

# When they joined: restricted agency and victimhood in Kenyan women's pathways into Al-Shabaab

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*Abstract:* It has been claimed, often without evidence, that women have flocked to Al-Shabaab to work as fundraisers, cooks, intelligence officers, suicide bombers and sex slaves, and have even recruited others into the group. After attacks, such as that on Mombasa's Central Police Station, which have involved women, their motivations have been ascribed to factors including ideological commitment; the desire for financial gain, fame or danger; love; the pursuit of vengeance; curiosity; coercion; and kidnap. Attention paid to women's motives tends to be informed by the perception that women are automatically victims of violence, but the phenomenon is more complex than that. In this article, the testimonies of Kenyan women who have participated in Al-Shabaab's activities are used to explore the complex and multifaceted realities and multiple factors that enabled their mobilisation. Three motivational pathways that led Kenyan women into Al-Shabaab are identified, and Al-Shabaab's mobilisation strategies are also addressed.

*Keywords:* Al-Shabaab, religion-justified militancy, politicised religion, politicised Islam, jihad, mobilisation

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## Introduction

The role of women in political violence, such as that perpetrated by religion-justified militant groups like Al-Shabaab, has increasingly come under scrutiny in recent decades. Interest has been propelled by the emergence of new evidence that shows women taking up roles beyond those of passive, ‘second-class’ supporters, especially in the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and even acting as combatants (Spencer 2016: 74). The misogynist doctrines and brutal violence of ISIS, together with the fact that women, especially from Western countries, joined the group in large numbers, added to this shock (Vale 2019: 2). However, women have participated in combat activities since time immemorial, as is demonstrated, for example, by the case of Safiyya, an aunt of the Prophet Muhammad, who defended the fortress in Medina during the battle of the trench. A woman named Um ‘Umara not only nursed the wounded but also fought, and the prophet’s wife, Aisha, led an army against the fourth Caliph Ali (Parashar 2011a: 296; Johnston *et al.* 2020: 1). In later years, outside the Islamic tradition, the assassination of Russia’s Tsar Alexander II and the activities of groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany, Latin American guerrilla factions, and many other groups employing violence have involved women, including suicide bombers, in places including Chechnya, Palestine, Sri Lanka and Iraq (Spencer 2016: 75; Chatterjee 2016: 201; Weinberg & Eubank 2011).

The shock at women’s involvement is therefore due to the flawed assumption in international politics that women are inherently peaceful, a view that leads to women being essentialised as passive victims of war or dismissed as ‘cogs in the wheel’, whose nature is different from that of male perpetrators (Del Villar 2019; Bloom 2011b; Sjoberg 2009). As a result, women’s motivations are generally understood to derive from the narrow sphere of personal interests, framed in stereotypical gendered terms and experiences that align strongly with victimhood such as drug abuse, coercion, the urge to restore reputation after rape or financial gain. In short, women’s involvement is explained by everything other than political devotion (Agara 2017: 49; Ortals & Poloni-Staudinger 2018; Windsor 2020: 513; O’Rourke 2009: 684; Harmon & Holmers-Eber 2014: 20; Bloom 2011a: 11–15). Women’s agency is, therefore, inextricably tied to men’s in global politics (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007; Parashar 2009: 252; Parashar 2011b: 166; Alison 2003). However, research conducted in recent decades has produced findings that run contrary to this view and shed light on the diverse ways in which women are involved in political violence.

In her study of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – an organisation where more than a third of members were women ideologues, strategic leaders and managers of guerrilla fighting, operating both in the background and as attackers and suicide

bombers – [Alison \(2004\)](#) moved beyond the ‘agency’/‘victimhood’ binary to explain the complexity of women’s participation in the group and demonstrate that women are more likely to be included, ideologically and practically, in non-state liberation movements than in conformist/state-centric ones ([Alison 2004: 448](#)). She further argued that, even though both men and women have agency, some types of agency are gender-specific, and women’s motivations and experiences can vary across time and space, particularly when they are transformed in different phases of a conflict ([Alison 2004, 2009](#)). Even within armed groups that appear similar, women’s roles can vary widely as a result of their diverse and unique capabilities ([Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2020: 2–5](#)). Women may act in roles as varied as food and healthcare providers that work indirectly with extremist groups and traffickers of arms to perpetrators, and they often have the same motivations for the exercise of their agency as their male counterparts ([Jackson et al. 2011](#); [Sjoberg & Gentry 2007](#); [Sjoberg & Wood 2015](#); [Jacques & Taylor 2013](#)).

