

The role of women in violent extremism in Kenya

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Recruiters, spies, cooks and cleaners. These are just a few of the indirect roles women play in violent extremist groups such as al-Shabaab. The full extent of their involvement remains unknown, including their more direct role as perpetrators of violent extremist acts in Kenya. The indirect roles women play appear to be more prominent and are connected to the individual, socioeconomic, cultural and political contexts. Yet their involvement remains deeply nuanced and impervious to generalisation.

Key points

- ▶ Evidence of women as direct perpetrators of violent extremism in Kenya is limited.
- ▶ Women are more actively involved in violent extremism in non-combative or indirect roles.
- ▶ Women provide an ‘invisible infrastructure’ for al-Shabaab by enabling, supporting and facilitating violent extremism through a range of roles, both within and outside the group.
- ▶ Factors that account for women’s involvement include the influence of personal relationships, economic issues, governance issues, and ideological and religious factors.
- ▶ Further research is needed into why and how women get involved in violent extremism in Kenya.
- ▶ Policy makers should prioritise women within the context of violent extremism and widen the lens through which women’s connections with violent extremism are perceived.

Recently, several highly publicised reports have drawn attention to the involvement of Kenyan women in violent extremist organisations.¹ The reported incidents have involved women travelling to join al-Shabaab,² recruiting for al-Shabaab,³ masterminding terrorist attacks in Mombasa,⁴ forming terror cells,⁵ and channelling information and finances for terrorist organisations.⁶

In April 2015, three girls – one Tanzanian and two Kenyans – were arrested while allegedly en route to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. Reports differ as to their motivations: some claim that the girls intended to become suicide bombers and jihadists, while others contend that they ‘were lured by recruiters to be concubines or “what is commonly known as *Jihadi Brides*”’.⁷

In July 2015 a woman was arrested in Mombasa and charged with attempting to recruit five youths for al-Shabaab.⁸ In August 2015 the Kenyan government identified Rukia Faraj Kufungwa as an al-Shabaab female recruiter, and claimed that she was responsible for grenade attacks and assassinations in Mombasa. A reward of 2 million Kenyan shillings (Ksh) was offered for any information leading to her successful arrest.⁹ In May 2016 two Kenyan women who were enrolled as medical students at Kampala International University in Uganda were arrested and held on suspicion of forming a terror cell of students in Kansanga.¹⁰

There has been limited evidence of women directly perpetrating violent acts in the context of violent extremism in Kenya

Most recently, a woman named as Hania Said Sagar – the widow of slain Muslim cleric Sheikh Aboud Rogo – has been linked to a network of terror activities in Kenya and beyond.¹¹ She is accused of channelling information and financing, as well as of conspiring to commit acts of terror within Kenya.¹²

While there is now a growing global body of work on women’s roles in violent extremism – and in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) – very little of it has focused on Africa and even less on Kenya. This is despite the fact that the country is at the frontline of combatting violent extremism in Africa. As such, there is no strong empirical evidence to inform an understanding of women’s interface with violent extremism in Kenya – whether as sympathisers, enablers or perpetrators of violent acts within extremist groups, or as activists in addressing, preventing and countering violent extremism. This report begins to fill some of these knowledge gaps.

This report is one of three publications reporting on the results of an empirical study on women and violent extremism in Kenya. The full study is presented in the ISS monograph, *Violent extremism in Kenya: why women are a priority*.¹³ This report provides findings on the specific drivers of women’s involvement in violent extremism in Kenya and the roles that they play. The results are

based on 108 interviews with women from communities affected by violent extremism, returnees, civil society organisations, community leaders and organisers, government officials and donors. The background and methodology are detailed in the full study.

Women as violent actors

There has been limited evidence of women perpetrating violent acts in the context of violent extremism in Kenya.

