Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism among Muslim women in Kenya

Rickline S. Ng'ayo

Abstract: Islamic feminism is a budding ideology in Kenya that conservative Muslims perceive as a distortion of pure Islam. Despite its prospects for empowering Muslim women, its utility for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is largely unexplored, and security agencies and non-governmental organisations prefer to engage with mainstream patriarchal Islamic ideologies that reinforce the gender vulnerabilities Al-Shabaab successfully exploits to engage women in violent extremism. This study draws on research conducted with Muslim clerics, scholars, women's associations, feminists, government officials, and female returnees in Nairobi and Mombasa counties to demonstrate that Al-Shabaab is exploiting traditional gender constructions including marriage, sisterhood, motherhood and women's religious obligations to recruit, radicalise and exploit women. While Islamic feminism exposes and contests gender inequalities, it remains unpopular, is often dismissed as secular, and meets resistance from both extremists and moderate Muslims, and therefore further studies are needed to validate its rightful role within Islam.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, P/CVE, Al-Shabaab, gender constructions, sisterhood, motherhood

Note on the author: Rickline Ng'ayo is a PhD candidate with an interest in peace and security at the United States International University–Africa (USIU–Africa). He holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science, Master of Arts in International Relations, Master of Science in Organizational Development and Master of Arts in Gender and Development Studies. Rickline is also a security analyst with an interest in counterterrorism and previously taught International Relations and Security Studies at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

Introduction

The use of Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is predicated on the understanding that power relations between men and women define their social organisation and therefore a gendered lens is an essential tool of analysis. Gendered and Islamic feminist approaches share a common perspective, even though they remain distinct in many ways. Gendered perspectives are simply approaches that require the use of a gender lens in the process of analysis, while Islamic feminism is a movement and an ideological standpoint with a methodology and objectives that seek to promote gender equality through the re-interpretation of Islamic religious texts. Islamic feminism seeks to clarify misconceptions and cultural practices misconstrued as religious that are used to subjugate women in society. In this study, Islamic feminism is given credence as a P/CVE strategy because of its ability to generate ideological responses that can be used as counter-narratives and strategies to obliterate the gender vulnerabilities exploited by violent extremist groups.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the world has witnessed a series of new waves of Islamic violent extremism in the last three decades, partly because of the resilience that Islamic extremist groups have demonstrated in exploiting the inadequacies of states' counterterrorism measures (UNDP 2017). At a global level, states' failures to treat gender as an integral part of counterterrorism strategies, despite the increasing number of women in both combat and support roles, has weakened their counterterrorism measures. Terrorist groups, including more conservative ones such as Al-Shabaab, have long realised the tactical and operational advantages of using women, and so they have changed their stances to become more permissive about women's engagement in front-line roles and combat. Given this shift, the failure of counterterrorism measures to account for women has partly contributed to the exponential growth of women's participation in terrorism in the last two decades (Bloom 2011; Spencer 2016).

The Global Terrorism Index 2019 shows that, between 1985 and 2013, women were involved in at least 300 suicide attacks that were carried out by terrorist groups (Institute for Economics and Peace 2019). This number increased by 450 per cent between 2013 and 2018, with Boko Haram accounting for 80 per cent of these attacks. Female involvement in combat roles also went up by more than 200 per cent in the same period (Institute for Economic Peace 2019). In 2017, women constituted 26 per cent of all of those arrested on terrorism charges in Europe, registering an 8 per cent increase from the previous year (Bigio & Vogelstein 2019). In Syria, women accounted for 13 per cent of the Islamic State's foreign recruits, the majority of whom came from the Middle East and North Africa or the Asia-Pacific region (Institute for Economic

Peace 2019). The UNDP (2017) has estimated that women form about 17 per cent of terrorism's new recruits in Africa, while the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate estimates that women currently constitute 10 to 15 per cent of the membership of terrorist groups globally (CTED 2019).

In Kenya, while there is no disaggregated data on the number of women engaged in Islamic violent extremism, security and media reports indicate that Al-Shabaab has intensified the recruitment, radicalisation and use of women in both support and front-line roles. In January 2020, security agencies in Kenya arrested five terrorism suspects, including two women believed to be on a reconnaissance mission in preparation for an attack on a popular night spot in the country's capital (Agutu 2020). Similarly, in the 2019 DusitD2 attack in Nairobi, the mission's mastermind, Salim Gichunge, was assisted in planning the attack by his wife, Violent Kemunto, alias Khadija (Cherono 2020). Another terror attack involving women occurred in 2016 when three women attacked Mombasa Central Police Station. Accounts of some of these young women indicate that gender constructs were exploited in their motivation and recruitment and their decisions to remain in or leave Al-Shabaab. However, the roles, motivations and status of women in violent extremist movements remain under-researched (Bloom 2011; Fink *et al.* 2013).

