



# **Al Shabaab Wives and Widows: A Survey**

**TSN**

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## Executive Summary

This paper seeks to understand the role Somali women play in al-Shabaab (AS) and their place in Somali society more broadly. Its findings paint a complicated picture, with women far more than unwitting victims of predatory husbands and a rapacious group. Rather, women who join AS through marriage largely do so willingly, with many of those interviewed saying they believe they are doing a service in protection of their country and the wider Muslim community. They praised AS's judicial system as fairer than that administered by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and largely embraced their role in spreading AS's ideology to their children.

In conversations with both AS wives and widows as well as with Somali subject matter experts, it became clear that women are more than just homemakers in AS-controlled territories. Interviewees noted cases where women have been allowed to open businesses, have run safe houses in government-controlled territory and abroad, and have even themselves participated in terrorist operations on behalf of the group. Such activity is made easier because women, according to interviewees, are generally allowed to move unencumbered between FGS and AS areas and are seen as beyond suspicion.

Nevertheless, the interviewees said that in much of AS's territory, ordinary women and men have been turning against the group in ever greater numbers. It is already common practice for fighters to send their wives and children to government-controlled towns because of the perceived danger from airstrikes and joint Somali-US offensives, especially in the country's south. The fear that comes from the ongoing air war has caused a number of women to rethink their roles within the group, and the group's uncompromising—and at times contradictory—application of its version of shari'a law has only exacerbated this disillusionment.

The findings of this study paint a picture both of AS and of the women who are associated with it that is complex, but one that offers several possible leverage points for programs to exploit existing weaknesses in the group's self-portrayal and its gender-based policies.

## Introduction

### *Research Question & Methodology*

This paper seeks to understand the role Somali women play in AS and their place in Somali society more broadly. It examines Somali women's experience with the group, from recruitment, to daily routines to—for some—the process of leaving AS. Field research was conducted between June and July 2018, with a particular emphasis placed on first-hand accounts from women living in areas controlled by AS including AS wives, widows and divorcées. To supplement this data, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with those with first-hand operational knowledge of AS's activities. Those with an understanding of the group's views of gendered roles were prioritized. To ensure that the study maintained high evidentiary standards, wherever possible research was triangulated between interviewees as well as between types of interviewees (i.e. between primary and secondary sources). This data was supplemented with an open source review of recent AS media outputs.

### *Primary & Secondary Sources*

The bulk of primary data was gathered during interviews with wives, divorcées and widows of AS members who live or have lived with the group in the Jubbas, Gedo and HirShabelle regions. The semi-structured interviews employed open-ended questions about life as an AS wife, with topics ranging from recruitment procedures and operational roles played by women within the group to—where relevant—the process of defection and life after AS. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in 'neutral' (i.e. not FGS or AS-dominated) areas, to ensure that the subjects felt free to answer without fear of retribution. Some women were interviewed on multiple occasions in order to strengthen confidence between research subject and researcher to yield more in-depth answers. All interviewees were assured that they would remain anonymous.

Below are brief profiles of those interviewed:

Source	Age	Relationship
ASW1	24	Married to an AS jabha (front-line) fighter in Lower Jubba
ASW2	26	Married to an AS da'wa (preaching) official
ASW3	18	Married to an AS jabha fighter
ASW4	47	Married to a Kenyan AS foreign fighter
ASW5	25	Married to an AS jabha fighter in Gedo
ASW6	23	Married to an AS military trainer
ASW7	25	Married to a Tanzanian AS foreign fighter
ASW8	28	Divorcée; was married to an AS amniyat (intelligence) trainer
ASW9	30	Widow; was married to an AS jabha fighter



Secondary data was obtained in a series of KIIs, including those with FGS administrative, security and intelligence officials. Interviews were prioritized with those displaying knowledge of AS's modus operandi with regard to women.

### *Women in Somalia*

Customarily, women in Somalia have been confined to traditional gender roles, including homemaking. The United States Department of State (DOS) in its 'Country report on human rights practices for 2016', reported that women in Somalia suffer systematic gender-based discrimination in education, politics and housing, among other areas.<sup>1</sup> Further, it is generally expected that Somali women will marry at an early age—45 percent of women in the country are wed before they turn 18—and have children young.<sup>2</sup> Although traditionally Somali wives are considered the heads of the household, the family wealth is considered the husband's property.