No respondents had first-hand knowledge of women who had perpetrated acts of violent extremism, citing instead media reports of an incident in Mombasa where three women attacked a police station with knives and a grenade. In general, the respondents denied that women were increasingly involved as perpetrators of violence, preferring to label violent extremism as *mambo ya vijana* (Kiswahili for 'issues of male youth').¹⁴

Government officials in Garissa and Diani noted that, in their experience, perpetrators are males between the ages of 16 and 25,¹⁵ and that no women have been convicted on terror-related charges.¹⁶ However, other government officials reported that many girls had gone to Somalia, where some had been trained as suicide bombers,¹⁷ that one woman had been arrested on terror-related charges, and that women had been involved in terrorist attacks (although no details were forthcoming due to on-going investigations).

It may well be that women's involvement as violent actors is deliberately kept hidden

The limited data on women as perpetrators can be explained in various ways.

Some socio-cultural and religious norms in Kenya may limit the roles women play in extremist organisations. Kenya and Somalia are both male-dominated societies where women tend to be seen as nurturers and peacemakers, preferably within a domestic context. This understanding of femininity as peaceful and generative could therefore deny women agency and limit the space they can occupy within extremist organisations.

Some extremist groups have, however, learned how to 'exploit gender stereotypes and cultural clichés to their advantage',¹⁸ deliberately using women and children, who might not come under the scrutiny of security agencies, as attackers.¹⁹ It may well be that al-Shabaab is doing this, but that counter-terrorism and P/CVE responses in Kenya, as elsewhere in the world,²⁰ have not yet adapted to this strategy and therefore fail to notice when women's involvement as violent actors is deliberately kept hidden.

Cultural or religious norms may also define whether women are willing to discuss such matters with outsiders; or they may be too fearful to speak out. Previous research has indicated that women in Muslim communities in Kenya are either not permitted to speak publicly or may prefer that their male counterparts speak for them,²¹ and this could explain the lack of information about their active roles in extremism. Equally likely is the possibility that women who are perpetrators of violent extremism are afraid of the threat posed by state actors, of retribution by al-Shabaab operatives or other returnees, or of being stigmatised by their communities should they speak out or openly confess their involvement.

Indirect roles for women in violent extremism

The findings showed that women are far more actively involved in violent extremism in non-combative or indirect roles; they provide an 'invisible infrastructure' for al-Shabaab by enabling, supporting and facilitating violent extremism.²²

Recruiters

Various examples of women's roles in recruiting for al-Shabaab were noted in the study. The focus group discussions (FGDs) cited women who used their positions as wives, sisters and mothers to recruit for violent extremist organisations.²³

In Majengo it was reported that a female recruiter was well known for inducing youths – young men in particular – to join al-Shabaab with the promise of jobs.²⁴ A security official in Garissa noted that some women had been arrested on charges relating to recruiting for al-Shabaab, and that there was intelligence of women in the refugee

camps both actively recruiting and participating in the logistics of recruitment.²⁵

Respondents viewed women who acted as recruiters through the lens of two female stereotypes: mother and temptress. Those who used their influence in the home – as the familial ‘custodians of cultural, social and religious values’²⁶ – were seen in their domestic roles as mothers and wives; those who recruited in a context external to the home, such as in the refugee camps, were seen as temptresses ‘luring’ young men with false promises.

