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Harnessing Kenyan Mothers Knowledge to Counter Violent Extremism: A Contribution to Feminist Philosophical Approaches

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Abstract. The capturing of the knowledge of Kenyan mothers can improve the effectiveness of countering violent extremism efforts. This is because African women possess power and agency within their societies that contributes to their knowledge. This paper analyses the knowledge and experience

of mothers whose sons joined the al Shabaab violent extremist organisation in Somalia as a contribution to African feminist epistemology. It interrogates the epistemological representation of African women in violent extremism practice from a knowledge production perspective. The paper explores the contribution of mothers of al-Shabaab recruits to African feminist epistemology on approaches to address violent extremism. Through an African feminist narratological approach, the paper contributes to the reclamation of African women's place in knowledge production. The paper coins an African feminist grounded theory, '*Nafsi African feminism*' that denotes that African women's knowledge is based on a convergence of their power and vulnerabilities borne out of their lived experiences. Through its study findings, utilising the NVivo data analysis software to thematise, the paper reveals that the knowledge of mothers of al Shabaab recruits touches on institutions, processes, structures, and systems including sociology, political science, education, religion, and health. The paper concludes by calling for the reclamation and capturing of African feminist epistemology to contribute to a holistic and effective approach to addressing violent extremism.

Keywords: African, Women, Epistemology, Power, Agency.

Introduction

Discourse on violent extremism peripheralizes African women's knowledge based on their lived experiences rendering it ineffective. The field of violent extremism is male-centric resulting from patriarchal processes of knowledge production. Where African women's knowledge has been included, it has been distorted, inferiorised, misrepresented, subordinated, or subjugated (Spender, 1985, Moguerou, Imam, Mama, Sow, 2004). This despite the fact that women are affected by and contribute to violent extremism, and to efforts to counter it. The exclusion of African women's voices is evident in the knowledge production of policy, practice and scholarship that aims to address violent extremism. Ali and Mwambari (2021) note that this omission is fuelled by various aspects such as gender, colonialism, religion, or race.

By not capturing African feminist knowledge on violent extremism, policymakers, practitioners and scholars are missing out on African women's insights into addressing violent extremism. This masculinised positionality of violent extremism has not gone unchallenged. Through an African feminist epistemological approach, the prevalent social order, including discourses, practices, structures, and systems on violent extremism are continually confronted (Pivec, 2015, Ahmed, 2010). This has been through the questioning of the patriarchal ownership, and masculinised language used in knowledge production, confronting the power and privilege that makes African women's knowledge peripheral (Gasztold, 2020). In addition, it challenges the practice of white women speaking for African women on their knowledge and experiences of violent extremism, and instead brings in African women's lived realities while acknowledging their diverse experiences, broadening the depth and scope of knowledge on, and in Africa (Shepherd, 2022; Zakaria, 2021).

This paper is framed from an African epistemological perspective and showcases African women's knowledge of violent extremism and related fields. It does this through knowledge gained from the lived experiences of mothers in Majengo, Nairobi, Kenya, whose children joined al Shabaab, a violent extremist organisation.

The paper analyses the experience of mothers whose sons have joined the al Shabaab violent extremist organisation, and captures it as knowledge. The paper explores how the knowledge of the mothers of al-Shabaab recruits, contributes to African feminist epistemology on approaches to address violent extremism? The paper interrogates the epistemological representation of African women in violent extremism practice from a knowledge production perspective. This paper opines that African

women are best placed to voice their own experiences, challenges, successes, and victories to inform public knowledge (Kabira, W.M, Mbote, Kabira, N., Meroka, Eds, 2018). This is because African women's knowledge on violent extremism is emergent and differs from that of men (Okech, 2020).

