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Worth many sins: Al-Shabaab's shifting relationship with Kenyan women

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ABSTRACT



What happens when the world's 'oldest profession' interacts with history's oldest form of war? In the Horn of Africa, a symbiotic relationship between prostitutes and terrorists has emerged, illuminating critical information about the group's ideology and strategy. In this article, we argue that al-Shabaab's differential treatment of Somali and other East African women reveals the group's strategic focus on Somalia, despite its claims to be a globally focused Islamic extremist organization. Through original ethnographic fieldwork in Kenya, the authors explore al-Shabaab's deliberate relationships with different groups of women and explain how this helps scholars better understand the group. This article suggests the next phase of scholarship on gender and terrorism, encouraging scholars not only to pay attention to the relationship between women and terrorist groups, but to also examine the nuanced relationships between different categories of women and terrorist groups.

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Introduction

Partnering with sex workers¹ and engaging in a sex trafficking scheme are not expected behaviors for a conservative Islamic group that espouses the purity of women and seeks to control their sexuality. However, qualitative fieldwork in Nairobi, Kenya revealed that terrorist group engagement with women is more complicated than their apparent ideological tenants, and more nuanced than existing theoretical views predict. Al-Shabaab has instrumentalized Nairobi's sex workers as intelligence agents, paying them to report on 'pillow talk' disclosed by their erstwhile clients. By doing so, the group appears to be contravening a wealth of ideology and proclamations

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on morality. Are al-Shabaab's leaders hypocrites? Or simply ruthlessly practical?

In this article we take the latter position, arguing that this relationship demonstrates deep and interesting implications for terrorism studies at large. First, we find that terrorist groups' proclamations about their ideology must consistently be questioned and examined related to their actual behavior. Second, one cannot assume a group's treatment of women will be consistent, because women are not a monolithic category. Instead, by incorporating a gender lens, we encourage asking, 'which women?' Which women are seen as worthy of protection by al-Shabaab? Which women's purity does al-Shabaab protect? From which women does al-Shabaab tolerate (and even promote) independence and entrepreneurship?

In answering these questions, we recognize the distinctions al-Shabaab makes in terms of women from different ethnic and national groups.² Our argument in this article is that al-Shabaab's treatment of women based on their nationality and ethnicity reveals essential information about the group's ideology and objective. Al-Shabaab treats Somali women differently from Kenyan women (and other women from East Africa) because while the group claims to promote an ideology based on global Islamic principles, instead al-Shabaab is actually an ethnonationalist group focused on controlling, improving, and expanding Somalia. Ideas about the protection and purity of women, that are part of the transnational extremist Islamist rhetoric, are only useful for al-Shabaab in relation to its treatment of Somali women.

Our findings emerged from independent data gathering trips in Nairobi where we discovered the outlines of a relationship between local *Kenyan*³ sex workers and the Somali extremist group al-Shabaab. Further investigation revealed a highly structured, hierarchical network in which the women sell information gleaned from their clients, who are primarily police officers, to al-Shabaab. Further, while in the field, news articles and reports were published and expanded upon by key informants, that revealed al-Shabaab developed a sex trafficking business that supplies Kenyan women as coerced sexual partners to al-Shabaab fighters. We explore how these unexpected relationships shed light into the nature and aim of al-Shabaab and provide actionable policy recommendations for responding to the group.

Al-Shabaab's partnership with sex workers in Kenya reveals its pragmatism over ideological motivation and its understanding of its different audiences. The primary audience for al-Shabaab is Somalis living within Somalia and in the diaspora abroad, and it is only secondarily concerned with a broader global audience.⁴ Further, not only does al-Shabaab partner with sex workers, but the networks within which the sex workers operate are independent and led by women. This is surprising considering that in areas

under its control, al-Shabaab relegates women to the private sphere and prohibits them from operating businesses.⁵ The sex workers involved are not active members of al-Shabaab, but independent entrepreneurs who have monetized a secondary benefit of their sexual liaisons, and al-Shabaab does not seem interested in recruiting or coopting these women into their organization.

Second, al-Shabaab members participate in another form of an illicit economy and engage in a sex trafficking scheme to abduct Kenyan women to al-Shabaab camps. The Kenyan women who arrive in these camps are raped by multiple members of al-Shabaab and are kept captive as sexual slaves for group members.⁶ These two patterns support the argument that al-Shabaab should not be viewed as a monolithic, ideologically motivated group, but instead must be understood as a pragmatic organization that is adept at manipulating its image to different audiences. As one informant remarked wryly, 'Al-Shabaab likes [that group of sex workers] very much. They are worth many sins.'⁷ Because al-Shabaab is focused on its Somali audience, in line with its strategic focus on Somalia, the treatment of Kenyan women is less consequential to group leadership.

Extremist organizations that claim to espouse radical Islamic views often rely on rhetoric about traditional social roles, the protection of women, and enforce rules about women's behavior as part of their larger social vision.⁸ Academics and policymakers often fail to appropriately challenge the depth of influence of a group's stated Islamist ideology, reflexively accepting coherence between rhetoric and action. For example, during field interviews, key informants outside the sex worker community (researchers, individuals working in international organizations, or security organizations) dismissed the idea that al-Shabaab would use sexual violence because of its stated adherence to Islamic principles. However, in line with feminist research methodology,⁹ when we took women's lives 'seriously'¹⁰ and spoke to women in areas where al-Shabaab operated, we gained a more accurate understanding of al-Shabaab's behavior and the ways in which it contradicted its stated views about Islam. Al-Shabaab's narrative about its behavior reflecting its ideology as a religious conservative group is questioned when examining its treatment of women within Kenya.

