International Studies Quarterly (2026) **70**, sqag044

The Reintegration of Women and Children Defecting from Armed Groups during Conflict: Evidence from Somalia

Blair Welsh*
University of Western Ontario,Canada

Prabin B. Khadka
University of Essex,United Kingdom

The public acceptance of former enemy collaborators by local communities is crucial for preventing violent extremism. Few studies experimentally examine such acceptance, particularly from a gendered perspective in active conflict zones. We address this gap by centering the diversity of the defector population, highlighting how gendered experiences of entry into and exit from armed groups affect opportunities for peacebuilding. We argue that both gender and age are important determinants of public acceptance, and that the narratives through which women are perceived—especially as wives—shape reintegration outcomes. We test these expectations with a vignette experiment involving 880 respondents across 81 communities in seven cities in South Central Somalia. We find that respondents are more willing to accept female and child defectors, with acceptance particularly high for those wedded to al-Shabaab fighters. These findings underscore the gendered and intersectional dynamics at play in reintegration and reconciliation processes, particularly in conservative Muslim societies, and suggest that the identities and social scripts attached to former enemy collaborators are central to understanding public attitudes toward peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies.

La aceptación pública de antiguos colaboradores del enemigo por parte de las comunidades locales es fundamental para prevenir el extremismo violento. Existen pocos estudios que examinen experimentalmente esta aceptación, particularmente desde una perspectiva de género en zonas de conflicto activo. Con el fin de abordar esta brecha, nos centramos en la diversidad de la población de desertores y destacamos cómo las experiencias en materia de género al ingresar en grupos armados y salir de ellos influyen sobre las oportunidades relativas a la construcción de la paz. Argumentamos que tanto el género como la edad son determinantes importantes de la aceptación pública, y que las narrativas a través de las cuales se percibe a las mujeres (especialmente como esposas) configuran los resultados de la reintegración. Ponemos a prueba estas hipótesis mediante un experimento de viñetas que involucra a 880 encuestados en 81 comunidades localizadas en siete ciudades del centro-sur de Somalia. Concluimos que los encuestados están más dispuestos a aceptar a mujeres y niños desertores, siendo la aceptación particularmente alta para aquellas mujeres casadas con combatientes de al-Shabaab. Estos hallazgos ponen de manifiesto las dinámicas de género e interseccionales presentes en los procesos de reintegración y reconciliación, particularmente en sociedades musulmanas conservadoras, y sugieren que las identidades y los guiones sociales asociados con los antiguos colaboradores del enemigo resultan fundamentales para comprender las actitudes públicas hacia la construcción de la paz en sociedades afectadas por conflictos.

L'acceptation publique d'anciens collaborateurs par les communautés locales est cruciale quand il s'agit de prévenir l'extrémisme violent. Peu d'études examinent cette acceptation sous la forme d'expériences, surtout d'un point de vue genré dans des zones de conflit actif. Nous traitons cette lacune en nous centrant sur la diversité de la population de transfuges, soulignant l'effet des expériences genrées d'entrée dans des groupes armés et de sortie de ces groupes sur les possibilités de consolidation de la paix. Nous affirmons que le genre et l'âge sont tous deux des déterminants importants de l'acceptation publique et que les récits par lesquels l'on perçoit les femmes (notamment en tant qu'épouses) façonnent les issues de la réintégration. Nous testons ces attentes avec une expérience de capsule impliquant 880 participants dans 81 communautés de sept villes du centre et du sud de la Somalie. Nous observons que les participants se montrent plus enclins à accepter des femmes et enfants transfuges, l'acceptation étant particulièrement forte chez les individus liés par le mariage à des membres du Al-Chabab. Ces conclusions soulignent les dynamiques genrées et intersectionnelles en jeu dans les processus de réintégration et de réconciliation, notamment dans les sociétés musulmanes conservatrices, et suggèrent que les identités et scripts sociaux reliés aux anciens collaborateurs sont décisifs lorsqu'il s'agit de comprendre les attitudes publiques à l'endroit de la consolidation de la paix au sein de sociétés touchées par le conflit.

Introduction

"I became involved with al-Shabaab when I was 20 years old … I was made a commander because they saw I could fight. I

*Corresponding author: University of Western Ontario, Canada. Email: blair.welsh@uwo.ca

Dr Blair Welsh is a Wolfe-Western Fellow and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Western Ontario. His research investigates the politics of armed violence and development across three major themes: (1) causes and consequences of armed violence; (2) conflict and displacement; and 3) post-conflict recovery.

Dr Prabin Khadka is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Government, University of Essex. He researches how international interventions shape social cohesion and conflict dynamics. My research builds on practical experience in conflict-affected settings, focusing on how peacekeeping, counter-insurgency, and countering violent extremism intersect with economic and political dynamics.

Welsh, Blair, and Prabin B. Khadka. (2026) The Reintegration of Women and Children Defecting from Armed Groups during Conflict: Evidence from Somalia. *International Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqag044

was put in charge of the women … I did not get married and did not have children when I was at the camp. Other girls had babies … I escaped after I was sent to the market to buy food … I sold my gun and used the money to return [home] … The reaction from my family was not good and I am currently living with friends but it has been difficult. I am jobless. I am not doing well mentally … Current initiatives in our community that work to counter violent extremism need to be strengthened … "

—Khadija, former female al-Shabaab commander (Ndung'u et al. 2017, 33).

At the age of 20, Khadija was abducted and recruited into al-Shabaab, serving as a commander in charge of over 40 women. She was able to leave the organization, escaping by selling her gun outside of an al-Shabaab camp and using the money to flee. Upon her return home, she was not accepted by her family and faced community backlash for being a member of the group. Khadija's experience is not uncommon. Across Somalia and conflict zones around the world, thousands of individuals, including women and children, leave violent organizations each year but face profound challenges when attempting to return to civilian life. Understanding what determines their acceptance by local communities is not only a humanitarian concern but a critical factor in preventing violent extremism and building sustainable peace.

The social reintegration of armed group defectors is essential for demilitarization and preventing violent extremism (Knight and Özerdem 2004).[1] Without successful reintegration, there is a risk of increased violence and displacement. The scale of this challenge is substantial. Since 2019, over 6,000 children have been recruited by armed forces and groups in Somalia alone (UNICEF 2024). An estimated 3,000 individuals—including approximately 600 women—have participated in Somalia's Defector Rehabilitation Programme (DRP) since 2012 (Sarfati and Donnelly 2022). But these figures represent only those entering formal pathways. Many more attempt to reintegrate informally, "slipping back" into communities without government knowledge (Stern and Peterson 2022). Without community acceptance, defectors face isolation, economic marginalization, and potential re-recruitment by the groups they fled. For communities, failed reintegration perpetuates cycles of violence. Rejected defectors may return to armed organizations or face retaliatory attacks from both the groups they abandoned and the communities they hoped to rejoin. When reintegration fails during active conflict, it can also deter other potential defectors from leaving, thereby prolonging violence as individuals remain with armed groups out of fear that they have nowhere else to go.

An expansive literature evaluates the reintegration trajectories of former enemy collaborators, highlighting the complex nature of the process (e.g., Annan et al. 2011; Bauer et al. 2018; Blattman and Annan 2016; Gilligan et al. 2012; Godefroidt and Langer 2022; Phayal et al. 2015; Kaplan and Nussio 2018; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007). A growing number of studies also experimentally examine public opinion surrounding former enemy collaborators with a gendered focus (e.g., Annan et al. 2011; Mironova and Whitt 2023; Kao and Revkin 2023). While important, our understanding of the reintegration of former enemy collaborators is largely limited to the post-conflict period (e.g., Kao and Revkin 2023; Kao et al. 2024), and the focus on gender is mostly limited to empirical considerations of punishment (e.g., Kao and Revkin 2023; Mironova and Whitt 2023, 2025).[2] As a result, we know little about how the gendered expectations of women in society and their counter-normative participation in violent organizations inform public opinion of former enemy collaborators beyond punishment. Additionally, much less is known about public perceptions of reintegration while conflict is still ongoing—as in countries such as Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen—and whether there are differences in opinion between the conflict and post-conflict periods.

The challenges of reintegration take on distinct dimensions for women and children who leave armed groups. Women associated with violent organizations navigate contradictory social expectations. They transgress gendered norms about women's roles in society, particularly in conservative contexts, yet they may also be viewed as less culpable than men for violence (e.g., Annan et al. 2011; Kao and Revkin 2023; Sjoberg and Gentry 2015). Children face different questions of agency, moral responsibility, and developmental capacity (e.g., Bauer et al. 2018; Faulkner and Welsh 2022). Despite their vulnerabilities and distinct roles within armed groups, existing work focuses predominantly on adult male combatants (e.g., Blattman and Annan 2016; Gilligan et al. 2012; Kaplan and Nussio 2018). Without accounting for these differences, reintegration programs risk misunderstanding community receptivity and designing interventions that fail to address the distinct challenges women and children face upon return.

To this end, this article centers on the diversity of the ex-combatant population to examine how gendered experiences of entry to and exit from armed organizations during conflict affect opportunities for peacebuilding. We emphasize how social perceptions and expectations attached to gender and age can alter preferences for reintegration and the acceptance of armed group defectors. We test our preregistered expectations with a vignette experiment embedded in an original survey of 880 citizens in seven cities across South Central Somalia. The experiment randomizes the profile of the armed group defector for each respondent. We use gender and age as profile cues to develop two treatments: female (as opposed to male) defectors and child (as opposed to adult) defectors. We also include post-treatment questions on marriage to al-Shabaab fighters, as well as those intended to probe the mechanisms at play, such as whether the role of the defector in the organization or the context of their reintegration program matters.

Contrary to our hypothesis, we find the public is more willing to reintegrate female and child defectors. We also find that marriage to an al-Shabaab fighter influences citizens' decision to support reintegration, irrespective of whether the marriage was forced. In probing our mechanisms, we find that non-fighting roles and forced recruitment increase citizens' willingness to accept armed group defectors. The completion of a United Nations vocational training program is important for the reintegration of female defectors. For child defectors, having never killed someone and being financially stable increases citizens' willingness to accept them. Taken together, our results emphasize the gendered dynamics at play in reintegration processes, suggesting the gendered experiences of entry to and exit from armed organizations ultimately shape public preferences for acceptance in local communities.

[1] We use the terms disengaged person, former enemy collaborator, and defector interchangeably.

[2] Notable exceptions include Godefroidt and Langer (2022), Littman et al. (2021), and Marks et al. (2023), who focus on the reintegration of former Boko Haram affiliates in Nigeria.

This study makes three significant contributions. First, we add to the literature on gendered trajectories of armed group exits by examining public opinion beyond punishment. While recent work focuses on preferences for retribution in post-conflict Iraq (e.g., Mironova and Whitt 2023; Kao and Revkin 2023), we examine attitudes toward reconciliation and acceptance, revealing how gendered scripts and age-based frameworks shape community receptivity. The evidence that gendered trajectories matter for micro-level peacebuilding processes joins a growing body of work on gender in deradicalization and demobilization campaigns (e.g., Altier 2021; Cook and Vale 2018), allowing policy-makers to consider more precise exit packages and long-term solutions aligned with the diversity of this population.

Second, our study is among the first to consider reintegration of defectors during active conflict, when community acceptance faces distinct security constraints and when failed reintegration can directly prolong fighting. By providing a micro-level study during ongoing conflict in Somalia, we unveil how the public forms preferences for individuals leaving violent organizations in particularly violent and volatile contexts. Our findings reveal that marriage to fighters creates pathways for acceptance regardless of coercion, and that women and children receive more favorable treatment than adult men, showing how gendered and age-based considerations operate even amid ongoing violence in conservative Muslim societies.