Operational roles

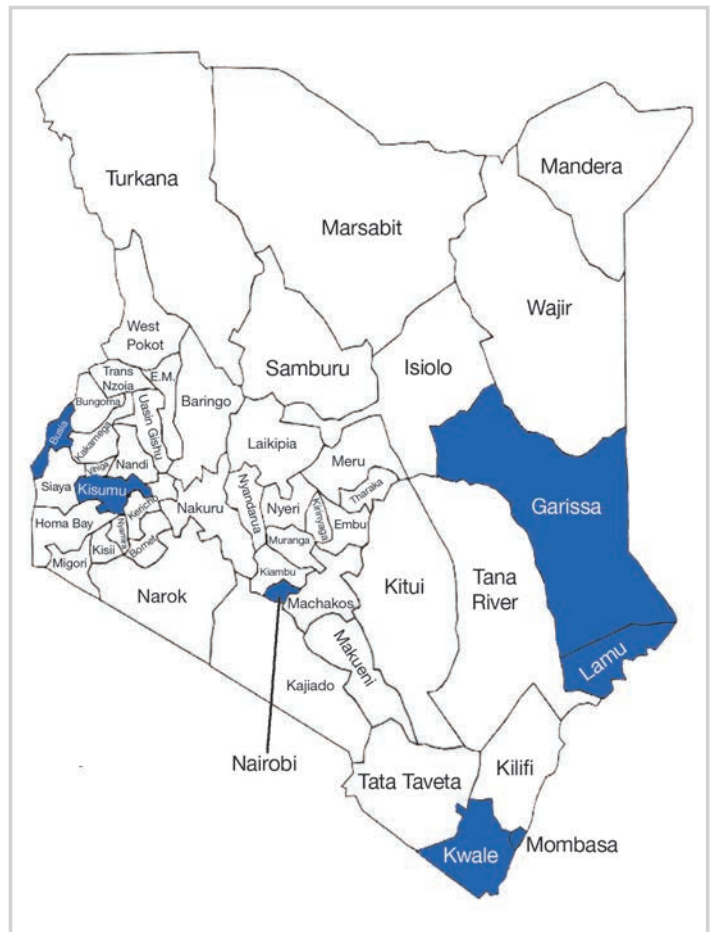
Many government respondents reported that women play operational roles as intelligence gatherers and spies for al-Shabaab.²⁷ They said that women are ‘used to collect information [and for] surveillance because they are viewed with less suspicion’ and ‘pass this information on to others’.²⁸ One official claimed that ‘women are part of *Amniyat*, the intelligence wing of al-Shabaab’.²⁹

Supporting roles

Women were also seen as playing various supporting roles in violent extremist groups or for the men fighting for these groups, including:

- Providing shelter to and hiding terrorists or family members involved with extremist groups³⁰
- Taking food to family members who have been arrested on terror-related charges, or preparing food for violent extremists³¹
- Facilitating financial transactions to fund violent extremist organisations³²
- Providing medical care in the Dadaab refugee camp to extremist fighters who have been injured in Somalia³³
- Cooking and cleaning in al-Shabaab training camps
- Radicalising their own children³⁴
- Providing ‘company’ to or ‘comforting’ terrorists,³⁵ usually through marriage among the networks of extremists’ own relatives and friends, as reported by security agents from the Coastal region, Garissa and Nairobi (this supports previous research

Figure 1: Counties in Kenya where the research was undertaken



that members of extremist groups tend to solidify their participation by marrying the sisters of other members)³⁶

Women’s involvement in violent extremism as enablers and sympathisers is a complex issue, and aptly summarised by an Anti-Terror Police Unit (ATPU) officer:

Some women are caught between a rock and a hard place. They are the caregivers to the terrorist and play a supportive role; they are facilitators because they are least suspected. Mothers quietly try to prevail on their sons and husbands to prevent their involvement, but it is difficult for women to persuade the men to stop. The wave of the ideology is very appealing that some people end up believing 100%. When al-Shabaab warns them, they fear the group and cannot talk. No one will protect the women if the information is leaked. Fear [of the police] prevents the disclosure of information, especially when police are corrupt and take money from people.³⁷

Why women become involved in violent extremism

Globally, the main drivers of women's involvement in violent extremism and terrorism are strong relationship ties (family, kinship and romantic), grievances regarding their economic and socio-political circumstances, and a commitment to and/or the oppression of certain religious or ideological beliefs.

The interplay between these drivers and factors, which creates the dynamics for women's involvement in violent extremism, is also reflected in this study's findings.

Influence of relationships

Studies have shown that relationships may be a key predictor of women's involvement in an extremist group, indicating that if a woman has a male relative who is already involved in an extremist group, 'this exponentially increases the likelihood that she will be welcomed in that group'.³⁸

The returnees interviewed for this study did not appear to be inspired by ideological or religious factors in joining al-Shabaab; aside from finding work, following partners and husbands to Somalia was a key factor for them. This motivation was echoed in the FGDs.³⁹ One woman reported that her brother's widow went to Somalia with their daughter to visit his grave; they have not returned.⁴⁰