The cultural stereotypes or biases that portray women as victims rather than perpetrators of terrorism have undermined efforts to understand the role and status of women in violent extremism. Furthermore, very few studies have focused on understanding how religious justifications for gender roles intersect with extremism, even though they represent a cataclysmic force in the recruitment, retention and deployment of women in Islamic violent extremist groups. Gaps in understanding arising from a lack of empirical information have made existing P/CVE strategies ineffective at curbing women's participation in violent extremism. Meanwhile, the UN's recommendations on the integration and mainstreaming of gender in member states' National Plans of Actions on counterterrorism, particularly in areas of strategy development, training and analysis, remain either neglected or unimplemented. Only Switzerland had managed to fully implement the UN recommendations by 2017 (Fransen *et al.* 2017).

In Africa, the formulation and implementation of P/CVE strategies remains at a nascent stage, and several countries have been struggling with problems generated by legislative and institutional frameworks, as well as problems arising from limited financial support and technical capacities to support their strategy or policy documents. In East Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are yet to formulate and adopt policy documents on CVE (United States Department of State 2019), and, while countries such as Kenya and Somalia have formulated policies that recognise the importance of gender dimensions and gender equality as strategies in P/CVE, they have not provided any specific recommendations to be followed (Fransen *et al.* 2017).

The limited availability of ethnographic work on the roles of women in violent extremism has left researchers dependent on secondary data and theoretical speculations that are often based on subjective interpretations of unreliable observations (Brugh *et al.* 2019; Bloom 2011). Jackson *et al.* (2011) have therefore called for a systematic study of violent extremism with a view of providing in-depth knowledge on the status of women and gender. Bloom (2011) has also called for empirical studies that go beyond simplistic understandings of the motivations and roles of women in violent extremism, further giving credence to the importance of a gendered perspective. This article examines the prospect of using Islamic feminism as an alternative P/CVE strategy to counter Al-Shabaab in Kenya. The study focuses on Al-Shabaab, which is considered to be an Islamic violent extremist group and the biggest terrorism threat in Eastern Africa. Striegher (2015) defines a violent extremist group as one which has an ideology that is permissive about the use of violence in pursuance of socio-political and religious objectives. Al-Shabaab qualifies as an Islamic violent extremist group because its members use Islamic ideology to rationalise their use of violent practices and beliefs.

The first section of the article reviews a selection of relevant literature and draws attention to the gaps in existing P/CVE measures and the importance of integrating gender perspectives, as well as considering the evolution of women in violent extremism, and particularly their roles, motivations and status in terrorist groups. The second part of the article elaborates on the contribution that Islamic feminism can make as a theoretical framework and as a source of counter-narratives that can be used to prevent and counter violent extremism.

Literature review

Islamic extremism thrives on the use of Islam as a political ideology and as a source of law and public policy. Proponents of Islamic extremism essentially seek to Islamise every aspect of social life with what is perceived as authentic Islamic values (Othman 2006). Women are often the first target of Islamisation by violent extremist groups, who regard the control of women, their social roles, movements and sexuality as the embodiment of a pristine Islamic society (Othman 2006). As a result of this worldview, when these groups reclaim or take control of new territory, their actions often begin with stripping women of their rights and freedoms, which are perceived as unwarranted, including their freedom of movement and their rights to public participation, education and economic empowerment (Langholtz 2021).

Needless to say, the status of women in Islamic violent extremist groups is largely determined by each group's ideology, decrees and historical practices, as well as its

affiliation to global jihadist groups. It therefore follows that different groups have different rules that relate to women's behaviour, roles, positions and commitments. For example, while Hamas has commissioned a female battalion, al-Qaeda has remained rather conservative in the roles it allows for women, confining them to the care of homes and families. Conversely, Boko Haram has no reservations about using women and has been responsible for the highest number of female suicide bombings conducted by any terrorist group in history (*The Economist* 2018). It is worth noting that women's involvement in violent extremism, referred to hereafter as jihad, is recognised in the Quran and *hadith*, as well as in Muslim traditions. However, even in the early days of Islam, women did not enjoy equal status with their male counterparts. In the Quran and *hadith*, women's participation in jihad is often represented as sanctioned or uncommon, and it was hardly the first option for women, who were often limited to supportive roles that involved them nursing or bringing food and water to the wounded on the battlefield and encouraging their sons, daughters and husbands into jihadism as a religious duty (Nelly 2014). The major shift in the status of women in violent extremist groups came in the 20th century, and it arose not from Islamic violent extremist groups but from secular extremist organisations that used women in the planning and delivery of operations, as well as the dissemination of terrorist propaganda. This marked a new dawn in which women were raised to positions of leadership, acted as combatants and field operatives, and were involved in ferrying weapons, driving getaway cars, setting bombs and carrying out arson attacks. These changes were evident in the operations of groups such as the Baader-Meinhof gang, Red Zora, the Basque separatist party ETA and the Irish Republican Army (Bloom 2017).

