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Policy brief

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The gendered dimensions of conflict impacts in the borderlands between Tanzania and Mozambique

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Purpose

This policy brief presents key findings and policy implications from research conducted between August and December 2024 on the gendered dimensions of conflict in the Mozambique - Tanzania borderlands. Since 2017, ongoing violence from the militant insurgency in northern Mozambique has spilled over into Mtwara region in southern Tanzania, leading to widespread displacement, heightened insecurity, and evolving cross-border dynamics that shape both conflict and peacebuilding efforts. The conflict, primarily centred in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province, is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including socio-economic marginalisation, religious extremism, and the presence of the Al-Shabaab (Mozambique) insurgency.[1] This group, with ties to both Mozambican and Tanzanian nationals, has exploited pre-existing cross-border tensions to fuel violence and instability.

The evidence synthesis carried out during the early stages of the research revealed that existing research on this cross-border conflict often overlooks the diverse roles that women play, not only as victims but also as active participants. Moreover, there is limited nuanced analysis of the complexities of this cross-border conflict and how it is shaped by and affects ordinary people. By examining these dynamics through a gendered lens, this research provides critical insights into this cross-border situation, and women's roles and experiences in the conflict and highlights key considerations for policymakers working on conflict resolution and prevention in the region.

Methodology

This research used qualitative methods, including a desk review of academic literature, research reports, and 'grey literature' (research produced outside traditional academic publishing). Data collection included 50 Key informant Interviews (KIIs) (10 of which were remote due to access restrictions in Tanzania) and 24 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in Mozambique and Tanzania. A total of 228 individuals were consulted (56% women, 44% men).

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[1] It is important to note that the group locally referred to as 'Al-Shabaab' in the Tanzania-Mozambique borderlands, also known as 'Ansar al-Sunna' or 'Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama' (ASWJ), is a completely distinct group from Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The group usually does not refer to itself as 'Al-Shabaab', but the group is known locally as such, or also as 'Mashababos'. All references to 'Al-Shabaab' in this brief refer to the Mozambique group, unless otherwise indicated.

Source: XCEPT

Figure 1. Focus area - border areas between Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique, and Mtwara Province, Tanzania

Respondents included local officials, community leaders, CSOs, and conflict-affected communities, ensuring diverse perspectives across age and gender.[2]

Key finding 1

Men and women's involvement in and contribution to the conflict in northern Mozambique largely adhere to prevailing gender norms and roles.

Most Al-Shabaab leaders and fighters are men and boys, and men predominantly make decisions and carry out attacks. This is in accordance with patri-archal norms that cast men as leaders, protectors

and providers. Young men are disproportionately targeted for recruitment into Al-Shabaab on both sides of the border.[3]

While research indicates that most men join Al-Shabaab (Mozambique) voluntarily, women's recruitment is more complex, involving both forced recruitment through abductions and voluntary participation. Women's roles in the conflict are also diverse; while some women may be involved in support functions (such as transporting money and weapons across the border), others take on more active roles, including espionage.[4] Some women have also taken on combat roles, challenging the prevailing gender norms typically associated with conflict in the region.[5] Women's motivations for

2   Key Informants were selected on the basis of previous stakeholder identification exercises conducted by the team for other studies in Mtwara and Cabo Delgado, and using snowball sampling, with respondents suggesting other suitable respondents. FGD respondents were selected in the communities covered by this study on the basis of their demographic characteristics, with the aim of understanding the different experiences of individuals not only by sex, but also by age group.

3   Key Informant Interview (KII) 9 (15), (CSO representative), (Maputo, Mozambique (remote), September 2024); KII 7, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); International Crisis Group (2021), 'Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado'. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado.

4   Feijó, J. (2021), 'The Role of Women in the Conflict in Cabo Delgado: Understanding Vicious Cycles of Violence', *Observatório do Meio Rural (OMR)* 114. Available at: https://omrmz.org/wp-content/uploads/OR-114-The-Role-of-Women-in-the-Conflict-in-Cabo-Delgado.pdf.