Some of the women in the FGDs revealed that their partners are members of al-Shabaab in Somalia, and explained that young girls are at risk of radicalisation by their partners or husbands.⁴¹ In Majengo, the girls who have left to join loved ones are reported to be 'as young as 16 and 19'.⁴²

There were reports of women being blackmailed, intimidated or kidnapped by people known to them to join al-Shabaab

The findings also show that some women are coerced and pressurised into joining their husbands, friends, peers or partners in Somalia.⁴³ There were reports of women being blackmailed, intimidated or kidnapped by people known to them to join al-Shabaab.⁴⁴

One returnee said that her husband's friends forced her to join him when he left for Somalia six months after their marriage.⁴⁵ Fatuma's story (on page 6) illustrates the influence of personal relationships in some women's involvement in violent extremism.

A senior counter-terrorism official noted that most girls who are recruited to join al-Shabaab through personal relationships have only a primary school education. However, other reports and data presented here indicate that educated young women are also being recruited.⁴⁷



FAMILY RELATIONSHIP TIES
OFTEN DRAW WOMEN INTO
VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Box 1: Fatuma's story (not her real name)

I am 22 years old and was born in Likoni. I was brought up by both parents, who are still alive. I liked to play football for fun at school, listened to music and socialised with friends and neighbours. I wanted to become a nurse but had to drop out of high school in Form 2 due to lack of school fees. My family was not very well off and sometimes struggled to provide food.

I was punished mostly by my father and there was domestic violence in my home while I was growing up. Like other children, I was punished by the teachers if I was naughty, like for being late or not doing homework.

I come from a Muslim family but my family was not very religious when we were growing up; I have friends from other religions and never felt discriminated against because of my religion. My mother is Kamba and my father is Digo, but I never felt discriminated against for belonging to these particular tribes. While growing up, my family did not discuss politics except when the topic came up.

I was married to my first husband for six months before he left for Somalia and I still do not know if he is alive or dead. I was 18 years old when I went to Somalia.

I remember finding myself in a forest after getting into a car with my husband's friends, who harassed, intimidated and forced me to go and join him, although I never found my husband at the camp.

The living conditions at the camp were terrible; we were treated like slaves and ate only once a day. We had no sanitaryware.

We were forced to use the drug *bugizi* by al-Shabaab, which is usually administered to mentally ill patients. We were dressed in al-Shabaab clothes and dressed 'ninja style'.

We were taught how to use weapons like knives and guns, but I did not go out to fight. Men would give the orders but there were also women who were more brutal than the men. We were verbally and physically abused. I did not get married to any of the

group's members but they would use us for sexual purposes and we were given contraception so that we did not conceive. They did not use protection.

I escaped one day with the help of one of the female leaders of the group I had befriended. She gave me a thousand shillings and some clothes and I ran through the forest until I came to a tarmac road and found my way back home to my parents. My parents were surprised to see me but they were welcoming even after I told them where I had been.

After I returned, I remarried and started selling chips and did not struggle for employment. I have a son who is one and a half years old and have been married to my current husband for three years.

I do not feel part of the organisation and have severed ties with them. I am not afraid of the group and I'm not afraid they will come looking for me. I am not afraid my first husband will come back. I was stressed and crying all the time, but after getting married again I am much better and hopeful.

I would consider joining community groups that try to persuade young people not to join such organisations, because groups like al-Shabaab have impacted on our community by taking away young women.

I feel afraid of the government and fear I will be 'disappeared' if they were to find out about me. Government efforts to counter violent extremism are not working and are not visible in the community; they are not targeting the right people. I was not aware of the government amnesty programme.

I am still a practising Muslim and have never converted to another religion. I believe my religion is under threat because 'those who are guilty of terrorism and those who are not guilty are treated in the same manner by the authorities'. I wish the community would support us and not stigmatise women like us.

Other women actively choose to join their loved ones in Somalia. A woman from Kwale said that her 34-year-old female cousin was radicalised by her husband and followed him to Somalia, where she has also joined al-Shabaab.⁴⁸

Revenge for the treatment of loved ones at the hands of security agents was noted as a key factor in influencing women to become involved in violent extremism. In all the FGDs, women spoke of a range of experiences – including the extra-judicial killing of their husbands and children, police brutality, and the disappearance of innocent people, allegedly at the hands of security agents – that have contributed to radicalisation.