Literature review

Knowledge production is about having and retaining male power and privilege. This is historically evident as espoused by notable Greek scholars like Aristotle, Hegel and Plato who opined that women were incapable of logical reasoning (IEP, 2023). Scholars, like Stevanović (2023) term this untrue by noting that women in Greek history were the experts in medical-related fields. Currently, at less than 1 % globally, scholars and researchers have systematically excluded African women in knowledge production (Assié-Lumumba, 2020, Anbi and Lazaar, 2021). This exclusion extends to the field of violent extremism as noted by Aroussi and Ali (2023). Policy makers do not sufficiently include women's input on how to address violent extremism, relegating them instead to the prevention domain (Fink, Barakat, Shetret, 2013). Yet, studies have shown that where women are involved particularly at policymaking levels, it reduces the likelihood of violence occurring (O'Reilly, 2015). Despite this knowledge, in what Gasztold (2020) refers to as the male gaze, women still remain invisibilized in knowledge on violent extremism, with men speaking for and on behalf of women based on their male understanding resultantly distorting women's reality. Ndung'u, Salifu and Sigsworth (2017) note that even when attempts have been made to capture the experiences of women on violent extremism, there has been very minimal focus on African women.

To address this, Shepherd (2022) and Zakaria (2021) argue for the adoption of an African feminist lens to epistemology which challenges this exclusion, and calls for the capturing of women's knowledge based on their diverse lived realities. This towards increasing the effectiveness of efforts to address violent extremism. As Dunn (2021) notes, the value add of women's knowledge is that it is vast, contextualised and transverses several domains. This is reflected in the knowledge of African women on violent extremism which intersects with economics, education, health, sociology, and political science.

African feminist grounded theory – '*Nafsi*' African feminism.

Afrocentric epistemic feminist thought calls for the validation and production of knowledge through alternative means including daily conversations (Collins, 1990). It allows for emphasis on an African feminist standpoint that acknowledges the social factors, complexities, and identities that homogenise rather than heterogenises knowledge (Longino and Lennon, 1997; Knowles, 2021).

Lorde (1984) asserts current prevailing scientific methods of inquiry are male-centric, and not ideal in the capturing of African feminist knowledge. This paper utilises a narratological approach based on African feminist grounded theory. This allows for an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of women, particularly those whose voices have previously been left out of the knowledge sphere (Plummer and Young, 2010). This approach, advanced by Mama (2011) and Hunsu (2015) centralises the subject, in this paper, mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits. It foregrounds their experiences, redefining knowledge on violent extremism from an African feminist perspective.

This paper coins and grounds itself on '*Nafsi*' (the essence of being) African feminist theory of the convergence of power and vulnerability. This theory is subjective in capturing the individual experiences of African women and translating them into collective Afrocentric feminist knowledge on countering violent extremism. '*Nafsi*' African feminism, in this paper, furthers that mothers of recruits

of violent extremism bring knowledge based on their experiences of reinforcing factors of power and vulnerability.

It posits that one, any individual woman has both power and vulnerability that are mutually constitutive of each other and that inform the African woman's knowledge. Two, this power comes from the African woman's role as an influential nurturer within both her family and society. Three, the African woman's power is intrinsic and enables her to contribute to knowledge based on her lived experiences. Fourth, this power is embedded with the African woman's vulnerability borne out of her life experiences which may include poverty, sexual and gender-based violence, homelessness, being orphaned, sickness, marginalisation, and ostracization.

Materials and methods

This paper employs a qualitative approach to African feminist research methods. It is based on a 2021 field study in Majengo, an informal settlement in Nairobi that captured the experiences of 21 mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits. al Shabaab is a violent extremist organisation headquartered in Somalia but with Kenya as one of its key recruitment and support bases.

The study covered the period 1998–2018 when several young people left Majengo, Nairobi to join al Shabaab in Somalia. The study gathered primary data through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions with the mothers to build a collective body of knowledge on violent extremism from an African feminist perspective. The study also obtained secondary data through key informant interviews with opinion leaders, community members, local administration, civil society actors, and religious leaders to get their perspectives on the mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits, and from available literature on the subject matter.

Due to the highly securitized and sensitive nature of the violent extremism issue, the respondents were anonymised and the information treated with the required confidentiality. The African feminist experiential research design employed is both descriptive and exploratory, and focused on validating the mothers' experiences as knowledge. The study utilised feminist narratology to shift the power of self-representation to the mothers and capture their knowledge within their political and socio-cultural context.

Cognisant of an African feminist research approach, the mothers had the power to choose where to hold the conversations, and when (date and time). They also chose the language to be used and had the liberty to stop the conversations at any time, and to only share what they felt comfortable with. The study utilised NVivo 12, a data software program to analyse the unstructured text, audio, video, and image data including interviews and focused group discussions, to capture and thematise the findings and inform African feminist epistemology. The study took ethical considerations into account.