Yet, while roles for women increased, their status did not change, even when they became involved in national politics and liberation movements to fight for independence. For instance, the Algerian women who fought alongside and helped their male counterparts in the Battle of Algiers against the French were expected to return to the domestic sphere after independence. Similarly, in Somalia, women played a crucial role in the overthrow of the dictatorial government of Said Barre only to lose the legal status and equal rights that had previously been accorded to them when the state collapsed (Jama 2010). Ali (2006) contends that women's presence and participation has been instrumentalised by their male counterparts, with women benefitting less than men from liberation movements, regardless of their levels of participation or engagement in the respective conflicts or struggles.

Badurdeen (2018) describes women in terrorists' groups as expendable resources who remain denigrated, particularly in terrorist-controlled territories or camps. Their sacrifices are barely recognised, while their bodies are offered as rewards to men in return for the latter's piety and bravery. This positioning is enabled in part because radical Islamic ideologies largely situate women as rewards for men, both on earth and

in heaven, particularly when the men die through martyrdom. The violent commoditisation of women and girls is an essential element of the modus operandi of extremist groups; for example, Islamic State (IS) soldiers in Iraq became infamous for selling and using Yazidi women as sex slaves. Similarly, Boko Haram has been known to use women as bargaining chips in their dealings with the Nigerian government (Bloom 2013). Even when women die 'for the cause' as suicide bombers, the designation of martyrdom is not automatic but is carefully considered, while when men die for the same cause, martyrdom is assumed without question (Inch 2017).

Undoubtedly, the status of women has undergone some change in the last five decades. Bloom and Matfess (2016) note that women have become powerful symbols, weaponised by Islamic violent extremist groups (IVEGs), who oblige them to execute their missions and purposes. Not surprisingly, contemporary Islamic violent extremist groups, such as IS, have invested a lot of resources in efforts to attract and retain female recruits. IS has set up websites, blogs, magazines and online support systems for female recruits, as well as social media platforms for 'sisters' who wish to join the *mujahedeen*. This pattern has been replicated by conservative violent extremist groups including al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, which previously discouraged women's involvement in violent extremism but have now intensified female recruitment. Al-Qaeda has even established a jihadist female magazine, dubbed *Beituki*, that teaches female jihadists how to treat their husbands so as to live a good life (*The Economist* 2018).

Nevertheless, information on women's experiences and their changing roles in violent extremist groups remains not only scant and patchy but largely outside empirical studies, which have tended to downplay the utility of gender perspectives in the study of violent extremism. The use of gender perspectives in the study of violent extremism remains a topic of major debate in International Relations and Security Studies. Scholars have differed on the centrality of gender as a unit of analysis: pro-gender arguments aver that to understand the reasons behind men's and women's engagement in violent extremism, it is essential to understand the gender constructions – namely, gender identities, roles and behaviour – which are the drivers of the push and pull factors that affect involvement (Phelan 2020). This view is supported by Littleton (2016), who draws a line between violent extremism and masculinities, indicating that the sheer number of young men involved in extremism is either a manifestation of certain masculine values or an indication of changes in those values in society. This view is supported by Aslam (2014), who links religious masculinities among young Pakistanis to violent extremism. From an early age, males are trained in and indoctrinated into violence, which is represented as tolerable and justifiable, especially if it is undertaken in defence of one's honour, family and Islam (Bozkurt *et al.* 2015). Meanwhile, femininity in Islam is highly regulated, with Muslim girls being taught from an early age that they need to behave in a certain way and uphold certain values; namely, how to

be a good wife, mother and Muslim woman. These three roles represent the pinnacle of femininity in Islam and partly explain the significance of marriage and family to young Muslim women (Brown and Saeed 2015). It is notable that IVEGs have exploited these values to appeal to women and encourage their commitment to the group, mirroring their efforts to recruit and instil loyalty in men (Brown and Saeed 2015; Ndung'u & Shadung 2017).

Conversely, Allan *et al.* (2015) have dismissed the utility of gender constructions as mere conjecture, indicating that there is very little empirical evidence to link Muslim masculinities and femininities with violent extremism. This view is justified partly because information about gender constructions remains largely undocumented and inconclusive (Katz 2015). Critics also argue that the use of gender constructions by violent extremist groups in recruitment has not been sufficiently evaluated. Inch (2017) asserts that empirical studies on the motives, roles and status of women in IVEGs remain limited and inconclusive, while Ndung'u & Shadung (2017) point out that there are only a few studies linking gender to Islamic violent extremism and terrorism. Bloom (2011) asserts that many of the existing studies have failed to interrogate extensively the deeper motives and roles of women in violent extremist groups, which means that scholars have largely had to rely on media accounts, conjecture and unreliable scientific studies.

