

The disregard of mothers' knowledge and experiences in violent extremism discourse in Kenya

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Abstract: This article argues for the inclusion of women's epistemology in discourse about violent extremism and approaches to tackling it in Kenya. It focuses on mothers of male recruits to violent extremist organisations, arguing that, although mothers have critical insights to offer, their knowledge and experiences remain unacknowledged and unheard in Kenyan responses to violent extremism. Although women, including mothers, are understood to be useful contributors to the fight against violent extremism, their voices remain peripheral in masculinised discourses and actions. This article uses an African feminist theoretical approach, informed by 'Motherism', and gendered peace – as well as security frameworks including UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR 1325 and 2242) on women, peace and security and women's inclusion in efforts to address violent extremism – to argue that policy development and implementation processes in Kenya have failed to capture the meaningful contributions that recruits' mothers can make to addressing violent extremism.

Keywords: African feminism, violent extremism, women, knowledge, exclusion

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Introduction

'A woman's place is everywhere'. (Azraa 2021)

At a global level, the field of peace and security issues and policymaking in these areas is gendered and favourably skewed towards the male gender (Watson 2015). The field of violent extremism in Kenya is no exception. Although women are active in Al-Shabaab, they are glaringly missing from efforts to counter violent extremism in Kenya, including at policy development and implementation levels (Idris 2020a). This state of affairs is neither new nor accidental. It is deliberate in a field where women are relegated to the sphere of victimhood and where their role is solely to influence the men in their lives, not to join violent extremist organisations (VEOs) (Idris 2020b). This placement of women's knowledge removes women from discourses about and implementation efforts that seek to address violent extremism (Idris 2020b). Kenya's national strategy to counter violent extremism (Government of Kenya 2016) makes no mention of mothers, or women more generally, as critical actors in the formulation and implementation of policies and actions to address violent extremism. Yet half of Kenya's population are women, and it makes no logical sense that they are left out of such an important discourse.

This article reiterates the importance of, and the need for, the meaningful inclusion of the voices of mothers of VEO recruits in the policy discourse on violent extremism. It draws attention to the erasure of women's roles and the marginalisation of their experiences and influences as mothers in the public sphere, even while United Nations (UN) frameworks call for women to be meaningfully incorporated into measures for ending violent extremism. It examines the global history of violent extremism and terrorism, assesses how these terms have been defined and explains the challenge that violent extremism poses in Kenya. Women, and particularly mothers, have significant existing roles in preventing and responding to violence at family and community levels, and this article opines that their meaningful inclusion can support a holistic approach to understanding and addressing violent extremism (Henty & Eggleston 2018). As Fink *et al.* (2016) note, the inclusion of women in efforts to deal with violent extremism has the potential to help address some of the pitfalls of current approaches and may result in the development of more effective strategies.

The article demonstrates that there is sufficient theoretical justification for the meaningful inclusion of women, including mothers of VEO recruits, in the discourse on violent extremism in Kenya. African feminist theories, discussed further below, have called for the inclusion of women and mothers in the knowledge sphere on the basis of their lived experiences. Mwakimako (2018) asserts that it is important to listen to women who share personal experiences of violent extremism in their own words to

capture their perspectives on the issue. [Henty & Eggleston \(2018\)](#) further note that, while mothers' roles in families and communities have strategic value and mothers have the authority to identify and influence young people with a propensity to join VEOs, they remain peripheral in the fight against violent extremism. These observations make it clear that Kenya's current policies against violent extremism need to be challenged and a more inclusive and holistic approach needs to be adopted, one that includes women in policy formulation processes and incorporates their input in the discourse on countering violent extremism (CVE).

An African feminist theoretical framework

Feminist epistemology emerged in the 1970s, motivated by Simone de Beauvoir's proclamation that knowledge is seen, interpreted, understood and accepted as truth from men's point of view ([Bart 1998](#)). Feminist knowledge contests this patriarchal worldview and promotes women's lived experiences and thoughts as knowledge ([Spender 1985](#)). Feminist epistemology focuses on the 'knower', using a gendered analytical lens, and it also considers historical and socio-cultural specificities (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy n.d.). This article explores African feminist theoretical perspectives that foreground African women's lived experiences and suggests that they are critical to addressing the challenges women face in both the public and private spheres ([Shangare 2017](#)).

