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The Nexus of Grievance, Pragmatism, and Ideology: Unpacking the Drivers of Women's Violent Extremism in Mandera County, Kenya

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Abstract

The role of women in terrorist activities has grown even with increased efforts to counter terrorism in Kenya. The common view of women as peacekeepers, victims, and homemakers has shaped Kenya's counter-terrorism strategies, which often overlook women as active participants. Although research on women and terrorism in Kenya is expanding, most studies do not fully explore the reasons why Muslim women join Al-Shabaab. The main goal of this study was to examine the reasons Muslim women engage in Al-Shabaab's violent extremism and thus guide policymakers on suitable and inclusive counter-terrorism. This research was guided by intersectionality theory which was according to Davis (2015). This qualitative research employed a Mixed Methods Phenomenological Research (MMPR) design to analyse female agency and other factors related to their recruitment. The research took place in Mandera County and included 64 participants from four groups, with 16 respondents in each and they include: Muslim female returnees from Al-Shabaab, security agents and policymakers, civil society Organization leaders dealing with countering violent extremism programs, and female terror victims. Participants were chosen using specific and snowball sampling methods. Data was gathered through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Interpretative phenomenological analysis /and Thematic analysis, supported by MAXQDA software, was used to analyze the data qualitatively. The findings show that women's involvement is not caused by a single factor. Instead, it results from grievances such as revenge and perceived injustice, along with socio-economic pressures and ideological manipulation. The results emphasize the importance of viewing women as individuals with personal agency and motivations, rather than just as victims. The

study suggests a comprehensive approach that involves all segments of society and government, including women and youth, in peace, security, and prevention of violent extremism efforts. This study adds new insights into the reasons behind Muslim women's involvement in violent extremism and aims to help policymakers create more effective and inclusive counter-terrorism strategies.

Keywords: Muslim women, drivers, counter-terrorism, Al Shabaab

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Introduction

The growing female involvement in violent extremism is a global challenge that meets classical constructs of women as vulnerable victims face-to-face. In the evolving face of terrorism, the dynamic roles of Muslim women in organizations like Al-Shabaab are a signature, yet under-examined, feature of the conflict (Salifu et al., 2017). Existing research and counter-terrorism measures have often adopted a masculinized understanding of violent extremism, leading to a significant lack of comprehensive understanding of the evolving roles and drivers of women, particularly in contexts like Mandera County, Kenya.

To fully grasp this phenomenon, we must move beyond reductive push factors. While such established models as Mia Bloom's (2011) "four Rs" (Revenge, Redemption, Respect, and Romanticism) provide a starting point, they are insufficient to capture the complete picture. A complete analysis should also account for rigorous pull factors, such as the sense of belonging, economic reward, and marriage. Notably, a considerable lack of empirical examination on direct participation and agency of Kenyan Muslim women in violent extremism has not fairly captured comprehension of intricate personal, socio-economic, and ideational drivers. That deficit is answered head-on by this paper. It strongly argues that women's participation is complex but an outcome of a complex mix of grievance, pragmatism, and ideology. Knowing such drivers, this study unpacks the dynamics of women's radicalization and presents qualitative and inclusive examination. The evidence will contribute to improved and gender-sensitive counter-terrorism policy, reframing women no more as victims but

actors whose motivations must be understood in order to deter future radicalization in Kenya.

Literature Review

The push and pull factor concept is a foundational framework for understanding why individuals, including women, choose to join violent extremist groups. Push factors are the drivers that compel one to join, while pull factors are the attractions that entice them (Jacobsen, 2017). The motivating factors behind women's radicalization are typically founded upon three levels of influence: organizational influence, meaning the group's agenda towards accepting women; women's influence, meaning their personal motivations; and environmental influence, which provides opportunities to both the organization and the potential recruits.

Researchers have cataloged numerous push factors, including perceptions of discrimination and alienation. Cochrane and Smith (2021) note that this is particularly relevant for Western Muslim women who experience hostility and abuse on a daily basis. Another is the quest for clarity of identity, with some women rejecting the ambiguities of Western feminism for conservative movements that provide clear roles as "homemakers and caregivers."

Moreover, status seeking and the violation of social norms are good motivators. O'rourke (2009) and Brenner (2024) explain that the aspiration of women to surpass community expectations by raising their social status may prompt them to violate traditional norms. In conservative societies like those in Kenya, these norms typically define women's roles as being in the domestic sphere, and their public presence and empowerment are limited. By adopting behaviors and roles traditionally monopolized by men, women attempt to redeem themselves and achieve a higher status. Harmon and Holmes-Eber (2014) also found that women who have experienced violence in conservative societies would join extremist groups in order to cleanse themselves and seek redemption. This is typically utilized as a recruitment tool, as can be seen in Bloom's (2011) statement that sexual violence is intentionally used as a war tactic to ensure that women have no hope of looking back.

As far-reaching as this global literature is, it falls short of explaining the specific dynamics of radicalization in Kenya. For instance, the radicalization triggers for Western women, i.e., rejection of Western feminism, are not fully relevant to the socio-political and cultural context of Mandera County. The general assumption that women are mere victims or peacebuilders has created a broad knowledge gap because there is a clear lack of empirical research on the active roles and agency of Kenyan Muslim women in violent extremism. This limited perspective overlooks the complex matrix of individual, socio-economic, and ideological determinants particular to the area.

This study aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the Mandera-specific, localized drivers. The Mandera County Action Plan (MCAP) 2019/2024 identifies a number of factors that push youth into Al-Shabaab, including proximity to the Somali border, unemployment, and inter-clan clashes. However, the MCAP evidently foregrounds that the drivers for women are distinct and more precise. This study will therefore delve into the key drivers for women's engagement as outlined in the MCAP: cultural and religious factors, absence of representation in developmental programs, and the absence of gender mainstreaming in

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives. This focused approach will provide a detailed, context-aware analysis that transcends global generalities to inform more effective local responses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is intersectionality theory, a phrase employed by law theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (Crenshaw, 1989). The theory posits that a person's social and political existence is determined by the point at which their various identities intersect, such as gender, race, class, and religion. These identities do not act in isolation; they intersect to create unique types of discrimination or privilege. For instance, the discrimination experienced by a Black woman is not simply an intersection of racism and sexism but a distinct one that arises from the two systems of oppression crossing over. It defies comprehension that one identity can fully account for an individual's life experiences.

In this article, intersectionality provides a necessary perspective through which to view how women get drawn into violent extremism in Mandera County. Three applications of the theory are utilized. First, it enables us to move beyond common, reductionist explanations of women as victims or fanatics. Instead, it has a nuanced approach that takes into consideration their complex combination of identities, such as gender, religion, marital status, and socio-economic class, to understand their motivations. Secondly, the theory illustrates how the motivations for becoming part of extremist groups can be an immediate response towards various, simultaneous forms of discrimination. Women are not only radicalized by gender discrimination, but by the manner in which it intersects with poverty, political marginalization, and ethno-religious belonging. Finally, using this model, this paper breaks away from broad theory to engage with the unique local context of Mandera. It helps to explore how some local circumstances like clan politics and political exclusion cross with women's personal identities to define their paths toward violent extremism.

Methodology

A Mixed Methods Phenomenological Research (MMPR) approach was employed, integrating Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Thematic Analysis to yield a robust and thorough understanding. A total of 64 participants from Mandera County participated, selected via purposive and snowball sampling to select a mix of responses. Purposive sampling was adopted to target in particular key groups that have first-hand experience, while snowball sampling was required to reach hard-to-reach participants, such as the returnees, through a pre-existing network of trust.

The subjects were in four categories of 16 each: Muslim female terrorist returnees, security officials and policy makers, civil society CVE program directors, and female terror victims. Intersectionality Theory was employed to conceptualize the study, and it provided a way of understanding how women's multiple social identities intersect to create their experiences. Data collection instruments, such as key informant interviews and focus group discussions, were pilot-tested in Bulla Mpya, Mandera County, to ascertain validity and reliability. Transcribed data were coded and arranged using MAXQDA software.

Analysis involved the use of IPA on personal interviews to reveal the detailed experiences of radicalization, victimization, and reintegration. IPA was used as its interpretive and descriptive quality enabled the in-depth examination of the subjective lived world of a small homogenous group of participants. It was not only necessary to describe what they experienced but, crucially, how they made sense of it. Thematic analysis then applied to group discussions and key informant data isolated recurring patterns in policy and community responses. The IPA findings guided the specific themes that we looked for in the thematic analysis to maximize complementarity between the two methods and generate a thick, multi-layered description of the phenomenon.

Throughout the research, rigorous ethical standards were followed. Informed consent was given by all participants. We employed a clear language consent form and also a verbal consent process, considering the delicate nature of the subject matter to ensure that all the participants, literate or illiterate, comprehended in full the research purpose, their rights, and the voluntary aspect of participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by the use of pseudonyms or simply referring participants by group (e.g., "Returnee 1," "Security Official") in the final report in order to protect vulnerable respondents. Participants were also screened for vulnerability on the basis of a predetermined list of criteria, including emotional distress, recent trauma, and threats to physical safety. Arrangements were made for providing protection and need-based professional counseling services, reflecting more ethical planning and care towards the well-being of all parties involved.

Findings

The study achieved a 100% response rate by engaging all 64 targeted participants. Demographic analysis showed clear patterns among the four respondent groups. Security agents were mostly in their late twenties to late thirties, with a few younger agents. In contrast, female victims of terror were typically older, mostly in their late thirties to late forties. Terrorist returnees were mainly younger, aged 18 to 27, while civil society actors ranged from 28 to 37. Educational backgrounds also varied quite a bit. Security personnel and civil society actors mostly had undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. On the other hand, female victims of terrorism and returnees had lower educational levels, with many completing secondary education or holding certificates. The qualitative data was analyzed using MAXQDA software to create a coding system. This coding framework, formalized as a codebook, allowed for the categorization of themes related to violent extremism and government policy. It provided a structured way to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in detail.

Drivers of Involvement in Violent Extremism

The analysis used an interpretive phenomenological approach to understand the complexity of participants' lived experiences, revealing three key drivers: Grievance-Based Motivations, Socio-Economic Pressures, and Ideological Manipulation. This interpretive approach goes beyond a mere description of the situation, aiming to clarify the meanings participants assign to their involvement or observations within their unique social and political settings.

Grievance-Based Motivations: Revenge and Perceived Injustice

A key theme that emerged is the importance of grievance-based motivations, particularly those connected to perceived injustice and revenge. Participants expressed a widespread feeling of political exclusion and marginalization, stating they felt neglected and disenfranchised by the system. Interviews showed a general lack of trust in local government institutions due to corruption, weak rule of law, and ineffective public services. This has weakened faith in the legitimate state. A sensitive yet critical issue was the overreach of security operations. Painful stories of human rights abuses, arbitrary arrests, and harsh tactics by security forces often drove communities away instead of deterring extremism. This fosters deep resentment and unwittingly supported extremist narratives that painted the government as oppressive.

Their accounts depict a "broken contract" between citizens and the state, where harsh security measures generate resentment instead of compliance. For example, the stories of women seeking revenge for family members harmed or killed in counter-terror operations show a cycle where trauma drives more radicalization. This desire for revenge is not just an abstract idea; it is a visceral response to deep loss and injustice, shaping women's choices to connect with extremist groups.

> *"Some women are grieving. They might have witnessed things, suffered at the hands of security forces, or lost a loved one. That anger, that sense of injustice, drives some of them to extreme actions, revenge." (Victim 3, FGD_Bulla mpya).*
>
> *"It's a vicious circle. I know of cases, of women being recruited by Al-Shabaab with the precise purpose of taking revenge for their husbands, their sons, or their brothers being killed. When security officers injure their kin, it is a very deep wound, and certain women feel that the only thing they can do is revenge." (Returnees, 2, FGD_Bulla Power).*
>
> *"Although revenge is a very powerful feeling, I think that it's too easy to assume that it's the single most powerful motivation. There are quite a lot of women who are just badly informed or otherwise have no choice but to play this role, not solely motivated by a need for revenge. We have to think about more than just anger." (Returnees, 1, FGD_Bulla Power)*

This finding aligns with Bloom's (2011) "Four Rs" framework, which identifies Revenge for the death of loved ones as a primary push factor. The data illustrates a vicious cycle where injuries or killings of kin by security officials lead women to seek vengeance, sometimes by joining groups like Al-Shabaab. This resonates with the UNPD (2017) report, which found that grievances against the government, particularly the "killing of a family member or a friend" or an arrest, are significant drivers for women's involvement in violent extremism.

From an interpretative phenomenological analysis perspective, this emphasizes the personal and shared meaning given to experiences of injustice and loss. Revenge is not just a political calculation; it is a deeply felt emotional response linked to identity and survival. However, the data also complicates simple views that reduce women's motivations solely to revenge. Some participants pointed out the roles of misinformation, coercion, and a lack of alternatives, highlighting vulnerabilities that go beyond emotional responses. These details underscore that

involvement arises from a mix of emotional, social, and cognitive factors rather than a single motivation—an important insight for understanding the personal experiences of women in extremism. This finding contradicts earlier perceptions by researchers like Bloom (2007) and Nagarajan (2016), who often portrayed women as easily manipulated or coerced, implying a lack of rational choice. Instead, this qualitative insight emphasizes the importance of factoring in vulnerabilities, limited options, and manipulation, alongside emotional reactions. This broader perspective aligns with the nuanced understanding called for by scholars like Nzomo (2018), who argues that women possess agency and their involvement cannot be understood solely through the lens of male influence, but rather through a comprehensive appreciation of human capacities for both compassion and violence.

Socio-Economic Pressures and Survival Pragmatism

Another layer arises from participants' thoughts on socio-economic pressures and the need for survival. Many women noted social isolation and exclusion as critical factors leading to radicalization. Many women who got involved reportedly lacked strong, positive social networks. They often felt socially isolated and excluded from their communities due to factors like stigma, marital breakdown, or displacement. Extremist groups that offer a sense of "family," belonging, and acceptance appeal to those who feel marginalized. This practical attraction to extremist networks serves as an escape from loneliness and economic hardship. Adding to this vulnerability was the strong influence of peers, which played a significant role in drawing women into extremist circles. Interviews and focus groups showed how subtle encouragement or pressure from friends or social networks worked not as overt force, but as a gradual pull through trusted relationships. In this context, adopting extremist views became a way to maintain social ties or gain acceptance within a radicalized peer group. This highlighted the powerful, often subconscious desire to belong and avoid being excluded.

One of the most alarming factors identified was the influence of radicalized family members. Reports confirmed that spouses, parents, or siblings already involved in extremist activities often acted as key channels for radicalization. This familial connection offered a unique level of trust and emotional leverage, making it extremely hard for women to resist or question the ideology. Tragically, this turned the home, meant to be a place of safety, into a recruitment ground where extremist beliefs were normalized and participation was often seen as a duty or a way to achieve family unity. Besides these emotional grievances, economic vulnerability has also emerged as a significant driver of women's involvement in extremism. In an environment marked by widespread poverty and limited opportunities, the need for basic survival and material security for their families becomes a strong attraction. This is especially true for women whose husbands are already part of extremist groups, where long-term membership often promises some form of material support.

> *"For others, it's a survival issue. If their husbands join up, then they think they have no option but to follow, or at least get into position, so that the family can be maintained. It's a harsh fact when poverty forces it to happen." (Returnee 1, FGD_Bulla township).*
>
> *"It's not belly, so much as ideology that's hungry. If the*

husband is not there, or if he's providing through that mobility, the wife will stay, because who is going to feed the kids? It's not doctrine, it's necessity." (Civil society leaders, KII_Male)

This analysis highlights how this search for stability reflects a need for connection, purpose, and material support. Involvement in extremism is rooted in social contexts of deprivation and fragmentation, making ideological beliefs inseparable from everyday realities. These findings challenge simplistic models that view ideology separate from socio-economic issues, calling for a more complete understanding of involvement as a mix of ideological, emotional, and practical elements. The findings highlight that the potential for basic subsistence and material security for their families often becomes a compelling motivator, especially for women whose husbands are already members of extremist groups. This finding aligns with Jacques and Tailor (2013), who identified economic motivation as a common trait among women joining terrorist groups, particularly those who are single parents or face unemployment. The qualitative data therefore dissolves reductionist explanations that solely attribute involvement to ideological commitment, instead asserting a pragmatic, survival-based dimension to women's decision-making.

This emphasis on economic necessity over pure ideology is further underscored by observations that women may remain with extremist groups because their husbands provide through that affiliation, making it a matter of necessity for feeding their children rather than doctrine. This aligns with Ali's (2018) argument that many women return from violent extremism because they have children and require distinct economic needs, often becoming breadwinners in the process. It also resonates with the UNDP (2017) report, which highlighted economic factors as significant drivers in women's involvement in terror activities, suggesting that the instrumental role played by extremist groups in providing material support is a powerful pull factor for women facing financial precarity. This perspective challenges the notion that ideological commitment is the sole or primary driver, showing a more instrumental, survival-oriented motivation.

Ideological Manipulation and Exploited Vulnerabilities

A further interpretive point involves the manipulation of ideology and the exploitation of vulnerabilities. Participants shared how distorted extremist narratives, which promise divine justice and community, appeal strongly, especially in unstable environments. Recruiters often tailor their messages to individual grievances, presenting what participants saw as a "clear path forward," showing how ideology becomes internalized as a source of identity and hope in difficult times.

Beyond social and political issues, the strong attraction of extremist narratives served as a major reason for some women in Mandera. Interviews with returnees and observations from civil society showed how these ideologies, despite being harmful, could seem to offer legitimacy and a clear vision. They often made promises of divine justice, spiritual purity, or a perfect society free from corruption. This provided a powerful, even appealing alternative for those unhappy with their current situations. This troubling attraction was often intensified by the widespread effects of religious misunderstandings. Extremist groups skillfully twisted established religious teachings to justify violence, recruit followers, and enforce harsh ideologies.

This gave many women, who often play vital roles in their communities' religious life, a misguided sense of moral approval for their involvement.

From this perspective, the experience of ideological indoctrination carries significant emotional and cognitive weight; it is not just about persuasion but also about changing identity. The data shows how extremist groups take advantage of gaps in religious knowledge, using the term “jihad” deceptively to give a false sacred legitimacy to violence and membership. For many women, especially those from troubled backgrounds, these groups appear to offer a safe haven, a substitute family, and a sense of belonging. This highlights how extremist ideology can gain much meaning through trust and social connections, challenging the simplistic view of ideology as mere propaganda.

Importantly, charismatic recruiters stood out as a strong influence. These individuals, whether met online or in person, had a special talent for connecting with vulnerable women on a personal level. They could pinpoint individual grievances or hopes and cleverly link them to the extremist message, offering tailored solutions, validation, and a misleading but clear path forward. In the end, many women found the appeal of extremist groups in their promise of a strong sense of belonging and purpose. In settings marked by social instability, economic struggle, and limited opportunities, these organizations provided a ready-made identity, a defined role, and a cause that seemed bigger than them. This was especially attractive to younger women or those going through personal crises. These groups offered a structure, a community, and a clear mission that seemed to promise meaning and significance in lives that otherwise felt directionless. The extensive application of ideological manipulation, in the guise of misinterpretation of Islamic text, was confirmed as the main driver for participation in violence.

Extremist groups, especially Al-Shabaab, are adept at manipulating religious teaching, i.e. the concept of 'Jihad', to justify violence and recruit followers. This manipulation is most effective where, as with many like women and young children, there is a lack of detailed religious education or exposure to trusted counter-narrative. The promise of religious reward or a "true" Islamic way of life, however false, can have great appeal to the purpose or meaning-seeker. Furthermore, in the instance of young females, dysfunctional homes marked by conflict or neglect trigger acute vulnerabilities. Terrorist recruiters exploit the emotional void and offer an illusory sense of belonging, family, or escape from their desperate realities by projecting the group as a surrogate support system.

> *"The greatest issue is how they warp our faith. They're saying to women, to youth, especially, that what they're doing is 'jihad,' this sort of Islamic holy war. But it's not, a complete misperception of what Islam really has to say about peace and justice. They are /abusing the uninformed." (Civil society leaders, KII_Female).*
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> *"They abuse the term 'jihad' so skillfully. They manipulate it to make it seem like it's a struggle for God, a means to paradise, when in fact it's merely destruction and violence. It's because many lack good religious education that they get duped by these erroneous understandings." (Policy maker, KII_Bulla township)*
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> *"You meet these girls who have very bad home relationships, always fighting with parents or guardians, rejected. They think they have no place to go and*

therefore turn to Al-Shabaab. The group offers them an illusion of a family or home." (Security Agent, KII_Male).

"If a girl feels unwanted, unloved at home, if the world becomes poisoned for her, she's an open invitation. These groups take advantage of that openness and offer her a seemingly 'safe' alternative haven or a new 'family' where she's made to feel appreciated, even if it's only in an illusory sense of danger." (Victim, 6, FGD_Bulla mpya).

This theme ties into broader sociological and psychological views of radicalization as a slow, socially accepted change in identity, often facilitated by trusted figures (Autcher, 2012). The emotional support, recognition, and significance provided by militant groups become a powerful motivator that should be central to intervention efforts. The pervasive use of ideological manipulation, particularly through the misinterpretation of Islamic texts, was confirmed as a primary driver for women's involvement in violence. Extremist groups are adept at distorting religious teachings, such as 'Jihad', to justify violence and recruit followers. This manipulation is particularly effective where individuals, especially women and youth, lack detailed religious education or exposure to credible counter-narratives. The promise of religious reward or a "true" Islamic way of life, however false, can hold immense appeal for those seeking purpose or meaning, aligning with Campbella's (2015) claim that women's participation can be motivated by deceptive religious doctrines.

Furthermore, the qualitative data highlights how extremist recruiters exploit the acute vulnerabilities of young females from dysfunctional homes marked by conflict or neglect. Insights reveal that girls facing difficult home relationships, feeling unwanted or rejected, may turn to extremist groups who offer an illusion of a new family or haven. This resonates with the "Relationship" component of Bloom's (2011) "Four Rs," where women join groups when a relative is already a member, suggesting a search for belonging and connection. This exploitation of emotional voids and the provision of an illusory sense of belonging or escape aligns with Badurdeen (2018) assertion that a sense of belonging and identity are key factors in the radicalization process of women, particularly when combined with the inaccurate interpretation of religion and the vulnerabilities of youth. The groups leverage these pre-existing vulnerabilities to offer a seemingly 'safe' alternative, even if it is built on a dangerous illusion.

These findings thus highlight various and often connected reasons for women's involvement in violent extremism, especially with Al-Shabaab. Key factors include personal grievances and the desire for revenge against injustices or victimization by security forces, as well as the loss of male relatives, like husbands, sons, and brothers. Socio-economic pressures and family dynamics also play a big role. Women often join to support their families when their husbands engage in fighting or to escape challenging home situations, such as forced marriages. Additionally, incorrect interpretations of Islam and Jihad, along with influence from friends, colleagues, and family members who are already part of Al-Shabaab, contribute to radicalization and recruitment.

The findings suggest that counter-extremism strategies should be nuanced and go beyond simplistic blame or victim narratives. Interventions need to validate and address the complex realities women face by recognizing emotional traumas, socio-economic struggles, relational influences, and cognitive vulnerabilities.

The importance of close social networks and relational recruitment indicates that prevention efforts should focus on community-based approaches. Trusted local actors can help build resilience and create alternative pathways for belonging and support. Gender-sensitive programs should address the specific social roles that extremist groups exploit, such as "Jihadi Brides," and offer meaningful alternatives that meet the psychological and material needs these groups claim to satisfy. Additionally, understanding the gradual and complex nature of ideological indoctrination highlights the need for ongoing engagement that encourages critical thinking and empowers women's agency within culturally relevant frameworks. Practical support services, along with credible religious education and trauma-informed counseling, are vital for breaking the cycle of radicalization.

Summary of the Findings

The first objective of this study was to analyze the drivers of the involvement of Muslim women in violent extremism, a case study of Mandera County Kenya. The question was that was asked was that what are the drivers of the involvement of Muslim women in violent extremism in Mandera County, Kenya? The study found that Muslim women's involvement in violent extremism in Mandera County is driven by a complex mix of personal, emotional, social, and economic factors. Many respondents cited revenge for the loss or unjust killing of loved ones as a primary motivator. Women who had experienced personal or familial trauma due to conflict or state violence often found themselves emotionally driven to seek justice or retaliate. Others were driven by economic desperation, especially in contexts where local industries had collapsed, and alternative means of survival were limited. The loss of employment, particularly after the closure of quarries and the border with Somalia, left many women and their families economically strained. In these circumstances, joining extremist groups that promised monetary support or basic provisions became a viable, albeit dangerous, alternative. Furthermore, some women expressed a desire for belonging and purpose, especially those who had been marginalized socially or had experienced domestic abuse. Violent extremist groups often offered them not only financial incentives but also emotional support and ideological justification, presenting their struggles as part of a larger cause. The study's findings indicate that women's choices to engage in extremism were frequently framed as pragmatic and deliberate rather than forced or naïve. Overall, the motivations reflect a rational calculus grounded in the immediate pressures and hardships women face in conflict-affected settings like Mandera.

Conclusion

This study explored the various reasons why Muslim women get involved in Al-Shabaab's violent extremism in Mandera County, Kenya. From the findings, it is evident that Muslim women's involvement in violent extremism is shaped by a mix of personal motivations, social pressures, structural inequalities, and strategic agency. The findings show that women's motivations are complex and cannot be narrowed down to one single cause. They are influenced by a mix of grievances, like a desire for revenge due to perceived state injustices and abuses by security forces, as well as socio-economic pressures. These pressures include a practical need for survival, a sense of belonging, and family influences. The study also pointed out that ideological manipulation and the exploitation of vulnerabilities play a significant role.

Extremist narratives give women a false sense of purpose and community, especially those facing personal crises and social isolation. These factors are interconnected and challenge simplistic views of women's involvement, emphasizing their personal agency and rational choices in a challenging environment.

Counter-terrorism efforts, while necessary, have sometimes caused additional harm by undermining trust, contributing to family disintegration, and exposing communities to abuses of power. These unintended consequences further alienate affected populations and may, paradoxically, create the very vulnerabilities that extremist groups exploit. Therefore, any effective response must incorporate a holistic and gender-sensitive approach that considers the nuanced realities of women in conflict-affected areas.

Recommendations

Based on our evidence, we present the following elaborate policy recommendations to promote more effective and comprehensive counter-terrorism policies.

Address Perceived State Injustices and Enhance Security Oversight: Counter-extremism must address the root grievances and emotional wounds caused by perceived state injustices. Security operations must adopt a human rights approach to prevent revenge and radicalization. Priorities include establishing an open and clearly defined oversight mechanism for security agents in Mandera County, ensuring accountability among agents for human rights abuses, and incorporating trauma-informed counselling into programs of community rehabilitation.

Combine Targeted Socio-Economic Interventions: Policymakers have to target investments in employment generation, vocational training, and women-targeted microenterprise initiatives. These programs need to be so context-specific as to, for instance, re-stimulate neighbourhood industries like quarrying and enable safe, regulated cross-border trade. These initiatives provide a tangible alternative to economic inducements offered by extremist organisations and address a key recruiter of women.

Promote Community-Led and Gender-Sensitive P/CVE Initiatives: Counter-violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives must be led by local credible actors like women, religious leaders, and civil society. Community-led initiatives are central to developing real counter-narratives to the extremist narrative and building resilience in important social and family institutions. Specific activities must target the roles and needs of women, making them peace agents and enhancing their sense of belonging and purpose.

Recommendations for Future Research

To further our knowledge and support evidence-based interventions, the following areas need closer examination:

Future research should focus on the respective roles religious communities and clergymen can play in empowering or delaying women's radicalization. A study of this kind might explore whether de-radicalization programs sponsored by such stakeholders are effective or not, and their grassroots level of trust within communities, in order to learn how best to deploy authoritative religious voices in countering terrorist narratives.

There would be a need for an overall policy and implementation review to identify how gender considerations are currently included in Kenya's national counter-terrorism and P/CVE policies. The research would help bridge the gap between women's actual lives and state

responses, and identify where policies fall short in addressing the particular drivers of female radicalization.

Further research can also examine the real social and family networks wherein radicalization occurs. A look at the interaction dynamics of peer and family influence would provide us with data on how extremist ideologies are being delivered and how one should develop resistance in these important social structures. Understanding these relationship channels is critical in developing effective and targeted prevention strategies.

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