Dufour-Genneson & Alam (2014) claim that much of the evidence around gender constructions gathered to date is anecdotal and insufficient to form coherent policy. This is partly because the use of gender perspectives in the study of violent extremism is relatively new. Traditionally, terrorism has been fundamentally associated with men, and counterterrorism measures, including P/CVE, have inadvertently ignored the utility of gender perspectives in curbing violent extremism. Theuri (2013) affirms that P/CVE has evolved from hard security measures to multi-sectoral preventative and comprehensive approaches against violent extremism guided by three principles that seek, first, to identify the push factors that encourage violent extremism; second, to develop targeted interventions based on the identified factors; and third, to implement programmes designed for the individuals most vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation (Theuri 2013). These approaches are ordinarily structured to work at three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary level focuses on prevention at a societal level, mitigating the root causes of extremists' behaviour by addressing social grievances that drive populations to violent extremism. The secondary level focuses on the individuals and groups that are most vulnerable to violent extremism, with emphasis being put on the prevention of radicalisation and efforts to halt its progression and reduce attempts at future radicalisation. The tertiary level focuses on radicalised groups that are actively planning and recruiting for violent extremist causes (Challgren *et al.* 2016).

The UN has made P/CVE an integral part of diplomacy and political discourse at the global level. P/CVE has also been incorporated into the growing field of development aid and international cooperation, particularly in US policy (Frazer & Nünlist 2015). In Kenya, the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE), which was launched in September 2016, brought together stakeholders including security agencies, civil society groups, and community and faith-based organisations, as well as development agencies, under the auspices of the National Counter Terrorism Center, to build the country's resilience and coordinate its efforts at preventing and countering violent extremism (Mathenge 2016). The strategy placed emphasis on matters such as youth empowerment, social and economic inclusion, alternative messaging, improving local governance, and enhancing knowledge and skills as preventative measures. However, the framework remained notably silent on many issues related to women and failed to provide direction for the County Action Plans on violent extremism, which were meant to be derivatives of the national strategy (Fransen *et al.* 2017). Initiatives under the NSCVE also remained largely disjointed, prompting scholars, such as Badurdeen (2018), to call for a broader analysis so that the impact of P/CVE projects could be evaluated in a meaningful way. The pressure to review the strategy finally pushed the Kenyan government to initiate a review process with the aim of strengthening areas deemed inefficient, including those related to gender and ideological responses to Islamic violent extremism.

Sjoberg (2016) argues that issues linked to female emancipation must be integrated with matters of security, including political economy, human rights and environmental concerns. Blanchard (2003) argues that, in the context of growing terrorist threats and techno-wars that have resulted in mounting causalities, gender must become a unit of analysis to enable the construction of sustainable and comprehensive security in the international system. Gender perspectives in the analysis of international politics provide insights that demystify long-standing myths about wars and their causalities. It also provides insights into the nature of war and conflict and the gender constructions that have sustained wars, showing where women are, what drives them, and how certain beliefs and practices have been wrongly legitimised at the expense of others (Tickner 2001).

Theoretical framework

Islamic feminism can be described as a conflation of various perspectives that articulate and advocate for gender equality and social justice as directed by the Quran (Abdo 2012). It traces its origin to the Asian and Middle Eastern national liberation and religious reform movements (Ahmadi 2006), and it gained impetus in the 1990s among

female Muslim scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi, Mir Zaki Hosseini, Mai Yamani and Yesim Arat (Badran 2011). Islamic feminists believe that gender discrimination is socially constructed rather than a natural phenomenon and therefore advocate for equal rights for women including the right to reinterpret the Quran – *Ijtihad* – from women's perspective (Najmabadi 2006).

As an ideology, Islamic feminism seeks to impress feminist consciousness and reforms on the global Muslim family. Islamic feminists make a distinction between faith in Islam (values and principles) and organised religion (institutions, laws and practices), and they advise caution about the risks of using the two terms interchangeably. Gender equality is deemed to be possible within the Islamic faith, but it is constrained by Islamic religious practices. Islamic feminists believe that *Shariah* – God's will, as revealed by the Prophet Mohammed – has been debauched by *fiqh*, the human endeavour to extract rules from the Quran and the *Sunna*. Furthermore, they suggest that this endeavour is fundamentally patriarchal, both in spirit and in form (Mir-Hosseini 2006). Islamic feminism therefore seeks a path of renegotiation between Islam and patriarchy to find a compromise and synthesis (Bodman & Tohidi 1997). Hashim (1999) points out that there is substantial evidence in Islamic texts of support for women's rights and gender equality.

According to Al-Sharmani (2014), in order to end discriminatory normative systems that have perpetuated gender inequalities in Muslim societies, what is needed is transformative change in public discourses, laws and policies. This type of change can be achieved through the production and dissemination of new religious knowledge that solidifies and persuasively grounds egalitarian gender relations and rights in the core principles and doctrines of Islam. The utility of Islamic feminism as an approach in this study is premised on its detachment from the secular base of other feminisms, by virtue of its location in the structures of Quranic exegesis and prophetic traditions. By extension, Islamic feminism advocates for changes within the confines of Islamic culture, and so it is theoretically more acceptable to Muslim men and women because it makes inferences from religious scriptures (Nuraan 2015). Such changes can also be used or extended in P/CVE programmes. In addition, Islamic feminism advocates for an end to gender inequalities, which must be achieved through reformation of Islamic education and deliberate engagement with Quranic discourses with a view to contesting the privileges of male interpretation. According to this view, the structure of Islamic education and limited deliberation on Quranic discourses and prophetic traditions form the basis of unequal power relations between Muslim women and men (Nuraan 2015). These unequal power relations have been used by Islamic extremist organisations to recruit and radicalise Muslim women (Al-Sharmani 2014).

