Returning home: the reintegration dilemmas of female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya

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Abstract: Gendered responses to the disengagement and reintegration of female defectors are needed to respond to trends that indicate increasing female radicalisation and growth in the recruitment of women into terrorist networks. The development of successful gender-sensitive amnesty policies and reintegration programmes is crucial, not only to prevent recidivism and re-engagement among female defectors, but also to mitigate the risk of further female radicalisation and recruitment at community level. This article, based on research conducted with female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya, explores women's gendered motives for joining the Al-Shabaab network, their experiences within it and their reasons for quitting in order to inform an evidence-based reintegration process. It identifies the gendered nuances involved in recruitment, disengagement and deradicalisation, and it also considers gender-specific aspects of reintegration, highlighting the need to focus on gendered needs, norms and the expectations of female Al-Shabaab defectors and the communities in which they are reintegrated.

Keywords: reintegration, defectors, Al-Shabaab, disengagement, amnesty policy, gender

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Introduction

Managing the return of Al-Shabaab and ISIS defectors in Kenya is a complex endeavour.[1] In April 2015, the Kenyan government launched an Amnesty and Reintegration Program which encouraged repentant Al-Shabaab individuals to return to Kenya and report to their county commissioners. The programme allowed return-ees considered eligible for amnesty to receive supports that would enable them to reintegrate into society (Downie 2018). In 2016, the reintegration process was further reinforced by a National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE), which aimed to cascade national-level efforts into county-level programming to deradicalise, rehabilitate and reintegrate Al-Shabaab defectors or returnees who were willing to leave the network and denounce its ideology. However, the amnesty process, while well intentioned, lacks clear guidelines for how defectors should be assisted. There is no reintegration policy to enable effective rehabilitation, and the ad hoc and haphaz-ard reintegration programmes that are currently in place have not yet been properly scrutinised.

The process through which the Al-Shabaab terrorist network recruits women and girls has been well documented, and researchers have emphasised the role that gender and gender differences have played in both radicalisation and recruitment (Badurdeen 2018a: 31). Yet there is no gendered framework for analysing derad-icalisation and reintegration efforts, and the existing frameworks tends to focus on defectors as a single group rather than taking specific gender intersectionalities into consideration. Nthamburi (2018: 71) highlights the research gap that exists in relation to the gender nuances involved in the reintegration process, even though 'gender' is identified as an important factor in Kenya's policies on countering violent extremism (CVE). The significant focus on men in CVE programming and planning is connected to the fact that security concerns are often male-biased, with limited focus on women and girls (Dharmapuri 2016: 36). The failure to address gender-sensitive concerns during the screening, investigation and prosecution of defectors upon their return risks creating a grey area that contributes to disengagement and poor reintegration, as well as limited success in countering violent extremism and terrorism.

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[1] Although Kenya also has ISIS or Daesh returnees, this article focuses on female Al-Shabaab defectors. Al-Shabaab is a transnational terrorist network which originated in Somalia in 2006, and it has since escalated terrorism and recruitment drives in the East African region and beyond. The words 'defector', 'foreign fighter' and 'returnee' are used synonymously in Kenya to define individuals who have joined the Al-Shabaab network; crossed Kenya's borders to become involved in the planning and execution of terrorist acts, mainly in Somalia; and have either returned to Kenya from the Al-Shabaab network or have become involved in activities in Somalia and elsewhere.

The motives of female Al-Shabaab defectors vary: some are defectors or returnees from the Al-Shabaab movement who joined the organisation but found it disappointing, while others have returned but still remain committed to Al-Shabaab's ideology, extremist ideals or violent methods. The terms 'Al-Shabaab returnee' and 'Al-Shabaab defector' are both used in this study, because not all those who return from Al-Shabaab are defectors, and the researcher does not know the real intentions of the research participants. The term 'Al-Shabaab defector' is used to refer specifically to those people who have returned from extremist involvement outside the country or disengaged from the Al-Shabaab network within the country. Kenyan authorities are faced with the problem of how to identify, screen, triage and manage threat risks effectively, at the same time as grappling with the scope for people's rehabilitation and effective reintegration into society.

In this article, the term 'reintegration' is used to refer to the restoration of a defector's social, familial and community ties, either in their own community or in a different locality the defector prefers. However, not all those who are successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated are deradicalised. Deradicalisation entails a gradual shift from radical extremist ideological positions to more moderate ideas, and it often takes years to deradicalise individuals successfully. At a global level, projects that seek to deradicalise terrorist defectors have yet to be evaluated for success, and deradicalisation processes aimed at individuals generally lack gender frameworks. The development of successful reintegration programmes that take gender-sensitive approaches to deradicalisation and rehabilitation is crucial (see Hills & MacKenzie 2017: 455; Henshaw 2020: 63), not only to prevent recidivism and re-engagement among returnees, but also to mitigate further radicalisation and recruitment of women at community level.

This article considers the influence of gender on the reintegration of Al-Shabaab female defectors in Kenya. The study is based on the premise that, in order for reintegration programming to be effective, it needs to be informed by returnees themselves (Horgan 2009a: 291), as well as by the host communities in which they are to be integrated (Altier 2021: 11–15). This evidence-based study supplements the meagre body of existing literature on the reintegration of Al-Shabaab defectors or returnees in Kenya and elsewhere in the East African region. It draws on the author's research with female defectors and returnees in Kenya to highlight gendered nuances in disengagement and reintegration processes and inform their improvement. This study pays particular attention to women's motivations for joining the Al-Shabaab network, their experiences and lives within it, and their reasons for leaving the network. It also considers gender-specific aspects of reintegration, highlighting the need to focus on gendered needs, norms and expectations in the communities that receive defectors and returnees.

Using narrative inquiry to research female Al-Shabaab defectors and returnees

This research is based on case studies of women and girls who joined or were recruited to Al-Shabaab. The case studies were recorded in the form of biographical narratives, and the biographical narrative method was selected for this study because it facilitates retrospective understanding of the daily lives of the women and girls who were involved with Al-Shabaab and either defected or returned from the network (Charon 2006). This methodology was chosen to facilitate the researcher's understanding of the lives of these women and girls before, during and after their involvement in the network and during the reintegration process. The article draws on the narratives of 23 women returnees or defectors, as well as 43 key informants. Key informant interviews were undertaken with returnees' family members, community mobilisers and other community members.

