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Analytica

Women Inside Al-Shabaab

Ideological Exclusion and Operational
Dependence

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Executive Summery

- Women inside al-shabaab remain entirely excluded from leadership, military command, judicial authority, clan affairs, and organizational decision-making structures due to the group's ideological doctrine and internal culture.
- Despite this exclusion, women play a strategically significant and deeply embedded role within the group's operational infrastructure, functioning as critical enablers across intelligence, logistics, finance, healthcare, recruitment, ideological indoctrination, and clandestine support systems.
- Female networks provide al-shabaab with low-visibility access to households, markets, businesses, transportation systems, healthcare facilities, and civilian social environments that are often inaccessible to male operatives.
- The group increasingly relies on women in intelligence and clandestine support activities, particularly inside government-controlled areas.
- al-Shabaab's leadership has over the past two years developed a dedicated female suicide operational structure due to increasing security pressure and declining effectiveness of male operatives in urban environments.
- Women are deeply involved in covert financial facilitation and money laundering activities, including cash transfers, concealment of operational funds, mobile money usage, bank account registration, business facilitation, and financial concealment mechanisms.
- Clan hierarchy significantly shapes women's status, protection, operational access, and vulnerability inside the group, women from marginalized clans remain highly vulnerable to coercion and exploitation.
- Foreign women inside al-Shabaab represent one of the most discriminated, marginalized and vulnerable categories within the organization.

BACKGROUND

One of the foundational pillars of Al-Shabaab's ideological doctrine is the absolute exclusion of women from leadership, authority, and decision-making structures. The group considers female participation in governance, religious authority, strategic affairs, or leadership to be religiously illegitimate and fundamentally incompatible with its extremist interpretation of Islam.

From its earliest formation until the present, al-Shabaab has never allowed a woman, whether local or foreign, to hold any formal title, recognised authority, or decision-making role within the organisation. Women remain entirely excluded from leadership structures at all levels, including the Shura Council, executive branches (Maktabas), judiciary apparatus, Fatwa structures, and lower administrative bodies. No office, council, or department exists within the group specifically designed to represent women's interests or facilitate female participation in organisational decision-making processes.

This exclusion is deeply ideological and reinforced through the organisation's internal culture. Female influence over male members is considered a sign of weakness and a direct threat to authority and leadership credibility.

Women are also systematically prohibited from involvement in clan-related matters. Clan affairs are treated as an exclusively male domain, and female participation in clan discussions, mediation, negotiations, or dispute-resolution processes is viewed as both religiously forbidden and culturally unacceptable.

Despite this institutional exclusion, women constitute one of the most strategically important yet least understood components of the group's operational infrastructure. Contrary to the widespread perception that women occupy merely passive or domestic roles, female networks inside al-Shabaab function as critical operational enablers supporting the organisation's intelligence, financial, logistical, ideological, and clandestine activities.

Although women hold substantially less authority than men within the organisation's hierarchy, local Somali women possess significantly greater operational relevance, mobility, and influence than foreign women. In contrast, foreign women represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalised categories within the organisation. They possess the fewest rights, the lowest degree of influence, and the most restricted operational role.

Despite their extensive involvement in covert and support activities, women

have never formally participated in open frontline combat operations alongside male fighters, either collectively or independently. The group's ideological doctrine and internal culture strictly prohibit women from serving as conventional combatants.

However, the organisation has repeatedly utilised women in suicide operations, particularly inside urban centres and government-controlled areas, where female operatives are considered operationally valuable due to their lower visibility and reduced likelihood of attracting suspicion.

Al-shabaab's exploitation of women demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of clandestine warfare, operational concealment, and long-term organisational sustainability. While women remain formally excluded from leadership and authority, they have become operationally indispensable to the organisation's covert survivability, financial resilience, intelligence activities, and long-term continuity.

Women's Life Inside al-Shabaab

Women living under al-Shabaab control face severe restrictions on movement, business activity, marriage rights, and social interaction. Strict dress codes and gender segregation policies are aggressively enforced across areas under the

group's influence. Women are generally prohibited from travelling independently and are expected to remain under continuous male supervision, whether by husbands, fathers, brothers, or other designated male guardians.

