the population in al-Shabaab territory receive little humanitarian aid, largely prohibited by al-Shabaab in the 2000s. A woman interviewed said, “Al-Shabaab would not allow people to get aid support. International aid, like food, education and health, are not allowed.” To make ends meet women in al-Shabaab territory often rely on family living outside of al-Shabaab territory. “The only support we got was from family in Mogadishu.” Another said, “My family members supported me.”

For many interviewed for this study, the economic hardships were the thing that ultimately pushed them to leave al-Shabaab territory. “My husband was not providing financial support and I had six children. ... I phoned my mother in Mogadishu, asking her to help me with transport to come to Mogadishu. I came and joined my mother. She now supports me and my children.”

### Al-Shabaab’s gendered spending

The way that al-Shabaab dispenses of its resources, provides some interesting, gendered insights into the group. The group’s spending reflects its priorities, and its vision for the type of society it wishes to create. For one thing, al-Shabaab believe in the primacy of marriage as an ordering principle for society; in which men are the heads of their households, financially responsible for their families; and women remain at home, largely relegated to the domestic sphere. The group spends money enabling this vision.

Al-Shabaab expects men to support their families – and it assists them in doing so. When paying out staff costs, al-Shabaab pays more to married men, seeing their roles in supporting their wives and families as a critical expense, worked into the group’s financial structuring. An unmarried male al-Shabaab defector confirmed, “Al-Shabaab only gives us $10 per month. Married men got $30.” The Hiraal Center explains, “The group has a large expenditure in recurrent payments in the form of salaries to soldiers, policemen, administrators, orphans and the maintenance of loyalties among more than 100 'unemployed' officials of the group. Foot soldiers are relatively cheap, receiving starting salaries of $30 per month with those having wives receiving an extra $30 per wife and $20 per child.”

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67 Ibid, at 3 - 4.
The group takes the obligation to care for families seriously. The Stabilisation Network notes: “AS requires their members take care of their wives with those who do not charged with neglect by the AS courts. For deployed AS members, the group channels monthly salaries directly to their wives. The group appoints one amir (local military and political leader) per unit to administer family welfare. Whenever an AS fighter is deployed, the amir stays behind to disburse the payments. In addition, the amir resolves any problems that may arise with fighters’ families while the men are away, for example by ensuring sick wives or children receive medical attention.”

The group supports al-Shabaab wives’ financial wellbeing in other ways too – particularly when their husbands are unable to. An interviewee in Mogadishu recounted an incident; “The IDP camps were given money. Al-Shabaab forced those who are working on the IDP programme to give al-Shabaab wives money. Someone in charge of the IDP camp was threatened – he was told to give al-Shabaab wives money. He refused and said that the money is for IDPs. So, he was killed by the group.” When husbands are killed, al-Shabaab reportedly works to ensure that women receive shares of inheritance, so that widows are not left with nothing. This said, when interviewees for this study were questioned on whether al-Shabaab provides support to the families of militants who have been killed, a high-level defector noted, “No. Only relatives can help.”

Al-Shabaab’s approach to women working: Rule versus reality

Formally, al-Shabaab does not allow women to work, as they consider this to be ‘un-Islamic’. Al-Shabaab advocates a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam, banning women from working or running businesses. Women are prohibited from leaving their homes without a male relative and cannot loiter in public. Instead, women are expected to remain in their homes. Interactions between unrelated men and women are prohibited – further hampering women running restaurants and tea shops, with their businesses impeded by the enforced sex segregation and prohibition on women engaging with male customers. Women are not supposed to spend time at the market and are prohibited from selling khat and tobacco – typically sold by Somali women.

This ban on women working forms part of a package of other restrictions, including a strict dress code, which includes a long dark chador (robe), a full-face veil and gloves. Women are subjected to beatings, punishments or arrest for going out without these mandated clothes. Women cannot visit hair salons – and are even prohibited from wearing bras. Al-Shabaab has put in place a system of surveillance and enforcement, to ensure adherence with its rules, using a sophisticated network of informants – with even family members informing on one another. Violence is frequently used to enforce the group’s rules. Interviewees described entire communities being forced to watch stonings and executions of those who committed serious wrongdoings.

The consequences for violating al-Shabaab’s ban on women’s work can be severe. Human Rights Watch reports of, “several instances of Al-Shabaab ordering women to be imprisoned or beaten, or both, for

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74 Ibid.
sitting tea, and notes that women are not exempt from punishment if they are infirm, elderly, pregnant, or the sole source of income for their family.”75 Women who work are sometimes fined or have their goods confiscated by the group – an added source of income in al-Shabaab’s war economy.

Prior to al-Shabaab rule, large numbers of Somali women were engaged in small-scale business; running tea shops and restaurants, selling khat, tobacco or other goods. Al-Shabaab’s work ban left many women with no alternative means of generating income – a situation that has been particularly cruel to female breadwinners and female-headed households – estimated at 70% of Somali households. That said, even families with men face greater economic burden due to the ban on women working.

Women interviewed for this study described this ban and its effects on their lives. One woman explained that, “Women are not allowed to do business at all”, while another added that, “There was no freedom of work.” One woman recalled, “… when al-Shabaab was here, you could not wash clothes for al-Shabaab. They did not even give you one dollar. They wear a green uniform; but they wash it themselves at night and wear it in the morning. There is nothing for the women to wash.” An interviewee described how back at the time when al-Shabaab arrived in Baidoa she used to own a restaurant. Her daughter would look after her restaurant while she used to travel. She recalled returning home from a trip to find her restaurant was closed – with al-Shabaab saying said she could not open the restaurant without wearing a veil.