Moreover, the 2016 DOS report states that in Somalia "domestic and sexual violence against women remain a serious problem." This is despite the provisional federal constitution prohibiting any form of violence against women.<sup>3</sup> Further, Human Rights Watch's 'World Report 2018' noted that "internally-displaced women and girls [are] at particular risk of gender-based violence by armed men including government soldiers and militia groups" such as AS.<sup>4</sup>

Abbreviation Used	Definition
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AS	Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen
DOS	United States Department of State
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
KII	Key informant interview
VBIED	Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device

<sup>1</sup> "Somalia 2016 Human Rights Report," US Department of State. <https://goo.gl/512Awo>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2012). Somalia Human Development Report 2012: Empowering Youth for Peace and Development, p. xviii.

<sup>3</sup> "Somalia 2016 Human Rights Report," US Department of State. <https://goo.gl/512Awo>

<sup>4</sup> "Somalia – Events of 2017", Human Rights Watch. <https://goo.gl/VMDm9C>

## Life as an AS Wife

### Marriage

According to interviewees, women who marry into AS largely—though not always—do so willingly.<sup>5</sup> As is common across Somalia, women in AS-controlled areas tend to be married before the age of twenty.<sup>6</sup> Although most of these women technically have a say in their own marriage, in areas controlled by AS, given the group's considerable influence over the populace, the protection afforded to its members and their families, and the economic and the social status that comes with marrying an AS fighter, refusing is not always an option.<sup>7</sup> In such cases, the family often fears that rebuffing an AS-affiliated suitor may lead to retributive violence.<sup>8</sup>

Upon marrying into the group, AS brides receive part of the husband's monthly salary to run the household, and her family is immediately placed under the protection of AS. ASW2 noted that part of the appeal of marrying an AS member included protection for the family, as no civilian would think of harming an AS member or his relatives. In these areas, there is little-to-no stigma associated with marriage to an AS member and it may even be encouraged for the above-mentioned reasons.<sup>9</sup> As an example, ASW2 noted that, in marrying an AS member, especially a prominent one, her family's station was improved.<sup>10</sup>

Religion appears to be particularly important to some women who choose to marry AS members. Perhaps unsurprisingly, AS members are generally considered strident in their adherence to Islamic principles, which in many cases attracts women from more conservative families.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, several AS wives interviewed agreed that the group is waging a legitimate jihad against foreigners whom they claim want to take over Somalia and impose un-Islamic practices on its people.<sup>12</sup> Women like these feel that AS is engaged in a justified global jihad by supporting the umma (worldwide Muslim community), including through conducting external operations. Some of the AS wives felt that by virtue of being married to a mujahid (fighter) they themselves are playing their part in this struggle.<sup>13</sup>

Interviewees noted that it was not uncommon for women to travel to AS-controlled areas from elsewhere in the country to meet prospective husbands. According to the interviewees, women are often introduced to AS fighters through female friends who have married AS members. In many such cases, prospective husbands court women over the phone for

<sup>5</sup> According to the interviewees, none were obliged to marry their AS husbands.

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned by multiple interviewees.

<sup>7</sup> The interviewees all noted that, to greater and lesser degrees, they had the choice of whom to marry.

<sup>8</sup> ASW2 noted that her husband had a prominent role in AS while the group was in control of the town they were living in at the time. ASW2 said that when her father was asked for her hand, he felt he had no choice but to accept.

<sup>9</sup> ASW9 noted that her aunt had introduced her to her future husband, a distant relation.

<sup>10</sup> "UN decries high unemployment rates in Somalia," Xinhua, 16 July 2017. <https://goo.gl/yN9UTK>

<sup>11</sup> ASW4 noted that part of the reason she married an AS member was that they are considered shaykhs (wise men with religious knowledge).