Freedom of expression and independent decision-making in daily life are heavily restricted. Within the group's internal culture, women are often treated similarly to children who are considered incapable of making responsible decisions about their own lives without male approval or supervision. They are systematically excluded from influence over social, religious, organizational, or operational matters and are expected to demonstrate complete obedience to male authority figures. In practice, women are not regarded as autonomous individuals but as dependents whose primary role is to follow instructions and support responsibilities assigned by male leadership structures.

Although al-Shabaab formally permits women to own businesses, and some women are involved in the management of businesses linked to or owned by the organization, the group's restrictions on mobility, interaction with unrelated men, and independent movement make genuine economic independence extremely limited. Marriage decisions are also heavily shaped by family pressure, social coercion,

and organizational influence mechanisms, leaving women with minimal personal agency over major life decisions.

According to multiple sources within the group, there are notable differences between the leadership approaches of al-Shabaab's former leader Ahmed Abdi Godane and the current one Ahmed Diiriye regarding female members. Sources stated that although both leaders shared the same ideological foundations, Godane was perceived as comparatively more attentive and sympathetic toward issues affecting women inside the organization. Former female members reported that Godane showed greater concern for the protection and welfare of women, particularly in cases involving domestic abuse, forced marriages, or sexual violence. According to these accounts, husbands accused of severely abusing their wives were reportedly punished harshly under his leadership.

Godane occasionally held limited meetings exclusively with female members, reportedly three to four times during his leadership, to hear their concerns, discuss issues affecting women, and encourage their support role within the organization. While these meetings did not translate into institutional representation or decision-making authority for women, defectors viewed them as symbolic recognition

of female members within the group.

In contrast, since Ahmed Diiriye assumed leadership, female defectors stated that there has not been a single known meeting between the Amir and female members of the organization. This is viewed by many former female members as further evidence of the increasing isolation, marginalization, and exclusion of women under the current leadership structure.

Women inside al-Shabaab possess extremely limited personal autonomy, and nearly every aspect of their daily life is regulated through a combination of ideological control, social pressure, and security oversight. Any form of unauthorized gathering, private social interaction, or meeting outside officially sanctioned organizational activities is prohibited and frequently interpreted as a potential security threat, moral violation, or sign of disloyalty. This environment severely restricts freedom of movement, access to information, social interaction, and the development of external support networks. In practice, women inside al-Shabaab operate under continuous social monitoring by husbands, family members, local administrators, religious enforcers, and the group's broader internal security environment.

Access to "justice, healthcare, and basic social services" for female members is also highly constrained and structurally

unequal. The terrorist group's administrative, judicial, and welfare systems are overwhelmingly designed to support the operational, logistical, and military requirements of male fighters and male leadership networks. Women frequently encounter serious barriers when attempting to report abuse, seek medical treatment, challenge forced decisions, or obtain institutional protection. Their access to dispute resolution mechanisms is often indirect and dependent on male intermediaries, including husbands, clan elders, commanders, or religious figures.

In many cases, complaints involving domestic abuse, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, inheritance disputes, or child custody issues are resolved through male-dominated clan and religious structures that prioritize organizational cohesion, family control, and security considerations over the welfare of women themselves. Female members living in remote rural areas, clandestine safe houses, or frontline zones remain particularly vulnerable due to weak medical infrastructure, shortage of trained female healthcare personnel, movement restrictions, and the prioritization of wounded fighters over civilian or female welfare needs. Even where healthcare services exist, women's access is often shaped by permission requirements, clan influence, or the approval of male guardians.

Clan hierarchy plays a central role in shaping the lived experiences, protection levels, and vulnerabilities of al-Shabaab women. Although clan influence affects nearly all internal dynamics within the organization, its impact on women is particularly severe because women possess very limited independent protection mechanisms and rarely hold positions capable of defending their interests directly. Women originating from large or politically influential clans, or those connected to senior figures, commanders, financiers, judges, or religious authorities, often receive relatively greater protection from abuse, forced displacement, arbitrary punishment, confiscation of property, and economic deprivation. Their clan affiliations can provide informal leverage, mediation channels, and social guarantees capable of reducing exposure to internal abuse or exploitation.

By contrast, women from marginalized, minority, or politically weak clans remain substantially more vulnerable to coercion and exploitation. These women are more likely to face forced marriages, social exclusion, confiscation of assets, denial of protection, loss of children to recruitment structures, and limited access to dispute resolution mechanisms. In some cases, women from weaker clans are treated as socially expendable due to the absence of powerful clan actors capable of interven-

ing on their behalf. This produces an internal hierarchy of vulnerability where clan status directly influences personal security, treatment by local administrators, access to resources, and overall survival conditions inside the organization.

