



Journal of the British Academy

Volume 11, Supplementary issue 1

2023

Gender and Violent Extremism

Edited by

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Introduction: Rethinking Gender in Responses to Violent Extremism

Sahla Aroussi and Fatuma Ahmed Ali

Abstract: Over the last few years, there has been a growing interest in the role of women in the prevention of violent extremism and within extremist networks. Yet research and scholarship in this area remains limited and a deeper engagement with gender and the role of norms around masculinities and femininities in violent extremism is needed. This special issue includes a selection of both timely and relevant articles by academics and practitioners, mostly from the Global South, focusing on gender and violent extremism particularly in the context of East Africa. The articles were presented at the Global Network on Gender and Responding to Violent Extremism (GARVE) online conference in November 2021. GARVE is an international network involving academics, policymakers and practitioners to promote innovative and critical thinking on violent extremism from a gender perspective and facilitate shared learning.

Keywords: gender, violent extremism, terrorism, race politics, responses, GARVE Network

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Violent extremism is not only a global security threat but also a complex gendered phenomenon that involves both men and women through diverse personal, ideological, structural and context-specific drivers (UNDP 2017). Violent extremist groups and networks have strategically utilised gender to mobilise, recruit and enhance the perceptions of their legitimacy. Yet, in initial responses to terrorism and violent extremism, gender was absent. Huckerby (2020: 181) writes that prior to 2015, gender in countering terrorism was ‘simultaneously everywhere and nowhere’. It is everywhere because gender stereotypes and gendered assumptions are used in counterterrorism, as is evident, for example, in the type of abuse inflicted on prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad (Kaufman-Osborn 2005; Gronnvoll 2007). But it is also nowhere because of the absence of a gendered perspective, particularly on women’s experiences and roles in terrorism and counterterrorism.

Nonetheless, recently we have witnessed an unprecedented level of attention to gender in research and policies on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), particularly following the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and UN Security Council Resolution 2242 on women, peace and security in 2015. This resolution emphasises the need for gender-sensitive research and for increased consultations with women-led organisations affected by violent extremism (Ndung’u & Shadung 2017: 4; Idris 2020: 9). The 2016 UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism dedicates significant attention to women and the importance of gender considerations when developing PVE strategies (Ndung’u & Shadung 2017; Idris 2020: 9). It calls on states to place the protection and empowerment of women at the centre of efforts to address terrorism and violent extremism and to ensure that these do not impact adversely on women’s rights (Ndung’u & Shadung 2017; Idris 2020: 9). In June 2018, the Sixth Review Resolution of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy urged member states and UN entities to integrate a gender analysis on the drivers of radicalisation of women to terrorism into their relevant programmes, and to seek greater consultations with women and women’s organisations when developing CVE strategies (Idris 2020: 10).

Scholarly interest regarding gender in responses to violent extremism was largely generated by the above-mentioned expansion of the UN’s P/CVE agenda; the presumption of a surge in the number of women joining violent groups; the increased attention to the targeting of women and girls by terrorist violence; the integration of P/CVE within the women, peace, and security framework; and the subsequent development and uptake of ‘feminism-as-counter-terrorism’ based on the idea that gender equality can be used as a national security tactic to combat and prevent violent extremism (Huckerby 2020).

However, this increased attention to gender within P/CVE work is challenging because there is no agreed definition on what violent extremism is (Ní Aoláin 2016).

One dimension of this complexity is that attempts to define extremism have been politically charged, involving major tensions and disagreements on the sources and meaning of violent extremism between different states (Thiessen 2019). Moreover, what governments and members of the international community would consider violent extremism may not be the same as what local communities, men and women, consider violent extremism. Hence, this makes theorising and designing effective responses extremely difficult.

Moreover, the idea that there has been an increase women's participation in extremist activities is difficult to evidence, and one may argue that women are not more attracted to violence and violent extremist groups but rather that the attention to women's roles in this area has now increased (Tariq & Sjoberg 2021: 1). Historically, women have been involved in political violence and armed struggles (Alison 2004, 2009; Parashar 2011, 2014; McEvoy 2009; Mackenzie 2009, 2012). However, the history of women's involvement in terrorism and violent extremism is difficult to ascertain because these terms are relatively new and ambiguous, and also due to the tendency to marginalise women's contributions to national and armed struggles (Tickner & True 2018).

The articles in this Special Issue were selected from among those presented at the International Virtual Conference on Gender and Responding to Violent Extremism from 23–4 November 2021. This conference explored how, over the last few years, attention to gender in P/CVE research and policies has impacted on responses to violent extremism, the women's rights agenda and local communities. The conference was organised by the Gender and Responding to Violent Extremism (GARVE) network (2019–22) led by the editors of this Special Issue. The GARVE network was funded by the United Kingdom Research and Innovation's Global Challenge Research Fund, and its core members include United States International University–Africa in Kenya, University of Leeds in the UK and Rift Valley Institute, a think tank based in Kenya.

GARVE is a global network that adopts an interdisciplinary approach and a multidisciplinary membership to allow new perspectives on gender and responding to violent extremism to emerge. It promotes critical, strategic, innovative and constructive thinking on violent extremism from a gender perspective and facilitates shared learning. The network encourages alternative ways of understanding and tackling violent extremism based on gender equality, human rights and sustainable development. As a global community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, local organisations and members of local communities from across the globe, the network is aimed to stimulate research ideas, enable generation of research projects, and create synergies between theory and practice around the topic of gender and violent extremism. It also serves as a platform for sharing best practice on community-based and socially engaged gendered approaches to human security through various activities such as roundtables, online seminars and the conference.

The GARVE network's activities have highlighted with concern the fact that threats from violent extremism and terrorism have increased in the last two decades, with violent extremist groups exploiting grievances, inequalities and governance deficits to recruit followers. Atrocities committed by violent extremist groups have exacerbated existing challenges and eroded progress towards gender equality. This is because the underlying premise is that violent extremist organisations tend to take root in marginalised areas, using local grievances to recruit young citizens in vulnerable circumstances and environments characterised by factors such as varying degrees of unemployment, low education or literacy levels, and historical discrimination.

Furthermore, GARVE has also enabled reflections on how securitised and militarised responses to violent extremism in recent years have often taken priority over conflict prevention and peacebuilding approaches (Aroussi 2020). Initiatives to promote the rights of women to participate in security sector decision-making platforms remain underfunded and often tokenistic. Countries experiencing violent extremism devote sizeable portions of their budgets to military spending and counterterrorism operations, funds that otherwise could be invested in services, infrastructure and development projects. As a result, poverty increases and deepens, and the population suffers. Evidence also suggests that attempts to include gender in policies and programmes on violent extremism typically reduce gender to women and girls, leading to tokenism that diminishes women's activism and agency (Huckerby 2020; Skjelsbæk *et al.* 2020). It is further argued that this tokenism complicates the gendered aspects of the push and pull factors in violent extremism and leaves questions unexplored. In addition, human rights violations committed under the pretext of counterterrorism, especially gender-based and sexual violence, are underreported, and perpetrators are rarely held to account. Sometimes, the lack of gender-sensitive approaches leads to harmful practices and/or reinforces gender-based discrimination.

The network also highlighted the issues of ethics, methodology and race politics in researching violent extremism as an area for theory, practice and future research directions. Ethics in researching violent extremism is highly significant. The issue of harm, for example, comes up when the research produced securitises the studied population or risks the safety and security of researchers, especially when state security actors consider the information critical. While a foreign researcher working on violent extremism in the Global South might be able to leave the research site safely, local researchers may be subjected to surveillance and scrutiny and harm by security actors or violent extremist groups, particularly after the dissemination stage. Moreover, due to gatekeeping, epistemic bias and the hegemony of Western knowledge production and criteria for publications, local scholars and practitioners often find it challenging to have their work accepted and published in reputable journals.

Racism is inherent in knowledge production on gender and violent extremism and terrorism. Terrorism, as a field of study, is built on gender, racial, imperial and heteronormative aphasias (Gentry 2020). Research in this area has resulted in ‘subjugated knowledges’ where certain experiences and understandings are diminished and dismissed as non-knowledge because of ontological, epistemological and methodological biases (Jackson 2012). Lisa Stampnitzky (2013) argues that Terrorism Studies is dominated by inner circles and subjugated knowledge. Her work examines how the inner circle, or what she calls the terrorism mafia, constructed what violence and actors are included in the label of terrorism. Puar (2007) also highlights how the entrenchment of Islamophobia in Terrorism Studies is both structural and ideological. She invites us to reconsider the scholarship and policies on counterterrorism, arguing that the field of Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies is dominated by private security trade corporations and neo-conservative think tanks with a vested interest in a particular narrative. Gentry (2020) argues that ‘the label of terrorism is in itself a form of violence that materialises against particular populations’ (Gentry 2020: 4). She contends that the boundaries of what is defined as terrorism are typically drawn around highly racialised discourses and internalised cultural and religious biases reinforced through the contested concept of radicalisation (Gentry 2020).

Since 11 September 2001, we have witnessed a process of racialisation of religion whereby members of Muslim minorities, particularly in the West, are identified as terrorists and dis-identified as citizens (Puar 2007; Cherney & Murphy 2016). Butler’s (2004, 2009) idea of grievable and non-grievable deaths is also of relevance here. People who have lost loved ones in terrorist attacks are depicted as sufferers of trauma and injustice, but those who have lost loved ones because of the war on terror are not depicted as sufferers or victims of injustice. ‘The sexual torture scandal at Abu Ghraib is an instructive example of the devalorisation of the life of one population for the purpose of optimisation and maximisation of the life of another (Western, American)’ (Puar 2007: 33).

Moreover, the epistemic dominance of the Global North in this field of study occurs at the cost of excluding voices that are vital to changing things on the ground (Baaz & Parashar 2021). Baaz & Parashar (2021) highlight how researchers often engage in knowledge production while ignoring vital local knowledge, insights, concerns and development needs. The heightened attention to gender in terrorism and violent extremism in recent years has led to increased involvement of Western women in scholarship, research and policies on countering and preventing violent extremism and the growth of what Abu Lughod called *securofeminism*. Zakaria (2021), in her work on this topic, has labelled the war on terror as America’s First Feminist War. Shepherd (2022) also condemns this increased involvement and participation of Western feminists and scholars with security institutions and actors and their

complicity with the racism, homophobia and exclusion inherent in these structures. [Shepherd \(2022: 737\)](#) calls attention to how epistemic whiteness structures and informs other expressions of white supremacy. Epistemic whiteness, she argues, is a form of ‘feminist knowledge which reproduce[s] racial hierarchies and ignorance about how whiteness functions’ and which maintains white supremacy in the guise of progressive policy and activism. This clearly indicates how politics of representation in knowledge production on violent extremism is centred on race and also how it alienates gendered lived experiences.

A growing body of scholarly research suggests that concerns for more equal gender relations and the empowerment of women may manifest only shallowly, if at all, in P/CVE work, while race is frequently elided altogether ([Shepherd 2022: 729](#)). Therefore, research shows that counterterrorism narratives and interventions have globally racialised, militarised and securitised a group of people as potential terrorists because of their race and religious affiliation. For instance, the construction of Muslim women as passive, invisible victims of a repressive ideology (Islam) and perceived extreme patriarchy is evident in mainstream scholarship, policy and practice ([Ali & Mwambari 2021](#)). Moreover, Muslim women have transitioned from victim to suspect, especially when they fail to follow the gendered norms and expectations of Western society; they are automatically seen as accomplices of Muslim men, not as victims ([Ali & Mwambari 2021](#)).

This Special Issues concludes the work of the GARVE network. The Special Issue critically reflects on the role of gender in violent extremism and on responses to it, and it constructively offers alternative approaches to understanding and tackling violent extremism using a gender lens. The articles in this volume are both diverse and grounded, looking at women’s involvement, recruitment, radicalisation and disengagement; the impact of violent extremism and counterterrorism operations on communities; the role of motherhood from an African feminist perspective; and issues of masculinity, gender inequality, misogyny and human rights. Some of them suggest solutions to violent extremism by proposing Islamic feminism as a potential alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism and salvaging the P/CVE agenda by transforming its harmful aspects into a more positive set of values and principles drawing on the nexus between peacebuilding leadership and gender identity. These articles also approach gender in responses to violent extremism from an intersectional perspective through a generational lens that is concerned with how innocent men, boys, women and girls are impacted by racialised and masculinised security discourses at both the national and global levels.

Additionally, this volume is a reflective analysis of the theory and practice of gender and violent extremism today. The authors comprise practitioners and academics, mainly from the Global South, who seek to stimulate significant conversations and

debates and engage in knowledge production in rethinking gender in responses to violent extremism. Moreover, many of the authors are practitioners, and their contributions demonstrate their capacity for reflexive analysis of their practice and lived experiences. The authors of this Special Issue further choose to rethink gender in responses to violent extremism by moving beyond the gender essentialist perspective – assuming that men and boys are the main perpetrators and targets for radicalisation and women and girls are the victims, mothers and wives of recruits or potential recruits – that until recently was the main approach in understanding and responding to violent extremism.

In rethinking gender in responses to violent extremism, Hawa Noor Zitzmann's article in this volume looks at women's pathways into Al-Shabaab. The article discusses how the responsibility for women's involvement with terrorism in Kenya is often attributed to men, with women only represented as victims without agency. Based on 15 explorative interviews with female returnees from Mombasa and Kwale, the article argues that the motivations for women's participation in religion-inspired militancy are complex and multiple and therefore defy the simple binary of agency and victimhood. The article contextualises women's recruitment to Al-Shabaab in the Kenyan political context, arguing that this phenomenon only became prominent after Operation Linda Nchi due to increased demands for additional followers and the enhanced operational capacity of the group. The article identifies three pathways to joining Al-Shabaab: retaliatory, responsive and reunion paths. The first pathway demonstrates that women who join Al-Shabaab can do so for political reasons, enabled by political grievances and experiences of marginalisation, as well as for personal reasons such as the desire for revenge and retaliation. Discussing the responsive pathway, the article reveals that women can also be motivated by socio-economic opportunities such as employment and education in their decision to join Al-Shabaab either consciously or by deception. The reunion pathway explores how reunion with a partner or a husband or promises of love and marriage can also motivate women to join Al-Shabaab. The article argues that the conditions of impoverishment, violence and marginalisation in which these women lived and their desire for love, family and a decent life and livelihood are what unite the three pathways. These conditions were successfully exploited by Al-Shabaab to recruit them, whether this happened unwittingly or intentionally. The article therefore concludes that efforts to counter the recruitment of women into extremism must take into consideration how the involvement of women with extremist groups is enabled by the unjust, insecure and unequal economic, political and social structures in which they live.

Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen, in her article, also focuses on women and girls in extremist organisations, asking not only why they joined, but also why and how they left. Using narrative enquiry and drawing primarily on 23 interviews with female

returnees in Kenya, the article considers the role of gender in the disengagement and reintegration of defectors. Badurdeen argues that the gendered recruitment process that leads women into Al-Shabaab is a continuum that ranges from voluntary to involuntary (deceptive or forced) recruitment. Badurdeen warns against treating these two as a binary, arguing that individuals often fluctuate between voluntary and involuntary involvement, with positive and negative experiences within the movement shaping and altering their decisions at any given time. Badurdeen links the potential for reintegration with the reasons behind disengaging from violent groups. Disengagement, she argues, often happens when expectations of joining the violent groups are unmet. She explains that when female recruits find themselves performing roles they consider demeaning or difficult, they are more likely to seek to disengage from the network out of feelings of disillusionment, frustration and anger. While acknowledging exceptions where certain women gain trust within the network or acquire status through marriage, the patriarchal and rigidly hierarchical nature of groups such as Al-Shabaab, as well as the prevalence of racism and tribalism within these groups, all limit the roles and spaces permitted to women, which can lead to disenchantment. As such, identifying what roles returnees played in the network can in many cases shed further light on their reasons for disengagement and potential for deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration or re-engagement. However, understanding how and why they left the group is also important for assessing the reintegration of female returnees. Reintegration is more successful when the decision to disengage was made voluntarily. The article also identifies some of the reasons for returning from Al-Shabaab, including the amnesty offered by the Kenyan government; family and community acceptance and support; available livelihood opportunities and financial incentives; the possibility of creating a new life or to be with children or parents; and divergence from the religious ideology of Al-Shabaab. Effective reintegration, however, rests on the availability of conducive factors such as family and community acceptance and support.

The article argues that successful rehabilitation and reintegration requires assessing and addressing the returnees' psychosocial, vocational, financial, educational, legal, religious, familial and communication needs. It calls for gender-sensitive and long-term psychosocial supports targeting returnees as a prerequisite for successful rehabilitation and reintegration and healing. Cultural and community-based stereotypes around women can also impact on their effective reintegration. Hence, the article calls for gender-sensitive, culturally appropriate and context-specific reintegration programmes delivered in coordination between the Kenyan government and different actors such as civil society organisations, religious and traditional leaders, and the wider community. The author also recommends tailor-made approaches adapted for each returnee based on their needs.

The next article in the volume shifts the focus from women who join terrorist groups to those who are left behind. In his article, Hussein Abdullahi Mahmoud takes us on a journey to explore the impact of violence and counterterrorism operations on communities around the Kenyan coast. The author first examines the typology, actors and main victims of this violence. The author particularly highlights the plight of the families of those who have fallen victim to the Kenyan war on terror through extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances. Using key informant interviews, the author discusses the difficulties experienced by these secondary victims. The findings show that the widows and children of those who lost their lives often find themselves unable to obtain death certificates, which are essential for accessing bank accounts to claim funds and for inheriting properties from the deceased. These certificates are also required for widows to remarry and to secure identity documents for their children, such as birth certificates or passports, and to access public services such as healthcare and education. The author concludes that the Kenyan state has no clear policy or protocol on how to respond to and support the families of those who have been killed or disappeared in the war on terror and that such failure is tantamount to a loss of citizenship status.

Staying with the theme of families, in their article, Beatrice Kizi Nzovu and Fatuma Ahmed Ali focus on the mothers of recruits. They discuss the roles that mothers already play in preventing and responding to violence at the family and community levels, arguing that the inclusion of women in efforts aimed at curbing violent extremism would necessarily deliver more effective strategies. The authors offer a detailed examination of Kenya's countering violent extremism and counterterrorism policies to highlight the inconsequentiality of mothers' knowledge in policies and discourses around violent extremism. This disregard for mothers' knowledge, according to Nzovu and Ali, is not accidental but a form of deliberate erasure deployed by a patriarchal state machinery, even when several United Nations resolutions and reports have emphasised the importance of and need for women's meaningful participation in efforts aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism. The authors employ an African feminist theoretical perspective informed by Motherism to argue that the views and lived experiences of mothers are essential in efforts aimed at addressing and preventing violent extremism. African feminism recognises the importance of culture and cultural practices to African women's identity and lived experiences (Coetzee 2018; Atanga 2013). An African feminist perspective is one that celebrates those cultural practices that value women's contribution and knowledge, and one that works with men – rather than against them – towards a fairer and gender-inclusive African society (Mekgwe 2006). Motherism, as a concept, contends that the mother's role and close connection with her children is an essential component of African feminism. Motherhood bonds women and their children even when the latter are recruited to violent extremism,

and as such mothers' knowledge and experiences become crucial if we are to understand and respond to violent extremism effectively. Looking at the policy framework in Kenya, which includes the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012), the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism and the Statute Law (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill (2019), which modified the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012), the authors condemn the fact that women, and particularly mothers and motherhood, not only remain at the periphery of the policy framework on countering violent extremism but are also exploited as a source of information and as a focal point for intervention by actors working to prevent violent extremism. Nzovu and Ali argue that both policy development and implementation processes in Kenya should meaningfully capture contributions that recruits' mothers can make to addressing violent extremism.

Moving away from discussing motherhood and feminism, the next article in this volume focuses on the role of men and masculinities in violent extremism. In his article, Okumba Miruka considers, first, the fact that most identified terrorists are men, and second, the irrefutable evidence that most men, including in areas where radicalisation is high, do not engage in violent extremism. Miruka argues that these two facts place gender, and particularly masculinity, at the heart of any quest for understanding violent extremism. In his article, Miruka first reviews the literature on masculinities and violent extremism to comprehend the nature of their connection. The article explores six prominent themes within the literature on men and violent extremism: the concept of masculinities; gender norms in the context of economic challenges; disillusionment and alienation; ideological and familial solidarity; militarisation; and inversion. Based on this review of the literature, Miruka argues that the inclination to join violent extremist groups should not be generalised as natural in all men. The article argues that there are multiple and complex factors that may lead individuals into violent extremism which are recurrent within the literature. It emphasises the need to contextualise and localise research on masculinities and violent extremism, drawing on existing research in the field. In its last section, the article proposes three conceptual frameworks for researching masculinities and violent extremism that provide a better understanding of the phenomenon and can potentially contribute to preventing it. The first framework focuses on understanding the categories of violent extremism – ideological, issue-based and ethno-nationalist/separatist. The second is an ecological model that enables understanding of the varied reasons and factors for joining at the individual or micro, meso and macro levels – the community, societal and global levels. The third framework is one that takes into consideration the push and pull factors for violent extremism. The article concludes by offering a few recommendations for future research on this subject.

In the final two articles, the volume moves to consider solutions to violent extremism. Rickline S. Ng'ayo's article explores how Islamic feminism can potentially be

used as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism. The article argues that Islamic feminism can empower Muslim women against recruitment into extremist groups. The article claims that women who join violent extremist groups have little religious or formal education and are therefore less knowledgeable about their rights and freedoms as Muslims, making them vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment. The article contends that relying on patriarchal norms, Al-Shabaab successfully leveraged both religion and femininity in their recruitment strategy. Stereotypical gender constructions around Muslim women's purity, women's role as good Muslim wives and mothers, and the desire for redemption, love and the thrill of adventure are all exploited by Al-Shabaab to motivate women to join the group. The lack of economic and social independence is also an obstacle for women, which leads to forced or involuntary recruitment into Al-Shabaab alongside their husbands and partners. The article also argues that Kenya's National Countering Violent Extremism policies are underpinned by patriarchal assumptions and a lack of gender insights and therefore have failed to counter the gendered strategies used by Al-Shabaab, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment. As a solution to this rather thorny issue, the article proposes Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for countering the narratives that Al-Shabaab uses to recruit and radicalise women and for the promotion of women's rights. Islamic feminism, according to Ng'ayo, offers women additional rights and freedoms and a chance for change and empowerment in accordance with Islam and hence reduces the appeal of these violent groups.

In the final article, Rosalie Fransen, reflecting on 20 years of practice, considers the question 'can P/CVE be salvaged'. The article argues that there is a conceptual incompatibility between the problem-oriented P/CVE discourse and the aims and objectives of peacebuilding and the women, peace and security agenda. This mismatch has necessarily resulted in serious compromises on the principles of human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence. The article argues that the global P/CVE agenda has resulted in a narrowing of the scope of work of civil society organisations involved in peacebuilding, endangered their safety and limited their ability to hold states accountable.

Through analysing the case studies profiled in 'Case studies on the role of gender and identity in shaping positive alternatives to extremism' (ICAN, 2021), the article evaluates the contributions of women peacebuilders and pro-peace organisations in delivering alternatives to extremism grounded in the framework of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism (PREP) as proposed by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini (2018). The article argues that despite being negatively impacted by the P/CVE agenda, local, women-led civil organisations and pro-peace organisations have managed to continue to work towards realising peace, justice, human rights and gender equality by being authentic, flexible and adept at managing hostile political spaces. The main

contributions these organisations make to their communities include providing positive alternatives and creating space for power-building in programmes and activities aimed at transforming extremism. By engaging people in different activities, they can help empower them, strengthen their sense of belonging and enhance their resilience to extremism.

The article argues that salvaging P/CVE requires reimagining this practice in a way that recognises the leadership of women peacebuilders and the significance of gender and identity, cultural credibility and trust, and power-building. The article concludes that there is a need for a transformational shift away from the harmful P/CVE agenda towards a positive set of values and principles – conceptualised using either the PREP framework or a similar model – that better aligns with and supports the work of women-led civil society.

The articles in this Special Issue reveal that a more nuanced picture is emerging from the growing body of literature on gender and violent extremism, which sheds light on the importance of women for violent extremist organisations such as Al-Shabaab and in the P/CVE initiatives. The publication of this volume is one of the key achievements of the GARVE network, which was formed with the aim of bringing together diverse members from a multidisciplinary background to promote innovative and critical thinking on violent extremism from a gender perspective, to facilitate shared learning, and to attempt to dispel stereotypes and influence mainstream or policy-level thinking. It also highlights our approach to gender as a relational experience where female gender norms are constructed in relation to male gender norms and vice versa.

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To cite the article: Aroussi, S., & Ali, F.A. (2023), 'Introduction: Rethinking Gender in Responses to Violent Extremism', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.001>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

When they joined: restricted agency and victimhood in Kenyan women's pathways into Al-Shabaab

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Abstract: It has been claimed, often without evidence, that women have flocked to Al-Shabaab to work as fundraisers, cooks, intelligence officers, suicide bombers and sex slaves, and have even recruited others into the group. After attacks, such as that on Mombasa's Central Police Station, which have involved women, their motivations have been ascribed to factors including ideological commitment; the desire for financial gain, fame or danger; love; the pursuit of vengeance; curiosity; coercion; and kidnap. Attention paid to women's motives tends to be informed by the perception that women are automatically victims of violence, but the phenomenon is more complex than that. In this article, the testimonies of Kenyan women who have participated in Al-Shabaab's activities are used to explore the complex and multifaceted realities and multiple factors that enabled their mobilisation. Three motivational pathways that led Kenyan women into Al-Shabaab are identified, and Al-Shabaab's mobilisation strategies are also addressed.

Keywords: Al-Shabaab, religion-justified militancy, politicised religion, politicised Islam, jihad, mobilisation

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Introduction

The role of women in political violence, such as that perpetrated by religion-justified militant groups like Al-Shabaab, has increasingly come under scrutiny in recent decades. Interest has been propelled by the emergence of new evidence that shows women taking up roles beyond those of passive, ‘second-class’ supporters, especially in the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and even acting as combatants (Spencer 2016: 74). The misogynist doctrines and brutal violence of ISIS, together with the fact that women, especially from Western countries, joined the group in large numbers, added to this shock (Vale 2019: 2). However, women have participated in combat activities since time immemorial, as is demonstrated, for example, by the case of Safiyya, an aunt of the Prophet Muhammad, who defended the fortress in Medina during the battle of the trench. A woman named Um ‘Umara not only nursed the wounded but also fought, and the prophet’s wife, Aisha, led an army against the fourth Caliph Ali (Parashar 2011a: 296; Johnston *et al.* 2020: 1). In later years, outside the Islamic tradition, the assassination of Russia’s Tsar Alexander II and the activities of groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Red Army Faction (RAF) in West Germany, Latin American guerrilla factions, and many other groups employing violence have involved women, including suicide bombers, in places including Chechnya, Palestine, Sri Lanka and Iraq (Spencer 2016: 75; Chatterjee 2016: 201; Weinberg & Eubank 2011).

The shock at women’s involvement is therefore due to the flawed assumption in international politics that women are inherently peaceful, a view that leads to women being essentialised as passive victims of war or dismissed as ‘cogs in the wheel’, whose nature is different from that of male perpetrators (Del Villar 2019; Bloom 2011b; Sjoberg 2009). As a result, women’s motivations are generally understood to derive from the narrow sphere of personal interests, framed in stereotypical gendered terms and experiences that align strongly with victimhood such as drug abuse, coercion, the urge to restore reputation after rape or financial gain. In short, women’s involvement is explained by everything other than political devotion (Agara 2017: 49; Ortals & Poloni-Staudinger 2018; Windsor 2020: 513; O’Rourke 2009: 684; Harmon & Holmers-Eber 2014: 20; Bloom 2011a: 11–15). Women’s agency is, therefore, inextricably tied to men’s in global politics (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007; Parashar 2009: 252; Parashar 2011b: 166; Alison 2003). However, research conducted in recent decades has produced findings that run contrary to this view and shed light on the diverse ways in which women are involved in political violence.

In her study of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – an organisation where more than a third of members were women ideologues, strategic leaders and managers of guerrilla fighting, operating both in the background and as attackers and suicide

bombers – [Alison \(2004\)](#) moved beyond the ‘agency’/‘victimhood’ binary to explain the complexity of women’s participation in the group and demonstrate that women are more likely to be included, ideologically and practically, in non-state liberation movements than in conformist/state-centric ones ([Alison 2004: 448](#)). She further argued that, even though both men and women have agency, some types of agency are gender-specific, and women’s motivations and experiences can vary across time and space, particularly when they are transformed in different phases of a conflict ([Alison 2004, 2009](#)). Even within armed groups that appear similar, women’s roles can vary widely as a result of their diverse and unique capabilities ([Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2020: 2–5](#)). Women may act in roles as varied as food and healthcare providers that work indirectly with extremist groups and traffickers of arms to perpetrators, and they often have the same motivations for the exercise of their agency as their male counterparts ([Jackson et al. 2011](#); [Sjoberg & Gentry 2007](#); [Sjoberg & Wood 2015](#); [Jacques & Taylor 2013](#)).

Empirical evidence collected in relation to women’s roles in religion-justified militancy in Kashmir and in ISIS have also demonstrated the nuances of women’s participation by deconstructing the meaning of participation and demonstrating the variety of the roles that women have played ([Parashar 2009, 2011a](#); [Chatterjee 2016](#)). Their role as active militants is all the more interesting given that religion-justified militant groups are often tagged as misogynistic advocates for domesticated femininity and the associated subordination of women ([Eggert 2015: 365–6](#)). As media interest in women’s involvement in ISIS increased, so did the pace with which the organisation enlisted women into diverse roles for propaganda purposes. These women and teenage girls, from as far afield as Europe and North America, were initially allocated secondary logistical roles before being increasingly integrated into operational ones in the women-only al-Khansaa brigade ([Spencer 2016: 77–8](#); [Sjoberg & Gentry 2016: 24](#)). Here they performed ‘stop and search’ duties, as well as intelligence-gathering, law enforcement and oversight functions, which saw them enforce morality over other women, and some also acted as recruiters ([Youssef & Harris 2017](#)). Women’s operational role was, however, limited because they were mere enforcers of ISIS’s diktats, and so their agency was restricted in the sense that their contribution was feminised and denigrated on grounds of their perceived physical limitations ([Spencer 2016: 84](#); [Chatterjee 2016: 213](#)). Nevertheless, the cases of LTTE and ISIS demonstrate three main circumstances that enable the involvement of women in war: when there is a shortage of militants, when the level of underground activities becomes significant, and in order to provide sexual pleasure ([Chatterjee 2016: 212](#)). These roles are shaped by various factors, such as the complexity of a war, the type of society in which it is taking place, women’s place in that society, and the insurgent group’s dynamics, ethics and gender narratives ([Alison 2009](#)). The theological conditions that permit women to participate, like men, in combat roles in a defensive war include situations where the

enemy invades Muslim lands, Muslim leaders make calls for the whole *ummah* (global Muslim community) to participate, or when Muslim women are appointed for specific and indirect tasks, such as monitoring the enemy or collecting information (Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2020: 3; Weinberg & Eubank 2011).

Zeroing in on the case of Kenya and Al-Shabaab, in March 2015, two Kenyans were among three girls incarcerated in Elwak, on the border between Kenya and Somalia, after allegedly having been found on their way to Syria to become ‘jihadi brides’ (*Capital Campus* 2015; Juma 2015). Even more shocking was the case, a year later, in which three other girls – two sisters and their friend – were shot dead by police, allegedly on the basis that they were about to attempt a suicide assault on the Central Police Station in Mombasa. It was reported that the girls were all wearing concealed suicide vests and that one of them was brandishing a knife and stabbing a police officer as another threw a petrol bomb with the intention of burning down the entire building (Solomon 2016; Ochami & Ombati 2016). Some Kenyan women, such as Rukia Faraj Kufugwa and Violent Kemunto, have been linked to Al-Shabaab’s financing operations, while others, including the so-called white widow, Samantha Lewthwaite, and Haniya Said Sagar have been linked to active mobilisation. The latter is the widow of the assassinated Muslim cleric Sheikh Aboud Rogo and was also linked to the Mombasa Central Police Station assault (Mukinda 2015; Akwiri 2016). These incidents have led to mixed claims about Kenyan women’s involvement in Al-Shabaab (Ndung’u *et al.* 2017: 20). Research suggests that while some women were pushed into the group by their desire to improve their living conditions (Mwakimako 2018: 51–7; Ali 2018; Badurdeen 2018), others exercised their ‘autonomy’ by joining Al-Shabaab voluntarily (Badurdeen 2020), while still others recruited fellow women into the group (Badurdeen 2018: 19–20).

In this article, I dig deeper to demonstrate the complexity of Kenyan women’s participation in Al-Shabaab, which, I argue, is a reflection of their equally complex realities. The case of Kenya is particularly interesting because its nationals, including women, have become involved in the activities of Al-Shabaab despite the country having better economic and security prospects than Somalia, where Al-Shabaab is based. Furthermore, although Africa (and East Africa in particular) is a breeding ground for religion-justified militancy due to the activities of the group, it is still generally portrayed as a receiver rather than a producer of the phenomenon. A lack of empirical data has continued to obscure the complexities of the issue, and research, including gender analysis of the role of women in the group, still has many gaps. In the next section, I briefly present some reflections on the methodology used in this study. An introductory survey of Al-Shabaab is then provided, followed by a discussion about Kenyan women’s pathways into the group, grounded in their own testimonies and linked to specific historical occurrences.

