

Beyond Material Interventions: Rethinking the Role of Gender, Media, and the Politics of Female Violent Extremism in Kenya

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Traditionally, terrorism has been perceived as a preserve for men, a perception that has been reinforced by the mainstream media, where women are typically represented as victims or bystanders of terror. This perception is increasingly being challenged in various parts of the world, including in Africa. While Kenya has not seen female suicide bombers, media reports indicate a small but rising number of women involved in violent extremism, mostly working behind the scenes in support of terror activities. These women, most of whom it appears are radicalized through marriage links and family ties, have been dubbed “jihadi brides.”

The evolving global nature of terrorism, including the entry of women into terrorism in Kenya, calls for a better understanding by the counterterrorism community of the role and scope of women’s involvement. A lack of effective research, coupled with public perceptions informed by gender normative roles in society, has limited understanding. Consequently, jihadi brides and other women who radicalize are understood within a limited and prescriptive gender framework that compels society to view them as deviants, as a result of the false perception that women are naturally peaceful.¹ This has affected interventions aimed at preventing female violent extremism in Africa. Furthermore, the narrow conceptualization, definition, and application of gender roles in countering violent extremism (CVE) emphasizes responses targeted at women which has alienated men and other equally important stakeholders. Finally, states have focused on material preventive approaches to addressing violent extremism while neglecting philosophical and ideological (political) approaches to the issue.

Researching important questions regarding women’s involvement in terrorism in Kenya and constructing more informed media and government responses is paramount. What motivates women to radicalize should be investigated, as should whether or not there are identifiable and consistent socio-economic, cultural, political, or religious patterns among these women, and whether that can be applied across the board to accurately develop a profile of such women for effective preventive or corrective responses. It is important for the counterterrorism community to extend their focus to address both immediate dangers posed by terrorists and strategic prevention, which deals with the radicalization and recruitment of individuals into terrorist groups and the urgent need for socio-economic empowerment to create more resilient communities.

The Kenyan government has established the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NCTS), which is enforced by a number of agencies, but more needs to be done to make its response human rights and gender-sensitive.² Generally, security discourses surrounding female violent extremism conceptualize women as passive actors,

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devoid of agency, yet some women join terrorist groups out of free will. It is important to localize causes of female violent extremism in order to respond in a multi-dimensional manner. That allows for the application of a gender lens that is cognizant of the differences in social experiences of gender in different contexts and how this interplays with socio-economic and political factors that drive violent extremism at the community level.³ If the complexity of gender is appreciated, then an understanding of why young women are involved in violent extremism can be safely established.

Media organizations in Kenya have played a reactive—rather than proactive—role in counterterrorism. In order for the media to evolve in line with contextual security and gender realities, it requires sensitization to be peace- and gender-literate for more meaningful and nuanced coverage of what motivates violent extremism. This is critical, since there can hardly be a single distinctive causal pattern in extremism and jihadi brideism that can be applied across the board. This is why government efforts should now include efforts that will allow them to understand the politics and broader motives (ideology) of organizations and institutions, such as al-Shabaab, that these individuals are part of. The media should be at the forefront of this effort.⁴

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. For the Kenyan Government

- a. **Invest in understanding:** The Kenyan government can invest in research and intelligence in order to better understand and analyze the evolving role of women and terrorism in Kenya.
- b. **Introduce a comprehensive gendered component to the NCTS:** The Kenyan government can work with other stakeholders to incorporate a more comprehensive gendered component in the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy, beyond just working with Muslim women's groups.
- c. **Work with moderate Muslim theologians:** The Kenyan government could work with moderate Muslim theologians to use madrassas as avenues for religious literacy to sensitize and discourage young women from becoming jihadi brides. The engagement strategy could be one that empowers, supports, and elevates the voices of moderate Muslim theologians and religious leaders to create an enabling environment for them to continue playing a role in countering violent extremism.

2. For the African Union

- a. **Develop gendered CVE components:** The African Union's African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism could partner with selected research centers in local universities in member states to develop more comprehensive and specifically gendered component of CVE. This should be anchored on a training curriculum of Hybrid Peace Journalism, a pan-African media philosophy that emphasizes non-sensationalized conflict reporting informed by the values of peace, unity, and national cohesion, along with efforts to support its implementation.

3. For the International Community

- a. **Address gender issues:** The international counterterrorism community should account for the complex nature of gender issues within violent extremism, and develop strategies and programs—in partnership with the Kenyan government—to address these issues. For example, the U.S. State Department has a pilot project, "Women Preventing Violent Extremism," funded through the United States Institute of Peace, which consists of a consortium of 12 civil society groups in Kenya called "sisters without borders."

Efforts should be made to ensure this program dovetails with the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy's gender strategy in order to measure levels of interaction for proper application of funding.

b. Work with mothers of jihadi brides: The United States could develop policies that will support improved relations between the Kenyan government and civil society groups to encourage more civil society organizations in Kenya to work under the "sisters without borders" program to target mothers whose daughters are married to al-Shabaab militants. Targeting mothers is important due to the supportive roles women play in family relations especially in Muslim communities. Women are understood to be wives and camp mothers in al-Shabaab discourses and young men are expected to be fighters. Mothers are therefore the strongest link for sourcing intelligence and building community resilience in the absence of men, and they need government support to play this important role.⁵

4. For the Media

a. Create campus radio stations for peace: Local universities offering journalism programs can partner directly with the U.S. Institute of Peace and civil society organizations through public-private partnerships to set up community radio stations for peace managed by students (campus peace ambassadors). These stations could conduct youth community dialogues where women could explore ways to counter female violent extremism.

b. Partner with journalism research centers: Media organizations could partner with journalism research centers to conduct periodic training workshops that will sensitize journalists on gender and terrorism reporting. These workshops would culminate in the development of a media training tool kit. There can be further collaboration with local universities on designing and institutionalizing graduate curricula on African journalism to create a critical mass of scholars and literature in the area who will transform the media industry in Africa from within.

For an in-depth analysis of the media, jihadi brides, and female violent extremism in Kenya, see the accompanying Africa Program Research Paper No. 15 by Fredrick Ogenga.

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- 1 Kathleen Kuehnast, Presentation at *Countering Female Violent Extremism, Government and Media Approaches*, panel discussion, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 1, 2016; Fredrick Ogenga, "Don't Ignore Women in the War on Terrorism," *Daily Nation*, September 16, 2016.
 - 2 "Charting a New Course: Women Preventing Violent Extremism: Thought for Action Kit," *United States Institute of Peace*, 2015.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Fredrick Ogenga, "Africanizing" Media Coverage of Threats to Peace and Security on the Continent," *Kujenga Amani* (Published by the African Peacebuilding Network of the Social Science Research Council), October 26, 2016.
 - 5 Katherine Zimmerman (Research Fellow, American Enterprise Institute), discussion with Fredrick Ogenga at the Wilson Center, October 28, 2016.

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