The disengagement process for women often seems difficult compared to male members. Male members frequently disengage alone and may later arrange for their wives, children and dependents to relocate separately. For women, however, independent disengagement is significantly more complicated. Female members often cannot safely bring children, relatives, or other family members with them during escape operations. Informing a husband, family member, or close associate about plans to quit carries extreme personal risk, as internal reporting, surveillance, and suspicion inside the group create a high probability of exposure before an escape can occur.

Former female members interviewed for this report noted that post-disengagement opportunities remain heavily unequal. Former male members frequently retain pathways toward employment, social reintegration, or support roles within government security institutions and local administrations. Women, by contrast, rarely receive such kind of employment opportunities, financial support, psychological

care, or sustainable reintegration support. Many former female members remain socially isolated, economically vulnerable, and dependent on relatives or informal support networks after leaving the group. According to multiple sources, this combination of security barriers, economic dependency, family constraints, and lack of institutional support creates a situation in which many women feel effectively trapped inside the organization even when they no longer support it ideologically.

Women working with al-Shabaab generally fall into two broad categories.

1. The first category consists of formal or semi-formal members attached to specific departments who perform regular duties and receive financial compensation, salaries, allowances, training and ideological classes.
2. The second category consists of unofficial or ad-hoc facilitators who support the organization without formal attachment to any department.

Assigning women to sensitive operations is treated by the group as a significant operational security matter. Selection is based primarily on secrecy, loyalty, family connections, operational usefulness, and financial dependency. In many cases, women are utilized for operational support activities without fully understanding the

broader nature, operational context, or strategic significance of the activities they are facilitating.

In such cases, male guardians, including fathers, husbands, brothers, or other close relatives affiliated with the organization, influence or pressure women into facilitating activities on behalf of the group. These activities may include financial transfers, safe-house management, logistical support, transportation of materials, or the opening of financial accounts used for covert organizational purposes. Women are often chosen for these roles because they attract less suspicion from security agencies and financial institutions.

For example, in mid-2025, a father and his two daughters appeared before the Banadir Regional Court on accusations related to money laundering activities connected to al-Shabaab. According to the case details, the father allegedly used his two daughters to open bank accounts intended for al-Shabaab financial activities without fully informing them of the purpose or obtaining meaningful consent. Similar cases involving female facilitators regularly emerge in the Banaadir regional court, particularly in relation to financial facilitation, mobile money usage, business registration, and the opening of bank or mobile money accounts linked to the

group's financial networks.

Women Recruitment Process

Al-Shabaab maintains no formal recruitment system specifically designed for women. In practice, the factors driving women into the organization are largely identical to those affecting male recruits. According to sources within the group, very few individuals initially join purely because of ideological conviction. Recruitment is primarily shaped by a combination of financial hardship, insecurity, family obligations, clan pressure, social dependency, coercion, and the absence of viable alternatives.

Women are particularly vulnerable to recruitment through family and kinship networks, which remain the organization's most effective and sustainable recruitment mechanism. Many women are radicalized through husbands, fathers, brothers, sisters, extended relatives, or clan-linked social circles already connected to the organization. In some cases, families actively pressure daughters or female relatives to support or cooperate with the group as part of broader family loyalty, clan alignment, or survival strategies. For many women, radicalization process does not begin as an individual ideological choice but as an extension of existing family structures and social obligations.

Environmental conditions inside AS-controlled territories play a decisive role in long-term recruitment and normalization. Women born and raised in areas under prolonged terrorist influence are often exposed exclusively to the group's harsh administrative structures, religious messaging, justice system, and social order from childhood.

In many rural communities where the terrorist group control, it functions as the only visible and functioning *de facto* authority. Entire communities remain economically and socially tied to these environments through landownership, livestock, farming activity, clan presence, and family dependency networks. As a result, many women living in such areas have extremely limited ability to distance themselves from the organization without risking social isolation, economic collapse, retaliation, or displacement.

This vulnerability is particularly acute among younger generations born during the past two decades of conflict. Many women and girls raised in al-Shabaab controlled territories have never experienced an alternative governing system, educational structure, or social environment outside the group's influence. In such settings, the group gradually becomes normalized as part of everyday life instead of

being viewed solely as an armed extremist movement. The organization's ideology, restrictions, and authority structures become socially embedded and internally accepted through long-term exposure and repetition.