Revenge for the way security agents treated loved ones was a key factor in women's involvement

Even women who do not join their husbands or partners in Somalia are drawn into the realm of violent extremism through their relationships. As pointed out above, the mothers, wives and girlfriends of extremists often end up – through choice or coercion – playing supportive roles in extremist organisations. Harmon and Holmes-Eber explain that women who are close to violent extremists 'may end up advocating for their male family members when the men are arrested or jailed';⁴⁹ women in this study discussed how wives would support each other and their husbands at trial, or would go to the police station to provide food for their loved ones in the cells.

As Fink et al. argued, current literature often views women 'as passive or coerced actors or supporters rather than active participants or perpetrators of terrorism and violent extremism'.⁵⁰ The findings of this study suggest that women's motivations for joining violent extremist groups defy simplistic labelling such as choice or coercion.

If agency and coercion exist on opposite sides of a spectrum, women's reasons for becoming involved with violent extremism can be positioned from one extreme to the other and in all the shades of grey in between. Drivers such as relationships, grief and economic hardship are too complex to assign to either choice or coercion.

Economic factors, for instance, reduce the agency that women might have under more favourable circumstances and may lead them to make 'choices' that they would not have had to make otherwise. Agency and coercion may also apply at different stages of the process of becoming involved in extremist groups.

For the returnees interviewed in this study, the search for jobs and wanting to be reunited with their loved ones strongly motivated their choice to travel to Somalia to join al-Shabaab. However, personal agency was later overtaken by coercion and the women found themselves trapped in unwanted situations.

Economic issues

One woman explained that while some members of al-Shabaab base their recruitment strategy on ideological grounds, many others' recruitment strategies favour economic motivations.⁵¹

Women from Majengo and Mombasa blamed the poverty and unemployment in their communities for the radicalisation of their children.⁵² They noted that al-Shabaab is taking advantage of this poverty by promising young people jobs, money and 'free stuff'.⁵³

Women from Majengo and Mombasa blamed poverty and unemployment for the radicalisation of their children

Other criminal groups in the area are also exploiting the dire economic situation to victimise young women. One woman reported that her 24-year-old daughter was paid Ksh 17 000 to join an extremist group, instead of the Ksh 26 000 promised her; she was taken to Oman, where the agents who recruited her are now demanding Ksh 40 000 for her release.⁵⁴ Al-Shabaab has likewise capitalised on the high unemployment rate in the coastal region by luring people with promises of jobs,⁵⁵ money⁵⁶ and other livelihood opportunities.⁵⁷ One woman explained that 'poverty is pushing people to al-Shabaab; if one is earning Ksh 3 000 but is promised Ksh 26 000, that is a lot of money and the person will choose to join al-Shabaab'.⁵⁸

Although they constitute a small sample, two of the three women returnees interviewed for this study left for Somalia

at a young age solely or partly to find work. Khadija's story shows how a search for employment led to her involvement in al-Shabaab.

Box 2: Khadija's story (not her real name)

I am 24 years old and I was born in Garissa. I became involved with al-Shabaab when I was 20 years old. I went to college and high school. I became involved because I was jobless and needed a job.

A friend took me to Mombasa where we stayed for some days before we got on a bus and were given a drink, after which I found myself in Burabe. We were about 40 girls in a camp and all of us were Kenyan. Our living conditions were very poor and life was desperate. I received religious and weapons training. I was involved in combat training, including suicide bombing.

I was a virgin when I arrived and after receiving basic training, I declined sexual advances by a fighter, fought him and stabbed him and he died. Because of this incident, I was made a commander because they saw I could fight. I was put in charge of the women.

We experienced sexual, verbal and physical abuse. Some girls were forcefully married. Almost 75% of the girls were infected with HIV. The fighters would not use protection and would forcefully have sex with the girls when they were menstruating. I did not get married and did not have children when I was at the camp. Other girls had babies; there were many children in this camp and no one was really taking care of them. We were forced to take drugs mixed with water.