Empirical evidence collected in relation to women’s roles in religion-justified militancy in Kashmir and in ISIS have also demonstrated the nuances of women’s participation by deconstructing the meaning of participation and demonstrating the variety of the roles that women have played ([Parashar 2009, 2011a](#); [Chatterjee 2016](#)). Their role as active militants is all the more interesting given that religion-justified militant groups are often tagged as misogynistic advocates for domesticated femininity and the associated subordination of women ([Eggert 2015: 365–6](#)). As media interest in women’s involvement in ISIS increased, so did the pace with which the organisation enlisted women into diverse roles for propaganda purposes. These women and teenage girls, from as far afield as Europe and North America, were initially allocated secondary logistical roles before being increasingly integrated into operational ones in the women-only al-Khansaa brigade ([Spencer 2016: 77–8](#); [Sjoberg & Gentry 2016: 24](#)). Here they performed ‘stop and search’ duties, as well as intelligence-gathering, law enforcement and oversight functions, which saw them enforce morality over other women, and some also acted as recruiters ([Youssef & Harris 2017](#)). Women’s operational role was, however, limited because they were mere enforcers of ISIS’s diktats, and so their agency was restricted in the sense that their contribution was feminised and denigrated on grounds of their perceived physical limitations ([Spencer 2016: 84](#); [Chatterjee 2016: 213](#)). Nevertheless, the cases of LTTE and ISIS demonstrate three main circumstances that enable the involvement of women in war: when there is a shortage of militants, when the level of underground activities becomes significant, and in order to provide sexual pleasure ([Chatterjee 2016: 212](#)). These roles are shaped by various factors, such as the complexity of a war, the type of society in which it is taking place, women’s place in that society, and the insurgent group’s dynamics, ethics and gender narratives ([Alison 2009](#)). The theological conditions that permit women to participate, like men, in combat roles in a defensive war include situations where the

enemy invades Muslim lands, Muslim leaders make calls for the whole *ummah* (global Muslim community) to participate, or when Muslim women are appointed for specific and indirect tasks, such as monitoring the enemy or collecting information (Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2020: 3; Weinberg & Eubank 2011).

Zeroing in on the case of Kenya and Al-Shabaab, in March 2015, two Kenyans were among three girls incarcerated in Elwak, on the border between Kenya and Somalia, after allegedly having been found on their way to Syria to become ‘jihadi brides’ (*Capital Campus* 2015; Juma 2015). Even more shocking was the case, a year later, in which three other girls – two sisters and their friend – were shot dead by police, allegedly on the basis that they were about to attempt a suicide assault on the Central Police Station in Mombasa. It was reported that the girls were all wearing concealed suicide vests and that one of them was brandishing a knife and stabbing a police officer as another threw a petrol bomb with the intention of burning down the entire building (Solomon 2016; Ochami & Ombati 2016). Some Kenyan women, such as Rukia Faraj Kufugwa and Violent Kemunto, have been linked to Al-Shabaab’s financing operations, while others, including the so-called white widow, Samantha Lewthwaite, and Haniya Said Sagar have been linked to active mobilisation. The latter is the widow of the assassinated Muslim cleric Sheikh Aboud Rogo and was also linked to the Mombasa Central Police Station assault (Mukinda 2015; Akwiri 2016). These incidents have led to mixed claims about Kenyan women’s involvement in Al-Shabaab (Ndung’u *et al.* 2017: 20). Research suggests that while some women were pushed into the group by their desire to improve their living conditions (Mwakimako 2018: 51–7; Ali 2018; Badurdeen 2018), others exercised their ‘autonomy’ by joining Al-Shabaab voluntarily (Badurdeen 2020), while still others recruited fellow women into the group (Badurdeen 2018: 19–20).

In this article, I dig deeper to demonstrate the complexity of Kenyan women’s participation in Al-Shabaab, which, I argue, is a reflection of their equally complex realities. The case of Kenya is particularly interesting because its nationals, including women, have become involved in the activities of Al-Shabaab despite the country having better economic and security prospects than Somalia, where Al-Shabaab is based. Furthermore, although Africa (and East Africa in particular) is a breeding ground for religion-justified militancy due to the activities of the group, it is still generally portrayed as a receiver rather than a producer of the phenomenon. A lack of empirical data has continued to obscure the complexities of the issue, and research, including gender analysis of the role of women in the group, still has many gaps. In the next section, I briefly present some reflections on the methodology used in this study. An introductory survey of Al-Shabaab is then provided, followed by a discussion about Kenyan women’s pathways into the group, grounded in their own testimonies and linked to specific historical occurrences.

## Method

This study relied on explorative narrative interviews conducted with 15 Kenyan female former participants in Al-Shabaab between 2017 and 2019 in the coastal counties of Mombasa and Kwale. A number of these women were also former participants in a government amnesty programme. Perspectives from government representatives, members of civil society organisations (CSOs), academics and community leaders were also incorporated. Explorative research, which relies on qualitative methods, such as narrative interviews, has gained traction as an alternative to dominant approaches that tend to ignore contexts in the study of political violence. The dearth of empirical data and perspectives from people who have themselves participated in violence, together with the twin challenges of access and safety that affect data collection, mean that the approach is also a pragmatic choice, and one that avoids being constrained by pre-existing theories (Reiter 2013: 1–2; Schlichte 2009: 26). Because of the unpredictability of fieldwork dynamics and respondents' willingness or unwillingness to engage, the snowball sampling technique, which uses contacts developed with the support of participants in the field, was utilised.