In government-controlled areas, recruitment and cooperation are often facilitated through intimidation, extortion, coercion, financial dependency, or family pressure. Women connected to business networks, government offices, transportation systems, or financially strategic environments may be pressured into cooperation under threat of violence, economic punishment, or retaliation against relatives.

Although ideology is rarely the primary factor during initial recruitment, it becomes central after integration into the organization. Al-shabaab maintains a highly sophisticated and deeply embedded *Dacwa* structure specifically targeting women. Through religious lessons, domestic study circles, social conditioning programs, women-only gatherings, emotional reinforcement, and sustained ideological exposure, the group systematically reshapes personal identity, loyalty, and worldview over time. Former female members consistently report that prolonged exposure to al-Shabaab indoctrination systems often produces women

who are more ideologically rigid, uncompromising, and emotionally committed than many male members.

This ideological hardening is not accidental but reflects a deliberate long-term strategic design by the organization. The group leadership understands that controlling women's beliefs, behavior, and social influence provides a pathway to shaping the broader community and future generations. The group views women not only as supporters of the group but also as critical instruments for sustaining ideological continuity inside families and society. By influencing mothers, wives, sisters, and female educators, the group regularly seek to embed its ideology at the household and community level, ensuring intergenerational transmission of loyalty, obedience, and extremist narratives.

Education and Religious Propaganda

The largest concentration of female members within the group is found within the group's Dawah and Education structures. This doesn't accidental but reflects a deliberate long-term strategic design by the organization to influence, shape, and control the largest and most socially influential segment of society, particularly women and children, both inside and out-

side areas under its control. Within al-Shabaab, the dawah and education maktabas operate as closely interconnected structures with overlapping functions focused on ideological indoctrination, social control, religious influence, and long-term generational conditioning.

Al-Shabaab maintains a dedicated and highly organized network of female operatives responsible for preaching, teaching, and ideological mobilization in both urban and rural environments. These women operate madrasas, community-based religious gatherings, domestic study groups, seminars, Quranic classes, and women-only religious sessions where they disseminate ideological narratives and religious interpretations. The curriculum taught in these environments combines basic Quranic education and the group's own distorted interpretation of religion, and, most importantly loyalty to the organization and its leadership.

Female dawah and Education operatives primarily target women and children. Organizational restrictions prohibit them from preaching to or teaching adolescent and adult males. Their operational value lies in their ability to penetrate households, influence private domestic environments, and shape family-level socialization processes that are difficult for male

¹Religious preaching office in charge of indoctrination and radicalization.

operatives to access directly.

One of the most strategically important assignments given to female operatives across is the management and ideological conditioning of young children through Quranic madrasas. According to former members of the group, children, often beginning around the age of seven, are gathered from families either through coercive pressure, social obligation, religious influence, or voluntary enrollment. These children are then subjected to years of sustained ideological indoctrination under the supervision of female preachers and teachers, often remaining within these educational environments until approximately twelve years of age.

These madrasa systems serve as one of the organization's most effective long-term indoctrination mechanisms. Children raised within these environments are systematically conditioned to internalize absolute loyalty to the group, obedience to the leader, hostility toward external actors, and acceptance of extremist interpretations from an early age. Former members repeatedly describe graduates of these systems as among the most ideologically rigid and uncompromising supporters of the organization due to their prolonged exposure during formative developmental years.

The group leadership understands that women's access to households and private domestic spaces provides the organization with a highly effective mechanism for embedding ideology within families and communities. Female operatives play a critical role in influencing wives, mothers, daughters, and children while reinforcing obedience, conformity, and loyalty within family structures. In practice, women function as key transmitters of organizational narratives inside homes and local communities.

In rural areas, female operatives are heavily involved in preaching activities targeting nomadic populations and isolated rural communities through a broad and well-coordinated network of female preachers. In urban environments, women conduct ideological gatherings inside homes, women's groups, madrasas, and community centers. Female members are also used as internal ideological enforcement mechanisms within households, reinforcing narratives related to sacrifice, obedience, martyrdom, and loyalty while discouraging criticism, dissent, or defection among relatives and community members.