Method

This study relied on explorative narrative interviews conducted with 15 Kenyan female former participants in Al-Shabaab between 2017 and 2019 in the coastal counties of Mombasa and Kwale. A number of these women were also former participants in a government amnesty programme. Perspectives from government representatives, members of civil society organisations (CSOs), academics and community leaders were also incorporated. Explorative research, which relies on qualitative methods, such as narrative interviews, has gained traction as an alternative to dominant approaches that tend to ignore contexts in the study of political violence. The dearth of empirical data and perspectives from people who have themselves participated in violence, together with the twin challenges of access and safety that affect data collection, mean that the approach is also a pragmatic choice, and one that avoids being constrained by pre-existing theories (Reiter 2013: 1–2; Schlichte 2009: 26). Because of the unpredictability of fieldwork dynamics and respondents' willingness or unwillingness to engage, the snowball sampling technique, which uses contacts developed with the support of participants in the field, was utilised.

Access was supported by networks of former colleagues and friends, as well as my partial position as an insider in the Kenyan context. Relying on others was necessary given the milieu of insecurity and violence resulting from Al-Shabaab activities on the one hand and the dynamics of the global war on terror (GWOT) on the other, though it also required the exercise of maximum caution. Although my identity as a partial outsider from a foreign university was rewarding, in the sense that I was able to see what a full insider can easily overlook, my identity as an insider was pivotal in winning trust, especially given the highly polarised and violence-affected context of my fieldwork locations.

Equipped with my research permit from the Kenyan government, I used a field approach that was as transparent as possible, letting my participants know who I was, why the information I was seeking was crucial and what purposes I would use it for. Due to safety considerations, especially those affecting my interlocutors, the only recording devices used were a notebook and a pen, though, for the purposes of verifying the data, I conducted the interviews twice on different days (Van Baalen 2018: 2). It was also wise for me to converse with research participants in Kiswahili, a language they could understand and use to express themselves freely. Given my partial insider status, this choice also helped to bolster trust. This approach meant that I had to translate my handwritten notes into English prior to analysis while adhering to high ethical standards in order to preserve the quality of the data (Emerson *et al.* 2011: 142–3). Respondents' accounts were triangulated with observed metadata, repeat interviews, additional interviews and secondary data, while the identities

of all former Al-Shabaab participants and some key informants were concealed for safety purposes. Emergent themes were used to organise the materials and structure the study's findings.

Context: Al-Shabaab and its targets

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen (movement of the striving youth) – commonly referred to as Al-Shabaab (the youth) – is a Somalia-based militant group. It evolved from grassroots configurations of clans and early Islamic groups or learning circles and operates within and outside Somalia (Solomon 2015: 39), though literature on the group's precise origins is still scanty and sometimes conflicting. Due to the impacts of globalisation and the migration of scholars between the gulf and Somalia in the post-1960 period, the Muslim Brotherhood's politicised views on religion slowly diffused into Somalia, leading to a gradual shift from local customs towards more diverse practices of Islam, such as Salafism, neo-Sufism and Tabliq, as well as the formation of Al-Itihaad Al-Islaamiyya (AIAI, or Islamic Unity) (Marchal 2009: 382; Shinn 2011: 204; Abdisaid 2008: 1). It was the AIAI that later transformed into Al-Shabaab. The group initially operated as part of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which had emerged as an attempt to bring about order in an anarchic Somalia following the state's collapse in 1991. However, following Ethiopia's intervention under the auspices of the GWOT in 2006, Al-Shabaab became radicalised (Della Porta 1995, 2013, 2018; Alimi *et al.* 2015) and retreated to the south of the country, where it remains based at present (Anzalone 2013).

Compared with other East African states, Kenya has borne the brunt of Al-Shabaab's violence, especially following the dispatch of its troops under the auspices of Operation Linda Nchi (Operation Protect the Country) to Somalia in 2011. High-level assaults on its soil have included the 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi, two attacks in Mpeketoni in 2014, the bus and quarry attacks in Mandera in 2014, the Garissa University attacks of 2015, the assault on the 2019 DusitD2 Hotel in Nairobi, and other smaller-scale incidents, such as the targeting of police stations in remote locations. These attacks have ranged from suicide bombings and shootings to the detonation of improvised explosive devices and the targeting of strategic locations and individuals. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for most of these incidents and designated them as forms of retaliation against the presence of Kenyan troops in Somalia, injustices committed against Kenyan Muslims and other issues of international concern. Kenyans have also comprised the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Al-Shabaab camps; these fighters mainly operate within the Jaysh Ayman contingent that was specifically formed in 2014 to retaliate in response to the Kenya Defence

Forces' incursion into Somalia (Chome 2019). Kenyan recruits have played a pivotal role in the success of assaults against their own country and its neighbours (Anderson & McKnight 2015: 545; Cannon & Pkalya 2019: 836), and they have also been involved in Al-Shabaab's mobilisation of their compatriots. The most visible recruit was Sheikh About Rogo, a cleric who repeatedly reiterated the religious obligation of every able-bodied Muslim to support Al-Shabaab (Abdulrahman Mohammed, personal interview, summer 2018). Rogo and his peers cited Islamic sources to back up their claims and connected events in Somalia to the plight of Muslims in Kenya, saying that the latter were living under an illegitimate political system, occupied and dominated by non-Muslims, and so secularism, democracy and the nation state ought to be rejected *in toto* (Ndzovu 2018: 361). The mobilisation of Kenyans to Al-Shabaab has been enabled by these grievances, anchored in historical tensions and conflict dynamics coupled with a particular interpretation of Islamic sources, and fuelled by financial and material incentives, coercion and the use of online tools (Omenma *et al.* 2020: 11–14; Papale 2020). Although, at first glance, it appears that men were the key targets, given the group's rhetoric about protecting women, women were also included in certain circumstances (Petrich & Donnelly 2019: 1170). A male former Al-Shabaab participant who had played a senior role in the mobilisation of Kenyans into the group explained that women's unique abilities were an asset:

While many women went either to join their husbands or to marry a *Mujahid*, there were brave women, such as the white widow, who plan attacks. A woman has some privileges that she enjoys that men do not have and this made them attractive for 'Jihad'. (Duana, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Recent documentation by modern Muslim feminists about historical women who fought during the time of the Prophet also underscores this (Mwakimako 2018: 52–3).

Kenyan women's pathways into Al-Shabaab

The comprehensive overview provided in this article allows Al-Shabaab's activities to be contextualised in the broader history of mobilisation. The motivations and pathways presented here can be categorised into two broad but dynamic narratives focused on consent and deception. As Badurdeen (2020) has observed, the binary opposition between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' behaviour is problematic. Drawing a distinction instead between decisions arrived at through consensus or created through deception offers a more nuanced framework that is focused on whether a person was aware of the implications of their actions or not. Some women involved in this study were aware that they were joining Al-Shabaab and, though their motivations differed,

consented to involvement, while others were deceived into becoming involved in the group. I discuss their various trajectories below while also situating them in relation to different historical events and Al-Shabaab mobilisation phases.

The dawn of Al-Shabaab mobilisation (c. 2009–11)

Kenyans had already been involved in religion-justified militant activities long before the tensions between the Kenyan state and Al-Shabaab reached their peak, for example in incidents such as the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (CSIS 2013: 63; Botha 2014: 24), the 2002 al-Qaeda attacks on the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel, and the failed missile attack on an Israeli charter plane at Moi International Airport in Mombasa (*Guardian* 2003). The formation of Al-Shabaab brought ‘jihad’ closer to home, and many Kenyans are believed to have joined the group in or around 2009 (Chome 2019; Botha 2013: 9). As the ICU made considerable gains in Somalia, news about its victories spread across East Africa, eliciting excitement and hope in some quarters (BBC News 2006) – for many, it was startling and inspiring to witness the extraordinary unfolding of an ‘internally driven process’ seemingly beating all odds and delivering services in a country that had been crippled by civil war for about two decades. However, this image was soon replaced by panic following the Ethiopian intervention in 2006 that toppled the ICU and ended its brief period in power. This development was disappointing for people such as Sheikh About Rogo, who condemned the invasion as an injustice against Muslims, and so they appealed for Kenyan Muslims to support the ICU’s ‘jihad’ and liberate Somalia, which they situated as a Muslim land under attack (Ndzovu 2013: 8). Rogo asserted that it was the obligation of every able-bodied Kenyan Muslim to support the defeat of the invading ‘infidels’ (Khalifa, personal interview, summer 2018; Bosi & Della Porta 2012: 365; McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1; Snow 2004). In response, some individuals, including former students of the late Sheikh Aziz Rimo (a rejectionist preacher from Kwale County), acted on his appeal and made their way to Somalia. Rimo had been a fierce critic of the state for its treatment of Muslims and was once imprisoned for his outspoken attacks (Banda, personal interview, summer 2018; Muhammad, personal interview, summer 2018). He was also the founder of Ansar al-Sunna (protectors of the tradition of Prophet Muhammad), in emulation of the prophet’s migration (*Hijra*) from Mecca to Medina. Although he neither called for violence nor involved himself in formal politics, his views were admired by others who later turned out to be some of the most ardent advocates of violence, such as About Rogo, Abubakar Shariff (Makaburi), Samir Khan and others (Ndzovu 2018: 364). The context in which he had operated went on to become one, and perhaps the most fertile, of the grounds for Al-Shabaab mobilisation. The decisions of many of

those who responded to Rogo's calls were supported by their already politicised views on Islam and the fact that his rhetoric resonated with Al-Shabaab's diagnostic frames and mobilisation strategy. They therefore readily acceded to the view that their actions would emulate those of the Prophet Muhammad and his migration from Mecca to Medina (Snow & Benford 1988: 202; Benford & Snow 2000: 619). Sheikh Aboud Rogo once referred to them as the 'real Mujahideen' when he said that 'the real mujahideen are from Ukunda' (Wesangula 2019). A study by a Kenyan CSO highlighted that Diani, a division near Ukunda town (in Kwale), was prone to Al-Shabaab mobilisation because of ideas supported by this apostasy (*takfiri*) persuasion, which was introduced by Sheikh Rimo in areas such as Kona ya Musa, Magutu, the Ukunda settlement scheme, Bongwe, Vukani and Tiwi, areas where many Al-Shabaab returnees reside (TTUC 2016; Faraj, personal interview, summer 2018).

Because mobilisation during this period was still highly secretive and was treated as a confidential matter that involved only a few trusted members of Al-Shabaab, many of those who joined the network as combatants during this period were men from tight-knit networks, such as those in Ukunda and the Muslim Youth Centre in Nairobi. Their roles, and the general cultural expectations in relation to masculinity, meant that they were perceived to carry a heavier obligation to participate in the fighting than women (Zitzmann 2021). Although some women from the Ansar al-Sunna circle in Ukunda were seemingly involved in the nascent phase of Al-Shabaab activities in Somalia, they were limited to secondary roles, taking responsibility for searches for peaceful places to practise their faith (*as muhajirat*), for example, as opposed to taking up combat roles (Mwakimako 2018: 57). It is also likely that, during this early phase, Al-Shabaab agents were filled with optimism due to the initially overwhelmingly positive responses they received and the support pledged by Kenyan male potential members, so the idea of including women as combatants had not yet arisen. As the next section shows, existing empirical evidence suggests that women's involvement began to emerge after this phase.

The peak of tensions between Al-Shabaab and the Kenyan state (c. 2011–15)

The incursion into Somalia by the Kenyan Defence Forces in 2011 intensified tensions between Al-Shabaab and its sympathisers and the Kenyan state. As the group's most prominent charismatic supporter in Kenya, Rogo raised his voice to intensify support for the view that jihad in Somalia was a religious obligation for every able-bodied Muslim. He openly issued legal opinions (*fatwas*) against the Kenyan authorities and called for violence against Christians and the destruction of churches (Ndzovu 2013: 7–8). Citing Islamic sources to back his claims, Rogo also condemned fellow Muslims as apostates and connected events in Somalia to the plight of Muslims in

Kenya, who he suggested were under the control of ‘an illegitimate political class’ that was only out to humiliate them (Ndzovu 2018: 361). It was during this phase that Al-Shabaab heightened its attacks on Kenya in retaliation for Operation Linda Nchi. Very few days would pass without explosions occurring, especially on public service vehicles in Nairobi, and Al-Shabaab threatened to flatten Nairobi’s glass skyscrapers. Polarisation increased when allegations spread that influential clerics, including Mohammed Kassim, Samir Khan and even Sheikh Rogo, had been gunned down in Mombasa by security forces (Jacinto 2012). The assassination of Rogo in 2012 was a significant factor in heightening running battles between Kenyan youth and police on the streets of Mombasa. After the assault on the Westgate shopping mall in 2013, policing activities were further intensified, leading to events such as the raid on Masjid Musa in Mombasa in the following year. Indeed, tensions reached new heights in 2014, intensified by the disappearance and killing of several prominent clerics, including Ahmed Makaburi and Mohamed Idris in April and June respectively (Human Rights Watch 2014), as well as two brutal attacks in Mpeketoni and the bus and quarry attacks in Mandera, among other incidents. Although the situation deteriorated further the following year, with the shocking assault on Garissa University in April that led to the deaths of 148 students, the subsequent period remained relatively calm until the assault on Nairobi’s DusitD2 complex in 2019.

What is clear from a review of these incidents is that reactions from the state, on the one hand, and Al-Shabaab, on the other, triggered escalations from both sides. Polarisation and the creation of division are strategies often used by armed groups such as Al-Shabaab that seek to challenge the state, as the state’s predictable hard-line reaction has strategic value as a political opportunity for mobilisation. Using strategic narratives that harness topical Muslim grievances, such as those involving the actions of security forces and socio-economic marginalisation, Al-Shabaab was able to expand its pool of potential members. It was during this phase of increased escalation that women became more involved, including possibly in combat roles, and their participation was driven by pragmatic considerations, including the need to recruit larger numbers and women’s availability. As the testimonies shared below about women’s pathways into Al-Shabaab illustrate, while some women became involved with their consent, others were drawn in through pure deception.

The retaliatory path

The stories of three women – Anne, Chloe and Bella – reflect how polarisation, at the peak of political tensions, impacted their lives by infringing on their personal security as never before. The pain of losing their loved ones at the hands of people they believed to have been law enforcers pushed them to consider the idea of retaliation. The murder

of a cousin by the police was something that led 34-year-old Anne, a stay-at-home mother, to seek retaliation through involvement in Al-Shabaab. She explained that, although she was initially discouraged from pursuing the idea by individuals linked to the group who had been in contact with her family during the mourning period, her persistence meant that they ultimately gave her their support:

One day at about 4:30 pm, after the late afternoon prayers, I was approaching our house from the neighbourhood, when someone told me that five men, who looked like police officers, had ambushed our house looking for my young cousin Kalu and shot him dead. I immediately rushed home to find the situation exactly as it had been described. Kalu's body lay cold on the bed. The whole situation was unbearable and I did not know what to do. I wanted to do something about it but I was helpless; my family was helpless. Then the thought of vengeance came to my mind and I decided to pursue it. So I approached someone I knew with the idea, but he discouraged me because I was a young woman. He and his colleagues sent me home to 'cool down my anger' which I did, but I went back to persuade them again after a few days. During that period, he and the other leaders were still alive and knew what had happened to my family. Ultimately, I managed to convince them and was delighted when they finally decided to support my wish of joining 'jihad'. (Anne, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Thirty-year-old Bella, whose brother was abducted and disappeared by people she believes to have been law enforcement officers, related a similar experience. Her family tried to trace his whereabouts in various police stations, in both Kwale and Mombasa counties, but to no avail. They were later told that he had been transferred to Nairobi. Fatigued, frustrated and lacking financial resources to follow up the case, her family lost hope and retreated to their home. For Bella, however, love for her brother, and the continued harassment of her family by people who were, in her view, security officers, pushed her to take the decision to join Al-Shabaab. She recalled an incident in which some people visited her family to provide financial support in a show of solidarity:

It was in September 2013 when, one early morning, my family heard a commotion outside our house that was followed by a loud shout: 'Open the door! Open the door!' It was the police, judging from their commanding style of communication, bullet-proof vests, and weapons. They forced their way in and grabbed my brother, Baha, as they beat us up while asking for my brother's identity card. Then they took him away. Baha was only 26 years old – I love him and was worried about his safety. I know for sure that he had interests in 'jihad' issues, but, if this was the problem, I believe he should have been arrested instead of being taken away just like that – and who knows if he is still alive?

To add salt to injury, after the incident, the police did not stop coming to intimidate my family. We demanded to see their credentials but nothing was shown. My family

was grieving every day. Then, one day, some people came to visit us in solidarity for our loss and gave us some money. I could recognise one of them and, before they left, they proposed the idea of ‘doing something about the situation’. For the sake of my brother, and all other families suffering similar fate, this became an option. I wanted to do something for Baha, but, when I told my mother about it, she disapproved of it, saying that it was risky and that I would put the entire family in danger. Well, this was true, but I wanted to do something for my brother nevertheless so I went. (Bella, narrative interview, summer 2018)

The husband of 36-year-old Chloe, a mother of three, was gunned down by people she believes to have been security officers. During the grieving period, among the people who regularly came to console her was a man from the neighbourhood to whom she became increasingly close, and he slowly persuaded her to consider retaliation. He told her that she would be targeted because of her husband’s activities, despite her innocence, and he offered to facilitate her mission. She told the story of how she ended up in Al-Shabaab:

I received news that my husband had been attacked and killed, yet there was no trace of the criminals responsible. This was quite painful for my children and me. I know it was the police behind it, and, as the pain sunk in with no trace of his killers, a good friend who had stood by us all along informed me of my possible fate – that I was being watched closely and sooner or later I would face the same fate as my husband. This shocked me, hence my journey up there [to Somalia]. (Chloe, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Although Chloe’s motivations included a search for protection as well as retaliation, all three women aimed to avenge the pain and injustice they had experienced at the hands of a repressive state and its security apparatus. Their outrage during the mourning period was turned into a mobilisation opportunity for Al-Shabaab by its agents. These agents, who seemed to know the women and their families, approached them strategically, introducing the idea of retaliation and guiding them through the recruitment process. On their part, the women were committed to undertaking retaliation missions on behalf of their cousin, husband or brother of their own accord, even if possible secondary factors such as financial reward were at play. Arguably, their actions were driven not just by personal desire for revenge but also by political motivations, which encouraged them to take action against law enforcers. The people they perceived to be law enforcement officials were seen to be acting in their capacity as representatives of the state, which is seen as repressive and unjust. Al-Shabaab represents itself as the adversary of this supposedly repressive state, and so participating in its activities was also understood to contribute to the ‘good’ of the whole community, as indicated by Bella’s explanation that her actions were undertaken ‘for the sake of my brother and all other families suffering similar fate’. In these terms, participation

is also understood to represent hope for the liberation that will come at the end of the struggle (i.e. when the ‘repressive state’ is defeated and stops committing injustices against Kenyan Muslims).

While the details of the roles that these women undertook while in Somalia lie beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that their decisions to pursue retaliation of their own accord demonstrate the exercise of agency on their part. It could be argued that this agency was restricted in a sense, given the hurdles they faced in trying to convince Al-Shabaab agents to allow their participation. For example, Anne was discouraged from participating on the basis of her gender and was instead first advised to go home and ‘cool down her anger’, and some of the other women also had to invest extra effort to get the green light for their involvement. Alternatively, these obstacles could be interpreted as attempts by Al-Shabaab agents to test the women and see whether they were serious in their ambitions. In either case, the experiences of these women show that, in certain phases of a conflict, when tensions are running high – in this case during their climax – opportunities can open up for women to participate in more diverse roles (Bloom & Lokmanoglu 2020: 3).

The responsive path

The experiences of two other women show how women’s struggle for social and economic opportunities, at the peak of a tense political period during which Al-Shabaab was desperate for more constituents, facilitated their mobilisation into the group. These women were responding to Al-Shabaab’s actions but were oblivious to the group’s involvement. Luna comes from an impoverished family of five. She had to drop out of primary school and, due to a lack of employment opportunities, ended up selling food items on the streets of Mombasa. After she became pregnant, her situation worsened to the point that she even contemplated taking her own life. She recalled how an old schoolfriend approached her at that point with a plausible idea:

A former classmate from Likoni told me of job opportunities in Somalia. She said that, from what she had heard, those who had gone were doing well financially and even mentioned some people that I knew personally. Since she was also looking for work, we encouraged each other and decided to give it a try. She then told me of four men who had arrived for a short ‘visit’ from Somalia and who could take us with them on their return. I had already made up my mind as she was talking and when the day came, we left in a group. (Luna, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Thirty-year-old Mia had to drop out from both her secondary and her Islamic school due to a lack of funds to pay school fees. She then got married and had two children, but she was later divorced, which left her with the burden of taking care of her

children. This pushed her to move back to her parents' house, where life became more difficult without an income. Then, one of her cousins, who was already in Al-Shabaab, attempted to entice her into joining the group without her knowledge:

I was married with two children. Then, I got divorced and moved back to my parents' house in Ukunda after the birth of my second child and stayed there without work and without a man to take care of me, yet my parents are poor. Then one day, one of my cousins called and said that he could help me join him in Somalia where life was better; there was work and people lived a pious life and practised their religion freely. He said that he did not wish to return because life there was much better than back home. He called me once in a while and promised to also find me a husband. I thought the idea was fantastic and so I decided to go, but it all backfired and now I am here where it all started, with even more problems than before. (Mia, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Mia's cousin encouraged her to romanticise Somalia as a place where she would be able to earn an income and live freely. As her cousin knew her well, he was able to use personal knowledge as leverage to try to win her over, even though she smelled a rat midway through the recruitment process and decided to escape before reaching the destination. While Mia and Luna knew their placement was going to be in Somalia (which is not synonymous with Al-Shabaab), others were deceived by the promise of opportunities elsewhere. Holly, from Mombasa, dropped out of school due to family responsibilities following the deaths of her parents, and Alisa was looking for a better opportunity than her teaching job in a nursery school because her income could not cater for all her needs. Alisa's active online search for new opportunities saw her reunited with an old acquaintance in Somalia (Holly, narrative interview, summer 2018; Alisa, narrative interview, summer 2018). Both were enticed by fresh work opportunities, while others, such as Kate, Darcy, Raya and Etta, were approached with offers for 'sponsored study' opportunities (Kate, narrative interview, summer 2018; Darcy, narrative interview, summer 2018; Raya, narrative interview, summer 2018; Etta, narrative interview, summer 2018). Their families were not sceptical about the strangers who offered these educational opportunities because they presented themselves, through their persuasive language and modes of dress, as fellow Muslim brothers and sisters in order to win sympathy. The inclusion of women in the recruitment team was a further strategy to win trust from the targeted women (McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1; Badurdeen 2018: 35–7). Etta recalled her grandmother's view of the strangers:

My grandmother and I thought it was a good idea especially because I had never had a chance to attend an Islamic school in my life. After my father gave his consent, my grandmother told me that she supported the idea because the agents were Muslims and so were respectful people. She encouraged me to go and study religion so that

when she dies, I would perform her last prayer and ritual. (Etta, narrative interview, summer 2018)

The experiences of these eight women highlight that women's vulnerability to deception and mobilisation is often based on their circumstances, including impoverishment, and on patriarchal structures – common in the coastal parts of Kenya where these women grew up – that make them dependent on men for security and opportunities. Their recruitment happened during a specific period when tensions were at their height and Al-Shabaab was desperate for more active participants, and so it aligned its tactics with these women's needs and situations (Snow & Benford 1988: 202; Benford & Snow 2000: 619; Bosi & Della Porta 2012: 365; McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1; Snow 2004). During this phase, more opportunities for women to become involved seem to have become available, driven by demand within Al-Shabaab, yet it is problematic to claim that the women involved were entirely victims because, despite the extent of their vulnerability, they were still demonstrating some resilience and agency through their efforts to make ends meet or improve their knowledge and skills. Their situations as impoverished women without support pushed them to work hard, and the exploitation of that drive unfortunately landed them in the wrong hands. Their experiences further indicate that, even in highly hierarchical societies with clearly stipulated gender roles, there are exceptional circumstances where these roles can become fluid, allowing women to take on untypical responsibilities that can include fending for their families.

The reunion path

The final type of pathway that leads women into Al-Shabaab involves false promises of marriage or reunions with spouses who engaged them solely to lure them into Al-Shabaab. Although other secondary motivations were significant in their decision-making processes, these women from impoverished backgrounds said they were primarily motivated to travel to Somalia either to meet these fake spouses or to reunite with them. Jayana dropped out of school to support her mother after her parents' divorce, while Zoriana lived with her uncle after her parents' death. The latter explained how mistreatment by her uncle pushed her into a relationship with a man who later took advantage of her:

I met my boyfriend Uba, who was from a neighbouring school, and decided to be his girlfriend for support because things were not well at home. I loved him because he treated me well. Uba finished school one year ahead of me and stayed in the area for about eight months before traveling 'abroad', but I did not know it was Somalia. He would give me money whenever he returned. One day, he told me that I could

overcome my challenges by joining him – an idea that I immediately welcomed. When the plan was set, we departed in the company of two of his friends and ended up in Kiyunga. This is where things began to get complicated as I came to know Uba’s true colours. He later confessed to being an Al-Shabaab agent. His friends harassed me and called me a prostitute, and he did not protect me. At that moment, the idea of escaping came to my mind. (Zoriana, narrative interview, summer 2018)

While Zoriana seems to have been fairly familiar with her boyfriend from their school days, Jayana married her husband barely three months into their relationship and obeyed his wishes, which landed her in a difficult situation:

We got married about three months after our first meeting and lived together for a couple of months in his house in Kisauni. Then he said he was going to travel in search for work. By then I had not known much about him apart from his appearance as a good man. Then, one day, he called to tell me that he had found work for both of us and so I should join him. He said that he had sent some people to pick me up and that I should not tell anyone about the trip to prevent unnecessary attention and jealousy. Because I loved him, I did what he told me and ended up in this mess. (Jayana, narrative interview, summer 2018)

Two other women talked about similar experiences. Indy, a school dropout from a family of ten siblings, eloped with her new lover against her family’s wishes, only to discover later that he was associated with Al-Shabaab (Indy, narrative interview, summer 2018). Meanwhile, Suri, a single mother who also dropped out of secondary school, was motivated by desperation to marry her new partner before knowing him well, and, as she explained, it turned out that he was an Al-Shabaab member:

He was from Western Kenya and a convert. I came to know him through a friend who told me that he was a good person and was serious about settling down with me and so I agreed to meet him for a date. He was calm and handsome and I fell in love with him. Soon after, we got married, and a month later he told me that we needed to move to another place where life was better. I did not ask him for details of the plan, but I remember hearing something like Somalia and that we would come back soon. To me, Somalia meant Garissa or Wajir – some place where Somalis live. Although my family was against the idea, I decided to go with him. We eventually arrived in Kismayo, where he told me he had to go to work. First he was away every two weeks, and then every three months. This continued for the whole year. I had never checked his identity card because I trusted him. (Suri, narrative interview, summer 2018)

In their quest to reunite with their ‘spouses’, these women ended up, through deception, in Al-Shabaab territory against their will. Their desire was to live a normal life by having a spouse and/or family, which also meant having a breadwinner – a plan that was jeopardised by deceitful male Al-Shabaab agents who abused their trust to draw them into the group’s affairs. Their agency is evident in their conscious decisions to

marry strangers, but those decisions were arguably constrained by patriarchal structures and expectations in coastal Kenya which make the practice of marrying strangers generally acceptable. Like the other routes to victimhood explored here, the reunion pathway demonstrates how the demand for women at a critical phase in a tense political situation was met through Al-Shabaab's strategic calculations and manipulation of women's vulnerabilities (McCarthy & Zald 1977: 1220–1).

Conclusion

Like men, Kenyan women have been involved in Al-Shabaab's activities, although data on their involvement is only beginning to emerge. When news of women's involvement became better known, it elicited reactions that assumed women's victimhood and placed responsibility in the hands of men. In this article, I have set out the motivations that led some Kenyan women to become involved in Al-Shabaab and shown how the time period during which they became involved enabled their participation. The evidence set out here shows that the politics of women's participation in religion-justified militancy are multi-layered and complex and confound the strict binarisation of agency and victimhood.

The comprehensive approach taken in this study has enabled women's participation to be properly contextualised in relation to historical developments in Kenya that involved Al-Shabaab activities, thereby demonstrating the various circumstances under which Kenyan women became involved in the group. In the initial phases of Al-Shabaab mobilisation in Kenya, women's involvement seemed less prominent than it was in the period after Operation Linda Nchi, when the group, mainly driven by necessity and demand, effectively expanded its net to incorporate diverse groups including women. Those women who followed a retaliatory path were outraged by the direct experience of violence and feelings of injustice inflicted upon them, their families and community members. The decisions these women made were therefore political, as well as personal, and they were secondarily enabled by prior experiences of marginalisation and latent political grievances.

Some socio-economically deprived women who took the responsive path to Al-Shabaab were similarly mobilised as they sought educational and employment opportunities. While some of them made conscious decisions, exercising their agency in the absence of a male breadwinner, others were not aware of their predicament until it was too late. The latter group's experiences of deception were shared by the reunion cohort, whose members were striving, firstly, to attain a normal family life in terms of love and family, and, secondly, to have their basic needs met by reuniting with men they had loved and trusted, perhaps too quickly. However, these women

found themselves caught up in a deception racket enabled by the patriarchal gender norms that are prevalent in the rural coastal setting where they grew up. In all three pathways, women's conditions of impoverishment and direct experiences of violence inflicted upon them, their families and community members, as well as their pre-existing grievances and their search for normal lives and love, were strategically manipulated by Al-Shabaab to mobilise them into its ranks. Efforts to counter the phenomenon of women's participation in religion-justified militancy should take into account the complex and multifaceted nature of women's experiences of involvement, and more attention needs to be given to how women's political agency is enabled and constrained by structures that nurture their insecurities.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank everyone who supported me in various capacities to make this study successful including respondents who volunteered information.

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Interviews

Duana (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Anne (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Bella (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Chloe (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Luna (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Mia (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Holly (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Alisa (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Kate (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Darcy (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Raya (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Etta (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Jayana (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Zoriana (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Suri (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Indy (codename), Former Al-Shabaab Participant, Narrative Interview, Summer 2018. Kenya Sauti, Mwakidudu, Hassan, Religious Leader from Ukunda, Personal Interview, October 2020. Kenya Khalifa Khelef, Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya Amir Banda (late), Al-Qaf Development Welfare, Ukunda, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya Swale Muhammad, Religious Leader from Mombasa/Lamu, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya Munira Faraj, Social Worker from Mombasa, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya Abdulrahman Mohammed, Social Worker from Mombasa, Personal Interview, Summer, 2018. Kenya

To cite the article: Zitzmann, H.N. (2023), 'When they joined: restricted agency and victimhood in Kenyan women's pathways into Al-Shabaab', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 15–36.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.015>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

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

Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Women in the Al-Shabaab network: recruitment and radicalisation

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

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

The reintegration of female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pathways and motivations to join Al-Shabaab

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

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

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

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

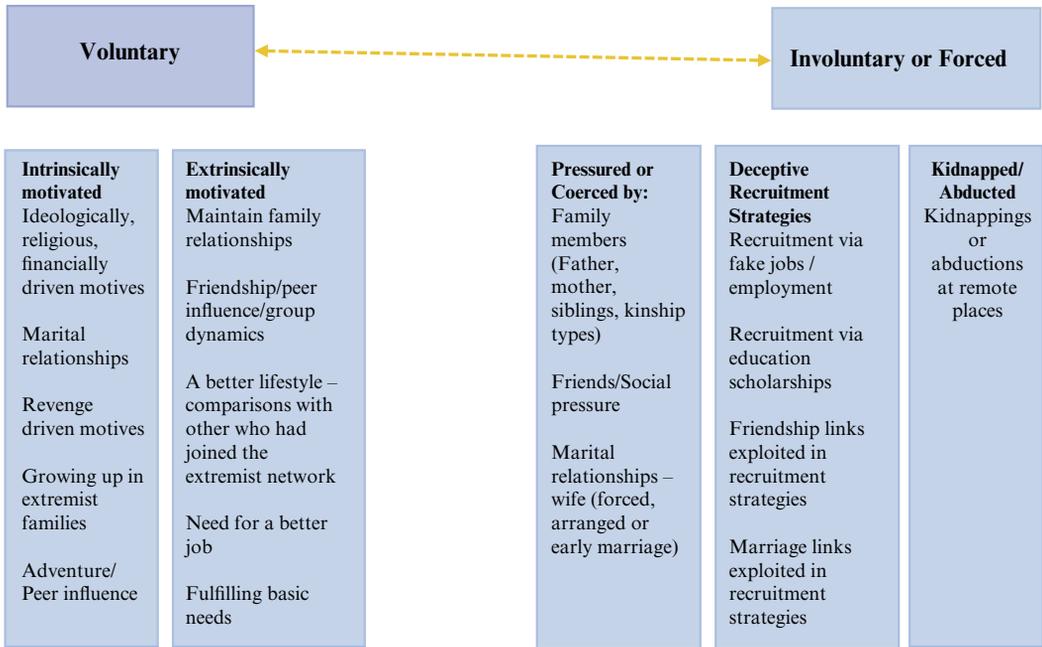


Figure 1. Recruitment pathways for women and girls in the Al-Shabaab network

Source: Badurdeen (2018b: 41).