African feminist theory examines gendered societal power relations, influenced by culture, roles and institutions ([Steady 1981](#)), in order to challenge male dominance of institutions and institutional policies, and it calls for fair representation of women in these structures. However, the challenge to male dominance posed by African feminism, as advanced by [Atanga \(2013\)](#), is one based on enquiry rather than difference: it embraces cultural practices that do not degrade women and seeks to journey with men towards a more holistic and gender-inclusive African society that benefits both women and men ([Mekgwe 2006](#)). This approach is valuable because it recognises the critical fact that a woman's culture plays an integral role in who she becomes and her ability to share her lived experiences ([Coetzee 2018](#)). The focus on culture also allows positive aspects of African culture in relation to gender to be appreciated. For example, as [Oyèwùmí \(2016\)](#) notes, gender distinctions in the Yoruba community were not a determining factor when it came to social roles, and instead seniority and levels of responsibility took centre stage. As [Atanga \(2013\)](#) argues, it is more appropriate to talk about 'feminism(s)' rather than 'feminism' in relation to Africa; this broader approach recognises that African women are not a homogeneous group and that their individual experiences are influenced by differing cultural practices. A focus

on African feminist theory is valuable because the approach draws attention to, and explores differences as well as similarities that emerge from, varied experiences and histories within a given context (Terborg-Penn 1995).

African feminism(s) connote an approach to knowledge, language, legislation and policymaking that is cognisant of gendered and socio-political dynamics (Atanga 2013). In this way, they provide an entry point for mothers of VEO recruits to engage with policymaking on CVE discourse. Scholarly works in and on Africa that inform and influence African philosophical thoughts and actions, however, remain masculinised (Du Toit & Coetzee 2017). Efforts to highlight the diverse and specific experiences of African women, including mothers and those in the diaspora, through African feminist thought have been criticised as a protest-based critique of Western feminist thought (Du Toit & Coetzee 2017).

This article draws on a range of feminist theoretical approaches that call for understanding, and inclusion, of the African woman; these approaches include Africana womanism, Nego-feminism, Stiwanism and Snail-sense, though the article's specific focus is on Motherism. Africana womanism, as advanced by Clenora Hudson-Weems in 1987 (see Hudson-Weems 2022) and furthered by Kolawole in 1997, focuses on addressing social inequalities and examines critical questions that acknowledge the desires, experiences, needs and struggles of the African woman and the significance of a cultural dimension to African feminism that is inclusive of the African man. In envisioning a transformed Africa, it encourages women to speak for themselves but also to write about themselves, to create knowledge about the African woman, based on their lived experiences (Alkali *et al.* 2013). Most significantly, African womanism foregrounds the central leadership role that African mothers play in the reconstruction of values such as justice, truth and reciprocity within African society (Dove 1998). In 1994, Ogun-dipe-Leslie advanced a theoretical approach, commonly referred to as Stiwanism ('Social Transformation in Africa Including Women'), that focused on the transformation of African society's structures and institutions and sought to recreate the African woman's identity based on her experiences and knowledge (Shangare 2017). Stiwanism places emphasis on an inclusive approach to social transformation that involves both women and men working towards a harmonious society, a concept that is less controversial and less threatening to African masculinity than other types of feminism (Ebunoluwa 2009; Amaefula 2021). The Snail-sense African feminist theory advanced by Adimora-Ezeigbo in 2003 continues this trajectory, stating that the African woman should espouse and build on the snail's virtues of determination, resilience, wisdom and sensitivity to open up dialogue and negotiate her positionality in the public sphere (Akanmode 2015). Snail-sense feminism introduces an individualist perspective, suggesting that the African woman should focus primarily on self-preservation and self-actualisation as strategies that recognise her complementarity to

the African man in the realisation of shared societal goals (Akanmode 2015). Nego-feminism, propagated by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), is another theory that contributes to African feminist discourse; it argues for an approach based on negative ego and negotiation that embraces compromise and seeks to enable African women to negotiate Africa's patriarchal space through the lens of shared attitudes, institutions and values (Nnaemeka 2004; Amaefula 2021).