Data was collected over a five-month period (April–September 2017), during which 23 participants were interviewed, and follow-up interviews were carried out with some of the participants over a later three-month period (June–August 2018). The study was strengthened by the doctoral field research the researcher conducted with girls and women involved with, or considered at risk of, Al-Shabaab recruitment and radicalisation. The article also draws on a dataset of interviews conducted between March 2019 and December 2021 with participants who had defected from or had been involved with Al-Shabaab. This dataset (research for which was funded by the Pamoja Research Partnership) included interviews with defectors, at-risk youth and community members in areas deemed as hotspots in Nairobi and Mombasa.

Some participants were contacted through community support groups, while others were accessed through contacts established with the help of community mobilisers. Interviews with participants were conducted in locations agreeable to both the participant and the researcher, and subsequent interviews were arranged around their evolving life situations. More than one interview was conducted with each participant, and the time involved ranged from 1.5 to two hours, depending on how interactions developed between the researcher and the participant.

A number of factors affected the research process. Firstly, some returnees were unwilling to talk to the researcher due to fears about the consequences of discussing specific details of their involvement with the Al-Shabaab network. Even when people did participate, answers were often twisted by fear, and on some occasions, they were based on the interviewee's reintegration needs. Meanwhile, some information was evidently being withheld as female returnees or defectors did not want to be implicated in crimes committed during their time with the network. However, the triangulation

of defector narratives with contributions from other key informants enabled the researcher to develop a nuanced understanding of returnees' and defectors' experiences and gain insights into their reintegration experiences. The names of respondents and potentially identifying references to dates and places have been withheld here. Pseudonyms have also been used to maintain anonymity.

A second complicating factor was that the terms 'defector', 'returnee' and 'foreign fighter' are used interchangeably in the Kenyan context, and so the researcher could not easily establish whether or not the presumed extremists or terrorists participating or discussed in interviews had really defected from the terrorist network. Moreover, defectors from Al-Shabaab in Kenya may not have crossed borders or even left Kenya and may have been involved in carrying out the network's operations within the state. However, some useful distinctions can be made between these terms. The term 'foreign fighter' generally refers to an extremist who is involved in conflicts or violent activities outside their country of origin, although foreignness is rather difficult to assess when ethnicity and other clan dynamics cross borders within the African region (Olojo *et al.* 2018). The word 'returnee' is generally used to refer to Al-Shabaab recruits who have either returned to Kenya after having travelled to Somalia or have been intercepted at the borders of Tanzania, Uganda or any other country where they had been involved with Al-Shabaab activities. The term 'returnee' is also commonly used in CVE practitioner circles to define individuals who denounce Al-Shabaab ideology or have been deradicalised, and so it tends to indicate the denunciation of Al-Shabaab ideology or disengagement from the network.

Women in the Al-Shabaab network: recruitment and radicalisation

Female membership of the Al-Shabaab network is an evolving phenomenon that has generated interest within the discourse on how to counter violent extremism. The Al-Shabaab movement recruits members mainly from the Horn and East African regions, as well as from the West. The Somali militant organisation Al-Shabaab – also known as Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujahideen ('the youth') – came into existence in 2004 as the militant wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (Hansen 2013: 1–14). The demand for female Al-Shabaab network members has risen due to the ability of women and girls to evade security personnel and penetrate specific communities; it can also be attributed to the value of women's perceived skills in socialising Al-Shabaab ideology within their families and social networks. Women are also valuable to the network because they face less scrutiny at border checkpoints and are easily smuggled across borders. The gendered recruitment motives of terrorist organisations are therefore often based on rational, cost–benefit calculations (Badurdeen 2018b: 20).

The Kenyan media has increasingly reported on aspects of women's and girls' involvement with terrorist organisations, including travel to join Al-Shabaab or ISIS (Oketch 2015); the role of women and girls as recruiters; and their involvement as logistical and financial supporters, planners of terrorist acts, and even spies for the terrorist network. Reports on the role of women as recruiters emerged in relation to the cases of Rukia Faraj Kufugwa and Hania Said Sagar, who were convicted, in 2015 and 2016, of financing and conspiring to commit acts of terrorism (Ocharo 2016). Other prominent cases included the arrest in 2014 of Muna Osman Jama and Hinda Osman Dhirane, who were sentenced in the United States for providing material support to the Al-Shabaab networks in Kenya and Somalia (Milimo 2017). Women's involvement as combatants became evident when three women were alleged to have been involved in a suicide bombing at Mombasa's Central Police Station in 2016 (*Capital News* 2016). Additionally, women and girls have been shown to work as spies for the Al-Shabaab network, assisting in planning terror-related activities; providing logistical support for the concealment of personnel or weapons; acting as camp caretakers; and fulfilling traditional roles by cooking, cleaning and nursing the wounded (Badurdeen 2018a: 38). Al-Shabaab's use of women as suicide bombers who commit acts of terror on the front line has further challenged the assumptions that underpin Kenyan preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions, questioning their focus on men and necessitating the development of equivalent interventions for women and girls (Goldberg 2015).

The reintegration of female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya

States stress the important role of deradicalising and reintegrating defectors or returnees from terrorist networks in efforts to mitigate the risk of terrorist attacks. These state efforts concentrate on changing the terrorist behaviours of those who defect through processes of disengagement, deradicalisation and rehabilitation aimed at reintegrating them into communities (Bjørgo & Horgan 2008). The United Nations' CVE strategy focuses on the importance of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) to disengage armed combatants and reintegrate them into society; however, the effectiveness of DDR strategies in CVE remains to be proven. Existing programmes have rarely been evaluated, with few proven successes, and successful reintegration initiatives appear to be uncommon (Cockayne & O'Neil 2015). Analysis of reintegration programmes in Africa reveals the significant difficulties that arise in contexts where conflicts are ongoing, work to counter ideologies is challenging, resources are limited, and the screening processes used to distinguish between low- and high-risk detainees are problematic (Sharif 2018).

Studies have highlighted the fact that a limited focus on women and girls in DDR adds to these complexities (MacKenzie 2012; Tarnaala 2016; Mazurana & Eckerbom 2012; Henshaw 2020). In the East African region, for example, the effects of reintegration experiences on Al-Shabaab defectors from Somalia, Kenya and Uganda have yet to be assessed and gendered reintegration processes have still not been designed and evaluated. There is no perfect model for reforming a terrorist or effectively carrying out deradicalisation or reintegration processes, and the disengagement of an individual from a terrorist network does not necessarily mean that the individual has been deradicalised or that recidivism has been prevented (Horgan 2009b). Reintegration strategies for defectors or returnees require the screening of individuals who may fall into categories that complicate the reintegration process. These categories include disillusioned followers of the terrorist network; current followers who have committed acts of violence either abroad or locally; followers who have not committed acts of extremism; potential funders and recruiters for the terrorist network; and followers who are not fully deradicalised and still have the capability to carry out attacks (Interview with law enforcement staff member, June 2018).