While this article is focused on al-Shabaab, it is broadly applicable to understanding similar violent groups who use radical conservative Islam to gain legitimacy. Additionally, while we use the al-Shabaab case study as an example to reveal one group's variation in its treatment of women, this type of intersectional gender analysis is applicable for understanding the spectrum of treatment of women by all violent non-state groups. Research on gender and terrorism has made progress in exploring the presence of women in terrorist groups, but the next step in this field of research¹¹ is interrogating the spectrum of relationships that terrorist groups have with

different 'types' of women. An intersectional gender analysis seems particularly useful for understanding another active violent group today, the Islamic State, a group that also engages differently with women based on nationality and ethnicity. For example, the Islamic State encourages women to join the group voluntarily from countries like the U.S. and the United Kingdom¹² whereas it forcibly recruits Yazidi women in Iraq to be forced wives and sexual slaves.¹³

By focusing on al-Shabaab's engagement with women as opposed to their public narrative, and by recognizing and differentiating between al-Shabaab's 'nested games'¹⁴ of several apparently contradictory goals, we argue that al-Shabaab should be treated as a nationalist, pragmatist group as opposed to a dogmatic religious organization. Our analysis illustrates the utility of a gender lens because by examining al-Shabaab's treatment of different groups of women, we are able to more accurately understand the group's ideology and strategy.

Theories about gender and terrorism

Significant existing research has examined the variation in women's membership in terrorist groups and the diversity of roles women serve in different groups. We can gain contextual insight from other research projects on women's roles inside terrorist groups, and other types of rebel groups, that are useful for examining al-Shabaab's relationships with different groups of women. This article is unique in that it focuses more broadly on al-Shabaab's relationship with women (as opposed to focusing only on the roles women play inside the group) and specifically with different kinds of women.

The overriding perspective this article takes is that women are key political actors whose experiences and perspectives are essential for understanding terrorist organizations, an approach that has been promoted within the field of feminist security studies. Al-Shabaab's relationship with sex workers and engagement in sex trafficking might not be initially seen as a topic integral to international security, but significant strategic insights can be gained from expanding the understanding of security beyond guns and bombs. In Ann Tickner's discussion of the intersection between gender and security she writes, 'war and national security are areas where it has been presumed that women have little important to say.'¹⁵ Feminist security studies broadens the conception of what is relevant to international security to include women's experiences during and after conflict.¹⁶ Annick Wibben explains that focusing on women's everyday experiences leads to new ideas about what security means that extend beyond the traditional focus on the behavior of states or state militaries.¹⁷ This framework is particularly useful for understanding rebel groups like al-Shabaab that are operating outside of formal state frameworks and that give key clues to their priorities through

their engagement with women across Kenya. The interview participants (women in communities in Nairobi) and focus of this article, women's relationship with al-Shabaab, fit within the feminist security studies approach.

Scholarship on women's participation in terrorist groups, and rebel groups more broadly, can be divided into two different perspectives. There is the 'supply side' of research on women in rebel groups that focuses on the reasons women participate in rebel groups.¹⁸ Our argument focuses instead on the 'demand side' or the explanations for why terrorist groups include women in specific roles.¹⁹ We add to this body of scholarship by not only focusing on the reasons terrorist groups engage with women in certain ways, but by asking how groups engage with *different* groups of women *differently*.

An important finding from the demand side literature on women's engagement with rebel group is the way in which scholars have grappled with the relationship between strategy and ideology. Reed Wood and Jakana Thomas predict that groups with ideologies that challenge the status quo are more likely to include women than groups that promote more traditional social hierarchies.²⁰ While Wood and Thomas' prediction was correct for *most* rebel groups, they found that groups with an Islamic ideology, do not behave as their hypotheses predict, and *do* include women in active combat roles, usually as suicide bombers. In explaining this phenomenon, Wood and Thomas come to a similar conclusion as this article that Islamist groups 'are willing to modify their stance on female fighters when doing so provides strategic benefits.'²¹

Alexis Henshaw similarly notes that Islamist movements are less likely overall to include women as members, yet certain groups, during certain time periods, seem willing to loosen their restrictions on including women as members.²² We demonstrate that al-Shabaab shows significant flexibility in the ideology for a group claiming to be 'Islamist,' in line with Henshaw, and Wood and Thomas' findings. The findings in this article help explain Henshaw, and Wood and Thomas' counterintuitive findings, by noting that rebel groups may have specific rules about membership and treatment for certain groups of women.

The tension between groups that state their ideology supports women remaining in the private sphere versus the strategic benefits groups can gain from incorporating women, is explored in the work of Lindsey O'Rourke. O'Rourke argues that female suicide terrorism (FST) is highly effective and because of this effectiveness terrorist groups will increasingly use FST regardless of whether the group has promoted a conservative stance towards women's roles. According to O'Rourke, this pattern of the use of FST by both religious and secular groups demonstrates that 'strategy trumps ideology.'²³ We add more nuance to O'Rourke's claim by noting that

ideology can be manipulated related to strategic considerations and ideological conceptions of women do not necessarily apply to all groups of women.

Al-Qaeda's engagement with women is particularly illuminating because it reveals a common misperception of the group as a 'monolithic, international terrorist organization,' as opposed to a 'networked transnational constituency.'²⁴ Discussing al-Qaeda is especially useful for understanding al-Shabaab because al-Shabaab declared allegiance to al-Qaeda and has remained linked with the group despite interest from the Islamic State in aligning with al-Shabaab.²⁵ If we viewed al-Qaeda falsely as a monolithic group with one standardized ideology and strategy, it would be surprising to note that some of al-Qaeda's branches explicitly incorporate women while other branches do not.²⁶ Paying attention to branches of al-Qaeda's differing relationship with women reveals that the group is made up of 'far-flung nodules' and each branch 'is an independent entity engaged in its own regional conflict with its own set of rules.'²⁷ While al-Shabaab utilizes ideology related to a global Islamic struggle, in fact it is engaged in its own regional conflict with a focus on Somalis and building a new Somalia. For this reason, it is beneficial for al-Shabaab to *appear* to be treating Somali women in line with its ideas about conservative Islam, but it has less strict rules about how it engages with Kenyan women.