This article focuses on the African feminist concept known as Motherism, advanced by Catherine Acholonu (1995, cited in Alkali *et al.* 2013: 238), which contends that the mother's nurturing role and the mother-child relationship are integral parts of African feminism. Motherism is also part of the African feminist theory advanced in the 1980s by Filomina Chioma Steady, who noted that African feminism is defined not only by gender but also by additional factors such as power, social constructs, history and individual contextual experiences (Alkali *et al.* 2013; Steady 2005). Motherism suggests that there are no imperative reasons for the continued exclusion of women's knowledge other than patriarchy, male power and dominance. The theory is highly relevant to mothers of VEO recruits, who have a distinctly personal experience of violent extremism (Karimi 2018). Mothers, according to Acholonu, provide a support system upon which entire communities depend (Godono 2005). Oyèwùmí (2016) uses the term 'matripotency' to denote the supremacy of motherhood within society and refers to the power women exercise through this system. Oyèwùmí's (2016) concept emphasises that there is an unbreakable bond between a mother and her child that can be considered 'otherworldly' and 'timeless' because it starts even before conception and continues through the gestation period, the child's birth and life, and even beyond death. It influences every aspect of the child's existence, be it social, political, material or spiritual. Oyèwùmí's (2016) assertions about motherhood apply to mothers of VEO recruits who play a distinct role in their sons' lives, and they help to illustrate why mothers' experiences are useful in providing a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to violent extremism so that the challenge it poses can be addressed more effectively. Alkali *et al.* (2013) and Godono (2005) further note that a mother's influence extends not only over her family but also into broader society.

Taking mothers' centrality in the African context into account, as Nnaemeka (2004) argues, means that it is not possible to term knowledge as holistic within the African setting when the mother's voice is missing. Yet this is exactly what Kenya's CVE discourse has done by obliterating the mother's voice and agency in CVE policymaking. In advancing the African woman's space, positionality and advancement within the African context, African feminist theories argue for the inclusion of African mothers in all societal decisions and actions, including those on violent extremism and terrorism. Hence, this article adopts Eze *et al.*'s (2016) pre-emptive approach, which

encourages capture of the knowledge and experiences of mothers of VEO recruits to inform policy discourse on approaches to violent extremism in Kenya.

Kenya's experience with violent extremism from 1998 to 2019

According to the Kenyan government, terrorism is an act of violence that involves the use of explosives or firearms, or the release of chemicals, that put both people and their property in danger ([Government of Kenya 2016](#)). This article uses the terms 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism' interchangeably, as there has been no universal agreement on a distinct, conceptual or phenomenological definition of the terms or their practice. To appreciate the importance of the inclusion of the voices of mothers of VEO recruits in CVE policy discourse, it is important to appreciate the fact that Kenya has experienced several terrorist attacks. Several major attacks influenced the entry of Kenyan troops into Somalia as part of the US-led global war on terror. [Botha \(2013\)](#) states that while Kenya has experienced attacks on its soil by Al-Shabaab, it has also been a site for Al-Shabaab recruitment. It is therefore inappropriate to exclude the knowledge of mothers of VEO recruits, who have played a nurturing, mothering role in the lives of these male youth.

On 7 August 1998, a bomb exploded in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, targeting the US Embassy, resulting in the deaths of approximately 213 people and 4,000 injuries ([Helling 2004](#)). On 28 November 2002, there was a suicide car bomb attack on the Kenyan coast, at the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, which left 15 people dead and 40 wounded ([US Department of State 2004](#)). On the same day, an Arkea Airlines flight heading to Israel with 261 passengers on board was attacked by missiles, and, although they luckily missed the plane, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the incident ([US Department of State 2004](#)). The period from 1992 to 2002 saw violent extremist networks in East Africa being strengthened by two groups, namely Al-Ittihad al-Islami and al-Qaeda East Africa, with the support of a fluid network of Kenyan supporters that later formed into a unified unit, Al-Shabaab ([Bryden & Bahra 2019](#)).