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

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

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

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

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

Causes for disengagement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gendered experiences of reintegration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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To cite the article: Badurdeen, F.A. (2023), 'Returning home: the reintegration dilemmas of female Al-Shabaab defectors in Kenya', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 37–62.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.037>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Suffering in silence: counter-productivity of Kenya's 'war on terror' at the Kenya coast

Hussein Abdullahi Mahmoud

Abstract: This article examines the detrimental effects of Kenya's wide-ranging policies, strategies and tactics of waging the war on terror at the Kenya coast. The 'war' is waged through police-related killings and enforced disappearances and is becoming counterproductive as it is contributing to a loss of citizenship rights for an increasing segment of the population. These grievances are rarely portrayed in the public sphere but continue to manifest in the suffering of families, livelihood losses, increased stigmatisation and, most importantly, through violation of the citizenship rights of widows and their orphaned children. Using interview data from the Kenya coast, the article attempts to shift beyond perceiving women and young people as perpetrators of violence to seeing them as silent victims of the war on terror. The article analyses these dynamics from community and civil society perspectives. It contributes to the emerging literature on women and violent extremism by examining the silent suffering of widows and their children, who often are neither seen nor heard.

Keywords: citizenship rights, widows, youth, violence, war on terror, Kenya coast

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Introduction

The East African region has been experiencing an outbreak of violence often linked to extremist violent organisations. In Kenya, these acts of violence are concentrated in the highly marginalised Muslim-dominated north-eastern and coastal regions and in the capital city of Nairobi. Several writers have noted the numerous attacks perpetrated against the state and civilians on Kenyan soil (e.g. [Kagwanja 2012](#); [Lind & Howell 2010](#); [Rosenau 2005](#); [Shinn 2004](#); [USIP 2004](#)). The most devastating recent attacks have been attributed to Somalia-based Al-Shabaab militants, including the Westgate shopping mall attacks of 2013, the Mpeketoni attacks of 2014, the multiple Mandera attacks of 2014, the Garissa University College attacks of 2015 and the DusitD2 hotel attacks of 2019. These violent incidents have had devastating impacts on lives and livelihoods, and on peace and national security; hundreds of people have died, property has been destroyed and livelihoods have been shattered. The attacks were highly publicised through local and international media outlets and the state's anti-terror resources were fully mobilised to respond to the aftermath of the attacks.

However, Kenya's response to terror threats posed from external as well as internal sources, particularly at the Kenya coast and in the north-eastern region, has been violent, haphazard, indiscriminate and counterproductive, and it continues to be a source of serious human rights violations. Describing the state's response to 'terror', [Al-Bulushi \(2021: 822\)](#) asserts that the Kenyan police 'increasingly rely on "pop-up" tactics (checkpoints, house raids, abductions, killings)'. Similarly, the state's anti-terror machinery has been blamed for several and ongoing extrajudicial killings and kidnappings in response to terror attacks (see [Buchanan-Clarke & Lekalake 2015](#); [Freedom House 2018](#); [Haki Africa 2021](#); [Human Rights Watch 2015, 2021](#); [Kagwanja 2006](#); [KNCHR 2015](#); [Mazrui *et al.* 2018](#); [MUHURI 2021](#)).

This article examines the detrimental effects of Kenya's wide-ranging policies, strategies and tactics in its war on terror at the Kenya coast. The article argues that the way this war is being fought by the state and its machinery is becoming unpopular and counterproductive as it is contributing to a loss of citizenship rights for an increasing segment of the population at the Kenya coast. This group of people includes widows and young men and women whose husbands, fathers and close relatives have been killed by state agencies or have been the victims of mysterious disappearances. These grievances are rarely portrayed in the public domain but continue to manifest in the suffering of families, livelihood losses, stigmatisation and most importantly through violation of the citizenship rights of widows, sons and daughters. The article attempts to go beyond answering the question of why women and young people join militant organisations and what roles they play to understand the grievances that are at the

core of their citizenship status and that continue to produce tensions between them and the state.

The article makes an important contribution to the emerging literature on women and young people and violent extremism by examining the silent suffering of widows and their children through the lens of citizenship rights. More broadly, the article addresses the citizenship and rights issues of communities that perceive themselves not only as disenfranchised, but also as living on the periphery of the state and slowly slipping into the status of *stateless citizenship*. The article introduces the term ‘stateless citizenship’ in this context to examine its production through covert state actions in the name of waging the war on terror on communities at the Kenya coast, with adverse consequences for women and young people. Al-Bulushi (2021) argues that the Kenyan security apparatus uses strategies that are producing ‘new uncertainties and insecurities’. Police power is manifested in different forms, impacting negatively on citizen safety and security at the Kenya coast. These covert police actions are producing stateless citizens whose only crime is belonging to the same families as those who have been killed or kidnapped by the state.

A note on methodology

The study utilised different methods of data collection and involved both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through key informant interviews with community members, human rights officials, civil society actors in Mombasa and Kwale counties at the Kenya coast as well as local and international print and online sources. A total of seven key informants were interviewed representing widows and organisations working in the field of human rights and violent extremism in Mombasa and Kwale counties. Interviewees were selected based on their knowledge and experience working with individuals and families that have been affected by the war on terror at the Kenya coast. The questions asked related to how the war on terror is affecting those families, in what ways, how they overcome those effects. The interviews were unstructured and aimed at gaining insights into the question of violent extremism at the Kenya coast, especially focusing on how the state’s tactics are becoming increasingly counterproductive and further alienating a community that was already alienated through the state’s unfair policies.

Data collection through interviews is hazardous in studies related to violent extremism at the Kenya coast due to safety, security and expectation issues. The risk of being tracked and attacked by the state, members of extremist groups, or individuals or groups sympathetic to violent extremism is extremely high in the region. In most cases one cannot know the true identity of one’s respondents. For example, your

respondent could be a woman whose husband, brother or close relative was a member of a violent organisation within or outside the country and she could be in close contact with other members of the organisation. Furthermore, the victims' expectations of material and psychological assistance are raised whenever they encounter relief organisations and researchers. For these reasons, it is useful to rely heavily on documented information and insights provided by organisations working in the field of violent extremism.

The Kenya coast context

The Kenya coast is a diverse region with varied social, cultural, demographic, economic and ecological characteristics. The region consists of six counties, which were created following the promulgation of the new Kenya Constitution in 2010: Kilifi, Kwale, Lamu, Mombasa, Taita Taveta and Tana River. The region is vast and rich in minerals, wildlife, marine life and other natural resources found in the adjacent Indian Ocean and its vast hinterland. According to the 2019 National Population census, the six coastal counties had a combined population of about 4,329,388 people living in an area of about 82,382.5 square kilometres ([Government of Kenya 2019](#)).

The Kenya coast holds 9.1 per cent of the total national population, 14.2 per cent of the total national land area and 8.7 per cent of households in the country. These figures affirm the Kenya coast's importance and prominent position in the country's economic, political and social structure. It is widely held that the scramble for, and marginalisation from, economic and political resources and a wide range of other grievances in the region, such as land-related evictions, have contributed massively to unrest and violence over the past decades, including actions related to violent extremist organisations (VEOs) based both within and outside the region (e.g., see [Botha 2014](#); [Dowd 2017](#); [Meinema 2020](#); [Van Metre & Calder 2016](#)).

Who is violent and why?

Kenya's security threats are increasing as much as efforts to address them are evolving. This section addresses a couple of significant questions – first, what is the genesis of violence; and second, what are the outcomes of violence in the Kenya coast context, particularly related to the broad field of enquiry related to Kenya's war on terror? Communities at the Kenya coast are caught between two forms of violence: (1) violence originating from the state in the name of fighting terror and decimation of violent groups from within the communities; and (2) violence by aggravated young

people who accuse the state and their own community of conspiring against them. The second category of violence represents two sources of youth aggravations: (a) young people having accumulated grievances against the state for a myriad of reasons, such as economic and political marginalisation; and (b) young people seeking revenge in the form of violence directed at the community for its perceived collaboration with the state. Consequently, violence at the Kenya coast is defined differently by those involved – if the state is talking about violence, the community is branded as violent against the state, and if the community is talking about violence, the state is branded as violent against the community. In this context, the community bears the brunt of violence, whether engendered by the state or by its own young people.

It is imperative to understand both perspectives, and the forms and sources of violence, to comprehend their evolution, their extent, the actors involved, and the security challenges faced in the Kenya coast. Only then will well-informed and focused policies and programmes implemented by the Kenyan government and non-state actors produce the desired results. However, due to lack of adequate understanding of the terrain in which the state is acting, and despite massive monetary and military deployment in the region, the so-called war on terror in Nairobi, north-eastern Kenya and at the Kenya coast has not produced the desired results (e.g., see [Bachmann & Hönke 2010](#); [Balakian 2016](#); [Buchanan-Clarke & Lekalake 2015](#); [KNCHR 2015](#); [Lind et al. 2017](#); [Žák 2020](#)).

The violent state

State violence against its own citizens and human rights violations committed as part of war on terror programmes have been documented, for example, in Northern Ireland ([Lowry 1976](#); [Macfarlane 1992](#); [Ramraj 2006](#)), in India ([Haragopal & Jagannatham 2009](#); [Prasad 2016](#)) and in Colombia ([Rudling & Dueñas 2021](#)).

In Kenya, the constitution, under the section on rights and fundamental freedoms, affirms the right to freedom and security of persons and prohibits, among many other things, subjection to any form of violence emanating from public or private sources; physical or psychological torture; and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment ([Government of Kenya 2010](#)). Community sentiments and civil society perceptions at the Kenya coast are that, despite these constitutional provisions, the state continues to violate citizens' human rights, which is not only an infringement on citizenship rights but is also tantamount to denial of citizenship status to sections of the Kenyan population who are already marginalised by the state because of their regional origins and religious beliefs.

State provocation in Kenya has been noted in numerous studies. For example, as [Van Metre \(2016: 5\)](#) notes, 'the heavy-handed security response to growing levels

of violent extremism has antagonised Kenya's local communities and angered youth, increasing their vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment'. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) published an extensive report on how the state is missing the point in its war on terror. Using the captivating title 'The error of fighting terror with terror', the state was severely criticised for deploying thousands of security officers in 'Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood to arrest foreign nationals who were in the country unlawfully and anyone suspected of terrorism'; the operation was later expanded to 'other parts of Nairobi and later to Mombasa, Nakuru, Thika, Eldoret, Lamu, Malindi, Garissa, Mandera and Kitale' (KNCHR 2015: 3–4). The Commission further states that it:

documented multiple human rights violations and breaches of the law committed by security agencies against innocent civilians particularly members of the Muslim Somali community. The violations included arbitrary arrests, extortion, theft and looting of businesses and homesteads, sexual harassment, arbitrary detentions, illegal deportations, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment. (KNCHR 2015: 4)

Further, the KNCHR continues to accuse Kenya's security agencies of gross violations of human rights and of conducting 'abusive operations against individuals and groups suspected to be associated with terror attacks in various parts of the country (KNCHR 2015: 6). The Commission reports that the state employs a combination of governmental units that include the Kenya Defence Forces, National Intelligence Service, the Kenya Wildlife Services, various county commissioners and their deputies and assistants, chiefs, and the National Police Service (NPS), including Anti-Terrorism Police Unit), Kenya Police Reservists, the Rapid Deployment Unit of the Administration Police, the Border Patrol Unit and the General Service Unit. This is a massive assemblage of power that is often unleashed on suspected individuals, leading to deaths and disappearances. In 2015, the KNCHR documented over 120 cases of human rights violations, which included 25 police-related deaths and 81 enforced disappearances (KNCHR 2015). This narrative coincides with the sentiments of civil society organisations working at the Kenya coast that extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances started to occur in 2012 and have been increasing since 2017.¹ Estimates indicate about 60 police-related killings and 45 enforced disappearances to date in Kwale County alone.²

In its annual report regarding the status of human rights at the Kenya coast, *Haki Africa* (2021) documented several types of human rights violations between 2019 and 2020. The organisation documented nine types of human rights violations at the Kenya coast and provided an insight into escalations and de-escalations in these

¹ Author's interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

² Author's interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

violations. Notorious sources of human rights violations in 2020 in order of intensity were gender-based violence, labour-related cases, land evictions, torture/assault cases, a mix of ‘other cases’, killings by police, enforced disappearances, killings by mobs/civilians and killings by criminal/terror gangs.

All the deaths reported in the Haki Africa report were attributed to the police, but not all of them were terror-related killings. In fact, of the 32 deaths attributed to the police, 10 of them were linked to terror-related activities. The rest of the killings attributed to the police included gang activities, curfew violations, robbery cases, domestic deaths involving a police couple, death in a police cell, death while under arrest, suicide in a police cell and death due to suspicions of crime (Haki Africa 2021).

Haki Africa argues that cases of enforced disappearance at the Kenya coast are not only rampant but also occur in the presence of victims’ families. Affected families report seeing masked and armed men, often claiming to be part of the police force, abducting their relatives as they watch helplessly (Haki Africa 2021). This is a source of severe trauma as numerous families at the coast have been affected and it might take a long time before the survivors heal and get back to their normal lives, as will be demonstrated later. Cases of enforced disappearance increased from 11 to 18 persons between 2019 and 2020, an increase of 64 per cent. Haki Africa provided the name and age of each victim, the date and location where they were last seen, and the circumstances surrounding the enforced disappearances.

‘Missing Voices’ is a group of organisations established in August 2018 whose mission is to ‘shine light upon extrajudicial killings ... *and* to end enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions in Kenya’. The group, with national coverage, states that it has ‘documented and verified data of police killings and enforced disappearances, [and] held several campaigns and events to increase public awareness on violent policing and to create platforms for dialogues with stakeholders’.³ The main motivation for the documentation and the awareness campaign on enforced disappearances and police-related killings is the group’s assertion that ‘[t]he Kenyan government does not keep a formal record of police killings and enforced disappearances’.⁴

The violent youth

As mentioned earlier, subdued and frustrated young people at the coast direct their violence at two targets: firstly, the police, whom they consider the security arm of the state, mandated to ostracise and annihilate them; and secondly, community elders, whom they perceive as agents of the state whose job is to spy on them. The second

³ <http://www.missingvoices.or.ke>.

⁴ <http://www.missingvoices.or.ke>.

type of violence occurred in 2016/17 among a group of returnees from Somalia who had been involved with Al-Shabaab. Upon their arrival in the country, the youth were swiftly arrested by security forces in the south coast area. Suspecting that the local elders might have leaked the information about their return to the police, the youth attacked eight Nyumba Kumi elders in eight different villages in Kwale County at the Kenya coast.⁵ The youth blamed the Nyumba Kumi chairmen for allegedly acting as informants for the police and asked, ‘how did the police know about our return from Somalia if not through the Nyumba Kumi network?’⁶

The concept of Nyumba Kumi ‘is a strategy of anchoring community policing at the household level or any other generic cluster’ ([National Police Service 2017: 4](#)). Under the section on the functions of the NPS, the Kenya Constitution ([Government of Kenya 2010](#)) under Article 244(e) states that the police will ‘foster and promote relationships with the broader society’. Under the functions of Community Policing, the NPS will undertake the following functions in conjunction with the community:

Establishing and maintaining partnership between the community and the Service, promoting communication between the Service and the community, promoting cooperation between the Service and the community in fulfilling the needs of the community regarding policing, improving the rendering of police services to the community at national, county and local levels, improving transparency in the Service and accountability of the Service to the community, and promoting policing problem identification and policing problem-solving by the Service and the community ([National Police Service 2017: 7–8](#)).

While the idea of establishing the Nyumba Kumi structure within communities was to improve community security, the selection process of Nyumba Kumi members by the state caused contention among communities. For example, in the south coast case, the state established the appointment of mostly elders at the exclusion of young people to leadership positions in the Nyumba Kumi, which infuriated the youth and pitted them against their own community. The perception of the young people of the area is that they are excluded from the structure because its aim is to spy on them and hand them over to the state.

Living in limbo

Police-related killings are often associated with loss of citizenship rights, loss of opportunities in education at different levels, trauma, stigma, alienation and a host

⁵ See [National Police Service \(2017\)](#) for a detailed description of the concept.

⁶ Author’s interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

of other undesirable outcomes. Unfortunately, some of these effects can be life-long, causing different degrees of damage to a family's prospects. It is important to explore how families affected by these incidences navigate through life, especially in a community setting. Uncertainty certainly creeps in slowly as the reality dawns on affected wives and children. In other words, what is being voiced by members of the communities, particularly widowed women and orphaned children? To the researcher, these local communities' experiences and stories come to the fore in social gatherings, such as at mosques and during burial ceremonies, that all members of the community are expected to attend. Community complaints and outrage about the state's involvement in mysterious deaths and disappearances are expressed in these community forums in an effort to find a lasting solution to the problem. Unless emic studies are carried out to understand the magnitude of the problem, recovery will be slow, and families will continue to suffer at the hands of the state, which appears too distant from the communities affected by the war on terror at the Kenya coast. The following section explores some of the ramifications to illustrate the lives in limbo of affected families.

Becoming stateless citizens

Since the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Kenya in late 1991, society–state engagement on citizenship rights and obligations, particularly involving migratory and minority groups in northern Kenya, has become part of the public discourse (Mahmoud 2008). Although the Kenyan public sphere has increasingly become a place for discussing and negotiating citizenship (Mahmoud 2008), the current crisis involving citizenship rights for families affected by the war on terror in the coast of Kenya is seldom presented or discussed in public. The loss of citizenship rights has a couple of significant outcomes: firstly, the dead person in this war on terror loses their formal legal identity as a Kenyan citizen. Consequently, the state does not recognise and issue such a body with a death certificate. Secondly, the state does not issue any documentation or provide any form of acknowledgement of disappearance of an abducted person. In both cases, families of the dead and the disappeared are not entitled to any form of recognition because of the circumstances under which their relatives died or were forced into disappearance.

In losing their husbands at the hands of the police, widows lose the trust of the state, and that is where their prolonged uncertainty begins. Widows' lack of access to legal documents, such as the death certificate of the killed person, and their inability to access their bank accounts is a form of denial of rights. The following is a story of a widowed woman,⁷ whose husband and brother were both killed in mysterious

⁷ Author's interview with a widow in Mombasa (8 November 2021).

circumstances in Mombasa, and her struggle to access and exercise her citizenship rights as a Kenyan:

DS lost her husband and brother in 2013 when they were killed by unknown assailants north of Mombasa Island. The two were travelling in a car, with her brother driving and her husband in the passenger seat, when their lives were suddenly cut short. The family went through a period of intense mourning as they tried to come to terms with the loss of two main breadwinners in a large family with many dependents, including young and old people and unemployed adults. DS remained a widow for four years then remarried four years ago, meaning it has been eight years since she lost her first husband and brother. Immediately after the killings, her husband's bank accounts were frozen, and DS had no access to any funds to sustain her family. All efforts to enable her to access her husband's accounts failed and the family was in desperate straits. After seven months of being unable to access her own funds, she decided to go to the County Commissioner's (CC) office to seek his intervention. She was initially prevented from seeing the CC as she did not have an appointment and he was busy with many visitors that day. DS reported that she insisted on seeing the CC and asked his assistants to inform him that she was a widow of Kenya's anti-terror programme and desperately needed to see him. The information was relayed to the CC, and she was immediately ushered into the CC's office. The CC was surprised to see her and was nervous about possibly being harmed by the agitated widow. At this moment, the widow was not agitated due to the deaths of her husband and brother, but due to the violation of the rights of the surviving family members, who were on the verge of destitution and even starvation. She explained to the CC the dire situation the family was in and their inability to access funds to purchase food, pay for school fees and seek medical services. She explained that all she was seeking was the CC's authorisation for the release of her husband's death certificate, which was required for her to access the bank accounts. The CC instructed the police officer in the district in which the deaths occurred to sign the documents. Meanwhile, the CC instructed his officers to drive DS to the relevant police station. DS became very scared as she thought they would kill her as well. She reported that she was squeezed between two police officers as she was driven in the CC's car. It was the most frightening moment of her life, but it was worth the risk since her family was on the brink of starvation and facing intense suffering through no fault of their own. Upon arrival at the police station her articles were duly signed and in a matter of days, she secured the death certificates of her husband and brother.

There do not seem to be any guidelines for the Kenyan security agencies mandated to deal with terror-related issues on how to deal with such situations, particularly regarding the needs and rights of surviving family members of those who have been killed or disappeared by the police. The above is a case of one determined woman seeking justice for her surviving family members, but there are many out there who do not know what to do or where to turn for the restoration of their citizenship rights.

Effects on the children of victims of police-related deaths and disappearances

The children of persons killed or forced to disappear under the war on terror policies find it extremely difficult to access legal documents, such as birth certificates, national identity cards (IDs), passports, school/college bursaries and driving licences, and therefore the ability to hold a bank account or conduct monetary transactions, such as M-Pesa,⁸ access to health facilities and health insurance, and an array of other crucial social services. In this way the state denies its own citizens entitlements and social rights and renders them stateless. Numerous cases have been documented. The following examples are illustrative of the brutal ways in which the state strips its own citizens of their fundamental human rights, including those who already face a myriad of challenges at the Kenya coast.

The national ID is a crucial document in Kenya that serves as proof of citizenship and is required to access various governmental and other services countrywide. New applications for IDs are done at the National Registration Bureau offices located in all counties across the country, particularly in the county commissioners' and chiefs' offices. There are several requirements for the application: one must be at least 18 years old and must fill out a form at the bureau's offices and have fingerprints and a passport-size photo taken. In addition, the applicant is required to submit the following documents: a birth certificate, a religious certificate, a school leaving certificate, an age assessment certificate from a medical officer of health, a child health card, a notification of birth card, a letter from the administrative officer or a chief or assistant chief of the village in which one was born, proof in support of citizenship and parents' ID cards.⁹

The main challenge for communities at the Kenya coast who have been touched by the war on terror is the nightmare of applying for an ID. As mentioned earlier, one of the requirements for the ID application is the provision of one's parents' IDs. But in cases where the father has been killed or forced into disappearance, it becomes an arduous task to complete the application. Moreover, it is difficult to provide the father's ID as the father cannot be registered by the state as killed or disappeared because the state does not recognise the death or disappearance of such a person. Among the communities at the Kenya coast, it is highly preferred and regarded as the norm to use the father's ID rather than the mother's in the application process. Not to present the father's documents in the application for an ID or other official documents

⁸ M-Pesa is a popular mobile money transfer system operated by the Safaricom company in Kenya and widely used across the East African region. An ID or a passport is required to register and access an array of services that the telephone company provides.

⁹ See <https://www.hudumakenya.go.ke> for detailed descriptions of the requirements for obtaining a Kenyan ID card.

is shameful as this points to the illegitimacy of the child. Hence, the death or disappearance of a father, and the subsequent denial of issuance of a death certificate by the state to acknowledge that death, complicates the children's citizenship status. According to a local non-governmental organisation, the residents of Kwale and Tana River counties at the coast and those of north-east Kenya face massive challenges in acquiring a Kenyan ID.¹⁰ The following cases illustrate the frustrations with acquiring legal documents by people touched by the war on terror.

Case I

In Kenya's south coast, a young man faces difficulties securing an ID because he had to produce his father's death certificate, but his father has not been documented as dead because he is not known to have died.

Case II

In August 2021, a young woman wants to travel to the Middle East for work and commences the process of acquiring a Kenyan passport to facilitate her travels. She hits a snag because her father was a victim of enforced disappearance and this complicates the processing of the much-needed document, as she was required to produce her father's ID card, if alive, or his death certificate if dead. Neither case was applicable to this young woman's father. The father's life status could only be described as existing between the living and the dead.

Case III

A man who was forced into disappearance leaves behind four children and property. The children are unable to claim their father's property because of challenges around producing the father's documents. The family finds itself in a dilemma as it is difficult to produce the father's ID because he is not around and it is difficult to generate his death certificate because he is not known to have died. The property is in the hands of relatives whom they fear will plunder and misuse it.

Case IV

A young man, aged 24 years from Kwale County, secures funding to start a small business through a government employment assistance programme. He fails to acquire an

¹⁰ Author's interview with a local organisation in Mombasa County (15 November 2021).

ID because of his status as the son of a victim of enforced disappearance. He loses the chance to become an entrepreneur because of his father's victimhood in the war on terror.

According to a local organisation working with communities, especially with widows and young men and women affected by the war on terror in Kwale County, about 500 young men and women have related stories similar to those described above, while many others are unwilling to share their stories and grievances due to fear of the state and of humiliation from the community.¹¹

Fending for the family and increased parental roles for widows

The role of these widows changes instantly from being homemakers to breadwinners and they do not hesitate to narrate the difficult paths they have to traverse to make ends meet in terms of raising their children, ensuring they attend school and the madrasa, and safeguarding their safety and welfare. As the burden of taking care of the family suddenly shifts to women, many widows find themselves completely unprepared as most have been homemakers with little education or no formal education or work experience.

Dim prospects for remarriage

Women whose husbands have been killed and those whose husbands have been forcefully disappeared experience similar forms of stigma among society as they suffer from three forms of accusations. Firstly, they are accused of being members of the Al-Shabaab militant group; secondly, they are branded as *jasusi*,¹² or police informants, and are often accused of handing their husbands over to the police; and thirdly, society discourages the remarriage of such widows because they already have children from their previous husbands who might become a burden for the new husbands.¹³ For example, despite DS having remarried four years after becoming a widow, her new sister-in-law still does not approve of the new marriage.¹⁴ The wives of men forced into disappearance by the police face different prospects for remarriage from those who have been killed. Firstly, men are afraid of marrying a woman whose husband died in a police-related killing for fear of facing the same kind of death and for agreeing

¹¹ Author's interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

¹² *Jasusi* is a Kiswahili term for an informant. It is not uncommon for a person to be branded as a *jasusi* when the community sees them frequently interacting with the police, other security agencies or senior government officials.

¹³ Author's interview with a widow in Mombasa (8 November 2021).

¹⁴ Author's interview with a widow in Mombasa (8 November 2021).

to marry the wife of a ‘suspected terrorist’. However, a woman whose husband was forced into disappearance tends to wait for the safe return of her disappeared husband. Secondly, society does not approve of the woman marrying another man when the marriage to the first man has not been terminated. Thirdly, the act of remarrying is seen as a betrayal of the husband,¹⁵ so they hang on to the hope of seeing their disappeared husbands again one day.

Sina jirani, sina mizani – traumatising, stigmatising and exclusion

Widows often live with unbearable trauma, as many men were shot dead or abducted in the presence of families and close relatives.¹⁶ According to an official of a civil society organisation in Mombasa, widows often become overwhelmed with grief and sorrow when remembering the events that occurred during the killing or disappearance of their husbands.¹⁷ The war on terror widows often shy away from people outside their circles or networks because of the severe traumatic experiences they have undergone.¹⁸

The community is often shocked to learn that their neighbours are implicated in acts of terror through police actions of killings or kidnapping. More serious still are the repercussions that victimised families face from the rest of the society in terms of stigma and isolation. A widow in northern Mombasa reported that her children were unable to acquire IDs because of the stigma they faced. She was quoted as saying ‘*sina jirani, sina mizani*’, that is, ‘I have no neighbour, no honour’.¹⁹

Members of the community also commonly avoid businesses operated by the widows of victims of the anti-terror programmes for fear of being suspected of association with a terror suspect, causing serious disruption to the families’ livelihoods. In other words, society shuns them because what befell the victimised family is perceived as a sign of admonishment of a ‘radical’ family by the state and so they avoid associating with them.

¹⁵ Author’s interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

¹⁶ Author’s interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

¹⁷ Author’s interview with a local organisation in Mombasa County (15 November 2021).

¹⁸ Author’s interview with an official of an international organisation working at the coast (22 November 2021).

¹⁹ Author’s interview with a widow in Mombasa (8 November 2021). This is a Kiswahili poetic sentence meaning ‘I have no Neighbour, no honour’, implying not only the loneliness that widows of this kind face, but also being shunned by neighbours, relatives and society at large. It depicts the daily struggles of terror-related widows at the Kenya coast.

Disruptions and stigma at school

Cases of disruption and stigma at school directed at children whose fathers have been killed or abducted are numerous at the Kenya coast. Below is a case recorded in the south coast:

A man was abducted, leaving behind two children. One of them was about to be admitted to a nursery school, but the child did not have a birth certificate and therefore could not join the school as the document is a requirement for admission to Kenyan schools. The father is not known to have died so the mother could not produce his death certificate or his ID. The child missed the crucial opportunity of joining a school and missed the chance of accessing bursaries that are available to orphaned children.²⁰

According to an official of a Mombasa-based civil society organisation, there is a lot of fear around making payments for school fees for children of individuals killed in police-related operations and victims of enforced disappearance, as stated below:

No one wants to offer a cheque to a widow or an orphan because upon clearing the cheque the source of the money must be revealed, and no member of parliament, politician or donor wants to be associated with ‘terror suspects’.²¹

Further, it has been observed in schools that children whose fathers were killed in police-related raids or are not available due to enforced disappearance are branded by their schoolmates as ‘children whose fathers were killed for belonging to Al-Shabaab’. Thus, these children come home and ask their mothers, ‘was our dad killed because he was a member of the Al-Shabaab?’ Mothers are confronted with questions beyond their own capacity to provide an adequate explanation surrounding the circumstances in which their fathers were killed or disappeared.²²

Due to deaths and disappearances attributed to the state, the population of widows and orphaned children at the Kenya coast is increasing. It is difficult to contact many widows to offer them livelihood and psychosocial support for reasons of trust and inaccessibility, as some of them have been reported to be hesitant to speak with anyone outside their family circles. While there are programmes that provide support with regard to extremism at the Kenya coast, their focus is on preventing and countering violent activities rather than addressing the needs of victims of the war on terror, especially widows and orphaned children. For example, Mercy Corps’ Collective Resilience Against Extremism (CREATE) programme addresses two issues – ‘what matters for reducing vulnerability to VEO recruitment and what activities and

²⁰ Author’s interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

²¹ Author’s interview with a local organisation in Mombasa County (15 November 2021).

²² Author’s interview with a local organisation in Kwale County (12 November 2021).

approaches are most effective in increasing resilience among the highest-risk individuals' (Mercy Corps 2022). The programme also deals with 'how to identify and engage with at-risk individuals and how interventions that provide holistic packages of personal guidance, knowledge, and access to opportunities can be an effective means of reducing their vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment' (Mercy Corps 2022).

Meanwhile, MUHURI, Haki Africa, Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance and Coast Education Centre have been at the forefront in dealing directly with victims of the war on terror to provide livelihood and psychosocial support and engage widows in their work. For example, they offer group meetings to widows and orphans so that they can have a feeling of belonging. However, there are challenges involved when talking to widows of anti-terror programmes, as explained by civil society organisations working at the Kenya coast:

1. When discussing livelihood and psychosocial support with widows, their expectations rise as they look forward to receiving assistance from the organisations.
2. Widows easily become overwhelmed with grief and sorrow when remembering the events that occurred during the killing or disappearance of their husbands.
3. Some women who participate in support programmes have husbands who are currently living in Somalia and are still in touch with them. Thus, they might pass on information about meetings, assistance or other events that concern them to their husbands.
4. Sometimes victims of the war on terror shy away from people outside their circles or networks because of the severe traumatic experiences they have undergone.

Conclusion and the way forward

To effectively counter violence and create a conducive environment for improved governance and achievement of the various development goals in the region, the state, especially its security wing, must be sensitive to a collaborative engagement with the community and its young people. According to [Schwartz & Yalbir \(2019\)](#), a partnership between the state and its young population is critical in designing policies and institutions that will take care of the needs of the burgeoning youth population in the country generally and particularly in the coastal counties. [Sommers \(2019: 6\)](#) argues that 'government behaviour has been found to regularly side-line youthful populations and boost VEO efforts unintentionally. State repression is counterproductive in the extreme because it separates youth from governments and undercuts the viability of alternatives to joining a VEO ... Some youth may respond by forming their

own communities.’ Similarly, I argue here that the relationship between the police and young people at the coast is toxic and often leads to unnecessary confrontation, with long-term adverse implications.

As demonstrated in the article, violence related to extremism originates from two sources – the state, specifically the police, and aggravated young men and women. Violence from both sides produces suffering, most of which is silent and is borne by widows and their orphaned children. The article has shown that citizenship rights are eroded in times of violence and that violence has produced hidden victimhood and stateless citizenship among communities at the Kenya coast. The article has not only shed light on two types of violence exhibited at the Kenya coast but also unpacked them to demonstrate the grave consequences being meted out to communities by the state security machinery. The Kenyan state and communities at the Kenya coast are in a toxic relationship, although that may not be covert. Although the action of the state has caused grave suffering to families touched by the war on terror, the logic and reasons behind those atrocities against the population are hidden from the public sphere. The state is to blame for driving the community into compounded marginalisation and continuing to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

The introduction of the concept of stateless citizenship in this article is not only timely but also has immense significance in the evolution of violence by young people who find themselves born and growing into this citizenship status. It is very possible that these young people will create networks based on state-created grievances in the future to commit violence against the state and their own communities. There is no doubt that Kenya is experiencing an explosion of its youth population, and if not well managed, this might work against the long-term security of the state and society.

The attitude and actions of the state are driving the community away from its own government as people are intimidated by the presence of the police and security services in their neighbourhoods. Fear of approaching the ‘government’ is widespread as residents of the Kenya coast face ongoing harassment by the state, to the extent that seeking services entailed in the bill of rights is a herculean task for many.