<sup>12</sup> This was a view articulated by a majority of those interviewed.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with ASW7



Figure 1 : AS spokesman Ali Dhere speaking on the role of women in the group

several months before the latter travel to AS-controlled areas for an initial meeting.<sup>14</sup> During the courtship period, the AS member ensures that his would-be wife is a practicing Muslim by testing her religious knowledge.<sup>15</sup> If she cannot read the Quran, the man often tutors her before they meet.<sup>16</sup> After they are married, the husband continues to act as his wife's religious guide.<sup>17</sup> Also during the courtship period, the man instructs his wife-to-be on how to dress while in AS-controlled areas, including ensuring she wears a jilbab (a long and loose-fitting outer garment) as well as socks, gloves and a face veil. Failure to dress in this manner could result in a one-week imprisonment and public flogging.<sup>18,19</sup>

### *Day-to-Day Life*

Day-to-day life in AS-held areas is highly regimented to ensure maximum adherence to the group's principles and to guarantee that dissenting voices are drowned out. AS supports this aim through continuous, whole-of-society indoctrination and daily classes at the group's madrassas (religious schools) as well as by imposing stringent rules that govern all aspects of society.<sup>20</sup> Except in extraordinary circumstances (see below), women's activities are limited to raising children, household duties, socializing with each other, and ensuring

<sup>14</sup> Process as described by ASW3, who was courted over the phone before travelling to meet and then marry her husband.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> As per ASW8's description of the over-the-phone courtship process.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with ASW8

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> All interviewees noted that AS areas are all governed by a strict version of shari'a

that they and their children attend daily religious lectures. Deviations from these practices can often lead to punitive measures.<sup>21,22</sup>

AS madrassas are run by officials from the group's da'wa (religious outreach) department and are arranged at different times for men, women, and children.<sup>23</sup> According to the interviewees, women's classes focus on ethics, religious study and woman-to-woman da'wa.<sup>24</sup> One likely goal of continuing religious education for women is to extend the indoctrination to the home, yet another prescribed role for AS wives and mothers.<sup>25</sup> In larger AS-controlled towns with a sizeable number of foreign fighters (mostly from Kenya and Tanzania), the group often has two madrassas for women; one for the ansar<sup>26</sup> (locals, including women from the area not married to AS fighters) and one for the muhajirat<sup>27</sup> (foreign women). AS prefers to keep the foreign fighters and their families away from the local women and community.<sup>28</sup> According to ASW8, AS implemented this policy following drone strikes targeting high-ranking AQ-affiliated foreign fighters with some local AS fighters accused of providing information that led to the strikes.

In attending the daily classes, AS wives in the long term become vessels for the group's ideology and messaging. Within their households, AS wives then use this knowledge to spread the group's ideas and beliefs, ensuring that their children are raised according to AS's principles and are fully committed to the cause.<sup>29</sup>

### *Financial*

As was mentioned, women married to AS members receive money from their husbands' monthly salary to run their households and care for children. As such, they are entirely financially dependent on their husbands.<sup>30</sup> AS requires their members take care of their wives with those who do not charged with neglect by the AS courts.<sup>31</sup> For deployed AS members, the group channels monthly salaries directly to their wives.<sup>32</sup> The group appoints one amir (local military and political leader) per unit to administer family welfare. Whenever an AS fighter is deployed, the amir stays behind to disburse the payments. In addition, the amir resolves any problems that may arise with fighters' families while the men are away, for example by ensuring sick wives or children receive medical attention. Interviewee ASW4

<sup>21</sup> All interviewees gave a similar basic description of daily routines

<sup>22</sup> As revealed by a majority of interviewees.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, in Middle Jubba, children from the age of eight to fifteen attend madrassas from 7:30 a.m. while women have their lecture from 11:00 to noon.

<sup>24</sup> Da'wa can also be translated as 'evangelization'

<sup>25</sup> Daily routine of an AS wife as described by ASW1

<sup>26</sup> 'Ansar' literally means 'helpers' in Arabic but is used to refer to local members or fighters.

<sup>27</sup> 'Muhajirat' (masc. 'muhajireen') literally means 'emigrant' in Arabic and refers to foreign members or fighters.

<sup>28</sup> Most of those interviewed noted that foreigners do not often mix with locals

<sup>29</sup> A majority of AS wives interviewed admitted to spreading AS ideology to their children.