Ahmadi (2006) asserts that Islamic feminism is changing. As well as engendering discussions about Islamic concepts, laws and the interpretation of sacred texts

and debates on women, Islamic feminism is also embracing post-modern ideas about women's issues, including the importance of tolerance and self-knowledge, and a focus on the multiplicity of truth, roles and realities (Ahmadi 2006). Post-modernist approaches highlight the hidden power relations that subjugate women in their everyday lives and the ideological forces that authorise and sustain these relations. Using post-modernist ideas, one is able to identify the underlying power relations that constrain women in their everyday lives, relations that are readily harnessed by extremist groups. Ahmadi (2006) points out that the role of the Islamic feminism also involves challenging the monolithic power that Muslim clerics exercise over textual interpretation, as well as reformulating Islamic concepts and laws from a feminist perspective (Ahmadi 2006). Islamic feminism has sought to empower Muslim women and help them to access education and resources and to participate in decision-making processes. Women's empowerment is considered key in transforming gender inequalities. Afshar *et al.* (2005) show how empowering women makes them more inquisitive about their faith, recitations, understandings and commentaries, and it therefore encourages them to become more cautious about accepting the views of religious zealots with specific agendas.

Notwithstanding these benefits, Islamic feminism has its own challenges as an approach. First and foremost, it follows many other strands of feminism in making the blanket assumption that Muslim women are disempowered. This argument has been refuted by scholars such as Jacoby (2015), who questions the conceptual boundary feminists establish when they exclude jihadi brides and dismiss their ability to make choices about their lives. Ahmadi & Lakhani (2016) have also dismissed the construction of disempowerment as being applicable to all women recruited into Islamic violent extremism. Some Muslim women have considered feminist materials and interpretation of the Quran a threat to their cultures, communities and indeed the *ummah* (the collective Muslim family) (Ahmad, 2015). Moreover, whatever reforms and potential Islamic feminism represents, it must be legitimised by the reinterpretation and wide acceptance of the new traditions (Ahmad, 2015). Reinterpretation of these traditions can either be developed internally, within the framework of Islam, or externally, outside that framework. However, interpretations created externally, outside Quranic traditions of exegesis, can easily be perceived as an invasion of Islam.

Methodology

This study uses exploratory research design methods to explicate the prospects of Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy in P/CVE. The use of exploratory design is suited to subject matter where very little information is available, and so it is ideal

for exploring the use of Islamic feminism to counter gender vulnerabilities exploited by Islamic violent extremist groups. Additionally, exploratory design has the capacity to explain how and why certain phenomena occur. An understanding of how violent extremist groups use gender constructions to recruit women into their ranks, as well as the prospects of Islamic feminism reversing this process, depends on understanding 'how' and 'why' women are recruited into and disengage from those groups. Exploratory research design is also used in this study because it accommodates the extensive use of published literature, a factor which is an advantage in this study, given the extensive security risks and threats associated with collecting primary data.

The target population in the study was determined using selective participation criteria. Women involved in female empowerment projects at community or national levels, as well as female returnees participating in CVE rehabilitation programmes, were included in the study. Scholars of Islamic Studies who have produced publications on Islamic ideologies and jurisprudence, together with Kenyan government officials from counterterrorism bureaus with insights into government programmes and strategies on P/CVE in their counties, were also included in the study. The study was conducted in Nairobi and Mombasa counties. The two counties were selected because they have significant numbers of recorded cases of women's involvement in Islamic violent extremism, as well as active P/CVE programmes; the counties also have high levels of cultural and educational exposure to violent extremist ideologies and increasing numbers of female Muslim scholars, activists and civil society organisations active in seeking to empower Muslim women.

The study involved the use of both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through the use of an interview guide and focus group discussions. The guide was developed to ensure that all aspects of the study were covered in discussions with the informants and that the researcher maintained the study's parameters. The interviews were conducted face to face and were carried out with key informants including sheikhs, Muslim female community leaders and mobilisers, female returnees, senior government officials involved in P/CVE programmes, members of the intelligentsia, female scholars in Islamic Studies, and coordinators of projects and programmes run by non-governmental organisations that work with female returnees. Five focus group discussions were carried out in Mombasa and Nairobi, with participants including female Islamic scholars, civil society activists, community mobilisers, security officers and young Muslim women. There were six members involved in each focus group session, and each session involved participants from varied backgrounds with different types of knowledge and expertise in relation to the discussion topics. All focus group sessions were moderated by the researcher.