Finally, our study provides insight into an increasingly important context: the reintegration of Islamist insurgents in predominantly Muslim countries. Several militant groups across the Middle East and Africa have committed to al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) "brands" in recent years (Warner and Hulme 2018). Our findings underscore that cultural context shapes the pathways through which communities form preferences about reintegration: in conservative Muslim societies, gendered scripts around marriage and motherhood create legible roles that facilitate women's acceptance in ways that may not operate elsewhere, while age-based frameworks of moral development appear more universal. This means reintegration approaches must be tailored to local contexts rather than applied uniformly. Given unclear policy directions for understanding Islamist organizations in reintegration frameworks during conflict, our study is particularly timely and offers indication of what deradicalization and reintegration practices should prioritize in countering violent extremism in Somalia and beyond, thereby assisting in providing more sustainable, culturally informed pathways out of violent organizations for vulnerable populations.

Exiting Armed Groups and Returning to Civilian Life

Governments often introduce deradicalization and reintegration programs to destabilize conflict and offer pathways for individuals leaving armed groups to reenter civilian life. We refer to these individuals as armed group defectors or former enemy collaborators.[3] These programs typically provide defectors with security and alternative livelihoods outside armed organizations (Berdal 1996; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007) and have become a "standard peacebuilding strategy" (Godefroidt and Langer 2022, 411). Public opinion surrounding these programs is pivotal to their success (see Gilligan et al. 2012; Godefroidt and Langer 2022; Kaplan and Nussio 2018). Existing research identifies multiple mechanisms shaping community preferences over defector acceptance, including exposure to violence and victimization (e.g., Balcells 2012), economic concerns over resource competition and contribution (e.g., Humphreys and Weinstein 2007), and heuristic assessments of threat based on defectors' past roles, radicalization, and signals of commitment to peace (e.g., Godefroidt and Langer 2022). Building on these mechanisms, scholars evaluate program effectiveness from social and economic perspectives, finding improved economic outcomes for participants (e.g., Blattman and Annan 2016; Gilligan et al. 2012) but a more complex and uneven social trajectory (e.g., Gislesen 2006; Kao and Revkin 2023; Kaplan and Nussio 2018). This article focuses on social reintegration, defined as the perceived acceptance of defectors within local communities (see Gomes Porto et al. 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2007). While longer term relationship-building may shape reintegration over time (Kaplan and Nussio 2018), we focus on perceived acceptance in the short term, given its direct relevance to the aims of deradicalization and reintegration programs.

Qualitatively, previous research provides deep insights into the gendered trajectories of former enemy collaborators and defectors in conflict and post-conflict settings. Many accounts describe female and child defectors, particularly girls, as victims of violence within armed groups (e.g., Beier 2015; Cohen 2013). However, there is also a focus on armed group membership as empowering for women, particularly where military, leadership, and business skills are developed within violent organizations (e.g., Henshaw 2020; MacKenzie 2012). Women's roles in armed groups can be relatively similar to those of their male colleagues, but they primarily operate in non-fighting roles (Loken and Matfess 2024). There is a large, long-standing feminist critique of deradicalization and reintegration programs, highlighting concerns over the inclusion of women, or lack thereof (e.g., Shekhawat 2015; Shepherd 2017). In some countries, these programs exclude women or resume and reinforce their oppressive, subordinate roles in society. In others, however, national frameworks include women in the programs, offering gendered pathways out of armed groups, such as considering childcare needs for mothers. The visualization of the female as a combatant or collaborator is important for public discourse on the perception of women and girls in armed groups. For example, the public often notes how surprisingly relentless or merciless women and girls appear as combatants (e.g., Gutiérrez and Murphy 2023; Welsh and Faulkner 2025). This diversity in gendered experiences of entry to and exit from armed groups is critical for understanding public attitudes toward reintegration because the public perceives individual defectors and their culpability differently based on their gender and age. Without accounting for these differences, reintegration programs risk misunderstanding community receptivity and designing interventions that fail to address the distinct challenges women and children face upon return.

Quantitatively, previous research underplays the diversity of defectors and focuses predominately on attitudes toward adult men (e.g., Agneman and Strömbom 2025; Blattman and Annan 2016; Gilligan et al. 2012; Kaplan and Nussio 2018). There are some important exceptions. Annan et al. (2011) consider how gendered experiences of war affect reintegration success in Uganda. While gendered, the study considers perceptions of acceptance reported by defectors themselves, which is not necessarily representative of the community-level acceptance required for social reintegration. Further exceptions include a range of studies on post-

[3]We refrain from using the term "ex-combatant" as not every individual leaving an armed group is an ex-combatant; some individuals participate in organizations in other ways.

conflict preferences for punishment in Iraq (e.g., Mironova and Whitt 2023; 2025; Kao and Revkin 2023) and receptivity to returning former Boko Haram associates in West Africa (e.g., Littman et al. 2021; Marks et al. 2023). In Iraq, Mironova and Whitt (2023), for example, show how the gender of ISIS collaborators in Iraq and public perception of women's agency affect preferences for post-conflict punishment. In Nigeria, Littman et al. (2021) find that gendered perceptions of the public matter more than the identity of the former affiliates themselves. Research on children formerly associated with armed groups remains even more limited, with most work focusing on psychosocial outcomes and service delivery rather than community acceptance (e.g., Betancourt et al. 2010).

In a growing body of work, therefore, researchers emphasize the importance of gender for public perceptions of armed group defectors. However, without a more detailed discussion on how the gendered experiences of women in armed organizations affect preferences toward reconciliation and reintegration, our understanding of how gender affects public attitudes toward former enemy collaborators is largely limited to punishment in the post-conflict period.[4] Theoretically and empirically, we know little about why the public might prefer to reconcile with certain defectors over others and, in particular, how citizens weigh the gendered expectations of women in society and their counter-normative participation in violent organizations in this decision-making process.

Moreover, much less is known about how the public perceives reintegration while the conflict is ongoing and whether there are differences in opinion between the conflict and post-conflict periods. The timing of reintegration matters for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, post-conflict studies assume reduced security threats and established peace agreements, conditions absent during active conflict. Communities facing ongoing violence must weigh acceptance against immediate risks of retaliation from armed groups still operating in their vicinity. Practically, successful reintegration during conflict can shorten war duration by encouraging additional defections and weakening armed groups (e.g., Armand et al. 2020), while failed reintegration may prolong violence by deterring potential defectors who fear they have nowhere to go. While scholars have considered reintegration during conflict in Nigeria (e.g., Broeckhoven et al. 2024; Godefroidt and Langer 2022; Littman et al. 2021; Marks et al. 2023), the assessment of public opinion takes place in a context where many defector demographics, including women and children, are excluded from national reintegration frameworks. We therefore examine social reintegration in the more inclusive context of al-Shabaab defectors in Somalia, centering the diversity of former enemy collaborators to focus on how gendered perceptions of civilians and the experience of armed group defectors in conflict settings affect opportunities for peacebuilding.

Context: Al-Shabaab Defectors in Somalia

We study reintegration in the context of former al-Shabaab members in Somalia. This section provides the background necessary to understand this setting, including the structure of al-Shabaab and the institutional pathways through which women and children exit armed groups.

Al-Shabaab emerged from Somalia's civil war in the 1990s as part of a loose alliance of shari'a courts and armed groups. The organization capitalized on the 2006 Ethiopian invasion, garnering support for a major military movement. Al-Shabaab controls large swaths of territory in South and Central Somalia and is the predominant rival to the Somali Federal Government (Karr 2023). The organization exploits peer networks, religious identity, and socioeconomic circumstances to recruit civilians into their ranks (e.g., Botha 2014; Hassan 2012; Speckhard and Shajkovci 2019) and is particularly invested in recruiting children (HRW 2018). Women play a variety of roles within the organization and are key to the success and secrecy of al-Shabaab throughout Somalia. Some women serve in violent roles, including as fighters or assassins, while others serve in non-violent support roles, such as intelligence agents, recruiters, or cooks (Stern 2019).

In 2012, the Somali Ministry of Internal Security established a DRP to support efforts to counter violent extremism associated with al-Shabaab. Unlike other settings, there is no overarching program in Somalia but, instead, several programs offered under government guidelines, supported by different national and international organizations, including the UN (Sarfati and Donnelly 2022, 6). The DRP is a government-led program and is often preferred over pathways offered by traditional authorities (Gelot and Khadka 2024; 2025). The program pays specific attention to the gender and age of the former members and their levels of radicalization and involvement in the organization. The Somali context, therefore, serves as a good case to examine the gendered trajectories of defectors and public perceptions of women and children in reintegration processes.

We focus on women and children together rather than as separate populations for both theoretical and empirical reasons. In Somalia, reintegration institutions and community practices frequently treat women and children as a shared, protection-oriented category, emphasizing vulnerability, coercion, and reduced culpability rather than combatant responsibility. At the same time, public evaluations of both groups often rely on overlapping heuristics related to agency, social roles, and perceived threat. Analyzing women and children jointly within a single conflict context allows us to isolate how gender and age cues shape acceptance—clarifying when these cues produce similar versus distinct effects—without conflating differences across settings or reintegration frameworks. In what follows, we outline the formal government-initiated pathways out of al-Shabaab and the reintegration opportunities available to defectors in Somalia.

The DRP

The DRP aims to "provide support to low-risk al-Shabaab disengaged combatants attempting to reintegrate" (UNSOM 2016, 4).[5] It has five active rehabilitation centers: three for men and boys in Baidoa, Mogadishu, and Kismayo, and two for women and girls in Baidoa and Kismayo. As of 2021, over 3,000 individuals are estimated to have gone through the program, including 600 women (Sarfati and Donnelly 2022, 6). The DRP comprises five phases: outreach, reception, screening, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Al-Shabaab employs various means to discourage its members from leaving, including threats and punishment (Bacon 2022; Hansen et al. 2019). Outreach activities seek

[4] An important exception is Kao et al. (2024), who randomized gender and focused on both revenge and reconciliation in post-conflict settings.

[5] This section is based on several reports by implementing partners and experts in Somalia: ACCORD (2019); EUAA (2023); Freeman et al. (2018) ; IOM (2021); and Sarfati and Donnelly (2022). The reports obtain their information from primary data sourced through interviews with stakeholders, defectors, and citizens.

to spread information to individuals and communities about the DRP to encourage people to leave al-Shabaab and provide them with options to do so (EUAA 2023). Upon defection, disengaged members—including women and children—are received by the authorities. On occasion, women and children defecting from al-Shabaab are not received directly by the authorities but registered through community elders, IDP camps, or relatives (Stern and Peterson 2022, 18). Adults and children have different operating standards (EUAA 2023, 17). For adults, the main aim is to assess defectors' roles within the organization. For children, the main objective is to assess levels of radicalization. The DRP is only available to low-risk defectors. The assessment of whether an individual is high- or low-risk is somewhat arbitrary and largely based on their role in the organization (Freeman et al. 2018, 15). Low-risk defectors are considered foot soldiers, porters, and mechanics. High-risk defectors are those believed to be *amirs* [commanders]; these individuals are referred for criminal prosecution.

Those offered places in the DRP spend a varied amount of time in rehabilitation centers. Depending on the individual circumstances, this can range from 6 months to 2 years for men, 6 months to 1 year for women, and 8–9 months for children. Participants are offered basic education and different types of vocational and skills training. In female centers, women are offered child-friendly amenities, such as supervised care for children under 5. The aim is to have the women remain in their communities—with relatives or community elders—and visit the rehabilitation center around three days per week (Sarfati and Donnelly 2022). However, there are residential opportunities for women who do not have a safe place to stay (IOM 2021). In cases of disengaged children, most are offered a formal educational and vocational training program that ends with a graduation ceremony. Approximately 30 percent of children in the centers are girls (EUAA 2023). Across the centers, the aim is to provide the same reintegration package and services to all children, including counseling, psycho-social, and socioeconomic reintegration activities. However, some children require more specialized care.