Female operatives within al-Shabab's dawah and Education structures also play an important role in identifying, monitor-

ing, and influencing young girls that could be seen as vulnerable potentials. One of their key responsibilities is to encourage and facilitate marriages between young women and al-Shabaab fighters, particularly frontline combatants. Through religious gatherings, domestic study circles, and women-only ideological sessions, female dawah members actively glorify marriage to fighters as a religious obligation, honorable sacrifice, and contribution to jihad. They portray wives of fighters as spiritually rewarded supporters of the struggle and reinforce narratives that frame patience, loyalty, and personal hardship as acts of religious devotion.

Female dawah operatives also work to ensure that wives of fighters deployed on the frontlines remain emotionally committed to the organization, discourage complaints or dissent related to prolonged absence, economic hardship, or insecurity, and encourage continued loyalty and sacrifice while their husbands are engaged in combat operations.

Despite the central role women play in ideological mobilization and indoctrination activities, the group does not place significant institutional value on educated women inside the organization. Accord-

ing to former female members, women possessing higher education, computer literacy, or foreign language skills, including Arabic, English, Swahili, or Amharic, are not granted meaningful authority or leadership positions. Instead, such women are primarily utilized for limited functional purposes, including teaching, translation, media support, propaganda dissemination, or administrative assistance, without being integrated into broader organizational decision-making structures.

According to former members, the group is generally less restrictive regarding young girls receiving basic religious or elementary education during childhood. However, it is highly uncommon for girls inside al-Shabab controlled territories to complete intermediate or secondary-level education. Once girls reach approximately fifteen years of age, the likelihood of early marriage increases significantly. Marriage at this stage frequently interrupts educational progression and redirects girls into domestic responsibilities, motherhood, or support roles connected to the organization and its social structure.

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVSwoE9Y1RI> July 2022, video reported by Jamal a chanell4 news, show woman speaking English and teaching computer to other women in Jilib district Somalia

Amniyat³ and Hisba⁴ Sections

Women play a significant and deeply embedded role within the group's intelligence, clandestine, and operational support infrastructure, particularly inside government-controlled areas. Although women remain mainly excluded from formal military leadership and conventional frontline combat roles, the group relies on female operatives and facilitators to sustain covert activities, intelligence collection, urban infiltration, logistical support, and internal surveillance operations. Their involvement provides it with operational flexibility, concealment capabilities, and access to civilian and domestic environments that are often less accessible to male operatives.

Female operatives attached to or supporting the Amniyat structure are primarily responsible for facilitating covert operations inside government-controlled territories. Their activities include renting and managing safe houses, transporting and concealing weapons and explosives, conducting surveillance, collecting intelligence, facilitating communications, supporting recruitment efforts, and providing operational cover for male intelligence

operatives, couriers, and assassination teams. In many cases, women serve as low-visibility logistical enablers whose activities are intentionally designed to avoid attracting public or security attention.

On the other hand, women frequently accompany intelligence operatives, couriers, and assassination teams during movement in order to reduce suspicion from security forces and civilians. Their presence allows operatives to blend more effectively into civilian environments, particularly in densely populated urban centers such as Mogadishu. Female facilitators are also occasionally involved in kidnapping-related activities, including victim monitoring, movement facilitation, safe-house preparation, and logistical coordination connected to abduction operations.

Female operatives are also involved in safe-house management, which remains one of the group's most important clandestine support functions. Properties rented under women's identities are frequently used for covert meetings, operational planning, temporary accommodation of operatives, concealment of sleeper

³The intelligence apparatus of the group

⁴The office in charge of public order

⁵<https://goobjoog.com/2022/07/21/maxkamadda-ciidamada-oo-xukun-ku-ridday-haweeney-ka-tirsan-al-shabaab/>

cells, storage of weapons, explosives, and preparation for attacks. Although women rarely directly conduct assassinations, they play a critical role throughout the operational cycle, including target identification, surveillance, operational preparation, movement facilitation, concealment, and post-operation support activities.

A significant proportion of women involved in Amniyat-linked support activities are widows of deceased fighters residing in government-controlled areas. Many of them are pressured into continued cooperation with the organization in exchange for financial assistance, protection, or continuation of support previously allocated to their deceased husbands and/or children. This creates a dependency structure that the group exploits to sustain covert operational networks and long-term urban support infrastructure.