Al-Shabaab is engaging in partnerships with *Kenyan* prostitutes and victimizing *Kenyan* women through human trafficking schemes. This pattern highlights the importance of intersectionality which involves studying intersecting identities of gender, race, class, ethnicity together.²⁸ Studying al-Shabaab's treatment of 'women' is a useful start in asking questions about gender but does not provide as much as information as when we ask specifically about al-Shabaab's treatment of and relationship with Somali women versus Kenyan women. For true insight we need to examine the questions of *which* women. Future research could refine this even further by examining al-Shabaab's treatment of and relationship with women from different clans, age groups, or classes. Using an intersectional analysis is not a normative project, but instead is a method of analysis which revealed discrepancies in al-Shabaab's proclaimed ideology related to the treatment of women.

Methodology

This research is based on three independent qualitative fieldwork trips to Nairobi, where each author conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of participants.²⁹ Al-Shabaab's relationship with Nairobi's sex workers was not the initial purpose of either fieldwork trip, yet as this interaction emerged through the interview process, both researchers recognized the

interest and importance of this previously unknown business relationship. During a conversation at an academic conference the authors realized they had independently gathered corroborating interview data.

In total the sample size of 79 participants provided approximately 80 hours of conversation for analysis. On three separate trips, we interviewed 57 key informants and 22 community members in Majengo and Eastleigh. In both cases, we used local research assistants to facilitate introductions with some early participants, provide the occasional translation of a word or phrase, and act as a safety net in uncertain settings. Other interview participants were recruited through connections to a local organization in Nairobi, Kenya, and through a snowball sampling method following initial interviews.

The interview pool was a mix of local people living in the Majengo and Eastleigh districts of Nairobi (where this sex worker-al-Shabaab interaction took place), government officials, police officers, international diplomats, and nongovernmental researchers affiliated with both local and international organizations. The majority of the interview participants were women, a dynamic that was facilitated by the fact that both authors are female. Out of the total interview participants, we spoke to 50 women and 29 men. Finally, data was recorded via handwritten notes and was not recorded via audio or visual equipment as a safety precaution for interview participants; the notes are contemporaneous and include many verbatim quotes from participants.

We were clear about the purpose of the meetings with interview participants being for academic purposes, but our race and gender made us appear less threatening to local communities. Frequently, we were misperceived as missionaries or teachers, providing interview subjects with a plausible screen if needed. This article seeks to be as informative as possible about the sex worker-al-Shabaab relationship while also limiting some information or certain details that would make interview participants identifiable and thus, vulnerable to retribution.

In settings like Majengo and Eastleigh where there are high levels of suspicion, especially due to Kenyan security forces operation in the region,³⁰ it was especially valuable to conduct semi-structured interviews instead of adhering to a predetermined script. We kept the purpose of the meetings broad (describing the topics to be discussed as being focused on security in these neighborhoods) which allowed interview participants to discuss the topics they felt most comfortable discussing. Not only was this approach the most ethical in our perspective, but it also resulted in surprising findings, most notably the relationship between al-Shabaab and sex workers in Majengo and Eastleigh.

Al-Shabaab

The emergence and ascension of Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab emerged out of the civil war that gripped Somalia for the twenty years following the end of the Cold War. The early 1990s was also a period of conflict within Somalia that has been described as ‘clan cleansing’ in which members of opposing clans perpetrated widespread violence against each other.³¹ In the early 1990s, a major famine, combined with the increasingly intense rule of warlord Mohammed Siad Barre, prompted international intervention.

Various warlords and internationally supported governments competed for power during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the mid- 2000s there was a shift in the environment in Somalia with the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The ICU seemed to represent an avenue back to stability for a population exhausted by the violence of the warlord era. It advocated for a fairly liberal version of sharia law, had cross-clan appeal, and offered basic governance services for a population tired of constant conflict.³² Stig Hansen argues that Islamist ideologies were appealing in the early 2000s primarily because alternatives had already failed: nationalism, socialism, democracy, even traditional elder based clan rule had all failed to stem the violence of the 1990s.³³

Referencing ‘the Youth,’ al-Shabaab was initially the military wing of ICU, tasked with a range of enforcement activities. Following the Ethiopian intervention and the ousting of the ICU from formal power in 2006, al-Shabaab developed into an independent terrorist group which primarily targeted Ethiopian, African Union, and Transitional Federal Government (TFG) troops within Somalia. Al-Shabaab’s early narrative focused on expelling foreign actors from Somalia. They entered the ranks of terrorist actors with a bang: in March 2007, they claimed responsibility for Mogadishu’s first suicide attack, after deploying a car bomb against Ethiopian soldiers stationed in the city.³⁴

As early as 2006, al-Shabaab began adopting the language of jihadism and established ties to al-Qaeda. This relationship seems to have led to an increase in suicide attacks, as well as a shift to deliberately targeting civilians. Further, the group began displaying increasing technological sophistication – executing simultaneous attacks on several targets, providing governance services, and holding territory.³⁵ Using strategies of attrition, as well as capitalizing on historic hatreds of Ethiopia, al-Shabaab was able to generate a fairly significant groundswell of support.³⁶ By 2009, al-Shabaab controlled a significant portion of southern Somalia, including the strategic port of Kismayo, as well as large sections of Mogadishu.