In response to the infamous terror attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, the then President George Bush launched the global war on terror, inviting countries of goodwill to work together to achieve the shared goal of getting rid of terrorists ([Mogire & Mkutu Agade 2011](#)). Kenya became a key ally in this war and received financial and technical support from the US and other Western governments ([Mogire & Mkutu Agade 2011](#)). In the period 2012–14, Al-Shabaab and its supporters conducted attacks in Kenya with grenades and improvised explosive devices that targeted places of worship, bars and public service vehicles, but the attacks were uncoordinated, with few willing suicide bombers, and the intended

messaging around the attacks was neither clear nor well disseminated (Bryden & Bahra 2019).

On 21 September 2013, which was, ironically, the UN-designated International Day of Peace, Al-Shabaab opened fire on shoppers at the Westgate mall in Nairobi, leaving 70 people dead, including 18 foreigners, and 175 injured (Agbiboa 2014). Al-Shabaab fighters shouted that they would release only Muslims and claimed that they had attacked the Westgate mall because it was frequented by American and Israeli nationals (Agbiboa 2014). The Garissa University attack in 2015, coming two years after the Westgate mall attack, left 148 dead, a majority of whom were students, alongside some workers, soldiers and police officers, and 79 people were injured (Wakube *et al.* 2017). Al-Shabaab's attack on the DusitD2 complex, on 15 January 2019, left 21 dead and 28 injured (Musoma 2021). In 2020, Al-Shabaab conducted another attack on the Manda Bay Airfield, a military facility shared by the Kenyan and US governments, which left three US citizens dead (Congressional Research Service 2020). Al-Shabaab's overarching intention in these attacks was understood to be to create divisions among the Kenyan population by targeting non-Muslims (Congressional Research Service 2020). The threat posed by Al-Shabaab persists, and in 2021 the group purchased arms worth approximately USD 24 million (RedAction Africa News 2022).

Kenya's response to the Al-Shabaab threat remains highly securitised, and the fact that a militaristic approach is being prioritised (Henty & Eggleston 2018) is evidenced by the fact that the Kenya Defence Forces, National Police Service and National Intelligence Service are spearheading counterterrorism efforts (Botha & Abdile 2020). This militarised approach comprises alleged and reported forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the resultant damage to interethnic, interfaith and state–community relations (Torbjörnsson & Jonsson 2016).

In addition, Kenya has put in place a legal framework that includes the 2012 Prevention of Terrorism Act, which addresses the prevention, detection and prosecution of terrorist acts; it also includes aspects that broadly criminalise radicalisation, prescribe punitive measures and limit the rights of those identified by state actors as terrorists (Kenya Law 2012). Within this framework, the 2017 Crime and Anti-Money Laundering Act targeted the financing of terrorist activities and established the National Counterterrorism Centre (NCTC), which utilises a state-led, multi-agency approach that brings together security agencies, and the directorate of immigration and registration, to coordinate all CVE responses in Kenya undertaken by both state and non-state actors (Botha & Abdile 2020). In addition, the 2016 Kenya National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism was put in place to actualise the implementation of CVE actions (Botha & Abdile 2020). These securitised approaches and efforts have resulted in increased mistrust between state and non-state

actors, undermining the potential for collaborative and effective approaches to CVE (Botha & Abdile 2020). This article argues that moves to address some of these securitised, non-inclusive approaches must, as a matter of urgency, incorporate diverse experiences and knowledge, including those of mothers of VEO recruits, to ensure a holistic understanding of the issue that may influence strategies for addressing violent extremism in Kenya.

Exclusion of mothers from violent extremism discourse in Kenya

Spivak (1985) views the concept of ‘othering’ from an exclusionary perspective and posits that this concept is practised even by policymakers, who use political strategies to sideline other critical voices. This view suggests that the dominance of men in the policymaking sphere and the discourse on violent extremism – as well as the exclusion of women, including mothers of VEO recruits, from those spheres – is not coincidental, and deliberate efforts need to be made to create a more inclusive policy space.

The exclusion of women from the CVE sphere also needs to be looked at through a lens that recognises sustained gender inequalities, the ongoing curtailment of women’s rights and, more specifically, the continued abuse of these rights in the processes and actions employed by violent extremist organisations (Bhulai & Nemr 2018). The role of women, including mothers, in CVE efforts is often instrumentalised without any recognition of women’s agency and their potential to offer fresh perspectives on violent extremism, its impact on society and how best to address it (Sahgal & Zeuthen 2018). While historical and attitudinal exclusions that focus on women’s and mothers’ nurturing role rather than their agency limit women’s participation in the public sphere of CVE, structural policy exclusions also hinder women’s involvement in the CVE space, as shown below.