Upon completion of the program, access to financial support varies. Children are given start-up grants and allowances. Men and women are also given start-up grants, but these are not offered in every case and vary across centers. An exit committee—"comprised of representatives from the rehabilitation center, implementing partner agencies, and Somali government"—processes an individual's exit from the program (Sarfati and Donnelly 2022, 6–7). The exit approval is based on several conditions, including medical approval and confirmation that the reinsertion area is safe. According to ACCORD (2019), the best practice is to relocate individuals to a different area than their community of origin. This final reintegration phase comes with significant challenges, as some local communities are hesitant to receive former al-Shabaab members. As a result, individuals may be stigmatized or isolated in the reintegration process. Overall, community acceptance is viewed as fundamental to reintegration success (see EUAA 2023; Freeman et al. 2018; Sarfati and Donnelly 2022), but the conditions underpinning such acceptance remain underexplored.

Theorizing Public Support for Reintegration

In this section, we theorize how the public forms preferences for reintegrating former enemy collaborators into their communities.[6] We draw upon previous research on identity and reintegration (e.g., Annan et al. 2011; Gilligan et al. 2023; Godefroidt and Langer 2022; Jennings 2007; Kao and Revkin 2023; Phayal et al. 2015), as well as feminist work on international relations and criminology (e.g., Berrington and Honkatukia 2002; Sjoberg and Gentry 2015), to determine how gendered experiences of entry to and exit from violent organizations affect public preferences for social reintegration. Women associated with (e.g., Altier 2021; Henshaw 2020; Schmitt et al. 2021) and children born or abducted into armed groups suffer significant stigmatization and reintegration challenges (e.g., Drumbl and Barrett 2019; Gislesen 2006). In the rest of this section, we explore how social perceptions and expectations attached to these cues can shape preferences for reintegration and develop hypotheses to test these expectations.

Gender and Reintegration

Gender is a key determinant in shaping public preferences about the reintegration of armed group defectors. While women are often viewed as less violent than men, and women increase the legitimacy of armed groups (e.g., Manekin and Wood 2020; Viterna 2013), scholars are divided on how gender influences the social acceptance of women as members of violent organizations. On one hand, it is riskier for women to return to local communities as former combatants due to the stigma surrounding their involvement (e.g., Corbin 2008; Knight and Özerdem 2004; Nordstorm 1991; Sjoberg 2016; Tarnaala 2016). On the other hand, women might receive less severe forms of punishment as they are less likely to be seen as responsible for violence than men (e.g., Annan et al. 2011; Kao and Revkin 2023).

Conflict can call into play social perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Violent, militarized masculinities are valued during times of conflict. Women participating in armed organizations often perform activities associated with socialized masculinity (Henry 2017). In al-Shabaab, women help recruit and radicalize members. They also gather intelligence and carry explosives ahead of attacks, taking advantage of the fact that security forces tend to watch women less closely than men (ACCORD 2019; EUAA 2023). Moreover, women also serve as *zakat* collectors, *madrasa* teachers, preachers, and security agents. In a handful of cases, women carry out violent attacks themselves.

The gendered militarization of women in armed organizations can both change social perceptions of women disengaging from violent organizations and make it difficult for them to access support. High levels of mistrust, traditional gender roles, and economic insecurity place women who leave violent organizations at high risk of abandonment or violence. We argue that women are likely to be perceived as just as violent as men and receive a penalty for their membership in a violent organization, with citizens perceiving them as monsters (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). This narrative is an "exaggeration of female deviancy," in which participation in violence disrupts their femininity (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015, 185). Women are "supposed to nurture and protect, not kill"; therefore, when women commit crimes or engage in violence, "they are categorized and labeled as either 'bad' or 'mad'" (Berrington and Honkatukia 2002, 50–9). This "othering" produces a stylized, gender-marginalizing narrative of women's participation in violent organizations, emphasizing a monstrous irrationality (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015, 177).

[6] The hypotheses and experimental design were pre-registered prior to accessing data.

As a result, women receive a larger penalty for collaborating with the enemy because, as Mironova and Whitt (2023, *5*) argue, they transgress "socially constructed gender boundaries about who can participate in violence." This is especially the case for Islamist organizations that operate in Muslim societies (see Wood and Thomas 2017). Therefore, we expect women to be judged more harshly than men by the public for their membership in an armed organization.

H_1: Citizens are less accepting of female than male defectors.

Age and Reintegration

Aside from gender, the age of an ex-combatant is important for local community preferences surrounding reintegration. Experiences of conflict and violence are qualitatively different for children and adults (Andvig and Gates 2010; Annan et al. 2009). Children are unique socializing agents, and armed actors often condition children to violence in a form different from that of adults (e.g., Welsh and Faulkner 2025; Faulkner and Welsh 2022; Vermeij 2014). Around 800 children are annually recruited by al-Shabaab (EUAA 2023). Children associated with the organization take on various roles; some are actively engaged in combat roles, while others serve as cooks, washers, spies, or logistical assistants. We argue the public is likely to view children as less radicalized and more fit for socialization than adults. Criminology research suggests the public views children as less agentic than adults (e.g., Scott and Steinberg 2003). Children are incapable of making mature decisions and do not think about the consequences of their actions; thus, they should be protected from their developmental immaturity when considering liability (Scott et al. 2006, 816). While it could be argued that citizens are indifferent toward the reintegration of children and adults, the public attributes less responsibility to children than adults for the same crimes (e.g., Scott et al. 2006).

Moreover, Bauer et al. (2018) find that child soldiering increases individual trustworthiness and community engagement. In the context of reintegration, it is easier to disassociate ex-combatants under the age of 18 from al-Shabaab, particularly after 6–12 months, than it is adults, as older ex-combatants often have more ties to the organization that are difficult to navigate in the disengagement period (see ACCORD 2019; EUAA 2023). Therefore, we expect more citizens to support reintegrating children into their community than adults.

H_2: Citizens are more accepting of child than adult defectors.

Marriage and Reintegration

Trust in women and children, particularly girls, and biases toward their perceived deviance for participating in armed groups are unlikely to be constant across all enemy collaborators. Women and girls play a variety of roles in armed organizations. If their role in the organization is consistent with society's gendered expectations, we argue citizens should be more willing to support their reintegration. Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) suggest that one of the key visualizations of women in society is that of the female as a wife and mother. Women in supporting instead of fighting roles are common in many violent organizations, especially those that promote a policy or culture of marriage, such as al-Shabaab (Benstead and Lehman 2021; Donnelly 2019; Loken 2021, 2022; Matfess 2024). We argue that if a woman or girl were wedded to a fighter, the public would likely accept her reintegration. The public should view women as less culpable and more deserving of reintegration as wives because their social permission to serve "radical Islamic men" exceeds their permission to participate in violence (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015, 137). Women still operate within the "socially scripted" role as a mother and wife and, therefore, are generally viewed as nonviolent and domesticated. This essentialist notion of Muslim women's innocence "resides at an interesting crossroad where a mother/woman is presumed innocent/peace-loving owing to her gender and also presumed liberal owing to her peacefulness" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015, 142), creating culturally recognizable pathway for public acceptance of these defectors.

While the acceptance of married women for reintegration is akin to rebel wives adhering to the social and patriarchal gender expectations of women in society, wives are not a homogenous group. When armed groups are still active and constitute a threat, some women wedded to fighters might be subject to distrust as defectors, particularly if their marriage is viewed as voluntary and evidence of ideological support (Matfess 2024; Stern 2019). An alternative possibility is that marriage and motherhood can provide socially sanctioned roles that facilitate rather than hinder reintegration. Scholars describe this as "the other DDR" (see Shepherd 2015, 2016), whereby women are reclaimed into wife and mother identities as a pathway back into the community. In this view, wives are less threatening because their roles are legible within patriarchal scripts of domesticity and dependence, and their identities are reframed as familial rather than political.

However, these logics coexist uneasily. Marriage within al-Shabaab is not uniform but stratified. As Benstead and Van Lehman (2021) show, majority-clan women can enter marriages voluntarily, often gaining social status and material benefits, while Somali Bantu and other minority women are disproportionately coerced into unions amounting to sexual slavery. These distinctions suggest that communities may interpret forced marriages as coercion that mitigates women's culpability, whereas voluntary marriages risk being politicized as signs of ideological sympathy with the group. We therefore expect that wives will generally be less accepted than other women, except in cases where marriage was clearly forced, which provides a mitigating narrative of compulsion rather than choice.

H_3: Citizens are less accepting of women and girl defectors if they were wedded to an al-Shabaab fighter.
H_4: Citizens are more accepting of women and girl defectors if they were forcibly wedded to an al-Shabaab fighter.

Experimental Design

To evaluate citizens' attitudes toward the acceptance of defectors for reintegration, we utilize a vignette experiment embedded within a cell phone survey conducted in South Central Somalia.[7] The experiment shows respondents short descriptions of defectors to elicit their judgments. The experiment is realistic in our setting, given the defector program in Somalia. We believe it is also a more effective and realistic way to observe public opinion about defectors than a conjoint experiment. Scholarly work on public acceptance often presents respondents with a forced choice between two defectors based on a series of attributes, such as their role and engagement in the organization (e.g., Godefroidt and Langer 2022). However, the public rarely selects one collab-

[7]Approximately nine out of ten Somalis own a mobile phone (BRCiS 2021). Munguía et al. (2023) find that conducting remote surveys, such as our cell phone survey, is an effective alternative to physical data collection in insecure and inaccessible contexts such as Somalia. We, therefore, believe the results would be consistent across data collection methods.

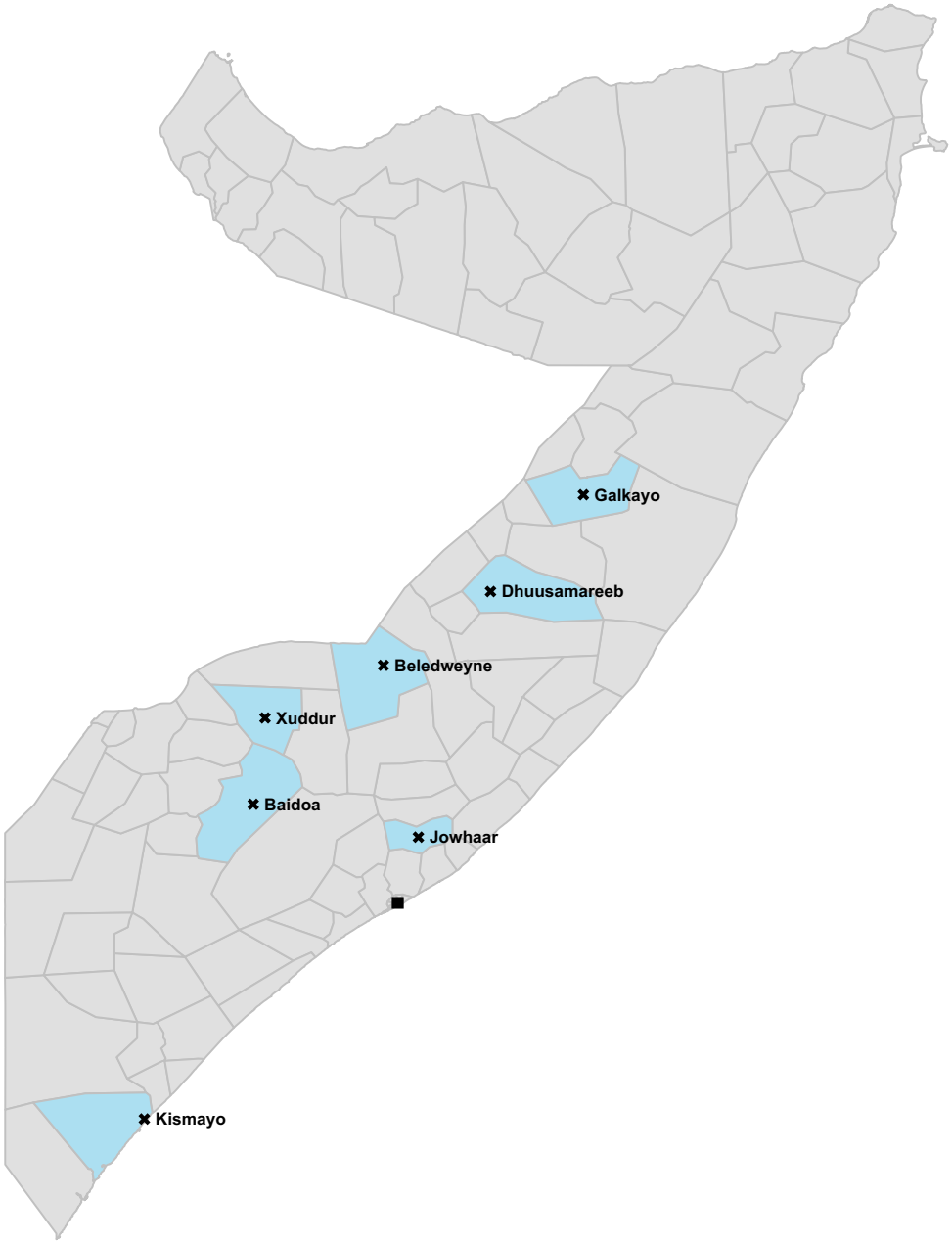

Figure 1. Survey coverage in South Central Somalia.
The seven cities where the survey took place are marked with a black cross. Mogadishu, the capital city, is indicated by the black square. It was not possible to survey the capital city due to ongoing political tensions leading to heightened security concerns.