In 2011, the Kenyan military invaded Somalia in an effort to displace al-Shabaab’s territorial control of southern Somalia, retake Kismayo, and end

the flow of Somalis across the border. Al-Shabaab was already suffering from internal divisions and, split between a nationalist identity and an international Islamist image, resulted in a fragmentation of al-Shabaab. The group relinquished a great deal of its territory, and moved to a more dispersed, light footprint model.³⁷ In doing so, they significantly increased their intelligence and support wings, increased recruiting in Kenya and surrounding countries, and moved from a more insurgent based model towards that of a pure terrorist group. This tactical shift is clearly demonstrated by their increasing pattern of high profile international attacks like the Westgate Mall suicide fighter strike in 2013 and the Garissa University attack in 2015, and the merging with its Kenyan affiliate, al-Hijra. This period also demonstrated the impressive resilience and strategic cohesion of al-Shabaab – traits that have allowed it to become one of the most durable and innovative terrorist actors of the current era.³⁸

In 2019, al-Shabaab remains an innovative and strategic rational actor with nationalist goals and a vision of 'Greater Somalia.' It is at best a limited ideological Islamist group, with far more in common with the post-colonial nationalist rebellions than groups seeking a global caliphate, regardless of their shared religious foundation or policymakers' perceptions.³⁹ Hussein Solomon argues that Somali nationalism has traditionally been spurred by an external threat.⁴⁰ Thus, al-Shabaab requires a connection to a greater narrative of existential menace to build consensus among fractious clans. Evidence of this divergence from a global radical Islamist movement can be found in the opportunistic and shifting pledging of allegiances to al-Qaeda (in 2012) and the Islamic State (in 2015), decisions reported to be solely based on which 'parent' group would provide greater resources.^{41,42} In our interviews, we consistently heard how al-Shabaab co-opted the narrative of a global struggle for its own purpose – one young man said wryly: '[they said] come, learn to fight in Somalia and then go to Syria and be a hero.'⁴³ Another teen related a heated conversation in which a clearly exasperated al-Shabaab recruiter exclaimed: 'why would you go so far to fight a war that is not yours? Your home, your people need you, not your brother Muslims.'⁴⁴

Al-Shabaab's ideology and strategy

Terrorist groups are too often seen as being constrained by their ideology to the point of strategic error. Al-Shabaab's relationship with women demonstrates that its adherence to a radical Islamist ideology is performative, not internalized. Al-Shabaab is a rational actor seeking territorial control and willing to use whatever tools are available to them, regardless of the conflict with ideological principles. It is ultimately interested in controlling a nation-state that approximates the boundaries of the ethnically Somali population,

or 'Greater Somalia.'⁴⁵ This article builds on Stig Hansen's seminal thesis that al-Shabaab is a group of two faces: stability via justice and a cosmic war with the West.⁴⁶ We argue that al-Shabaab's treatment of women indicates they are more interested in 'stability' or control, than rule of law or global ideological upheaval.⁴⁷

Al-Shabaab's engagement with ideological principles also relates to appeal to international audiences for funding and recruits. Although as noted earlier this is not al-Shabaab's primary audience, the group found benefits in appealing to this secondary audience. Evidence of al-Shabaab's pragmatism has been identified by Ken Menkhaus' analysis of the group's social media strategy. Al-Shabaab has focused on appealing to a growing Somali diaspora as well as to global Muslim communities.⁴⁸ The group's narrative of its jihad as an act of self-defense by a Muslim people against foreign military occupiers 'appealed both to Islamic sensibilities and Somali nationalism.'⁴⁹ Al-Shabaab's awareness of attention from global audiences would suggest that the group wants to appear in line with Islamic principles, and especially as legitimate representatives of the Somali population. When al-Shabaab focuses on global audiences, the crux of its rallying cry is situated within the 'Islamist-West' narrative versus its local communication which relates to Somali nationalism. Further, the diaspora and global Muslim community represent significant sources of financial support. This means that the group must be strategically balanced between its relationship with Somali nationals, the Somali diaspora, and the global Muslim community.

Women and Al-Shabaab

The relationship between women and al-Shabaab has been underexplored in scholarship, likely because of safety concerns and issues with access in Somalia for international researchers. In this section we will review the available data on women's participation in al-Shabaab emphasizing that al-Shabaab has been hesitant to use Somali women in active combat roles. However, outside of combat roles, al-Shabaab has relied on Somali and international women, demonstrating that al-Shabaab may be hesitant to engage with women, especially Somali women, in public roles, yet still relies on women for the group's operations.

According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), al-Shabaab has executed 3,298 violent attacks since 2007.⁵⁰ While data is unfortunately not available about the gender breakdown of the perpetrators for all attack methods, Ellen Chapin and Jason Warner of the Combating Terrorism Center have gathered data on one particular category of al-Shabaab's attacks: suicide bombing. They find that out of 155 attacks by 216 individuals, only ten were committed by women.⁵¹ For comparison, Boko Haram, the group most comparable to al-Shabaab in terms of geography and power, executed

238 strikes involving approximately 434 attackers between 2007 and 2017.^{52,53} Over half (288) of these bombers were female.⁵⁴

While the majority of interview participants concluded that al-Shabaab did not use women in combat roles, we each met several interview participants who gave accounts of women serving in active military units.⁵⁵ However, examining which women fill what kind of roles within al-Shabaab is revealing. One interview participant noted that he only heard about *diaspora* women serving in active combat roles in al-Shabaab.⁵⁶ It is also notable that the most famous female member of al-Shabaab, who is said to have a leadership role in the group, is a white British woman named Samantha Lewthwaite. Lewthwaite's race, gender, and marital status gave her the title of the 'white widow,' because her husband was killed in the 7/7 bombings in London.⁵⁷

Despite the invisibility of women in combat roles in al-Shabaab the group relies heavily on women within Somalia. The vast preponderance of women's involvement with al-Shabaab is in support roles: fundraising, recruiting, logistics support, domestic activities, and sexual services.^{58,59} Although internally al-Shabaab relies heavily on women in Somalia, the group restricts their freedoms under their application of Sharia law. When al-Shabaab controls a region they require women to wear a black *jilab* made out of heavy material and wear socks and gloves so they have no skin showing. This was a shock for most women in Somalia who traditionally have worn the *dirac*, a colorful dress made from light fabrics.⁶⁰ Other restrictions al-Shabaab places on women include banning them from operating small business or leaving the house without male relative chaperones.⁶¹ Al-Shabaab also uses forced marriage to bring women into the group.⁶² Using an intersectional analysis will allow scholars to better understand al-Shabaab's attitudes towards women of different nationalities or who live in different regions (i.e. diaspora women).