Access was supported by networks of former colleagues and friends, as well as my partial position as an insider in the Kenyan context. Relying on others was necessary given the milieu of insecurity and violence resulting from Al-Shabaab activities on the one hand and the dynamics of the global war on terror (GWOT) on the other, though it also required the exercise of maximum caution. Although my identity as a partial outsider from a foreign university was rewarding, in the sense that I was able to see what a full insider can easily overlook, my identity as an insider was pivotal in winning trust, especially given the highly polarised and violence-affected context of my fieldwork locations.

Equipped with my research permit from the Kenyan government, I used a field approach that was as transparent as possible, letting my participants know who I was, why the information I was seeking was crucial and what purposes I would use it for. Due to safety considerations, especially those affecting my interlocutors, the only recording devices used were a notebook and a pen, though, for the purposes of verifying the data, I conducted the interviews twice on different days (Van Baalen 2018: 2). It was also wise for me to converse with research participants in Kiswahili, a language they could understand and use to express themselves freely. Given my partial insider status, this choice also helped to bolster trust. This approach meant that I had to translate my handwritten notes into English prior to analysis while adhering to high ethical standards in order to preserve the quality of the data (Emerson *et al.* 2011: 142–3). Respondents' accounts were triangulated with observed metadata, repeat interviews, additional interviews and secondary data, while the identities

of all former Al-Shabaab participants and some key informants were concealed for safety purposes. Emergent themes were used to organise the materials and structure the study's findings.

### **Context: Al-Shabaab and its targets**

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen (movement of the striving youth) – commonly referred to as Al-Shabaab (the youth) – is a Somalia-based militant group. It evolved from grassroots configurations of clans and early Islamic groups or learning circles and operates within and outside Somalia (Solomon 2015: 39), though literature on the group's precise origins is still scanty and sometimes conflicting. Due to the impacts of globalisation and the migration of scholars between the gulf and Somalia in the post-1960 period, the Muslim Brotherhood's politicised views on religion slowly diffused into Somalia, leading to a gradual shift from local customs towards more diverse practices of Islam, such as Salafism, neo-Sufism and Tabliq, as well as the formation of Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiyya (AIAI, or Islamic Unity) (Marchal 2009: 382; Shinn 2011: 204; Abdisaid 2008: 1). It was the AIAI that later transformed into Al-Shabaab. The group initially operated as part of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which had emerged as an attempt to bring about order in an anarchic Somalia following the state's collapse in 1991. However, following Ethiopia's intervention under the auspices of the GWOT in 2006, Al-Shabaab became radicalised (Della Porta 1995, 2013, 2018; Alimi *et al.* 2015) and retreated to the south of the country, where it remains based at present (Anzalone 2013).

Compared with other East African states, Kenya has borne the brunt of Al-Shabaab's violence, especially following the dispatch of its troops under the auspices of Operation Linda Nchi (Operation Protect the Country) to Somalia in 2011. High-level assaults on its soil have included the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi, two attacks in Mpeketoni in 2014, the bus and quarry attacks in Mandera in 2014, the Garissa University attacks of 2015, the assault on the 2019 DusitD2 Hotel in Nairobi, and other smaller-scale incidents, such as the targeting of police stations in remote locations. These attacks have ranged from suicide bombings and shootings to the detonation of improvised explosive devices and the targeting of strategic locations and individuals. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for most of these incidents and designated them as forms of retaliation against the presence of Kenyan troops in Somalia, injustices committed against Kenyan Muslims and other issues of international concern. Kenyans have also comprised the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Al-Shabaab camps; these fighters mainly operate within the Jaysh Ayman contingent that was specifically formed in 2014 to retaliate in response to the Kenya Defence

Forces' incursion into Somalia (Chome 2019). Kenyan recruits have played a pivotal role in the success of assaults against their own country and its neighbours (Anderson & McKnight 2015: 545; Cannon & Pkalya 2019: 836), and they have also been involved in Al-Shabaab's mobilisation of their compatriots. The most visible recruit was Sheikh About Rogo, a cleric who repeatedly reiterated the religious obligation of every able-bodied Muslim to support Al-Shabaab (Abdulrahman Mohammed, personal interview, summer 2018). Rogo and his peers cited Islamic sources to back up their claims and connected events in Somalia to the plight of Muslims in Kenya, saying that the latter were living under an illegitimate political system, occupied and dominated by non-Muslims, and so secularism, democracy and the nation state ought to be rejected *in toto* (Ndzovu 2018: 361). The mobilisation of Kenyans to Al-Shabaab has been enabled by these grievances, anchored in historical tensions and conflict dynamics coupled with a particular interpretation of Islamic sources, and fuelled by financial and material incentives, coercion and the use of online tools (Omenma *et al.* 2020: 11–14; Papale 2020). Although, at first glance, it appears that men were the key targets, given the group's rhetoric about protecting women, women were also included in certain circumstances (Petrich & Donnelly 2019: 1170). A male former Al-Shabaab participant who had played a senior role in the mobilisation of Kenyans into the group explained that women's unique abilities were an asset:

While many women went either to join their husbands or to marry a *Mujahid*, there were brave women, such as the white widow, who plan attacks. A woman has some privileges that she enjoys that men do not have and this made them attractive for 'Jihad'. (Duana, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Recent documentation by modern Muslim feminists about historical women who fought during the time of the Prophet also underscores this (Mwakimako 2018: 52–3).