Historical and attitudinal exclusions of women and mothers

The vast majority of women in Africa are largely left out of the decision-making sphere due to exclusionary laws and cultural practices that render them invisible in knowledge discourse (Ilesanmi 2018). According to Ilesanmi (2018), this exclusion was further entrenched during the colonial period with the introduction of a formal education system, almost exclusively accessible to men, which granted men dominance in various spaces including decision-making, governance and security. In addition, the security sphere is viewed as the responsibility of the state, which is charged with protecting itself from external threats (such as Al-Shabaab), and this provides

an avenue for states to monopolise efforts to address violence and to curtail the role of civilian actors, including women and mothers, in addressing security challenges (Hamber *et al.* 2015). When women are viewed as inherently peaceful and fit for mothering and nurturing roles but not for the public sphere, this further contributes to their invisibility in efforts to address security matters (Okech 2016).

In challenging this patriarchal approach to matters in the public sphere, it is important to consider a broader approach that can open up spaces to accommodate the participation and contributions of women (Hamber *et al.* 2015). In violent conflict situations, women have shown initiative and leadership by engaging in actions to promote peace, especially in informal processes; however, when it comes to formal processes, they are left out from spaces that largely operate on an invitation-only basis (Norville 2011). Women's ability to contribute to conflict prevention and resolution is well known and appreciated, and so the gap that needs to be addressed is how best to include them in decision-making, policy formulation and implementation, including on CVE (Sherwood 2016). Women's contributions are based on their ability to promote social cohesion across clans, ethnic groups, political positions and religious beliefs and to build alliances on key issues such as protection, access to diverse resources and long-term peacebuilding measures at different levels (Affi *et al.* 2021). These widely understood roles do not, however, open avenues for women, including mothers, to engage in efforts on CVE, which usually involve processes where inclusion is decided on the basis of politics rather than principles (Henty & Eggelston 2018).

Although women are active contributors to violent extremism in Kenya, including as recruiters, fighters, suicide bombers, intelligence gatherers and wives, their involvement is not reflected when it comes to efforts to address violent extremism, especially in policy formulation and implementation, where they remain peripheral (Idris 2020a). In reality, women are excluded from the CVE space due to long-standing inequalities, power differentials, their historical exclusion from the peace and security space in general, the assumption that they are not actively involved in violent extremist organisations, and the belief that they cannot adequately influence CVE efforts due to their societal roles as mothers and women (Henty & Eggelston 2018). In Kenya, when women are viewed as mothers, this categorisation gives them a certain role in relation to being able to steer their sons away from violent extremism, but it does not give them agency as policy actors in the CVE space (Idris 2020a). This narrowly focused and gender-blind approach, coupled with a securitised approach to violent extremism that focuses on Islamic extremism and ignores other factors, has rendered CVE efforts ineffective (Idris 2020a).

Counterterrorism and CVE policy: the exclusion of women and mothers in Kenya

The policy framework Kenya has in place to support its counterterrorism and CVE efforts includes the [Prevention of Terrorism Act \(2012\)](#); the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism; and the [Statute Law \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) Bill \(2019\)](#), which modified the [Prevention of Terrorism Act \(2012\)](#). This section provides an overview of these CVE policy frameworks and examines to what extent they are gendered. It highlights the fact that the current CVE policy discourse is not inclusive of mothers of recruits to VEOs when it comes to policy input, and it renders them invisible and irrelevant in subsequent implementation actions.

Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012)

The 2012 Prevention of Terrorism Act, passed by the Kenyan Parliament, aims to provide strategies to detect and prevent terrorist and terrorism-related activities ([Government of Kenya 2012](#)). It calls on citizens to work collaboratively with the state and report anything suspicious related to terrorism. It does not mention civil society, women or mothers as actors in anti-terrorism efforts at all, beyond the expectation that they will provide information to the state in good faith, and provisions are made so that the state does not have to disclose actions taken thereafter. This means that, in addition to civil society members, including women and mothers, being excluded from the anti-terrorism agenda, they are also not able to provide oversight on any state actions classified as efforts to counter terrorism ([Freedom House 2018](#)). The [Prevention of Terrorism Act \(2012\)](#) is gender-blind and presumes that only men play a role in terrorism, as is clear from its use of ‘he, him, himself’ pronouns to refer to terrorist actors. By securitising and masculinising anti-terrorism efforts, it robs women, including mothers, of opportunities to contribute to holistic efforts. The fact that policy on anti-terrorism has neither a gendered lens nor a gender-responsive approach increases the bottlenecks that make it difficult for women and mothers to access and influence policy formulation and implementation because they have already been rendered invisible in this space. Yet this space is a critical starting point for the creation of a more holistic CVE discourse and the inclusion of women and mothers.

National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (2016)

In 2016, the Kenyan government developed its National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE). The strategy aimed to open up space for intervention in violent extremism discourse to other sectors beyond security actors. These sectors are

understood to include a wide range of civil society actors, namely non-governmental organisations, and other economic, social and religious institutions, with the state encouraging interventions informed by collaboration between state and community actors through frequent joint consultations ([Government of Kenya 2016](#)).

Although the NSCVE asserts the new openness of the CVE policy domain, the document does not mention women or mothers at all, and it mentions parents only twice, situating them predominantly as informants, not as contributors to the policy discourse on CVE. In this way, it fails to offer an inclusive gendered approach and contributes to making the knowledge and experiences of mothers of recruits to VEOs peripheral in CVE discourse. These mothers nurture and live with their sons in communities affected by terrorism, and their sons have either joined or are vulnerable to joining VEOs, but it is glaringly obvious that their input, based on their lived experiences and knowledge, is neither recognised nor sought.

The Statute Law (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill (2019) to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012)

In section 40C of the 2019 Statute Law Bill, the NCTC is placed in charge of all civil society actors and activities involved in supporting efforts to counter violent extremism and all anti-terrorism efforts in Kenya. The bill also calls for the public to take responsibility for informing the NCTC about any terrorism-related information they receive ([Government of Kenya 2019](#)). There is no reciprocity involved in this approach, whereby members of the public, including women and mothers, might be entitled to receive information in return from state agencies, including the NCTC, to support a collaborative approach to CVE and counterterrorism efforts. In addition, although the [Statute Law Bill \(2019\)](#) calls for a multi-agency approach to address violent extremism and terrorism in Kenya and invites other state agencies and departments to become involved, the Ministry of Public Service and Gender is not one of the departments it includes, and gender is not among the bill's otherwise well-thought-out considerations ([Government of Kenya 2019](#)). The effect of this omission is that women and mothers remain peripheralised in the mechanisms of terrorism-related policy.

Despite their omission from the CVE space, women, including mothers, have been playing pivotal roles in their communities in deterring violent extremism. Their activities have included identifying early signs of radicalisation, discouraging individuals from joining or supporting violent extremist organisations, and creating inclusive spaces for returnees in their communities ([Bhulai & Nembr 2018](#)). Inclusion in formal CVE policy formulation and implementation spaces would enable women, including mothers, to share their experiences and knowledge on platforms that have greater influence and impact. Thus Kenya's approach to violent extremism could be further

strengthened by including the voices of women, which could make an important contribution to neglected areas of the body of knowledge on CVE.

Why include mothers' experiences and knowledge in CVE discourse?

The holders of knowledge determine the decisions and actions to be taken within any sphere of discourse, including that of violent extremism. [Spender \(1985\)](#) questioned the male-centric notion of knowledge and created an opening for discussion about the importance of women's knowledge and the need for it to be recognised as valid. Betty Friedan (cited in [Spender 1985](#)) also challenged the centrality of men's knowledge, arguing that this centrality makes men the knowers not only of their own realities but also of women's realities, and, as they may not truly capture women's lived experiences, women should have the opportunity to speak to their own truth. The inclusion of women as policy formulators has the potential to contribute greatly to the successful prevention of violent extremism and terrorism, in addition to opening up feedback and development opportunities when these efforts do not produce their desired results ([OSCE 2013](#)).