Despite their extensive involvement in clandestine and operational support functions, women have never formally participated in organized frontline combat operations alongside male fighters, either collectively or independently. Al-Shabaab's ideological doctrine and internal culture continue to prohibit women from serving as conventional battlefield combatants. However, the organi-

zation has repeatedly utilized women in suicide operations, particularly inside urban environments and government-controlled areas through the use of concealed explosive devices and suicide vests.⁶

According to Somali government intelligence sources, one of the most significant female suicide operations linked to the group was the attack targeting Central Hotel on 20 February 2025, as well as the attack against the Banadir Regional Administration headquarters on 24 July 2019, targeted the Mayor of Mogadishu. Female suicide operatives are considered operationally valuable because they generally attract lower levels of suspicion, can move more freely through civilian areas, and are often better positioned to bypass security screening measures compared to male operatives. In such attacks, women are primarily utilized as covert delivery mechanisms for explosives instead of conventional battlefield fighters.

The group leadership has previously explored the creation of a dedicated female suicide unit due to operational necessity and the decline in successful suicide operations inside Mogadishu and other major urban centers. Sources indicate that the group increasingly views female suicide operatives as a mechanism

⁶<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/somalia-says-blind-female-suicide-bomber-killed-mogadishu-mayor-idUSKCN1UZ1CN/>

to compensate for operational setbacks, security pressure, and reduced freedom of movement for male operatives in heavily monitored urban environments.

According to former female members, many al-shabaab affiliated women receive basic operational security and digital concealment training intended to reduce detection by security institutions. In some cases, these operatives participate in targeted online harassment campaigns against specific individuals, journalists, activists, clan figures, or government institutions viewed as hostile actors

Women's participation in Hisba structures remains comparatively limited in numbers but highly important operationally. Female operatives involved in these structures are typically older women who operate inside al-shabaab territories are regarded by the group as trustworthy, disciplined, ideologically committed, and loyal to the leadership. Their responsibilities extend beyond the enforcement of social restrictions and moral regulations into intelligence gathering, ideological enforcement, and internal counterintelligence activities.

Women assigned to these functions play a direct role in monitoring loyalty and ideological conformity within communities

and households. They are responsible for identifying behavioral violations, monitoring grievances, detecting signs of dissent, and assessing attitudes toward the group. According to multiple sources, these women function as the "ears and eyes" of the organization inside private domestic environments where male operatives often have limited access.

Female operatives attached to Hisba structures also enforce organizational social regulations among women inside communities. Their activities include monitoring compliance with dress codes, gender segregation rules, religious obligations, and restrictions imposed by the organization. In some cases, they participate in the arrest, search, monitoring, and interrogation of female suspects accused of violating regulations or engaging in suspicious activities.

These women operate as informal instruments of surveillance and social control, extending al-Shabaab monitoring capabilities deep into households and local communities. According to former defectors, women working within its structures are considered among the most powerful and feared female members inside the organization due to their close relationship with the internal security apparatus,

intelligence-reporting responsibilities, counterintelligence functions, and direct access to enforcement mechanisms.

Financial Activities and Money Laundering

Women play a significant but often underestimated role in the group's financial architecture, particularly in covert financial facilitation, concealment, and money laundering activities. Female operatives and facilitators are deeply integrated into the organization's informal financial ecosystem and provide the group with critical operational advantages in maintaining discreet movement of funds inside both government-controlled and insurgent-controlled areas.

Female operatives are heavily involved in the collection, storage, concealment, transportation, and laundering of extortion revenue and operational funds. Their activities include managing cash transfers, safeguarding temporary financial reserves, facilitating electronic transactions, and serving as intermediaries between financial collectors, business networks, and operational cells. In many cases, women act as low-visibility financial facilitators whose activities are intentionally designed to blend into ordinary civilian and commercial environments.

Women associated with al-shabaab also

operate, manage, or facilitate businesses used for financial concealment and laundering purposes. These activities commonly involve real estate transactions, land acquisitions, gold trading, import-export businesses, retail shops, informal commercial enterprises, and mobile money-based operations. Additionally, the group relies on women to open bank accounts, register SIM cards linked to mobile money systems, establish fraudulent financial identities, and conduct electronic fund transfers intended to obscure the origin, ownership, and movement of organizational funds.