The study employed secondary data drawn from national and county-level governments, academic journals, online magazines, the publications of international security

organisations and online libraries to complement and fill information gaps identi-fied in the primary data sources. Reports supplied by government sources, including Kenya's Ministry of Interior and coordinators within the national government and the National Police Service, as well as annual reports on violent extremism produced by the National Counter Terrorism Centre, were instrumental in delineating trends and patterns in female recruitment and participation in terrorist groups. They also shed light on the threat of Islamic violent extremism in the region. Reports produced by intergovernmental organisations and policy documents on counterterrorism were used to provide information on the global threat as well as Islamic violent extrem-ist groups in other parts of the world. International databases, including the Global Terrorist Index, were also used in the study. Reports from local daily newspapers that share current stories and accounts of female experiences in Al-Shabaab were also employed to help verify and validate primary data. Secondary data used in the study was checked for its reliability, suitability and adequacy.

Findings

Gender constructions exploited by Al-Shabaab

The study sought to identify the gender constructions that have been exploited by Al-Shabaab to recruit women into their ranks in order to understand the motiva-tions, roles and status of women in the group. Any such understanding would be inextricable from, and critical to, analysing the prospects of Islamic feminism as a transformative and empowering strategy for making women less vulnerable to violent extremist groups. The study established three broad categories of gender construc-tions exploited by Al-Shabaab to engage women in violent extremism. These three categories – motivations, roles and status – are not mutually exclusive but are instead entwined with other factors that are known to help rationalise and sustain women's engagement in violent extremism.

Women's motivations

Of the 20 women participants in the study who had prior experience of or had inter-acted with Al-Shabaab, 16 indicated that they were motivated to join the group because their husbands were members. Ndung'u and Salifu (2017) affirm that spousal influence is a major factor that explains Kenyan women's recruitment. The respond-ents contended that love for their spouse and the desire to be a good wife, as required by the Quran, were the most compelling reasons for them to cling to their marriage

unions, even after their discovery of deceit and revelations that their husbands were members of the proscribed group. Idris & Abdelaziz (2017) reaffirm this view, noting that a significant number of Kenyan women who join Al-Shabaab are following their husbands.

Notably, for some women, joining the group was not necessarily a choice but was instead a forced decision resulting from coercion by their husbands. The influence of their husbands was the most compelling reason for most women to join the group. In the study's focus group discussions, women admitted that the threat of having financial support withdrawn forced them to follow their husbands wherever they went. There was also a general consensus that most women were deceived from the outset and only found out much later that their husbands were members of Al-Shabaab, at which point their lives and those of their children were threatened if they tried to leave.

The focus group discussions and the individual accounts of some of the respondents also identified the thrill of romanticism as a motivating factor that led Kenyan Muslim women to join Al-Shabaab. Similar views have been expressed in media reports which suggest that some young Muslim women run away from Kenya to Somalia to offer themselves to the fighters as jihadi brides; indeed, some of these women referred to themselves as jihadi brides in posts published through their social media accounts. According to a Muslim cleric involved in the study, many of these 'runaways' either have very little religious knowledge or are new converts who have not had proper training in Islam and have relied heavily on and drawn inferences from the radical teachings of their recruiters. Badurdeen (2018) affirms that interest in adventure and romanticism is strongly correlated with the youthfulness and low levels of education that often characterise women targeted for recruitment. These girls often create some form of escape fantasy which allows them to feel more useful and part of something greater than themselves. The prospect of marrying fighters, whom they deem to be 'holy warriors', is also enthralling for some (Bloom 2011).

This study's findings also show that, for some women in Al-Shabaab-controlled territories, marrying into Al-Shabaab is a survival tactic. Existing reports and accounts of female returnees in Kenya demonstrate that a significant number of women who join Al-Shabaab come from homes or communities where there is an increasing sense of helplessness, often driven by poverty. Their resentment and desire to change their status are powerful motivators that can lead them to join violent extremist movements. Focus group discussions revealed that some of the female recruits from parts of Lamu and Kwale who joined Al-Shabaab were escaping from situations of near-abject poverty at home. These women survived because of the financial assistance provided by Al-Shabaab through their spouses, and they remained loyal even after their spouses' deaths because of that support. This view is validated by Badurdeen (2019), who notes