Results and Discussion

Mothers' knowledge of violent extremism and related aspects

The study revealed that the mothers' knowledge is holistic and touches on institutions, processes, structures, and systems like sociology, political science, education including religious education, health, and social problems like drug abuse, sexual violence, teenage motherhood, and economic disparities. Some of the knowledge that the mothers shared on these aspects is outlined herein.

The Sociology of Vulnerabilities

The mothers strongly opined that to address violent extremism, it is not sufficient to focus only on the alleged extremists. Actors including policy makers and security agents must delve into historical family backgrounds and social contexts to understand better how these influence decisions to join violent extremist organisations. The Majengo, Nairobi mothers noted that to effectively address the issue of violent extremism, the social and structural context in Majengo, Nairobi that they experienced and brought up their sons who went to join al Shabaab needs to be well understood.

This includes understanding the mothers' backgrounds which impacted how they brought up their sons and contributed to the decisions their sons took to join a violent extremist organisation. The mothers grew up with structural challenges that included poverty, poor or no access to formal education, gendered social restrictions, and unemployment. This, coupled with social challenges that included drugs and substance abuse, sexual violence, teenage pregnancies, commercial sex work, early marriages, adultery, divorce, poor parenting, crime, and religious sectarianism.

These aspects formed part of their vulnerabilities which also impacted their sons. Within these contextual realities, the mothers exercised power and agency and were able to bring up their sons, at times singlehandedly, who later left to join al Shabaab.

90% of the respondents became mothers between the ages of 13 and 17. Only 10 % became mothers at the age of 18 and above (Fig. 1).

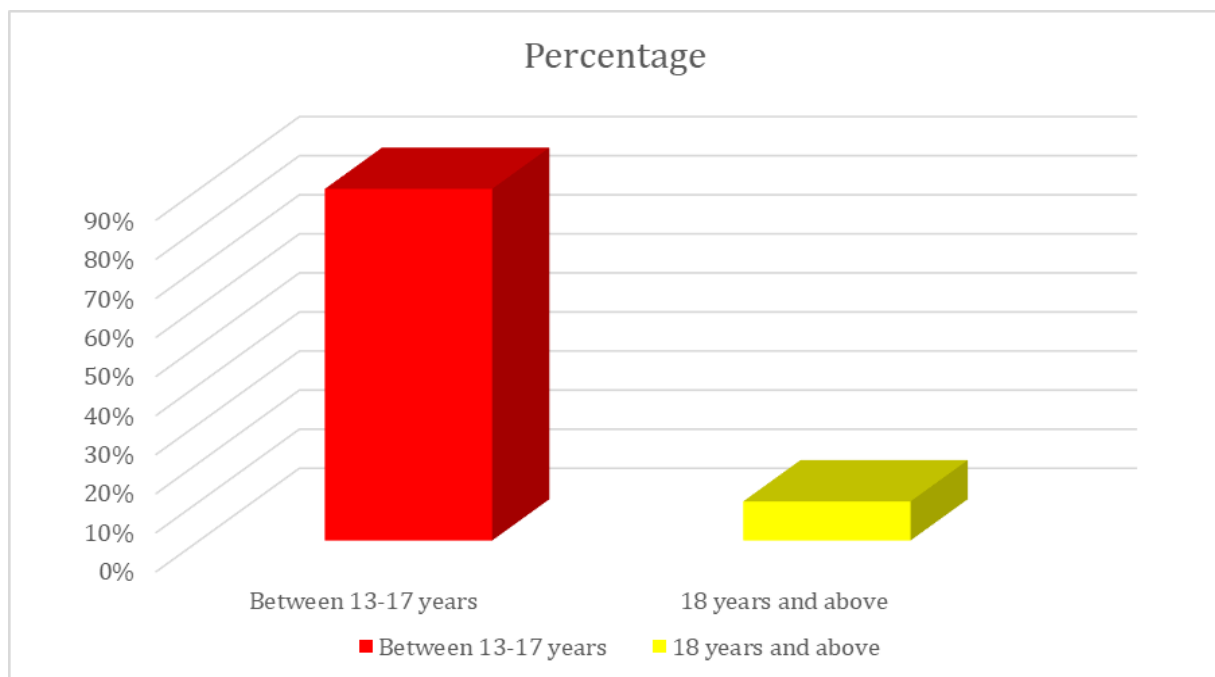


Figure 1. Early childbearing among mothers of male al Shabaab recruits

Source: (Nzovu, field notes, January – June 2021).