For example, in July 2025, Maryam Mohamed appeared before the Banadir Regional Court on allegations related to money laundering activities connected to AS. According to court proceedings, she was accused of facilitating the laundering of millions of U.S. dollars through land-related transactions and allowing AS-linked financial networks to move funds through bank accounts registered under her control. Similar financial facilitation and money laundering cases involving female suspects continue to emerge regularly before courts in the Banaadir region, highlighting the growing use of women in covert financial operations linked to the organization.

Female operatives involved in extortion-related activities primarily target businesses owned or managed by women, family-based commercial networks, and localized trading environments where social familiarity and community access provide operational advantages. Their ability to operate inside female social and commercial spaces enables them to sustain discreet revenue collection mechanisms with reduced public visibility and lower levels of immediate suspicion.

At present, there is no credible evidence indicating that female members play a direct role in the group's formal Zakat collection system or in large-scale extortion activities involving livestock, agricultural production, checkpoints, major businesses, or clan-based financial contributions. These revenue sectors remain overwhelmingly controlled by male operatives due to the highly public, coercive, and clan-sensitive nature of the collection process. In rural environments especially, revenue extraction frequently depends on armed enforcement, intimidation, clan negotiations, and direct interaction with male elders and community leaders, functions that remain institutionally dominated by male members of the group.

Health, Logistics, and Battlefield Support.

Women play an increasingly important role in the group's medical, logistical, and frontline support infrastructures. Over the past several years, sustained battlefield casualties, intensified military pressure, and expanding operational demands have forced the organization to increase the involvement of women in medical support and logistical activities. Female nurses, medical assistants, and healthcare workers now occupy a more visible and operationally important role in sustaining wounded fighters, supporting injured members, and maintaining basic healthcare services.

Al-Shabaab has significantly expanded the recruitment, training, and deployment of female nurses, first-aid workers, and emergency medical personnel as a direct response to operational necessity and rising casualty rates. The organization increasingly relies on women to fill critical gaps within its healthcare and frontline support systems, particularly in rural areas where access to formal medical infrastructure remains limited. Many of these women receive basic first aid, trauma-response, and emergency treatment training through insurgent linked medical centers, improvised field clinics, and informal

medical systems operating inside territories under the group's influence or control. Female healthcare workers are commonly deployed in al-shabaab controlled towns, rural settlements, and areas located near active frontline zones, where they provide medical assistance to both civilians and insurgent fighters. Their role serves multiple strategic functions for the organization.

Women also play an important clandestine support role in facilitating medical access for injured or sick terrorist members inside government-controlled areas. Female operatives frequently assist wounded fighters in reaching hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, or private healthcare providers while providing civilian cover that reduces the likelihood of detection by security authorities. In many cases, women are viewed as less suspicious during travel, procurement, or medical-related movement, making them operationally valuable for covert logistical support and casualty management activities.

Within Jabha⁷ and frontline support structures, women primarily contribute through logistical, administrative, and sustainment functions. Their responsibilities commonly include food preparation, transportation of supplies, management

of safe houses, movement of medicine and equipment, local surveillance, communication support, civilian mobilization, and morale support for frontline fighters. In some areas, women also assist with concealment and distribution of emergency supplies during military operations or periods of displacement.

Women are also deeply involved in the organization's broader logistical and supply-chain networks. Female members, particularly wives of senior figures or women originating from influential clans, often play an important role in managing or facilitating the movement of food supplies, fuel, livestock, medicine, and other operational resources. The group frequently outsources segments of its logistical system to trusted senior members, former officials, influential families, and loyal clan networks as a mechanism for maintaining internal cohesion, rewarding loyalty, and reinforcing dependency on the leadership structure and the leader.

Some women are additionally involved in the commercial and financial dimensions of the group's logistics infrastructure, particularly the handling and sale of livestock collected through Zakat taxation systems imposed on rural communities. Women linked to al-shabaab networks sometimes

⁷The group's military wing

participate in transporting, facilitating, or selling Zakat livestock in major urban markets and commercial centers. This activity not only generates revenue for the group but also helps integrate AS-controlled rural taxation systems into broader Somali commercial supply chains.

Foreign women and women from marginalized or politically weak clans have virtually no access to al-shabaab's logistical subcontracting networks, which are controlled through clan loyalty, family influence, and trusted patronage systems linked to senior leadership. Foreign women are often excluded due to limited clan protection, weak integration into local commercial systems, and persistent security distrust, while women from minority clans lack the social leverage and protection necessary to access financially valuable or strategically important roles.