orator over another in reintegration contexts and is, at least initially, unlikely to be aware of randomized attributes aside from their gender, age, and, to a probable degree, clan.[8]

We selected seven cities within the five Federal Member States to conduct the study: Baidoa, Beledweyne, Dhusamareeb, Galkayo, Jowhaar, Kismayo, and Xuddur. These cities and their corresponding districts are highlighted in figure 1. Respondent-level descriptive statistics for each city are in the Appendix. We had three criteria for selecting cities. First, cities had to be safe for enumerators.[9] Second, each location had to have an active DRP process to make our vignettes realistic and plausible.[10] Focusing on locations likely to receive defectors is also more ethically sensitive. Finally, we wanted geographic diversity in our sample.

The subjects were chosen from approximately 3,000 cell phone numbers that the UNDP Somalia Office collected at a

[8]Even in contexts where the public is presented with multiple defectors and limited resources in their community, there is still no forced choice in practice—the public does not choose between defectors, nor are they aware of typically randomized attributes, such as the level of violence a defector previously committed in an armed group. We believe the vignette experiment is, therefore, more favorable.

[9]While we conduct the survey remotely, cell phone numbers had to be collected in-person. We provide more details of data collection in the Appendix.

[10]This included cities with active programs and those where disengaged individuals were being reintegrated into local communities.

Table 1. Sample

City	Communities	Respondents
Baidoa	12	130
Beledweyne	12	130
Dhuusamareeb	11	130
Galkayo	10	110
Jowhaar	11	120
Kismayo	12	122
Xuddur	13	138
Total:	81	880

household level from the seven cities between May and June 2020. We randomly selected up to thirteen communities in each city, covering eighty-one in total. From the 81 communities, a total of 880 households were randomly selected to participate in the survey. Subjects to be interviewed on the phone were then randomly selected from each household. We ensured all subjects were over 18 years of age. Subjects were disaggregated by gender and age to match previous international survey demographics.[11] Table 1 provides a breakdown of our sampling units.

Enumerators belonged to a survey team under contract with the Ministry of Justice and UNDP Somalia, from whom they had already received significant training. The survey team included seven enumerators and a team leader, all Somali citizens. We trained members of the team remotely before survey implementation. The data collection was carried out from 3 to 17 August, 2021.

Design

The experiment randomized the defector profile for each respondent. We included gender and age as profile cues. We used the qualifier "below the age of 18" to identify a child.[12] The respondent is asked to consider the following prompt:

> In this section, we will ask some questions related to former [**adult male/adult female/child**] al-Shabaab members [**above/below**] the age of 18 and their acceptance in communities. As you know, there is an ongoing process of reintegrating [**adult male/adult female/child**] individuals who served with al-Shabaab. From your knowledge, has your community accepted any former [**adult male/adult female/child**] members of al-Shabaab [above/below] the age of 18 for reintegration?

We asked the respondents to select if their community accepted defectors for reintegration and, if so, how many. We then asked respondents about their reintegration preferences:

> Regardless of whether [adult male/adult female/child] former members are already re-integrated or not in your community, in general, do you think that your community should accept any [adult male/adult female/child] former members [above/below] the age of 18 for reintegration?

After the respondent had read the profile, they were given the following options, which comprise our dependent variable: Yes; No; Don't Know; and Refuse to Answer. We used only responses with a clear yes or no for the analysis.[13]

Asking whether a respondent's community accepted a defector before asking their preference on reintegration is important for two reasons. First, respondents from communities that have already accepted defectors might be more willing to accept further defectors. Relatedly, distinguishing between communities that have and have not received defectors and assessing preferences for reintegration is helpful in evaluating the success of the ongoing deradicalization process. We also include post-treatment questions on what factors matter the most when deciding whether to reintegrate a defector to probe the individual mechanisms at play.

To determine how marriage to an al-Shabaab fighter affects preferences for reintegration, we ask all respondents questions on female and child marriage.[14] This portion of the design is non-experimental in nature. We ask each respondent the following questions:

1. Would you support the reintegration of a former female member if she had been married to an al-Shabaab fighter?
2. Would you support the reintegration of a former girl member (below the age of 18) if she had been married to an al-Shabaab fighter?

For each question, respondents are given the following options: No; Yes; Yes, but only if the marriage was forced; Don't Know; and Refuse to Answer. For the analysis, we remove the uncertain or refusal responses.[15]

Research Ethics

Conducting research in conflict settings poses significant ethical challenges. These challenges risk respondent well-being and can affect how respondents answer questions on armed groups (see Campbell 2017; Wood 2006). We took a variety of measures to ensure our study met the highest ethical standards. We conducted enumerator training in collaboration with our survey firm in Somalia. The enumerators attended the sessions in person, and the research team vetted and attended each session virtually. Since the surveys were conducted remotely, we did not anticipate any COVID-19 risks. However, strict protocols were followed to ensure that those involved in the exercise to collect individual cell phone numbers from households were trained in an environment that followed the World Health Organization standards for COVID-19 safety. Enumerators were trained to ensure compliance with best practices and particular concern was paid to ensure their safety and the safety of the respondents. Respondents were able to drop out of the survey at any time. Given the nature of the cell phone survey, respondents' location and details were not disclosed to the enumerator; instead, anonymized codes were used for each city, community, and household. Respondents were also debriefed at the end of the interview to ensure they understood the hypothetical nature of the survey and its contents.

[11] Our sample corresponds well with samples in other studies on Somalia, as well as those of the World Bank.

[12] This follows the Paris Principles, previous work on child soldiering (e.g., Andvig and Gates 2010; Faulkner and Welsh 2022), as well as the requirements for child status in the DRP, and Article 29(8) of the Somali Provisional Constitution defining a child as a person under 18.

[13] Across all profiles, less than 10 percent of respondents refused to answer. Refusal rates are not correlated with any respondent-level demographics (see Appendix C2).

[14] According to the Family Code (1975) in Somalia, the legal age for marriage in Somalia is 18, but girls can marry at the age of 16 years with parental authorization.

[15] Forced marriage is measured directly through the conditional response option ("Yes, but only if the marriage was forced"), allowing respondents to state whether coercion is a necessary condition for their support.

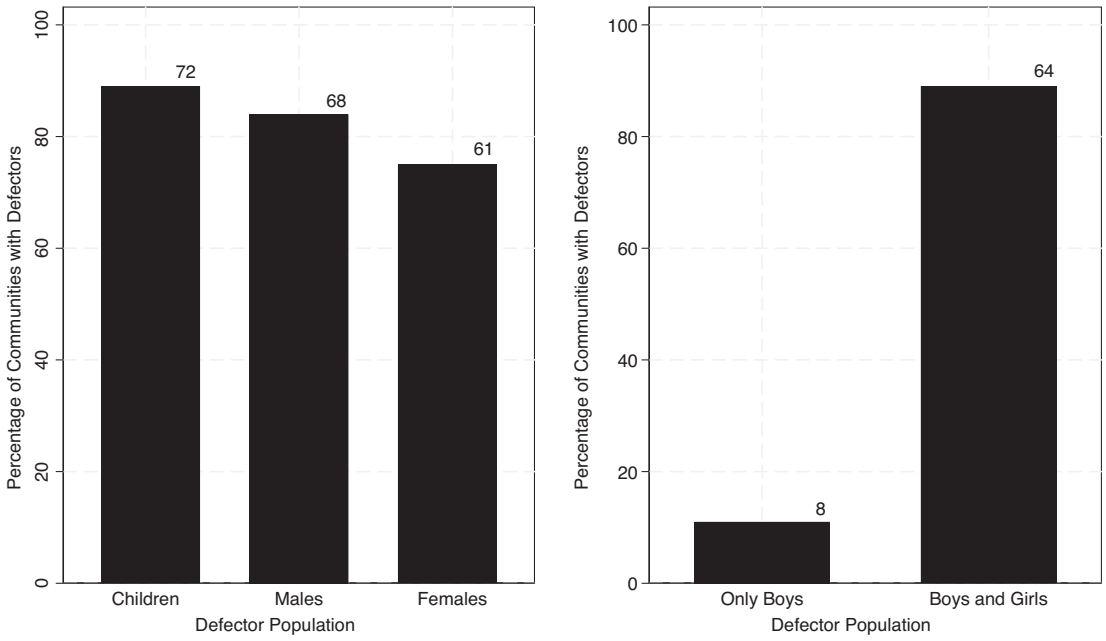

Figure 2. Demographics of reinserted defectors in Somalia. Statistics above bar indicate the number of communities.

In the context of an ongoing conflict in Somalia, there is concern that respondents might suppress their true levels of support for armed groups or fighter reintegration due to fears of retribution or stigmatization (Blair et al. 2014). To investigate the extent of this concern, we follow Kao and Revkin (2023) and ask respondents questions on perceptions of violence and acceptance of ex-combatants both directly and indirectly. For violence, our direct question is, "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: al-Shabaab's use of violence is sometimes necessary for them to achieve their goals." Our indirect question is, "If some people say that it is acceptable to use violence for political ends, do you agree or disagree?" For acceptance, we ask respondents to give *their* opinions on reintegration as well as what they think their *community's* opinion would be. We compute the difference for both. We find a 0.10 and a 0.04 difference, respectively.[16] The results suggest social desirability biases are unlikely to affect the results.

Analysis

As an estimation strategy, we follow Hainmueller et al. (2013) and employ ordinary least squares regression to estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of each of the identity cues.[17] This allows us to estimate the effects of these characteristics on preferences for reintegration, specified as follows:

$$Acceptance_i = \alpha_i + \beta_{identifier} + \Psi_i + \varepsilon_i.$$

Our outcome, *Acceptance*, takes a value of 1 if respondent $_i$ elects to accept the ex-combatant for reintegration and 0 if respondent $_i$ declines. We run two separate regressions for our parameter of interest $\beta_{identifier}$, each separately assessing preferences for female and child ex-combatants. The AMCE can be interpreted as the average change in the probability that a preference for reintegration will be chosen when the vignette includes the listed attribute value instead of the baseline attribute value (Hainmueller et al. 2013, 13). For female ex-combatants, the baseline value is male ex-combatants. For child ex-combatants, the baseline value is adult ex-combatants. To increase precision of our estimate, we control for respondents' gender, marital status, clan, economic situation, and education (represented by Ψ_i), and include enumerator and city fixed effects (represented by α_i). ε_i represents the error term encompassing any random variation and, importantly, additional determinants of preferences for reintegration not accounted for in our model. In all models, standard errors are clustered by communities.