Building on the ongoing efforts of civil society organisations is critical to create an atmosphere of harmonious co-existence between the state and society and to arrive at a win–win situation. Possibilities do exist to end the impasse, but that must involve measures that the state deliberately initiates to stop young people’s exclusion from national and county-level political, social, economic and cultural development. Until the security machinery and administration structure, especially at the community level, is seen to be talking to the people and listening to them, state–society relations will remain poor and the police will continue to be regarded as a force that is there to harass rather than protect, and to arrest rather than correct.

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To cite the article: Mahmoud, H.A. (2023), 'Suffering in silence: counter-productivity of Kenya's 'war on terror' at the Kenya Coast', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 63–82.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.063>

The disregard of mothers' knowledge and experiences in violent extremism discourse in Kenya

Beatrice Kizi Nzovu and Fatuma Ahmed Ali

Abstract: This article argues for the inclusion of women's epistemology in discourse about violent extremism and approaches to tackling it in Kenya. It focuses on mothers of male recruits to violent extremist organisations, arguing that, although mothers have critical insights to offer, their knowledge and experiences remain unacknowledged and unheard in Kenyan responses to violent extremism. Although women, including mothers, are understood to be useful contributors to the fight against violent extremism, their voices remain peripheral in masculinised discourses and actions. This article uses an African feminist theoretical approach, informed by 'Motherism', and gendered peace – as well as security frameworks including UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR 1325 and 2242) on women, peace and security and women's inclusion in efforts to address violent extremism – to argue that policy development and implementation processes in Kenya have failed to capture the meaningful contributions that recruits' mothers can make to addressing violent extremism.

Keywords: African feminism, violent extremism, women, knowledge, exclusion

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Introduction

'A woman's place is everywhere'. (Azraa 2021)

At a global level, the field of peace and security issues and policymaking in these areas is gendered and favourably skewed towards the male gender (Watson 2015). The field of violent extremism in Kenya is no exception. Although women are active in Al-Shabaab, they are glaringly missing from efforts to counter violent extremism in Kenya, including at policy development and implementation levels (Idris 2020a). This state of affairs is neither new nor accidental. It is deliberate in a field where women are relegated to the sphere of victimhood and where their role is solely to influence the men in their lives, not to join violent extremist organisations (VEOs) (Idris 2020b). This placement of women's knowledge removes women from discourses about and implementation efforts that seek to address violent extremism (Idris 2020b). Kenya's national strategy to counter violent extremism (Government of Kenya 2016) makes no mention of mothers, or women more generally, as critical actors in the formulation and implementation of policies and actions to address violent extremism. Yet half of Kenya's population are women, and it makes no logical sense that they are left out of such an important discourse.

This article reiterates the importance of, and the need for, the meaningful inclusion of the voices of mothers of VEO recruits in the policy discourse on violent extremism. It draws attention to the erasure of women's roles and the marginalisation of their experiences and influences as mothers in the public sphere, even while United Nations (UN) frameworks call for women to be meaningfully incorporated into measures for ending violent extremism. It examines the global history of violent extremism and terrorism, assesses how these terms have been defined and explains the challenge that violent extremism poses in Kenya. Women, and particularly mothers, have significant existing roles in preventing and responding to violence at family and community levels, and this article opines that their meaningful inclusion can support a holistic approach to understanding and addressing violent extremism (Henty & Eggleston 2018). As Fink *et al.* (2016) note, the inclusion of women in efforts to deal with violent extremism has the potential to help address some of the pitfalls of current approaches and may result in the development of more effective strategies.

The article demonstrates that there is sufficient theoretical justification for the meaningful inclusion of women, including mothers of VEO recruits, in the discourse on violent extremism in Kenya. African feminist theories, discussed further below, have called for the inclusion of women and mothers in the knowledge sphere on the basis of their lived experiences. Mwakimako (2018) asserts that it is important to listen to women who share personal experiences of violent extremism in their own words to

capture their perspectives on the issue. [Henty & Eggleston \(2018\)](#) further note that, while mothers' roles in families and communities have strategic value and mothers have the authority to identify and influence young people with a propensity to join VEOs, they remain peripheral in the fight against violent extremism. These observations make it clear that Kenya's current policies against violent extremism need to be challenged and a more inclusive and holistic approach needs to be adopted, one that includes women in policy formulation processes and incorporates their input in the discourse on countering violent extremism (CVE).

An African feminist theoretical framework

Feminist epistemology emerged in the 1970s, motivated by Simone de Beauvoir's proclamation that knowledge is seen, interpreted, understood and accepted as truth from men's point of view ([Bart 1998](#)). Feminist knowledge contests this patriarchal worldview and promotes women's lived experiences and thoughts as knowledge ([Spender 1985](#)). Feminist epistemology focuses on the 'knower', using a gendered analytical lens, and it also considers historical and socio-cultural specificities (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy n.d.). This article explores African feminist theoretical perspectives that foreground African women's lived experiences and suggests that they are critical to addressing the challenges women face in both the public and private spheres ([Shangare 2017](#)).

African feminist theory examines gendered societal power relations, influenced by culture, roles and institutions ([Steady 1981](#)), in order to challenge male dominance of institutions and institutional policies, and it calls for fair representation of women in these structures. However, the challenge to male dominance posed by African feminism, as advanced by [Atanga \(2013\)](#), is one based on enquiry rather than difference: it embraces cultural practices that do not degrade women and seeks to journey with men towards a more holistic and gender-inclusive African society that benefits both women and men ([Mekgwe 2006](#)). This approach is valuable because it recognises the critical fact that a woman's culture plays an integral role in who she becomes and her ability to share her lived experiences ([Coetzee 2018](#)). The focus on culture also allows positive aspects of African culture in relation to gender to be appreciated. For example, as [Oyèwùmí \(2016\)](#) notes, gender distinctions in the Yoruba community were not a determining factor when it came to social roles, and instead seniority and levels of responsibility took centre stage. As [Atanga \(2013\)](#) argues, it is more appropriate to talk about 'feminism(s)' rather than 'feminism' in relation to Africa; this broader approach recognises that African women are not a homogeneous group and that their individual experiences are influenced by differing cultural practices. A focus

on African feminist theory is valuable because the approach draws attention to, and explores differences as well as similarities that emerge from, varied experiences and histories within a given context (Terborg-Penn 1995).

African feminism(s) connote an approach to knowledge, language, legislation and policymaking that is cognisant of gendered and socio-political dynamics (Atanga 2013). In this way, they provide an entry point for mothers of VEO recruits to engage with policymaking on CVE discourse. Scholarly works in and on Africa that inform and influence African philosophical thoughts and actions, however, remain masculinised (Du Toit & Coetzee 2017). Efforts to highlight the diverse and specific experiences of African women, including mothers and those in the diaspora, through African feminist thought have been criticised as a protest-based critique of Western feminist thought (Du Toit & Coetzee 2017).

This article draws on a range of feminist theoretical approaches that call for understanding, and inclusion, of the African woman; these approaches include Africana womanism, Nego-feminism, Stiwanism and Snail-sense, though the article's specific focus is on Motherism. Africana womanism, as advanced by Clenora Hudson-Weems in 1987 (see Hudson-Weems 2022) and furthered by Kolawole in 1997, focuses on addressing social inequalities and examines critical questions that acknowledge the desires, experiences, needs and struggles of the African woman and the significance of a cultural dimension to African feminism that is inclusive of the African man. In envisioning a transformed Africa, it encourages women to speak for themselves but also to write about themselves, to create knowledge about the African woman, based on their lived experiences (Alkali *et al.* 2013). Most significantly, African womanism foregrounds the central leadership role that African mothers play in the reconstruction of values such as justice, truth and reciprocity within African society (Dove 1998). In 1994, Ogun-dipe-Leslie advanced a theoretical approach, commonly referred to as Stiwanism ('Social Transformation in Africa Including Women'), that focused on the transformation of African society's structures and institutions and sought to recreate the African woman's identity based on her experiences and knowledge (Shangare 2017). Stiwanism places emphasis on an inclusive approach to social transformation that involves both women and men working towards a harmonious society, a concept that is less controversial and less threatening to African masculinity than other types of feminism (Ebunoluwa 2009; Amaefula 2021). The Snail-sense African feminist theory advanced by Adimora-Ezeigbo in 2003 continues this trajectory, stating that the African woman should espouse and build on the snail's virtues of determination, resilience, wisdom and sensitivity to open up dialogue and negotiate her positionality in the public sphere (Akanmode 2015). Snail-sense feminism introduces an individualist perspective, suggesting that the African woman should focus primarily on self-preservation and self-actualisation as strategies that recognise her complementarity to

the African man in the realisation of shared societal goals (Akanmode 2015). Nego-feminism, propagated by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), is another theory that contributes to African feminist discourse; it argues for an approach based on negative ego and negotiation that embraces compromise and seeks to enable African women to negotiate Africa's patriarchal space through the lens of shared attitudes, institutions and values (Nnaemeka 2004; Amaefula 2021).

This article focuses on the African feminist concept known as Motherism, advanced by Catherine Acholonu (1995, cited in Alkali *et al.* 2013: 238), which contends that the mother's nurturing role and the mother-child relationship are integral parts of African feminism. Motherism is also part of the African feminist theory advanced in the 1980s by Filomina Chioma Steady, who noted that African feminism is defined not only by gender but also by additional factors such as power, social constructs, history and individual contextual experiences (Alkali *et al.* 2013; Steady 2005). Motherism suggests that there are no imperative reasons for the continued exclusion of women's knowledge other than patriarchy, male power and dominance. The theory is highly relevant to mothers of VEO recruits, who have a distinctly personal experience of violent extremism (Karimi 2018). Mothers, according to Acholonu, provide a support system upon which entire communities depend (Godono 2005). Oyèwùmí (2016) uses the term 'matripotency' to denote the supremacy of motherhood within society and refers to the power women exercise through this system. Oyèwùmí's (2016) concept emphasises that there is an unbreakable bond between a mother and her child that can be considered 'otherworldly' and 'timeless' because it starts even before conception and continues through the gestation period, the child's birth and life, and even beyond death. It influences every aspect of the child's existence, be it social, political, material or spiritual. Oyèwùmí's (2016) assertions about motherhood apply to mothers of VEO recruits who play a distinct role in their sons' lives, and they help to illustrate why mothers' experiences are useful in providing a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to violent extremism so that the challenge it poses can be addressed more effectively. Alkali *et al.* (2013) and Godono (2005) further note that a mother's influence extends not only over her family but also into broader society.

Taking mothers' centrality in the African context into account, as Nnaemeka (2004) argues, means that it is not possible to term knowledge as holistic within the African setting when the mother's voice is missing. Yet this is exactly what Kenya's CVE discourse has done by obliterating the mother's voice and agency in CVE policymaking. In advancing the African woman's space, positionality and advancement within the African context, African feminist theories argue for the inclusion of African mothers in all societal decisions and actions, including those on violent extremism and terrorism. Hence, this article adopts Eze *et al.*'s (2016) pre-emptive approach, which

encourages capture of the knowledge and experiences of mothers of VEO recruits to inform policy discourse on approaches to violent extremism in Kenya.

Kenya's experience with violent extremism from 1998 to 2019

According to the Kenyan government, terrorism is an act of violence that involves the use of explosives or firearms, or the release of chemicals, that put both people and their property in danger ([Government of Kenya 2016](#)). This article uses the terms 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism' interchangeably, as there has been no universal agreement on a distinct, conceptual or phenomenological definition of the terms or their practice. To appreciate the importance of the inclusion of the voices of mothers of VEO recruits in CVE policy discourse, it is important to appreciate the fact that Kenya has experienced several terrorist attacks. Several major attacks influenced the entry of Kenyan troops into Somalia as part of the US-led global war on terror. [Botha \(2013\)](#) states that while Kenya has experienced attacks on its soil by Al-Shabaab, it has also been a site for Al-Shabaab recruitment. It is therefore inappropriate to exclude the knowledge of mothers of VEO recruits, who have played a nurturing, mothering role in the lives of these male youth.

On 7 August 1998, a bomb exploded in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, targeting the US Embassy, resulting in the deaths of approximately 213 people and 4,000 injuries ([Helling 2004](#)). On 28 November 2002, there was a suicide car bomb attack on the Kenyan coast, at the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, which left 15 people dead and 40 wounded ([US Department of State 2004](#)). On the same day, an Arkea Airlines flight heading to Israel with 261 passengers on board was attacked by missiles, and, although they luckily missed the plane, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the incident ([US Department of State 2004](#)). The period from 1992 to 2002 saw violent extremist networks in East Africa being strengthened by two groups, namely Al-Ittihad al-Islami and al-Qaeda East Africa, with the support of a fluid network of Kenyan supporters that later formed into a unified unit, Al-Shabaab ([Bryden & Bahra 2019](#)).

In response to the infamous terror attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, the then President George Bush launched the global war on terror, inviting countries of goodwill to work together to achieve the shared goal of getting rid of terrorists ([Mogire & Mkutu Agade 2011](#)). Kenya became a key ally in this war and received financial and technical support from the US and other Western governments ([Mogire & Mkutu Agade 2011](#)). In the period 2012–14, Al-Shabaab and its supporters conducted attacks in Kenya with grenades and improvised explosive devices that targeted places of worship, bars and public service vehicles, but the attacks were uncoordinated, with few willing suicide bombers, and the intended

messaging around the attacks was neither clear nor well disseminated (Bryden & Bahra 2019).

On 21 September 2013, which was, ironically, the UN-designated International Day of Peace, Al-Shabaab opened fire on shoppers at the Westgate mall in Nairobi, leaving 70 people dead, including 18 foreigners, and 175 injured (Agbiboa 2014). Al-Shabaab fighters shouted that they would release only Muslims and claimed that they had attacked the Westgate mall because it was frequented by American and Israeli nationals (Agbiboa 2014). The Garissa University attack in 2015, coming two years after the Westgate mall attack, left 148 dead, a majority of whom were students, alongside some workers, soldiers and police officers, and 79 people were injured (Wakube *et al.* 2017). Al-Shabaab's attack on the DusitD2 complex, on 15 January 2019, left 21 dead and 28 injured (Musoma 2021). In 2020, Al-Shabaab conducted another attack on the Manda Bay Airfield, a military facility shared by the Kenyan and US governments, which left three US citizens dead (Congressional Research Service 2020). Al-Shabaab's overarching intention in these attacks was understood to be to create divisions among the Kenyan population by targeting non-Muslims (Congressional Research Service 2020). The threat posed by Al-Shabaab persists, and in 2021 the group purchased arms worth approximately USD 24 million (RedAction Africa News 2022).

Kenya's response to the Al-Shabaab threat remains highly securitised, and the fact that a militaristic approach is being prioritised (Henty & Eggleston 2018) is evidenced by the fact that the Kenya Defence Forces, National Police Service and National Intelligence Service are spearheading counterterrorism efforts (Botha & Abdile 2020). This militarised approach comprises alleged and reported forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the resultant damage to interethnic, interfaith and state–community relations (Torbjörnsson & Jonsson 2016).

In addition, Kenya has put in place a legal framework that includes the 2012 Prevention of Terrorism Act, which addresses the prevention, detection and prosecution of terrorist acts; it also includes aspects that broadly criminalise radicalisation, prescribe punitive measures and limit the rights of those identified by state actors as terrorists (Kenya Law 2012). Within this framework, the 2017 Crime and Anti-Money Laundering Act targeted the financing of terrorist activities and established the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), which utilises a state-led, multi-agency approach that brings together security agencies, and the directorate of immigration and registration, to coordinate all CVE responses in Kenya undertaken by both state and non-state actors (Botha & Abdile 2020). In addition, the 2016 Kenya National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism was put in place to actualise the implementation of CVE actions (Botha & Abdile 2020). These securitised approaches and efforts have resulted in increased mistrust between state and non-state

actors, undermining the potential for collaborative and effective approaches to CVE (Botha & Abdile 2020). This article argues that moves to address some of these securitised, non-inclusive approaches must, as a matter of urgency, incorporate diverse experiences and knowledge, including those of mothers of VEO recruits, to ensure a holistic understanding of the issue that may influence strategies for addressing violent extremism in Kenya.

Exclusion of mothers from violent extremism discourse in Kenya

Spivak (1985) views the concept of ‘othering’ from an exclusionary perspective and posits that this concept is practised even by policymakers, who use political strategies to sideline other critical voices. This view suggests that the dominance of men in the policymaking sphere and the discourse on violent extremism – as well as the exclusion of women, including mothers of VEO recruits, from those spheres – is not coincidental, and deliberate efforts need to be made to create a more inclusive policy space.

The exclusion of women from the CVE sphere also needs to be looked at through a lens that recognises sustained gender inequalities, the ongoing curtailment of women’s rights and, more specifically, the continued abuse of these rights in the processes and actions employed by violent extremist organisations (Bhulai & Nemr 2018). The role of women, including mothers, in CVE efforts is often instrumentalised without any recognition of women’s agency and their potential to offer fresh perspectives on violent extremism, its impact on society and how best to address it (Sahgal & Zeuthen 2018). While historical and attitudinal exclusions that focus on women’s and mothers’ nurturing role rather than their agency limit women’s participation in the public sphere of CVE, structural policy exclusions also hinder women’s involvement in the CVE space, as shown below.

Historical and attitudinal exclusions of women and mothers

The vast majority of women in Africa are largely left out of the decision-making sphere due to exclusionary laws and cultural practices that render them invisible in knowledge discourse (Ilesanmi 2018). According to Ilesanmi (2018), this exclusion was further entrenched during the colonial period with the introduction of a formal education system, almost exclusively accessible to men, which granted men dominance in various spaces including decision-making, governance and security. In addition, the security sphere is viewed as the responsibility of the state, which is charged with protecting itself from external threats (such as Al-Shabaab), and this provides

an avenue for states to monopolise efforts to address violence and to curtail the role of civilian actors, including women and mothers, in addressing security challenges (Hamber *et al.* 2015). When women are viewed as inherently peaceful and fit for mothering and nurturing roles but not for the public sphere, this further contributes to their invisibility in efforts to address security matters (Okech 2016).

In challenging this patriarchal approach to matters in the public sphere, it is important to consider a broader approach that can open up spaces to accommodate the participation and contributions of women (Hamber *et al.* 2015). In violent conflict situations, women have shown initiative and leadership by engaging in actions to promote peace, especially in informal processes; however, when it comes to formal processes, they are left out from spaces that largely operate on an invitation-only basis (Norville 2011). Women's ability to contribute to conflict prevention and resolution is well known and appreciated, and so the gap that needs to be addressed is how best to include them in decision-making, policy formulation and implementation, including on CVE (Sherwood 2016). Women's contributions are based on their ability to promote social cohesion across clans, ethnic groups, political positions and religious beliefs and to build alliances on key issues such as protection, access to diverse resources and long-term peacebuilding measures at different levels (Affi *et al.* 2021). These widely understood roles do not, however, open avenues for women, including mothers, to engage in efforts on CVE, which usually involve processes where inclusion is decided on the basis of politics rather than principles (Henty & Eggelston 2018).

Although women are active contributors to violent extremism in Kenya, including as recruiters, fighters, suicide bombers, intelligence gatherers and wives, their involvement is not reflected when it comes to efforts to address violent extremism, especially in policy formulation and implementation, where they remain peripheral (Idris 2020a). In reality, women are excluded from the CVE space due to long-standing inequalities, power differentials, their historical exclusion from the peace and security space in general, the assumption that they are not actively involved in violent extremist organisations, and the belief that they cannot adequately influence CVE efforts due to their societal roles as mothers and women (Henty & Eggelston 2018). In Kenya, when women are viewed as mothers, this categorisation gives them a certain role in relation to being able to steer their sons away from violent extremism, but it does not give them agency as policy actors in the CVE space (Idris 2020a). This narrowly focused and gender-blind approach, coupled with a securitised approach to violent extremism that focuses on Islamic extremism and ignores other factors, has rendered CVE efforts ineffective (Idris 2020a).

Counterterrorism and CVE policy: the exclusion of women and mothers in Kenya

The policy framework Kenya has in place to support its counterterrorism and CVE efforts includes the [Prevention of Terrorism Act \(2012\)](#); the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism; and the [Statute Law \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Bill \(2019\)](#), which modified the [Prevention of Terrorism Act \(2012\)](#). This section provides an overview of these CVE policy frameworks and examines to what extent they are gendered. It highlights the fact that the current CVE policy discourse is not inclusive of mothers of recruits to VEOs when it comes to policy input, and it renders them invisible and irrelevant in subsequent implementation actions.

Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012)

The 2012 Prevention of Terrorism Act, passed by the Kenyan Parliament, aims to provide strategies to detect and prevent terrorist and terrorism-related activities ([Government of Kenya 2012](#)). It calls on citizens to work collaboratively with the state and report anything suspicious related to terrorism. It does not mention civil society, women or mothers as actors in anti-terrorism efforts at all, beyond the expectation that they will provide information to the state in good faith, and provisions are made so that the state does not have to disclose actions taken thereafter. This means that, in addition to civil society members, including women and mothers, being excluded from the anti-terrorism agenda, they are also not able to provide oversight on any state actions classified as efforts to counter terrorism ([Freedom House 2018](#)). The [Prevention of Terrorism Act \(2012\)](#) is gender-blind and presumes that only men play a role in terrorism, as is clear from its use of ‘he, him, himself’ pronouns to refer to terrorist actors. By securitising and masculinising anti-terrorism efforts, it robs women, including mothers, of opportunities to contribute to holistic efforts. The fact that policy on anti-terrorism has neither a gendered lens nor a gender-responsive approach increases the bottlenecks that make it difficult for women and mothers to access and influence policy formulation and implementation because they have already been rendered invisible in this space. Yet this space is a critical starting point for the creation of a more holistic CVE discourse and the inclusion of women and mothers.

National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (2016)

In 2016, the Kenyan government developed its National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE). The strategy aimed to open up space for intervention in violent extremism discourse to other sectors beyond security actors. These sectors are

understood to include a wide range of civil society actors, namely non-governmental organisations, and other economic, social and religious institutions, with the state encouraging interventions informed by collaboration between state and community actors through frequent joint consultations ([Government of Kenya 2016](#)).

Although the NSCVE asserts the new openness of the CVE policy domain, the document does not mention women or mothers at all, and it mentions parents only twice, situating them predominantly as informants, not as contributors to the policy discourse on CVE. In this way, it fails to offer an inclusive gendered approach and contributes to making the knowledge and experiences of mothers of recruits to VEOs peripheral in CVE discourse. These mothers nurture and live with their sons in communities affected by terrorism, and their sons have either joined or are vulnerable to joining VEOs, but it is glaringly obvious that their input, based on their lived experiences and knowledge, is neither recognised nor sought.

The Statute Law (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill (2019) to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012)

In section 40C of the 2019 Statute Law Bill, the NCTC is placed in charge of all civil society actors and activities involved in supporting efforts to counter violent extremism and all anti-terrorism efforts in Kenya. The bill also calls for the public to take responsibility for informing the NCTC about any terrorism-related information they receive ([Government of Kenya 2019](#)). There is no reciprocity involved in this approach, whereby members of the public, including women and mothers, might be entitled to receive information in return from state agencies, including the NCTC, to support a collaborative approach to CVE and counterterrorism efforts. In addition, although the [Statute Law Bill \(2019\)](#) calls for a multi-agency approach to address violent extremism and terrorism in Kenya and invites other state agencies and departments to become involved, the Ministry of Public Service and Gender is not one of the departments it includes, and gender is not among the bill's otherwise well-thought-out considerations ([Government of Kenya 2019](#)). The effect of this omission is that women and mothers remain peripheralised in the mechanisms of terrorism-related policy.

Despite their omission from the CVE space, women, including mothers, have been playing pivotal roles in their communities in deterring violent extremism. Their activities have included identifying early signs of radicalisation, discouraging individuals from joining or supporting violent extremist organisations, and creating inclusive spaces for returnees in their communities ([Bhulai & Nemr 2018](#)). Inclusion in formal CVE policy formulation and implementation spaces would enable women, including mothers, to share their experiences and knowledge on platforms that have greater influence and impact. Thus Kenya's approach to violent extremism could be further

strengthened by including the voices of women, which could make an important contribution to neglected areas of the body of knowledge on CVE.

Why include mothers' experiences and knowledge in CVE discourse?

The holders of knowledge determine the decisions and actions to be taken within any sphere of discourse, including that of violent extremism. [Spender \(1985\)](#) questioned the male-centric notion of knowledge and created an opening for discussion about the importance of women's knowledge and the need for it to be recognised as valid. Betty Friedan (cited in [Spender 1985](#)) also challenged the centrality of men's knowledge, arguing that this centrality makes men the knowers not only of their own realities but also of women's realities, and, as they may not truly capture women's lived experiences, women should have the opportunity to speak to their own truth. The inclusion of women as policy formulators has the potential to contribute greatly to the successful prevention of violent extremism and terrorism, in addition to opening up feedback and development opportunities when these efforts do not produce their desired results ([OSCE 2013](#)).

Yet women remain absent when it comes to inputting their knowledge and experience into decision-making and policy formulation on security in general, and CVE in particular ([UN Women 2021](#)). This is despite the fact that, as the next section shows, several arguments have been made in support of the inclusion of women, including mothers, in decision-making spheres.

Supporting international frameworks

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325

The year 2000 marked an entry point for women into the sphere of peace and security with the passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women's inclusion in peace and security discourse. The resolution was created in recognition of the fact that women experience violence differently and, as such, need to be included in all processes that address it ([Rehn & Johnson-Sirleaf 2002](#)). The resolution has opened pathways for the interrogation of women's continued exclusion, even when frameworks for their inclusion exist.

Sixteen years after this landmark UN resolution was passed, the Government of Kenya launched its National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, which included as its pillars Participation and Promotion, Prevention, Protection and Relief, and Recovery ([Government of Kenya 2016](#)). The plan was cognisant not just of UN frameworks

but also of Al-Shabaab's threat to security in the Horn of Africa, including women's security (Government of Kenya 2016). Kenya's National Action Plan (KNAP) on UNSCR 1325 specifically notes that women are strategically placed at the household and community level to support the fight against violent extremism (Ndung'u 2016). However, the fact that the KNAP only recognises women's roles at these levels takes women out of spheres where they can influence, make and implement policy and relegates them back to the domestic sphere and its roles, thus missing an opportunity to harness women's knowledge at a political level. The KNAP on UNSCR 1325 mentions the internal and external sources of conflict in Kenya but specifically indicates that the issue of violent extremism represents a current threat to peace and security in Kenya, referring to al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab (Government of Kenya 2016). Both the KNAP on UNSCR 1325 and the Kenya National CVE strategy provide an opportunity for the inclusion of women in the peace and security sector, including mothers of VEO recruits; this policy space needs to be explored further for there to be systemic and sustainable change.

In 2020, Kenya reviewed its KNAP on UNSCR 1325 to assess progress in its implementation and address any emerging gaps identified through recommendations from diverse state and non-state actors. In addition to strengthening institutions and the awareness, monitoring and accountability frameworks of the KNAP at the national and grassroots levels, the second KNAP sought to broaden the range of actors involved with the plan and to incorporate the voices of women and youth, who can help to lead and spur implementation (WILPF 2020). The KNAP creates an opportunity for the Government of Kenya to engage more deliberately with women's peace and security issues and explore women's space in the CVE sphere. The Kenyan government's gender frameworks acknowledge women's role in violent extremism, but they have nevertheless failed to include women's knowledge, and, in particular, the knowledge and experience of the mothers of VEO recruits in policy frameworks on peace and security and the formulation of approaches to violent extremism. In essence, this omission compromises efforts to prioritise women's roles in CVE and involve them in decision-making and funding processes.

Since UNSCR 1325 was passed in 2000, the UN has passed other resolutions to further the women, peace and security agenda. These include UNSCR 1820 (2008), UNSCR 1888 (2009), UNSCR 1889 (2009), UNSCR 1960 (2010), UNSCR 2106 (2013) and UNSCR 2122 (2013), which respectively focus on the sexual and gender-based violence meted out against women during times of violent conflict; women's inclusion in peacekeeping; and considerations on the rule of law for crimes committed against women (Karimi 2018).

Furthermore, in 2015 the UN passed Security Council Resolution 2242, which specifically called for women's inclusion in efforts to address violent extremism

(Karimi 2018). In this way, the UN and its member states, including Kenya, have officially recognised that women have been left out of the discourse on violent extremism, even though they make up over half of the global population, and they have also recognised that this particular security challenge is transglobal and gendered in nature.

The Beijing Platform for Action 1995

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) called for the inclusion and participation of women in advancing peace in different spaces, including at the community and decision-making levels. The BPFA recognised that women's inclusion is critical if peace and security are ever to be sustainably achieved (UN Women 1995). Despite the BPFA calling for women's inclusion and participation in peace and security in the 1990s, women remain marginalised. Unfortunately, violent extremism remains an ongoing peace and security threat, and the exclusion of women from decisions on how best to address it fundamentally compromises the impact of these efforts.

Windhoek Declaration 2000

In the year 2000, in Windhoek, Namibia, a declaration was made on the need to mainstream gender in all peace processes. The declaration's nine agenda points form a highly relevant starting point for highlighting and realising the practical roles women can play in addressing violent extremism and terrorism. The nine points identified in the Windhoek Declaration (2000) (UN Women 2000) are briefly outlined here. (1) Women should be involved in the resolution of violent conflicts at all levels. (2) When peace and security mandates are drawn up, they need to take into consideration the role of women and ensure gender considerations are mainstreamed. (3) Women should be equally represented in leadership positions, with the necessary steps taken to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they need to undertake these tasks and take on management roles, as well as decision-making responsibilities. (4) Gender should be mainstreamed throughout the CVE process, including in the planning, structuring and allocation of resources. (5) A deliberate recruitment strategy is needed to ensure that women with relevant skills and experience are brought on board. (6) Necessary training must be provided for women so that they can be effective in delivering their peace and security mandates. (7) Standard operating procedures need to take gender into consideration, including in their design and reporting processes. (8) A monitoring and evaluation framework needs to be put in place to assess the extent to which gender has been mainstreamed to ensure accountability with regard to women's inclusion. (9) The general public must be made explicitly aware of the importance of women's contribution to peace and security. If these nine strategies are applied to the field of

violent extremism, they will empower women's voices, increase women's visibility and enable them to contribute to policies that will effectively address violent extremism.

The unabating gaps that propagate women's exclusion in CVE discourse

A [United Nations Development Programme \(2020\)](#) report reveals that when it comes to social power, including power in the political, educational and economic spheres, social biases relegate women to the periphery, particularly in relation to decision-making, thus reducing their agency. Although the frameworks outlined in this article highlight the importance of the role of women, they do not necessarily translate to women's increased participation in decision-making on approaches to violent extremism and terrorism.

As [Ndung'u & Shadung \(2017\)](#) note, women either tend to be more involved in the civil society space and/or their roles are considered from a stereotypical or securitised perspective. This is mainly because there is mistrust between practitioners, who are often women, and policymakers, the majority of whom are men ([Ndung'u & Shadung 2017](#)). The exclusion of women from the CVE policy space, according to [Ndung'u & Shadung \(2017\)](#), further threatens their democratic right to participation.

In addition, in 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms noted that, although the number of policies and programmes that recognise the gendered dimensions of violent extremism has increased, they generally do not acknowledge women as partners in fighting violent extremism and terrorism and instead instrumentalise them ([OSCE 2020](#)). It can be argued that there has been a widespread call to include women in discourse on peace and security policy, but this has not yet translated into women and mothers being brought in as critical actors in the formulation of policy on terrorism and violent extremism and/or its implementation.

Conclusion

By acknowledging that there is a need for the meaningful inclusion of mothers in the policy discourse on violent extremism, this article opens up a conversation about their glaring absence and investigates why this is the case in the Kenyan context, where women form more than half the population. The article has explored the possibility that efforts to address violent extremism may prove fruitless if the voices of women continue to be left out. It has also noted the fact that mothers play a central role in their sons' lives and in Kenyan communities, to the extent that their lived experiences of violent extremism should translate into knowledge that informs policy formulation.

The article has brought to the fore the reality that systematic and institutional discrimination against women limits their full participation in Kenyan society, and it has also shown that, when CVE is inclusive of women and mothers, it opens pathways to increased gender equality (Bhulai & Nemr 2018).

The article has also highlighted the various entry points that are already available to support the clamour for women's space in peace and security policy formulation, including African feminist theoretical perspectives that re-emphasise this. Mothers of VEO recruits want to be included and heard in the male-dominated arena of CVE policymaking and implementation, and so the government of Kenya should start speaking with them, in line with Betty Friedan's suggestion that 'if you want to know about women, ask them' (Friedan 2001). As Fink & Bhulai (2016) have argued, women, given the opportunity, can play a key role both in the early detection and prevention of radicalisation and in deradicalisation processes, based on their central role in families and communities. Leaving them out leads to a flawed and limited approach to violent extremism.

Acknowledgements

This article is inspired by the work of Filomina Chioma Steady (2005), who advanced the idea that African feminism should include efforts to empower women to participate in the public sphere, including in peace and security issues.

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To cite the article: Nzovu, B.K. & Ali, F.A. (2023), 'The disregard of mothers' knowledge and experiences in violent extremism discourse in Kenya', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 83–102.
<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.083>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Key insights into masculinities and violent extremism from a brief literature review

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Abstract: This article offers a brief review of the literature that explores the link between masculinities and violent extremism. A content analysis was carried out to isolate common themes that were then analysed for insights. The majority of violent extremists are men, and this article suggests that it is therefore imperative to question the link between these two variables. The justifications for the investigation are explored in relation to the idea that masculinities are drivers of violent extremism. Common patterns emerging from the literature review are teased out, and the article hypothesises that individual differences and a multiplicity of common factors lead to violent extremism. Three potential conceptual frameworks are then proposed for researching masculinities and violent extremism, with a view to prompting investigations that seek to solve actual problems.