I escaped after I was sent to the market to buy foodstuff. My journey back home was through Doble. I sold the gun and used the money to return to Kenya. I returned to Garissa because of the amnesty programme, but did not enrol in it due to fear of how the government would treat me and what they would do to me.

The reaction from my family was not good and I am currently living with friends, but it has been difficult. I am jobless. I am not doing well mentally and would like counselling but I am afraid of seeking these services. Current initiatives in our community that work to counter violent extremism need to be strengthened, including providing leadership programmes. I would like to be involved in educational activities as a peer counsellor.

* The interview with Khadija was conducted through an intermediary over the telephone. She is in hiding, fearing for her physical safety and security at the hands of the police and other returnees.



IDLENESS MAKES YOUTH
RECEPTIVE TO MATERIAL
BENEFITS PROVIDED
BY EXTREMISTS

These interviews support the view that 'idleness and under-unemployment may make youth far more receptive to the salaries and other material benefits which violent extremist organisations often provide',⁵⁹ and that poverty can

be a powerful motivator for radicalisation into violent extremism, especially in countries ‘where poverty-stricken young [people] have few livelihood options other than that of joining a militant group’.⁶⁰

Kenya has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the region,⁶¹ and anecdotal evidence from the FGDs indicates that many of the youth in the study areas have no jobs or any prospects of finding employment. Many of the women from Majengo complained about the lack of livelihood options for their husbands and children, especially their sons.

Husbands and sons who join al-Shabaab often leave their homes and/or families without breadwinners. Women are forced to take over as the heads of these households, but the burden of providing for their immediate (and often extended) families is often exacerbated by the lack of a regular income, and many find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty.⁶² Without any formal education, women’s choice of employment or livelihood is limited. When men stop providing for their families once they leave Kenya⁶³ this may also result in forced displacement and the loss or destruction of family assets, such as a house. Some women therefore choose to join their husbands in Somalia rather than succumb to poverty.⁶⁴

Economic distress appears to be a major motivating factor in women and their families’ involvement in violent extremism

Women are also drawn into violent extremism’s sphere of influence when al-Shabaab recruits their husbands and sons wishing to escape poverty-stricken areas such as Majengo, Garissa and Kwale. This means that – whether they choose to or not – wives and mothers are almost inevitably caught up in playing roles that support violent extremists or their organisations (such as those described above).

Although some experts contest the causal link between poverty and violent extremism,⁶⁵ economic distress appears to be a major motivating factor in women and their families’ involvement in violent extremist organisations in Kenya. There is a complex and cyclical relationship between violent extremism and economic hardship in these communities. Poverty and limited economic opportunities (or the complete absence of such opportunities) are both the drivers of involvement in violent extremism and the results of violent extremism.

Women seem to be caught at the centre of this web – not only are they vulnerable to the economic promises made by extremist groups and other criminal elements but they are also doubly impacted by the effects of violent extremism. They have to contend with the economic downturn in communities affected by terrorist attacks, and often lose their families’ breadwinners to violent extremism, through either death or recruitment.



WOMEN CONTEND WITH BOTH POVERTY AND LOSING BREADWINNERS TO EXTREMISM

Poverty not only drives violent extremism but is also exacerbated and made more complicated by violent extremism. The direct economic and social impacts of violent extremism on individual households can include the death or loss of the household breadwinner, forced displacement and the loss or destruction of family assets, such as a house. The indirect impacts can include 'changes in a household's surrounding institutional environment, such as changes in social networks or the destruction of exchange and employment markets, and effects on political institutions'.⁶⁶ Research has shown that female-headed households often remain trapped in poverty.⁶⁷

All of these dynamics are at play in the areas affected by violent extremism in Kenya, meaning that women may find it impossible to escape the cycles of poverty that feed into, are impacted by, and create the drivers for violent extremism.