<sup>30</sup> Most interviewees reported receiving monthly allowances from their husbands.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with ASW2.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with ASW9.



noted that despite last seeing her husband two years ago, she still receives a monthly payment of \$90 USD from AS.<sup>33</sup>

On rare occasions, a number of women in AS-controlled areas have been allowed to open and operate small businesses.<sup>34</sup> These businesses are mostly small in scale and include roadside shops and tailoring services. However, in cases where the business becomes too big, AS sends its amniyat (intelligence and special operations unit) to ensure that the source of funds for the business are legitimate and, more importantly, that the business is not a front for hostile actors to gather information on AS.<sup>35</sup>

Socially, AS wives largely rely on each other for support. They almost exclusively socialize amongst themselves and, anecdotally, support each other if one becomes sick or loses her husband to fighting. Widow ASW9 noted that when her husband was killed fighting in Lower Shabelle, fellow AS wives comforted her and attempted to keep her committed to their cause. ASW9 noted that AS wives share a strong and unique bond given their shared experience.<sup>36</sup>

### *Dispute Resolution*

In cases of dispute—whether domestic or outside the home—ansar and muhajireen communities are kept apart and use separate legal structures.<sup>37</sup> Interviewees note that it is often easier for a foreigner to articulate their issues to another foreigner as they may share a common language. However, prior to bringing an issue to an AS court, if an AS wife wants to report a domestic dispute, she first takes her grievance to the female head of her community (whether local or foreign).<sup>38</sup> However, if an AS wife feels that she has not received adequate redress, the issue is elevated to the male head of the community. If the male head cannot solve the problem, then it is taken to AS courts.<sup>39</sup>

ASW8 noted that while petitioning for divorce, her first recourse was to approach the female head of the Somali community in her area of Middle Jubba. ASW8 testified that her husband was mistreating her and not providing for her and her children. The woman was understanding of ASW8's predicament but felt it was not in her power to confront her husband. The female head and ASW8 then took the case to the male head of community. He then intervened, telling ASW8's husband to reform his behavior. When he did not, the issue was escalated to the AS courts, who in the end granted her a divorce.

### *Divorce*

According to divorcée ASW8, divorce is not common within AS. However, when it happens it is considerably easier for the husband to leave his wife than vice versa. However, if

<sup>33</sup> According to ASW8, AS pays foreign fighters money per month than local fighters, ostensibly because they do not have the same support structures as local fighters.

<sup>34</sup> Information provided by a majority of interviewees

<sup>35</sup> Interview with ASW7.

<sup>36</sup> Most of those interviewed noted that AS wives consider themselves a close-knit community

<sup>37</sup> Interview with ASW8, who spoke at length of the separation of locals from foreigners.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Interview with ASW8.

after mediation the woman adamantly insists on getting a divorce, according to interviewees it is more often than not granted.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, AS's custody system is similarly designed to keep children in their homes and inside AS-held territories, and as such largely favors the father keeping the children.<sup>41</sup> Women who are divorced or widowed are strongly urged to remarry within the group. AS pressures the women using religious justifications, according to interviewees.



Figure 2 : Picture obtained from AS media channel SomaliMemo showing children during Eid-al-Fitr 1439 (2018) celebrations in Middle Jubba

### Orphan Care

According to interviewees, many orphaned children of AS members have been placed

in a single orphanage in the Bay and Bakool region under the care of a woman dubbed Umm Shabaab (mother of Shabaab/mother of youth). Interviewees aver that Umm Shabaab plays a critical role in ensuring that the children's needs are taken care of and that they have a strong foundation in AS's doctrine and ideology. Umm Shabaab is responsible for them until the age of eight, after which they join the regular AS madrassas across areas it controls.<sup>42</sup> Umm Shabaab (her real name is unknown) is purportedly married to a senior AS commander and is perhaps the most important woman affiliated with the group given her responsibility for such a large cadre of future AS fighters.<sup>43</sup>

### Judiciary & Security

AS runs what interviewees have deemed 'a very effective' judicial system whereby anyone found guilty of going against their understanding of shari'a is punished by fines, imprisonment, and harsher punishments such as flogging or death. By most accounts, women living in AS-controlled areas prefer the AS system to that of the FGS because, they claim, it is less susceptible to corruption or clan influence. ASW4, an interviewee based in Kismayo who has lived in the town while under both AS and, later, the Jubbaland administration, described the difference between the two thusly:

"Under AS, crime is basically non-existent. For instance, when Kismayo was under AS no one ever heard of robberies, murders, assassinations or even petty crime."<sup>44</sup>

Some interviewees praised the AS justice system as particularly appealing because women have more access to justice with AS than those in non-AS territories.<sup>45</sup> ASW4 noted that

<sup>40</sup> Divorce procedure as described in detail by AS divorcee ASW8

<sup>41</sup> Logic of custody decision as described by ASW8

<sup>42</sup> Information on Umm Shabaab provided by ASW8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Interview with ASW4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

unlike FGS courts, AS judges take the time to listen to women whenever they bring a case, while in FGS courts, women are often ignored, especially if they come from minor clans.<sup>46,47</sup> Moreover, multiple interviewees noted that AS courts generally dole out capital sentences for perpetrators of gender-based violence and rape, while FGS courts have often declined to punish similar crimes.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> As revealed by ASW4, who has recently lived in both FGS and AS-controlled areas.