Keywords: radicalisation, masculinities, femininities, socialisation, violent extremism, gender norms, identity

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Introduction

The need to prevent and counter violent extremism gained prominence after the bombing of the Pentagon – the headquarters of the United States Department of Defense – on 11 September 2001. The sense of urgency surrounding these matters was also driven by the rise of high-profile violent extremist organisations, such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Boko Haram and al-Qaeda (Fried *et al.* 2020). It is widely agreed that the majority of individuals in extremist groups globally are (young) men (Dearing 2010; Groen *et al.* 2010; Carter 2013; Allan *et al.* 2015; Johnston & True 2019); however, ‘the vast majority of men in settings where violent extremism is more common are not engaged in (it), and many are vocal advocates against it’ (Fried *et al.* 2020: 8). This means that a proclivity to violent extremism should not be generalised as something innate to men.

Allan *et al.* (2015: 2) make the drastic claim that ‘although most violent extremists are young men, there is little convincing research to suggest that ideals of masculinity and honour play a significant role in causing violent extremism’; this sits somewhat paradoxically with their assertion that ‘the fact that men constitute the majority of violent extremists needs to be taken seriously’ (Allan *et al.* 2015: 24) and, certainly, evidence from primary studies in Asia and North Africa indicates that this dismissive statement was premature. The mere fact that most known violent extremists are young men places gender, of necessity, at the centre of the analysis that needs to take place. Patriarchy (an ideological framework that informs behaviour) is central to violence, and so masculinities have to be treated as a possible catalyst of violent extremism. As UN Women (2020: 9) states in a study of identity and violent extremism in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, ‘through better understanding the gendered drivers of violence, it may be possible to isolate potential perpetrators of violent extremism and to focus programming on effective methods to prevent radicalisation amongst men and women’.

According to Angus (2016: 1), violent extremism occurs when ‘a person or group decides that fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change, and acts accordingly’. In other words, radicalisation is a precursor to recruitment into extremist groups. Lewis *et al.* (2017: 31) adopt the definition set out by the Australian government, which suggests that violent extremism consists of the ‘beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals’. Meanwhile, other academics argue that extremist violence ‘can be exercised through discourse, institutions and practices of exclusivism’ (Lewis *et al.* 2017: 31, citing Arendt, 1970; Zizek 2009; Malešević 2016), and, according to True (2020), violent extremism is characterised by three basic elements, namely: the intention to achieve a cause; the targeting of a large population; and the perpetration of actions that fall outside the bounds of international humanitarian law.

The key conclusions that can be drawn from these views are that: extremism itself does not necessarily imply violence but often justifies it; extremism is based on and driven by a cause; and violence is utilised by extremist groups either to amplify their cause or for its own sake. When these assumptions are combined, firstly, with the observation that the majority of individuals involved in extremist groups are men, and secondly, with acceptance of the idea that extremism is behaviour inculcated through socialisation, the link between masculinities and violent extremism becomes tenable. This article explores research findings that relate to masculinities as a driver of violent extremism and emphasises the need to contextualise and localise studies on the subject. It also proposes three conceptual frameworks for use in researching the subject further.

Methodology

The article was developed on the basis of a rapid review of literature on the confluence of masculinities and violent extremism. The sampled literature was drawn from online and physical publications on masculinities and violent extremism, and the review was guided by the following questions:

1. What does existing literature reveal about masculinities as a driver of violent extremism?
2. What approaches emerge from the literature on researching the link between masculinities and violent extremism?
3. What do the findings portend for further research on masculinities and violent extremism?

A content analysis was carried out to isolate specific findings related to these questions. Common themes were identified and findings around them were consolidated and analysed, firstly, so that insights could be gained into whether or not masculinities drive violent extremism, and secondly, so that strategies for researching masculinities and violent extremism could be identified. Questions that may form the basis of further research were also derived from the literature review.

Masculinities as a driver of violent extremism

This section presents findings on emerging links between masculinities and violent extremism based on six themes: the concept of masculinities; gender norms in the context of economic challenges; disillusionment and alienation; ideological and familial solidarity; militarisation; and inversion.

The concept of masculinities

This article adopts the definition of ‘masculinities’ established by [Fried *et al.* \(2020: 4\)](#), which suggests that masculinities refer to ‘identities; power; individual and collective actions; and individually held and societally reinforced norms related to manhood’. The resulting identities are products of systematic socialisation into what each culture, community or society considers to constitute manhood. Using the notions of what it means to be a man in their environment, boys are conditioned to exhibit attributes such as courage, aggression, entitlement and leadership. Academic discourse about the construction of gender identifies violence as an attribute inculcated in boys/men, situating it as one of the factors that produce masculinities. It is on this understanding that scholars have generally accepted [Connell’s \(2002\)](#) argument that there are multiple masculinities, often in contest with one another. As [Pearson \(2018: 8\)](#) has noted, masculinities also vary horizontally (from place to place) and vertically (from era to era).

Recognition that not all masculinities are characterised by violence informs the idea of ‘toxic masculinity’. The term, popularised by [Connell \(2002\)](#), refers to ‘masculine gender roles associated with aggression and possibly violence’ ([Kupers 2005](#), cited in [Pearson 2019](#)), but a close reading reveals that the expression has been appropriated, distorted and oversimplified. The concept of ‘toxic masculinity’ is traceable to the 1980s and 1990s, when the mythopoetic (New Age) movement of men in the United States reacted to a perceived onslaught on manhood linked to second-wave feminism ([Bly 1990](#); [Salter 2019](#)). This movement argued that boys were being feminised and thereby losing their ‘true’ warrior identity, which thus needed to be reclaimed. Through men-only workshops and retreats in the wilderness, it sought to re-socialise them to their ‘true’ inner selves. In this framing, feminisation constitutes a toxin that is diluting warrior manhood, and it is feminised men who are understood to exhibit ‘toxic masculinity’.

The meaning of ‘toxic masculinity’ has morphed, and the term is now commonly used to reflect a meaning diametrically opposed to its original sense. [Salter \(2019: 2\)](#) refers to this distortion as a leakage from ‘academic literature to wide cultural circulation’ that has led to the expression being used, simplistically, as a diagnosis for all problems around masculinities of violence. As [Salter \(2019: 1\)](#) notes, this popular usage further implies that ‘the problem of masculine aggression and entitlement ... [is] a cultural or spiritual illness – something that has infected today’s men and leads them to reproachable acts’. [Waling \(2019\)](#) is also critical of what he considers as an obsession with ‘toxic masculinity’, a preoccupation that has developed at the expense of healthy and positive constructions of masculinity.

[Pearson \(2019\)](#) and [Treadwell & Garland \(2011\)](#) similarly regard as problematic the ‘toxic’, ‘crisis’ and ‘protest’ labels [Connell \(2002\)](#) ascribed to masculinities.

Treadwell & Garland (2011) specifically argue that Connell's formative work runs the risk of 'pathologising marginalised or subordinate men' (Pearson 2019: 1259). They agree, instead, with the approach favoured by Hood-Williams (2001), who considers masculinities to be psychological constructs and products of complex gendered relations. Pearson's observations are based on her research into the English Defence League (EDL) demonstration that occurred in Telford, United Kingdom, on 5 November 2016. In her study, which sought to 'outline the ways in which EDL masculinities (were) part of wider social norms' (Pearson 2019: 1252), Pearson noted that the aggressive physical postures and presence employed by the men involved in the demonstration, which Pearson collectively labels as instances of 'hyper-masculinity', were primarily meant to ward off emasculation in a hostile social environment. Pearson suggests that labelling such men with one identity was inaccurate, given that they also exhibited caring masculinities by protecting downtrodden and vulnerable members of the community. Moreover, the presence of equally aggressive women in the EDL negated the deterministic equation of violent masculinities with men. Pearson's central argument is that 'many of the so-called toxic practices of the extreme fringes are present in society more widely', and so 'the concept ... is inadequate to describe the gender practices of those involved' in the anti-Islam(ist) EDL protest (Pearson 2019: 1269). Similar arguments are advanced by Caravaggio & Davis (2020), Rahman (2020) and Duriesmith (2020) to suggest that masculinities vary contextually and locally, and therefore it is wrong to homogenise men and violent extremism.

It is evident from the above review that the meaning of 'toxic masculinity' has been completely inverted, and while academics have assigned it a descriptive value in order to label men's violent and sexist behaviours, popular users of the term have mobilised it to judge and condemn anything and everything discerned to be negative about men. Given these distortions, the expression is no longer useful.

Rather than focusing on labelling masculinities at work, which can become an abstract and sterile intellectual exercise, this article will produce credible evidence linking masculinities with violent extremism in order to put the focus on assessing and solving societal problems. This is the approach used by the UN Women (2020: 10) study on Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, which established that 'people who support violence against women (VAW) are three times more likely to support violent extremism'. UN Women's findings echo those of Hadiz (2008, 2013), Pedahzur (2013), Ghafar (2016), Bourekba (2016), Mokbel (2017), Johnston & True (2019) and Fried *et al.* (2020).

As Caravaggio & Davis (2020) have argued, it is a mistake to treat the actions of extremist groups as alien to mainstream society – like Pearson (2019), they posit that these actions are actually extensions of and predicated on the existing gender norms that groups use to recruit members and legitimise deeds, including VAW, in

their ranks. The actions of extremist groups should, therefore, be seen as existing on a continuum which begins with individual and domestic perpetration of, and extends to, violence in its extremist and large-scale forms.

The link between support for VAW and violent extremism implies that the men concerned have internalised the vice as part of their domestic lives and expanded its application to external spaces. Emerging from this view is the idea that, if socialisation of boys and men encourages and legitimises VAW, it constructs an identity that is likely to be sympathetic to and supportive of violent extremism. This finding needs to be verified because, if proved, it could assist in measuring the likelihood of support for extremism in a population; it also suggests that, if support for VAW can be subverted, then support for violent extremism can also be eradicated. The clear implication here is that confirming the drivers of VAW, including gender norms, is the first step towards tackling violent extremism.

Gender norms in the context of economic challenges

True (2020) notes contestation about whether or not economic factors (such as poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities for men) can be classified as root causes of violent extremism. Other studies are more definitive about the link. For example, Rahman (2020) notes that pressure to provide for households in a context of scarce economic opportunities for young men easily morphs into desperation for any source of income, which can increase men's attraction to extremist groups that promise financial benefits. In Libya, for example, extremist groups used financial incentives to radicalise men based on these types of gender norms and women's economic vulnerability in a war economy (Johnston & True 2019). Further evidence of this nexus was captured in a UN Women (2020: 11) report which established that accomplished manhood was 'defined by male leadership and earning power, as well as violence and protection of ... particularly female family members' in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines. In fact, half of all the report's male and female study respondents in Indonesia and the Philippines agreed that men should sacrifice their wellbeing for their families, even if this meant joining extremist groups (UN Women 2020: 26).

These findings are consonant with the claim that men who are unable to live up to social expectations deviate into crime, substance abuse and violence (Barker & Ricardo 2005; Robb *et al.* 2015; Barker *et al.* 2017). Explaining this dynamic, Messerschmidt (1997) and Connell (2002) observe that when acceptable traditional and conventional methods for fulfilling gender norms are unavailable, men tend to resort to criminal behaviour to accomplish or validate their identities. The behaviour they exhibit depends on how each individual constructs his gendered self in relation to the power

structures and resources available to him. Specifically, men who feel marginalised and disempowered are more likely to engage in protest as a way of resisting subordination.

The key point here is that socialisation creates a contradiction in men's lives: it teaches men to expect to lead, but the opportunities for them to do so have dwindled, and so leadership becomes, for many, an illusion. This contradiction effectively serves as a stimulus that can drive men to reclaim what is quickly slipping from their grasp by whatever means, including violent extremism. Embedded in this response is disillusionment with the status quo.

Disillusionment and alienation

One hypothesis about masculinities and violent extremism considered by [Allan *et al.* \(2015: 8\)](#) is that 'under-employed young men with frustrated aspirations and a limited stake in society are particularly susceptible to radicalisation'. The observation that militant groups primarily recruit members from this category is relevant to this claim, but more significant is the recognition that young men are vulnerable because they have been socialised to understand that economic success is a mark of manhood, while failure is a source of stigma. If they believe they can achieve some level of fulfilment from extremist groups, they may therefore be willing to join, not only to earn a livelihood, but also to try and transform a situation that does not serve their interests.

That violent extremist groups play on people's vulnerabilities for recruitment purposes is becoming clearer from recent studies in Asia as captured by [UN Women \(2020: 13\)](#). These vulnerabilities include feelings of discrimination, oppression and injustice that lead to resentment towards governments ([UN Women 2020: 48](#)). This situation is illustrated by a United Nations Development Programme study which identified unemployment 'as the single most immediate need faced at the time of joining extremist groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab' in Africa ([Fried *et al.* 2020: 17](#)).

On 2 November 2021, while this article was being prepared, a televised news item featured fishermen in the coastal Kenyan town of Lamu who were protesting about the confiscation of their fishing nets for violating prescribed standards. They asked the government how it expected them to make a living, when it had taken away their means of earning a livelihood. The clear but implicit message was that they had an alternative option in neighbouring Somalia, where they could join Al-Shabaab. The palpable anger and desperation in the men's voices were signs that resentment of government can catalyse people's movement into extremist groups.

In short, extremist groups become attractive because they fill a void left by governments that are unable to create employment, protect citizens and provide services. Closely related to the frustration these issues cause is the search for belonging by men

who feel alienated. A study on rural youth in Bangladesh shows that young men who leave their villages and go to towns for university education encounter a lifestyle in which their rural upbringing is demeaned as primitive. Extremist groups exploit this crisis by providing ‘an apparently safe space (for) validation of their rural practices’ and promising to make them ‘real’ men (Rahman 2020: 56). A similar appeal to ‘a sense of brotherhood, belonging and power’ also attracted men to violent extremist groups in Indonesia and the Philippines (UN Women 2020: 38), and evidence from Jordan and Syria also shows that the quest for inclusion and belonging, driven by peer influence, has pushed youth into violent extremism. Fried *et al.* (2020: 16) summarise the dynamic when they note that ‘especially [for] young men who are ostracised or marginalised, a violent extremist group provides ... a space that satisfies the essential human need for connection’.

The message arising from these studies is that the alienation of young men is being instrumentalised by extremist groups that offer solace in return for allegiance. In the broader scheme of things, this finding demonstrates that solidarity around ideology and identity is operating as a driving force in men’s recruitment into violent extremist organisations.

Ideological and family-based solidarity

The literature reviewed here identifies two levers that are being used to galvanise solidarity and recruit men, primarily, but also women, into violent extremist groups. The first lever is protest ideology, while the second is familial solidarity, and both are intertwined in the web of gender norms at the levels of family and society.

UN Women (2020) noted that Islamist extremist groups in Indonesia supported conservative practices that harmed women, such as polygamy, bride wealth and honour-based violence, by equating these activities with resistance to Western influence. The implicit goal was to form a coalition against the perceived onslaught on traditional Indonesian culture by modernity. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, extremist groups equated gender equality with Westernisation and moral decadence. They promoted an alternative concept of ‘gender complementarity’ that assigned men and women specific and fixed roles in which the former were heads of families, providers and protectors, while the latter were nurturers and caregivers (UN Women 2020: 41). Extremist groups also projected images of ‘perfect (traditional) romantic relationships’ between the men and women in the group to entice recruits (Johnston & True 2019: 6). Young men in rural Bangladesh were specifically indoctrinated into adopting hard-line and violent practices, which were clothed as resistance to ‘Western’ liberal ideas about gender norms promoted by non-governmental organisations (UNDP & UN Women 2020: 69). The strategy was to romanticise and idealise

men's traditional supremacy over women. The power of such appeals was evident in Indonesia, where more men (32 per cent) than women (23 per cent) thought regressive gender ideology motivated men to join violent extremist groups (Rahman 2020). Similarly, the 'recruitment messaging of violent extremist groups in Libya appeal[ed] to men's sense of masculine dominance over women as fighters, breadwinners, and decision-makers' (Johnston & True 2019: 9). The message here is that if extremism promises to, and actually does, enable men to retain and perpetuate their traditional dominance over women, they readily join violent groups and become allies in sustaining conservatism.

Extremist/masculinist standpoints have also become manifest in the actions of far-right activists in Australia. Lewis *et al.* (2017: 8) note that these activists promote what they call 'heroic' and 'salvational masculine violence', which offers its proponents the opportunity to "save" the world, culture, nation, or the purity of religion through the exercise of violence and exclusivism'. These far-right groups have unilaterally assumed the responsibility for defending the Australian nation from perceived Islamic oppression of women and sanctioned their own use of violence to fulfil their self-conferred obligation. This approach draws on the traditional notion of the nation as 'masculine, aggressive, powerful and culturally monadic' (Norocel 2010: 172). The type of dichotomised worldview promoted by Australian far-right groups has also been commonly used among Islamist groups. In Bangladesh, for example, these types of groups have propagated an ideology based on binaries of good or evil, right or wrong, and Islamic or un-Islamic behaviours, which they have confounded with existing gender norms (Rahman 2020), so that notions of conservatism, exclusion and masculinity became self-reinforcing.

These findings show that conservatism fosters a double-barrelled backlash against the perceived threats represented by emasculation and alien norms, one which allows extremist groups to project their adherents as valiant and powerful men. Extremist groups also capitalise on family solidarity to recruit members. In Libya, for example, 'women who are subordinate to and/or dependent on male relatives who (were) members of violent extremist groups (were) likely to be recruited by those relatives' (Johnston & True 2019: 5). Thus, they were drawn into a web where they felt permanently bonded to their husbands due to financial insecurity as well as fear of the stigma that would arise from divorce or separation. Familial relationships were also crucial in mobilising men in Morocco, where male recruits were deployed to conscript female relatives and online images promoted the idea that extremist fighters were authentic and ideal Muslim men in order to appeal to women's sentimentality (Johnston & True 2019: 5). In summary, extremist groups in Libya and Morocco appealed to masculinities and femininities for recruitment and manipulated these notions for group control.

The importance of family solidarity was reiterated in the [UN Women \(2020\)](#) report, which established that the presence of a male relative (spouse, father, brother or other) in extremist groups in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines was one of the reasons behind the successful recruitment of women. In Indonesia, women's recruitment was reportedly bolstered by the belief that 'wives ought to obey husbands in nearly all circumstances' ([UN Women 2020](#): 31).

It is evident from the studies explored here that men in extremist groups play a significant role in recruiting female relatives, which is a replication of the traditional gendered order in which the former provide leadership and direction. A critical dimension of recruitment concerns the role of religion and religious actors. While some literature points to the direct involvement of religious leaders in radicalising male youth towards recruitment, other research regards religious factors as less significant. [Rahman \(2020\)](#) is categorical that religious leaders play a central role in constructing masculinities in support of violence at home and its collective use through violent extremism. The assumption here is that religious leaders inculcate rigid gender norms informed by hegemonic patriarchy, and this behaviour is replicated by extremists who are intolerant of divergent opinions and readily enforce their own through violence. This religious influence on recruitment can be so subtle that it is often hard to detect. For instance, Yemeni women confessed that they found it difficult to recognise warning signs about their sons' progress into extremist groups because they thought that the children were 'merely becoming more religious', a change they considered positive ([Carter 2013](#), citing [SAVE 2010](#)). [Fried et al. \(2020\)](#) are among those who discount religiosity as a factor in recruitment for violent extremist groups, even though they acknowledge that recruiters peddle religious doctrine to justify masculine norms. This difference in opinion indicates the need to investigate the religious dynamic further.

Despite these differences, the findings indicate that violent extremism cannot be tackled decisively by focusing on the individual alone, without targeting the family as well. They also show that the individual and collective actors promoting violent extremism operate through multiple interlocking platforms, such as the family, community and religion. Furthermore, men emerge as the primary ideologues, recruiters and mobilisers for extremist groups. These findings further underline the need to explore the psychology of young people, considering that this is where indoctrination occurs. A strand in the literature also indicates that, while radicalisation is a precursor to men enlisting in violent extremist groups, the militarisation of young men, and associations with militant culture and exposure to militant imagery, also help to propel them towards violent extremism.

Militarisation

The militarisation of men has been identified as a contributing factor to violent extremism. In Syria, where ISIS thrives, martial education is mainstreamed in the school curriculum and military leadership is glorified. In Libya, the haphazard demobilisation and reintegration of former soldiers has created a cadre that can easily deploy its skills in extremist groups (Fried *et al.* 2020), and similar mobilisation occurs in Western countries through the glorification of violence in the mass media and popular culture – a trend that extremist groups replicate in their messages when appealing for recruits. In the Philippines, ‘men engaged in violent extremism often define their masculinity in relation to other men, and particularly those in the national military’ (Caravaggio & Davis 2020: 4). In cases such as these, militarism and extremism become mechanisms for acquiring authority and status. This insight reinforces this study’s earlier findings that men’s clamour for power, influence and supremacy is a key driving force in their mobilisation into violent extremist groups.

In a case study from the southern Philippines, Duriesmith (2020) notes that militarism was one of the most reliable pathways to status and belonging, particularly for young men who were facing exclusion from education and employment, restricted movement, humiliation at checkpoints and constant scrutiny from the state. Joining a militant group offered these young men meaningful avenues to regaining a sense of their own significance and proving their manhood.

‘Exaggeration’ emerges as another pathway to manhood under material conditions where other avenues have been blocked (Duriesmith 2020).¹ For example, when ‘an offense committed against a man that shames (*sipug*) him results in a reduced self-image’ it creates potential for conflict as the offended person seeks to restore personal and collective honour (Duriesmith 2020: 23), and this represents an opportunity for violent extremist groups. This resonates with findings in Lewis *et al.* (2017: 45) on how far-right organisations in Australia justified violence as a legitimate means of protecting the country, its values and its way of life from perceived Islamic gender-based violence against women.

In summary, a militant masculine mentality is clearly instrumental in the identification of extremist groups as legitimate fighters for a cause, a fact that resonates with this study’s earlier findings that ideology plays a role in driving violent extremism. So far, the highlighted themes have concerned direct recruitment methods, but the literature reviewed also unveiled an additional unique and subtle recruitment method, as described below.

¹ ‘Exaggeration exists when a mainstream narrative or norm is adopted but taken substantially further in its brutality or intensity’ (Duriesmith 2020: 12).

Inversion

‘Inversion’ refers to something that is done contrary to the norm in order to stimulate conventional behaviour. Essentially, as [Caravaggio & Davis \(2020: 7\)](#) explain, it enables extremists to ‘manipulate and instrumentalise existing gender power structures and cultural narratives within communities to validate their actions’. One manifestation of this tactic involves deploying women suicide bombers to shame men into participating in extremist groups ([Carter 2013](#), citing [Bloom 2007](#)). Another inversion tactic involves the sexual violation of women, with the aim of stigmatising them into joining extremist groups and making them easier to exploit ([Carter 2013](#); [True & Eddyono 2017](#); [Brown 2018](#); [True 2020](#)). For example, in Sri Lanka, women survivors of sexual violence opted for terrorism because the social disgrace arising from this type of experience precluded them from participating in marriage and motherhood ([Carter 2013](#)).

Inversion arises from a very nuanced strategy in which rape – typically, an expression of power relations by the perpetrator – is used to produce embarrassment, which helps to push women into extremist groups. The tragedy is that this type of violation continues even during women’s lives within extremist groups, where examples of their treatment include sexual slavery within ISIS and forced marriage in Al-Shabaab ([Fried *et al.* 2020](#)). While these groups claim to be protectors of women, they are essentially misogynistic. Inversion, therefore, allows men, paradoxically, to identify as both protectors of women and enforcers of traditional gender norms that situate women as subordinate and targets of sexual violence.

As the above findings make clear, the main concern of studies on masculinities and violent extremism tends to be to establish whether or not there is a verifiable link between the two phenomena. Emerging evidence suggests that while this link exists and cannot be decoupled from men’s socialisation, it is complex and needs to be deconstructed. A useful causality framework outlined by [Fried *et al.* \(2020: 13\)](#) attempts to unpack the link by identifying five processes ‘that influence the likelihood that men will participate in ... multiple forms of violence, including violent extremism’. First is the desire and propulsion to achieve socially recognised manhood, which drives motives that revolve around the self and a need to realise a prescribed identity ([Ezekilov 2017](#)), though the idea that this proves the existence of a causal link between masculinities and violent extremism is contested by [Kluch & Vaux \(2015\)](#) and [Allan *et al.* \(2015\)](#). Second is the policing of masculine performance, a process that sees men judged by certain criteria that determine whether or not they are successful and masculine. This form of surveillance pushes men into specific forms of behaviour to prove themselves. Third is “‘gendering” the heart’, men’s socialisation to suppress emotion and thus display immunity to their own pain and that of others. Logically, this process yields sadism and the ability to perpetrate violence

without guilt, which echoes what [Kaufman \(1999\)](#) refers to as the psychic armour of manhood.² The fourth process involves the construction of identity through spaces dominated by men, such as police and military forces, as well as criminal gangs, that replicate masculinities considered attractive by men who yearn for power and supremacy. Fifth is re-enforcement of patriarchal power over women, as well as other men, through mechanisms such as joining extremist groups in order to exercise unfettered control over people's lives. Taken together, these five elements suggest that proclivity to violent extremism, like gender, is socially constructed and performed through self- and externally driven processes, and, just as the construction of gender is contributed to by multiple agents, extremist violence is also created by several drivers. Two broad methodological approaches to researching masculinities and violent extremism emerge from the literature review, and each of them is elaborated on in the next section.

Researching masculinities and violent extremism

The two approaches to researching masculinities and violent extremism deciphered from the literature review focus, respectively, on contextualisation and localisation, and the development of potential conceptual frameworks for use in research.

Contextualising and localising research on masculinities

[Caravaggio & Davis \(2020\)](#) highlight the need for a relational and contextual understanding of masculinities in settings where violent extremism flourishes. They argue that rigid, generalised models of gender identity, such as 'toxic masculinity', should be avoided. This standpoint echoes [Duriesmith's \(2020\)](#) view that correlations between masculinity and violent extremism that have been largely developed in the Global North can lead to erroneous generalisations based on alien notions that do not pertain locally outside that arena.

A second strand in research that seeks to contextualise masculinities focuses on the portrayal of women and men by extremist groups. [Brown et al. \(2020\)](#), [Duriesmith \(2020\)](#) and [Rahman \(2020\)](#) all show that, while the role of men in violent extremism is magnified, that of women is deliberately downplayed by extremist groups and officialdom in order to sustain and reinforce the stereotype of masculine valour. Such cultural narratives depict men as martyrs and women as victims, and, by this means, violent extremism is masculinised. But this raises the following questions:

² See [Kaufman \(1999\)](#).

1. Is this a tactic to hoodwink society and thereby enable the use of women as underground actors?
2. Is it a practice, driven by denial, that seeks to maintain patriarchal ego and the interlocking frameworks on which men's authority across a society depends?
3. Is it a process of downplaying women's involvement in order to sustain men's hegemony?

A refreshing approach to the study of masculinities and violent extremism is that taken by Brown *et al.* (in [UNDP & UN Women, 2020](#)), who work from the standpoint that myths are meaning-making ways of rationalising reality. For instance, extremist groups in the Philippines not only created their own myths, they also appropriated existing ones that were aligned with their ideologies to legitimise their actions and causes. In this matrix, mythical characters clearly embody what is considered heroic or problematic, and their actions depict the values of the groups, including their views on the status of women versus that of men. These values include honour, loyalty, love and obedience for men, while women are often offered in these myths as rewards to heroic men, used as tricksters to beguile the enemy or depicted as villains. The myths' plots and settings feature extraordinary and extreme events and actions, including sacrifices, which endear the (male) heroes to the audiences and alienate the villains. The masculinities and femininities that are created are to be adopted and perpetuated as inviolable by virtue of the authority assigned by myths, which explains why heroes are rewarded while villains are punished and discredited.

The myth constructed around the Jabitah Massacre of 1968 is about the Islamic Moro of the Philippines and their struggle against domination by the Christian state. Their struggle is represented as a quest for self-governance pursued through an armed uprising which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s via the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and, later, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). According to popular myth, between 12 and 68 soldiers of Moro descent were killed by military commanders on 18 March 1968 on the island of Corregidor off Manila, having been duped and conscripted into efforts to reclaim the Sabah region from Malaysia.

The 'massacre' is mythologised to serve three functions: it provides a specific point of origin for state violence against the Moro; it sets the Moro apart as a distinct ethno-religious community oppressed by Christians and fake Muslim converts; and it helps to justify the resistance and recruitment of the Moro to defend themselves and challenge injustice. The myth helps to simplify and clarify the Moro struggle and serves as a powerful means to mobilise ethnic sentiment, much in the same way that Black consciousness became a rallying call against racism and Irish literary revival

was energised by nationalistic pride and achieved through the re-rendition of Gaelic legends.

The myth features a belle called Safiya. Her naivety is taken advantage of by Martelino, a man who feigns conversion to Islam in order to marry her. Safiya symbolises the bridge by which men's social integration occurs, in the same way that brides in traditional African communities were exchanged as a sign of peace and in order to normalise relations after warfare, although those women were also used as spies for their own communities. Safiya also represents the pristine territory which is the subject of contestation, while Martelino is the obvious villain who disrespects women and, symbolically, the Moro.

In the second myth, which focuses on the battle of Marawi, the role of Farhana Maute, a woman who finances the insurgent group, is downplayed by the violent extremist organisations as part of a deliberate strategy not to 'disrupt gender stereotypes, particularly with audiences beyond the Philippines that may have trouble comprehending the matriarchal structures that exist in parts of the country' (Brown *et al.* 2020: 40). This deliberate distortion of reality is a move that seeks to masculinise violent extremism. Not only does it obscure Maute's role, and, by extension, the agency of women, it also gives prominence to men as the principal actors in the insurgency, thus reinforcing the stereotype of men's agency.

Analysis of both myths reveals that they have been constructed to support a set of distinct gender identities, and that women's roles are denied and even denigrated within this framework. In these myths, women are objectified and instrumentalised to support what men perceive to be their own goals. The masculinisation of history through mythification emerges as a subtle strategy by which patriarchal notions and practices are sustained by extremist groups.

The uses of these myths demonstrate the need to contextualise and localise studies on violent extremism, especially given their divergence from the classical Western myth pattern, where the hero survives and returns home. In these Asian myths, the hero often dies, though this is only in the physical sense. Spiritually, they gain a higher status in paradise, a reward that symbolically subverts the apparent victory of their killers and confers a sense of divinity on these men and their masculinities. This is contiguous with Duriesmith's (2020) finding about the intransigence of suspected terrorists who refused to seek pardons, even as their execution dates drew closer, and instead perceived their impending elimination as a form of martyrdom which would confer hero status and immortality on them. The mythologisation process puts extremist men on a moral pedestal because it allows them to be depicted as iconic figures who are pursuing an ideal and pure world.

The mentality here is unconventional. Death is seen not as a loss but as a justified sacrifice; the eliminator of the martyr is situated as an instrument of infamy rather

than a victor; death does not instil fear but instead inspires the next generation of fighters; and belief in the divine call to fight for justice is so compelling that it elevates the actions of extremists from earthly pursuits to divine quests.

In essence, then, myths define a higher and more abstract ambition than the pursuit of material welfare. It is therefore vital that studies of masculinities and violent extremism go beyond the investigation of material motivations to analyse the abstract ideas that are the software driving violent extremism. Analysis of the abstract is key because myths play such an important role in the ways men are socialised into their missions as individuals, family and community members, national citizens and global actors. Given that not all men turn out to be violent, even when they have been socialised in the same context as others, individual differences are central to understanding masculinities and violent extremism. It is therefore imperative to pay attention to microscopic differences in men's socialisation as well as the broader factors that influence them.

Generalising about men again emerges as a folly. Labelling men as toxic is not only judgmental, it is also biased by the standards of the one applying the label. Extremist men perceive the acts of violence they commit as being driven by genuine grievances. The analogy of freedom struggles against colonialism in Africa comes to mind: while colonialists regarded the insurgents as terrorists, the colonised saw themselves as freedom fighters, and treating them as terrorists did not address the core problem that informed their actions. This insight suggests that the logic that underpins the existence and violence of extremist groups needs to be analysed and addressed, alongside the individual motivations already outlined in this article. To elaborate on how such studies can be conducted, three conceptual frameworks are set out below. Two of these models have been developed by the author, and one has been adopted from an existing model.

Potential conceptual frameworks for researching masculinities and violent extremism

Three models that can be used to study masculinities and violent extremism have been derived from the literature reviewed in this study: the first is a framework for understanding categories of violent extremism; the second is an ecological model; and the third is a framework that accounts for relevant 'push and pull' factors. These frameworks can be applied in isolation or in combination, depending on the focus and theme of the study a researcher undertakes. The three models are summarised below.

A framework for categories of violent extremism

Angus (2016) identifies three broad categories of violent extremism – ideological, issue-based and ethno-nationalist/separatist – and his typology can be applied in a general analysis of the subject, as well as in studies that examine how violent extremism links

with masculinities. The ideological type of extremism involves pursuit of a collective nationalistic/political or religious goal and tends to be conservative, authoritarian and coercive in character. Issue-based extremism is understood to be grounded in a specific cause and is generally peaceful, but it can resort to violence to increase attention and accelerate action. Meanwhile, the ethno-nationalist/separatist model brings together ‘groups or individuals involved in violent political or independence struggles based on race, culture or ethnic background’ (Angus 2016: 3). While the overlaps that can arise in this classification system will not be dwelt on here, this conceptualisation usefully clarifies that violent extremism is driven by one grievance/cause or another, and the model suggests that extremists are generally seeking attention and/or change (Figure 1 provides a graphical illustration of this model’s configuration).