Governance issues

Studies suggest that 'poorly governed or ungoverned areas may ... create passive or active support for [extremist] groups by communities who feel marginalized or neglected by a lack of government reach'.⁶⁸ Ironically, the economic distress and unemployment found in some of the areas examined in this study are as much a result of terrorist activities as they are of perceived or real government neglect or marginalisation.

Terrorists create the conditions that contribute to poverty and then use them as leverage to recruit locals

Violent extremism is proven to stunt economic growth and affect development, especially where the country or community in question is itself considered poor.⁶⁹ The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics reports that tourist numbers in Kenya dropped 12.6% between 2014 and 2015 alone, although these numbers have been steadily declining since 2011, when the Kenya Defence Forces sent troops into Somalia to help suppress the al-Shabaab insurgency.⁷⁰ The terrorists who create the conditions that contribute to underdevelopment and poverty then use them as leverage to recruit locals, leading women in Majengo and at the Coast to observe that 'terrorism [has become] a business'.⁷¹

Because the government's response to areas affected by violent extremism or radicalisation has historically been directed more towards military or police action, there is little focus on investing in the development of infrastructure, education and housing, and expanding access to health services in these areas. Turner et al. note that in places where 'armed violence is linked to social exclusion, diminishing investments in social services is likely to exacerbate tensions'.⁷² Indeed, women interviewed in the FGDs reported that their communities are both economically marginalised and socio-politically

12.6%

DROP IN TOURIST NUMBERS
IN KENYA BETWEEN 2014
AND 2015 ALONE

neglected by the government. Evidence from elsewhere in Africa suggests that such grievances render affected communities particularly vulnerable to violent extremism, as it promises both an income and a form of retaliation against a neglectful government.⁷³

Some women cited the denial of their rights as citizens as a driving factor for radicalisation. Two women in Lamu reported that their sons were denied identity documents because they look Somali.⁷⁴ The lack of a national identity document has major implications for travel and access to higher education opportunities.⁷⁵

While certainly not always the case, as evidenced by the highly educated mastermind of the Garissa attacks, a lack of formal education also emerged as a factor for radicalisation. Education is a key development indicator and is crucial in developing critical thinking skills to recognise, counter and reject distorted and dangerous ideologies and narratives employed by extremist recruiters. While primary education is free in Kenya, and the costs of a secondary education are subsidised by the government, women in the FGDs said they struggled to afford even the small amounts required for their children's secondary education. Two of the returnees described growing up in households too poor to send their children to school.

In addition, young people do not have access to the vocational skills training that may help them overcome the gap created by the lack of tertiary or secondary school education.⁷⁶ The women in the FGDs were concerned about their daughters' and other young women's vulnerability to recruitment, as they only have a primary school education because of the lack of choices and opportunities available to them.

Ideology and religion

Radical religious teaching was cited as another reason why young people become radicalised and engage in violent extremism.

Women in the FGDs suggested that youth radicalisation is taking place through the teaching of extremist ideologies in mosques and madrassas, especially in the Coastal region and Majengo. Because of their lack of education, young people in these areas may rely on religious instructors to read and explain religious texts, which leaves them more vulnerable to manipulation.

There were reports that clerics from a mosque in Majengo suspected to be sympathetic to al-Shabaab were paying the school fees of children whose fathers had joined al-Shabaab or had been killed while fighting for al-Shabaab. This dynamic could see the mothers of these children becoming economically dependent on such clerics.

The women in the study areas also said that unscrupulous religious teachers used distorted narratives and extremist ideology to mislead children, teach only selected aspects of Islam, and misinterpret the Koran to radicalise the youth.⁷⁷ A woman in Majengo told how her son had been radicalised at the age of 16. She described noticing changes in his behaviour; he had become rude and critical of her and seemed to be withdrawn, especially after coming home from madrassa.⁷⁸

Unscrupulous religious teachers used distorted narratives and extremist ideology to mislead children

Another woman described how her nephew, whom she had raised from a toddler, left for Somalia when he was a teen. She said that his behaviour began to change after he had attended a local madrassa for a few months – he became insulting towards her and criticised the way she dressed, saying she should be covering up.⁷⁹ In Kwale young people reportedly take oaths not to reveal what they are being taught in madrassas and mosques, which, as the women respondents noted, makes it impossible for parents to know what is going on.⁸⁰

Mothers in the FGDs said they needed to be informed of the madrassas' curricula so that they can give their children guidance. While some experts claim that mothers can provide effective and powerful counter-narratives to dangerous ideologies owing to the influence they wield in their families and communities, others describe this analysis as over-simplified.