On drugs, sexual violence, gendered social restrictions, homelessness, and commercial sex work, Habiba shared, “I was orphaned at a young age and taken in by a foster parent, who passed on when I was in standard seven. I became homeless. I was drowning in despair. I started abusing drugs which I could not afford so I found people to buy for me. I also engaged in illegal businesses and prostitution. At the time; unfortunately, there were no positive role

models in my neighbourhood. I had an 'uncle' (may God rest his soul in peace) that sexually abused me". (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 15 April 2021).

On living with disability, adultery, and singlehandedly fending for the family, Mariam said, "I am physically disabled from polio at a young age. This is the reason men toy with me. My first suitor impregnated me but did not marry me; the second and third one did the same. Ah! I viewed myself as being full of bad luck. After a while, I met the father of my three younger children, fortunately, he wanted to marry me. He even converted to Islam. However, fending for the family was all up to me. His money is spent on sex workers on the twilight lanes." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 15 April 2021)

Zara speaks of poverty, single motherhood, gender-based violence, teenage marriage and motherhood, and negative societal issues, "Our father died while we were young, we were raised by our mother and grandmother. Our mother struggled to raise us. Being raised by a single mother is not a joke, she sourced our food and educated us. I reached class eight and was unable to continue as she could no longer afford it. I then met a boy from Majengo, I fell in love with him, and we got married. I was married at the age of 16 and gave birth at 17 in 2001. He was not bad at the beginning but after some time he started being violent. My mother did not want me to get married to him because he was a thief, but I did." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 16 April 2021)

Education – the violent extremism panacea?

The mothers shared on, education and the power to speak. They spoke of their limited access to formal education and how this negatively impacts their level of agency to speak out on matters of violent extremism, and to be considered relevant enough to contribute to policy discussions on the same. Language is a barrier to the inclusion of African feminist voices, and in Kenya, policy spaces and discussions are dominated by the mastery and use of the English language.

The study revealed that only 33% of the mothers finished primary school, 19 secondary school until Form 2, 5% Form 3, and 5% Form 4. 10% had no formal education at all (Fig.2).