There is a further need for programming and screening to be tailored to youth, women and children of various ages and for these procedures to acknowledge other intersectionalities that impact policy and practice. Reintegration programmes need to be flexible and configurable so that they can meet the needs of different types of recipients, and reintegration efforts are futile if different levels of radicalisation and the reintegration needs of groups including women and girls go unheeded (Shtuni 2021). Too often, reintegration is viewed from a gender-blind perspective (Hills & MacKenzie 2017: 457; Mazurana & Carlson 2004), and, as Nthamburi (2018) has noted, the reintegration programmes related to Kenya's returnee and defector amnesty programme become futile if the process does not account for gender frameworks.

In April 2015, the Kenyan government, through its National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), announced an amnesty programme for Kenyans who had travelled to Somalia with the intention of joining Al-Shabaab. According to a statement made by the then cabinet secretary Joseph Nkaissery, those willing to surrender would be considered eligible for reintegration supports. The amnesty offer marked a shift from the government's previously hard-line approach to the terrorist threat to a more nuanced position. This fresh approach to counterterrorism aimed to work with individuals who were disengaging from Al-Shabaab rather than striving to eliminate individuals involved in terrorism. This strategy, which the NSCVE calls a 'soft' policy, has been coordinated by the NCTC and has involved the design of programmes to deradicalise, rehabilitate and reintegrate defectors and returnees who are willing to leave the Al-Shabaab network. Although there are no reliable figures for the number

of returnees, the government estimated that 1,500 former Al-Shabaab returnees had surrendered by February 2016 (Chanjl 2016).

The initial phase of the amnesty was well received, as individuals went through deradicalisation programmes and reintegration processes got underway through the provision of support for small-scale businesses that could be used to support the livelihoods of reintegrated people (Downie 2018). However, the programme was not without its failures. Al-Bulushi & Daghar (2018) highlighted that the amnesty programme for returnees provided opportunities for the government to detain terror suspects indefinitely. Meanwhile, Praxides (2021) and Ogada (2017: 6) emphasised the lack of clarity within the Kenyan returnee amnesty programmes, as the overall programme lacked a legal and policy framework, a factor that impeded the measurement of its success and understanding of the role of its stakeholders. The amnesty programme was also criticised for ignoring the concerns of women and girls (Nthamburi 2018: 71). Without empirical data on the 'different motivations, recruitment pathways, and reasons for their return' (Badurdeen 2020: 636) and CVE initiatives specifically designed to reintegrate Al-Shabaab female returnees or defectors, reintegration and rehabilitation efforts will be hampered 'because different female motivations and pathways entail different mitigation efforts' (Badurdeen 2020: 636).

Pathways and motivations to join Al-Shabaab

Knowledge about the individual motivations that support female recruitment and defection pathways will support the development of effective deradicalisation and reintegration programming for female defectors. Returnees or defectors make up a heterogeneous group with different motives influencing their decisions to join and leave the network. Deradicalisation and reintegration processes ought to explore their motives for joining (Perlinger *et al.* 2016) and leaving the network (Altier *et al.* 2014), before adopting gender-sensitive, case-by-case approaches to rehabilitation. Case-by-case action plans should be informed by an evidence-based needs and risk assessment framework that focuses on the reasons why and the processes through which women and girls joined the network in the first place. This approach would address two concerns that arise in relation to the design of reintegration programmes. Firstly, it would reveal individuals' different intrinsic or extrinsic motivations to enable better understanding of each person's recruitment story (Badurdeen 2020: 618) and provide insights into the innate needs and desires that can help shape her reintegration process. Secondly, the explanation as to 'why' and 'how' a woman or girl joined would enable understanding of the reasons why she left the network, including disillusionment and unmet needs or desires. However, it also needs to be acknowledged that an individual's

motivations for joining the network and her needs and desires may have changed due to the training and skills gained and interactions experienced within the network, where teaching and attitudes encountered may have shaped new decision-making processes (Ross 1996: 140).

The gendered recruitment processes that lead women and girls into Al-Shabaab exist on a continuum that includes voluntary and involuntary (deceptive) pathways (Badurdeen 2018a: 41). Voluntary recruitment pathways involve individuals joining the Al-Shabaab network of their own free will. Involuntary or deceptive recruitment pathways feature forced recruitment activities, such as trickery via employment or marriage scams, forced marriages and other strategies that manipulate women's subordinate positions in families. However, there should be no binary distinction between voluntariness and involuntariness, as these types of recruitment exist on a continuum in a dynamic terrorist recruitment process (Badurdeen 2018a). Individuals often fluctuate from voluntary to involuntary involvement, with positive and negative experiences and interactions inside the movement shaping their decisions. Gendered recruitment pathways into Al-Shabaab mean a gender-sensitive framework is needed to inform CVE initiatives and facilitate critical understanding of the gender dynamics of the recruitment process for women and girls (Badurdeen 2018a). Voluntary recruitment related to intrinsic or extrinsic gratification is often based on religious, spiritual, financial or political motives shaped by gendered experiences (as shown in Figure 1), but ideological efforts to radicalise and recruit female members are also gendered, with gendered propaganda being used to recruit women into Islamist militant networks (Badurdeen 2020: 630).