Foreign Women inside al-Shabaab

Foreign women inside al-shabaab represent one of the most vulnerable, isolated, and socially marginalized categories within the organization. The majority are wives or relatives of foreign fighters originating primarily from East African countries, particularly Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanza-

nia, and Uganda, with only a very small number linked to non-African countries.

Foreign women are subjected to severe restrictions and live under significantly tighter social and security control than Somali female members. They are generally prohibited from traveling independently with or without their male partners outside designated areas and remain under constant monitoring by local administrators. Their operational role is extremely limited and largely confined to attending dawah sessions, basic religious instruction, domestic responsibilities, and occasional propaganda or support activities. Unlike Somali women, foreign women possess virtually no clan protection, no influence within local communities, and almost no access to intelligence, financial, administrative, or logistical structures inside the organization.

Their living conditions are among the harshest. Many experience chronic economic hardship, social isolation, language barriers, and near-total dependency on husbands or assigned support networks for survival, security, and access to resources. Foreign women and their children also face deep social exclusion from local Somali communities and dominant clan structures, limiting integration, mo-

bility, and long-term stability. Marriage opportunities for their children, particularly daughters, remain highly restricted due to stigma surrounding foreign fighter families and the absence of strong clan affiliation.

According to former group members, foreign women experience some of the most severe forms of domestic abuse, coercion, and social neglect within the organization. Abuse frequently originates not only from husbands but also from other male authority figures and, in some cases, senior female members responsible for enforcing discipline and ideological compliance within foreign family networks. Foreign women possess almost no clan-based protection, mediation channels, or influential social networks capable of intervening on their behalf, making them particularly vulnerable to prolonged abuse and exploitation.

Leadership within the organization generally shows limited interest in internal disputes, welfare concerns, or social problems affecting foreign fighters unless such issues directly threaten operational security or organizational cohesion. As a result, many complaints involving domestic violence, forced marriages, financial neglect, child abuse, or mistreatment inside

foreign households are ignored, informally suppressed, or indefinitely delayed within al-shabaab judicial structures.

Legal cases originating from foreign fighter families reportedly receive lower priority within al-shabaab courts and mediation systems, partly because foreign communities lack the clan leverage and local influence necessary to pressure judicial authorities or commanders for intervention. This institutional neglect reinforces the isolation, dependency, and long-term vulnerability of foreign women inside the group.

Conclusion

The role of women inside al-shabaab is systematic, institutionalized, and strategically indispensable to the organization's long-term survival. Their involvement extends far beyond passive domestic or auxiliary functions and instead forms an integrated component of its ideological, intelligence, financial, logistical, recruitment, medical, and clandestine operational architecture. Although women remain formally excluded from leadership, decision-making authority, and military command structures, the organization increasingly depends on female networks to sustain operational continuity, internal cohesion, and covert support

capabilities across both rural and urban environments.

Women provide the group with low-visibility access to households, markets, businesses, transportation systems, health-care facilities, communication channels, and civilian social environments that are often less accessible to male operatives. Through these spaces, the organization maintains covert mobility, financial resilience, intelligence collection, logistical sustainment, ideological indoctrination, concealment of operatives, and long-term social penetration within local communities. Female networks also play an important role in preserving family structures linked to fighters, facilitating recruitment pipelines, supporting clandestine movement, and sustaining morale and survivability during periods of military pressure. The female infrastructure operating inside al-shabaab effectively functions as a parallel support ecosystem underpinning the organization's insurgent durability and clandestine warfare model.

At the same time, the report demonstrates that women remain deeply vulnerable to systemic exploitation, coercion, social isolation, and structural inequality. Clan hierarchy, foreign status, economic dependency, and lack of institutional pro-

tection heavily shape women's experiences inside the organization. Foreign women and women from marginalized clans remain particularly vulnerable due to the absence of clan-based protection, restricted mobility, limited access to justice, and minimal pathways for safe defection or reintegration.

The findings of this report highlight that women represent a critical and complex component of the group's operational ecosystem. Understanding the multidimensional role of women inside the organization is essential for developing more effective counterterrorism strategies, disengagement frameworks, rehabilitation programs, financial disruption efforts, and community-level prevention policies. Failure to properly assess the operational and social functions performed by female networks risks leaving significant portions of al-shabaab support infrastructure insufficiently understood and inadequately targeted.



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