### **Kenyan women's pathways into Al-Shabaab**

The comprehensive overview provided in this article allows Al-Shabaab's activities to be contextualised in the broader history of mobilisation. The motivations and pathways presented here can be categorised into two broad but dynamic narratives focused on consent and deception. As Badurdeen (2020) has observed, the binary opposition between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' behaviour is problematic. Drawing a distinction instead between decisions arrived at through consensus or created through deception offers a more nuanced framework that is focused on whether a person was aware of the implications of their actions or not. Some women involved in this study were aware that they were joining Al-Shabaab and, though their motivations differed,

consented to involvement, while others were deceived into becoming involved in the group. I discuss their various trajectories below while also situating them in relation to different historical events and Al-Shabaab mobilisation phases.

### **The dawn of Al-Shabaab mobilisation (c. 2009–11)**

Kenyans had already been involved in religion-justified militant activities long before the tensions between the Kenyan state and Al-Shabaab reached their peak, for example in incidents such as the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (CSIS 2013: 63; Botha 2014: 24), the 2002 al-Qaeda attacks on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel, and the failed missile attack on an Israeli charter plane at Moi International Airport in Mombasa (*Guardian* 2003). The formation of Al-Shabaab brought ‘jihad’ closer to home, and many Kenyans are believed to have joined the group in or around 2009 (Chome 2019; Botha 2013: 9). As the ICU made considerable gains in Somalia, news about its victories spread across East Africa, eliciting excitement and hope in some quarters (BBC News 2006) – for many, it was startling and inspiring to witness the extraordinary unfolding of an ‘internally driven process’ seemingly beating all odds and delivering services in a country that had been crippled by civil war for about two decades. However, this image was soon replaced by panic following the Ethiopian intervention in 2006 that toppled the ICU and ended its brief period in power. This development was disappointing for people such as Sheikh About Rogo, who condemned the invasion as an injustice against Muslims, and so they appealed for Kenyan Muslims to support the ICU’s ‘jihad’ and liberate Somalia, which they situated as a Muslim land under attack (Ndzovu 2013: 8). Rogo asserted that it was the obligation of every able-bodied Kenyan Muslim to support the defeat of the invading ‘infidels’ (Khalifa, personal interview, summer 2018; Bosi & Della Porta 2012: 365; McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1; Snow 2004). In response, some individuals, including former students of the late Sheikh Aziz Rimo (a rejectionist preacher from Kwale County), acted on his appeal and made their way to Somalia. Rimo had been a fierce critic of the state for its treatment of Muslims and was once imprisoned for his outspoken attacks (Banda, personal interview, summer 2018; Muhammad, personal interview, summer 2018). He was also the founder of Ansar al-Sunna (protectors of the tradition of Prophet Muhammad), in emulation of the prophet’s migration (*Hijra*) from Mecca to Medina. Although he neither called for violence nor involved himself in formal politics, his views were admired by others who later turned out to be some of the most ardent advocates of violence, such as About Rogo, Abubakar Shariff (Makaburi), Samir Khan and others (Ndzovu 2018: 364). The context in which he had operated went on to become one, and perhaps the most fertile, of the grounds for Al-Shabaab mobilisation. The decisions of many of



those who responded to Rogo's calls were supported by their already politicised views on Islam and the fact that his rhetoric resonated with Al-Shabaab's diagnostic frames and mobilisation strategy. They therefore readily acceded to the view that their actions would emulate those of the Prophet Muhammad and his migration from Mecca to Medina (Snow & Benford 1988: 202; Benford & Snow 2000: 619). Sheikh Aboud Rogo once referred to them as the 'real Mujahideen' when he said that 'the real mujahideen are from Ukunda' (Wesangula 2019). A study by a Kenyan CSO highlighted that Diani, a division near Ukunda town (in Kwale), was prone to Al-Shabaab mobilisation because of ideas supported by this apostasy (*takfiri*) persuasion, which was introduced by Sheikh Rimo in areas such as Kona ya Musa, Magutu, the Ukunda settlement scheme, Bongwe, Vukani and Tiwi, areas where many Al-Shabaab returnees reside (TTUC 2016; Faraj, personal interview, summer 2018).

Because mobilisation during this period was still highly secretive and was treated as a confidential matter that involved only a few trusted members of Al-Shabaab, many of those who joined the network as combatants during this period were men from tight-knit networks, such as those in Ukunda and the Muslim Youth Centre in Nairobi. Their roles, and the general cultural expectations in relation to masculinity, meant that they were perceived to carry a heavier obligation to participate in the fighting than women (Zitzmann 2021). Although some women from the Ansar al-Sunna circle in Ukunda were seemingly involved in the nascent phase of Al-Shabaab activities in Somalia, they were limited to secondary roles, taking responsibility for searches for peaceful places to practise their faith (*as muhajirat*), for example, as opposed to taking up combat roles (Mwakimako 2018: 57). It is also likely that, during this early phase, Al-Shabaab agents were filled with optimism due to the initially overwhelmingly positive responses they received and the support pledged by Kenyan male potential members, so the idea of including women as combatants had not yet arisen. As the next section shows, existing empirical evidence suggests that women's involvement began to emerge after this phase.