Macro- and meso-level factors, including political opportunities and constraints, such as marginalisation or Islamophobia, as well as heavy-handed counterterrorism strategies, are some of the factors that lead some women to join the Al-Shabaab network based on autonomous decision-making processes (Badurdeen 2021: 257). Intrinsic forms of motivation are driven by the ideological, religious, spiritual or financial lures that link inner satisfaction with joining the network. Marital relationships or other relationships driven by romantic love; spiritual satisfaction linked to religious or ideological fulfilment; and interest in taking revenge against the state or carrying out the desires of an extremist family are some of the intrinsic motives that drive individual decision-making. These factors in voluntary recruitment can also be categorised as extrinsic forms of motivation, if a woman or girl joins the Al-Shabaab network for external rewards, such as money, fame, praise or status within marital, family or peer relationships. Nevertheless, not all those who join Al-Shabaab do so voluntarily. Some have been coerced into the network using threats, deceptive strategies including job and marriage scams, and even kidnappings or abductions (Badurdeen 2018b: 40).
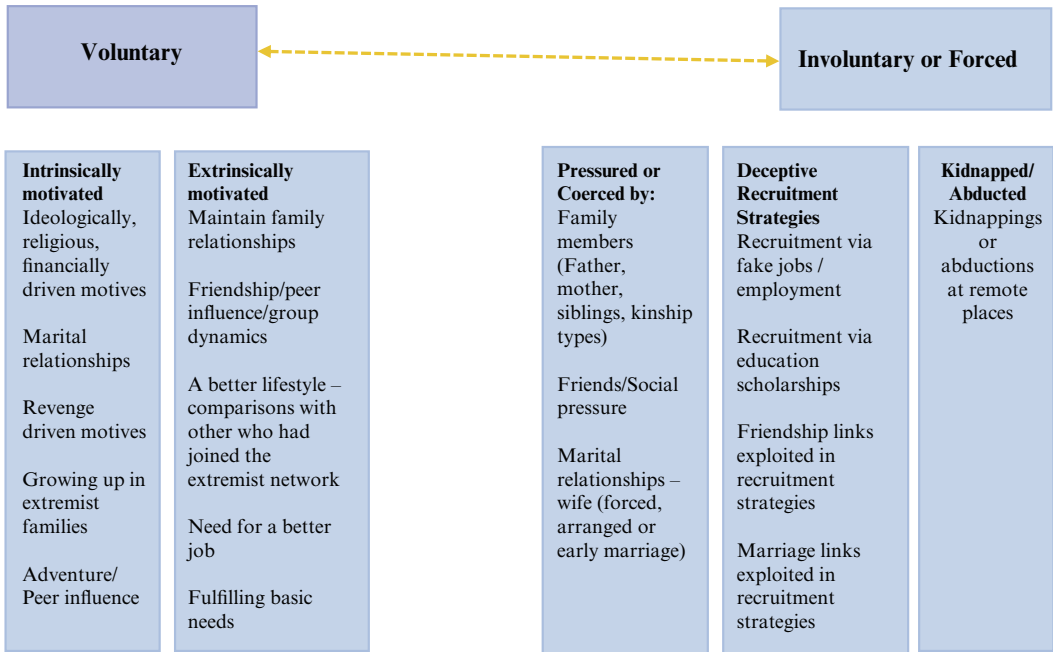
| Voluntary | | | ←- - - - - - - - - - - → | Involuntary or Forced | | |

Intrinsically motivated	Extrinsically motivated		Pressured or Coerced by:	Deceptive Recruitment Strategies	Kidnapped/ Abducted
Ideologically, religious, financially driven motives	Maintain family relationships		Family members (Father, mother, siblings, kinship types)	Recruitment via fake jobs / employment	Kidnappings or abductions at remote places
Marital relationships	Friendship/peer influence/group dynamics		Friends/Social pressure	Recruitment via education scholarships	
Revenge driven motives	A better lifestyle – comparisons with other who had joined the extremist network		Marital relationships – wife (forced, arranged or early marriage)	Friendship links exploited in recruitment strategies	
Growing up in extremist families	Need for a better job			Marriage links exploited in recruitment strategies	
Adventure/ Peer influence	Fulfilling basic needs				

Figure 1. Recruitment pathways for women and girls in the Al-Shabaab network
Source: Badurdeen (2018b: 41).

Often, assessment of these motives and corresponding recruitment pathways provides understanding about the returnee's or defector's reintegration needs. For example, Mariam, a 25-year-old who joined the Al-Shabaab network as a religious teacher, claimed that she initially did not realise that she was joining Al-Shabaab. As a passionate Muslim woman who craved an Islamic education and job, she wanted to become a madrasa teacher. At first, she was convinced by a friend to join a madrasa where she could further her Islamic education. Later, she was asked to join the network to secure better pay as a religious preacher. Having become part of a religious network, she believed she had found her purpose in life. But, after two years, she felt cheated, as she did not feel she was experiencing 'real Islam', and she ran away from camp life. She explained that, as the breadwinner for her family with responsibility for feeding her three siblings, she saw the network as the only viable option for her in 2016. However, she argued that if she had known Al-Shabaab was an extremist network and if she had had better job opportunities as an Islamic teacher in Kenya, she would never have considered joining. She was looking forward to having a job and a better life after reintegration in the mainstream community (Interview with Mariam, female returnee, July 2018).

Ummu, a 27-year-old woman who joined the network in 2016 and left a year later, explained that she was attracted to the ideological tenets of Al-Shabaab, which she used to discuss constantly with a friend. She felt it was her mission to save the Muslim

ummah (the entire community of Muslims), and some members of her family sympathised with the plight of Muslims who were experiencing discrimination in Kenya and elsewhere, agreeing with the belief that a Muslim-governed land or a caliphate was necessary for Muslims to govern themselves and secure equality. She felt she had a very important role in the Al-Shabaab network as a woman. She worked day and night for the network but came back after a year to see her children, whom she missed deeply (Interview with Ummu, female returnee, August 2018).

Juliet did not think she would ever become involved with Al-Shabaab, but, as an orphan and a school dropout, she did not have many options and had to hunt for jobs as a home help. After a long search, she found a good house to work in, but she did not realise her female employer was an Al-Shabaab recruiter until she travelled with her to Garissa. From there, she was convinced to travel from the house of one recruiter's relative to another, until she was forced to travel through thick forests to a camp. After a torturous time there, she escaped from the camp. She was angry at herself for trusting her employer. Upon her return from the camp, she was desperately looking forward to getting a job and settling back into the community (Interview with Juliet, female returnee, August 2018).

These three cases highlight the diverse motives and recruitment pathways women experience. Mariam and Ummu describe a voluntary recruitment pathway, while Juliet's involvement with Al-Shabaab was entirely involuntary and she was fervently looking forward to starting a new life. Mariam and Ummu were attracted to the network thanks to religious motives, along with multiple other pull factors, including employment and a sense of purpose. In terms of their exit motives, Mariam felt cheated because life in the network did not resonate with the Islamic teachings she knew, while Ummu was anxious to see her children. Assessment of each of these women in their respective contexts is needed to design an effective reintegration strategy based on why they joined and defected from the Al-Shabaab network. Caution needs to be applied in cases where women and girls are forced into Al-Shabaab by their husbands or family members via subservient relationships or intimidation strategies (Badurdeen 2020: 631). Similarly, there are cases of women who are trapped in the camps or commute to and from the camps, either to follow their spouses or to trace children who are lost in the network. These women may succumb and become innocent victims of the network, or they may become sympathisers or even deepen their allegiance to Al-Shabaab (Field notes, Mombasa, August 2019). Examination of different cases reveals the complex nature of the motives and gendered pathways that need to be explored prior to women's deradicalisation and reintegration. Further considerations need to be accounted for, including how certain forms of knowledge, skills, group dynamics and learning experiences within the Al-Shabaab network may have changed and shaped the perceptions women and girls have about the outside world.

