



## Women in al-Shabaab: Why They Join, What They Do

**OE Watch Commentary:** The academic field of terrorism studies which examines terrorists and their motivations, concentrated most of its early research on men, and paid little attention to women. Fortunately that glaring omission is changing, with new studies such as the accompanying one, which focuses on Kenyan women in the Somali based al-Shabaab terrorist group. The study provides rich insights in areas such as the hierarchical structure of terrorist organizations, the day-to-day operations of terrorist camps, why people join them, and most important, what can be done to dissuade individuals from joining them.

The study was based on interviews with government officials, donors, civil society organizations and women who identified as being returnees from al-Shabaab. Although the research project had planned to interview 15 returnees, only three actually participated, due to fears that they could become victims of retaliation if they participate in such studies.

According to the report, Somali women often find themselves with little economic alternative but to join al-Shabaab when they live in areas controlled by the group. There they are often forbidden from pursuing the type of employment men are allowed to pursue. This impoverishment combined with extremely high illiteracy makes them vulnerable to recruitment. The report also discusses other reasons women join the group, including relationships (following their husband), extremist ideologies, and revenge for the treatment their loved ones underwent at the hands of various security agencies. Their roles include fundraising, cooking, radicalizing the terrorists' children, gathering intelligence, providing medical care for fighters, and most notoriously, suicide bombing; that last one becoming particularly prevalent in several terrorist organizations across Africa. There is another role they play, unwillingly and repeatedly...that of sex slave. As one returnee described, if she refused to have sex the men would threaten to kill her. Like many females associated with al-Shabaab, she became HIV positive.

As noted in the article, Kenya, which has suffered a number of terrorist attacks from al-Shabaab, has emphasized counterterrorism efforts such as hardened security responses to terrorists on its soil. This is in contrast to instituting measures to dissuade its own people - especially impoverished, marginalized Muslim women - from travelling to Somalia and joining the group. Thus, the research report recommends Kenya adopt more policies that will result in economic development to help break the cycle of poverty and to also reduce the heavy-handed tactics used by security forces in Muslim communities. Interestingly there is anecdotal evidence that Kenyan women have started mobilizing on their own to address radicalization and prevent violent extremism, a positive grassroots action that could help lead the way for additional government initiatives. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

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Suicide bomb attacks in Somalia, such as the one pictured above, are often carried out by female members of al-Shabaab.

Source: AMISOM, <https://goo.gl/EhTRak>, Public Domain.

**Source:** Irene Ndung'u, Romi Sigsworth, and Uyo Salifu, "Violent Extremism in Kenya: Why Women are a Priority," *Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)*, November 2017. <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono197.pdf>

*The development context within which violent extremism is playing out in Kenya is crucial to this discussion. The interplay of development deficits and insecurity compounds and heightens the dynamics of violent extremism and its impact. The combined challenges of youth unemployment, poverty, inequality and poor governance (among other things) continue to interact in complex ways with the insecurity that results from violent extremism.*

*Women from Majengo and Mombasa blame the poverty and unemployment in their communities for the radicalization of their children and the inducement to join al-Shabaab. They noted that al-Shabaab was taking advantage of this poverty by promising young people jobs, money and 'free stuff.'*

*As actors, women commit, support, facilitate, prevent and counter violent extremist acts. The findings of this study show that the roles women play are intricately connected to their broader socio-economic, individual, cultural and political contexts, but at the same time these roles are deeply nuanced and cannot be generalized across the board. However, the motivation and the extent of this phenomenon requires further interrogation.*