Results

Before turning to the experimental results, we first present descriptive statistics on defector reintegration in Somalia. Most communities in our sample had received defectors at the time of our survey. Figure 2 outlines the demographics of reinserted defectors. 89 percent of communities had received children, 84 percent had received men, and 75 percent had received women. Of communities with children, 8 (11 percent of communities with children) received only boys, and 64 (89 percent of communities with children) received both boys and girls. Public opinion on the acceptance of defectors is relatively high, irrespective of age and gender. We find that 76 percent of respondents are willing to accept defectors into their community. Moreover, 68 percent of respondents are willing to forgive defectors for their involvement in al-Shabaab. However, acceptance rates differ across the cities in our sample. Public acceptance is highest in Jowhaar (95 percent) and lowest in Baidoa (58 percent). Low

[16] The results of a *t*-test are presented in the Appendix. It is also worth noting that no respondents declined to answer the direct questions.

[17] In our vignette design, the AMCEs are equivalent to average treatment effects.

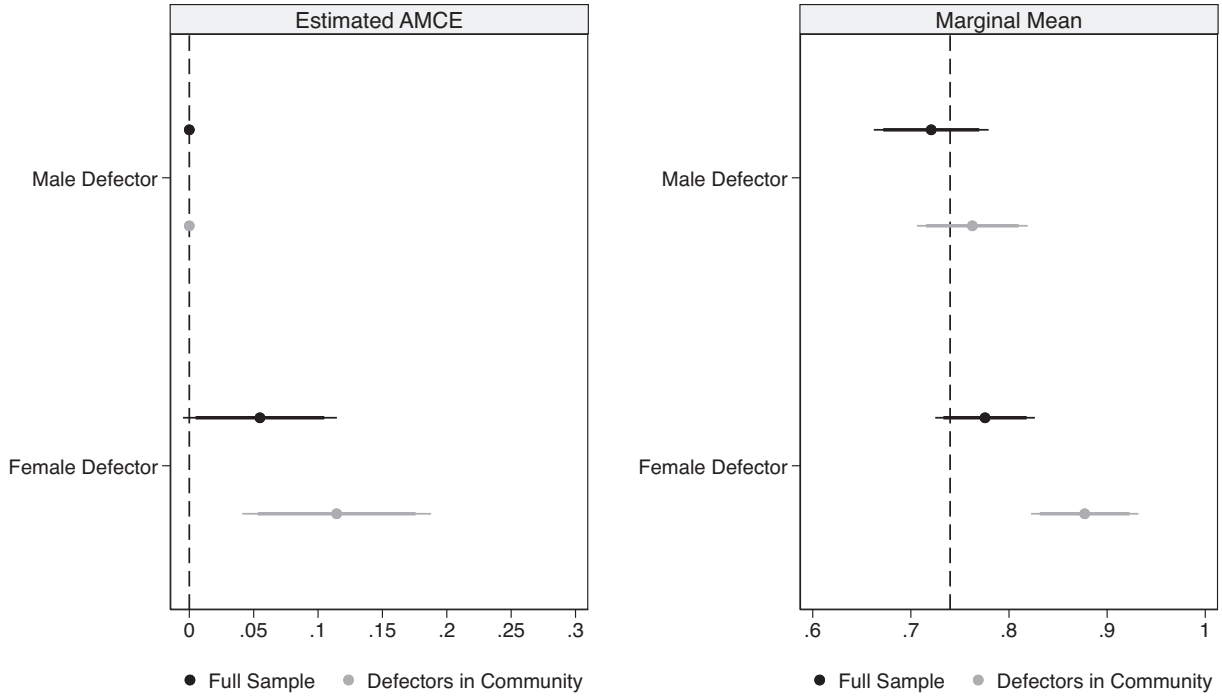

Figure 3. Gender and the acceptance of defectors.
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals for two samples. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

acceptance figures in Baidoa could be related to the high level of exposure to al-Shabaab violence, the amount of conflict-related displacement, or proximity to defector rehabilitation centers. We consider some of these possibilities as we examine the experimental results.

Figure 3 depicts the effects of our first treatment—female defectors—on respondents' reintegration preferences. The figure includes the results from our full sample and a limited sample of only communities with defectors present. The results suggest respondents are more willing to accept female than male defectors. In the full sample, a female defector increases the likelihood of acceptance by 5.5 percentage points ($p < 0.10$). In the limited sample only on communities with defectors present, this increase is by 11.4 percentage points ($p < 0.05$). The results, therefore, stand in stark contrast to our pre-registered expectations. Instead of a gendered backlash, we find respondents are more willing to accept female than male defectors. This finding suggests respondents are more lenient toward women, aligning with recent work expecting more favorable and less punitive attitudes toward women's involvement in violent organizations (e.g., Kao and Revkin 2023). It also suggests the monster trope associated with violent women (e.g., Sjoberg and Gentry 2015) may not extend to enemy collaborators in conflict-affected societies.

Moving to child defectors, figure 4 reports the effect of our treatment on attitudes toward reintegration. Again, the results are displayed with the full sample and a limited sample of only communities with defectors present. We find child defectors increase the likelihood of reintegration acceptance; relative to adult defectors, children increase the likelihood of acceptance by 5.5 ($p < 0.05$) and 10.7 ($p < 0.001$) percentage points, respectively, in each of our samples. These results support our pre-registered hypothesis and suggest respondents are more accepting of child defectors.

In figure 5, we consider the extent to which marriage to an al-Shabaab fighter influences respondents' reintegration opinions. The left panel displays the results for the effect of marriage on female defectors. The right panel shows the effect of marriage on girl defectors. The results for both are substantively similar. We find that being previously wedded to an al-Shabaab fighter increases the likelihood of acceptance by 59 percentage points for women ($p < 0.001$) and 53 percentage points for girl defectors ($p < 0.001$). We also find that being forcibly wedded to an al-Shabaab fighter increases the likelihood of acceptance by 44 percentage points for women ($p < 0.001$) and 48 percentage points for girls ($p < 0.001$). The results lend some support to our pre-registered hypotheses. Marriage is clearly an important factor in reintegration preferences; however, there is no difference between forced and voluntary marriages on preferences for reintegration. The results suggest that, even as members of violent organizations, women and girls are viewed more favorably when their role in the organization aligns with the gendered and patriarchal expectations of women and girls in society. This dynamic reflects what Shepherd (2015, 2016) terms the "other DDR," in which women are reclaimed into familiar patriarchal roles rather than assessed solely on their participation in armed groups.

The role of women as wives could be perceived as inherently non-violent, even in violent organizations. It could also be viewed as a lack of devotion to al-Shabaab's ideology. To investigate whether the public preference for women and girls wedded to fighters is associated with the ideology of marriage and not simply with a preference for women in non-violent roles, we interact marriage responses with respondents' role preferences for defectors. Specifically, we assess how and whether public preferences over marriage and non-violent roles in al-Shabaab align (Appendix C1). We find

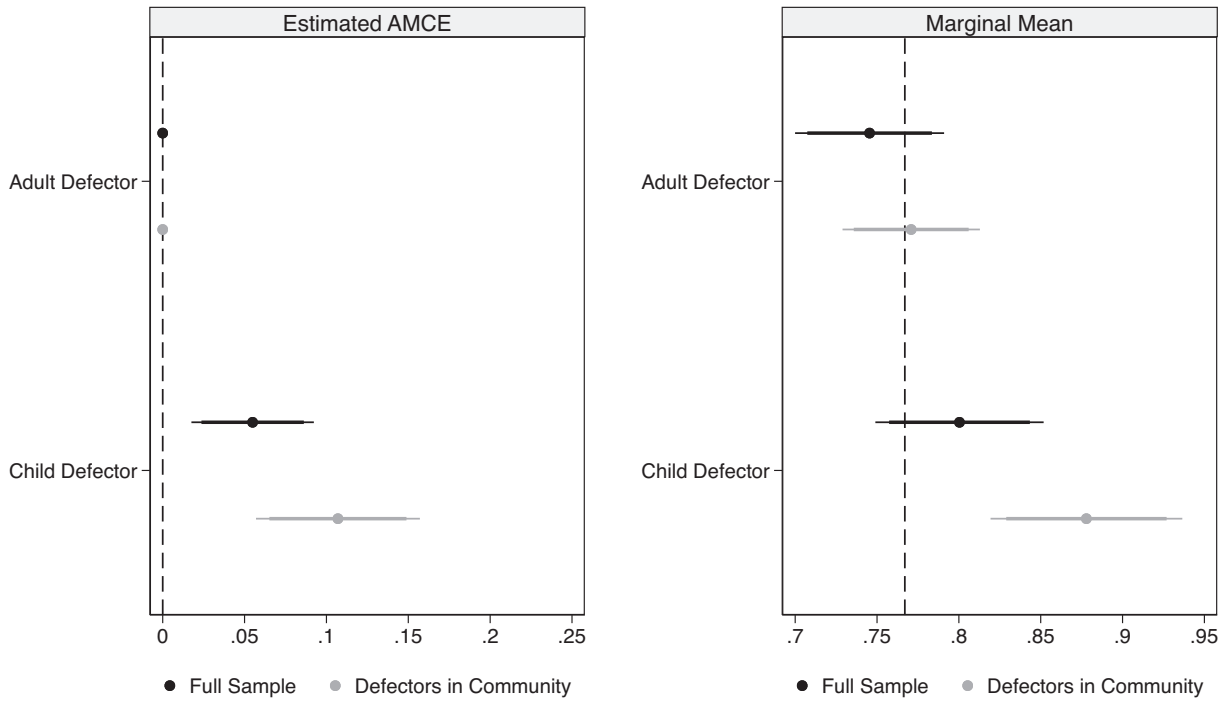

Figure 4. Age and the acceptance of defectors.
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals for two samples. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

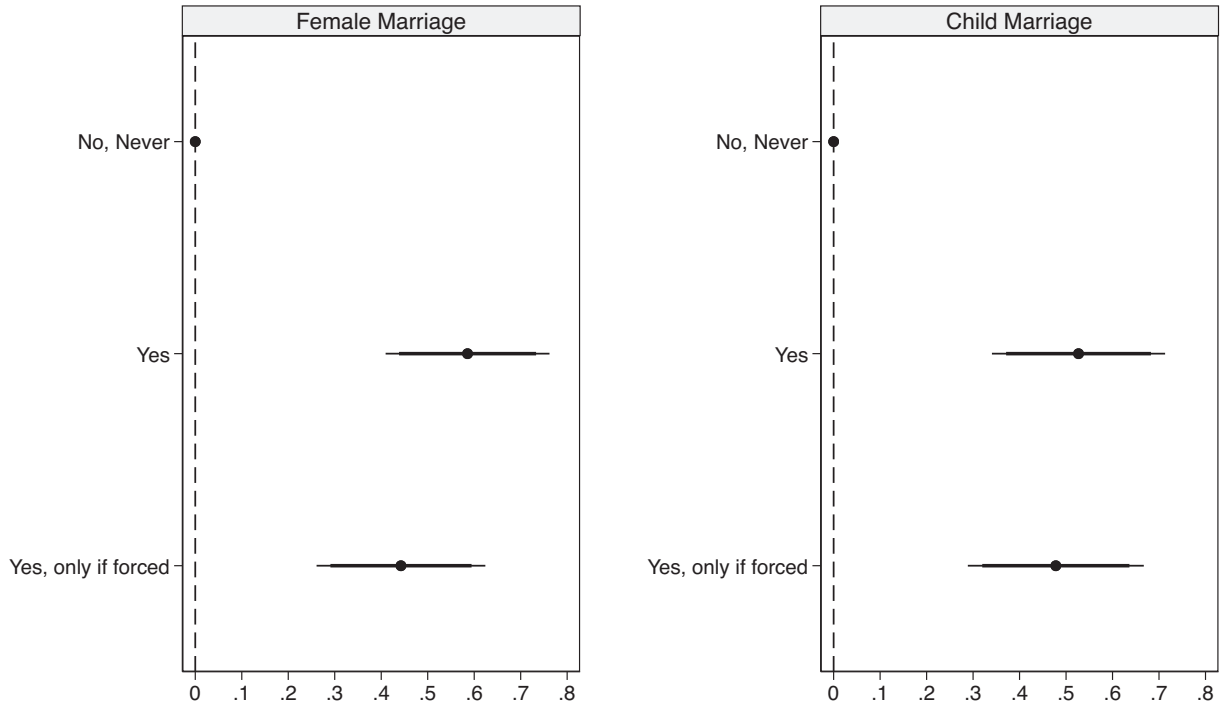

Figure 5. Marriage and the acceptance of defectors.
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

that, while the public does prefer non-violent roles, there is an explicit preference for women and girls as wives in al-Shabaab. Even when a female defector participates in violent roles, she is still more likely to be accepted for reintegration if she served as a wife to a fighter. Violence, in this case, is not excused but is socially re-scripted when embedded in normative gender roles. This underscores the importance of women as wives and the ideological and patriar-