Causes for disengagement

Evaluating the potential for individuals to reintegrate entails an assessment of the reasons why they disengaged from the network. The gendered roles a person performed as an Al-Shabaab member, the status associated with being a female member in the network and the lives women lived in the camps often help to explain why an individual may elect to disengage from or leave the network. Anyone who joins a terrorist organisation brings individual expectations to their involvement, and there is potential for disengagement if these expectations are unmet or are incompatible with a person's knowledge and skills. Factoring in knowledge about the roles individuals played in the network provides clues to the reasons for their disengagement, which can be critical in assessing individuals' potential for deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (Altier *et al.* 2021: 308–9).

Female Al-Shabaab members act as combatants, spies, recruiters, fundraisers, cooks, tailors, cleaners, religious preachers, logistics planners and sex slaves. Additionally, some women head mission-planning, money-laundering and communication projects from outside the camps (Badurdeen 2018a: 37). Interview narratives reflected the fact that roles which were considered low status or difficult, or incurred disrespect, were more likely to lead to disengagement from the Al-Shabaab network.

Most of the women interviewed explained that they had become tired and frustrated with their roles in the Al-Shabaab network. Nusra, a 29-year-old woman who joined Al-Shabaab with her husband, had to run away after 18 months, following his death, after which the chores allotted to her increased until she was working more than 18 hours a day, helping to cook, clean and do the camp's washing.

> I was tired, 'til I could not concentrate, I was even losing my eyesight and was becoming weak. I had to work even if I was sick. If I don't work, I will not get food. I was rarely given medicines and had to wait 'til they [a member] brought it. I was just surviving on a day-to-day basis. (Interview with Nusra, female returnee, June 2018)

Jasmine gave similar reasons for returning to Kenya as she had no hope in the network. Jasmine joined Al-Shabaab in 2017, partly because she was attracted to its much-vaunted religious ideologies and also because she was influenced by her husband and his family. Due to her knowledge of Islamic theology, she was given a role as a religious preacher, which saw her train new recruits. She often had to teach what she saw as misinterpretations of verses, and she came to resent the network. Her feeling that she was being cheated within Al-Shabaab led her to seek opportunities to run away from the camp (Interview with Jasmine, female returnee, August 2018).

Jasmine, Nusra, Mariam, Ummu and Juliet expressed views about their roles in the network which reflected their disillusionment, frustration and anger with the

terrorist organisation, and these feelings can be categorised as some of the push and pull factors that explain individuals' decisions to disengage or remain. Altier *et al.* describe push factors for disengagement as:

> experiences related to one's involvement in terrorism that drive him or her away and include burnout, difficulty living a clandestine lifestyle, loss of faith in the ideology, and disagreements with leaders or group members. Pull factors are influences outside the group that attract one to a more traditional social role, such as the desire to marry and have a family, the demands of a conventional career, and the promise of amnesty or material rewards. (Altier *et al.* 2017: 306)

The prevailing patriarchal and hierarchical structure in the Al-Shabaab network affects the roles and statuses provided to the network's female members and creates disenchantment. Al-Shabaab ideology and recruitment narratives promote the creation of an East African caliphate for the Muslim *ummah*, where all Muslims will be equal. However, female defectors described their plight within the network quite differently, explaining that they were discriminated against based on their race and tribe. Women of Somali ethnicity were treated better than others, and the trust bestowed on them was reflected in the positions allocated to them within the network, where they often served as camp guards, leaders of the women in the camp or combatants, and took on other supervisory roles. Arab women and foreign Muslims (e.g. European Muslims) were the next most favoured group, while women from Kenya who belonged to other tribes were given roles at the organisation's lowest rungs, often acting as cleaners and cooks, with some even being required to become sex slaves. All women had to undergo compulsory training, so that they would be able to defend themselves and the camps (Interviews with Nusra and Salma, female returnees, June and July 2018).

Exceptions were made in the camps for female members who gained trust within the network. For example, some Kenyan women who were capable of recruiting or gathering information in specific localities were given priority; theologically talented female members were often positioned as religious preachers in the camps; and educated female members, who could support the network with specific skills (e.g. computing and other technical knowledge), were given priority in the recruitment of teams responsible for devising strategic endeavours (Interview with Salma, female returnee, August 2018). Positions of influence were also allocated based on female members' marriages to men in leadership positions.

Remarriage practices also reflected women's positions in the network's power structure. After the death of her husband, a Somali woman in Al-Shabaab can decide if she wants to marry or not and make a choice as to whom to marry. If her husband was a leader, she is able to choose marriage to men with similar leadership status. Some other women, including those of Arab, Kenyan or Somali ethnicity, and other

foreigners, are also given leeway to make their own marriage choices. But the majority of those from other tribes are forced to marry or remarry based on decisions made by the network's leadership or individual men's preferences. Some women are even given as gifts after missions are accomplished (Interview with Nusra, female returnee, July 2018). Frustrations arising from this hierarchisation of women's treatment in the camps often led female members to plot their departure.

The harrowing narratives of those individuals who leave Al-Shabaab or escape indicate how individuals navigate their individual routes to freedom and a new life. Insights into the emotional experiences of women who leave can strengthen assessments of the risks they pose and/or their reintegration needs. Extreme frustration may shape the decisions women and girls make to never return to the camps, but their exit encounters will still provide valuable information about how and why they disengaged from the network. Often, disillusioned female members will find their way out by learning the geography around their camp and using this knowledge to plan their exit. Others will use relationships, and even seduction, to convince individuals to provide assistance that will help them make their way out of a camp (Interview with Jasmine, female returnee, August 2018).