5   Monzani, B. & Sustersic, M. S. (2023), 'Conflict analysis of Cabo Delgado Province in Mozambique. Research report', *Agency for Peacebuilding.* Available at: https://www.peaceagency.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/AP_Conflict-analysis_Coast-Mozambique_Feb-2024-1.pdf; Habibe, S., Forquilha, S., & Pereira, J. (2019), 'Islamic Radicalization in Northern Mozambique: The Case of Mocímboa da Praia', *Cadernos IESE,* 17. Available at: https://www.iese.ac.mz/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/cadernos_17eng.pdf.

joining Al-Shabaab also vary, with some potentially seeking opportunities for social and political empowerment.

Key finding 2

The conflict in northern Mozambique and the Tanzania-Mozambique borderlands has distinct economic impacts on men and women, primarily shaped by their gendered roles in socio-economic activities prior to the conflict.

In general, men were the primary providers in the household, relying on income from formal and informal employment. Insecurity in border areas has led to widespread unemployment among men, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty for their entire households.[6] In Mozambique, a primary coping mechanism reported by respondents was that men had been forced into casual labour, accepting low wages due to their precarious situation. In contrast, in Tanzania, the two main coping mechanisms for men were recruitment into Al-Shabaab and migration, which involves leaving their families behind.[7]

Although women had primarily domestic roles, some also engaged in informal business and agriculture, especially in Tanzania. As such, insecurity and securitisation in the borderlands have greatly affected their economic activities. 'Securitisation' in this context refers to the implementation of policies and measures by governments and security forces aimed at enhancing security, often involving increased military presence, stricter border controls, and restrictions on movement or activities.[8] These measures, while intended to enhance security, have had direct impacts on communities, particularly women and girls. Border restrictions and trade costs exacerbate existing challenges by limiting access to markets and opportunities, pushing communities towards reliance on illicit activities, increasing their vulnerability.

Before the conflict, women's income from outside the household could also supplement their husbands' earnings, often funding family responsibilities that their husbands did not prioritise, such as caring for children and the elderly. This gave them some influence over household decision-making.[9] After the onset of conflict, however, women struggled to adapt to the changing economic landscape. Gender norms that limited their mobility, access to resources, and participation in certain sectors confined them to more traditional domestic roles.

Key finding 3

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women has increased, particularly as women leave their homes to collect water and firewood or buy food and goods for their families.[10]

Despite this risk, the burden of household tasks continues to fall primarily on women. Domestic violence was also reported, which is exacerbated by men spending more time at home due to unemployment and a lack of economic activities, leading to increased frustration and aggression.[11] Research findings indicate that economic stress and lack of alternative outlets for men contribute to increased aggression within the household.

Additionally, while much of the research on SGBV in conflict contexts focuses on violence against women, this study acknowledges the complex roles women play in the conflict, including instances where women may perpetrate violence, as illustrated by women associated with Al-Shabaab who

6   Focus Group Discussion (FGD) 2, (Adult women), (Palma, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, June 2024); FGD 3, (Adults mixed), (Palma, Mozambique, July 2024); KII 8, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 16, (CSO representative), (Pemba, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remote), September 2024).

7   KII 2, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 12, (Community leader (woman)), (Palma, Mozambique, June 2024).

8   Ansorg, N. (2020), 'Securitisation strategies to prevent conflict diffusion in Tanzania and former Zaire', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies,* 38 (4), pp.579–593. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1811211.

9   Pinto, M. (2022), 'Conflict Sensitive Rapid Gender Analysis Cabo Delgado, Mozambique', *CARE International.* Available at: https://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Cabo-Delgado-RGA_Apr22.pdf.

10   FGD 6, (Adult men), (Mueda, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, August 2024); FGD 8, (Adult women), (Mueda, Mozambique, August 2024); KII 3, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 6, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 14, (Local leader (female)), (Mueda, Mozambique, August 2024); KII 18, (International organisation representative), (Pemba, Mozambique (remote), October 2024).

11   FGD 6, (Adult men), (Mueda, Mozambique, August 2024); KII 3, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 10, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 14, (Local leader (female)), (Mueda, Mozambique, August 2024).

have been involved in violent acts.[12] However, further research is needed to fully understand the dynamics of SGBV perpetration by women in this context.