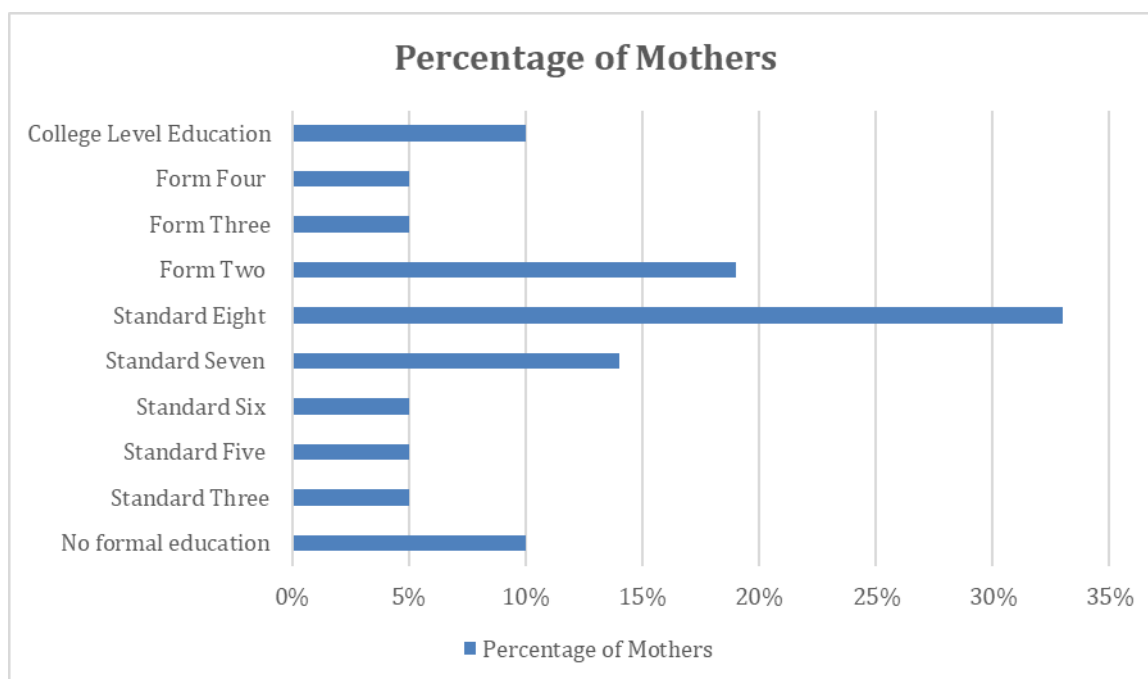


Figure 2. Education levels of mothers of male al Shabaab recruits

Source: (Nzovu, field notes, January – June 2021).

As Manar said, “I was born on the south side of Majengo in a village called ‘*Mtaa wa Chini*’. Both my parents are Kikuyu and we have lived in poverty since I was born. My mother used to sell illicit brew (*Chang’aa*). I attended Dr Aggrey Primary School, however, when I was in standard six (primary school level), my mother was arrested and incarcerated. I had to drop out of school which resulted in me not completing my education. After six months my mother was released from prison, but it took a whole year for her to stabilise, and when she proposed that I go back to school, I was too shy to go back. I adamantly refused citing that I would be laughed at, and this is why I am not educated. Similarly, my children are also not educated due to financial problems. All my children studied up to standard seven, except my youngest who got to form four, but did not continue with his studies post that. He is the one who joined al Shabaab.” (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 15 April 2021)

The study revealed that the mothers who strongly questioned the departure of their sons, and followed it up with state actors, had the rare privilege of not only having completed secondary school level education but also working in government agencies, and enjoying proximity to the state.

Economic realities

The study showed that 48% of the mothers are fully dependent on their spouses, partners, or children. 29% of the mothers are engaged in informal trade with meagre earnings and 23% are in formal employment (Fig.3).

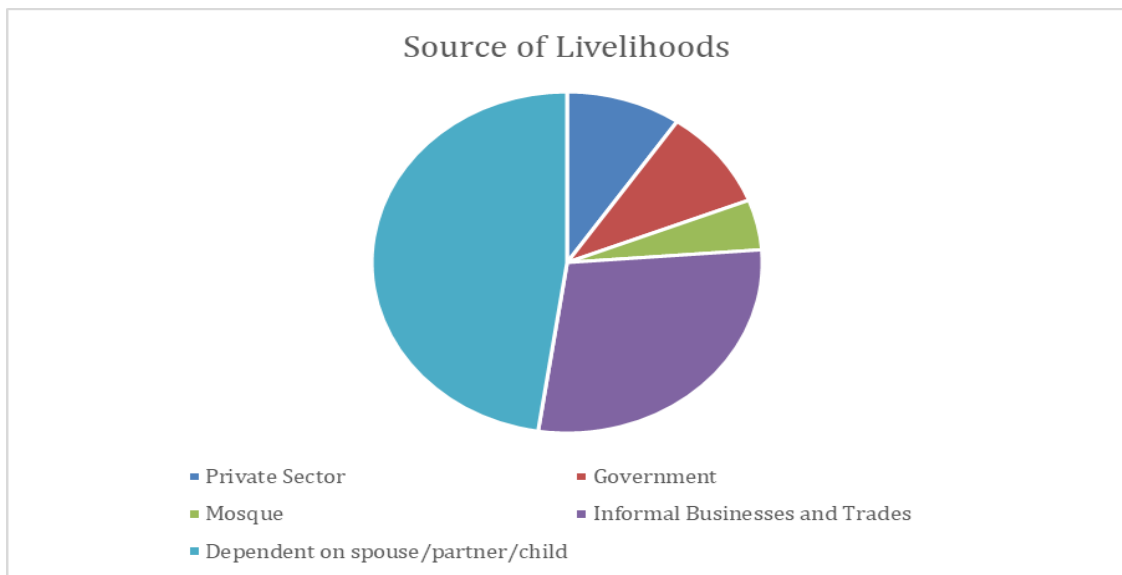


Figure 3. Sources of livelihood for mothers of male al Shabaab recruits

Source: (Nzovu, field notes, January – June 2021).