### **The peak of tensions between Al-Shabaab and the Kenyan state (c. 2011–15)**

The incursion into Somalia by the Kenyan Defence Forces in 2011 intensified tensions between Al-Shabaab and its sympathisers and the Kenyan state. As the group's most prominent charismatic supporter in Kenya, Rogo raised his voice to intensify support for the view that jihad in Somalia was a religious obligation for every able-bodied Muslim. He openly issued legal opinions (*fatwas*) against the Kenyan authorities and called for violence against Christians and the destruction of churches (Ndzovu 2013: 7–8). Citing Islamic sources to back his claims, Rogo also condemned fellow Muslims as apostates and connected events in Somalia to the plight of Muslims in

Kenya, who he suggested were under the control of ‘an illegitimate political class’ that was only out to humiliate them (Ndzovu 2018: 361). It was during this phase that Al-Shabaab heightened its attacks on Kenya in retaliation for Operation Linda Nchi. Very few days would pass without explosions occurring, especially on public service vehicles in Nairobi, and Al-Shabaab threatened to flatten Nairobi’s glass skyscrapers. Polarisation increased when allegations spread that influential clerics, including Mohammed Kassim, Samir Khan and even Sheikh Rogo, had been gunned down in Mombasa by security forces (Jacinto 2012). The assassination of Rogo in 2012 was a significant factor in heightening running battles between Kenyan youth and police on the streets of Mombasa. After the assault on the Westgate shopping mall in 2013, policing activities were further intensified, leading to events such as the raid on Masjid Musa in Mombasa in the following year. Indeed, tensions reached new heights in 2014, intensified by the disappearance and killing of several prominent clerics, including Ahmed Makaburi and Mohamed Idris in April and June respectively (Human Rights Watch 2014), as well as two brutal attacks in Mpeketoni and the bus and quarry attacks in Mandera, among other incidents. Although the situation deteriorated further the following year, with the shocking assault on Garissa University in April that led to the deaths of 148 students, the subsequent period remained relatively calm until the assault on Nairobi’s DusitD2 complex in 2019.

What is clear from a review of these incidents is that reactions from the state, on the one hand, and Al-Shabaab, on the other, triggered escalations from both sides. Polarisation and the creation of division are strategies often used by armed groups such as Al-Shabaab that seek to challenge the state, as the state’s predictable hard-line reaction has strategic value as a political opportunity for mobilisation. Using strategic narratives that harness topical Muslim grievances, such as those involving the actions of security forces and socio-economic marginalisation, Al-Shabaab was able to expand its pool of potential members. It was during this phase of increased escalation that women became more involved, including possibly in combat roles, and their participation was driven by pragmatic considerations, including the need to recruit larger numbers and women’s availability. As the testimonies shared below about women’s pathways into Al-Shabaab illustrate, while some women became involved with their consent, others were drawn in through pure deception.

### **The retaliatory path**

The stories of three women – Anne, Chloe and Bella – reflect how polarisation, at the peak of political tensions, impacted their lives by infringing on their personal security as never before. The pain of losing their loved ones at the hands of people they believed to have been law enforcers pushed them to consider the idea of retaliation. The murder

of a cousin by the police was something that led 34-year-old Anne, a stay-at-home mother, to seek retaliation through involvement in Al-Shabaab. She explained that, although she was initially discouraged from pursuing the idea by individuals linked to the group who had been in contact with her family during the mourning period, her persistence meant that they ultimately gave her their support:

One day at about 4:30 pm, after the late afternoon prayers, I was approaching our house from the neighbourhood, when someone told me that five men, who looked like police officers, had ambushed our house looking for my young cousin Kalu and shot him dead. I immediately rushed home to find the situation exactly as it had been described. Kalu's body lay cold on the bed. The whole situation was unbearable and I did not know what to do. I wanted to do something about it but I was helpless; my family was helpless. Then the thought of vengeance came to my mind and I decided to pursue it. So I approached someone I knew with the idea, but he discouraged me because I was a young woman. He and his colleagues sent me home to 'cool down my anger' which I did, but I went back to persuade them again after a few days. During that period, he and the other leaders were still alive and knew what had happened to my family. Ultimately, I managed to convince them and was delighted when they finally decided to support my wish of joining 'jihad'. (Anne, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Thirty-year-old Bella, whose brother was abducted and disappeared by people she believes to have been law enforcement officers, related a similar experience. Her family tried to trace his whereabouts in various police stations, in both Kwale and Mombasa counties, but to no avail. They were later told that he had been transferred to Nairobi. Fatigued, frustrated and lacking financial resources to follow up the case, her family lost hope and retreated to their home. For Bella, however, love for her brother, and the continued harassment of her family by people who were, in her view, security officers, pushed her to take the decision to join Al-Shabaab. She recalled an incident in which some people visited her family to provide financial support in a show of solidarity:

It was in September 2013 when, one early morning, my family heard a commotion outside our house that was followed by a loud shout: 'Open the door! Open the door!' It was the police, judging from their commanding style of communication, bullet-proof vests, and weapons. They forced their way in and grabbed my brother, Baha, as they beat us up while asking for my brother's identity card. Then they took him away. Baha was only 26 years old – I love him and was worried about his safety. I know for sure that he had interests in 'jihad' issues, but, if this was the problem, I believe he should have been arrested instead of being taken away just like that – and who knows if he is still alive?