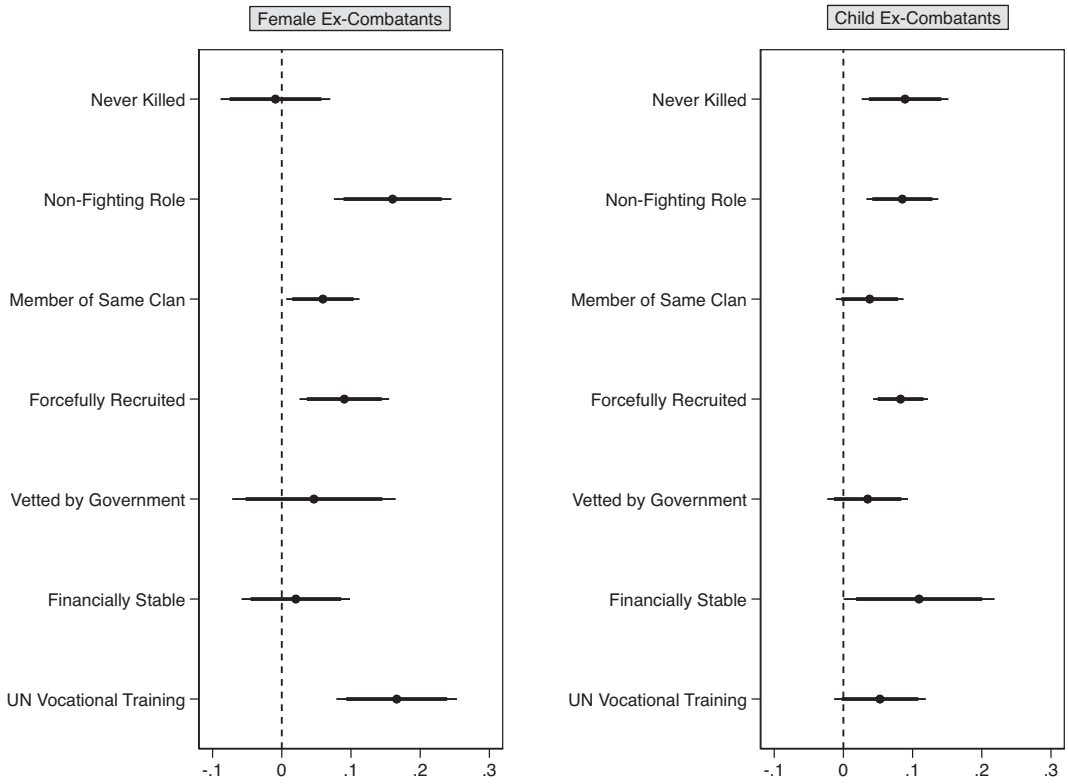

Figure 6. Factors toward acceptance.
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

chal representation of women in society in the reintegration process.

To further probe the mechanisms at play, we asked respondents what factors mattered most when deciding whether a defector should be reintegrated. We asked this question as a follow-up for each experimental profile cue. For example, a respondent receiving the female defector treatment was asked specifically about female defectors. To identify what matters, we needed to detect individual circumstances that could theoretically influence an individual's preference for reintegration. To do so, we relied on a combination of primary and secondary data. We identified seven possible factors: whether the defector (1) has never killed anyone; (2) has served in justice or police instead of fighting units; (3) is from the same clan as the respondent; (4) was forcefully recruited; (5) was vetted by the government; (6) has some money; and (7) has been provided vocational training by the United Nations.

Figure 6 displays the results from these tests. The left and right panels contain the results for the female and child defector treatments, respectively. There are some general trends as well as noticeable differences. In both categories, non-fighting roles and forced recruitment increase respondents' willingness to accept defectors; here, non-fighting roles include involvement in justice and the police. The finding on non-violence for women, alongside the finding on marriage, suggests public acceptance is inherently gendered and attached to the social and patriarchal expectations of women in society. For female defectors, being of the same clan as the respondent matters for factors contributing to acceptance. A female defector's completion of a United Nations vocational training program is also important. For child defectors, having never killed someone and being financially stable increases respondents' willingness to accept them.

Proximity to al-Shabaab

Along with our main analyses, we conduct a series of additional tests that examine reintegration preferences and respondent-level demographics, including clan. As a final consideration here, we explore whether an individual's physical and social proximity to al-Shabaab affects reintegration preferences for each of our treatments. In Somalia, some communities experience more violence than others, and individuals maintain varying preferences for al-Shabaab's political campaigns (Bakonyi et al. 2019; Felbab-Brown 2020). To investigate whether such physical or social proximity is important, we ask respondents additional questions on direct exposure to al-Shabaab violence, perceived motivations behind al-Shabaab violence, and observed al-Shabaab community activities.[18]

Direct Exposure to al-Shabaab Violence

We expect individuals directly exposed to al-Shabaab violence to be less willing to support reintegration. To evaluate exposure to violence, we asked respondents whether any member of their immediate family (living in the same household) had been killed or seriously injured by al-Shabaab. We also asked whether respondents had been displaced because

[18]Our arguments on social and physical proximity were pre-registered.

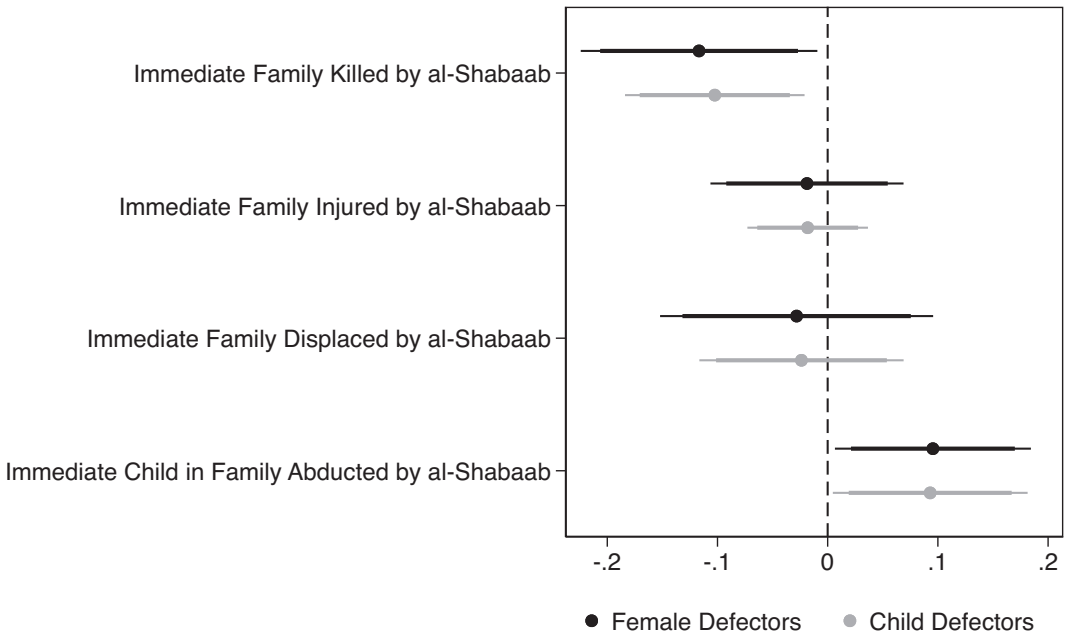

Figure 7. Exposure to al-Shabaab violence and reintegration preferences.
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

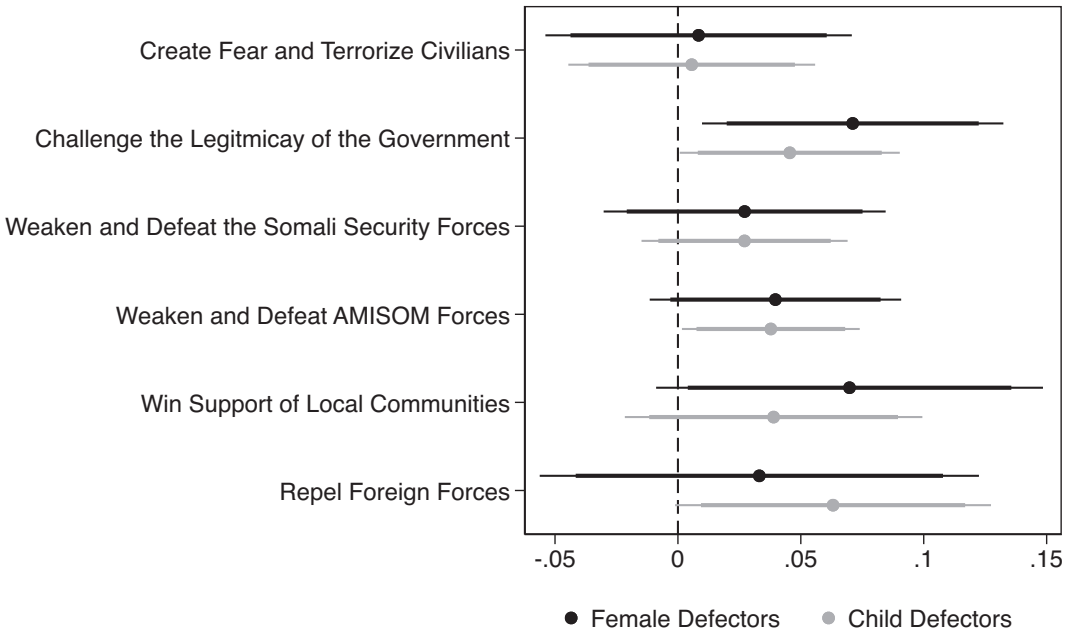

Figure 8. Perceived motivations for violence and reintegration preferences.
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

of al-Shabaab or had any children in their families abducted into the organization. We display the results in figure 7. We find respondents who have had immediate family members killed by al-Shabaab are, in both female and child treatments, less likely to accept ex-combatants ($p \approx 0.059$ and $p \approx 0.065$, respectively). Conversely, we find respondents who have had children abducted into al-Shabaab are more likely to accept ex-combatants in the female treatment ($p \approx 0.086$), but not the child treatment ($p > 0.10$). While many of the statistics fail to reach conventional standards for significance, their interpretation is useful descriptively and the results complement previous work on how individuals' exposure to violence hinders pathways to reconciliation (e.g., Balcells 2012; Pham et al. 2004).