The mothers shared that this dependency had an impact on the choices they made to speak out on violent extremism. The mothers are financially vulnerable.

Some of the mothers were financially dependent on their children to fend for their daily needs. They shared that after their sons left, they were left economically vulnerable.

It was also rumoured by community members that other mothers received financial support or household supplies from the al-Shabaab. This made them complicit. As a result, The Mothers suffered ostracization from other members of the community who accused them of selling their sons for money. Other Mothers had to financially support their sons or their sons' families after their sons left to join al-Shabaab which was an increased financial burden."

Only 44 % of The Mothers shared that there was no financial impact in their lives, either positive or negative after their sons joined al-Shabaab. Faiza states, "In 2011, my son called me from Somalia. He told me that he had found a man to marry me. He also instructed me to go to a certain place to collect money. When a woman has no money, she becomes an enemy, to her husband, her neighbours, and even her children." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 21 April 2021)

Hadija also shared 'After my son left Majengo for Somalia, he sent a friend of his to bring me some money for my upkeep. This is because at times I do not even have money to eat. His friend told me that my son will be back after three months.' (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 22 April 2021) Nadia said, "There were those mothers who knew that their children were going to Somalia. They were given benefits like food, money, and house rent to keep quiet about the issue." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 22 April 2021)

The mothers also shared that some of their sons who left to join al Shabaab went in search of a better life. As Umu said, "Most of the children who went, were taken there with promises of getting jobs. They were told there was money and food in Somalia and life there was good. They were promised by the recruiters that it was a good place." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 19 April 2021).

Religious binds and blinds

The mothers' shared their knowledge and understanding of religion in particular the Islamic faith. At the time their sons joined al-Shabaab, all the mothers belonged to the Islamic faith. 67% of the mothers were born Muslim, with 14% being married to Christian partners, while 33% were born Christian but converted to Islam through marriage. The mothers stated that religion, in and of itself, had no bearing on violent extremism and that extreme violence was not relegated to a singular religious practice. They stated that religion can, however, be misinterpreted to suit the perspectives of individuals or groups.

The mothers spoke of the importance of being able to understand and interpret the Quran themselves rather than relying on someone else to do it for them. They stated that their support of al Shabaab was based on the positive changes they noticed in their children, in what they now recognise was religious manipulation. The mothers noted that when their sons stopped engaging in vices like petty thieving, alcoholism, and use of illicit drugs and started going to the Mosque more often including at night, they were happy and encouraged it. This is because it is every mother's dream to see her son diligently following and growing in the faith he was brought up in. A few of the mothers raised concerns on why some of the teachings were different but largely they were pleased that their sons were growing in their Islamic faith. After their sons had gone to Somalia, some of The Mothers shared that it was their faith in God and Islam that enabled them to cope and to have hope that their sons would return. Most of The Mothers shared that their faith is important to them and without it, they would not have survived the discrimination, ostracization, loss, and disappearance of their sons.

Latifa recalls, "At that time there was a youth leader (Ahmad Iman) who had a strong vision. He wanted the youth to be leaders of the Mosque, owners of properties in the Gikomba market, and to access different job opportunities. Little did we know it was just mere talk, a scam. During that period, youth even used to sleep at the Mosque. We, as parents were not worried, because we believed that our youths had transformed and changed their behaviour for the better. They became deeply religious. There were signs but we did not know what they meant, but we came to notice them afterward. My son used to spend all the time at the Mosque, wearing pants that were above the ankle. We used to be incredibly happy with his behaviour. I preferred him spending his time at the Mosque than spending time at the bases (youth hangout places). He became so religious, that he had no time with his family. They were instructed to act that way in preparation for their travel. His mode of talking also changed. He used to tell me that one day we would all meet in paradise. He used to say some hurting things, but we were ok with them. He even used to urge his daughter to pray and to go to Madrassa." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 23 April 2021).