The prohibitions on women’s work and movement have changed dynamics between men and women. Donnelly notes that as women have had to rely on men for movement, this has shifted the power dynamics between them.76 This reliance by women on men, plays into al-Shabaab’s ideals about the appropriate place for women in society; Women are supposed to be married; reliant upon and controlled by a man. Donnelly surmises that an aim of al-Shabaab’s work ban is to reduce the number of single women. Women, denied the ability to earn a living, will have only one option available to them – getting married to an al-Shabaab man who they can rely on financially.77

Many women in al-Shabaab territory – and particularly those who do not have husbands to support them – have little option but to work. One interviewee explained, “I had to work. There was no other option. I had to go out and do cleaning and washing clothes. The story is true that women cannot work there. But I had to feed my children.” Another woman who ran a restaurant said, “I was doing the business, but I was fearing. They told me not to do business with non-al-Shabaab people. They were not happy with me working.” Female khat sellers recall continuing to sell khat, as they had no option but to earn a living – but describe being arrested, beaten and having their stock repeatedly burnt as punishment for doing so.78 Other business women describe having goods destroyed as penalties, or the vehicles hired to transport their goods damaged, leaving women heavily in debt.79

Gardner et al’s research describes how women seek to get around these rules. Some women cede the public facing sides of their businesses to male relatives, with women working behind the scenes. Some women operate underground – selling goods in secret, often from their homes, at night. Others who

76 Phoebe Donnelly, Wedded to Warfare: Forced Marriage in Rebel Groups, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019.
77 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
cannot find such work arounds, have to close their shops and stay indoors. Still others move away from al-Shabaab territory, seeking livelihoods elsewhere.\(^8\)

The rule against women working is applied inconsistently by al-Shabaab. Human Rights Watch explains that, “… despite its official stances, the movement displays some pragmatism in recognizing that women are often now primary breadwinners. Even in places it controls directly, it tends to allow women to run businesses.”\(^8\) Some female interviewees for this study, said that they carried on working and did not experience any problem with al-Shabaab. One interviewee, whose husband left to join al-Shabaab, carried on working their farm once her husband had enlisted. “I carried on farming. One year and a half I worked on the farm before leaving. Al-Shabaab had no problem with me farming. They didn’t take tax. I haven’t seen them.”

Al-Shabaab is also said to tolerate market women, who sell their goods to men and women alike. This appears to be an area where the group’s position has evolved, as they initially restricted women from sitting in markets.\(^8\) The Stabilization Network suggests that this leniency mainly applies to small female-owned business, “On rare occasions, a number of women in AS-controlled areas have been allowed to open and operate small businesses. These businesses are mostly small in scale and include roadside shops and tailoring services. However, in cases where the business becomes too big, AS sends its Amniyat (intelligence and special operations unit) to ensure that the source of funds for the business are legitimate and, more importantly, that the business is not a front for hostile actors to gather information on AS.”\(^8\)

The rule also appears to be applied differently in different locations, with male defectors from certain areas claiming that women were allowed to work and run businesses. One said, “Yes, women are allowed to work in the areas that the group controls.” Another said, “Yes, women are allowed to work in areas that al-Shabaab controls. Some women have shops and are shopkeepers. Some of them have their own restaurants. Some of them own small scale business – they sell tea and biscuits.” There was an interesting contradiction evident in this research, with men reporting that women could work, and female interviewees reporting on the work ban. One defector questioned about the ban said, “It depends on the role. Women in al-Shabaab they may say this, but they are a lot of women working for al-Shabaab.”

Al-Shabaab reportedly uses the ban on women working, as a means of extorting women. Human Rights Watch says, “The ban, which al-Shabaab claims is based in the Quran, is in some areas little more than another form of extortion. One female market vendor who had recently arrived in Kenya from Jilib in Middle Juba province told Human Rights Watch, “They were preventing us from working as women. If you wanted to work, you had to bribe them.”\(^8\) Reuters reports that women in Kismayo were banned from bartering with ship crew, something which had been the primary source of income for many, and women were also banned from selling or working in offices. They reported that these bans were often used as a means of extorting bribes from women who needed to work.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid.
Al-Shabaab using women in their business endeavors

Despite al-Shabaab’s formal ban on women working, there is significant evidence that al-Shabaab utilizes women in its own business-endeavors. As part of its war economy, al-Shabaab runs a range of businesses. This research revealed that women play important roles in these.

A key informant in Baidoa described how al-Shabaab finds women to take up these business roles. “Al-Shabaab check at the market. When people are successful, they encourage them. They give them capital. They invest in them.” When al-Shabaab identifies a good business woman, they invest in her. “Women do business on behalf of al-Shabaab – even now. When they see a good business person, they give her money. They invest in her. They give her about $3,000. Then they come back after two years. They then say to her, give this money to someone else.” An intelligence officer, questioned about women’s roles in al-Shabaab’s businesses said, “They are given money to do this by al-Shabaab. Later on, their profits from business they give to al-Shabaab.”

Interviewees describe women being given incentives to run businesses on behalf of the group. “They will get you some grain if you are a farmer. They will say, ‘This is grain you can use. When you are done, we can have our share.’ She is happy about this, because she can get something for her family. They get the grains from the men in the market. They bring them from them, and bring them to the women.”

Women involved in al-Shabaab’s businesses are given a freedom of movement that other women are not. “At the roadblocks they only allow women related to their businesses to pass.” Another interviewee said, “They [al-Shabaab] have women who do business. When they get business, they let women pass the barriers, such as roadblocks.”