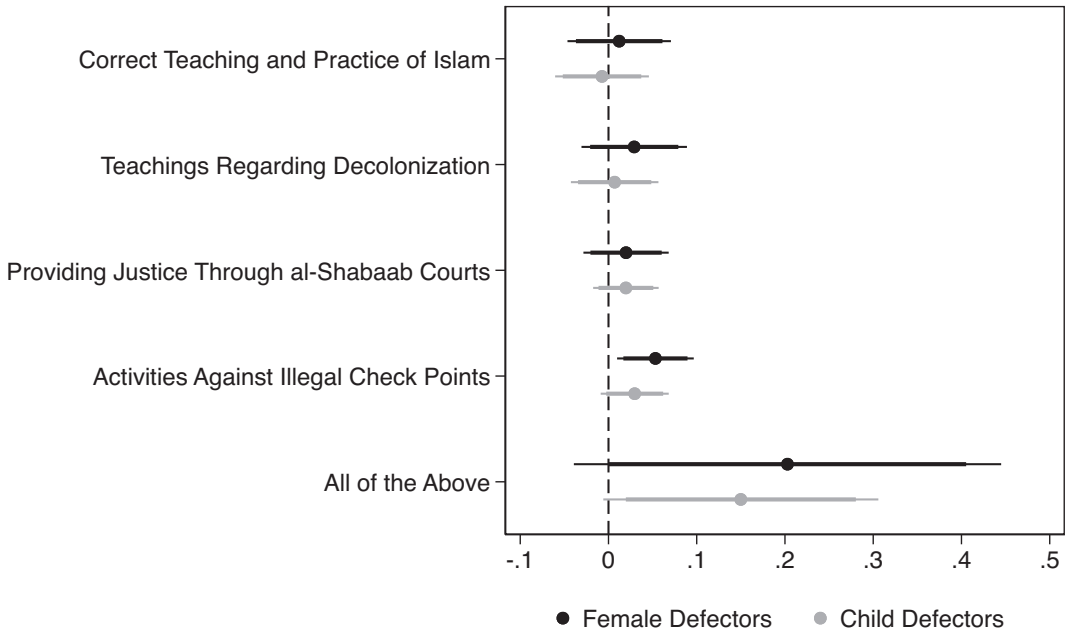

Figure 9. Observed community activities and reintegration preferences
Figure displays point estimates with 90 percent and 95 percent confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the community-level.

Perceived Motivations behind al-Shaabab Violence

Perceptions of al-Shabaab's motivations for violence likely shape reintegration preferences. To evaluate this social proximity to al-Shabaab, we asked respondents why they believe al-Shabaab uses violence and what they believe their primary objectives to be. Using primary and secondary sources on al-Shabaab violence, respondents were asked to choose from six possible motivations: (1) create fear and terrorize civilians; (2) weaken Somali Security Forces; (3) weaken African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) forces; (4) win support of local communities; (5) challenge the legitimacy of the government; and (6) repel foreign forces, such as AMISOM or US forces. While many of these are non-mutually exclusive and inter-twined, providing six potential motivations is useful for probing perceptions on the group's primary motivations. The results are displayed in figure 8. For our female treatment, we find individuals who believe al-Shabaab's primary objectives are to challenge the legitimacy of the government ($p \approx 0.047$), weaken AMISOM forces ($p \approx 0.054$), and win the support of local communities ($p \approx 0.054$) are more willing to accept defectors. For our child treatment, we find individuals who believe al-Shabaab's primary objectives are to weaken AMISOM forces ($p \approx 0.057$) and repel foreign forces ($p < 0.001$) are more willing to accept defectors.

Observed al-Shabaab Community Activities

Finally, we believe the type of activities individuals observe al-Shabaab carrying out in their community likely affect preferences for reintegration; specifically, observing positive or corrective, non-violent behavior by al-Shabaab should increase sentiment toward defectors. To assess this expectation, we asked respondents whether al-Shabaab carried out the following activities in their community: (1) correct teaching and practice of Islam; (2) teachings regarding decolonization; (3) provision of justice through al-Shabaab Islamic Courts; and (4) activities against illegal checkpoints or tax collectors. We also provided an option for respondents to select whether al-Shabaab completed all or none of these activities. While these categories do not represent every activity carried out by the organization, they are some of the most common across the cities we examined. The results are displayed in figure 9. For the female treatment, we find those who said al-Shabaab carried out activities against illegal checkpoints or tax collectors are more accepting of defectors ($p \approx 0.003$). For the child treatment, no activities are statistically significant, suggesting views on the defectors' profiles prevail in acceptance decision-making over situational factors related to al-Shabaab.

Conclusion

Understanding whether the diversity of the defector population matters for social reintegration is pivotal for ensuring equality and fairness in demilitarization processes. Our research has important theoretical and substantive policy implications for the case of al-Shabaab in Somalia and beyond. The gender and age of the armed group defector matter for reintegration preferences: The public favors women and children. We also find context is important for reintegration: The public is more likely to favor women who were wives of al-Shabaab fighters, aligning with social and patriarchal expectations of women in society. Moreover, those who already host defectors in their community are more likely to support defector reintegration, suggesting there may be some hesitancy in communities unexposed to existing reconciliation efforts. Relatedly, citizens' social and physical proximity to al-Shabaab is important. Those more aligned with the organization's political ideology are sympathetic toward defectors. Conversely, direct victims of al-Shabaab violence hold less favorable preferences. Thus, individual-level factors—both

related to the defector and the public—inform preferences for the reintegration of armed group defectors.

Our work leaves several important dimensions for future research. First, additional mechanisms, such as trust and fear, should be further examined. Second, future work should take our work on social and physical proximity to violence further to consider other forms of exposure. Some communities face violence from other conflict actors, including the government and external actors, for example, the United States drone strikes in the region. Exposure to these forms of violence might affect reintegration preferences. Third, our design could be employed elsewhere to better understand reintegration in similar contexts across the Middle East and Africa, particularly in Islamic insurgencies.

Given the lack of focus on reintegration in these contexts beyond the Islamic State (e.g., Kao and Revkin 2023) and Boko Haram (e.g., Godefroidt and Langer 2022), a further focus on reintegration of Islamic insurgents in predominantly Muslim societies would provide important insights into this understudied context. Finally, future work could consider social reintegration beyond acceptance by looking at relationship-building in host communities. Our findings suggest defectors are largely accepted in the short term, but whether such acceptance continues in the long run remains underexplored.

Acknowlegments

The project received ethical approval from the University of Essex Research Ethics Committee (Reference: ETH1920-1801) and was pre-registered with the Open Science Framework. We thank Andrew Coe, Noyonika Das, Pheobe Donnelly, Mirna El Masri, Maureen Fubara, Steve Monroe, Macartan Humphreys, Sara Mitchell, Maiyoraa Jeyabraba, Kristen Kao, Ayşegül Kayaoğlu, Gabriella Levy, Ellen Lust, Marwa Shalaby, Melina Platas, Anouk Rigterink, Peter van der Windt, and participants at the 2023 American Political Science Association Annual Conference in Los Angeles, the 2023 European Political Science Association Annual Conference in Glasgow, and New York University Abu Dhabi's Postdoctoral Seminar Series for their invaluable comments and suggestions. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), the UN Development Office in Somalia (UNDP), and the Somali Ministry of Justice. All views expressed are our own. The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *International Studies Quarterly* online.

References

ACCORD. 2019. *Disengaging from Violent Extremism*. Durban: The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes.

Agneman, Gustav, and Lisa Strömbom. 2025. "How Ethnic Discrimination Shapes Political Reintegration after War: Insights from a Conjoint Experiment in Colombia." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68: 152–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231222252.

Altier, Mary Beth. 2021. *Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: Lessons from over 30 Years of DDR*. Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network.

Andvig, Jens Christopher, and Scott Gates. 2010. "Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict." In *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, edited by Scott Gates and Simon Reich, 77–92. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vkgp3.

Annan, Jeannie, Christopher Blattman, Dyan Mazurana, and Khristopher Carlson. 2011. "Civil War, Reintegration, and Gender in Northern Uganda." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55: 877–908. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002711408013.

Annan, Jeannie, Moriah Brier, and Filder Aryemo. 2009. "From 'Rebel' to 'Returnee': Daily Life and Reintegration for Young Soldiers in Northern Uganda." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 24: 639–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558409350499.

Armand, Alex, Paul Atwell, and Joseph F. Gomes. 2020. "The Reach of Radio: Ending Civil Conflict through Rebel Demobilization." *American Economic Review* 110: 1395–429. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20181135.

Bacon, Tricia. 2022. *Inside the Minds of Somalia's Ascendant Insurgents: An Identity, Mind, Emotions and Perceptions Analysis of al-Shabaab*. Washington, DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism.

Bakonyi, Jutta, Peter Chonka, and Kirsti Stuvøy. 2019. "War and City-Making in Somalia: Property, Power and Disposable Lives." *Political Geography* 73: 82–91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.05.009.

Balcells, Laia. 2012. "The Consequences of Victimization on Political Identities: Evidence from Spain." *Politics and Society* 40: 311–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329211424721.

Bauer, Michal, Nathan Fiala, and Ian Levely. 2018. "Trusting Former Rebels: An Experimental Approach to Understanding Reintegration after Civil War." *The Economic Journal* 128: 1786–819. https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12503.

Beier, J. Marshall. 2015. "Shifting the Burden: Childhoods, Resilience, Subjecthood." *Critical Studies on Security* 3: 237–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2015.1114459.

Benstead, Lindsay J., and Daniel Van Lehman. 2021. "Two Classes of 'Marriage': Race and Sexual Slavery in al-Shabaab-Controlled Somalia." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 12: 385–403. https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2021.1923998.

Berdal, Mats R. 1996. *Disarmament and Demobilisation after Civil Wars: Arms, Soldiers and the Termination of Armed Conflicts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Berrington, Eileen, and Päivi Honkatukia. 2002. "An Evil Monster and a Poor Thing: Female Violence in the Media." *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention* 3: 50–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/140438502762467209.

Betancourt, Theresa S., Robert T. Brennan, Julia Rubin-Smith, Garrett M. Fitzmaurice, and Stephen E. Gilman. 2010. "Sierra Leone's Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 49: 606–15.

Blair, Graeme, Kosuke Imai, and Jason Lyall. 2014. "Comparing and Combining List and Endorsement Experiments: Evidence from Afghanistan." *American Journal of Political Science* 58: 1043–63. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12086.

Blattman, Christopher, and Jeannie Annan. 2016. "Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion? A Field Experiment with High-Risk Men in a Fragile State." *American Political Science Review* 110: 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000520.

Botha, Anneli. 2014. "Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization among Individuals Who Joined al-Shabaab in Kenya." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37: 895–919. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.952511.

BRCiS. 2021. *Empowering Youth through Information: Trends in Information Consumption among Urban Youth in Five IDP Camps in Somalia*. Building Resilient Communities in Somalia Report. https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/empowering-youth-through-information-trends-information-consumption-among-urban-youth. Date accessed 24 April 2026.

Broeckhoven, Kato Van, Anamika Madhuraj, Francesca Batault, Jessica Caus, Fatima Ajimi, Mohammed Bukar, and Siobhán O'Neil. 2024. *Picturing Conflict: Child Perspectives from Their Time with Boko Haram and Their Exit Journeys*. Geneva: UNIDIR.

Campbell, Susanna P. 2017. "Ethics of Research in Conflict Environments." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 2: 89–101. https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw024.

Cohen, Dara Kay. 2013. "Explaining Rape during Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980–2009)." *American Political Science Review* 107: 461–77. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055413000221.

COOK, JOANA, AND GINA VALE. 2018. *From Daesh to "Diaspora": Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*. London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR).

CORBIN, JOANNE. 2008. "Returning Home: Resettlement of Formerly Abducted Children in Northern Uganda." *Disasters* 32: 316–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2008.01042.x.

DONNELLY, PATRICIA G. 2019. "Wedded to Warfare: Forced Marriage in Rebel Groups." Doctoral dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.