This framework places grievance at the centre of all categories of violent extremism, and it illustrates that each category links with the others in some respects. For example, an extremist group fighting for self-determination may be regarded as ethno-nationalist, but it will certainly be driven by an issue (marginalisation, for instance) and an ideology (equality). It all depends on how one defines these terms. This framework can be used effectively in research that examines the drivers of violent extremism as independent or conjoined variables. For example, it supports enquiry into questions about how economic effects on men contribute to violent extremism and whether and how these factors might be solidified by radical ideology, gender

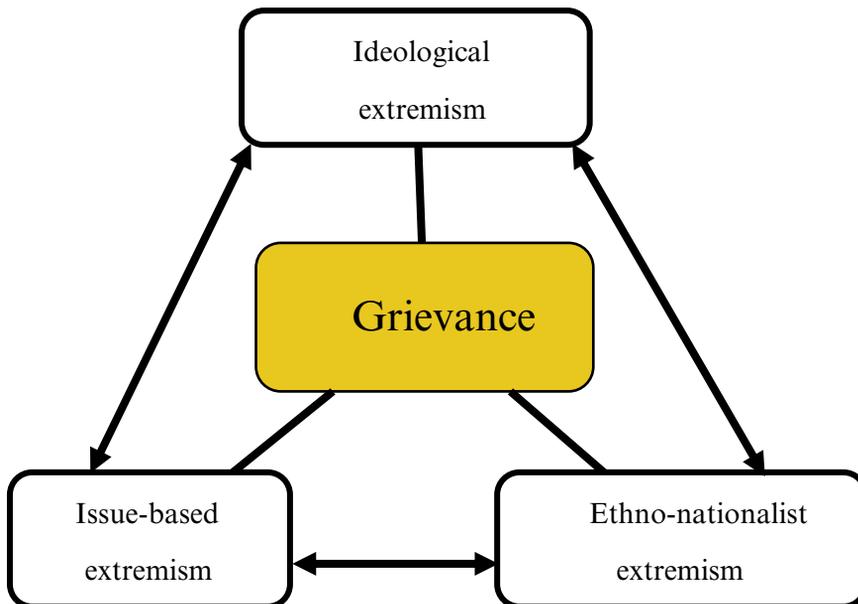


Figure 1. A framework for categories of violent extremism
(Source: Author, based on Angus 2016).

norms and militarisation. The ecological model provides another possible approach to organising research at various analytical levels, from the individual to the societal.

The ecological model

The assumption that the links between masculinities and violent extremism can be examined at micro, meso and macro levels is evident in [Allan *et al.* \(2015\)](#) and [Fried *et al.* \(2020\)](#). The ecological model set out here is derived from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework for human development, which was pioneered in the 1970s and developed into a systematic theory in the 1980s ([Harkonen 2007](#)). It posits that human development is affected by the entire cosmos in which one grows, including factors at individual, micro, meso and macro levels, and so analysis needs to take all of them into account. These levels and their relationships are illustrated in [Figure 2](#).

Factors at the individual level that can be related to violent extremism include attitude formation, religious indoctrination, exposure to and normalisation of violence in the domestic sphere, and perpetration of intimate partner violence. Family (micro-) and community (meso-) level factors reinforce individual ones and are consolidated through socialisation into what it means to be a man, which can solidify beliefs in violence, even if it is extreme. Structural (macro-level) factors then become the triggers that propel individuals towards specific types of action, such as joining violent

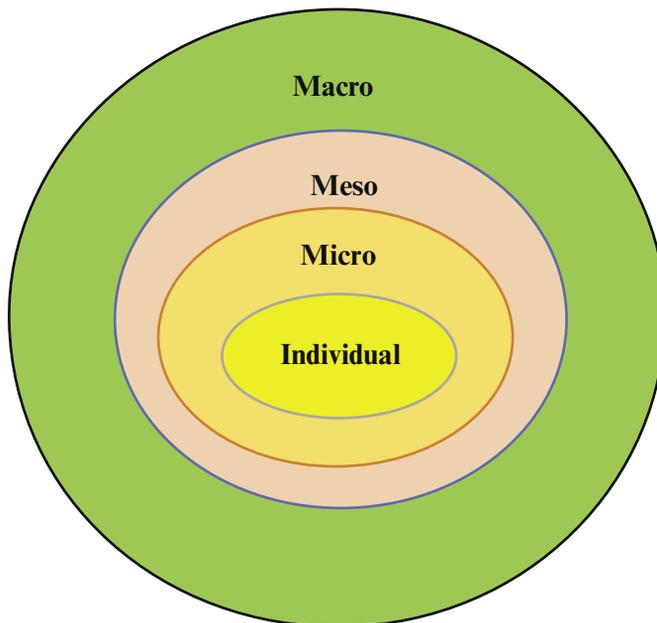


Figure 2. Ecological model (Derived from [Bronfenbrenner 1994](#))

extremist groups. The ecological model may be useful for showing how hierarchical factors that affect the creation of masculinities link with violent extremism. It may also provide helpful ways to identify entry points for initiatives seeking to prevent and/or respond to the vice.

A framework for 'push and pull' factors

Ezekilov (2017) posits that mapping the factors that push and pull individuals from society into and out of extremist groups is a useful way of isolating the conditions that lead to men's radicalisation. Hassan (2012) defines push factors as negative elements in one's 'societal environment', among which can figure a lack of economic opportunities in forms such as unemployment and a person's inability to provide for themselves and family. Barker (2005) identifies the lack of economic options as a significant element in emasculation and one that can catalyse the urge to join an extremist group. Hassan (2012) cites the example of former Al-Shabaab fighters in Somalia who confessed to having been motivated to join the group so as to enhance their ability to be self-reliant. Social marginalisation, arising from factors including race, age, religion, ethnicity or any other social identity, is also identified as a push factor (Jasko *et al.* 2017).

Conversely, 'pull' factors are the perceived positive features of extremist groups that attract men towards them. They include a sense of belonging, derived through an appeal to a common identity, and shared causes and joint goals, which can include the defence of identity, religion, territory and values (Bannon & Correia 2006; Aslam 2012; Khader *et al.* 2016). In this scheme, quests for power, status and honour in society, and among women, are also classified as pull factors (Hassan 2012), as Figure 3 illustrates.

The ecological model presupposes a direct correlation between push and pull factors – a push factor will not be presumed to be meaningful unless there is a corresponding

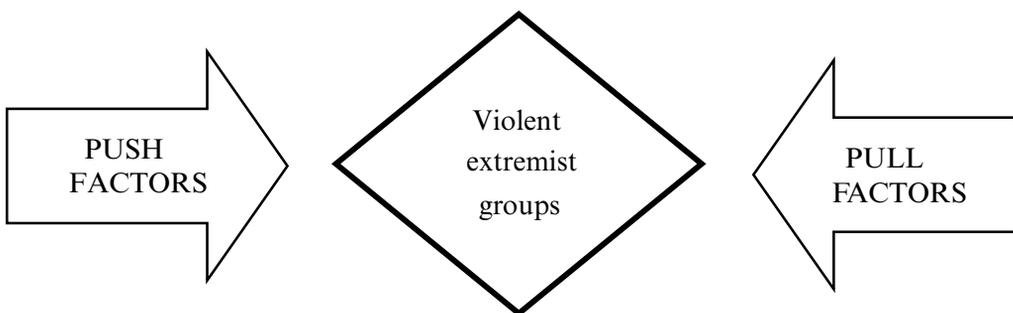


Figure 3. A framework for 'push and pull' factors

(Source: Author).

pull factor. For example, unemployed men without a means of earning a living (push) will only be attracted by a reliable and assured promise of employment and income (pull). The inability to be self-reliant, which fuels people's perception of themselves as failures (push), must correspond with an assurance of a sustained source of income and improved socio-economic status (pull). Marginalisation, alienation and a lack of a sense of belonging (push) must, according to this view, correspond with the promise of a sense of community (pull). And if diminished prospects of marriage due to poverty and low socio-economic status make affected men feel emasculated (push), the corresponding pull would be definite access to brides and the ability to sustain the family (pull).

This analytical model can be used to evaluate active and reformed violent extremists. It would also be important to establish whether one pair of push and pull factors is adequate to compel movement to an extremist group or if more sets are needed to reach a tipping point. Additionally, it would be helpful to establish whether the 'pull' promises made by extremist groups are actually fulfilled, as this may explain how they sustain recruitment. From a programmatic perspective, this might also help to identify preventive actions that could be taken to counter candidate recruitment efforts, even though this type of action may risk creating a blackmail culture in which the society is held to ransom by potential extremists. For example, an insurgent group called the Mombasa Republican Council, formed in 1999, threatened to establish an independent state because the region had been systematically marginalised politically and economically by successive governments in Kenya. It agitated using the slogan 'Pwani si Kenya' (The coast is not part of Kenya) (Kivoto 2012). The group was linked to sporadic violence against civilians in the coastal region and associated with terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab. If the government acceded to their demands, it is possible that more disgruntled groups would similarly call for secession or use violence to draw attention to their grievances.

Conclusions and recommendations

This article has offered a broad overview of insights emerging from literature on masculinities and violent extremism. Across the globe, violent extremism is largely perpetrated by men, and much of the reviewed research shares the view that the vice cannot be attributed to one or even a few causes. Instead, the literature identifies a complex range of isolating factors that lead individuals into violent extremism. Nevertheless, there are recurring themes that help to shed light on what facilitates recruitment into extremist groups.

Whichever way studies explore the subject of the links between masculinities and violent extremism, they invariably link causal factors to the ways boys and men are

socialised and the pressures on them to fulfil expectations of manhood. Central to these processes of socialisation are specific actors who must be the locus of studies due to their roles in transmitting beliefs, ideologies, philosophies, practices and attitudes in support of violent extremism. Such persons include religious and school teachers. This exploration of socialisation mechanisms will require a concurrent analysis of the individuals involved and their operational contexts with a primary focus on influential actors.

In terms of the structural factors that potentiate extremism, it is imperative to think not only of pull and push factors but also about the mediating or catalytic elements that can trigger people's move into extremist groups. For example, where a lack of employment and economic opportunities is a push factor and the promise of high salaries constitutes a pull, the pressure family members exert on men can be the mediating factor that seals a decision to move. All the elements that form part of a candidate's decision-making process must be addressed simultaneously in order for violent extremism to be addressed in a meaningful way.

As this article has illustrated, the manipulation of masculinities and femininities for recruitment purposes is informed and perpetuated by an underlying patriarchal ideology and normative framework. A few recommendations are floated here with a view to informing further research on the subject. Firstly, it is notable that studies on masculinities and violent extremism largely rely on secondary data, although primary studies have recently emerged, frequently based on case studies from Asia and North Africa. This points to a need for extensive primary research to generate incontrovertible evidence on the causal link between the two phenomena. Secondly, the confluence of broad ideological and more mundane concerns suggests that push and pull factors should be plotted on a continuum. This process will require detailed localised studies that can then be used as the basis for generalisation and theorisation. Such studies should be interdisciplinary. Thirdly, a fundamental question remains as to whether or not a groundswell of studies on masculinities and violent extremism will root out the problem. This scepticism arises from the observation that, while a large volume of research has been conducted on the relationship between patriarchy and gender-based violence, that violence remains prevalent, and, although researchers have reached a consensus on the link between masculinities and violent extremism, few practical and actionable suggestions for strategic interventions have been implemented to change the picture on the ground.

Based on the findings from the literature review, the following questions are proposed as the basis for further research that could contribute to the type of real-world solutions that are urgently needed:

1. What role do individual differences play in explaining why some men join extremist groups and others, in the same situations, do not?

2. To what extent is religiosity a factor in promoting violent extremism?
3. To what extent are initiatives that seek to prevent and counter violent extremism addressing the root causes of the vice?
4. How does downplaying women's roles help the cause of violent extremists?
5. Which specific men in families (e.g. fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, cousins and/or grandfathers) wield influence over the recruitment of female members?
6. Does the presence of a female relative in an extremist group also give men in their families a reason to join?
7. What is the role of women, as primary caregivers, in constructing masculinities that lead to violent extremism?

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To cite the article: Miruka, O. (2023), 'Key insights into masculinities and violent extremism from a brief literature review', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 103–128.
<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.103>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism among Muslim women in Kenya

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Abstract: Islamic feminism is a budding ideology in Kenya that conservative Muslims perceive as a distortion of pure Islam. Despite its prospects for empowering Muslim women, its utility for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is largely unexplored, and security agencies and non-governmental organisations prefer to engage with mainstream patriarchal Islamic ideologies that reinforce the gender vulnerabilities Al-Shabaab successfully exploits to engage women in violent extremism. This study draws on research conducted with Muslim clerics, scholars, women's associations, feminists, government officials, and female returnees in Nairobi and Mombasa counties to demonstrate that Al-Shabaab is exploiting traditional gender constructions including marriage, sisterhood, motherhood and women's religious obligations to recruit, radicalise and exploit women. While Islamic feminism exposes and contests gender inequalities, it remains unpopular, is often dismissed as secular, and meets resistance from both extremists and moderate Muslims, and therefore further studies are needed to validate its rightful role within Islam.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, P/CVE, Al-Shabaab, gender constructions, sisterhood, motherhood

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Introduction

The use of Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is predicated on the understanding that power relations between men and women define their social organisation and therefore a gendered lens is an essential tool of analysis. Gendered and Islamic feminist approaches share a common perspective, even though they remain distinct in many ways. Gendered perspectives are simply approaches that require the use of a gender lens in the process of analysis, while Islamic feminism is a movement and an ideological standpoint with a methodology and objectives that seek to promote gender equality through the re-interpretation of Islamic religious texts. Islamic feminism seeks to clarify misconceptions and cultural practices misconstrued as religious that are used to subjugate women in society. In this study, Islamic feminism is given credence as a P/CVE strategy because of its ability to generate ideological responses that can be used as counter-narratives and strategies to obliterate the gender vulnerabilities exploited by violent extremist groups.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the world has witnessed a series of new waves of Islamic violent extremism in the last three decades, partly because of the resilience that Islamic extremist groups have demonstrated in exploiting the inadequacies of states' counterterrorism measures (UNDP 2017). At a global level, states' failures to treat gender as an integral part of counterterrorism strategies, despite the increasing number of women in both combat and support roles, has weakened their counterterrorism measures. Terrorist groups, including more conservative ones such as Al-Shabaab, have long realised the tactical and operational advantages of using women, and so they have changed their stances to become more permissive about women's engagement in front-line roles and combat. Given this shift, the failure of counterterrorism measures to account for women has partly contributed to the exponential growth of women's participation in terrorism in the last two decades (Bloom 2011; Spencer 2016).

The Global Terrorism Index 2019 shows that, between 1985 and 2013, women were involved in at least 300 suicide attacks that were carried out by terrorist groups (Institute for Economics and Peace 2019). This number increased by 450 per cent between 2013 and 2018, with Boko Haram accounting for 80 per cent of these attacks. Female involvement in combat roles also went up by more than 200 per cent in the same period (Institute for Economic Peace 2019). In 2017, women constituted 26 per cent of all of those arrested on terrorism charges in Europe, registering an 8 per cent increase from the previous year (Bigio & Vogelstein 2019). In Syria, women accounted for 13 per cent of the Islamic State's foreign recruits, the majority of whom came from the Middle East and North Africa or the Asia-Pacific region (Institute for Economic

Peace 2019). The UNDP (2017) has estimated that women form about 17 per cent of terrorism's new recruits in Africa, while the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate estimates that women currently constitute 10 to 15 per cent of the membership of terrorist groups globally (CTED 2019).

In Kenya, while there is no disaggregated data on the number of women engaged in Islamic violent extremism, security and media reports indicate that Al-Shabaab has intensified the recruitment, radicalisation and use of women in both support and front-line roles. In January 2020, security agencies in Kenya arrested five terrorism suspects, including two women believed to be on a reconnaissance mission in preparation for an attack on a popular night spot in the country's capital (Agutu 2020). Similarly, in the 2019 DusitD2 attack in Nairobi, the mission's mastermind, Salim Gichunge, was assisted in planning the attack by his wife, Violent Kemunto, alias Khadija (Cherono 2020). Another terror attack involving women occurred in 2016 when three women attacked Mombasa Central Police Station. Accounts of some of these young women indicate that gender constructs were exploited in their motivation and recruitment and their decisions to remain in or leave Al-Shabaab. However, the roles, motivations and status of women in violent extremist movements remain under-researched (Bloom 2011; Fink *et al.* 2013).

The cultural stereotypes or biases that portray women as victims rather than perpetrators of terrorism have undermined efforts to understand the role and status of women in violent extremism. Furthermore, very few studies have focused on understanding how religious justifications for gender roles intersect with extremism, even though they represent a cataclysmic force in the recruitment, retention and deployment of women in Islamic violent extremist groups. Gaps in understanding arising from a lack of empirical information have made existing P/CVE strategies ineffective at curbing women's participation in violent extremism. Meanwhile, the UN's recommendations on the integration and mainstreaming of gender in member states' National Plans of Actions on counterterrorism, particularly in areas of strategy development, training and analysis, remain either neglected or unimplemented. Only Switzerland had managed to fully implement the UN recommendations by 2017 (Fransen *et al.* 2017).

In Africa, the formulation and implementation of P/CVE strategies remains at a nascent stage, and several countries have been struggling with problems generated by legislative and institutional frameworks, as well as problems arising from limited financial support and technical capacities to support their strategy or policy documents. In East Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are yet to formulate and adopt policy documents on CVE (United States Department of State 2019), and, while countries such as Kenya and Somalia have formulated policies that recognise the importance of gender dimensions and gender equality as strategies in P/CVE, they have not provided any specific recommendations to be followed (Fransen *et al.* 2017).

The limited availability of ethnographic work on the roles of women in violent extremism has left researchers dependent on secondary data and theoretical speculations that are often based on subjective interpretations of unreliable observations (Brugh *et al.* 2019; Bloom 2011). Jackson *et al.* (2011) have therefore called for a systematic study of violent extremism with a view of providing in-depth knowledge on the status of women and gender. Bloom (2011) has also called for empirical studies that go beyond simplistic understandings of the motivations and roles of women in violent extremism, further giving credence to the importance of a gendered perspective. This article examines the prospect of using Islamic feminism as an alternative P/CVE strategy to counter Al-Shabaab in Kenya. The study focuses on Al-Shabaab, which is considered to be an Islamic violent extremist group and the biggest terrorism threat in Eastern Africa. Striegher (2015) defines a violent extremist group as one which has an ideology that is permissive about the use of violence in pursuance of socio-political and religious objectives. Al-Shabaab qualifies as an Islamic violent extremist group because its members use Islamic ideology to rationalise their use of violent practices and beliefs.

The first section of the article reviews a selection of relevant literature and draws attention to the gaps in existing P/CVE measures and the importance of integrating gender perspectives, as well as considering the evolution of women in violent extremism, and particularly their roles, motivations and status in terrorist groups. The second part of the article elaborates on the contribution that Islamic feminism can make as a theoretical framework and as a source of counter-narratives that can be used to prevent and counter violent extremism.

Literature review

Islamic extremism thrives on the use of Islam as a political ideology and as a source of law and public policy. Proponents of Islamic extremism essentially seek to Islamise every aspect of social life with what is perceived as authentic Islamic values (Othman 2006). Women are often the first target of Islamisation by violent extremist groups, who regard the control of women, their social roles, movements and sexuality as the embodiment of a pristine Islamic society (Othman 2006). As a result of this worldview, when these groups reclaim or take control of new territory, their actions often begin with stripping women of their rights and freedoms, which are perceived as unwarranted, including their freedom of movement and their rights to public participation, education and economic empowerment (Langholtz 2021).

Needless to say, the status of women in Islamic violent extremist groups is largely determined by each group's ideology, decrees and historical practices, as well as its

affiliation to global jihadist groups. It therefore follows that different groups have different rules that relate to women's behaviour, roles, positions and commitments. For example, while Hamas has commissioned a female battalion, al-Qaeda has remained rather conservative in the roles it allows for women, confining them to the care of homes and families. Conversely, Boko Haram has no reservations about using women and has been responsible for the highest number of female suicide bombings conducted by any terrorist group in history (*The Economist* 2018). It is worth noting that women's involvement in violent extremism, referred to hereafter as jihad, is recognised in the Quran and *hadith*, as well as in Muslim traditions. However, even in the early days of Islam, women did not enjoy equal status with their male counterparts. In the Quran and *hadith*, women's participation in jihad is often represented as sanctioned or uncommon, and it was hardly the first option for women, who were often limited to supportive roles that involved them nursing or bringing food and water to the wounded on the battlefield and encouraging their sons, daughters and husbands into jihadism as a religious duty (Nelly 2014). The major shift in the status of women in violent extremist groups came in the 20th century, and it arose not from Islamic violent extremist groups but from secular extremist organisations that used women in the planning and delivery of operations, as well as the dissemination of terrorist propaganda. This marked a new dawn in which women were raised to positions of leadership, acted as combatants and field operatives, and were involved in ferrying weapons, driving getaway cars, setting bombs and carrying out arson attacks. These changes were evident in the operations of groups such as the Baader-Meinhof gang, Red Zora, the Basque separatist party ETA and the Irish Republican Army (Bloom 2017).

Yet, while roles for women increased, their status did not change, even when they became involved in national politics and liberation movements to fight for independence. For instance, the Algerian women who fought alongside and helped their male counterparts in the Battle of Algiers against the French were expected to return to the domestic sphere after independence. Similarly, in Somalia, women played a crucial role in the overthrow of the dictatorial government of Said Barre only to lose the legal status and equal rights that had previously been accorded to them when the state collapsed (Jama 2010). Ali (2006) contends that women's presence and participation has been instrumentalised by their male counterparts, with women benefitting less than men from liberation movements, regardless of their levels of participation or engagement in the respective conflicts or struggles.

Badurdeen (2018) describes women in terrorists' groups as expendable resources who remain denigrated, particularly in terrorist-controlled territories or camps. Their sacrifices are barely recognised, while their bodies are offered as rewards to men in return for the latter's piety and bravery. This positioning is enabled in part because radical Islamic ideologies largely situate women as rewards for men, both on earth and

in heaven, particularly when the men die through martyrdom. The violent commoditisation of women and girls is an essential element of the modus operandi of extremist groups; for example, Islamic State (IS) soldiers in Iraq became infamous for selling and using Yazidi women as sex slaves. Similarly, Boko Haram has been known to use women as bargaining chips in their dealings with the Nigerian government (Bloom 2013). Even when women die 'for the cause' as suicide bombers, the designation of martyrdom is not automatic but is carefully considered, while when men die for the same cause, martyrdom is assumed without question (Inch 2017).

Undoubtedly, the status of women has undergone some change in the last five decades. Bloom and Matfess (2016) note that women have become powerful symbols, weaponised by Islamic violent extremist groups (IVEGs), who oblige them to execute their missions and purposes. Not surprisingly, contemporary Islamic violent extremist groups, such as IS, have invested a lot of resources in efforts to attract and retain female recruits. IS has set up websites, blogs, magazines and online support systems for female recruits, as well as social media platforms for 'sisters' who wish to join the *mujahedeen*. This pattern has been replicated by conservative violent extremist groups including al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, which previously discouraged women's involvement in violent extremism but have now intensified female recruitment. Al-Qaeda has even established a jihadist female magazine, dubbed *Beituki*, that teaches female jihadists how to treat their husbands so as to live a good life (The Economist 2018).

Nevertheless, information on women's experiences and their changing roles in violent extremist groups remains not only scant and patchy but largely outside empirical studies, which have tended to downplay the utility of gender perspectives in the study of violent extremism. The use of gender perspectives in the study of violent extremism remains a topic of major debate in International Relations and Security Studies. Scholars have differed on the centrality of gender as a unit of analysis: pro-gender arguments aver that to understand the reasons behind men's and women's engagement in violent extremism, it is essential to understand the gender constructions – namely, gender identities, roles and behaviour – which are the drivers of the push and pull factors that affect involvement (Phelan 2020). This view is supported by Littleton (2016), who draws a line between violent extremism and masculinities, indicating that the sheer number of young men involved in extremism is either a manifestation of certain masculine values or an indication of changes in those values in society. This view is supported by Aslam (2014), who links religious masculinities among young Pakistanis to violent extremism. From an early age, males are trained in and indoctrinated into violence, which is represented as tolerable and justifiable, especially if it is undertaken in defence of one's honour, family and Islam (Bozkurt *et al.* 2015). Meanwhile, femininity in Islam is highly regulated, with Muslim girls being taught from an early age that they need to behave in a certain way and uphold certain values; namely, how to

be a good wife, mother and Muslim woman. These three roles represent the pinnacle of femininity in Islam and partly explain the significance of marriage and family to young Muslim women (Brown and Saeed 2015). It is notable that IVEGs have exploited these values to appeal to women and encourage their commitment to the group, mirroring their efforts to recruit and instil loyalty in men (Brown and Saeed 2015; Ndung'u & Shadung 2017).

Conversely, Allan *et al.* (2015) have dismissed the utility of gender constructions as mere conjecture, indicating that there is very little empirical evidence to link Muslim masculinities and femininities with violent extremism. This view is justified partly because information about gender constructions remains largely undocumented and inconclusive (Katz 2015). Critics also argue that the use of gender constructions by violent extremist groups in recruitment has not been sufficiently evaluated. Inch (2017) asserts that empirical studies on the motives, roles and status of women in IVEGs remain limited and inconclusive, while Ndung'u & Shadung (2017) point out that there are only a few studies linking gender to Islamic violent extremism and terrorism. Bloom (2011) asserts that many of the existing studies have failed to interrogate extensively the deeper motives and roles of women in violent extremist groups, which means that scholars have largely had to rely on media accounts, conjecture and unreliable scientific studies.

Dufour-Genneson & Alam (2014) claim that much of the evidence around gender constructions gathered to date is anecdotal and insufficient to form coherent policy. This is partly because the use of gender perspectives in the study of violent extremism is relatively new. Traditionally, terrorism has been fundamentally associated with men, and counterterrorism measures, including P/CVE, have inadvertently ignored the utility of gender perspectives in curbing violent extremism. Theuri (2013) affirms that P/CVE has evolved from hard security measures to multi-sectoral preventative and comprehensive approaches against violent extremism guided by three principles that seek, first, to identify the push factors that encourage violent extremism; second, to develop targeted interventions based on the identified factors; and third, to implement programmes designed for the individuals most vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation (Theuri 2013). These approaches are ordinarily structured to work at three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary level focuses on prevention at a societal level, mitigating the root causes of extremists' behaviour by addressing social grievances that drive populations to violent extremism. The secondary level focuses on the individuals and groups that are most vulnerable to violent extremism, with emphasis being put on the prevention of radicalisation and efforts to halt its progression and reduce attempts at future radicalisation. The tertiary level focuses on radicalised groups that are actively planning and recruiting for violent extremist causes (Challgren *et al.* 2016).

The UN has made P/CVE an integral part of diplomacy and political discourse at the global level. P/CVE has also been incorporated into the growing field of development aid and international cooperation, particularly in US policy (Frazer & Nünlist 2015). In Kenya, the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE), which was launched in September 2016, brought together stakeholders including security agencies, civil society groups, and community and faith-based organisations, as well as development agencies, under the auspices of the National Counter Terrorism Center, to build the country's resilience and coordinate its efforts at preventing and countering violent extremism (Mathenge 2016). The strategy placed emphasis on matters such as youth empowerment, social and economic inclusion, alternative messaging, improving local governance, and enhancing knowledge and skills as preventative measures. However, the framework remained notably silent on many issues related to women and failed to provide direction for the County Action Plans on violent extremism, which were meant to be derivatives of the national strategy (Fransen *et al.* 2017). Initiatives under the NSCVE also remained largely disjointed, prompting scholars, such as Badurdeen (2018), to call for a broader analysis so that the impact of P/CVE projects could be evaluated in a meaningful way. The pressure to review the strategy finally pushed the Kenyan government to initiate a review process with the aim of strengthening areas deemed inefficient, including those related to gender and ideological responses to Islamic violent extremism.

Sjoberg (2016) argues that issues linked to female emancipation must be integrated with matters of security, including political economy, human rights and environmental concerns. Blanchard (2003) argues that, in the context of growing terrorist threats and techno-wars that have resulted in mounting casualties, gender must become a unit of analysis to enable the construction of sustainable and comprehensive security in the international system. Gender perspectives in the analysis of international politics provide insights that demystify long-standing myths about wars and their casualties. It also provides insights into the nature of war and conflict and the gender constructions that have sustained wars, showing where women are, what drives them, and how certain beliefs and practices have been wrongly legitimised at the expense of others (Tickner 2001).

Theoretical framework

Islamic feminism can be described as a conflation of various perspectives that articulate and advocate for gender equality and social justice as directed by the Quran (Abdo 2012). It traces its origin to the Asian and Middle Eastern national liberation and religious reform movements (Ahmadi 2006), and it gained impetus in the 1990s among

female Muslim scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi, Mir Zaki Hosseini, Mai Yamani and Yesim Arat (Badran 2011). Islamic feminists believe that gender discrimination is socially constructed rather than a natural phenomenon and therefore advocate for equal rights for women including the right to reinterpret the Quran – *Ijtihad* – from women's perspective (Najmabadi 2006).

As an ideology, Islamic feminism seeks to impress feminist consciousness and reforms on the global Muslim family. Islamic feminists make a distinction between faith in Islam (values and principles) and organised religion (institutions, laws and practices), and they advise caution about the risks of using the two terms interchangeably. Gender equality is deemed to be possible within the Islamic faith, but it is constrained by Islamic religious practices. Islamic feminists believe that *Shariah* – God's will, as revealed by the Prophet Mohammed – has been debauched by *fiqh*, the human endeavour to extract rules from the Quran and the *Sunna*. Furthermore, they suggest that this endeavour is fundamentally patriarchal, both in spirit and in form (Mir-Hosseini 2006). Islamic feminism therefore seeks a path of renegotiation between Islam and patriarchy to find a compromise and synthesis (Bodman & Tohidi 1997). Hashim (1999) points out that there is substantial evidence in Islamic texts of support for women's rights and gender equality.

According to Al-Sharmani (2014), in order to end discriminatory normative systems that have perpetuated gender inequalities in Muslim societies, what is needed is transformative change in public discourses, laws and policies. This type of change can be achieved through the production and dissemination of new religious knowledge that solidifies and persuasively grounds egalitarian gender relations and rights in the core principles and doctrines of Islam. The utility of Islamic feminism as an approach in this study is premised on its detachment from the secular base of other feminisms, by virtue of its location in the structures of Quranic exegesis and prophetic traditions. By extension, Islamic feminism advocates for changes within the confines of Islamic culture, and so it is theoretically more acceptable to Muslim men and women because it makes inferences from religious scriptures (Nuraan 2015). Such changes can also be used or extended in P/CVE programmes. In addition, Islamic feminism advocates for an end to gender inequalities, which must be achieved through reformation of Islamic education and deliberate engagement with Quranic discourses with a view to contesting the privileges of male interpretation. According to this view, the structure of Islamic education and limited deliberation on Quranic discourses and prophetic traditions form the basis of unequal power relations between Muslim women and men (Nuraan 2015). These unequal power relations have been used by Islamic extremist organisations to recruit and radicalise Muslim women (Al-Sharmani 2014).

Ahmadi (2006) asserts that Islamic feminism is changing. As well as engendering discussions about Islamic concepts, laws and the interpretation of sacred texts

and debates on women, Islamic feminism is also embracing post-modern ideas about women's issues, including the importance of tolerance and self-knowledge, and a focus on the multiplicity of truth, roles and realities (Ahmadi 2006). Post-modernist approaches highlight the hidden power relations that subjugate women in their everyday lives and the ideological forces that authorise and sustain these relations. Using post-modernist ideas, one is able to identify the underlying power relations that constrain women in their everyday lives, relations that are readily harnessed by extremist groups. Ahmadi (2006) points out that the role of the Islamic feminism also involves challenging the monolithic power that Muslim clerics exercise over textual interpretation, as well as reformulating Islamic concepts and laws from a feminist perspective (Ahmadi 2006). Islamic feminism has sought to empower Muslim women and help them to access education and resources and to participate in decision-making processes. Women's empowerment is considered key in transforming gender inequalities. Afshar *et al.* (2005) show how empowering women makes them more inquisitive about their faith, recitations, understandings and commentaries, and it therefore encourages them to become more cautious about accepting the views of religious zealots with specific agendas.

Notwithstanding these benefits, Islamic feminism has its own challenges as an approach. First and foremost, it follows many other strands of feminism in making the blanket assumption that Muslim women are disempowered. This argument has been refuted by scholars such as Jacoby (2015), who questions the conceptual boundary feminists establish when they exclude jihadi brides and dismiss their ability to make choices about their lives. Ahmadi & Lakhani (2016) have also dismissed the construction of disempowerment as being applicable to all women recruited into Islamic violent extremism. Some Muslim women have considered feminist materials and interpretation of the Quran a threat to their cultures, communities and indeed the *ummah* (the collective Muslim family) (Ahmad, 2015). Moreover, whatever reforms and potential Islamic feminism represents, it must be legitimised by the reinterpretation and wide acceptance of the new traditions (Ahmad, 2015). Reinterpretation of these traditions can either be developed internally, within the framework of Islam, or externally, outside that framework. However, interpretations created externally, outside Quranic traditions of exegesis, can easily be perceived as an invasion of Islam.