Al-Shabaab use a range of methods to recruit women who they feel can further their business interests. They might approach a woman directly; get her relatives to talk to her; or send an al-Shabaab woman to approach her. Gardner et al describe another means by which women are entwined within the groups’ business dealings. A group representative places a bulk order with a businesswoman, without her realising that al-Shabaab is her new client. They sometimes request goods which she does not have in stock, so that she has to order these in on their behalf – in doing so, initiating a relationship between her and the group. After the first innocuous contact, the business relationship grows. By the time the woman realises who she is dealing with, she is entrapped in these dealings. Some women try to pull away once they realise they are doing business with al-Shabaab, yet find themselves entangled. Others see their relationship with the group as good for business and willingly continue. Still others continue in fear, afraid of the repercussions of doing otherwise.

Interviewees described a range of ways in which women assist al-Shabaab in their business endeavors. One key informant said, “A woman in Baidoa is still married to an al-Shabaab man. She sells food. She packs a truck of food to go to Mogadishu. Along the way, there are different instructions. Al-Shabaab men come and take over the truck.” An intelligence officer for NISA (the National Intelligence Security Agency) described a case he had come across; “There was a lady that NISA was watching. She came to the hospital for her abdomen. She gave the hospital a fake name. She was going to the region and selling fuel. NISA checked her account and it had $200,000.” Al-Shabaab male defectors also described women’s participation in these businesses. “Al-Shabaab use women in many

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87 Ibid.
different roles and areas that they work in.” Another said, “Yes, often women were working in al-Shabaab businesses. Based on the job they have a need for women. They don’t need women to carry weapons or tax, but they use them where it’s appropriate.” He continued, “Sometimes women do farming and small business or gas station. Women could be involved according to the role. These are run by the group itself. It is known in the community that this is an al-Shabaab business.”

There appear to be many women in Mogadishu who are involved in running businesses on behalf of al-Shabaab. A NISA officer went as far as to say that, “Most of the women who do business in Mogadishu, work for al-Shabaab.” An interviewee who runs a business network in Mogadishu, explained, “They are living in the city, but they are involved with al-Shabaab. They send them money. They are informers.” Another interviewee said, “I heard of ladies living in Mogadishu involved in al-Shabaab’s economy. They were doing logistics for them.” Al-Shabaab sometimes use women to collect information for them from within the business community.

Sometimes, women work together in groups. A NISA officer said, “Lots of women create a group of women. The group works together. They have ideas together, so it grows bigger. They do this on behalf of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab gives them capital. They don’t allow women to work. But for selected women they do business.”

When questioned about why al-Shabaab relies on women for these roles, an informant explained that women are seen as more malleable and compliant. “This [business] is especially for women, because they know that women won’t challenge them. They do what they ask and will not challenge, so they are easier than men.” Another interviewee said, “Al-Shabaab knows that you can trust a woman more than a man.” Another informant said, “I met one woman who does this business. … They will let her go out and get the product they want. It is easy for them to trust her.”

There are other reasons that it makes sense for al-Shabaab to utilize women in their business endeavors. For one thing, women have more freedom to move than men. Women can cross between al-Shabaab and government-held territory more easily than men, who are viewed with suspicion. “Women can easily carry stuff and cross the border. It’s not as easy for men. … If a woman becomes known in the area, then it’s easier to bring big cars of goods.” Women can also cross over national borders more easily. An interviewee explained that, “There is cross border trade that they are involved in from Kenya, Ethiopia and Somaliland. It’s women mainly who are doing this.” Women can also move between different clan territories and can cross checkpoints more easily. As they are not suspected of being involved with the group, they are checked less often by security officials – making women ideal for evading controls. “It’s easier for women to cross roadblocks. Because they are businesswomen, no one will suspect them. They have accessibility to everywhere.” Another interviewee added, “Women can carry money. They can escape more easily than men.” Using women allows al-Shabaab access into areas they would not otherwise have access to. “When they have no access, they send women.”

As well as running businesses for al-Shabaab’s benefit, women carry out trade that is critical to sustaining life in al-Shabaab territory. An interviewee explained, “Women were taking things to sell in al-Shabaab areas. Things like material, daily food, meat, creams and perfumes.” Another said, “I know that women were doing business. They were taking clothes and selling them in al-Shabaab area.” A NISA officer said, “They sell fuel. They take goods from government areas to the regions.”

The point was made by interviewees that it is often difficult to know which women are running businesses on behalf of al-Shabaab, and which are just running businesses. “Al-Shabaab are within the community. You can’t identify if they are business people, or if they are doing this. If someone has a shop or restaurant, they might be al-Shabaab, but you wouldn’t know it.” Gardner argues that most women conducting businesses in al-Shabaab

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88 Ibid.
territory, do so despite al-Shabaab, rather than because of it, often continuing with the businesses they had run before the group’s arrival – and perhaps using the group to assist in their business, by adding to their customer base, or gaining protection or authorization to travel due to their association with the group.\footnote{Ibid.}

Interestingly, while some defectors spoke freely about the economic roles that women played in al-Shabaab, several denied that they had ever heard of women doing these things at all. One defector said, “All finances, all collecting money, everything in terms of business and collecting taxes and doing all day-to-day operations in al-Shabaab is always men involved.” While some agreed that women can run business dealings on behalf of the group, they commented that women’s roles remain limited, “If women are allowed to do their own business, but are not allowed to hold positions in the group, like military. There are no women who are working in the offices of al-Shabaab.”

By furthering al-Shabaab’s business interests, women contribute to an important survival strategy of the group. Donnelly notes that, “Businesswomen were described as “money-making machines” for Al-Shabaab. … One interview participant described businesswomen as the “backbone” of Al-Shabaab.”

A key informant noted the irony of this strategy. “Al-Shabaab refused to let women do business then, but now, they use women for business. It’s a distorted view of Sharia.” A defector added, “They say that women should stay home and not work, but when they need to use them, they do – they make them work for them.”