Sex workers as an asset to Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab has consistently demonstrated a flair for innovation, from attack tactics to financing schemes. Within Kenya, al-Shabaab seems to be experimenting with a range of roles for women affiliated or sympathetic to the group. In the eastern coastal regions, most recruiters seem to be women, targeting both young men and women via social media, WhatsApp groups, and in person.^{63,64} These recruiters offer jobs overseas, opportunities for violence, or romantic relationships to either trick or convince their targets to travel to Somalia. These recruiters are active, knowing members of al-Shabaab who presumably believe in the group's cause.

It should come as no surprise then, that al-Shabaab's intelligence gathering methods have benefited from a similar twist. In line with al-Shabaab's tradition of cutting edge tactics, news reports from late

2017 and early 2018 suggest the group is strategically deploying 'very attractive women' to the towns and areas near major Kenyan military installations, with the express aim of developing relationships with soldiers for intelligence purposes.⁶⁵

In Nairobi, al-Shabaab has recognized the potential of an existing but untapped way to use women to advance their cause: sex workers as contractor-spies. During our interviews, we were casually informed that al-Shabaab had subcontracted some of the local sex workers as intelligence officers, paying them for information disclosed by their customers.⁶⁶ This relationship seemed antithetical to al-Shabaab's conservative Islamist principles, yet as one interviewee said 'if you want information here, you use prostitutes and street kids – they see everything, go everywhere, and nobody notices them.'⁶⁷ In contrast to formal intelligence operatives who use sex as one of many tools to elicit information and compromise loyalties, these women trade primarily in sex, and sell information as a secondary revenue stream.⁶⁸

In different areas of Nairobi, al-Shabaab has taken different positions on prostitution. This reflects al-Shabaab's concern with its image in appearing as an Islamic group to populations where it wants to recruit and gain support. In one informal settlement where al-Shabaab recruits and has had a support base, Majengo, one of the group's first public acts was to post signs that it would violently punish sex workers (widely labelled as Tanzanian women) operating in the neighborhood. Majengo is where the al-Shabaab Kenya branch is said to have been started and al-Shabaab has recruited heavily from mosques in the area.⁶⁹ Interview participants said that al-Shabaab follow through on their warning, with one interview participant suspecting two women were killed by al-Shabaab because they were sex workers.

Al-Shabaab public statements against prostitution in Majengo was used to gain support from the population and support al-Shabaab's image in two ways. The first was linking with Kenyan resentments towards Tanzanian immigrants. Al-Shabaab's action supported the narrative that the sex workers should, 'go back to where they came from and do this work there,' as though prostitution exists independently of clients willing to pay for sex.⁷⁰ Al-Shabaab's policy towards sex workers in Majengo also attempted to appeal to the local population by demonstrating al-Shabaab was 'fighting evil.'⁷¹ Prostitution was seen by individuals in Majengo as evil and al-Shabaab sought to be perceived as a just group establishing and maintaining rule of law in the absence of government will. Al-Shabaab's actions against sex workers exploited local concerns about patterns of youth petty crime, drugs, and sex work in Majengo.

In another region of Nairobi, Eastleigh, al-Shabaab contracts and engage with prostitutes as independent information entrepreneurs in areas outside

of their control or recruitment zones. Eastleigh is an informal settlement dominated by Somali immigrants which has led to its nickname, 'little Mogadishu,' and has been consistently linked to various types of al-Shabaab activity, including the Westgate Mall and Garissa University attacks.⁷² The sex workers whom al-Shabaab partners with in Eastleigh are not ethnically Somali or Kenyan, and instead may be immigrants from neighboring countries like Tanzania. Following the forcible suppression of sex workers in Majengo, many Eastleigh-based sex workers were able to move into the market, expanding al-Shabaab's intelligence possibilities.⁷³ It is unlikely, however, that the forcible removal of Majengo's original sex workers was designed to advantage the Eastleigh based women already working with al-Shabaab; more likely, this 'morality' campaign was a messaging device for the residents of Majengo.

The particular dynamics of Nairobi's slum-based sex workers is a key component for how and why al-Shabaab was able to efficiently develop an impromptu intelligence network. First, like most major metropolitan areas, sex workers charge different prices and appeal to different socio-economic classes of men. In Eastleigh and Majengo, the two neighborhoods where the majority of our interviews occurred, the primary form of prostitution is 'wazi wazi' sex work – street based, relatively low earning, and historically involving non-Kenyan women.⁷⁴ These sex workers independently developed robust information networks as a safeguard against corrupt police officers, abusive customers, and the other vagaries of street life.⁷⁵ Over time, these informal safeguards have evolved into highly structured, hierarchical networks almost entirely dominated by women – rather than relying on male bosses or pimps, sex workers more commonly coalesce around a senior woman, who can provide similar protections as a pimp at a lower physical or material cost.