<sup>47</sup> "Somalia – Country of Concern," UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 12 March 2015. <https://goo.gl/nRETEk>

<sup>48</sup> "Amina Ibrahim: Rape Broke My Spirit and Stole My Happiness," United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, 19 June 2018. <https://goo.gl/c2xhxY>.

## How Women Advance AS Goals

Traditionally, women have contributed to spreading AS's ideology by assuming non-violent auxiliary roles, such as by indoctrinating their children while their husbands are on the front lines. Women also play a part in recruiting new members and disseminating AS's ideology to local women under the guise of da'wa (proselytization). Beyond these more traditional roles, women have also been known to fundraise for AS, provide the group with operational assistance including intelligence collection, smuggling weapons and securing safe houses in areas outside its jurisdiction both in Somalia and outside the country. In rare cases, women have themselves served as operatives during attacks.

### *Da'wa and Recruitment*

AS wives play a central role in recruiting, primarily by finding brides for existing AS fighters from outside of AS-controlled territory. Using the 'knowledge' they acquired from living in AS-controlled areas and attending often daily religious classes, the AS wives attempt to convince their friends who may be living in areas under FGS control to join them.<sup>49</sup> AS wives do this by reaching out to non-AS affiliated women via phone calls, sending selected Quran verses via messages as well as directing them to AS media channels. Beyond the recruitment of other women, AS wives also reach out to male family members to join the group.<sup>50</sup> When they get to their teenage years, the AS wives often encourage their sons to join AS's military ranks while the girls get married off to AS members.<sup>51,52</sup>

### *Fundraising*

According to the AS wives interviewed, the group does allow women to open and operate businesses in areas under its control.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, some AS wives are known to operate additional businesses in areas under FGS-control. Security officials based in FGS-controlled areas suspect that a number of these businesses are fundraising fronts for the group.<sup>54</sup> In Kismayo, the wife of a prominent AS commander was known to have run a gasoline station until 2014 when Jubbaland security officials banished her from the town. Subsequent investigations revealed that she had been sending money to her husband and his associates in



Figure 3 : Picture above- Basra Mahamed Warsame who was convicted to five years in jail for storing weapons for AS in Mogadishu

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee ASW3 was recruited by a friend based in Middle Jubba who convinced her to travel and marry a mujahid

<sup>50</sup> As revealed by interviewee ASW1

<sup>51</sup> According to interviewees, children are required to attend madrassas from the age of eight, during their teenage years joining the group's ranks. Most AS wives interviewed are in favor of this system.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> All women interviewed indicated that the female running of businesses is allowed.

<sup>54</sup> A Mogadishu-based security official noted that they have a number of AS wives' business under investigation in Mogadishu for raising money for AS

AS-controlled areas.<sup>55</sup> Internationally, AS has also been known to use female-run charities to raise funds.<sup>56</sup>

### Operational Roles

In areas not under AS control—both in Somalia and abroad—women have played key roles in advancing the group's operational activities, from intelligence collection and support functions to facilitation of attacks and in some cases, direct violence.

### Intelligence Collection

According to interviewees, AS-affiliated women living in FGS-controlled areas have at times been used by the group to collect intelligence against adversaries. ASW1 noted that she personally knows women who have spied on FGS or African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) locations, including inside bases. The information they provided included force strength estimates and patrol routines.<sup>57</sup> Interviewees say that AS routinely uses female agents for such tasks as they are able to surveil FGS and AMISOM strongholds without raising suspicion. Notably, under the guise of seeking medical treatment, AS wives have accessed AMISOM camps without being suspected of nefarious motives.<sup>58</sup>

### Facilitation

Women are generally allowed to move between AS-controlled and FGS-controlled areas unencumbered, as they are not considered a threat by either side.<sup>59</sup> AS exploits this, at times using women to traffic weapons into areas under FGS control as well as to run safehouses for male operatives who have been dispatched to FGS-areas for operations.<sup>60</sup> For example, in the FGS-controlled border town of Beled Xaawo in the Gedo region, Ladan Barre, a woman with familial ties to the now-deceased AS external operations commander and Westgate Mall Attack planner, Adan Garar, was used as a key facilitator by the group for cross-border attacks into Kenya.