\section*{Al-Shabaab wives running businesses}

In particular, it seems that wives of prominent al-Shabaab men are often involved in running businesses. Being a militant’s wife confers certain privileges, which are useful for conducting business, including greater freedom of movement than other women enjoy, useful personal connections and access to smart phones – which are prohibited for others.

A key informant for this study interviewed a number of al-Shabaab wives, many of whom ran small businesses in al-Shabaab territory. These women were able to move to (government held) Kismayo to restock their goods, before returning to al-Shabaab territory to sell these, enjoying easier movement than others. It was unclear what portion of the funds from these businesses went to al-Shabaab, and how much the women kept for themselves. The key informant made the point that these women were left without money for months at a time as their husbands were away fighting, and they were able to use money from their businesses to support their families during these times.

‘Khadija’ and Harley write about interviews they conducted with wives of high-profile al-Shabaab men in Kismayo. They found that these wives were allowed – and apparently encouraged – to run businesses. They say, “The women noted that business activity was conducted with the awareness and approval of the Executive.”\footnote{Phoebe Donnelly, \textit{Wedded to Warfare: Forced Marriage in Rebel Groups}, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019, at 190.} To run these businesses, these wives were allowed access to smartphones and could travel relatively freely in Middle and Lower Juba. Part of the revenue from their businesses went to the women, and part went to al-Shabaab.\footnote{‘Khadija’ and Stephen Harley, \textit{Women in Al-Shabaab}, 2019, at 5.} Interestingly, in contrast to what was found by the key informant above, ‘Khadija’ and Harley found that these business earnings were just an extra for these women. “All the women ran businesses to supplement their already generous allowance from the Executive.”\footnote{Ibid.} They note

\footnote{92 Ibid.}
that, “The women say that while their husbands are absent on operations they are well looked after. The Executive Council of Al-Shabaab has appointed a dedicated Emir to ensure that fighters’ wives are provided with funds on a regular and generous basis and that they are secure.” Notably, this account contrasts with accounts provided by many al-Shabaab wives interviewed for this study – albeit mostly wives of lower-level fighters – who report being scarcely provided for by al-Shabaab and describe suffering financial problems when their husbands enlisted. These disparities might be due to there being differences in the ways that wives of high and low-level militants are treated.

An interviewee explained how wives combine business activities with providing other types of support to al-Shabaab. “They are moving around to do their business, and spying as they go. These women are fanatical.” ‘Khadija’ and Harley’s piece echoes this, describing, “Interviewee E noted that she had performed intelligence-gathering while on business in Kismayo…” This demonstrates the links between women’s business involvement with the group, marriage into the group, and other types of female support and involvement in the movement.

Taxation

Women play a part in al-Shabaab’s system of taxation – both as those who are taxed, and sometimes, although it appears rarely, as those involved in collecting taxes.

Like men, women are required to pay al-Shabaab’s taxes – ironic, given the group’s ban on women working. An interviewee explained, “If a person is in a high position, al-Shabaab will ask them for tax. ... They ask tax from both women and men.” A key informant, directly questioned on women and al-Shabaab’s taxation said, “If they see that you can produce anything, they’ll let you do it. If they think you cannot do anything, they’ll make you stay at home.” He added, “They are not just sitting there saying, ‘You are a woman, we are not going to take tax.’”

Women have to pay a variety of taxes to the group. A NISA officer noted, “At water points, al-Shabaab sells water. Al-Shabaab get taxes for water. Women have to pay these taxes.” As with men, female farmers are taxed on their crops and livestock. Another woman said, “When I get harassed, I’ll give them taxes. The rest, I’ll send to city.”

Ominously, those who cannot afford al-Shabaab’s taxes are sometimes told to hand over their children to the movement instead. A woman said, “Families are sending their children to Mogadishu’s IDP [internally displaced person] camps to hide them from al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab says you have to pay tax. If you do not, give us your children. Instead, the people hide their children.”

Interviews revealed that sometimes women are involved in collecting taxes. One woman explained, “The people who collected money; there was one lady who worked in the team. There were two or three in team – and one of them was a woman.” She said, “Because they were ruling the area, wives were helping them to collect these taxes. There were many wives doing this.” Another source said that wives of senior members often collect taxes for specific mosques that they are associated with.

Notably though, most of the defectors directly questioned about women’s roles in tax collection, said that this was man’s work – scarcely carried out by women. A defector said, “No, they don’t give such roles to women.

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94 Ibid, at 5.
95 Ibid, at 5.
Women have nothing to do with collection. Sometimes they use them for information and investigation, but not for taxation.” Another added, “I’ve never seen this. Women are not involved in collecting taxes.”

Women donating goods to the group

Significant pressure is put onto women in al-Shabaab territory to donate to the group. Women are said to sell their property in order to donate to the group; selling land, livestock and jewellery. Sometimes women take these resources from their bride price (meher), and sometimes they get this from their business activities. Gardner et al’s research describes women selling their gold and jewellery in order to give money to al-Shabaab – and refusing to even listen to their husband’s opinions about this. A defector noted, “Those who believe or are supporting al-Shabaab contribute money or even gold jewellery.”

Some women donate jewellery at public indoctrination events, specifically targeting women. Where women are wearing jewellery to these events, they are encouraged to donate it on the spot – with promises of being rewarded with access to heaven for themselves and their families if they donate ‘for the sake of God’.

Gardner et al, describe how after a time enthusiasm for donating to al-Shabaab waned. In order to avoid having to donate their gold, women stopped wearing jewellery. As a result, al-Shabaab’s system of fundraising became more systematised, with women compelled to donate under coercion – with punishments delivered to women who failed to do so. Women operating on behalf of al-Shabaab would draw up lists of women in the population, with each expected to pay an amount to the group. Women were arrested, beaten or intimidated if they failed to donate.