Jamila dissuaded her son from joining al-Shabaab, "Let it not be that one man is pressuring you to go to Somalia in the name of religion. You can get the same religious education here." She understood too well that the teachings being given by the recruiters were not accurate; "My son used to love religion a lot. This is how the recruiters got to him. They lied to him that he was going to Somalia to further his religious education. I told him, if you are going for good, let it be good, if you are going for evil intentions, may God remove the evil from your way." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 21 April 2021)

The mothers emphasised that religious teachings need to be utilised to counter narratives on violent extremism. They stated that mothers can be strategic allies on this as they can teach their children and also monitor the Islamic teachings their children are receiving. However, this requires that they be given access to read, understand, and interpret the Quran so that they can better guide their children.

al Shabaab recruitment processes

The mothers in Majengo were aware of al Shabaab. They knew of the radicalisation processes used to influence their sons to join al Shabaab. Seventy-one percent of the mothers in the study knew radicalisation was happening. They stated that they noticed the changes in their children. Some of the mothers supported it as they trusted that it would bring positive changes to their community and give their children a better future. Nadia said, “the recruiter got a chance to recruit more youths by telling them he could offer jobs where one does not need to have a national identity card, one will wear a uniform, and where one’s academic papers and documents are not required. The only requirement needed was for one to have the passion to handle a firearm and be able to go to war. This contributed greatly to most of the youths being taken to Somalia and it had a huge impact on how they perceived the government and believed that the government no longer cared for Muslims. That perception resulted in the absorption of many youths into violent extremist groups without them thinking twice.”

67% of the mothers knew of their sons’ intentions to join al Shabaab in Somalia. Jamila shared her prior knowledge of her son’s departure to Somalia. “He came to my home and told me, ‘Mama, I know you are sick, but mama please pray for me as I have gotten an opportunity to go and study.’ At this time, I knew the real situation, I was aware of where he was going and I had told him that things were not good there.” (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 21 April 2021).

The mothers also knew about recruitment routes. Salma said, ‘One day, my son came and told me he wanted to travel to Mombasa and then onward to Somalia. He said the Islamic religion teaches that if one finds things difficult in one location, they should move to another because maybe that is where their fortune is.’ (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 21 April 2021) The mothers also spoke of other locations like Nguluni and Garissa. The mothers’ knowledge of recruitment processes and procedures helps inform action against violent extremism.

Health impact of violent extremism

Having experienced violent extremism through their sons joining al Shabaab, the mothers know about the health impact of violent extremism. The mothers spoke of physical and mental health challenges following their sons’ departure to Somalia. This impacts the socio-economic development of the country as the mothers are not able to contribute to their full potential. Faiza said, “When I learned that my son had gone to Somalia, I could not eat or sleep. I fell sick. I got menstrual periods even thrice a month and would bleed profusely. They queried cervical cancer. Later, I learned that my son had become a suicide bomber and died while carrying out a mission. I asked whether they had buried him. I was told nothing was left of him to bury. I did not mourn him. I was afraid at that time that I would be arrested by the ATPU. His death affected me. I was traumatised.” (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 22 April 2021).

Munira shared, “From the day I learned of my son’s death in Somalia, even attending social functions has been a challenge. I suffered from a lot of traumas. I started suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart complications.” (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 23 April 2021)

Mothers’ actions against violent extremism

The mothers have and continue to contribute to addressing violent extremism. Their contributions can inform larger-scale approaches to violent extremism. However, they remain largely undocumented. In Majengo, 71% of the mothers actively participate in efforts to address violent extremism.

The mothers, in 2019, formed a community-based organisation, 'Dusk till Dawn' to provide a safe space for women directly affected by violent extremism to share their experiences and collectively heal. The group gives women an opportunity to rebuild their lives through access to mini-loans using the 'table-banking' approach.

Other actions that the mothers in Majengo, Nairobi have taken include maintaining regular communication and providing financial support to their children in Somalia. Also, following up with security agencies on their sons' whereabouts and working with them to seek lasting solutions to the violent extremism challenge. In addition, some of the mothers lead community initiatives to dissuade young people from going to Somalia while others have taken on community-level leadership roles as they seek to find a purpose to continue living.