Some members bribe their way out of Al-Shabaab camps or get assistance from other disillusioned members of the network (Interview with Nusra, female returnee, June 2018), and some women and girls are able to seek outside help when they meet villagers or take part in missions outside the camp on behalf of the Al-Shabaab network (Interview with Mariam, female returnee, July 2018). Other returnees are enabled to leave by government or law enforcement interventions, mainly after the capture of a camp or Al-Shabaab foothold. Some use human smuggler networks or other forms of criminal networks to leave camps with the assistance of boat or truck drivers, or *boda boda* (bike or motorcycle taxi) drivers. A few women choose to gain trust in the network and create some space for life outside the camps, either by carrying out external roles as recruiters or by taking on roles that see them setting up cells in fresh localities or providing logistical support for network members (Interview with village elder, July 2018).

The options for creating successful reintegration processes are narrowed by the difficulties involved in producing clear and well-ascertained risk assessments for disengaged female members who are prone to re-engagement and recidivism. The term 're-engagement' denotes 'a return to terrorism after a period of disengagement, regardless of whether the disengagement was involuntary, or voluntary and perhaps not on law enforcement's radar' (Altier *et al.* 2021: 837). However, the evidence gathered for this study suggests that re-engagement is less likely when the individual has voluntarily made the decision to disengage. The narratives shared by female Al-Shabaab defectors suggested that their willingness to disengage was primarily based on the following pull

factors: the amnesty offer provided by the Kenyan government; family and community acceptance of the individual; the livelihood opportunities and financial incentives available for a better life; the possibility of creating a new life, often explained as the opportunity to marry a good person or to be with children or parents; and divergence from the brand of religious ideology promoted by Al-Shabaab.[2]

Gendered experiences of reintegration

The desirability of the Kenyan government's amnesty policy was a key pull factor for people disengaging from the Al-Shabaab network. The amnesty programme announced in 2015 (Downie 2018) saw the government make efforts to assist terrorist defectors who were willing to surrender. The government-led scheme, implemented in partnership with an international organisation, offered livelihood programmes for defectors to enable them to reintegrate. Both male and female defectors were screened, given counselling and offered livelihood alternatives, including opportunities to set up either transport businesses (e.g. as *boda-boda* and *tuk tuk* – three-wheeled auto-rickshaw – operators) or business ventures, including salons, shops and facilities for selling frozen fish (Interview with a family member of a defected Al-Shabaab member, July 2018).

Gender sensitivity in livelihood and empowerment programmes is key to the success of their reintegration efforts. Some livelihood options for defectors failed as there was no clear gendered assessment of what was needed for the defector to reintegrate into the community. A non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff member from Kwale explained the need for a step-by-step approach that would couple realistic livelihood options with empowerment programmes and psychosocial supports (Interview with NGO staff member, August 2018). The success of this approach depends on a gendered assessment that takes into consideration what works best on a case-by-case basis, coupled with appropriate psychosocial support.

Most defectors have encountered some level of trauma during their lives. Trauma is gendered, and therefore psychosocial assessment and intervention, alongside livelihood support, is key for successful reintegration. A community mobiliser who had worked to help defectors reintegrate in their communities explained that some livelihood projects failed mainly because some defectors had experienced high levels of trauma and lived in fear of being kept under surveillance, either by Al-Shabaab or by law enforcement personnel, while others 'did not simply know how to manage the

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[2] These themes were derived from the small sample of interviews with women defectors who were able to respond about their motivations for return (n = 19).

given livelihood opportunity' (Interview with community mobiliser, June 2018). This issue of life skills competency after trauma was alluded to by another participant who went through the amnesty programme and was provided with a livelihood as part of her reintegration package. She reflected on the fact that she was unable to cope with her life due to unresolved trauma and so had to sell her salon equipment. She suffered from constant nightmares and panic attacks and did not know what to do after this setback to move her life forward (Interview with female returnee, July 2018).

An understanding of gender roles is of pivotal importance to the facilitation of disengagement and reintegration processes. Critical roles are often performed by the mothers, wives and other family members of defectors, who can help to clarify the extremist's decision-making processes around disengagement and then reintegration. Often, extremists will reach out to women – including mothers and wives – when they are dissatisfied with the Al-Shabaab network, and seeing the tears of a mother, wife or child can give an extremist powerful motivation to return to her community. Sometimes, an extremist will contact family members to ask for help with returning to her family (Interview with NGO staff member, March 2019). Some family members provide the financial resources an extremist needs to return home, and they may also assist by providing logistical support, including temporary stays at relatives' houses, while some parents even go to the extent of negotiating with the terrorist network, providing money in return for their child's freedom (Interview with a woman leader of a community-based organisation, July 2018).

A few parents even negotiate with Al-Shabaab intermediaries, such as Al-Shabaab-affiliated business networks, criminal gangs or human smuggler rackets, to seek assistance in bringing their children home. A participant explained that these gangs and trafficking networks were the same organisations that were used to recruit their children into the network in the first place (Interview with a woman leader of a community-based organisation, March 2019). Once a member of Al-Shabaab returns home, mothers and other family members often help to maintain secrecy about their involvement in extremism and support the individual in their reintegration efforts. A variety of explanations are offered to community members to maintain this secrecy; for example, interviewees gave examples of people claiming that their child had returned after a stint of work in Nairobi or a year or two in Saudi Arabia or Dubai (Interview with a religious leader, July 2018). Some participants highlighted the skills that mothers and other family members need to have to help a defector reintegrate and return to normal life (Interview with a returnee's family members, March 2019); one mother suggested that supportive parental involvement in reintegration requires skills in counselling, deradicalisation, and risk management (Interview with a returnee's mother, 2018).

Female defectors are more likely than their male counterparts to receive cooperation and support from their families and community members. This is mainly because

many families and communities believe gendered stereotypes around women's passivity and more readily accept women's status as victims when it comes to Al-Shabaab radicalisation and recruitment. Women and girls were often viewed with less suspicion than men who had been involved with the network, and family and community members were more likely to trust a female defector's capacity for change and to facilitate her reintegration efforts (Interview with a woman leader of a community-based organisation, March 2019). Community members suggested that girls and women were often following their partners, boyfriends or husbands when they joined Al-Shabaab or were duped into joining the network via deceptive offers of employment or education opportunities, and so less blame was attached to women (Interview with a member of the Peace Committee,[3] 2018).

Most often, community members believed that women and girls were recruited via manipulation rather than as a result of autonomous decision-making and would therefore find it easy to disengage and reintegrate if they became frustrated with Al-Shabaab (Interview with a woman leader of a community-based organisation, 2019). Female members build relationships faster in the community due to the community support they garner and so they are able to reintegrate quickly, especially if they are well supported by their immediate families and other relatives. This contrasts with how some community members view and treat boys and men in relation to the reintegration process. Some participants expressed the view that boys and men return with 'hidden motives' and may be planning attacks or even recruiting new members from the community. While some community members noted that female defectors may use their defector status to assist the network by providing logistical support or aiding in recruitment efforts, this involvement was generally regarded as an outcome of intimidation women had experienced within the Al-Shabaab network (Interview with a village elder, 2017).