Women engaged in fundraising

Al-Shabaab relies heavily on women in fundraising; in convincing others to donate to the group. Notably, women play this type of role in Somali society more broadly, with it being women who carry out fundraising activities, whether this be for victims of drought, for religious institutions, for political candidates during elections, or for fundraising for the army when it is preparing to conduct attacks. As such, it is fitting that this role would fall to women within al-Shabaab.

Fundraising is reportedly amongst the most important roles that women play for al-Shabaab – with the group said to be highly reliant on women’s fundraising and resource-mobilisation capacities. Al-Shabaab’s women are said to be skilled at convincing others to donate money, goods and jewelry. An interviewed explained, “Women were fundraising amongst families for funds for the group.”

One interviewee described the time when al-Shabaab occupied Baidoa. “There were public gatherings and women talked on the loudspeakers. One day they collected $10,000 worth of gold for al-Shabaab, in just one day.” One strategy would be to create competition between communities. “They would say on the media that this school or this village

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
has collected a certain amount of money, so others should compete. They used the radio – Shabaab radio. They were good at propaganda. They used busses with loudspeakers. They also went door to door, so everyone heard. They would announce, “Today, we had a fight with a murted (a non-believer)”, or “This number of our brothers died.”

The International Crisis Group notes that women help to fundraise for specific causes. “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. 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.”

Women also encourage other women to take on fundraising roles. One interviewee explained, “I saw ladies who are collecting money from people wanting to support al-Shabaab. They also used to give support for taking food to them and nursing them. One of them was my neighbour. They asked me – telling me to come and join them. They would say, ‘Let’s help with ideology, and cook and wash for them.’ I couldn’t, because I was busy managing my home. A few women were doing this. They accepted that I could not be involved.”

Women also fundraise for al-Shabaab outside of al-Shabaab-controlled territory, sometimes relying on mobile phone money transfers to send money that they have collected to the group.

### Money laundering

Women facilitate money laundering efforts for al-Shabaab. Moving money in and out of al-Shabaab territory is challenging – and is made more difficult by financial controls put in place to hamper the group, including controls aimed at preventing al-Shabaab from using banks and remittances to transfer finances. Just as women are not checked as closely as men at roadblocks, women are also not subjected to the same financial checks. As such, al-Shabaab uses women to transfer funds for them.

One method by which the group sends money from place to place, is by buying goods at one location, and selling them at another, in order to get cash there. Women are often used in this role; transporting, buying and selling goods as a means by which to move money. The International Crisis Group (ICG) explains, “One common method is to convert commodities into cash via the daily business operations of local female entrepreneurs. 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.”

As with other female involvement in the group, the reasons for female traders participating in these schemes are varied. Some participate because al-Shabaab offers them a share of profits, while others participate as they are coerced. ICG note that widows and divorcees in female-headed households are particularly vulnerable to this type of coercion.

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105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
Women’s madrassas

Another source of funds derived from women, are the mandatory fees for forced schooling. Compulsory religious classes are held for women in al-Shabaab territory and women have to pay to attend these. One interviewee explained, “These were $5–10 dollars per month, that they had to pay for these classes. ... Al-Shabaab controlled the curriculum. And they had to pay school fees. These were compulsory.”

On top of this, parents need to pay for children’s schooling. In addition to having to enrol their children in al-Shabaab’s schools, parents have to pay a $5 monthly madrassa (Islamic religious school) fee for each of their children. Al-Shabaab’s madrassas are run by officials from the group’s religious outreach (da’wa) department.109

Classes for women focus on religion, ethics and outreach. One aim of these classes is to allow women to continue al-Shabaab’s indoctrination work in their homes; teaching their children, in order to ensure their children are committed to the movement. In these schools, women are taught by other women. As secular education is banned in al-Shabaab territory, female teachers can only teach women and girls in religious schools.110 As such, these religious schools are amongst the few places where women are formally employed by al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab reportedly looks for religious women, or for women who had previously been Koranic teachers, to be teachers for them.

It’s not only education that these teachers are responsible for. Donnelly notes that, “Teachers served many roles for Al-Shabaab – they helped arrange marriages, collected taxes and donations from girls at their schools, and indoctrinated girls to believe Al-Shabaab’s ideology.”111 Donnelly finds that teachers in al-Shabaab schools play an important part in entrenching al-Shabaab’s system of marriage. Teachers collect information about young girls and whether they are married, and transmit this information to al-Shabaab, who can then decide whether to approach girls for marriage. Teachers also instruct girls about what’s expected from them in al-Shabaab marriages – including encouraging them to make these marriages affordable for men. She notes, “… female teachers convince young women not to demand material support or dowry from their Al-Shabaab husbands and taught them that, “In this world, one does not need material stuff and one has to strive for the next life.””112

Cheap marriages for al-Shabaab men

In Somalia there are significant costs associated with marriage. A Somali groom is responsible for making various payments to his bride and her family. One payment is the ‘meher’, which the groom pays to his bride. This payment, which forms part of Islamic law, is required to make a marriage valid. The amount of the meher is often announced at wedding ceremonies, reinforcing the groom’s obligation to pay this. Women often also receive jewellery and furniture as part of their marriage packages. In recent years prices have gone up significantly, with people competing against each other in the payment of meher, and prices rising as high as $50,000. Wedding costs have also increased; Somali weddings are elaborate affairs, involving large celebrations. As costs have increased, men have increasingly struggled to afford these.113

111 Ibid, at 191 - 192.
112 Ibid, at 191 - 192.
113 Ibid.
Addressing this male grievance, and reinforcing the place of marriage as its core system of social ordering and control, al-Shabaab has mandated ‘cheap marriages’ in its territory – marriages where meher does not have to be paid and where emphasis is placed on keeping the costs down for men. Al-Shabaab has banned largescale wedding celebrations, gifts and payments – and those who violate these bans are punished. Cheap marriages are enforced for all marriages, not just for al-Shabaab’s members.