Latifa said, "I struggled to turn my image in the community into a positive one after two of my sons joined al Shabaab. I gradually started gaining the community's trust through my involvement in different community activities including clean-ups and regained their trust to the point where they appointed me as their community-based policing (*Nyumba Kumi*) representative." (Field notes, Majengo, Nairobi, 23 April 2021).

The mothers' experiences showcase their knowledge of the gaps in countering violent extremism efforts. This is revealed through their highlighting of the need for an integrated approach to violent extremism that also addresses challenges in other critical spheres like education, health political science, and sociology.

This paper shows that mothers of male al Shabaab recruits have knowledge that is beneficial to efforts against violent extremism, nevertheless this knowledge is still peripheralized by policy makers, scholars and implementers because the field of violent extremism continues to be informed by male-centric political and philosophical thoughts rendering efforts against violent extremism ineffective. One, the study reveals that multiple contextual vulnerabilities within urban informal settlements like poverty, illiteracy, sexual and gender based violence, drugs and substance abuse, and marginalisation are enablers used to justify women's exclusion in discourse and practice on violent extremism. Two, that due to the mother-son relationship, mothers possess knowledge on violent extremism that can aid research, policy and action against violent extremism. This knowledge is on the recruiters' identities, modes of recruitment, travel routes, and money exchanges. Three, that it is key to support mothers in income generating entrepreneurial activities to deter their dependence on others and break the silence on violent extremism fuelled by notions of financial inadequacy and fear of loss of financial income if they share critical information. Four, that religion can be manipulated to fit negative violent ideologies, and women, including mothers, need to be exposed to religious teachings to be able to analyse and deter young people from joining violent extremist organisations. Five, that education plays a key role in promoting the agency to speak out against violent extremism and the prioritisation of women, including mothers, education is key in supporting the fight against violent extremism. And six, that violent extremism affects mental and physical health and responses to it must look beyond hard security approaches and deal with some of these effects to safeguard community members.

These findings are consistent with a number of studies by other scholars. Montasari, (2024), Kortam (2023), and Ng'ayo (2023) underscore that women are often victimised rendering them insignificant in actions against violent extremism because they are viewed from a multiple vulnerability lens. Nzovu and Ali (2023), Okafor (2022), and Khutia (2020), in agreement, opine that the mother-son relationship predisposes them to useful knowledge on strategies used by violent extremist organisations that can aid efforts to address violent extremism. Kilonzo (2024), and Moderan (2023) document the negative effects of violent extremism on women, including mothers. Wagha, 2024, Tilahun

(2022), and Diamond (2022) speak to factors that promote women's agency to speak out on issues affecting them including violent extremism including education. Also in agreement, with this paper, Dier and Baldwin (2022) note that the field of violent extremism has been masculinised contributing to women's exclusion. Oando (2024) in addition, states that Kenyan women need to be engaged in discussions on violent extremism that take into consideration their contextual realities.

This paper highlights the interlinkages between violent extremism and other spheres like multiple vulnerabilities, education, and health that calls for further research in these areas that has the potential to open up additional avenues to increase the effectiveness of efforts against violent extremism.

The findings in this paper reinforce the fact that women, including mothers have knowledge that needs to be harnessed to improve countering violent extremism efforts.

Conclusion

The reclamation and capturing of African feminist epistemology call for conversations with African women to document their knowledge. This process requires deliberate action by researchers, policymakers, and implementers. This paper has analysed the knowledge and experience of mothers whose sons joined the al Shabaab violent extremist organisation in Somalia as a contribution to African feminist epistemology. It has interrogated the epistemological representation of African women in violent extremism practice from a knowledge production perspective. This paper has revealed that African women's knowledge of violent extremism can render efforts to address this challenge more effective. This knowledge spans different spheres including peace and security, health, education, and religion. It also informs of broader societal challenges that are contributors to violent extremism including poverty, drugs and substance abuse, and teenage pregnancies. This paper calls for a holistic approach to violent extremism that takes the African women's already existing knowledge, into consideration. It emphasises the need to include African women at the implementation level, based on their lived experiences of violent extremism and their agency shown through the actions they have already taken. It calls for documentation of African women's experiences of violent extremism to inform peace and security discourse through Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Knowledge cannot be termed holistic when it is missing the voices of African women.

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Conflict of Interest

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