Family members of female defectors often supported the individual by assisting in her marriage, encouraging remarriage to a new partner (if the previous husband was affiliated with Al-Shabaab) or settling her into a new environment (Interview with a village elder, 2018). In the case of Rukiya, her parents and community members supported her reintegration. Her parents assisted her with a place to stay with her two children and provided financial support and protection, while her uncle, a village elder and an imam, gave her constant guidance and advice. It took some time for Rukiya to gain the trust of other community members and relatives, a process which she described as quite natural. She explained that she faced stigma in the community as people often looked at her with suspicion and even targeted her with derogatory names:

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[3] Peace Committees are local structures made up of village leaders whose role is to resolve local-level conflicts.

> Relatives take time to accept me as they are scared of me. Neighbours did look at me with suspicion. They referred to me with evil names. I took turns living with a few relatives who trusted me. Eventually, they learnt to accept me. After all, I am a mother. They knew that I can't do anything wrong that will affect the future of my kids. (Interview with Rukiya, female returnee, 2017)

Reducing the stigmatisation of female or male returnees in the community influences returnees' decisions about reintegration. Defectors attempting to reintegrate are dependent on how their families and their respective societies perceive them and how ready they are to accept them. Female and male defectors often weigh their options carefully before reintegrating, evaluating opportunities such as livelihood supports and their options for building new or reformed lives. Most of the female defectors involved in this study expressed their need for community acceptance, as well as a desire to achieve normalcy through acts such as getting married and settling down to build a family and have children (Interview with a woman leader of a community-based organisation, July 2018).

Juliet, a returnee aged 32, expressed concern that community members often view women who have returned from Al-Shabaab as 'being used', on the assumption that they have been sex slaves or have had multiple sex partners in the network. While this may be true in some cases (not all were sex slaves or had participated in multiple relationships), Juliet argued that this type of labelling prevents women from reintegrating into their home community, where people might engage in gossip about their lives. As a result of this type of response, some women prefer to be reintegrated into society far away from their home communities so they can make a fresh start (Interview with Juliet, August 2018). Campaigns which seek to reduce community stigmatisation and change popular perceptions will enable people to understand the plight of female Al-Shabaab defectors and improve the community supports offered towards their reintegration.

Interventions by civil society organisations (CSOs) and supports provided by community members are vital to the acceptance and rehabilitation of returnees after local screening processes have been completed with the participation of family members, village elders and local chiefs (Interview with an NGO staff member, August 2018). Screening and risk assessments which take into account gender sensitivities, local knowledge and international standards are key to strengthening the reintegration process. A clear and consistent risk assessment process enables law enforcement authorities to determine who is to be detained, cleared for rehabilitation or designated as ready for reintegration. Distinguishing between low- and high-risk defectors is often a complex process that involves the use of professional interrogation skills and long-term intelligence-gathering from family and community members who have knowledge of the defecting extremist. While law enforcement professionals are responsible

for most of Kenya's assessment and screening functions, it is recommended that some of the CSOs currently assisting with rehabilitation and reintegration processes should be trained in the basics of screening and risk assessment so that they are able to support the role of the government in determining the cases of disengaged Al-Shabaab members. The government needs to take advantage of the fact that reintegration processes were in place at the community level even prior to the formation of the NCTC and the roll-out of the amnesty programme in Kenya and harness skills and knowledge at local level (Interview with a religious leader, March 2019).

Often, CSOs and community members work in a clandestine way to help assess defectors and build their trust in the government amnesty programme before handing their cases over to the relevant authorities. Secrecy is involved because many CSOs fear they will face repercussions and will, wrongly, be labelled as Al-Shabaab sympathisers or Al-Shabaab funders if they are seen to be assisting Al-Shabaab defectors (Kubania 2015). Community members also play their own roles and sometimes intervene to enable defectors to reintegrate in their communities. For example, a village elder explained that a female defector was accepted in secrecy to enable her to reintegrate gradually into her family and the community:

> This is a girl from this community, she has made a mistake willingly or unwillingly. But now she is ready to come back as she also has suffered being with the Al-Shabaab. It is our responsibility to assist her [to] settle here. The lesser the people know about, the better it is as she can adjust without much attention on her. Her parents are really trying to help her settle here. My fear is, if we do not support, she has to run away again, sometimes even back to the group [Al-Shabaab] that she doesn't like to be with. (Interview with a village elder, July 2018)

Interventions need to be culturally specific and respond to differences in the recruitment trends and radicalisation propaganda women have encountered in Kenya and elsewhere. Interventions that may be applicable in Somalia may not necessarily work in Kenya. For example, the ideological tenets used to recruit Somali women affirm Somali nationalism and Islamism, whereas Al-Shabaab is represented to Kenyan women as a transnational network seeking cross-border involvement in support of an Islamic caliphate in East Africa. In Kenya, recruitment efforts and propaganda therefore focus on ideas such as the 'Muslim *ummah*', the 'role of motherhood and the Muslim woman for a stronger caliphate' or '*hijra* [migration] to a land ruled by an Islamic ruler'. An understanding of these differences is important when framing female deradicalisation processes. For instance, female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya often require trained female *ustadhas* (religious scholars)[4] with sufficient theological

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[4] *Ustadhas* are female religious scholars who have graduated from an institute of Islamic higher learning. In Kenya, *ustadhas* are also involved in religious education and community work.

knowledge to deconstruct ideas that can inhibit deradicalisation (Interview with an NGO staff member, March 2019).

Designing a reintegration strategy focused on gender and intersectionality to cater to the needs of the defectors is crucial. It is important to acknowledge that women and girls are not a homogeneous group and fall into different categories based on age, ethnicity, religion and income level. They therefore have diverse needs, and interventions should be designed on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, female members need assistance when they leave the Al-Shabaab network and come to unfamiliar cities where they cannot call on their families and other social connections. They lack support and information that would help them understand where to report their cases and what to do next. Having come from difficult environments, sometimes having been on the run for days and preoccupied by hunger and fear, these women have immediate as well as long-term needs. In such cases, it is necessary to build community awareness about how best to assist defectors (e.g. through trust-building and safe reporting routes).