Methodology

This study uses exploratory research design methods to explicate the prospects of Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy in P/CVE. The use of exploratory design is suited to subject matter where very little information is available, and so it is ideal

for exploring the use of Islamic feminism to counter gender vulnerabilities exploited by Islamic violent extremist groups. Additionally, exploratory design has the capacity to explain how and why certain phenomena occur. An understanding of how violent extremist groups use gender constructions to recruit women into their ranks, as well as the prospects of Islamic feminism reversing this process, depends on understanding 'how' and 'why' women are recruited into and disengage from those groups. Exploratory research design is also used in this study because it accommodates the extensive use of published literature, a factor which is an advantage in this study, given the extensive security risks and threats associated with collecting primary data.

The target population in the study was determined using selective participation criteria. Women involved in female empowerment projects at community or national levels, as well as female returnees participating in CVE rehabilitation programmes, were included in the study. Scholars of Islamic Studies who have produced publications on Islamic ideologies and jurisprudence, together with Kenyan government officials from counterterrorism bureaus with insights into government programmes and strategies on P/CVE in their counties, were also included in the study. The study was conducted in Nairobi and Mombasa counties. The two counties were selected because they have significant numbers of recorded cases of women's involvement in Islamic violent extremism, as well as active P/CVE programmes; the counties also have high levels of cultural and educational exposure to violent extremist ideologies and increasing numbers of female Muslim scholars, activists and civil society organisations active in seeking to empower Muslim women.

The study involved the use of both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through the use of an interview guide and focus group discussions. The guide was developed to ensure that all aspects of the study were covered in discussions with the informants and that the researcher maintained the study's parameters. The interviews were conducted face to face and were carried out with key informants including sheikhs, Muslim female community leaders and mobilisers, female returnees, senior government officials involved in P/CVE programmes, members of the intelligentsia, female scholars in Islamic Studies, and coordinators of projects and programmes run by non-governmental organisations that work with female returnees. Five focus group discussions were carried out in Mombasa and Nairobi, with participants including female Islamic scholars, civil society activists, community mobilisers, security officers and young Muslim women. There were six members involved in each focus group session, and each session involved participants from varied backgrounds with different types of knowledge and expertise in relation to the discussion topics. All focus group sessions were moderated by the researcher.

The study employed secondary data drawn from national and county-level governments, academic journals, online magazines, the publications of international security

organisations and online libraries to complement and fill information gaps identified in the primary data sources. Reports supplied by government sources, including Kenya's Ministry of Interior and coordinators within the national government and the National Police Service, as well as annual reports on violent extremism produced by the National Counter Terrorism Centre, were instrumental in delineating trends and patterns in female recruitment and participation in terrorist groups. They also shed light on the threat of Islamic violent extremism in the region. Reports produced by intergovernmental organisations and policy documents on counterterrorism were used to provide information on the global threat as well as Islamic violent extremist groups in other parts of the world. International databases, including the Global Terrorist Index, were also used in the study. Reports from local daily newspapers that share current stories and accounts of female experiences in Al-Shabaab were also employed to help verify and validate primary data. Secondary data used in the study was checked for its reliability, suitability and adequacy.

Findings

Gender constructions exploited by Al-Shabaab

The study sought to identify the gender constructions that have been exploited by Al-Shabaab to recruit women into their ranks in order to understand the motivations, roles and status of women in the group. Any such understanding would be inextricable from, and critical to, analysing the prospects of Islamic feminism as a transformative and empowering strategy for making women less vulnerable to violent extremist groups. The study established three broad categories of gender constructions exploited by Al-Shabaab to engage women in violent extremism. These three categories – motivations, roles and status – are not mutually exclusive but are instead entwined with other factors that are known to help rationalise and sustain women's engagement in violent extremism.

Women's motivations

Of the 20 women participants in the study who had prior experience of or had interacted with Al-Shabaab, 16 indicated that they were motivated to join the group because their husbands were members. [Ndung'u and Salifu \(2017\)](#) affirm that spousal influence is a major factor that explains Kenyan women's recruitment. The respondents contended that love for their spouse and the desire to be a good wife, as required by the Quran, were the most compelling reasons for them to cling to their marriage

unions, even after their discovery of deceit and revelations that their husbands were members of the proscribed group. [Idris & Abdelaziz \(2017\)](#) reaffirm this view, noting that a significant number of Kenyan women who join Al-Shabaab are following their husbands.

Notably, for some women, joining the group was not necessarily a choice but was instead a forced decision resulting from coercion by their husbands. The influence of their husbands was the most compelling reason for most women to join the group. In the study's focus group discussions, women admitted that the threat of having financial support withdrawn forced them to follow their husbands wherever they went. There was also a general consensus that most women were deceived from the outset and only found out much later that their husbands were members of Al-Shabaab, at which point their lives and those of their children were threatened if they tried to leave.

The focus group discussions and the individual accounts of some of the respondents also identified the thrill of romanticism as a motivating factor that led Kenyan Muslim women to join Al-Shabaab. Similar views have been expressed in media reports which suggest that some young Muslim women run away from Kenya to Somalia to offer themselves to the fighters as jihadi brides; indeed, some of these women referred to themselves as jihadi brides in posts published through their social media accounts. According to a Muslim cleric involved in the study, many of these 'runaways' either have very little religious knowledge or are new converts who have not had proper training in Islam and have relied heavily on and drawn inferences from the radical teachings of their recruiters. [Badurdeen \(2018\)](#) affirms that interest in adventure and romanticism is strongly correlated with the youthfulness and low levels of education that often characterise women targeted for recruitment. These girls often create some form of escape fantasy which allows them to feel more useful and part of something greater than themselves. The prospect of marrying fighters, whom they deem to be 'holy warriors', is also enthralling for some ([Bloom 2011](#)).

This study's findings also show that, for some women in Al-Shabaab-controlled territories, marrying into Al-Shabaab is a survival tactic. Existing reports and accounts of female returnees in Kenya demonstrate that a significant number of women who join Al-Shabaab come from homes or communities where there is an increasing sense of helplessness, often driven by poverty. Their resentment and desire to change their status are powerful motivators that can lead them to join violent extremist movements. Focus group discussions revealed that some of the female recruits from parts of Lamu and Kwale who joined Al-Shabaab were escaping from situations of near-bject poverty at home. These women survived because of the financial assistance provided by Al-Shabaab through their spouses, and they remained loyal even after their spouses' deaths because of that support. This view is validated by [Badurdeen \(2019\)](#), who notes

that the pressure on women to fend for their families is enormous and endears them, without their knowledge, to Al-Shabaab recruiters, who are able to make use of their desperation. The recruiters often give or promise better wages, salaries or business deals, which are often irresistible for their victims. Some women follow their spouses into the group because of their unemployed status, as well as their economic dependence on their spouses (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In-depth interviews with community mobilisers and the coordinators of programmes designed to counter violent extremism in both Nairobi and Mombasa also revealed that some women are motivated to join Al-Shabaab by their desire to seek redemption. For these women, the group is understood as a provider of second chances, and indeed Al-Shabaab positions itself in ways that support this view. The desire to secure a second chance or redemption often arises from the frustrations of life, some of which emanate from the effects of gender inequalities. Notably, the Somali community in Kenya remains one of the most patriarchal societies in the country. Its customs and traditions have restricted women's rights, including their rights to participate in public life and higher education and their access to some occupational opportunities. Additionally, cases of gender violence, including rape and physical abuse, are often kept as family secrets, with settlements being made between one family and the other. Justice for the victims is not enacted in courtrooms or determined by the victims. Many of the affected women are left to deal with the pain and stigma associated with their experiences, with very little or no social support or access to groups that could provide guidance and counselling. Their sense of violation and belief in their own impurity, coupled with social stigma, can make these women victims susceptible to Al-Shabaab recruitment, as Al-Shabaab recruiters devise propaganda to capitalise on these women's vulnerability. Al-Shabaab propaganda promises these women greater freedom, rights and a sense of belonging, as well as the prospect of sisterhood, to appeal to their desire to be understood and accepted. Al-Shabaab offers women a way to escape the miseries of feeling abused or oppressed, unwanted, misunderstood and disappointed – that is, it promises an opportunity for redemption. Haner *et al.* (2019) suggest that patriarchal societies which use patriarchal cultural measures to limit women have pushed some of them into terrorist groups in search of a reprieve as well as spaces where they can express themselves. Gan *et al.* (2019) also contend that the desire to escape alienation and inequality is one of the strongest push factors driving women into the arms of violent extremist groups.

The study's findings also show that Al-Shabaab has exploited women's interest in religion as a powerful recruitment tool. Religion is used by violent extremist groups to provoke a sense of responsibility and obligation. It is also a source of doctrines that can be used to entice individuals with the promise of a better life, both on earth and in the world to come. Although it is highly gender sensitive, religion has a transnational

and unifying appeal, and a cultural legitimacy, which makes it the single biggest catalysing factor in the recruitment and radicalisation of any individual. The study's findings reveal that Al-Shabaab is continuously using organised and forced religious preaching in mosques to recruit and radicalise men and women in the north-eastern region of Kenya. According to a Muslim cleric involved in the study, Al-Shabaab is keen to see its version of Islam go unquestioned and so it is keen to remove any obstacles, including formal education, that may encourage people to know more or raise their aspirations. Religion is a particularly powerful tool for recruiting women because of its psychological and emotional effects (Fink & El-Said, 2011). Importantly, Muslim women are socialised to respect and oblige religious sanctions as the epitome of a good Muslim woman, hence the use of religion by terrorists to rationalise their participation.

Women's roles

The study's findings reveal that women in Al-Shabaab have diverse roles, which stretch from domestic duties to the front line, but they are largely confined within the patriarchal continuum. A significant number of the study's respondents contended that Al-Shabaab has given most recruited women roles as fighters' wives to provide men with the psychological and emotional comfort necessary to make them focus on the group's bigger tasks, which are to fight and remain faithful to the cause. It is equally important for women to give birth to and nurture the next generation of fighters. This is very important for Al-Shabaab, which encourages every fighter to enter into a marriage that produces children, even if that means marrying more than one wife. Ndung'u & Salifu (2017) argue that women's prominence in Al-Shabaab is fundamentally linked to their supportive roles, their responsibility for raising families for the fighters and their service as good wives for their husbands. Celibacy is barely tolerated for men or women, and, according to one female respondent who had interacted with Al-Shabaab, the group encourages its fighters to marry more than two wives so they can have as many children as possible.

The focus group discussions also revealed that Al-Shabaab has enlisted women to help recruit other women. The group's increasing preference for women as recruiters is premised on the belief that women can use their position as mothers, sisters and wives, along with their sexual appeal, to recruit the men and women, and particularly the youth, in their environments (Ndung'u & Salifu 2017). According to Badurdeen (2019), the use of female recruiters by Al-Shabaab represents a conscious decision to eliminate their targets' initial suspicions and build trust and confidence. Woman-to-woman interactions and even friendships are unlikely to provoke any suspicion, even among women themselves. This is important for the group, as they are able to

lure in their newly acquired recruits gradually but surely. This view is supported by Bloom (2017), who observes that female recruits are proficient at lowering their victims' guards and putting them at ease, at the same time as building rapport, trust and an environment of secrecy and exclusivity.

Women are also used to spread propaganda, particularly within Al-Shabaab's administrative units (the *wilayat*), where the group has established committees that comprise the wives of senior-ranking fighters and women supporters who are used to conduct door-to-door campaigns and recruitment for Al-Shabaab. The group has also started using women as suicide bombers in recent times. Warner & Chapin (2018) pointed out that of the 155 suicide attacks that had been carried out since its formation, 10 had been committed by women. The group is also training more of its female recruits as suicide bombers, particularly after lifting the moratorium on the use of female suicide bombers in 2015. However, according to 16 female respondents who had had previous interactions with the group, while some women have been trained to become suicide bombers, hardly any have been used for that purpose. Women are also used as facilitators and enablers of the group to collect tactical information and to smuggle weapons and explosives, as well to provide cover for *Amniyat* operatives (from the intelligence wing of Al-Shabaab) in their missions (Ndung'u & Salifu 2017).

The use of women to collect information is widely practised in both Somalia and Kenya. Stern (2019) estimates that about 85 per cent of Al-Shabaab's intelligence collection is conducted by women. Petrich (2018) observes that, in Kenya's capital Nairobi, Al-Shabaab has enlisted prostitutes who are paid to collect intelligence about their clients, and particularly police officers, prominent politicians and businessmen. The sex workers who are affiliated with Al-Shabaab do not claim membership of the organisation or share its ideological stances, and so these relationships are solely based on the exchange of information and money (Petrich 2018). Association with and tacit endorsement of prostitution are both, in theory, repugnant to Al-Shabaab, and these transactions therefore demonstrate that the organisation is applying its ideological stances flexibly, making necessary adjustments to secure operational gains. In summary, while Al-Shabaab remains conservative in its deployment of women, particularly in front-line combat roles, women are a key part of the group's invisible infrastructure, which performs the necessary logistical and supportive functions to keep the group resilient.

Women's status

The findings of the study reveal that the status of women in Al-Shabaab is fundamentally dictated by the group's patriarchal ideology. The group has enacted stringent rules that constrain women's behaviour. For example, women are prohibited from

chatting in public, wearing bras and working, and they are also forbidden to walk unaccompanied without a *mahram* (a male chaperone who is sexually incompatible). Some of the women in the group are used solely for the sexual gratification of fighters and they are frequently either beaten, denied food or threatened with murder. Needless to say, sexual violence and slavery are common occurrences in Al-Shabaab camps. Al-Shabaab has also introduced its own form of wife inheritance (*Dumaal*), according to which all militants are considered to be brothers and can therefore marry each other's widows (Stern 2019). This practice is designed to ensure that the women in the group stay married and continue to produce and care for fighters' families. At an operational level, women have been confined to non-combat roles, rather than assigned to front-line battles.

Women's recruitment into the group has largely been conducted through abduction, which suggests that a good number of women in Al-Shabaab are held against their will (Amoroso 2017). This view is shared by Attwood (2017), who asserts that Al-Shabaab has increased its kidnapping of both Muslim and non-Muslim women. Parker (2017) provides an account of a woman held by Al-Shabaab for nine years in Boni forest, after she was lured with a reunion invitation and promise of employment, supposedly by her husband who had previously separated from her and disappeared in Somalia. On arrival Amina discovered that none of this was true; her husband had long since died. Notwithstanding the prevalence of kidnap-based recruitment, there are also cases of women who have willingly and knowingly joined Al-Shabaab, motivated by a desire to participate in the jihad against the governments of Somalia and Kenya (Amoroso 2017).

Stern (2019) argues that it is problematic to talk about women's 'membership' of Al-Shabaab, because most women in the group have married into Al-Shabaab rather than being recruited. It is therefore difficult to argue that women share the ideological standpoints of the group or have the same kind of commitment to it as their male counterparts. Stern (2019) suggests there is no general consensus among Al-Shabaab operatives that women are considered members of the group. While some members of the extremist group refer to women as supporters and sympathisers, others consider them to be full members.

The study's findings further indicate that no woman has so far been accorded leadership command of a unit, territory or jurisdiction under Al-Shabaab's control. The absence of women in Al-Shabaab leadership positions is indicative of the status of women in the group. While women play an important role in the insurgency, they remain subjugated and under the directive of men. The group's practice of not encouraging female education is deliberate and intended to confine women's roles largely to the domestic sphere. Lack of education among women also maintains women's dependence on men and removes the possibility that they will compete with them for

leadership positions. Often, very little non-essential information is given to women about the nature of the tasks they undertake on behalf of Al-Shabaab, and therefore women tend to learn very little about the operations and the modus operandi of the group. Restrictions on women's knowledge and responsibilities also mean that women in Al-Shabaab are always managed and take direction from other sources, which in practice means they answer to a male leader at the top of the chain of command.

Islamic feminism in Kenya

The findings of this study indicate that Islamic feminism in Kenya is a budding concept that is expressed less in acts of prayer and books than in practice, beliefs and modes of dressing. Islamic feminism is strongly associated with the values of modernity and feminism and has largely been confined to the cities, particularly Nairobi and Mombasa. The spread of the movement's ideals is driven largely by the forces of modernity rather than through preaching or inculcation of the movement's values and principles in places of worship. As a result, Islamic feminism as an ideology remains scanty, disparate and inadmissible in places of worship, largely because of its perceived bias and clash with entrenched mainstream ideologies such as Sufism and Salafi-Wahhabism in Mombasa and Nairobi. The challenges involved in conceptualising Islamic feminism as an ideology or movement have further undermined the spread and acceptance of its ideals in Kenya. In many instances, Islamic feminism has been construed as a form of intrusion or unwanted innovation and an attempt by Westerners to pervert what is perceived to be the true way of Islam. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the respondents in this study, including Muslim clerics, did not know or understand what Islamic feminism stood for and had not heard about it, but they were, interestingly, very quick to dismiss the concept as an aberration from pure Islam.

However, a significant number of respondents in the study, namely Muslim scholars and female professionals, including legal practitioners, community activists and security analysts, expressed knowledge of, familiarity with and a willingness to advocate for the tenets of Islamic feminism. According to one female community activist, who is also a legal practitioner, knowledge of Islamic feminism is a kind of professional requisite which compels women to search for more information on the rights of Muslim women. Among the Muslim scholars involved in the study, Islamic feminism was well understood in terms of its merits and demerits, and its traces in the history of the country were also well known. However, it is worth noting that, despite the tremendous changes driven by women in Kenya in the six decades since independence, which have included the enactment of affirmative action and expanded representation for women in the country's legislative houses, gender equality and equity remain distant goals, and Kenyans, including the country's Muslim communities, remain largely

patriarchal. Women continue to bear the triple burden of giving birth, nurturing and providing for their families.

The in-depth interviews with Muslim scholars also revealed that female Muslim voices involved in the generation and description of Islamic knowledge remain subdued, as patriarchy is given doctrinal validation and women are relegated to subordinate roles as citizens, not leaders, within their community of faith. The respondents in the study generally agreed that Muslim women are often reluctant to challenge the normative behaviour of men, particularly if the said behaviour is perceived to be a derivative of or sanctioned by religion. The patriarchal system which engenders women's exploitation has been supported by the teachings women are subjected to in the madrasa in early childhood, which impresses on Muslim girls the absolute importance of obeying their fathers, husbands and brothers at all times. Obedience is established at a very early age as a value that is critical to women's spiritual and social wellbeing.

Yet interviews with female Muslims professionals, including lawyers, security analysts and community workers, revealed that there is an emerging cohort of young Muslim women, between the ages of 22 and 30, who are redefining and questioning the conventional conservative obligations of the Muslim woman. While the young women who were interviewed did not label themselves, or want to be labelled, as 'Islamic feminists', their perceptions and understanding of the obligations of Muslim women marked a clear departure from conventional, conservative dictates – they have embraced modern forms of dressing, uncover their hair, occupy positions of leadership in corporate organisations, run programmes and initiatives, are economically independent, and are more fixated on their careers than on marriage. Seemingly, many of these women have high levels of education: a significant number have university degrees or tertiary college diplomas. Their attitudes, sense of identity and modes of expression, as well as their preferences as Muslim women, demonstrated confidence.

Notably, members of this new cohort of young female Muslim professionals are slowly working towards and advocating for change within the confines of Islam. They are reading religious texts and making individual interpretations of them, and even though they do not consider themselves to be Islamic feminists or label themselves as such, they share the same vision, which is focused on expanding the rights and freedoms of women as envisaged in the Quran. These women are questioning the patriarchal undertones in the practice of Islam and are no longer obeying religion blindly or embracing cultural traditions without question; instead, they are driven by the desire to have a deeper understanding of their religion. For these young, educated Muslim women, the spirit of Islamic feminism is a reflection of the desires and aspirations of the modern Muslim woman. Their image of the modern Muslim woman as someone who has a relatively good education and a career is proving equally attractive to Muslim men who are looking for spouses, according to one of the study's

female respondents. It can be inferred, then, that the Muslim household is incrementally undergoing changes that are giving more prominence to women and promoting female agency as a way of life.

The contribution of Islamic feminism to preventing and countering violent extremism

The study evaluated how Islamic feminism can make a contribution towards preventing and countering violent extremism from groups such as Al-Shabaab. Feminists have set out to eradicate various forms of discrimination and exclusion which have historically been overlooked but continue to be used to subjugate women. The largest blame is apportioned to patriarchal institutions and practices that have reinforced a status quo maintained by denigrating female agency. The findings of the study show that Islamic feminism is predicated on the belief that patriarchal inclinations in Islam have reinforced the circumstances that have left Muslim women vulnerable to, inter alia, violent extremism. The focus group discussions revealed that Al-Shabaab has established a patriarchal system that oppresses women, reduces them to subservience, and leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Religion and gender are identified as cataclysmic forces that Al-Shabaab uses to recruit and radicalise women and sustain their engagement in violent extremism. Al-Shabaab uses religious scriptures to compel wives to remain obedient and loyal to their husbands. The group also seeks to remove or prevent access to practices or beliefs that are perceived to be likely to promote, trigger or provoke female agency, including education, career pursuits, religious literacy outside the group's ideology or teachings, and women's ascension into leadership positions or financially rewarding roles. Instead, Al-Shabaab's practices implicitly rationalise gender inequalities, encourage female dependency, and demand unquestioning loyalty and obedience from women. Together, these factors have sustained the vicious cycle of violent extremism in parts of Kenya and Somalia.

[Bloom & Matfess \(2016\)](#) have helped to illuminate the nexus between women's increased exposure to violent extremism and gender-based violence in the form of rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery and forced marriage in Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia and Syria. The correlation they identify shows that women are more likely to participate in violent extremism in societies where their roles and status are limited and demeaned than in those where there is gender parity ([Ispahani 2016](#)). It is possible, then, to suggest that societies with higher levels of gender equality and equity may be more resilient and resistant to violent extremism than those with higher levels of gender inequality and injustice.

According to the security analysts who participated in the study, the utility of Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy in P/CVE is premised on its advocacy for improved religious knowledge, changes of perspective in Islam, and the premium it

places on the expansion of women's rights, freedom and status in society. At the core of Islamic feminism is an emphasis on the reinterpretation of religious scriptures. Islamic feminists suggest that the root causes of women's oppression and suffering lie in the patriarchal interpretation of religious scriptures. Reinterpretation of the sources of Islam using a feminist perspective is deemed critical to the work of restoring social justice and reviving the intended meaning of Islamic principles. The objective of reinterpretation is to displace the entrenched traditions and misogynistic understandings that have been compounded with the teachings of Islam and have long held sway.

The findings of the study illustrate that Islamic feminism claims its legitimacy and authority from religious scriptures and promotes religious literacy and knowledge for Muslim women so they can read and reinterpret the scriptures for themselves. [Kresse \(2009\)](#) argues that, in Islam, knowledge provides the guidance, orientation and justification for practice. Knowledge forms the basis of a person's decisions on which views they consider to be authoritative and worthy of respect. As a result, those with a solid religious foundation or knowledge are less likely to accept the misinterpretations and misinformation propagated by violent extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab. According to the study's female respondents, Al-Shabaab targets women with little religious knowledge and preaches that its understanding of scripture is the only true way to Islam. For female recruits who join the group, Al-Shabaab's version of Islam appears to be the only true version because they have no other point of reference.

The plausibility of Islamic feminism as a strategy for contesting extremism was also asserted by some of the female community activists who participated in the study. They argued that Islamic feminism, unlike mainstream feminism, is not seeking radical changes in the religious institutions or the culture of Muslim people but is instead seeking the restoration of authentic Islam. According to [Ahmad \(2015\)](#), Islamic feminists only seek the restitution of rights for women that may have been obscured by cultural norms.

The findings of the study also showed an intersectionality between Islamic feminism and proposed changes to the NSCVE which assumes that P/CVE measures are strengthened when women are engaged as change agents. According to female scholars who participated in the study, Islamic feminism indicates that respect for women is both religiously and culturally sanctioned by the teachings and commands of the Prophet. Indeed, it is the general belief of all Muslims that paradise lies under the feet of mothers and that whosoever angers their mother is unlikely to find favour with God. Women also play critical cultural roles as caregivers, nurturers and figures of authority within their households ([Majoran 2015](#)). This is a unique and powerful position that allows them to invoke both respect and obligations from men and children, which has proven to be a powerful force in driving change including in the fight against violent extremism. As caregivers and nurturers, women can often detect

the tell-tale signs that daughters or sons have been radicalised from the outset and are well placed to engage in processes of deradicalisation (Idris & Abdelaziz 2017). Moreover, their traditional roles in the home place them in a unique position to shape familial and social norms and promote increased tolerance and non-violent political and civic engagement (Fink *et al.* 2013). The study's focus group discussions suggest that women are also considered to be ardent community mobilisers capable of delegitimising extremists' narratives in their community, and they can also assist security agencies with the design and implementation of CVE programmes to make them more effective (Majoran 2015; Calfas 2016).

Islamic feminism advocates for female agency and empowerment through education. Enhanced social and economic opportunities strengthen the prospects of Islamic feminism as a strategy to counter violent extremism, as improved quality of life, including access to knowledge about religion, financial capacity and social support networks, helps to cushion women from the strategies that terrorists' recruiters have designed to exploit them (Idris & Abdelaziz 2017). This view is also affirmed in the United Nations' (2015) Plan of Action for preventing violent extremism and by Couture (2014), who argued that empowering women would naturally have a positive outcome on all CVE indicators. This view was validated in the study by women activists supporting programmes that help female returnees: they indicated that Al-Shabaab often targets women who are hopeless, desperate or going through an identity crisis, and they argued that, to find a more effective solution, the government needs to invest in religious education and support economic inclusion.

There was general consensus among the security experts involved in the study that Islamic feminism provides responses to the existing ideological gaps relating to gender in existing P/CVE measures in Kenya. The national government's deradicalisation programmes have, for some time, remained oblivious to the ambiguities within the ideological stances professed by Al-Shabaab. Moreover, attempts at gender mainstreaming have been superficial and have not engaged with the practice of Islam. The continued disproportionate allocation of resources to hard-power approaches has reinforced the perception that women are solely the victims of violent extremism, and the confinement of Muslim women's voices to the level of policy implementation and the lack of women's involvement in policy formulation have further limited the government's ability to fight terrorism. The need for a comprehensive P/CVE strategy, one that incorporates nuanced responses to the ways violent extremist groups exploit gender constructions, has been acknowledged by the government, but its development has been bogged down in bureaucracy, and relevant policies remain unratified or, at best, underfunded or uncoordinated, which has led to disjointed stakeholder interests, goals and outcomes. As a result, it is difficult to certify that female returnees have gone through deradicalisation processes and are ready to rejoin mainstream society. This has, in turn, led

to calls for a fresh, comprehensive gendered approach to the development of P/CVE strategies, one that can provide detailed insights into the drivers and impact of violent extremism in Muslim communities, as well as available responses.

Conclusion

The findings of this study prove that Islamic feminism is a viable alternative strategy for countering and preventing violent extremism, even though it may seem preposterous to some. As a strategy, Islamic feminism possesses certain principles and values that empower Muslim women and helps to make them less vulnerable to Al-Shabaab recruiters. Stereotypical gender constructions constitute the vulnerabilities that have partly contributed to the exponential growth of women's participation in Al-Shabaab activities, and this study has shown that the group leverages them to motivate women and define their roles and status in ways that support Al-Shabaab's aims.

The study's findings show that spousal influence, the desire to be a good Muslim wife, fear for one's life and the lives of one's children, financial dependency and unemployment, as well as the thrill of adventure and romance, are often related factors that have motivated women to join and remain in Al-Shabaab. Additionally, the desire for redemption arising from feelings of violation and impurity, stigma and identity crises have equally endeared women to Al-Shabaab, with recruiters consistently posing as providers of second chances. Al-Shabaab has leveraged religion and femininity in relation to all the aforementioned factors in order to amplify or create women's sense of obedience or obligation, their desire for validation, and/or their belief in the possibility of securing greater or divine rewards.

The findings of the study further demonstrate that, although roles for women have expanded in Al-Shabaab, precedence is given to supportive roles which lie within the domestic sphere, and women are primarily expected to take care of their families, be good spouses, procreate and provide logistical support that includes nursing wounded fighters. Similarly, the logistical roles accorded to women – including their involvement in the recruitment of new members, the collection of intelligence, the promotion of propaganda and weapons smuggling – are premised on exploiting culturally feminine values that are deemed to give the group operational and tactical advantages over the security forces. Due to cultural stereotypes, women are more often treated as victims than as perpetrators, and security forces tend to deal with them more lightly than they do with male operatives. The study has also revealed that the mistreatment of women, in forms including rape, sexual slavery, physical abuse, denial of access to formal education and leadership positions, and restricted movement, are highly regulated as part of a general strategy to control female behaviour.

When gender vulnerabilities have been exploited on the basis of a religious rationale, Islamic feminism can serve as a suitable antidote. This study has revealed that female recruits who join Al-Shabaab often have little religious knowledge or formal education and are less cognisant than others of their rights and freedoms as Muslim women. The patriarchal assumptions shaping the implementation of Kenya's NSCVE policies have led to further failures to develop solutions to the gendered strategies that have been exploited by Al-Shabaab to motivate and sustain female engagement in violent extremism. Although Islamic feminism is in its nascent stage in Kenya, it provides an apt alternative strategy for countering the narratives Al-Shabaab uses to recruit and radicalise women and sustain their engagement with violent extremism. The study's findings have shown that there is an emerging cohort of young Muslim women who do not label themselves as Islamic feminists but seek out and pursue the same values – these women are advocating for change within the confines of Islam, producing individual reinterpretations of the religious scriptures, and seeking more rights and freedoms for women on the basis of how they understand those rights to have been originally constituted in the Quran. The rise of young Muslim women in Kenya with financial freedom, successful careers, knowledge based on religious studies and improved roles within marriage provides anecdotal proof that Islamic feminism can reduce the gendered vulnerabilities that have been and continue to be exploited by Al-Shabaab. However, more empirical studies are required to explore how Al-Shabaab has exploited the femininities of Muslim women perceived to have higher education, more religious knowledge and higher economic status. This may need to begin with examining how women have exploited their femininities to remain relevant in violent extremist groups.

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To cite the article: Ng'ayo, R.S. (2023), 'Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism amongst Muslim women in Kenya', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 129–156.
<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.129>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
 The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Can P/CVE be salvaged? Lessons and questions from gendered practice

Rosalie Fransen

Abstract: This article argues that the problem-oriented framing of the international agenda for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has limited the conception of gender in P/CVE and constrained the work of women-led civil society organisations. Through a meta-analysis of the cases profiled in *Case Studies on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms*, this article assesses the gendered interventions made by women peacebuilders and pro-peace organisations, noting their role in providing positive alternatives to extremism grounded in the framework of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism proposed by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini. The article argues that salvaging P/CVE practice requires recognition of the leadership of women peacebuilders and presents strategies that should inform future P/CVE practice, including the holistic integration of gender and identity, the leveraging of cultural credibility and trust, and the important role of power-building.

Keywords: violent extremism, gender, identity, rights, pluralism, civil society, hate speech, white supremacy

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Introduction

The coincidence of the 20th anniversary of the 11 September attacks – which marked the start of two decades of the global war on terror – with the fall of Kabul to the Taliban sparked a period of reckoning and reflection in relation to the global agenda aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The chaotic withdrawal of the United States left Afghan women to their own devices, as their rights and ability to participate in public life were taken from them almost overnight. Afghan, women-led civil society organisations – which, for years, had worked as partners implementing P/CVE and women’s rights initiatives alongside both the US and its allies, and the United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – now found themselves at immediate risk of retaliation and received little to no protection or evacuation support from their international counterparts. These events in Afghanistan reinforced a dynamic that has long been felt by women-led civil society organisations active in P/CVE: while the elimination of violent extremism has been asserted as a primary objective within international military, political and development policies, higher-level aspirations to secure peace, human rights and gender equality have been sidelined.

The P/CVE policy agenda gained popularity in the late 2000s as a complement to security-oriented counterterrorism approaches. While it was initially conceptualised at the national level through the development of domestic CVE policies, such as the United Kingdom’s ‘Prevent’ strategy, the agenda rapidly globalised with the establishment of the Global Counterterrorism Forum in 2011 and the adoption of then-UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (hereafter, the Plan of Action) in 2015 (Kundnani & Hayes 2018; Ucko 2018). By signing up to the P/CVE agenda, the international community aimed to take a united, holistic approach to combating terrorism, one that would combine traditional security policies with preventative development measures (Rothermel 2020). Today, P/CVE is used an umbrella term that covers a broad range of activities implemented by the multi-lateral bodies, governments and non-governmental actors that are seeking to prevent or counter violent extremism through non-coercive measures, united by their focus on addressing the root causes and drivers of violent extremism. Through the national action plans which the Plan of Action calls on UN member states to develop, and through an influx of UN funding to local projects, the P/CVE agenda has been institutionalised in domestic policy worldwide and constitutes an evolving and well-funded field of practice.