Key finding 4

The conflict has increased women's economic vulnerability and uncertainty, especially as the number of women-headed households has increased.

Since 2017, the number of women-headed households has increased. In Tanzania, insecurity and securitisation of the borderlands has pushed men to abandon families or migrate elsewhere for work; in Mozambique, males have either died in conflict or been recruited (either voluntarily or through abduction).[13] This has led to women being forced to adopt precarious coping mechanisms, as they face the double burden of providing income to support their families while still managing domestic responsibilities. Securitisation measures implemented in response to the conflict, including restrictions on movement and increased military presence, have often worsened insecurity, heightening women and girls' vulnerability to protection and security risks.

This has manifested in multiple ways. On the Tanzanian side of the border, where cultivation is banned under government security measures,[14] women risk arrest by secretly growing vegetables in poorly patrolled areas.[15] With limited market access, some of these women have desperately resorted to a risky coping mechanism of selling their produce to members of Al-Shabaab.[16]

Women's motivations for joining Al-Shabaab have sometimes been driven by this vulnerability, with some potentially seeking opportunities for social and political empowerment as well as economic security or access to resources. According to

respondents, several women on the Tanzanian side of the border have resorted to marrying Al-Shabaab fighters themselves or giving their daughters in marriage as a form of survival. The distinction between 'membership' and marriage to Al-Shabaab fighters is often blurred in practice, with varying levels of commitment and involvement.[17] Child and forced marriage was reported on the Mozambican side, often driven by poverty as families seek a bride price or material support.[18] In addition to forced marriage, transactional sex has increased as a coping mechanism, particularly among women heads of households seeking income to feed their families.

Key finding 5

Shifts in gender roles do not automatically change underlying gender norms.

While conflict has driven some women, especially those who are the heads of households, into traditionally male roles, these shifts have not led to broader changes in gender roles. The enduring influence of gendered power dynamics and the resilience of traditional norms, along with the impacts of conflict, have instead even reinforced women's traditional domestic roles in some cases. This has been seen, for example, where a rise in care needs for orphans and elderly people who have lost family members is often taken on by women-headed households. In some cases, unemployed men staying at home has also led to a reduction in women's already limited decision-making power.

Even as the conflict has constrained women's spaces in many ways, however, women in the borderlands have shown resilience and adaptation by gradually seizing spaces and opportunities to drive small changes which gradually and increasingly challenge traditional, discriminatory gender roles and norms. Women, especially heads-of-household, have often been forced to take on roles traditionally

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12   FGD 8, (Adult women), (Mueda, Mozambique, August 2024); KII 6, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 7, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024).

13   FGD 2, (Adult women), (Palma, Mozambique, June 2024); FGD 3, (Adults mixed), (Palma, Mozambique, July 2024).

14   *Zitamar News* (2021) 'Cabo Ligado Analysis: The refugees returned by Tanzania'. Available at: https://www.zitamar.com/cabo-ligado-analysis-the-refugees-returned-by-tanzania/.

15   KII 2, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 3, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 8, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 10, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024

16   KII 8, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024).

17   KII 6, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024); KII 9, (CSO representative), (Mtwara, Tanzania (remote), August 2024).

18   KII 14, (Local leader (female)), (Mueda, Mozambique, August 2024); KII 15, (CSO representative), (Maputo, Mozambique (remote), September 2024); KII 17, (CSO representative), (Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remote), October 2024).

reserved for men, such as income generation, (re) construction (especially in areas of IDP returns) and community governance, taking on leadership roles reserved for men.[19] Women have increasingly joined local councils, advised men in conflict resolution, and played a key role in mediating and resolving conflict among women or involving women victims.[20] One key example of women involved in conflict resolution is the *matronas* – traditional birth attendants – who, due to their role, have often become activists for women's rights, including by joining community governance and justice structures.

International and national CSOs and NGOs have played a key role in enabling women's participation, including through training on conflict management and community-based development, which has afforded women the skills and confidence to seek opportunities to become agents for change in their communities, including by establishing and supporting structures such as the *clubes da paz* (peace clubs), cooperatives, and village savings and loans associations (VSLA).[21] Some NGO/CSO programmes have also sought to transform harmful local gender norms and imposed quotas on women's participation in their programmes, which has contributed to creating spaces for women to claim some degree of agency in processes that have an impact on community peace and development.