Unsurprisingly, Donnelly’s research finds that men feel positively about these ‘cheap marriages’, while women are more likely to oppose them. The practice of cheap marriage has led many men to view the group more positively – as al-Shabaab is actively challenging practices which make it harder for men to marry, and which thereby threaten male power. This therefore encourages male recruitment and support for the group. This is reinforced by the practice of polygamy, also supported by al-Shabaab, which further entrenched male preference and power. Beforehand, a man could barely afford to get married at all. Now, due to al-Shabaab, he can marry several women, and hardly has to pay anything.

Enforcing cheap marriages therefore forms part of al-Shabaab’s goal of creating an ‘ideal’ society in which male dominance is reinforced by marriage. Donnelley explains, “Meher is an Islamic practice, yet Al-Shabaab decided to abolish it because of the power it gave to women and the ways in which it was disempowering Somali men.”

### Women’s clothing

Al-Shabaab has imposed strict rules about what women need to wear. An interviewee recalled, “If you stepped outside the door in the wrong clothes you would get into trouble.” To adhere to the group’s rules, a range of clothes were required. “We had to wear long dresses – in a not soft material, gloves, socks, face veil and a long burqa.”

Women had to purchase these outfits for themselves. Women interviewed in Baidoa recalled that when al-Shabaab took over the town, its associates arrived with large shipments of these clothes. Gardner’s research estimates that each outfit requires three meters of cloth, with a meter costing about $8, and a full outfit costing around $24. This is very expensive in comparison to the $3 or $4 that a full dirac (which Somali women normally wear) costs.

Aside from the ideological motivation for al-Shabaab’s dress code, there appears to be an economic objective at play. The mandatory dress code creates financial opportunity for al-Shabaab and its affiliates to sell clothes, creating a forced market. If one applies this rule at scale to all women in al-Shabaab territory, this becomes a significant source of income.

These outfits are unaffordable for many women. Interview accounts are given of women arrested and beaten for not wearing these, despite their claims that they could not afford them. Al-Shabaab reportedly have little sympathy for this excuse.

A woman interviewed in Baidoa recalled how she and seven other women shared a house during the time that al-Shabaab occupied the city. All of these women’s husbands were absent, dead, or recruited into al-

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114 Ibid.
117 Ibid, at 106.
Shabaab. Between the eight of them, they could only afford three of the mandatory outfits. Over the four years that al-Shabaab held Baidoa, they shared three outfits between them – with each only able to leave the house when they had their turn. The remaining five women had to remain at home, waiting to use the clothes.

This woman recalled how one day she went to collect water from a well. As she didn’t want to get their shared chador wet, she pulled it up a little, tying it around her waist while she drew water, her legs still covered by the under-trousers she wore below. Some al-Shabaab men spotted her, flogged her on the spot and then arrested her. She described how for the duration of her time in jail, most of her housemates could not leave their home, as she was jailed in one of their previous outfits. She said a man had to bring her child to her in jail, as the other women could not even leave the house to bring her the child.

International women and al-Shabaab’s war economy

Women from a range of countries around the world have contributed to al-Shabaab’s fundraising and economic endeavors. Public information on this remains limited – yet a number of examples can be gleaned from media reports about women arrested for this. A 2014 media article tells of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in America arresting three women for running a conspiracy to funnel money to al-Shabaab. A Seattle newspaper describes another woman charged with fundraising for the group – with the report illustrating how such female support plays out. It reads “Almost all of the transactions involved relatively small amounts of money, a few hundred dollars or so. The total for all of the transactions was $8,350. According to court records, the defendants referred to the money they sent overseas as “living expenses,” and they repeatedly used code words such as “orphans” and “brothers in the mountains” to refer to Shabab fighters, and “camels” to refer to trucks needed by the group, the Justice Department said.” Another woman in Minnesota was convicted of fundraising for al-Shabaab – with prosecutors explaining how women went door-to-door collecting funds for al-Shabaab, claiming that they were collecting charity. They also held religious teleconferences to seek donations, which they sent to al-Shabaab. Closer afield in East Africa – particularly in Kenya and Tanzania – numerous women have been charged with crimes relating to their involvement with al-Shabaab.

One piece describes the ‘Mata Hari network’ in Kenya – a more unusual way in which al-Shabaab utilizes women. This piece by Petrich reports that al-Shabaab pays Tanzanian sex workers in Nairobi for information, which they collect from their clients – often Kenyan police officers, politicians or businessmen – who reveal information as ‘pillow talk’. These Tanzanian women are said to work for a Kenyan-Somali woman who has a connection to al-Shabaab, with her acting as a channel between the women and the group. Petrich notes, “What’s notable here is the scale: For such an intelligence gathering operation to work, there must be enough officers involved, who can all offer different pieces of information.” Other news reports from 2017-2018 tell of al-Shabaab deploying attractive women to

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120 Kent Woman Charged with Funding al-Qaeda-linked Group, Mike Carter, The Seattle Times, 23 July 2014.
124 Ibid.
towns and locations near to Kenyan military installations, with women aiming to develop relationships with soldiers, as a way to collect intelligence.\textsuperscript{35}