During its short span of existence, the P/CVE agenda has faced a myriad of criticisms, many of which have focused on the lack of an agreed working definition for what constitutes ‘violent extremism’. Critics argue that this leaves the agenda ripe

for subversion, misuse and manipulation by states in the name of national security (Striegher 2015), and the adverse human rights implications of leaving the definition of violent extremism open to state interpretation are well documented (OHCHR 2019). The integration of gender perspectives in P/CVE programmes and policies has also become subject to question, with critics pointing to programmes' reliance on problematic gender stereotyping (Gordon & True 2020; Rothermel 2020; Schmidt 2020); the instrumentalisation of women, particularly mothers and wives, as assets for countering radicalisation (Giscard d'Estaing 2017); and the prevalence of P/CVE programmes, plans and national strategies that omit gender entirely (Fransen 2017; Brown 2013). Assessments of the body of P/CVE programmes that do include gender components have found they frequently approach gender simplistically, treating it as a value to be 'added and stirred' to satisfy international commitments to gender equality rather than a consideration that needs to be woven into all aspects of a programme's life cycle (White 2020).

Building on these critiques, this article posits that the dominant discourse of the P/CVE framework – and, specifically, the problem-oriented emphasis its vocabulary places on 'countering' and 'preventing' the threat of violent extremism – constrain measures, approaches and strategies that integrate a gender perspective into efforts to tackle extremism. The limits placed on 'gendered practice' not only adversely impact the work of women-led civil society organisations active in P/CVE but are also fundamentally incompatible with the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. This study responds to Sanam Naraghi Anderlini's (2018) call for a necessary conceptual shift in P/CVE discourse and practice, one which would situate it in a broader framework of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism (PREP) and build on existing international policy commitments to human security and WPS. The article applies Naraghi Anderlini's analysis to the context of the P/CVE agenda after the fall of Kabul and advances her argument by identifying points of tension between the P/CVE, WPS and peacebuilding agendas. It documents the negative impact that the problem-oriented framing she criticises has had on women-led civil society organisations, and it applies the PREP approach to contemporary practice aimed at transforming extremists. It does this by conducting a meta-analysis of a series of five examples drawn from *Case Studies on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremism* (ICAN 2021). The case studies detail gendered interventions made by local, women-led civil society and pro-peace organisations that are implementing positive approaches to transforming violent extremism consistent with the PREP paradigm. The article draws lessons from these interventions and highlights the ways in which they organically incorporate an understanding of gender and identity to strengthen impact, leverage trust and cultural credibility, and embed power-building strategies. By illustrating what a shift from P/CVE to PREP might look like, and by

offering practical examples of holistic approaches to mainstreaming gender, the article seeks to make both a conceptual and a practical contribution to gendered practice in the P/CVE field.

Centring the problem, sidelining the solution

In her paper on ‘Challenging conventional wisdom, transforming current practices’, [Naraghi Anderlini \(2018: 26\)](#) argues that the current discourse and practice of P/CVE impede the effective transformation of violent extremism. She attributes this issue to the problem-oriented framing of the agenda, arguing that ‘the framing of both “countering” and “preventing” violent extremism, while necessary, is not sufficient. These terms state what we are “against”. Even prevention ... is problem-, not solution-oriented’ ([Naraghi Anderlini 2018: 26](#)). Naraghi Anderlini contrasts this framing with the recruitment narratives of violent extremist groups, which promise clear alternatives to people’s grievances, as well as articulating what they stand against. Violent extremist groups, she posits, understand contemporary global trends, such as hyper-connectivity, the uncertainty that comes with rising pluralism and the importance of capturing educational spaces ([Naraghi Anderlini 2018](#)). In response to these trends, they disseminate powerful messaging that taps into people’s gender, religious, economic and ethno-racial identities to foster in-group solidarity and offer them a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning. The messaging of the P/CVE community lags behind that of violent extremist movements in its ability to connect and persuade because it is purely aspirational and does not promise positive change; instead, it offers a return to a problematic status quo.

The problem-oriented conceptual framing of P/CVE that Naraghi Anderlini highlights can, of course, be traced back to the agenda’s roots in counterterrorism policy. In 2005, in the midst of the global war on terror, the Bush administration shifted its approach from using military violence against al-Qaeda leaders towards the broader goal of countering ‘radical Islam’ through a ‘strategy against violent extremism’ that combined a purely military response with the ‘softer’ approach of tackling the ideological and cultural dimensions of radicalisation. Despite this change in tactics, the overt conceptual focus of CVE – and, later, of PVE – remained the prevention, suppression and elimination of a non-state violent extremist threat. A commitment to restore a world order in which violence is the exclusive purview of states was a strong subtext. In the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy adopted by the Security Council in 2006, ‘addressing the conditions conducive to terrorism’ (including the ‘promotion of a culture of peace’) and ‘ensuring respect for human rights for all and the rule of law’ form two of the four pillars subsumed under the overarching goal,

which is to prevent and combat terrorism in all its forms (UNGA 2006). The strategy's structure implies that the pursuit of peace and human rights is a secondary consideration, worthwhile only insofar as it supports the elimination of international terrorism and violent extremism.

From its inception, this conceptual framing placed P/CVE practice at odds with the well-established field of peacebuilding, which calls not for the elimination of a specific threat but for the broader attainment of positive peace. Abu-Nimer characterises this dissonance as a clash between realism and idealism: P/CVE emerges from a realist power paradigm that serves state interests and regards security, state sovereignty and order as its primary outcomes, while peacebuilding emerges from idealism and prioritises justice, non-violence, human relationships and reconciliation (Abu-Nimer 2018). In line with this premise, Abu-Nimer (2018: 15) argues that when peacebuilding practitioners uncritically deploy P/CVE language and methodology, they 'operate against their own "idealist" paradigm'. Viewed through this lens, the P/CVE agenda is incompatible with a number of international frameworks that are grounded in idealist, positive, peacebuilding approaches, including the human security paradigm; the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and particularly SDG 16, which promotes just, peaceful and inclusive societies; and even the UN founding charter, which affirms the values of human rights, peace, dignity, freedom and social progress (UN 1945).

Central to the focus of this article is the idea that the current discourse and practice of P/CVE is antagonistic to the framework of the WPS agenda. First articulated in 2000 in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the WPS agenda advocates for the achievement of lasting and meaningful peace through efforts to strengthen the protection, participation and rights of women and women-led organisations across the conflict cycle.¹ Efforts to align the WPS and P/CVE agendas have been met with considerable resistance. The adoption of UNSCR 2242 in 2015, which calls for the 'participation and leadership of women and women's organisations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism', was widely criticised for instrumentalising women in service of P/CVE objectives (Ní Aoláin 2016). The message of the resolution was clear: yes, women and women's organisations are invited to participate in the fight against the violent extremist threat, but they have neither the opportunity to define what that threat is nor the chance to decide whether pursuing the fight against it is a worthwhile, feminist goal.

The marrying of these agendas allowed states to interpret WPS solely as a 'way of doing' P/CVE and to deprioritise its higher-level, idealistic, guiding principles – peace, gender equality and equal rights – in favour of the singular, realist objective

¹ It is important to note that the WPS agenda, though not within the scope of this article, has also been subject to criticism by feminist scholars. Several critiques are detailed in Aroussi (2021).

of countering violent extremism (GAPS 2018: 2). The implication of this approach is that gender equality and women's rights will only be respected to the extent that they are useful in countering violent extremism, and, as soon as they are perceived to be a hindrance, they will be sacrificed. A global study on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 further stresses the incompatibility of the two agendas, noting that 'to include [human and women's rights] as counterterrorism efforts is to deeply compromise their value in any given society' (UN Women 2015: 230). The study therefore recommends 'detach[ing] programming on women's rights from counterterrorism and extremism, and all military planning and military processes' (UN Women 2015: 231). The findings of the global study confirm Naraghi Anderlini's view that the P/CVE agenda's problem-oriented framing makes it an ineffective method for transforming violent extremism, but they also go further to suggest that the agenda actively harms gendered and women-led peacebuilding practice.

Conceptual tensions at the grassroots level

The real-world implications of these conceptual tensions and incompatibilities can be most vividly observed through an examination of the impact the P/CVE agenda has had on the work of local, women-led civil society organisations and individuals active in peacebuilding.² Before discussing how the P/CVE agenda's negative framing has adversely impacted the work of these actors, it is important to note that women-led civil society organisations, women peacebuilders and women activists have been among the first to notice and respond to the rise in patriarchal, extremist thinking, the deliberate and strategic targeting of women's rights by extremist groups, and the weaponisation of identity in their communities. Critiques of the P/CVE agenda that position it as a uniquely donor-driven practice, one in which local civil society is by default instrumentalised, obscure a rich history of locally driven and women-led initiatives to resist, counteract and transform violent extremism. To assume that the P/CVE interventions of local, women-led civil society organisations are by nature designed and driven by external forces is to disregard their agency, autonomy and dexterity in navigating politicised spaces to make international agendas work for them.

Since the focus of these organisations is the long-term welfare of their communities rather than the suppression of any single threat, their work on extremism is traditionally broader than P/CVE, aligning closely with the principles of SDG 16, the WPS agenda and peacebuilding practice. For instance, they might advocate for protecting gender equality under the law; provide people with alternatives to extremist activities

² See, for instance, the work of members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL).

that integrate social, educational and economic dimensions (Naraghi Anderlini & Koch 2015); and design multi-sectoral approaches to reintegration and rehabilitation (ICAN & UNDP 2019). With the advent of the multilateral P/CVE agenda and the resulting influx of funding for local-level P/CVE work, women-led civil society organisations have experienced a shift in international and national focus from the positive pursuit of peace, justice and rights to the narrower goal of P/CVE. This has undermined and damaged their work in four key ways.

Firstly, donor funding has been directed away from community-level priorities towards the security sector priorities of international donors and governments (Aroussi 2021). Women-led peacebuilding organisations already face financial exclusion and struggle to find resources for WPS-related work, and this additional demand has put pressure on them to develop (or repackage their existing work in the form of) P/CVE programmes and projects in order to access funding (Duke IHRC & WPP 2017). As a result, initiatives that fall outside the scope of P/CVE, such as those that take a holistic, long-term approach to realising sustainable development, peacebuilding, good governance and gender equality, receive less funding and attention (Duke IHRC & WPP 2017; Attree 2017). The donor-driven P/CVE projects that local civil society organisations are asked to submit proposals for and implement tend to be singular in scope, shorter-term and more technocratic than the holistic, transformative programming they design autonomously (Naraghi Anderlini & Rosand 2019).

For women-led civil society organisations, committing to the delivery of projects tied to top-down P/CVE strategies can mean taking on increased risk. As they become visible amplifiers and implementers of international P/CVE priorities and national security policies, they may be perceived as biased and lose trust, credibility and deep relationships with the communities that make their work so valuable (Charbord & Ní Aoláin 2018). Their association with governments and the international community also places them at greater risk of retaliation from violent extremist groups. The P/CVE agenda has not, so far, prioritised building the legal and political safety nets necessary to mitigate the vulnerability of women-led civil society organisations and the risks they undertake (Holmes 2020). Consequently, these organisations have developed their own protection strategies to limit risk and maintain the cultural relevance and transformative nature of their interventions. These strategies include avoidance of the term ‘P/CVE’ and the use of alternative language to refer to their work when engaging with local actors and communities.

Secondly, the focus of problem-oriented P/CVE discourse and practice on suppressing a violent extremist threat has provided a convenient smokescreen for states to shrink the civic space in which women-led civil society organisations operate. In the name of counterterrorism (CT) and P/CVE, states have implemented measures and created legal frameworks that curtail the rights of civil society, human rights defenders

and other actors perceived as dissenters (Wilding 2020; Charbord & Ní Aoláin, 2018). Minority groups, including women-led civil society organisations and women human rights defenders, are particularly vulnerable to state persecution. Efforts to counter the financing of terrorism, including financial institutions' de-risking practices, have had an additional adverse impact on their work, leading to delays in funding transfers, burdensome due diligence and administrative requirements, closure of bank accounts, and security and harassment concerns (Holmes 2020: 14). Counterterrorism finance conditions concerning 'material support', which criminalise engagement with certain stakeholders or parties to a conflict, can make the work of women peacebuilders impossible, as their strength lies in reaching across divides and dialoguing with all conflict parties. As a result, many have had to redesign and limit the scope of their projects (Holmes 2020: 14). Restrictive CT and P/CVE measures compound existing challenges that include the escalation of conservative ideologies and religious fundamentalism, the prevalence of patriarchal cultural norms, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its reinforcement of gender inequalities and discrimination. Women-led civil society organisations and their operating space are being squeezed by all these factors, yet they persist, adjusting and continuing their work even in the face of overwhelming constraints and threats. In some cases, their local networks and relationships built on trust offer them a level of protection, including protection from administrative, legal and physical retaliation from state authorities and state security forces (Holmes 2020: 10–11).

Thirdly, while women-led civil society organisations suffer significant negative consequences from the securitisation of their work under the P/CVE agenda, their ability to participate in high-level decision-making on peace and security is severely limited. The P/CVE agenda remains dominated by political and security actors who have had little exposure to WPS principles and are resistant to expanding the participation of women-led civil society organisations. At the UN, the bodies responsible for CT and P/CVE policy – namely the Counter-Terrorism Committee and the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate – 'remain distinctly masculine spaces' (Ní Aoláin 2016: 286), and women are underrepresented in peace processes, as mediators, as political leaders and in senior military positions (UN Women 2021). In the global P/CVE sphere, the role of women-led civil society organisations is often constrained to that of project-implementing partner, consultant or briefer rather than independent expert partner. Consequently, local women-led civil society organisations shoulder a great deal of the risk in delivering P/CVE interventions while wielding limited decision-making power and influence in international fora.

Finally, problem-oriented P/CVE discourse that centres violence inflicted by non-state groups, rather than transforming violence in all its forms and manifestations, removes states' accountability for their role in perpetuating direct and structural

violence. States can deploy the P/CVE narrative to define the root cause of violence and conflict as ‘other’, thereby divesting themselves of responsibility for injustices, including those perpetuated against women and girls. This also allows states to shift the terms of their accountability so that, instead of taking responsibility for realising peace through good governance and structural change, they gain licence to define and suppress an external violent extremist threat. As a result of the discursive framing of the P/CVE agenda, the ability of local civil society organisations to call out governance failures and advocate for responsive, fair and just governance is stifled. These silos, imposed from the top down, run counter to women-led civil society’s holistic approach to transforming extremism, which recognises that governance issues, such as a lack of service delivery, corruption and poor security practices, create fertile ground for the proliferation of violent extremist movements (Naraghi Anderlini & Rosand 2019).

The dominant discourse and practice of P/CVE inhibits the essential qualities and functions that make women-led civil society organisations so adept at building peace: it detaches them from a long-term peace and gender equality agenda, undermines their capacity to reach across divides and build trust, denies them access to spheres of power and influence, and restricts their ability to speak freely and demand government accountability. Yet, while women-led civil society organisations have significant limitations imposed on their work by the P/CVE agenda, it would be a misrepresentation to characterise them solely as instrumentalised victims of global P/CVE policy. Instead, the limitations that affect these organisations highlight the extent to which they understand the political sensitivities of the agenda and engage with it strategically, deploying P/CVE discourse and language when it serves their work and drawing on other agendas, such as peacebuilding and WPS, in spaces where associating with P/CVE poses a risk, confines them in silos or is counterproductive. This strategic engagement allows them to maintain a practical focus on their positive end goals, which are to build peace, promote gender equality, advocate for justice and rights, and strengthen the impact and longevity of their work.

Lessons from positive gendered practice

The conceptual irreconcilability of current P/CVE discourse and practice with long-term peacebuilding and gender equality objectives is compounded by the agenda’s track record of constraining and damaging the peacebuilding and security work of women-led civil society organisations. Therefore, simple tweaks or adjustments will not suffice to ensure P/CVE is fit for purpose in the coming decade. Instead, a transformative shift is required, which must encompass the value system that underpins the

agenda, its conception of gender, and the types of projects funded and implemented under its remit. Naraghi Anderlini argues for precisely this type of transformative shift towards an idealistic, positive framework, proposing that the international community should ‘articulate and stand by a set of values and principles that promote peace, resilience, equality, and pluralism (PREP), [and that are] are rooted in dignity and offer non-violent practical alternatives’ (Naraghi Anderlini 2018: 34). P/CVE would be one component encompassed in the broader goal of PREP, which prioritises non-violence, resilience to violent extremist messaging, adherence to human rights, and respect for pluralism and a multiplicity of identities.

This section discusses practical examples that demonstrate how – despite the increasingly fraught and constrained environments they operate in – women peacebuilders, women-led civil society organisations and pro-peace organisations are pioneering strategies to transform extremism that embody the values of the PREP paradigm. It draws on a brief meta-analysis of an example set drawn from ‘Case studies on the role of gender and identity in shaping positive alternatives to extremisms’, published by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN 2021), which compiles examples of peacebuilding, deradicalisation, reintegration and counternarrative work in Indonesia, Somalia, Sweden and the United States. A fifth, unpublished case study on Iraq is also included in the analysis.³ The meta-analysis identifies shared themes, lessons and questions across the case studies to illustrate in a practical way what reimagining P/CVE might look like, with an emphasis on gendered practice. The analysis will also reflect on best practices in the P/CVE field and identify positive elements of P/CVE research and practice that might indeed be ‘salvageable’ and support a new era of policy and research-based action.

Positive alternatives

The interventions profiled in the case studies not only ‘counter’ or ‘prevent’ violent extremism but also deliver clear, positive alternatives for communities that constitute a direct counterweight to the way in which extremist groups exploit grievances, societal trends and unmet aspirations in each country context (see Table 1). These include socio-political, cultural and economic alternatives that are rooted in PREP values, authentic to their context, delivered by trusted messengers and cross-sectoral in nature. Crucially, the alternatives are *desirable*. They do not merely promise a return to the status quo but propose a different, peaceful path to attaining a sense of belonging,

³ Due to security concerns for the organisation profiled in the Iraq case study, names and identifying details related to the organisation and its projects have been redacted.

Table 1. Extremist tactics and corresponding positive alternatives

Case study	Extremist tactic	Positive alternative
Indonesia	Dissemination of simplified, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts by trusted messengers (young conservative women) as the only truth.	Dissemination of peaceful, tolerant interpretations of Islamic texts that centre gender equality and social justice by trusted messengers (women <i>ulama</i>). Creation of spaces for civic discourse, debate and the exchange of multiple narratives.
Iraq	Use of online hate speech to sow societal division and maintain economic and social power over marginalised identity groups.	Use of peaceful and pluralistic speech to unify citizens, encourage community service and enable power-building.
Somalia	Reinforcement and co-option of rigid gender roles to support extremist recruitment, logistics, fundraising and intelligence-gathering.	Expansion of socially accepted roles for all groups, creating spaces for different identity groups to come together.
Sweden	Provision of a predefined masculine identity, ideological superiority, brotherhood and camaraderie.	Development and rebuilding of pro-social identities, including a healthy relationship to masculinity and connection with other men.
United States	Manipulation and infliction of trauma to recruit and retain members, including the offer of a simplistic, binary worldview and the channelling of trauma into violence.	The healing of trauma to disengage members, including by teaching non-violent communication methods and developing the capacity to deal with complexity and experience empathy.

connection and purpose in society. The organisations and peacebuilders delivering the alternatives understand that, as [Naraghi Anderlini \(2018: 34\)](#) states, ‘simply being against [extremist movements] is not enough’.

The case studies demonstrate that, in order to successfully develop and deliver positive alternatives, peacebuilding actors need to draw on a robust understanding and analysis both of the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in their context and of the drivers and conditions necessary for peaceful transformation. In two of the cases assessed here (Sweden and the United States), this understanding results in part from personal experience, with interventions being delivered by former violent extremists who have themselves been active participants in and exited from white extremist movements. In the other cases (Indonesia, Iraq and Somalia), the locally rooted nature of the organisations implementing alternatives gives them real-time insight into the changing dynamics of violent extremism on the ground. The research findings, analytical tools and assessment methodologies of the P/CVE field of practice stand to make an important contribution to the development of positive alternatives by complementing local expertise, strengthening analysis

of violent extremist threats and tactics, and sharing lessons and strategies across contexts.

The notion of positive alternatives is important in work to disengage, reintegrate and rehabilitate violent extremists, as is made clear in the Swedish case study and EXIT Sweden's approach to the disengagement of members of white extremist groups. Rather than challenging former members' ideology, beliefs and political views directly, the programme shows them a new, positive approach to forming relationships and to rebuilding a peaceful social identity. This work includes efforts to help them find alternatives to the resources, relationships and connections they had access to in the movement by, for instance, supporting them to rebuild their social lives. Providing positive alternatives can also mean the development of alternative narratives, as can be seen in the case study from Indonesia, where women religious scholars challenge narrow, extremist interpretations of Islam, not by denouncing them, but by promoting the idea that multiple narratives, perspectives and interpretations can exist, including ones grounded in peace and gender equality. In the Iraqi case study, a local NGO draws on Quranic verses, Shi'a religious heritage, and universal norms of human rights and women's rights to construct pluralistic alternative narratives.

The case studies illustrate that, when interventions are grounded in a strong analysis of local dynamics and delivered by trusted actors, the concept of positive alternatives is broadly applicable to different types of extremism, such as Islamic extremism and white extremism, and to a variety of contexts, spanning the Global North and South.

The centrality of gender and identity

Gender and identity play a central role in the violent extremist movements depicted in the case studies, which provide practical examples of several ways that violent extremist groups manipulate individual identity, including gender identity, to recruit and retain their members and to sow division, fear and hatred. In their recruitment narratives, extremist groups often implicitly promote clearly defined, heteronormative gender identities, both as models of their ideals and as goals for their members. In the Swedish case, white extremist groups propose an untamed, heroic, superior masculine identity as a solution for empowering young men, while in the Indonesian case, conservative Islamic groups popularise notions of piety and wifhood as the key to attaining happiness for young women. In both cases, extremist groups tap into gender identity to promise certainty, simplicity, belonging and meaning to prospective recruits and current members. Group identity also plays an important role. Extremist groups use social networks to recruit members and then strive to retain them by cultivating a sense of brotherhood and community, fusing individual and group identities

to justify violent behaviour and inhibit disengagement by isolating members from outside influences.⁴

Violent extremist groups understand the power of gender identity and co-opt traditional gender roles. In the Somalia case study, Al-Shabaab leverages women's extensive social networks, family connections and place in society to support fundraising, proselytisation, intelligence-gathering and recruitment efforts. Even in spaces where male supremacy is the norm, such as in the white extremist groups described in the case study from the United States, women may derive a sense of expanded social, political and economic power from participating in violent extremism due to their access to in-group support systems, perceived superiority over other identity groups, and the opportunity to have their input both solicited and valued.

The case studies demonstrate that gender identity cannot be considered in isolation from other identities, such as age, class and sexual orientation. The Somali case study finds that young women are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, since they face 'double marginalisation' due to their age and gender. The same is true for older men in the Swedish case study, who, because of their age, are often more isolated and solitary than younger men and can therefore experience a stronger attraction to the community and support offered by white extremist groups and ideologies. In the Iraqi case study, hate speech and extremist narratives target men who either belong, or are perceived to belong, to the LGBTQIA+ community and present themselves in ways that deviate from traditional masculine norms.

In short, violent extremist groups routinely and deliberately target, co-opt and manipulate gender roles and intersectional identities. For responses to violent extremism to be effective, they need to pay equal attention to identity. An 'add women and stir' approach is thus insufficient. Instead, interventions must prioritise a thorough, intersectional understanding of identity factors, including gender, and consider the role individual and group forms of identity play in cultivating belonging and meaning. The case studies demonstrate that taking identity and gender seriously in the design and delivery of interventions strengthens their impact and sustainability. In the Swedish case study, the disengagement and deradicalisation programme actively unpacked clients' constricting ideas of masculinity by encouraging reflection on their experience of being a man in the white extremist movement and modelling positive masculine behaviour. This helped clients open up and organically supported the construction of a pro-social identity. In the Somali case, recognising the power of women's social networks and kinship relations enabled the intervening NGO to leverage them as avenues for peace, bringing together different identity groups – elders, youth,

⁴ The findings from the case studies are in line with recent research on the role of group identity, such as [Ferguson & McAuley \(2021\)](#).

women and religious leaders – to promote positive alternatives, such as expanded roles for women in civic life.

The P/CVE field has generated a growing body of research on identity and on the connection of identity to violent and non-violent behaviour. Deepening examination and recognition of the search for identity and the fundamental human need for belonging, meaning and social connection is an especially positive contribution made by P/CVE, and it should have an ongoing place in policy and practice. Defining participation in violent extremism as an identity-driven rather than an ideology-driven process comes with challenges, however, such as the risk of removing accountability from perpetrators of extremist violence and the normalisation of hateful speech and actions as a developmental stage. Additional research on integrating accountability and restorative justice processes in work on violent extremism, including those pioneered and implemented by women peacebuilders and local civil society organisations, will be essential for informing future practice and for asserting a non-militaristic approach to disengagement and rehabilitation.⁵

Credibility and trust

The case study meta-analysis makes it clear that *who* designs and implements interventions to transform extremism matters as much as, if not more than, the content of those interventions. The draw of violent extremist groups lies in their authenticity, their ability to generate trust and their local roots. In the Somalian case, for instance, Al-Shabaab provided social services to win the trust of communities that had been abandoned by government institutions. Consequently, the actors delivering positive alternatives to extremism needed to possess a similar level of authenticity. The impact of the interventions profiled in these case studies can be attributed to the fact that they have been conceived and implemented by civil society organisations and individuals with track records, trust and expertise in their contexts. In the Indonesian case study, for instance, the women who act as *ulama* – Islamic clerics – are part of a centuries-long tradition of Indonesian religious leadership. Their history and status in the country enable them to disseminate peaceful religious narratives authentically and authoritatively. As mentioned previously, the fact that the implementing organisations and individuals in the case studies from Sweden and the United States are themselves former extremists helps them generate rapport and build relationships founded on trust.

⁵ For a research study that outlines such an approach and details additional gendered practice in relation to rehabilitation and reintegration conducted by women peacebuilders and women-led civil society organisations, see [ICAN & UNDP \(2019\)](#).

Women-led civil society organisations and women peacebuilders are ideally positioned to lead on delivering positive alternatives. In her analysis, Naraghi Anderlini notes that while women peacebuilders mirror some of the qualities of violent extremist groups, unlike these groups they leverage them to deliver on PREP. For instance, they maintain deep local connections and credibility, understand cultural nuances and community grievances, and are often charismatic leaders (Naraghi Anderlini 2018: 31–2). Perceptions and presentation can make or break an intervention, and cultural sensitivity is paramount, particularly in work to deliver alternative narratives. For example, in the Iraqi case study, a woman peacebuilder noted that her presentation as a woman clad in an abaya gave her access that enabled her to engage with male tribal leaders in rural areas, who might not want to speak with younger, less traditional-looking women or with Western outsiders.

Trust is fragile, and its breakdown can damage even the most well-designed intervention. As previously noted, instrumentalisation by governments or the international community, or even the perception that such instrumentalisation is in play, can lead to a loss of access, damage community relationships, and even incur threats or retaliation. The closeness of local civil society and women peacebuilders to their communities and their function as ‘bridge-builders’ also places them at additional risk (Holmes 2020). The international P/CVE community has a critical role to play in building the safety net necessary for local civil society organisations and women peacebuilders to conduct their work safely, including by building mechanisms for the prevention and mitigation of, as well as responses to, threats.

Power-building

The case studies demonstrate that, in addition to offering people a clearly defined, socially sanctioned identity and belonging, participation in extremist groups also gives them a sense of control, power and agency. The power-building quality of extremist movements carries particular weight for women and people belonging to minority groups, who have, historically, been denied power. The US case study, for instance, suggests women may join white extremist groups in part because they are able to derive a sense of agency and self-worth through adjacency to power; by expanding their social, political and economic influence; and by maintaining a sense of dominance over the targets of their hate and violence. Part of the attraction to extremist groups is their promise of emancipation: they invite recruits to become active agents in reshaping their social, economic and political circumstances (UN SRSR 2019).

Conversely, interventions to transform extremism are more impactful when they include elements of pro-social power-building that offer participants a positive, alternative sense of hope, control and agency over their own lives and over the fate of

their society. Disseminating positive, peaceful narratives can lay the groundwork for the reclamation of power and autonomy. In the context of Iraq, where hate speech is used to maintain divisions and prevent different social groups from unifying their demands for rights and resources from the country's leadership, narratives that promote peace, justice and solidarity act as power-building tools. They enable members of marginalised identity groups to come together to organise around shared aims; resist oppressive action by violent extremist groups and the government; and jointly build a peaceful, just and equal Iraqi nation.

Involving women and members of marginalised groups in protests, civic or political activism, volunteerism and community service forms another avenue for building power and self-determination. In the Somalian case, organising groups and networks of people with different identities supported them to reclaim civic space, gave them agency to speak out against violent extremism in their societies, and provided them with the opportunity to become active agents for change and peace. The Iraqi case study also points to artistic expression as a mechanism for power-building, highlighting how it can give a voice to women, youth and people with marginalised identities, enabling them to broadcast their concerns and experiences to society and build a movement of resistance to violent extremism and state violence.

The case studies indicate that the popular P/CVE approach that focuses on building skills – including vocational, psychosocial, educational and critical thinking skills – is more effective when paired with modalities that allow people to feel a sense of control and agency, advocate for transformative change and peacefully channel their grievances. Teaching people positive skills while leaving them in an unjust society that they feel powerless to change will not achieve enough to transform violent extremism (UN SRSRSG 2019). Positive alternatives to extremism must include opportunities for power-building that enable organisations and individuals to connect and contribute to their societies and effect change over their structural conditions. These opportunities can take forms such as the dissemination of unifying narratives, engagement in civic and political activism, artistic expression and community service. In this regard, the P/CVE field can learn from existing theory and practice on social movements, social and gender justice, and alliance-building, including feminist alliance-building.

Integrating elements of power-building will require P/CVE practice to approach civic space not just as a channel for dialogue and programme implementation, but also as an arena where peaceful resistance and mobilisation can take place. Naturally, states that maintain security through political exclusion and the suppression of dissent are likely to resist giving citizens more autonomy. Engaging with states around power-building will require holding them accountable for human rights and good governance and emphasising the importance of making concessions in terms of political freedom to manage civilian discontent and extremist violence. In contexts

where donors and states view power-building as too high-risk, self-resourcing and income-generating strategies can provide an alternative avenue of support for civil society organisations that are looking to implement power-building initiatives.

Conclusion

Reflecting on 20 years of practice, this article has sought to illustrate the conceptual incompatibility of problem-oriented P/CVE discourse and terminology with the positive, idealistic aspirations of the peacebuilding and WPS agendas. Attempts to consolidate P/CVE with these agendas have led to concessions on their guiding principles of women's rights, gender equality, non-violence and human rights. As a result, the global P/CVE agenda has constrained the work of local, women-led civil society organisations active in peacebuilding, calling for them to narrow the scope of their projects, placing them at greater risk without sufficient protection mechanisms in place, shrinking their operating space, excluding them from decision-making processes and limiting their ability to hold the state accountable for governance failures. These tensions and failures underscore the need for a transformational shift from P/CVE towards a positive set of values and principles – conceptualised using either the PREP framework or a similar model – that better aligns with and supports the work of women-led civil society.

While local, women-led civil organisations and pro-peace organisations have been negatively impacted by the P/CVE agenda, they have been able – thanks to their flexibility, pragmatism and careful navigation of politicised spaces – to maintain a strategic focus on realising the positive end goals of peace, justice, rights and gender equality. It is precisely their work on transforming extremisms that has the most to teach us in reimagining P/CVE practice. Their primary contribution lies in their delivery of positive alternatives to vulnerable communities, alternatives which form a powerful, pro-social counterweight to rising extremism. The authenticity of these organisations and the trust and credibility they have accrued at grassroots level is central to their success. They demonstrate the value of giving primacy to identity, including gender identity, in efforts to transform extremisms, having incorporated an in-depth, intersectional understanding of identity factors to increase the impact of their interventions. Finally, they highlight the importance of creating space for power-building in interventions aimed at transforming extremisms. Their work demonstrates that engaging people in unifying narratives, activism, artistic expression and community service can help to strengthen their agency and connection to society and reduce their vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups.

To answer the question this article posed about whether or not P/CVE can be salvaged, the elements of current P/CVE practice that can be repurposed are those that

work in solidarity with the efforts of local civil society and complement their leadership on developing positive alternatives to extremism. Research studies, assessment methodologies and analytical tools that enable in-depth analysis of violent extremist dynamics and radicalisation strategies, especially those that consider gender and identity dimensions, have an important place in ongoing practice too. P/CVE has directed attention to the importance of identity and to the human drive for social connection, meaning and belonging, and this focus should be maintained and amplified. Furthermore, the international P/CVE community has an essential role to play in ensuring the protection of local civil society organisations, their work and their rights.

This article has focused on the role of local interventions by women-led and pro-peace organisations in delivering positive alternatives and realising PREP's goals of peace, resilience, equal rights and pluralism. However, it is important to note that their work – even when fully supported, heard, funded and protected – will not suffice to transform violent extremism. As [Naraghi Anderlini \(2018: 35\)](#) notes, a 'whole of society' approach is needed, with governments internalising and practicing PREP values. Such an approach will require states to address the ways in which they perpetuate direct and structural violence and extremist thinking, and they must take steps to face and dismantle legacies of colonialism, reform imbalanced economic systems and discriminatory social structures, and/or redress violence at the hands of state law enforcement and security apparatuses. The most significant disincentive for states in moving towards a PREP approach may be that they can no longer take the moral high ground over violent extremist groups by presenting a façade of tolerance or justice. To effectively work with states on transforming extremism, the international community will need to encourage not only the implementation of positive alternatives and interventions aligned with PREP but also honest self-reflection.

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To cite the article: Fransen, R. (2023), 'Can P/CVE be salvaged? Lessons and questions from gendered practice', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1): 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s1.157>