These groupings seem to be loosely organized by both the ethnicity of the sex worker as well as the type of client she specializes in – a dynamic likely driven by the 'word of mouth' nature of the industry. Specifically, client specialization means that the patrons, or 'johns' in common parlance, generally share professional backgrounds; bankers may visit a particular subset of women while bricklayers visit another. In this case, the core of the sex workers involved in al-Shabaab's intelligence network specialize in police officers and government officials.⁷⁶ Further, many of the sex workers appear to be Tanzanian, organized under an older Kenyan-Somali woman. This woman was not a prostitute herself, but rather engaged in a diverse array of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, police corruption, identity theft, and other types of petty crime.⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that this woman while ethnically Somali, has Kenyan nationality. Al-Shabaab partners with this independent businesswoman while forbidding Somali women from operating businesses in

areas under their control.⁷⁸ There are nuances in the ways in which Somali ethnicity and nationality are interpreted and al-Shabaab may also not be opposed to working with this woman because she is not the one participating in sexual acts.

Everyone who spoke about the relationship between al-Shabaab and this group of sex workers noted that the prostitutes were Tanzanian again reinforcing the idea that gender intersects with nationality in key ways. Because of this phenomenon of client specialization, al-Shabaab was able to target women who work primarily with police officers and government officials, and then collectively negotiate via the senior woman. The sex workers receive money for the useful information revealed in the course of their encounter, without necessarily pledging any ideological support or commitment to al-Shabaab – a distinction further enforced by their non-Somali identity. As one interviewee noted wryly: ‘half the reason these men go to [sex workers] is to complain about their lives. Why not get paid for listening?’⁷⁹

There are two surprising aspects to this interaction. First, that it is such an open secret among the community. Interview after interview confirmed that al-Shabaab paid sex workers for information, and participants expressed surprise in our interest in the topic. It defies belief that these women’s clients, therefore, are unaware that whatever they say might make its way back to al-Shabaab. When we interviewed Kenyan, American, and British law enforcement officers in the region, all expressed surprise and skepticism. This emphasizes the success of al-Shabaab’s portrayal of itself as a dogmatic Islamic group. Most observers would overlook a potential relationship between sex workers and al-Shabaab because of the false assumption that al-Shabaab follows Islamic ideas about sex and women. This also could be linked to traditional security actors’ association of women with peace instead of seeing women as multifaceted diverse actors that could be engaging with terrorist actors.⁸⁰

Second, the partnership demonstrates that al-Shabaab has a flexible relationship with its conservative Islamist ideology. Not only is it willing to compromise on its moral and social teachings about women, it is willing to strategically engage in a relationship with non-members who do not share a common religion (in some cases) or ethnic identity. It is noteworthy that not only is al-Shabaab engaging with sex workers, but these sex workers are independent female business operators. Instead of engaging with a sex worker scheme with a traditional male boss controlling women, al-Shabaab partners with women directly. Al-Shabaab does not seem interested in recruiting or co-opting these sex workers – this is purely a transactional relationship of information for money. One of al-Shabaab’s greatest strengths seems to be creating relationships and securing support across ideological divisions.⁸¹

Al-Shabaab and sex trafficking

Paying sex workers to report information they acquire in the context of their jobs is not the only way al-Shabaab engages with Kenyan women and sex outside of marriage. Kenyan women have been victims and participants in al-Shabaab's human trafficking scheme to bring women to al-Shabaab camps on the border of Kenya and Somalia. Members of al-Shabaab have used different forms of deception, including promising women jobs overseas to drugging them, to bring them to an al-Shabaab camp in the Boni Forest on the border of Somalia and Kenya.⁸² The women affected lived in Kenyan's coastal communities and range in age and religious affiliation (both Christian and Muslim). Once the women reached the camp they faced sexual abuse by members of al-Shabaab and one journalist described the experience akin to being slaves in a brothel.⁸³

Women from the coastal region were often recruited by other women who were working with al-Shabaab.⁸⁴ There is little information on the nationality of the female recruiters (although one was described as an older Somali lady) but they were described as all being Muslims and having money. There was a power dynamic between the women being recruited and the female recruiters, as described by Fathima Badurdeen, with the recruiter being rich, religious, stable, and the recruit made vulnerable by need or desire.⁸⁵

The ways women were brought into al-Shabaab from the Kenyan coastal regions in some cases involved elaborate schemes. For example, one woman had been looking for jobs abroad and an al-Shabaab recruiter called the woman saying she was responding to her application for a job in Dubai. The woman being recruited said the recruiter knew about the procedures for job applications abroad and described specific forms she would be required to complete. The recruiters were perceived to be addressing 'the demands of al-Shabaab' and women who they recruited were chosen 'mainly for sex purposes.' While some reports claim that Kenyan women were 'easy targets' because they needed jobs,⁸⁶ we believe al-Shabaab's targeting of Kenyan women is more intentional because protecting Kenyan women is seen as less essential given al-Shabaab's focus on promoting a new Islamic Somalia (focused on ethnic Somalis).

Women had different experiences in the al-Shabaab camp based on their nationality. The Kenyan women from the coast were tasked with cooking for al-Shabaab fighters or cleaning weapons. The Kenyan women in the camp were also repeatedly sexually abused by al-Shabaab fighters with some describing being raped by one specific member of al-Shabaab and others sharing experience of gang rape by multiple members of al-Shabaab. One woman who spent time in the camp said she thought there were 300 women there, a few were Somalis, but she believed almost all were

Kenyan.⁸⁷ The Kenyan women in these camps came across some Somali women who they described as 'legitimate wives.'⁸⁸ Within these camps there appears to be a hierarchy between Kenyan and Somali women, with Kenyan women mostly being used as sexual slaves by members of al-Shabaab, and Somali women being forcibly married to a member of al-Shabaab.⁸⁹

Al-Shabaab's adherence to Islamic rules about sex are disregarded for Kenyan women because these women were not part of al-Shabaab's nationalist project. It is also notable that al-Shabaab is engaged in a human trafficking scheme that Kenyan women played an active role in leading. Similar to al-Shabaab's engagement with sex workers in Nairobi, certain women are allowed independence when it supports al-Shabaab's short-term goals.