Petrich says that it is notable that these women are not Somali – suggesting they likely do not have an ideological link to al-Shabaab. She notes that this network is also interesting given al-Shabaab’s ideological positions relating to extra-marital sex and sex work, which they strongly condemn. In trying to explain this, Petrich notes, “The co-option of sex workers as intelligence officers suggests that al-Shabaab is a rational actor willing to circumvent its highly public ideological stances when there is significant operational benefit to be gained.”\textsuperscript{36} In a different part of Nairobi, where al-Shabaab has a stronger support base and where it actively recruits – and therefore, where the group is more concerned with maintaining its public image as an Islamist group – al-Shabaab has taken an altogether different position on prostitution. One of the group’s first public acts in Nairobi’s Majengo neighborhood was to post signs saying that they would violently punish sex workers operating in the neighborhood. This stance against prostitution there is aimed at gaining support from the local population, by acting like they are fighting immorality and crime, as well as maintaining law and order in the absence of government doing this.\textsuperscript{37}

## Trafficking of Women

Women are trafficked as a resource in al-Shabaab’s war economy. An area of al-Shabaab’s operations that could be classified as human trafficking, is al-Shabaab’s ‘recruitment’ of Kenyan women, aimed at supplying sexual partners for al-Shabaab men and for al-Shabaab’s camps.\textsuperscript{38} A rich body of literature documents the experiences of Kenyan women trafficked into Somalia, drawing on testimonies of victims who have returned to Kenya following these experiences.\textsuperscript{39} Many report being deceived or misled into joining the group, finding themselves embroiled in experiences wholly different to those they had consented to – suggesting elements of human trafficking.

Many of those recruiting and trafficking on behalf of al-Shabaab are women. The group targets young Kenyan women using social media, WhatsApp or in-person engagements. Recruits are offered jobs or romantic relationships in order to encourage them to travel to Somalia.\textsuperscript{40} Some describe elaborate schemes, including false job adverts to Dubai, applied for by unsuspecting women, and responded to by al-Shabaab’s recruiters. Other women are simply drugged and kidnapped. This happens to women of a range of ages, and to both Christians and Muslim women. Interviewees describe the power dynamics established between recruiter and recruited, with, “the recruiter being rich, religious, stable, and the recruit made vulnerable by need or desire.”\textsuperscript{41}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{petrich2019worth} Ibid.
\bibitem{petrich2019worth} Ibid, at 1183.
\end{thebibliography}
On arrival, women describe being taken to al-Shabaab camps near the Kenya/Somali border. They are then held there and subjected to systematized exploitation, rape and mistreatment. Women describe being sexually abused by numerous al-Shabaab members. Some report being forced to use drugs, especially Bugizi, a combination of heroin, marijuana and Rohypnol. Some women say they were given contraceptives so they would not fall pregnant, or if pregnant, being given medication to make them abort. Many report contracting HIV during this period.\textsuperscript{132} In addition to being sexually available, women are made to provide forced labor, including domestic tasks such as cooking and washing.

Notably, in the interviews conducted for this study within Somalia, there were no reports given of Somali women having experiences like these. It appears that this treatment is reserved for foreign women – and largely, for Kenyans. Petrich and Donnelly confirm this finding, saying, “Women had different experiences in the al-Shabaab camp based on their nationality. The Kenyan women from the coast were tasked with cooking for al-Shabaab fighters or cleaning weapons. The Kenyan women in the camp were also repeatedly sexually abused by al-Shabaab fighters … The Kenyan women in these camps came across some Somali women who they described as ‘legitimate wives.’”Within these camps there appears to be a hierarchy between Kenyan and Somali women, with Kenyan women mostly being used as sexual slaves by members of al-Shabaab, and Somali women being forcibly married to a member of al-Shabaab.”\textsuperscript{133}

\textbf{Analysis: Al-Shabaab’s complex relationship with women}

One of the themes demonstrated by this research, is the disjuncture between al-Shabaab’s stated beliefs about the place of women, and the group’s actual use of women. This is evident in their formal ban on women working, while they themselves utilize women in their business endeavors. This is also evident in their strict rules around sex and morality, and their simultaneous use of sex workers to collect intelligence, or their running of a sex trafficking operation. Beyond gender, the ideological disjuncture is evident in others areas too; like the banning of khat and drugs, while simultaneously profiting from them.

So many of al-Shabaab’s economic activities feel out of sync with its ideological positions – both in its dealings with women, and more broadly. One conclusion is that the group is utilitarian about the place of ideology and is willing to put aside ideological ideals where this is useful for them. Petrich concludes, “The group is a rational actor seeking territorial control and willing to use whatever tools are available, regardless of the conflict with ideological principles.”\textsuperscript{134}

Petrich and Donnelly argue that the way that al-Shabaab engages with ideological principles, is shaped by its need to appeal to particular audiences and constituencies. One such audience is people inside Somalia, which the group is trying to appeal to with messaging about its goals of an Islamic state and lifestyle; a message in line with the group’s nationalist objectives. The group’s public treatment of Somali women speaks to this, portraying a specific picture of women in an Islamic state; married, at home, and under the care of their husbands. A different constituency is the group’s international funders, who are drawn by a narrative of al-Shabaab acting in self-defense of Muslims against foreigners trying to occupy and rule them. To them, the group should act like legitimate representatives of the Somali population, living in strict


\textsuperscript{133} Katharine Petrich & Phoebe Donnelly, \textit{Worth Many Sins: Al-Shabaab’s Shifting Relationship with Kenyan Women}, Small Wars & Insurgencies, 30-6-7, 2019, at 1183.

adherence with Islamic principles and acting harshly against behavior perceived as un-Islamic. Playing towards these audiences shapes some of the actions the group carries out publicly, like its harsh public condemnation of violations of its rules. In contrast, the group’s actions towards women that are less visible, are often not entirely in line with Islamist principles.135

Another thing which this research demonstrates is that not all women are treated the same by al-Shabaab. There are differences between the ways that Somali women are treated, and in how foreign women, like Kenyans, are utilized. While local women are taken as wives, foreign women are more likely to be trafficked into exploitative roles. Petrich and Donnelly also explain this by reference to the fact that al-Shabaab is playing towards audiences in Somalia, to whom advocating for an Islamic way of life in Somalia is key. The mistreatment of Somali women would stand in the way of this picture. In contrast, mistreating Kenyan women does not get in the way of the nationalist religious picture that is so important to their target audience and hence, the group do not mind doing this.136 Again, al-Shabaab’s differing treatment of different women, demonstrates pragmatism over ideology.