It is also vital to combine psychosocial care, in the form of individual counselling, mentoring and personalised interventions, with efforts to strengthen family ties and community relationships. Many women have left their husbands and children, as well as the network, behind. Through their lives in the camps or roles in other parts of the network, they may have participated in disturbing events or endured horrendous experiences and torture, which are often difficult for individuals to process. They are often in depressive states of mind, to one degree or another, and need psychosocial and emotional support. Adequate counselling, in the form of individual and group counselling, coupled with the strengthening of their relationships with their parents or other family members, is important, and assisting them with spiritual needs is another valuable tool that can contribute to their disengagement process (Interview with a religious leader, 2018). The following narratives highlight the need for psychosocial support:

> I run from one place to another. Every vehicle I hear is like they [police] have come to take me. It is unbearable when I hear noises. I hear a woman, I feel it is my camp guard. I hear a man, I feel he has come to have sex with me. I look at my door every time. I even dream that it is opening on its own. (Interview with Mercy, female returnee, July 2017)

> I have started to hate this dress [*bui bui* and the niqab – traditional forms of Muslim dress]. I see all women in *bui bui* as women who have come to drag me out. The men in *kanzus* who had come to beat me. I even don't wear like a Muslim now. I was a Muslim before, and I am still a Muslim. But I live like a Christian and look like a Christian as I am scared. When I hear prayers, I shiver. I have scary memories of my camp life. I am scared to go out. (Interview with Kadija, female returnee, August 2018)

Skills training, livelihood opportunities, health screening and legal aid will all enable female defectors to become independent and encourage them to seek better alternatives in life. For those female members who are threatened or intimidated in their localities, the best option is to settle them in new locations and provide forms of security (Interview with a woman leader of a community-based organisation, July 2018). Long-term projects that provide counselling and livelihood supports with a gender focus are vital, not just to prevent recidivism and re-engagement, but also to promote long-term reintegration and inclusion. Finally, P/CVE programmes can be strengthened if the stories of female champions are incorporated to help de-glamorise Al-Shabaab recruitment appeals. Ultimately, it is important to harness the experiences of these women and girls so they can inform the design and implementation of programmes aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (Interview with an NGO staff member, July 2017).

Conclusion

If efforts to reintegrate defectors are to be successful, a gendered lens needs to be applied in a comprehensive assessment of all phases of a defector's involvement with Al-Shabaab. Female motivations and recruitment pathways may vary, but they differ significantly from male motivations and routes into Al-Shabaab. Similarly, exit and reintegration pathways may differ and will be largely dependent on contextual, socio-cultural factors. The use of first-hand information drawn from the personal narratives of defectors, as well as perspectives from family members, local communities and CSOs in their respective localities, is vital to the design of successful reintegration programmes.

The amnesty programme implemented by the government of Kenya gave both male and female network members a strong motive to defect from Al-Shabaab. However, a lack of clarity within the amnesty policy, coupled with safety concerns for surrendered defectors and the lack of a gendered framework, has impeded the process and stages of disengagement (Interview with a CSO member, 2019). This article has demonstrated that effective reintegration in communities is dependent on the effective disengagement and deradicalisation of Al-Shabaab defectors. Furthermore, effective reintegration of female Al-Shabaab members is linked to the reasons why they first joined the movement, their recruitment pathways, their commitment to the movement, their lives in the camps, their reasons for leaving and conducive factors for reintegration. Reintegration programmes also need to ascertain and take into account the changing gender roles of defectors after their return (see Specht & Attree 2006: 219). For example, some end up as family breadwinners if they are war widows, while others

may end up alone if their families or communities disown them. Moreover, some female members may find it difficult to transition to civilian lives and build social relationships with community members (Friedman 2018: 632; Hauge 2020: 206).

The motivations that lead defectors or returnees to disengage hinge on a number of push and pull factors (Altier *et al.* 2017: 307), as well as the availability of channels that enable effective disengagement processes (Khalil *et al.* 2019: 425) and which play a crucial role in successive rehabilitation, deradicalisation and reintegration processes. Successful rehabilitation and reintegration programmes should address a wide range of the defectors' needs, and so they require careful, gender-sensitive assessment processes that review each person's psychosocial, vocational, financial, educational, legal, religious, familial and communication needs on a case-by-case basis. Services should also extend their work beyond catering to the needs of returnees and defectors to support their family members, people who are deemed to be at risk of involvement in violent extremism, and victims and community members who are impacted by counterterrorism strategies, in order to prevent feelings of injustice arising in the reintegration process.

Gendered cultural perspectives, 'based on how a woman is viewed in the society', affect the reintegration of women and girls in their respective communities. A locally driven, culturally specific reintegration programme will, in the long run, facilitate improved communication and coordination between different actors such as the Kenyan government, CSOs, religious and traditional leaders, and the wider community. Therefore, culturally appropriate reintegration models based on gender analysis and intersectionalities should be prioritised over models which may fail to take the contexts that affect the reintegration process into account. Tailor-made approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration that look at defectors on a case-by-case basis are vital as motives and pathways differ from one individual to another.

Furthermore, more clarity is needed around disengagement and reintegration processes for women who have taken on non-combat roles in Al-Shabaab, including, for example, those wives or mothers who may have indirectly supported the network's information-gathering and logistical activities. Lack of support for these women excludes them from CVE processes that could lead to their disengagement and deradicalisation. Henshaw (2020: 2) highlights the fact that women who play non-combat roles in non-state rebel groups are given little attention in DDR programming and are effectively excluded from participation in post-conflict development.

Gender-specific psychosocial supports and strategies for tackling trauma are key to successful rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Trauma is gendered, and gender-specific psychosocial support and strategies for healing are vital elements of any successful rehabilitation and reintegration programme. Long-term trauma healing processes, informed by gendered knowledge about relevant historical, social and

religio-cultural contexts (Iantaff 2020), would help to address various facets of female defectors' experiences and better enable them to reintegrate into their respective societies.

Distrust towards the government's amnesty programme in certain counties in Kenya illustrates the need for more trust-building initiatives between the government, CSOs and local communities. This work is vital to strengthen the government's efforts to secure the reintegration of defectors (Juma & Githigaro 2021: 71). Investing in sustainable, long-term projects that aim to address local perceptions about defectors and their families will strengthen reintegration efforts in the community. CVE action plans at county level in Kenya have focused on addressing the gendered nuances of radicalisation and recruitment, but there remains a need for more empirical data on gendered aspects of deradicalisation, disengagement and reintegration to further strengthen CVE policy and practice.

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