De Jonge Oudraat and Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) argue that in contexts where women have less formal education or are subject to more rigid cultural and religious norms, mothers may be powerless to influence their children against extremist doctrines, even realising 'too late when their family members are involved with

extremist thought and/or action'.⁸¹ Most of the women who participated in the FGDs for this study had only a primary school education and were therefore at risk of falling into at least one of the categories outlined above, if not both.

Women participants in the FGDs also explained that perceived injustices against Muslims, as well as media profiling, had created a feeling of being 'under attack' among Muslims, especially among their husbands and sons.⁸² This feeling of persecution has resulted in their becoming protective of their faith and of themselves. One of the government officials was of the view, however, that Muslim women are being radicalised because they are brought up with extremist teachings and are taught to accept everything their husbands, fathers or brothers say.⁸³ Another Muslim woman stated, 'Islam is not terrorism; Islam is a religion but it has been misused to carry out terror attacks.'⁸⁴

Perceived injustices against Muslims, as well as media profiling, had created a feeling of being 'under attack' among Muslims

Conclusion

For some time, women were perceived simply as the victims of violent extremism. Evidence from this study provides a more expansive view, which indicates that women play multiple and complex active roles in relation to violent extremism. These roles exist along a spectrum that extends from being the perpetrators of violent acts through to shaping policy aimed at preventing violent extremism.

In Kenya, when women become involved in violent extremism the key roles they play are as enablers, facilitators and supporters. These roles are intricately connected to their broader socio-economic, individual, cultural and political contexts, while being deeply nuanced and not open to generalisation. However, the motivations for and extent of women's involvement in violent extremism in Kenya require further interrogation.

Women must be prioritised within the context of violent extremism in Kenya, and researchers and policymakers must widen the lens through which women's connections with violent extremism are viewed.



WOMEN PLAY MULTIPLE,
COMPLEX ROLES IN RELATION
TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Notes

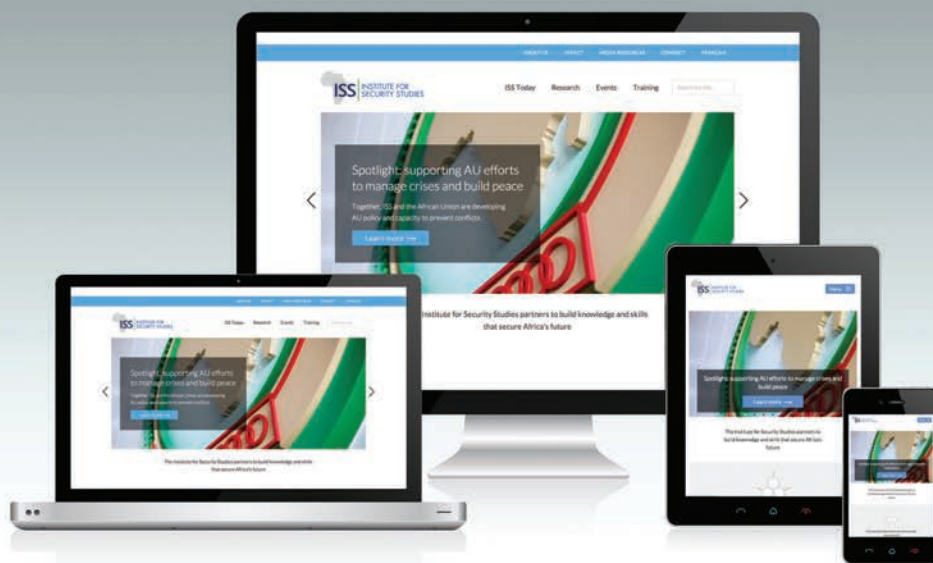
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the People of Japan**



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