that the pressure on women to fend for their families is enormous and endears them, without their knowledge, to Al-Shabaab recruiters, who are able to make use of their desperation. The recruiters often give or promise better wages, salaries or business deals, which are often irresistible for their victims. Some women follow their spouses into the group because of their unemployed status, as well as their economic dependence on their spouses (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In-depth interviews with community mobilisers and the coordinators of programmes designed to counter violent extremism in both Nairobi and Mombasa also revealed that some women are motivated to join Al-Shabaab by their desire to seek redemption. For these women, the group is understood as a provider of second chances, and indeed Al-Shabaab positions itself in ways that support this view. The desire to secure a second chance or redemption often arises from the frustrations of life, some of which emanate from the effects of gender inequalities. Notably, the Somali community in Kenya remains one of the most patriarchal societies in the country. Its customs and traditions have restricted women's rights, including their rights to participate in public life and higher education and their access to some occupational opportunities. Additionally, cases of gender violence, including rape and physical abuse, are often kept as family secrets, with settlements being made between one family and the other. Justice for the victims is not enacted in courtrooms or determined by the victims. Many of the affected women are left to deal with the pain and stigma associated with their experiences, with very little or no social support or access to groups that could provide guidance and counselling. Their sense of violation and belief in their own impurity, coupled with social stigma, can make these women victims susceptible to Al-Shabaab recruitment, as Al-Shabaab recruiters devise propaganda to capitalise on these women's vulnerability. Al-Shabaab propaganda promises these women greater freedom, rights and a sense of belonging, as well as the prospect of sisterhood, to appeal to their desire to be understood and accepted. Al-Shabaab offers women a way to escape the miseries of feeling abused or oppressed, unwanted, misunderstood and disappointed – that is, it promises an opportunity for redemption. Haner *et al.* (2019) suggest that patriarchal societies which use patriarchal cultural measures to limit women have pushed some of them into terrorist groups in search of a reprieve as well as spaces where they can express themselves. Gan *et al.* (2019) also contend that the desire to escape alienation and inequality is one of the strongest push factors driving women into the arms of violent extremist groups.

The study's findings also show that Al-Shabaab has exploited women's interest in religion as a powerful recruitment tool. Religion is used by violent extremist groups to provoke a sense of responsibility and obligation. It is also a source of doctrines that can be used to entice individuals with the promise of a better life, both on earth and in the world to come. Although it is highly gender sensitive, religion has a transnational

and unifying appeal, and a cultural legitimacy, which makes it the single biggest catalysing factor in the recruitment and radicalisation of any individual. The study's findings reveal that Al-Shabaab is continuously using organised and forced religious preaching in mosques to recruit and radicalise men and women in the north-eastern region of Kenya. According to a Muslim cleric involved in the study, Al-Shabaab is keen to see its version of Islam go unquestioned and so it is keen to remove any obstacles, including formal education, that may encourage people to know more or raise their aspirations. Religion is a particularly powerful tool for recruiting women because of its psychological and emotional effects (Fink & El-Said, 2011). Importantly, Muslim women are socialised to respect and oblige religious sanctions as the epitome of a good Muslim woman, hence the use of religion by terrorists to rationalise their participation.

Women's roles

The study's findings reveal that women in Al-Shabaab have diverse roles, which stretch from domestic duties to the front line, but they are largely confined within the patriarchal continuum. A significant number of the study's respondents contended that Al-Shabaab has given most recruited women roles as fighters' wives to provide men with the psychological and emotional comfort necessary to make them focus on the group's bigger tasks, which are to fight and remain faithful to the cause. It is equally important for women to give birth to and nurture the next generation of fighters. This is very important for Al-Shabaab, which encourages every fighter to enter into a marriage that produces children, even if that means marrying more than one wife. Ndung'u & Salifu (2017) argue that women's prominence in Al-Shabaab is fundamentally linked to their supportive roles, their responsibility for raising families for the fighters and their service as good wives for their husbands. Celibacy is barely tolerated for men or women, and, according to one female respondent who had interacted with Al-Shabaab, the group encourages its fighters to marry more than two wives so they can have as many children as possible.

The focus group discussions also revealed that Al-Shabaab has enlisted women to help recruit other women. The group's increasing preference for women as recruiters is premised on the belief that women can use their position as mothers, sisters and wives, along with their sexual appeal, to recruit the men and women, and particularly the youth, in their environments (Ndung'u & Salifu 2017). According to Badurdeen (2019), the use of female recruiters by Al-Shabaab represents a conscious decision to eliminate their targets' initial suspicions and build trust and confidence. Woman-to-woman interactions and even friendships are unlikely to provoke any suspicion, even among women themselves. This is important for the group, as they are able to

lure in their newly acquired recruits gradually but surely. This view is supported by Bloom (2017), who observes that female recruits are proficient at lowering their victims' guards and putting them at ease, at the same time as building rapport, trust and an environment of secrecy and exclusivity.

Women are also used to spread propaganda, particularly within Al-Shabaab's administrative units (the *wilayat*), where the group has established committees that comprise the wives of senior-ranking fighters and women supporters who are used to conduct door-to-door campaigns and recruitment for Al-Shabaab. The group has also started using women as suicide bombers in recent times. Warner & Chapin (2018) pointed out that of the 155 suicide attacks that had been carried out since its formation, 10 had been committed by women. The group is also training more of its female recruits as suicide bombers, particularly after lifting the moratorium on the use of female suicide bombers in 2015. However, according to 16 female respondents who had had previous interactions with the group, while some women have been trained to become suicide bombers, hardly any have been used for that purpose. Women are also used as facilitators and enablers of the group to collect tactical information and to smuggle weapons and explosives, as well to provide cover for *Amniyat* operatives (from the intelligence wing of Al-Shabaab) in their missions (Ndung'u & Salifu 2017).