MARK A. DRUMBL AND JASTINE C. BARRETT, eds. 2019. *Research Handbook on Child Soldiers*. New York: Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788114486.

EUAA. 2023. *Somalia: Defection, Desertion and Disengagement from al-Shabaab*. Brussels: European Union Agency for Asylum.

FAULKNER, CHRISTOPHER M., AND BLAIR WELSH. 2022. "Rebel Child Soldiering and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence." *International Studies Quarterly* 66: 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac073.

FELBAB-BROWN, VANDA. 2020. "The Problem with Militias in Somalia: Almost Everyone Wants Them Despite Their Dangers." Washington, DC: Brookings.

FREEMAN, MARK, RON SLYE, MARA REVKIN, AND VANDA FELBAB-BROWN. 2018. *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism*. Barcelona: Institute for Integrated Transitions.

GELOT, LINNÉA, AND PRABIN B. KHADKA. 2024. "Traditional Authorities as Both Curse and Cure: The Politics of Coping with Violent Extremism in Somalia." *Conflict, Security & Development* 24: 25–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2310317.

GELOT, LINNÉA, AND PRABIN B. KHADKA. 2025. "Social Reintegration of Former al-Shabaab Militants: How Formal Channels Help Mitigate Threat Perceptions." *Journal of Peace Research* 62: 1820–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433241303285.

GILLIGAN, MICHAEL J., PRABIN B. KHADKA, AND CYRUS SAMII. 2023. "Intrinsic Social Incentives in State and Non-State Armed Groups." *American Political Science Review* 117: 22–41. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000020X.

GILLIGAN, MICHAEL J., ERIC N. MVUKIYEHE, AND CYRUS SAMII. 2012. "Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Burundi." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57: 598–626. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712448908.

GISLESEN, KIRSTEN. 2006. *A Childhood Lost? The Challenges of Successful Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: The Case of West Africa*. Oslo: Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt (NUPI).

GODEFROIDT, AMÉLIE, AND ARNIM LANGER. 2022. "What Drives Attitudes towards the Reintegration of Former Fighters? Insights from a Conjoint Experiment in Nigeria." *Journal of Peace Research* 60: 410–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221087070.

GOMES PORTO, JOÃO, IMOGEN PARSONS, AND CHRIS ALDEN. 2007. *From Soldiers to Citizens: The Social, Economic and Political Reintegration of UNITA Ex-Combatants*. Basingstoke: Ashgate.

GUTIÉRREZ, JOSÉ A., AND EMMA MURPHY. 2023. "The Unspoken Red-Line in Colombia: Gender Reordering of Women Ex-Combatants and the Transformative Peace Agenda." *Conflict and Cooperation* 52: 211–30.

HAINMUELLER, JENS, DANIEL HOPKINS, AND TEPPEI YAMAMOTO. 2013. "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments." *Political Analysis* 22: 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpt024.

HANSEN, STIG JARLE, STIAN LID, AND CLIFFORD COLLINS OMONDI OKWANY. 2019. *Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia and Kenya: Actors and Approaches*. Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research.

HASSAN, MUHSIN. 2012. "Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of al-Shabab and Somali Youth." *CTC Sentinel* 5: 18–20. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/understanding-drivers-of-violent-extremism-the-case-of-al-shabab-and-somali-youth/ . Accessed April 24, 2026.

HENRY, MARSHA. 2017. "Problematizing Military Masculinity, Intersectionality and Male Vulnerability in Feminist Critical Military Studies." *Critical Military Studies* 3: 182–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1325140.

HENSHAW, ALEXIS LEANNA. 2020. "Female Combatants in Postconflict Processes: Understanding the Roots of Exclusion." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5: 63–79. https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz050.

HRW. 2018. *Somalia: Al-Shabab Demanding Children*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

HUMPHREYS, MACARTAN, AND JEREMY M. WEINSTEIN. 2007. "Demobilization and Reintegration." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51: 531–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707302790.

IOM. 2021. *DDR Transitional Rehabilitation*. Geneva: International Organisation for Migration.

JENNINGS, KATHLEEN M. 2007. "The Struggle to Satisfy: DDR through the Eyes of Ex-Combatants in Liberia." *International Peacekeeping* 14: 204–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310601150800.

KAO, KRISTEN, KRISTIN FABBE, AND MICHAEL BANG PETERSEN. 2024. "The Irredeemability of the Past: Determinants of Reconciliation and Revenge in Post-Conflict Settings." Harvard Business School. https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=64611. Accessed April 24, 2026.

KAO, KRISTEN, AND MARA REVKIN. 2023. "Retribution or Reconciliation? Post-Conflict Attitudes toward Enemy Collaborators." *American Journal of Political Science* 67: 358–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12673.

KAPLAN, OLIVER, AND ENZO NUSSIO. 2018. "The Social Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Colombia." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35: 132–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894215614506.

KARR, LIAM. 2023. *al-Shabaab's Areas of Operation*. Washington, DC: Critical Threats.

KNIGHT, MARK, AND ALPASLAN ÖZERDEM. 2004. "Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion of Former Combatants in Transitions from War to Peace." *Journal of Peace Research* 41: 499–516. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304044479.

LITTMAN, REBECCA, SIOBHÁN O'NEIL, KATO VAN BROECKHOVEN, MOHAMMED BUKAR, AND ZOE MARKS. 2021. *Community acceptance of former Boko Haram affiliates*. MEAC Findings Report 7. New York: United Nations University. https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8245/MEAC_FindingsReport_7.pdf. Date accessed 24 April 2026.

LOKEN, MEREDITH. 2021. "'Both Needed and Threatened': Armed Mothers in Militant Visuals." *Security Studies* 52: 21–44.

LOKEN, MEREDITH. 2022. "Non-Combat Participation in Rebellion: A Gendered Typology." *International Security* 47: 139–70. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00440.

LOKEN, MEREDITH, AND HILARY MATFESS. 2024. "Introducing the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) Project, 1946–2015." *Journal of Peace Research* 61: 489–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221128340.

MACKENZIE, MEGAN H. 2012. *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development*. New York: NYU Press.

MANEKIN, DEVORAH, AND REED M. WOOD. 2020. "Framing the Narrative: Female Fighters, External Audience Attitudes, and Transnational Support for Armed Rebellions." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64: 1638–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720912823.

MARKS, ZOE, FATIMA YETCHA AJIMI BADU, AND REBECCA LITTMAN. 2023. *Understanding receptivity to returning former Boko Haram associates through a gender lens*. MEAC Findings Report 30. Geneva: UNIDIR. https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/23/04. Date accessed 24 April 2026.

MATFESS, HILARY. 2024. *In Love and at War: Marriage in Non-State Armed Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009358859.

MIRONOVA, VERA, AND SAM WHITT. 2023. "Gender, Agency, and Accountability for ISIS Violence: Public Perceptions from Mosul, Iraq." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2290370.

MIRONOVA, VERA, AND SAM WHITT. 2025. "Retribution versus Rehabilitation for Children within Insurgency: Public Attitudes toward ISIS-Affiliated Youth in Mosul, Iraq." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37: 512–30.

MUNGUÍA, JUAN ARMANDO TORRES, MOHAMMED BUKAR, FATIMA YETCHA AJIMI BADU, SIOBHÁN O'NEIL, AND KATO VAN BROECKHOVEN. 2023. *The prospects for remote assessment: A comparison of phone vs in-person interviews in Nigeria*. Findings Report 29. Geneva: UNIDIR. https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/23/03. Accessed April 24, 2026.

NDUNG'U, IRENE, UYO SALIFU, AND ROMI SIGSWORTH. 2017. *Violent Extremism in Kenya: Why Women Are a Priority*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 1991. "Women and War: Observations from the Field." *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military* 9: 1–15.

Pham, Phuong N., Harvey M. Weinstein, and Timothy Longman. 2004. "Trauma and PTSD Symptoms in Rwanda: Implications for Attitudes toward Justice and Reconciliation." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 292: 602–12. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.292.5.602.

Phayal, Anup, Prabin B. Khadka, and Clayton L. Thyne. 2015. "What Makes an Ex-Combatant Happy? A Micro-Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration in South Sudan." *International Studies Quarterly* 59: 654–68.

Sarfati, Agathe, and Patricia Donnelly. 2022. *Protection Dilemmas Arising from the Reintegration of Former Combatants and the Impact of the Terrorist Designation*. New York: International Peace Institute.

Schmitt, Sabine, Katy Robjant, and Anke Koebach. 2021. "When Reintegration Fails: Stigmatization Drives the Ongoing Violence of Ex-Combatants in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Brain and Behavior* 11: e02156. https://doi.org/10.1002/brb3.2156.

Scott, Elizabeth S., N. Dickon Reppucci, Jill Antonishak, and Jennifer T. DeGennaro. 2006. "Public Attitudes about the Culpability and Punishment of Young Offenders." *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 24: 815–32. https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.727.

Scott, Elizabeth S., and Laurence Steinberg. 2003. "Blaming Youth." *Texas Law Review* 81: 800–40.

Shekhawat, Seema. 2015. *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137516565.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2015. "Constructing Civil Society: Gender, Power and Legitimacy in United Nations Peacebuilding Discourse." *European Journal of International Relations* 21: 887–910. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115569319.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2016. "Making War Safe for Women? National Action Plans and the Militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda." *International Political Science Review* 37: 324–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512116629820.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2017. *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sjoberg, Laura. 2016. *Women as Wartime Rapists: Beyond Sensation and Stereotyping*. New York: NYU Press. https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814744932.001.0001.

Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry. 2007. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*. New York: Zed Books.

Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry. 2015. *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics*. New York: Zed Books.

Speckhard, Anne, and Ardian Shajkovci. 2019. "The Jihad in Kenya: Understanding al-Shabaab Recruitment and Terrorist Activity inside Kenya—In Their Own Words." *African Security* 12: 3–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2019.1587142.

Stern, Orly Maya. 2019. *The Invisible Women of al-Shabaab*. London: Adam Smith International.

Stern, Orly Maya, and Catherine Peterson. 2022. *Assisting Women Formerly Associated with al-Shabaab: A Proposed Approach to Programming*. London: Adam Smith International.

Tarnaala, Elisa. 2016. *Women in Armed Groups and Fighting Forces: Lessons Learned from Gender-Sensitive DDR Programmes*. Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) Report.

UNICEF. 2024. "Children Formerly Associated with Armed Groups Determined to Make Positive Changes." https://www.unicef.org/somalia/stories/children-formerly-associated . Date accessed 24 April 2026.

UNSOM. 2016. *Voice of al-Shabaab: Understanding Former Combatants from the Baidoa Reintegration Center*. Mogadishu: United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia.

Vermeij, Lotte. 2014. "'The Bullets Sound Like Music to My Ears': Socialization of Child Soldiers within African Rebel Groups." Doctoral dissertation, Wageningen University.

Viterna, Jocelyn. 2013. *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador*. London: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199843633.001.0001.

Warner, Jason, and Charlotte Hulme. 2018. "The Islamic State in Africa: Estimating Fighter Numbers in Cells across the Continent." *CTC Sentinel* 11: 21–8.

Welsh, Blair, and Christopher M. Faulkner. 2025. "The Gendered Composition of Child Soldiers and Conflict." In *Handbook on Gender and Security*, edited by Jutta Joachim, Annica Kronsell and Natalia Dalmer, 166–79. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803928364.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2006. "The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones." *Qualitative Sociology* 29: 373–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-006-9027-8.

Wood, Reed M., and Jakana L. Thomas. 2017. "Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participation in Violent Rebellion." *Journal of Peace Research* 54: 31–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316675025.

Welsh, Blair, and Prabin B. Khadka. (2026) The Reintegration of Women and Children Defecting from Armed Groups during Conflict: Evidence from Somalia. *International Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqag044