



Young Women and Terrorism: A Gendered Approach to Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in Kenya

Executive Summary

The involvement of women in violent extremist and terrorist groups is on the rise in Kenya and the Horn of Africa region. Women, as opposed to men, have long been treated majorly as victims of terrorism and violent extremism. Resultantly, women have received lesser scrutiny by security agencies and policy-makers. As a consequence, extremist and terrorist groups recruit women into their activities for tactical and strategic reasons. Therefore, security agencies and policy actors should equally involve women in P/CVE and scrutinize their involvement in violent extremism and terrorism. This brief highlights the roles, motivations, and vulnerabilities of women to violent extremism and terrorism, and advances a gendered approach to P/CVE.

Introduction

The mention of Samantha Lewthwaite alias 'the White widow', as a mastermind of the September 21, 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, which left about 67 people dead, upset the Kenyan public's perception towards women and violent extremism. In 2016, Maimuna Abdirahman Hussein, Ramla

Abdirahman Hussein, and Tasmin Farah Abdudallahi, all young women, attacked a police station in Mombasa but were fatally shot in retaliation. Three more women, Naema Mohammed Ahmed, Saida Ali Haji, and Shukri Ali Haji were arrested for housing the ringleader (also a woman) of the women who attacked the police station in Mombasa, Tasnim Yakub (Ondieki et al., 2016).

In their 2017 study, Ndung'u, Salifu, and Sigworth (2017) observe that the trend of women joining terrorist groups is on the rise in Kenya. Koigi (2016) also warns that this trend is growing across East Africa and that radicalization and recruitment of women is going on across social spaces. In 2015, 40 Australian women were involved in the activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terror group in Syria, Iraq, and Australia. In the first five months of 2017, one of every four terrorist attacks in Europe involved women as perpetrators. Women were perpetrators of 13 per cent of terror attacks in Europe in 2014, 5 per cent of 2015 and, 22 per cent of 2016 and 2017 terrorist attacks (Bergin, 2017).



Roles of Women in Extremist and Terrorist Groups

Women play strategic roles including spies, facilitators for networking and mobilization, and recruiters for the terror organizations. However, they also play professional roles in logistics, accountancy, courier, and medical care for the groups (Bergin, 2017). For instance, Shamisa Noor, a young Kenyan woman, joined ISIS to serve as a medical officer after her medical course at Africa International University of Khartoum. She was later killed by United States airstrikes (Ondieki et al., 2016). Bergin (2017) observes that some of the women involved in violent extremism have established international networks of successful businesses and charities that fund these extremist groups. Their online presence is used in production and distribution of extremist propaganda. They create chat forums and propaganda tailored to attract recruits. They also extend extremist information to second-generation Muslims, Western converts, young and educated Muslim women from families with no tradition of *jihad* and women on travel. Women also provide comfort

for the Mujahedeen fighting on the frontlines. They are, in most cases, used as sex slaves (Koigi, 2016; Ndung'u, Salifu & Sigsworth, 2017).

Motivations for Women Joining Violent Extremist Groups

Analysis of motivations reveals uniformity between men and women who join Islamist extremist and terror groups. Such motivations range from solidarity with the 'oppressed and persecuted' Muslim nation (*ummah*) or against a certain social group (in case of non-religious extremism), and employment or financial gain, to the call to the noble and just duty of every Muslim – *jihad* (Koigi, 2016). Shamisa, for instance, cited the oppression of Muslims as well as the call to *jihad* (for all Muslims) as the main reasons she joined ISIS (Ondieki et al., 2016). The lack of proper understanding of the Quran, peer influence, dysfunctional family backgrounds, and experiences of abuse also expose women to radicalization into violent extremism (Ondieki et al., 2016). However, other women join or support terrorist groups as a result of filial attachments. They join under the influence of their

brothers, husbands, sisters or even fathers who are already members of such groups (Bloom, 2017).

Women on the Frontlines

Suicide bombing as a tactic of extremist and terrorist groups is increasingly involving women because they are less likely to be suspected or scrutinized and can thus access soft targets such as crowded market places, bus and train stations, and refugee and military camps easily (Warner & Matfess, 2017). In West Africa for instance, Boko Haram has been using female suicide bombers since 2014. A study by Warner and Matfess between 2011 and 2017 reveals that the group sent 434 bombers to 247 targets in 238 separate attacks. 56 per cent of these suicide bombers were women and 81 were teenagers and children. Among the teenagers or children recruited as suicide bombers, Boko Haram prefers girls to boys in a ratio of four to one, according to the study. For instance, of the 81 teens and children, 42 were teenage girls and 23 were young girls below teenage. From January 2016 to May 2017, Boko Haram's use of women suicide bombers increased from 60 per cent to 68 per cent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is evident that women are capable of joining, helping and carrying out terrorist-related activities. Policy and practice of P/CVE should, therefore, embrace a gendered approach, and even use women as agents of preventing and countering violent extremism in their traditional roles as mothers, and as community leaders and professionals.

Schools, Universities and Religious Education Institutions

The administration, parents, and regulatory bodies of learning institutions which have female enrolment should mainstream P/CVE education and maintain close monitoring and communication channels on any forms of radicalization into violent extremism and terrorism.

Kenya Prisons Service

Empowerment programs such as industrial training and post-jail re-integration programs that include livelihood stabilization should be implemented for female terror convicts. De-radicalization programs and positive or counter narratives should be advanced to pre-empt and prevent formation of extremist cells in women's prisons.

Mosque and Madrassa Administrators in Kenya

Internal regulatory frameworks should be developed to safeguard Islamic preaching from extremist encroachment of radical clerics. More access to the Qur'an and clerical guidance should

be given to young Muslim women to improve their understanding of Islam and the Qur'an.

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Grassroots community awareness creation campaigns should be carried out around women's involvement in violent extremism and terrorism. Parents, especially mothers, should be sensitized on young people's (especially women) vulnerabilities so as to enable them to effectively monitor, guide and report to security agencies, any development towards violent extremism and terrorism in their children (especially daughters). Parents and other family members should be sensitized to reject and report family members linked to violent extremism and terrorism so as to prevent them from pulling along remaining young female members of the family.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of Immigration

Monitor movement of (young) women especially between Kenya and terror-prone countries and regions in Africa and the Middle East. Background checks, travel reasons and contact links in destination countries should be established and monitored.

County Governments

Economic programs and opportunities that create employment and gainful enterprises for young women should be promoted and sustained to destroy the lure of financial and employment rewards from extremist and terrorist groups.

National Counter Terrorism Centre, County Peace Committees

Women should be involved in P/CVE policy-making and implementation from national to county and grassroots levels.

Kenya National Police Service

Women security officers perform well in building trust between communities and security agencies and thus should be more involved in P/CVE as well as in conducting security checks on civilian women.

Sources

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