Al-Shabaab appears to be strategic in which women it uses for which roles. Donnelly puts forward the argument that, “Al-Shabaab’s internal division of labor is based on ideas about marriage. For example, certain women, such as older businesswomen, were not seen as desirable wives so Al-Shabaab instead gave them a part-time role where the group exploited their skills but did not marry them into the group.”137 Donnelly argues that al-Shabaab recognizes two different types of women – those who are good for marrying, and those who are good for working with. Older, more skeptical women would not make good wives, as they would be harder to bend to the group’s rules and ideology. However, they can still be useful to the group in others way.138 While this slightly contradicts the finding of this study, that al-Shabaab wives are particularly active in the group’s economic endeavors, it is an interesting point, nevertheless.

Donnelly argues that al-Shabaab’s use of business women is revealing of the group’s relationship between ideology and strategy. While the group has banned women from working, they have recognized what is to be gained from working with women. Donnelly notes that, “In this way, money became somewhat of an equalizer between men and women. If a person had money, Al-Shabaab wanted to use and exploit them.”139

Women’s economic contributions to al-Shabaab provide a further lesson about the nature of support to the group. Looking at the inner workings of al-Shabaab’s war economy demonstrates how not everyone who works to advance the group’s interests necessarily supports the group, or sees themselves as ‘working for’ or ‘belonging to’ al-Shabaab. Some might be acting voluntarily, and others, acting out of coercion or expedience. Gardner et al suggests using a spectrum, rather than a binary model, to think about the population’s support for al-Shabaab. She says that this, “contributes to a greater understanding of the gendered, context- and time-specific nature of individuals’ experiences and relationships with the group. This study’s findings complicate some common assumptions, such as the idea that those whose actions support al-Shabab are necessarily ‘radicalized’ or ‘supporters’ of the movement.”140

136 Ibid, at 1174.
137 Phoebe Donnelly, Wedded to Warfare: Forced Marriage in Rebel Groups, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019, at 169.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid. at 190 - 191.
Conclusion

Al-Shabaab has managed to keep its insurgency going for years, relying on a multi-faceted combination of crime, economics and governance. Its war economy has been amongst its greatest assets, allowing the group the means by which to continue fighting and with which to attract population support. This research has demonstrated that women play a key part in al-Shabaab’s economy – albeit one that is often unrecognized. It is only by painting a face to this picture, that we can begin to properly understand and combat this.

Efforts to undermine al-Shabaab’ earnings and finances will be critical to defeating the group. Yet, to date al-Shabaab has worked around efforts to stifle its financing – with women playing a part in this. Al-Shabaab has learned that women can bypass financial controls, just as they can get through roadblocks and checkpoints, as people are simply not looking out for them. Understanding more about the parts that women play in these processes, will be critical in establishing better tailored interventions to counter the group.

Exploring the parts of women in al-Shabaab’s war economy tells us a lot about the group. For one thing, this reveals some of the chinks in the group’s ideological position – understandings which should be key in developing messaging and strategies to counter them. Al-Shabaab prohibits women working, yet rely heavily on women in business. They hold conservative views on sex and sex work, but run a sex trafficking network and use sex workers in their intelligence collection endeavors. Gendered ideological messages are utilized in al-Shabaab’s recruitment and fundraising, yet are only adhered to a limited extent by the group. This understanding should be highlighted in counter-messaging developed to weaken al-Shabaab.

In countering al-Shabaab’s economy, gendered understandings are key – in understanding the groups’ earnings, spending, strategies and priorities, as it seeks to implement its own utopian version of society. Those seeking to encourage defection and population dissent, should take these understandings into account, in order to tailor more nuanced gendered strategies and messages to entice the population. Continuing to do this work, blind to the gendered aspects, neglects a core strategy that might significantly strengthen these efforts.
**Recommendations**

The following steps are recommended:

1. **Degrading al-Shabaab’s income generation capacity:** Incorporate a gendered lens into efforts to degrade al-Shabaab’s income generation capacity. Consider the parts that women play in supporting various al-Shabaab income streams and ensure that interventions acknowledge and respond to these.

2. **Terrorist financing:** Terrorism financing research, and initiatives designed to limit terrorist financing, should consider the roles of women as essential in the supply, transfer and white washing chain.

3. **Security and financial controls for women:** Ensure that women are subjected to the same controls that men are – including being properly checked at checkpoints and being subjected to the same financial controls as men.

4. **Service provision as a means to win support:** To reduce population support for al-Shabaab, the government of Somalia and relevant agencies should provide services that are distributed equitably across the country, which are distributed in a non-biased way, which doesn’t favor certain clans / populations above others, and which are of a higher quality than current services are. In particular, it is important to ensure that services required by women, such as health care and education services, are adequately provided.

5. **Income generation programming for women:** Promote income generating avenues for women across the country, as a means to draw women who are unable to work or earn, away from al-Shabaab territory.

6. **Messaging:** Highlight the discrepancies between al-Shabaab’s stated ideologies and their actions, as a means of counter-messaging. Gendered ideological messages are utilized in al-Shabaab’s recruitment and fundraising, yet are only adhered to to a limited extent by the group. This understanding should be highlighted in counter-messaging developed to weaken the group.
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