To add salt to injury, after the incident, the police did not stop coming to intimidate my family. We demanded to see their credentials but nothing was shown. My family

was grieving every day. Then, one day, some people came to visit us in solidarity for our loss and gave us some money. I could recognise one of them and, before they left, they proposed the idea of ‘doing something about the situation’. For the sake of my brother, and all other families suffering similar fate, this became an option. I wanted to do something for Baha, but, when I told my mother about it, she disapproved of it, saying that it was risky and that I would put the entire family in danger. Well, this was true, but I wanted to do something for my brother nevertheless so I went. (Bella, narrative interview, summer 2018)

The husband of 36-year-old Chloe, a mother of three, was gunned down by people she believes to have been security officers. During the grieving period, among the people who regularly came to console her was a man from the neighbourhood to whom she became increasingly close, and he slowly persuaded her to consider retaliation. He told her that she would be targeted because of her husband’s activities, despite her innocence, and he offered to facilitate her mission. She told the story of how she ended up in Al-Shabaab:

I received news that my husband had been attacked and killed, yet there was no trace of the criminals responsible. This was quite painful for my children and me. I know it was the police behind it, and, as the pain sunk in with no trace of his killers, a good friend who had stood by us all along informed me of my possible fate – that I was being watched closely and sooner or later I would face the same fate as my husband. This shocked me, hence my journey up there [to Somalia]. (Chloe, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Although Chloe’s motivations included a search for protection as well as retaliation, all three women aimed to avenge the pain and injustice they had experienced at the hands of a repressive state and its security apparatus. Their outrage during the mourning period was turned into a mobilisation opportunity for Al-Shabaab by its agents. These agents, who seemed to know the women and their families, approached them strategically, introducing the idea of retaliation and guiding them through the recruitment process. On their part, the women were committed to undertaking retaliation missions on behalf of their cousin, husband or brother of their own accord, even if possible secondary factors such as financial reward were at play. Arguably, their actions were driven not just by personal desire for revenge but also by political motivations, which encouraged them to take action against law enforcers. The people they perceived to be law enforcement officials were seen to be acting in their capacity as representatives of the state, which is seen as repressive and unjust. Al-Shabaab represents itself as the adversary of this supposedly repressive state, and so participating in its activities was also understood to contribute to the ‘good’ of the whole community, as indicated by Bella’s explanation that her actions were undertaken ‘for the sake of my brother and all other families suffering similar fate’. In these terms, participation

is also understood to represent hope for the liberation that will come at the end of the struggle (i.e. when the ‘repressive state’ is defeated and stops committing injustices against Kenyan Muslims).

While the details of the roles that these women undertook while in Somalia lie beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that their decisions to pursue retaliation of their own accord demonstrate the exercise of agency on their part. It could be argued that this agency was restricted in a sense, given the hurdles they faced in trying to convince Al-Shabaab agents to allow their participation. For example, Anne was discouraged from participating on the basis of her gender and was instead first advised to go home and ‘cool down her anger’, and some of the other women also had to invest extra effort to get the green light for their involvement. Alternatively, these obstacles could be interpreted as attempts by Al-Shabaab agents to test the women and see whether they were serious in their ambitions. In either case, the experiences of these women show that, in certain phases of a conflict, when tensions are running high – in this case during their climax – opportunities can open up for women to participate in more diverse roles (Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2020: 3).

### **The responsive path**

The experiences of two other women show how women’s struggle for social and economic opportunities, at the peak of a tense political period during which Al-Shabaab was desperate for more constituents, facilitated their mobilisation into the group. These women were responding to Al-Shabaab’s actions but were oblivious to the group’s involvement. Luna comes from an impoverished family of five. She had to drop out of primary school and, due to a lack of employment opportunities, ended up selling food items on the streets of Mombasa. After she became pregnant, her situation worsened to the point that she even contemplated taking her own life. She recalled how an old schoolfriend approached her at that point with a plausible idea:

A former classmate from Likoni told me of job opportunities in Somalia. She said that, from what she had heard, those who had gone were doing well financially and even mentioned some people that I knew personally. Since she was also looking for work, we encouraged each other and decided to give it a try. She then told me of four men who had arrived for a short ‘visit’ from Somalia and who could take us with them on their return. I had already made up my mind as she was talking and when the day came, we left in a group. (Luna, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Thirty-year-old Mia had to drop out from both her secondary and her Islamic school due to a lack of funds to pay school fees. She then got married and had two children, but she was later divorced, which left her with the burden of taking care of her

children. This pushed her to move back to her parents' house, where life became more difficult without an income. Then, one of her cousins, who was already in Al-Shabaab, attempted to entice her into joining the group without her knowledge:

I was married with two children. Then, I got divorced and moved back to my parents' house in Ukunda after the birth of my second child and stayed there without work and without a man to take care of me, yet my parents are poor. Then one day, one of my cousins called and said that he could help me join him in Somalia where life was better; there was work and people lived a pious life and practised their religion freely. He said that he did not wish to return because life there was much better than back home. He called me once in a while and promised to also find me a husband. I thought the idea was fantastic and so I decided to go, but it all backfired and now I am here where it all started, with even more problems than before. (Mia, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Mia's cousin encouraged her to romanticise Somalia as a place where she would be able to earn an income and live freely. As her cousin knew her well, he was able to use personal knowledge as leverage to try to win her over, even though she smelled a rat midway through the recruitment process and decided to escape before reaching the destination. While Mia and Luna knew their placement was going to be in Somalia (which is not synonymous with Al-Shabaab), others were deceived by the promise of opportunities elsewhere. Holly, from Mombasa, dropped out of school due to family responsibilities following the deaths of her parents, and Alisa was looking for a better opportunity than her teaching job in a nursery school because her income could not cater for all her needs. Alisa's active online search for new opportunities saw her reunited with an old acquaintance in Somalia (Holly, narrative interview, summer 2018; Alisa, narrative interview, summer 2018). Both were enticed by fresh work opportunities, while others, such as Kate, Darcy, Raya and Etta, were approached with offers for 'sponsored study' opportunities (Kate, narrative interview, summer 2018; Darcy, narrative interview, summer 2018; Raya, narrative interview, summer 2018; Etta, narrative interview, summer 2018). Their families were not sceptical about the strangers who offered these educational opportunities because they presented themselves, through their persuasive language and modes of dress, as fellow Muslim brothers and sisters in order to win sympathy. The inclusion of women in the recruitment team was a further strategy to win trust from the targeted women (McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1; Badurdeen 2018: 35–7). Etta recalled her grandmother's view of the strangers:

My grandmother and I thought it was a good idea especially because I had never had a chance to attend an Islamic school in my life. After my father gave his consent, my grandmother told me that she supported the idea because the agents were Muslims and so were respectful people. She encouraged me to go and study religion so that

when she dies, I would perform her last prayer and ritual. (Etta, narrative interview, summer 2018)

The experiences of these eight women highlight that women's vulnerability to deception and mobilisation is often based on their circumstances, including impoverishment, and on patriarchal structures – common in the coastal parts of Kenya where these women grew up – that make them dependent on men for security and opportunities. Their recruitment happened during a specific period when tensions were at their height and Al-Shabaab was desperate for more active participants, and so it aligned its tactics with these women's needs and situations (Snow & Benford 1988: 202; Benford & Snow 2000: 619; Bosi & Della Porta 2012: 365; McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1; Snow 2004). During this phase, more opportunities for women to become involved seem to have become available, driven by demand within Al-Shabaab, yet it is problematic to claim that the women involved were entirely victims because, despite the extent of their vulnerability, they were still demonstrating some resilience and agency through their efforts to make ends meet or improve their knowledge and skills. Their situations as impoverished women without support pushed them to work hard, and the exploitation of that drive unfortunately landed them in the wrong hands. Their experiences further indicate that, even in highly hierarchical societies with clearly stipulated gender roles, there are exceptional circumstances where these roles can become fluid, allowing women to take on untypical responsibilities that can include fending for their families.

### **The reunion path**

The final type of pathway that leads women into Al-Shabaab involves false promises of marriage or reunions with spouses who engaged them solely to lure them into Al-Shabaab. Although other secondary motivations were significant in their decision-making processes, these women from impoverished backgrounds said they were primarily motivated to travel to Somalia either to meet these fake spouses or to reunite with them. Jayana dropped out of school to support her mother after her parents' divorce, while Zoriana lived with her uncle after her parents' death. The latter explained how mistreatment by her uncle pushed her into a relationship with a man who later took advantage of her:

I met my boyfriend Uba, who was from a neighbouring school, and decided to be his girlfriend for support because things were not well at home. I loved him because he treated me well. Uba finished school one year ahead of me and stayed in the area for about eight months before traveling 'abroad', but I did not know it was Somalia. He would give me money whenever he returned. One day, he told me that I could

overcome my challenges by joining him – an idea that I immediately welcomed. When the plan was set, we departed in the company of two of his friends and ended up in Kiyunga. This is where things began to get complicated as I came to know Uba’s true colours. He later confessed to being an Al-Shabaab agent. His friends harassed me and called me a prostitute, and he did not protect me. At that moment, the idea of escaping came to my mind. (Zoriana, narrative interview, summer 2018)

While Zoriana seems to have been fairly familiar with her boyfriend from their school days, Jayana married her husband barely three months into their relationship and obeyed his wishes, which landed her in a difficult situation:

We got married about three months after our first meeting and lived together for a couple of months in his house in Kisauni. Then he said he was going to travel in search for work. By then I had not known much about him apart from his appearance as a good man. Then, one day, he called to tell me that he had found work for both of us and so I should join him. He said that he had sent some people to pick me up and that I should not tell anyone about the trip to prevent unnecessary attention and jealousy. Because I loved him, I did what he told me and ended up in this mess. (Jayana, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Two other women talked about similar experiences. Indy, a school dropout from a family of ten siblings, eloped with her new lover against her family’s wishes, only to discover later that he was associated with Al-Shabaab (Indy, narrative interview, summer 2018). Meanwhile, Suri, a single mother who also dropped out of secondary school, was motivated by desperation to marry her new partner before knowing him well, and, as she explained, it turned out that he was an Al-Shabaab member:

He was from Western Kenya and a convert. I came to know him through a friend who told me that he was a good person and was serious about settling down with me and so I agreed to meet him for a date. He was calm and handsome and I fell in love with him. Soon after, we got married, and a month later he told me that we needed to move to another place where life was better. I did not ask him for details of the plan, but I remember hearing something like Somalia and that we would come back soon. To me, Somalia meant Garissa or Wajir – some place where Somalis live. Although my family was against the idea, I decided to go with him. We eventually arrived in Kismayo, where he told me he had to go to work. First he was away every two weeks, and then every three months. This continued for the whole year. I had never checked his identity card because I trusted him. (Suri, narrative interview, summer 2018)

In their quest to reunite with their ‘spouses’, these women ended up, through deception, in Al-Shabaab territory against their will. Their desire was to live a normal life by having a spouse and/or family, which also meant having a breadwinner – a plan that was jeopardised by deceitful male Al-Shabaab agents who abused their trust to draw them into the group’s affairs. Their agency is evident in their conscious decisions to



marry strangers, but those decisions were arguably constrained by patriarchal structures and expectations in coastal Kenya which make the practice of marrying strangers generally acceptable. Like the other routes to victimhood explored here, the reunion pathway demonstrates how the demand for women at a critical phase in a tense political situation was met through Al-Shabaab's strategic calculations and manipulation of women's vulnerabilities (McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1).

## **Conclusion**

Like men, Kenyan women have been involved in Al-Shabaab's activities, although data on their involvement is only beginning to emerge. When news of women's involvement became better known, it elicited reactions that assumed women's victimhood and placed responsibility in the hands of men. In this article, I have set out the motivations that led some Kenyan women to become involved in Al-Shabaab and shown how the time period during which they became involved enabled their participation. The evidence set out here shows that the politics of women's participation in religion-justified militancy are multi-layered and complex and confound the strict binarisation of agency and victimhood.

The comprehensive approach taken in this study has enabled women's participation to be properly contextualised in relation to historical developments in Kenya that involved Al-Shabaab activities, thereby demonstrating the various circumstances under which Kenyan women became involved in the group. In the initial phases of Al-Shabaab mobilisation in Kenya, women's involvement seemed less prominent than it was in the period after Operation Linda Nchi, when the group, mainly driven by necessity and demand, effectively expanded its net to incorporate diverse groups including women. Those women who followed a retaliatory path were outraged by the direct experience of violence and feelings of injustice inflicted upon them, their families and community members. The decisions these women made were therefore political, as well as personal, and they were secondarily enabled by prior experiences of marginalisation and latent political grievances.

Some socio-economically deprived women who took the responsive path to Al-Shabaab were similarly mobilised as they sought educational and employment opportunities. While some of them made conscious decisions, exercising their agency in the absence of a male breadwinner, others were not aware of their predicament until it was too late. The latter group's experiences of deception were shared by the reunion cohort, whose members were striving, firstly, to attain a normal family life in terms of love and family, and, secondly, to have their basic needs met by reuniting with men they had loved and trusted, perhaps too quickly. However, these women

found themselves caught up in a deception racket enabled by the patriarchal gender norms that are prevalent in the rural coastal setting where they grew up. In all three pathways, women's conditions of impoverishment and direct experiences of violence inflicted upon them, their families and community members, as well as their pre-existing grievances and their search for normal lives and love, were strategically manipulated by Al-Shabaab to mobilise them into its ranks. Efforts to counter the phenomenon of women's participation in religion-justified militancy should take into account the complex and multifaceted nature of women's experiences of involvement, and more attention needs to be given to how women's political agency is enabled and constrained by structures that nurture their insecurities.

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## Interviews

Duana (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Anne (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Bella (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Chloe (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Luna (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Mia (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Holly (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Alisa (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Kate (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Darcy (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Raya (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Etta (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Jayana (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Zoriana (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Suri (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Indy (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya  
 Sauti, Mwakidudu, Hassan, Religious Leader from Ukunda, Personal Interview, October 2020. Kenya  
 Khalifa Khelef, Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya  
 Amir Banda (late), Al-Qaf Development Welfare, Ukunda, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya  
 Swale Muhammad, Religious Leader from Mombasa/Lamu, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya  
 Munira Faraj, Social Worker from Mombasa, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya  
 Abdulrahman Mohammed, Social Worker from Mombasa, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya

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