Sex work and human trafficking are linked parts of an illicit economy and al-Shabaab engaged with women in these domains when it was useful for their own interests. If al-Shabaab was driven only by an ideology based on Islam it would not create or allow these massive camps or 'brothels,' nor would it limit the women involved to Kenyans. Cynthia Enloe describes one form of rape in conflict as 'rape by a male soldier of a woman he thinks of as a "foreigner."⁹⁰ Additionally, providing male members of al-Shabaab access to Kenyan women within these camps could be seen as a way to prevent them from raping Somali women.⁹¹ One interview participant who had spoken with the women who returned from the camps described his interpretation of al-Shabaab's behavior in the camps:

It strikes me as deeply hypocritical in an ideological sense. It seemed to me as a big group of men who couldn't keep their home lives in order, couldn't cook for themselves and clean for themselves, and also have these kinds of desires ... seems like a way to keep fighters happy, keep them content, give them a misguided notion of the purity and paradise they were looking for.⁹²

It is noteworthy that this interview participants recognizes al-Shabaab's ideological claims as being false when he refers to the 'misguided notion of purity and paradise.'

We seek to draw attention to the link between al-Shabaab's relationship with *Kenyan* sex workers and the rape of *Kenyan* women. Although members of al-Shabaab, to our knowledge, are not having sex with the Kenyan sex workers, we see this pattern of behavior as linked. Enloe explains why rape and prostitution are often separated in analyses, 'Prostitution seems routine. Rape can be shocking. Prostitution can seem comforting to some. They imagine it to be the "oldest profession."⁹³ Rape, by contrast, shocks. It shocks, but then it loses its distinctiveness.⁹³ Sex workers are seen as having agency in participating in sex acts whereas victims of rape have their agency taken away.

Conclusions

Beyond the perplexing pattern that a conservative Islamist group is leveraging sex to advance their strategic interests in several ways, al-Shabaab's partnership with sex workers and use of rape is particularly shocking because of their behavior towards Somali women in Somalia and statements related to their interpretation of Islam. There are two common ways of misunderstanding al-Shabaab. First, by passively accepting al-Shabaab's statements about their ideology. Second, by assuming that al-Shabaab treats all women in the same way.

When evaluating terrorist groups, there is a tendency among both academics and policymakers to 'take them at their word' – that is, to uncritically accept the group's ideological narrative as its true motivation. This flat appraisal is challenged when examining the ways in which individual women's lives are affected by al-Shabaab. Our findings show how a gender lens is critical in terrorism studies because by examining al-Shabaab's shifting treatment of different women, we are able to more accurately grasp the group's ideology and strategy.

Strategically, the revelation that al-Shabaab has instrumentalized sex workers in Kenya tells us several things about the group. This article is unique in that rather than focusing only on the roles women play inside the group, it builds a broader narrative about al-Shabaab's relationship with women, and specifically how the bounds of that relationship changes with different kinds of women. Al-Shabaab's contracting with sex workers demonstrates that even in a highly conservative Wahhabi organization, necessity easily displaces ideology, particularly outside of their area of direct territorial control. The fact that the group clearly distinguishes between various types of women participating or interacting with the organization tells us that there are rational, strategic calculations being made about 'which women, where.'

The sex worker network and al-Shabaab's leverage of existing criminal activity in Kenya shows how deeply entwined the group is within communities beyond Somalia. Al-Shabaab continues its violent struggle not simply because it has a never-ending supply of suicide bombers and fanatical supporters: al-Shabaab's 'fish' are hidden within a 'sea' of corrupt government officials and police officers, poor sex workers, marginalized immigrants, and other 'ordinary' people.⁹⁴ The current narrow focus on military operations along the Kenyan-Somali border and into southern Somalia where al-Shabaab maintains its formal camps is insufficient for making true and lasting progress toward regional stability. Al-Shabaab is filling a governance void in coastal Kenya and in the slum districts of Nairobi by providing jobs, expelling or redirecting people the community perceives to be a threat, and offering a sense of collective identity. We must expand both our understanding of the conflict theater and the conflict timeline to more

efficiently resolve the instability in the Horn of Africa. Islam is a tool used by al-Shabaab to gain legitimacy to audiences inside and outside Somalia. However, it is clear religious dogma is not inhibiting the group from exploiting all potential avenues for success.

Only by speaking to citizens in certain areas in Nairobi (including impoverished or higher crime areas that may be less convenient for researchers or policymakers) do we begin to understand the ways in which al-Shabaab has infiltrated the community. Stakeholders must diversify their understanding of successful counterterrorism campaigns beyond body counts and displaced soldiers to include rule of law mechanisms, efficient and just prosecutions, and alternative livelihood projects to cut off both the pool of recruits as well as a source of critical intelligence. Further, policymakers and academics would be well served to utilize a gender lens to better understand the different ways in which women participate and perpetuate conflict patterns, beyond actively joining the kinetic struggle. This does not mean targeting women with additional law enforcement, but instead considering women's complex relationships with terrorist groups and designing amnesty and rehabilitation programs with women in mind.

Beyond implications for understanding al-Shabaab, this interrogation of the diversity of relationships that terrorist groups pursue with different 'types' of women provides significant insight into the groups themselves and communities in which they exist. Recognizing the complexity of the relationship between terrorist groups like al-Shabaab and women defies simplistic explanation of terrorist group behavior and provides additional opportunities for scholars and policymakers to counter the harmful effects of terrorist groups globally.

Notes

1. We use the term 'sex worker' and 'prostitute' interchangeably throughout this article.
2. We discuss ethnicity and nationality when discussing being Somali because due to colonial boundaries, individuals considered ethnic Somalis are not necessarily nationals of Somalia, but instead live and are considered nationals of neighboring Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.
3. For ease of reference we will refer to the non-Somali women involved in this analysis as Kenyan women, but as noted in descriptions throughout the article, al-Shabaab also has relationships with Tanzanian and other sex workers from across East Africa. However, since they are all residents of Kenya, we use Kenya as a short hand.
4. This distinguishes the group from other terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Syria which messages to both a domestic and international audience.
5. Donnelly, "Wedded to Warfare," 89–123.
6. Petrich Interview. Pretoria via Skype. February 2018.

7. Petrich Interview. Nairobi. January 2018.
8. Abdi, "Convergence of Civil War and the Religious Right," 183–207.
9. For details on feminist research methodology see Ackerly and True, *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science*.
10. Cynthia Enloe promotes this idea of taking women's lives seriously throughout her work, see e.g. Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?*
11. See e.g., Sjoberg, Cooke, and Neal, "Introduction."
12. Saltman and Smith, "'Til Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon." See also recent news stories on young women from the United Kingdom and the United States joining ISIS, Adam, "Shamima Begum, teenager who joined ISIS, to lose UK citizenship, Callimachi and Porter, "2 American Wives of ISIS Militants Want to Return Home."
13. Ahram, "Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS."
14. Tsebelis, *Nested Games*.
15. Tickner, "Gendering Security Studies and Peace Studies," 22.
16. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, 21.
17. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
18. Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations."
19. *Ibid.*, 489.
20. Wood and Thomas, "Women on the Frontline," 36.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel*, 117.
23. O'Rourke, "What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?" 692.
24. Sjoberg, Cooke and Neal, "Introduction," 282.
25. Felter, Masters, and Sergie, "'Al-Shabab.' Backgrounder."
26. Sjoberg, et al., *Gender and Terrorism*, 14.
27. *Ibid.*, 15.
28. See Yuval-Davis, "Intersectionality and Feminist Politics."
29. In an effort to conduct this potentially disruptive work ethically and safely, we went through rigorous institutional review board (IRB) review processes at our institutions before arriving in Nairobi. We worked closely with local researchers to ensure the interview sites, general topics covered, and informed consent procedures protected interview participants.
30. Human Rights Watch, "Kenya: Killings, Disappearances by Anti-Terror Policy."
31. Kapteijns, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia*.
32. Bohumil, "Shapeshifter of Somalia."
33. Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia*.
34. Al Shabaab. "Mapping Militant Organizations."
35. *Ibid.*
36. Bohumil, "Shapeshifter of Somalia."
37. *Ibid.*
38. Bryden, *The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab?*
39. Ingiriis, "The Invention of Al-Shabaab in Somalia."
40. Solomon, "Somalia's Al Shabaab."
41. 'Al Shabaab.' 2018. *Mapping Militant Organizations*.
42. See note 38 above.
43. Petrich Interview. Nairobi, Kenya. February 2018.
44. *Ibid.*
45. See note 40 above.
46. Hansen.

47. Ibid.
48. Menkhaus, "Al-Shabaab and Social Media."
49. Menkhaus 312–3.
50. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). "Global Terrorism Database."
51. Warner and Chapin, *The Suicide Bombers of Al-Shabaab*.
52. Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*.
53. Warner and Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes*.
54. Ibid.
55. Petrich Interview. Pretoria via Skype. February 2018; Donnelly Interviews. Nairobi, Kenya. March 2017 and May 2017.
56. Donnelly Interview. Nairobi, Kenya. March 2017.
57. See e.g. Auer, Sutcliffe and Lee, "Framing the 'White Widow,'" for more info on Samantha Lewthwaite.
58. Donnelly, "Wedded to Warfare," 174–92.
59. Ndungu, Irene and Uyo Salifu, *The Role of Women in Violent Extremism*.
60. Donnelly, "Wedded to Warfare," 239.
61. Ibid., 89.
62. Ibid; Bader, Coursen-Neff and Hassan, *No Place for Children*.
63. Petrich Interview. Nairobi, Kenya, February 2018.
64. Ngungu and Salifu.
65. Frykberg, "Kenyan Women Evicted as Reports."
66. Petrich Interview. Nairobi, Kenya. January 2018.
67. See note 43 above.
68. Petrich, "Al-Shabaab's Mata Hari Network."
69. Anzalone, "Kenya's Muslim Youth Center and Al-Shabaab East African Recruitment," 10. "Special Report: In Africa, a Militant Group's Growing Appeal". "Kenya Imam Denies His Mosque Is Center of Radicalization."
70. Donnelly Interview. Nairobi, Kenya. May 2017.
71. Ibid.
72. Sperber, "Little Mogadishu, Under Siege."
73. See note 66 above.
74. Izugbara, "Everyday Negotiations of State Regulation," 115–30.
75. See note 66 above..
76. See note 68 above.
77. Petrich Interview, Nairobi, Kenya. January 2018.
78. Donnelly, "Wedded to Warfare," 189–92.
79. See note 43 above.
80. See Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, 22 for discussion related to the correlation between women and peace.
81. See note 68 above.
82. Charlotte Attwood, "The Sex Slaves of Al-Shabab."
83. Attwood.
84. Badurdeen, "Women and Recruitment in the Al-Shabaab Network," 19–48.
85. Ibid.
86. *The Sex Slaves of Al-Shabaab*.
87. Ibid.
88. Donnelly Interview. Skype. February 2018.
89. It is not the intention of the authors to create a hierarchy of the harms faced by different groups of women, but instead to draw attention to different forms

of gender-based violence women experienced based on nationality. Additionally, while the authors describe a particular pattern in the camp, it is also possible that in different contexts Kenyan women were subjected to forced marriage by al-Shabaab members and Somali women were subjected to different forms of sexual violence by al-Shabaab members.

90. Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 109
91. *Ibid.*, 111.
92. See note 88 above
93. Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 108.
94. Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*.

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