Yet women remain absent when it comes to inputting their knowledge and experience into decision-making and policy formulation on security in general, and CVE in particular ([UN Women 2021](#)). This is despite the fact that, as the next section shows, several arguments have been made in support of the inclusion of women, including mothers, in decision-making spheres.

Supporting international frameworks

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325

The year 2000 marked an entry point for women into the sphere of peace and security with the passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women's inclusion in peace and security discourse. The resolution was created in recognition of the fact that women experience violence differently and, as such, need to be included in all processes that address it ([Rehn & Johnson-Sirleaf 2002](#)). The resolution has opened pathways for the interrogation of women's continued exclusion, even when frameworks for their inclusion exist.

Sixteen years after this landmark UN resolution was passed, the Government of Kenya launched its National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, which included as its pillars Participation and Promotion, Prevention, Protection and Relief, and Recovery ([Government of Kenya 2016](#)). The plan was cognisant not just of UN frameworks

but also of Al-Shabaab's threat to security in the Horn of Africa, including women's security (Government of Kenya 2016). Kenya's National Action Plan (KNAP) on UNSCR 1325 specifically notes that women are strategically placed at the household and community level to support the fight against violent extremism (Ndung'u 2016). However, the fact that the KNAP only recognises women's roles at these levels takes women out of spheres where they can influence, make and implement policy and relegates them back to the domestic sphere and its roles, thus missing an opportunity to harness women's knowledge at a political level. The KNAP on UNSCR 1325 mentions the internal and external sources of conflict in Kenya but specifically indicates that the issue of violent extremism represents a current threat to peace and security in Kenya, referring to al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab (Government of Kenya 2016). Both the KNAP on UNSCR 1325 and the Kenya National CVE strategy provide an opportunity for the inclusion of women in the peace and security sector, including mothers of VEO recruits; this policy space needs to be explored further for there to be systemic and sustainable change.

In 2020, Kenya reviewed its KNAP on UNSCR 1325 to assess progress in its implementation and address any emerging gaps identified through recommendations from diverse state and non-state actors. In addition to strengthening institutions and the awareness, monitoring and accountability frameworks of the KNAP at the national and grassroots levels, the second KNAP sought to broaden the range of actors involved with the plan and to incorporate the voices of women and youth, who can help to lead and spur implementation (WILPF 2020). The KNAP creates an opportunity for the Government of Kenya to engage more deliberately with women's peace and security issues and explore women's space in the CVE sphere. The Kenyan government's gender frameworks acknowledge women's role in violent extremism, but they have nevertheless failed to include women's knowledge, and, in particular, the knowledge and experience of the mothers of VEO recruits in policy frameworks on peace and security and the formulation of approaches to violent extremism. In essence, this omission compromises efforts to prioritise women's roles in CVE and involve them in decision-making and funding processes.

Since UNSCR 1325 was passed in 2000, the UN has passed other resolutions to further the women, peace and security agenda. These include UNSCR 1820 (2008), UNSCR 1888 (2009), UNSCR 1889 (2009), UNSCR 1960 (2010), UNSCR 2106 (2013) and UNSCR 2122 (2013), which respectively focus on the sexual and gender-based violence meted out against women during times of violent conflict; women's inclusion in peacekeeping; and considerations on the rule of law for crimes committed against women (Karimi 2018).

Furthermore, in 2015 the UN passed Security Council Resolution 2242, which specifically called for women's inclusion in efforts to address violent extremism

(Karimi 2018). In this way, the UN and its member states, including Kenya, have officially recognised that women have been left out of the discourse on violent extremism, even though they make up over half of the global population, and they have also recognised that this particular security challenge is transglobal and gendered in nature.

The Beijing Platform for Action 1995

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) called for the inclusion and participation of women in advancing peace in different spaces, including at the community and decision-making levels. The BPFA recognised that women's inclusion is critical if peace and security are ever to be sustainably achieved (UN Women 1995). Despite the BPFA calling for women's inclusion and participation in peace and security in the 1990s, women remain marginalised. Unfortunately, violent extremism remains an ongoing peace and security threat, and the exclusion of women from decisions on how best to address it fundamentally compromises the impact of these efforts.

Windhoek Declaration 2000

In the year 2000, in Windhoek, Namibia, a declaration was made on the need to mainstream gender in all peace processes. The declaration's nine agenda points form a highly relevant starting point for highlighting and realising the practical roles women can play in addressing violent extremism and terrorism. The nine points identified in the Windhoek Declaration (2000) (UN Women 2000) are briefly outlined here. (1) Women should be involved in the resolution of violent conflicts at all levels. (2) When peace and security mandates are drawn up, they need to take into consideration the role of women and ensure gender considerations are mainstreamed. (3) Women should be equally represented in leadership positions, with the necessary steps taken to ensure they have the knowledge and skills they need to undertake these tasks and take on management roles, as well as decision-making responsibilities. (4) Gender should be mainstreamed throughout the CVE process, including in the planning, structuring and allocation of resources. (5) A deliberate recruitment strategy is needed to ensure that women with relevant skills and experience are brought on board. (6) Necessary training must be provided for women so that they can be effective in delivering their peace and security mandates. (7) Standard operating procedures need to take gender into consideration, including in their design and reporting processes. (8) A monitoring and evaluation framework needs to be put in place to assess the extent to which gender has been mainstreamed to ensure accountability with regard to women's inclusion. (9) The general public must be made explicitly aware of the importance of women's contribution to peace and security. If these nine strategies are applied to the field of

violent extremism, they will empower women's voices, increase women's visibility and enable them to contribute to policies that will effectively address violent extremism.

The unabating gaps that propagate women's exclusion in CVE discourse

A [United Nations Development Programme \(2020\)](#) report reveals that when it comes to social power, including power in the political, educational and economic spheres, social biases relegate women to the periphery, particularly in relation to decision-making, thus reducing their agency. Although the frameworks outlined in this article highlight the importance of the role of women, they do not necessarily translate to women's increased participation in decision-making on approaches to violent extremism and terrorism.

As [Ndung'u & Shadung \(2017\)](#) note, women either tend to be more involved in the civil society space and/or their roles are considered from a stereotypical or securitised perspective. This is mainly because there is mistrust between practitioners, who are often women, and policymakers, the majority of whom are men ([Ndung'u & Shadung 2017](#)). The exclusion of women from the CVE policy space, according to [Ndung'u & Shadung \(2017\)](#), further threatens their democratic right to participation.

In addition, in 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms noted that, although the number of policies and programmes that recognise the gendered dimensions of violent extremism has increased, they generally do not acknowledge women as partners in fighting violent extremism and terrorism and instead instrumentalise them ([OSCE 2020](#)). It can be argued that there has been a widespread call to include women in discourse on peace and security policy, but this has not yet translated into women and mothers being brought in as critical actors in the formulation of policy on terrorism and violent extremism and/or its implementation.

Conclusion

By acknowledging that there is a need for the meaningful inclusion of mothers in the policy discourse on violent extremism, this article opens up a conversation about their glaring absence and investigates why this is the case in the Kenyan context, where women form more than half the population. The article has explored the possibility that efforts to address violent extremism may prove fruitless if the voices of women continue to be left out. It has also noted the fact that mothers play a central role in their sons' lives and in Kenyan communities, to the extent that their lived experiences of violent extremism should translate into knowledge that informs policy formulation.

The article has brought to the fore the reality that systematic and institutional discrimination against women limits their full participation in Kenyan society, and it has also shown that, when CVE is inclusive of women and mothers, it opens pathways to increased gender equality (Bhulai & Nemr 2018).

The article has also highlighted the various entry points that are already available to support the clamour for women's space in peace and security policy formulation, including African feminist theoretical perspectives that re-emphasise this. Mothers of VEO recruits want to be included and heard in the male-dominated arena of CVE policymaking and implementation, and so the government of Kenya should start speaking with them, in line with Betty Friedan's suggestion that 'if you want to know about women, ask them' (Friedan 2001). As Fink & Bhulai (2016) have argued, women, given the opportunity, can play a key role both in the early detection and prevention of radicalisation and in deradicalisation processes, based on their central role in families and communities. Leaving them out leads to a flawed and limited approach to violent extremism.

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This article is inspired by the work of Filomina Chioma Steady (2005), who advanced the idea that African feminism should include efforts to empower women to participate in the public sphere, including in peace and security issues.

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