Nevertheless, even when women have seized these spaces, they have a limited voice, with most of the decision-making power remaining with traditional male elders and local government authorities.[22] In many cases, women often face resistance and backlash from traditional community members, which may lead to social ostracization, harassment, or violence. It is also important to consider the potential unintended consequences of programmes that focus on women, which can compound the feeling of 'emasculation' of men, and inadvertently contribute to harm, including SGBV.[23]

Despite the recognition by a plurality of respondents that men's unemployment has contributed to a rise in domestic violence, and a recognition of the increased burden on women, there is a general sense of sympathy, and even pity, for men among women respondents. This prevailing attitude means that men have, in many ways, escaped accountability for violence in which they are the primary perpetrators, reinforcing and underlining men's agency and women's enduring subordination.

While not a dominant trend, these cases demonstrate that the impacts of the conflict have created spaces for women to take on greater agency and shift their perceptions of their capabilities and the roles that they can play even in the face of deep challenges. This can drive small changes which gradually and increasingly challenge traditional, discriminatory gender roles and norms. This is a process that will take time, but external programming has the potential to support these changes and to help create opportunities for shifting gender norms.

Policy considerations

Drawing on the research findings, below are six key recommendations for policymakers and practitioners shaping policies and delivering interventions in the Mtwara-Tanzania - Northern Mozambique borderlands.

1. **The Governments of Mozambique and Tanzania should decrease onerous border checks, reduce fees, and put measures in place to discourage (and hold accountable) individuals eliciting bribes.** While the border crossings have mostly reopened, trade has not yet returned to previous levels due to the high cost of crossing the border. Reducing those costs will be crucial to enable trade to resume.

2. **The Government of Tanzania should review its policy of banning cultivation near the border and, instead, put measures that allow communities to farm securely.** This could include opening specific plots of land and providing security in and around those areas, escorting communities to and from their plots, and strengthening relationships with local communities to build trust and increase the likelihood that they will report suspicious activity.

19   KII 16, (CSO representative), (Pemba, Mozambique (remote), September 2024).

20   KII 15, (CSO representative), (Maputo, Mozambique (remote), September 2024).

21   KII 15, (CSO representative), (Maputo, Mozambique (remote), September 2024; KII 17, (CSO representative), (Cabo Delgado, Mozambique (remote), October 2024); KII 18, (International organisation representative), (Pemba, Mozambique (remote), October 2024).

22   KII 18, (International organisation representative), (Pemba, Mozambique (remote), October 2024).

23   Lukunka, B. (2012), 'New Big Men: Refugee Emasculation as a Human Security Issue', *International Migration,* 50 (5), pp.130-141. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00670.x.

3. **Donors and other organisations delivering interventions in the borderlands should integrate livelihoods and job creation components into their programming,** including strengthening cross-border value chains. As borders have reopened and trade begins to resume, external programmes can support communities in improving the productivity of their economic activities, including by enhancing the efficiency of value chains in the borderlands.

4. **Donors and humanitarian organisations should ensure that both men and women are targeted in their interventions.** While continued support to women is essential for economic development and women's empowerment, including men will be crucial to improving livelihoods and decreasing the rate of SGBV.

5. **Adopting a gender-transformative approach will enable humanitarian and development programming to seize opportunities to contribute to shifting gender norms.** A gender-transformative approach should include women in programmes to redefine norms by seizing opportunities to support women – and male champions – to challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours. This should include efforts to leverage the influence and spaces created by matronas and women heads-of-household to give them, and other women, more confidence and agency. This would also require working with men and broader communities to ensure that women are adequately supported and not put at risk for being assertive or positioned in spaces not traditionally allocated to women.

About the authors

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Bodhi Global Analysis conducts political economy analysis, conflict analysis, research, and evaluations in urban and rural locations across Sub-Saharan, West, and North Africa; the Middle East; and Southeast Asia. The peacebuilding, humanitarian and development landscape is changing with increased focus on locally-led action, and we work with affected communities and civil society to reflect their experience and needs to our clients as these complex dynamics are negotiated.

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