Figure 4 : Figure above is a Kenya police poster of the bounty placed on Mumina Eroba an AS-wife to Ahmed Dabar

<sup>55</sup> As described by a Kismayo-based security official involved in investigations into the AS wife who was banished from town.

<sup>56</sup> In 2011, two Somali women—Amina Farah Ali and Hawo Mohamed Hassan—were convicted in the United States of conspiring to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. See: Bergen and Sterman, 29 September 2013. <https://goo.gl/i99G4Y>

<sup>57</sup> Information provided by ASW1 who revealed that she personally knows of women asked to collect intelligence in FGS-controlled areas.

<sup>58</sup> Analysis by a Jubbaland security official as to why AS uses women for intelligence operations.

<sup>59</sup> A majority of the women interviewed pointed to the ease of movement

<sup>60</sup> As revealed by a Mogadishu-based security official



Ladan used her house and business (a maternal and child health center) in Beled Xaawo to host operatives and store their weapons.<sup>61</sup> In December 2014, Ladan was arrested in Mogadishu. Until her arrest, Ladan also played a key role in facilitating AS attacks inside Kenya, by providing transit points for operatives and weapons.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, on 4 August 2018, a military tribunal in Mogadishu sentenced Basra Mahamed Warsame to five years in prison for storing weapons for AS in Hilwaa, Mogadishu.<sup>63</sup>

AS's use of women to facilitate attacks has also extended outside Somalia. In Kenya, Fadumo Mohamed Masuo, an AS widow from Somalia, was used by the group to set up safe houses in Mombasa. From the safe houses, AS operatives planned and carried out a number of operations along the Kenyan Coast, which included assassinations of security officials and community leaders.<sup>64</sup>

### *Violent Support for AS*

Despite AS's assertions to the contrary, the group has even, on rare occasions, used women as attackers. For example, on 20 February 2015, AS launched a complex attack at the Central Hotel in Mogadishu. The attack commenced with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) hitting the hotel wall during Friday prayers. During the commotion, Luul Dahir, a female suicide bomber, detonated her explosive vest. The hotel was popular with FGS officials, and at the time of the attack a number of Ministers were praying at the hotel's mosque.<sup>65</sup> Investigations carried out after the attack revealed that Dahir had worked at the hotel for four months as a receptionist and was a widow to Abdi Salan, an AS operative who died conducting an attack on Villa Somalia (the Presidential residence) in Mogadishu on 21 February 2014.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, in May 2014, two AS suicide bombers—Musa Roble Hirad (male) and Hodan Mohammed Isse (female)—attacked the La Chaumière restaurant in Djibouti.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Information on Ladan provided by a Beled Xaawo security official involved in the operations targeting her.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Radio Dalsan Reporter, 4 August 2018. <https://goo.gl/Zs81KP>

<sup>64</sup> Ombati, 28 September 2016. <https://goo.gl/YovXjH>

<sup>65</sup> Harding, 23 May 2015. <https://goo.gl/js3JrL>

<sup>66</sup> BBC, 21 February 2014. <https://goo.gl/abP972>

<sup>67</sup> Bahadur, 24 June 2014. <https://goo.gl/5XJ6mG>

## Challenges Faced by AS Wives

### *Healthcare*

Access to maternal healthcare remains a challenge in Somalia, a fact which is doubly true in AS-controlled areas. A majority of the women interviewed for this report noted that one of the most common reasons for a woman to leave an AS-controlled area for an FGS area is to access healthcare facilities.<sup>68</sup> Interviewee ASW7 noted that while AS employs doctors and midwives capable of handling and safely delivering babies, the group lacks specialized maternal and neonatal facilities. As a result, in AS-controlled areas, maternal mortality rates are much higher than in FGS-controlled towns such as Mogadishu and Kismayo, where many travel to give birth.<sup>69</sup>

### *Realities of War*

Being an AS wife necessitates something of a nomadic existence, especially during government offensives. During these periods, wives and children are often moved from town to town and never fully settle. One respondent noted that she had to move to and from, variously, Elasha Biya, Barawe, Kismayo and smaller towns in the Middle and Lower Jubbas because of military offensives.<sup>70</sup> Following a recent (May 2018) government offensive into Jubbaland, women living in AS-controlled towns there have grown increasingly anxious that they may be caught in the fighting.<sup>71</sup> This anxiety has led a number of them to complain of trouble sleeping out of fear of airstrikes.<sup>72</sup>

The continual relocation and fear of being a casualty of war has led a number of women to rethink their role within the group. ASW8 noted that a number of her AS contacts in the group's Middle Jubba stronghold now want to move to FGS-controlled towns if only for peace of mind. Moreover, Jubbaland security officials have noted a significant increase in the number of AS members defecting with their families since the launch of the current offensive. Recent defectors complained that the ongoing offensive has made life especially straining in certain AS-controlled areas.<sup>73</sup> The defector wives noted that AS has become paranoid about spies, which has made life "unbearable".<sup>74</sup> A Jubbaland security official assessed that with the offensive into AS-controlled areas ongoing, AS wives are likely to leave AS towns for FGS-controlled areas in greater numbers. The official suspects that women may even do so without informing their husbands, who may be on the front lines without access to communications.

### *Diminished Support over Time*

Despite strong initial support for the group, some of the women interviewed have come to feel that AS does not in fact follow Islamic principles. Some those interviewed said that

<sup>68</sup> Most interviewees noted that AS did not offer adequate maternal health care.

<sup>69</sup> Some interviewees were pregnant at the time of the research and had travelled to FGS-controlled towns to give birth.

<sup>70</sup> As stated by a number of AS wives interviewed, including ASW3 who had lived in a number of AS-held towns in the Jubbas.

<sup>71</sup> Garowe Online, 8 January 2017. <https://goo.gl/vxPJgS>

<sup>72</sup> Interview with ASW7, who remains in contact with a number of AS women in Jilib and Jamaame.

<sup>73</sup> As provided by a Jubbaland security official involved in vetting AS defectors and their families.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

AS was wrong to kill fellow Muslims, especially when carrying out indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Somalia. ASW9 noted that incidents like the 14 October 2017 truck bomb attack, which killed over 600 people, were unjustifiable. Additionally, ASW8 noted that AS has been known to unjustly imprison or kill people, often on unfounded accusations of 'spying' for hostile entities or simply for dissent. ASW8 gave an example from 2015 wherein a number of AS members—both local and foreign—were arrested and executed on suspicion of supporting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Daesh). The suspected Daesh supporters had been held for over two years with no trial before their executions.<sup>75</sup>

Over time, some AS wives noted that the group has become less pure, contravening its own stated principles whenever it deems convenient.<sup>76</sup> ASW8 said that despite claiming to be an Islamic movement, AS's daily operations run counter to Islamic values. As a corollary, AS defectors claim that dissent is growing within the group and it is increasingly viewed as non-Islamic.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with ASW8

<sup>76</sup> As provided by a Mogadishu-based security official involved in the defector program

<sup>77</sup> As provided by a Jubbaland security official involved in vetting AS defectors and their families.

## Leaving AS and Life After

FGS officials normally consider women “affiliated to AS” only by virtue of being married to an AS member. This definition is extended to include other women if they are found to be involved in AS operations.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, women's affiliation with the group is considered weaker (though not non-existent) if the woman is a divorcée or a widow, or if the woman's wife has defected from the group.<sup>79</sup> As was mentioned above, due to the daily radicalization undertaken in areas controlled by AS, it is very common for women who are either divorcées or widows to remarry into the group rather than leave it.<sup>80,81</sup>

Upon arriving to FGS-areas, former AS women are exposed to alternative voices and schools of thought from a variety of sources including their neighbors and the media. Some of the AS wives who live in FGS-controlled areas over time have changed their views of the group and have begun to see it as running contrary to widely-accepted Islamic principles.<sup>82</sup> ASW9, for one, admitted that living in Mogadishu gave her the opportunity to hear alternative voices. Other AS wives such as ASW4 said they preferred life in FGS-controlled areas despite still being married to an AS member. ASW4 said that she would rather her children had a regular education and not join AS. However, this was not the majority opinion.

### *Reintegrating into non-AS Communities*

Depending on the attitude of regional authorities, former AS wives and defectors are treated differently by local security officials. In Kismayo, the authorities have prioritized the threat posed by AS wives and have attempted to mitigate these by at times making the women sign letters in the presence of either their brother or father stating that they will not go back to AS territory under threat of banishment.<sup>83</sup> Alternatively, AS wives who claim that they have divorced their AS husbands are required to show a letter of divorce from an AS court, a rare instance of FGS and regional governments recognizing (in a limited way) the authority of AS courts.<sup>84</sup> Occasionally, authorities in Jubbaland (and especially in Kismayo) have used state media to urge women still married to AS members to leave town. Following such bulletins, all known AS wives are rounded up by security services and asked to leave.<sup>85</sup> However, these measures have proven ineffective as a deterrent for AS wives travelling between AS-controlled and FGS-controlled areas. AS wives often ignore such warnings and more-or-less live freely between the two.<sup>86</sup> Kismayo especially is a hotbed for AS wives living separately from their husbands.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>78</sup> As provided by security officials in Mogadishu and Kismayo.

<sup>79</sup> Based on discussions with security officials in Mogadishu and Kismayo who stated that once a woman has divorced an AS fighter, she is no longer considered part of the group.

<sup>80</sup> ASW7 divorced an AS fighter and got married to another. During her interview noted that it is common for women who have lost husbands to remarry into the group.

<sup>81</sup> As revealed by a Mogadishu-based intelligence official who described how the government views AS-affiliated women.

<sup>82</sup> ASW8 view of the group largely changed when she left AS-controlled areas for FGS-areas.

<sup>83</sup> As revealed by a Kismayo-based security official who noted that the requirement that AS women sign letters vowing not to go back to AS-held territories is unevenly applied.

<sup>84</sup> As revealed by both Mogadishu and Kismayo-based security officials.

<sup>85</sup> Jubbaland deports wives to AS members,” Goobjoog News, 21 September 2015. <https://goo.gl/riH9LB>

<sup>86</sup> As revealed by both an FGS security official in Mogadishu and a Jubbaland administrator in Kismayo.

<sup>87</sup> As revealed by a Kismayo-based security official.

## Conclusion

This report's findings paint a complicated picture of women and AS, with so many showing themselves to be much more than wives, mothers, and daughters. Rather, the women who marry AS members often do so wittingly. When joining, the women overwhelmingly support the group's jihadi goals both domestically (i.e. that the group is protecting Somalia from foreign invaders) and globally (in service of the larger Muslim community).

Whether or not the women fully support the AQ affiliate's goals, they have volunteered—or have been instrumentalized—to fulfill a number of goals, from opening businesses that help to fund AS operations, to running safe houses in government-controlled territory and abroad, to serving as intelligence gathering operatives on AMISOM and Somali Army bases, to participating themselves as attackers and suicide bombers.

To the group, their most important role is as vessels to transmit AS's ideology to what the group hopes will be its next generation of fighters—children. While Somali youth in AS-controlled territories are themselves required to attend daily indoctrination at AS-run mosques, so too are their mothers, who then continue this “education” in the home.

At the same time, one must recognize that AS wives are also victims, who are subjected to daily radicalization via mandatory daily lectures they are forced to attend at AS madrassas. While some have married AS fighters out of self-interest or to achieve a higher station for their family in a society in which one's fate is often determined by clan affiliation, others have essentially been forced into the marriages—and the lifestyle—often at a very young age.

According to interviewees, more and more AS wives have been turning against the group. It is already common practice for fighters to send their wives and children to government-controlled towns because of the perceived danger from airstrikes and joint Somali-US offensives, especially in the country's south. The fear that comes from the ongoing air war has caused a number of women to rethink their roles within the group, and the group's uncompromising—and at times hypocritical—application of its version of shari'a law has only exacerbated this disillusionment.

The picture that results is not a simple one, and many questions raised during this research are surely deserving of more study. Among them are the mechanics around leaving AS, whether one remains married to an AS fighter or not; the social habits and hierarchies between AS wives in AS-controlled territories; the difficulties integrating back into non-AS Somali society both from the point of view of the wives and that of the local community; and specific cognitive and narrative openings that would be particularly effective at cleaving AS wives from the group's pernicious ideology.





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