The use of women to collect information is widely practised in both Somalia and Kenya. Stern (2019) estimates that about 85 per cent of Al-Shabaab's intelligence collection is conducted by women. Petrich (2018) observes that, in Kenya's capital Nairobi, Al-Shabaab has enlisted prostitutes who are paid to collect intelligence about their clients, and particularly police officers, prominent politicians and businessmen. The sex workers who are affiliated with Al-Shabaab do not claim membership of the organisation or share its ideological stances, and so these relationships are solely based on the exchange of information and money (Petrich 2018). Association with and tacit endorsement of prostitution are both, in theory, repugnant to Al-Shabaab, and these transactions therefore demonstrate that the organisation is applying its ideological stances flexibly, making necessary adjustments to secure operational gains. In summary, while Al-Shabaab remains conservative in its deployment of women, particularly in front-line combat roles, women are a key part of the group's invisible infrastructure, which performs the necessary logistical and supportive functions to keep the group resilient.

Women's status

The findings of the study reveal that the status of women in Al-Shabaab is fundamentally dictated by the group's patriarchal ideology. The group has enacted stringent rules that constrain women's behaviour. For example, women are prohibited from

chatting in public, wearing bras and working, and they are also forbidden to walk unaccompanied without a *mahram* (a male chaperone who is sexually incompatible). Some of the women in the group are used solely for the sexual gratification of fighters and they are frequently either beaten, denied food or threatened with murder. Needless to say, sexual violence and slavery are common occurrences in Al-Shabaab camps. Al-Shabaab has also introduced its own form of wife inheritance (*Dumaal*), according to which all militants are considered to be brothers and can therefore marry each other's widows (Stern 2019). This practice is designed to ensure that the women in the group stay married and continue to produce and care for fighters' families. At an operational level, women have been confined to non-combat roles, rather than assigned to front-line battles.

Women's recruitment into the group has largely been conducted through abduction, which suggests that a good number of women in Al-Shabaab are held against their will (Amoroso 2017). This view is shared by Attwood (2017), who asserts that Al-Shabaab has increased its kidnapping of both Muslim and non-Muslim women. Parker (2017) provides an account of a woman held by Al-Shabaab for nine years in Boni forest, after she was lured with a reunion invitation and promise of employment, supposedly by her husband who had previously separated from her and disappeared in Somalia. On arrival Amina discovered that none of this was true; her husband had long since died. Notwithstanding the prevalence of kidnap-based recruitment, there are also cases of women who have willingly and knowingly joined Al-Shabaab, motivated by a desire to participate in the jihad against the governments of Somalia and Kenya (Amoroso 2017).

Stern (2019) argues that it is problematic to talk about women's 'membership' of Al-Shabaab, because most women in the group have married into Al-Shabaab rather than being recruited. It is therefore difficult to argue that women share the ideological standpoints of the group or have the same kind of commitment to it as their male counterparts. Stern (2019) suggests there is no general consensus among Al-Shabaab operatives that women are considered members of the group. While some members of the extremist group refer to women as supporters and sympathisers, others consider them to be full members.

The study's findings further indicate that no woman has so far been accorded leadership command of a unit, territory or jurisdiction under Al-Shabaab's control. The absence of women in Al-Shabaab leadership positions is indicative of the status of women in the group. While women play an important role in the insurgency, they remain subjugated and under the directive of men. The group's practice of not encouraging female education is deliberate and intended to confine women's roles largely to the domestic sphere. Lack of education among women also maintains women's dependence on men and removes the possibility that they will compete with them for

leadership positions. Often, very little non-essential information is given to women about the nature of the tasks they undertake on behalf of Al-Shabaab, and therefore women tend to learn very little about the operations and the modus operandi of the group. Restrictions on women's knowledge and responsibilities also mean that women in Al-Shabaab are always managed and take direction from other sources, which in practice means they answer to a male leader at the top of the chain of command.

Islamic feminism in Kenya

The findings of this study indicate that Islamic feminism in Kenya is a budding concept that is expressed less in acts of prayer and books than in practice, beliefs and modes of dressing. Islamic feminism is strongly associated with the values of modernity and feminism and has largely been confined to the cities, particularly Nairobi and Mombasa. The spread of the movement's ideals is driven largely by the forces of modernity rather than through preaching or inculcation of the movement's values and principles in places of worship. As a result, Islamic feminism as an ideology remains scanty, disparate and inadmissible in places of worship, largely because of its perceived bias and clash with entrenched mainstream ideologies such as Sufism and Salafi-Wahhabism in Mombasa and Nairobi. The challenges involved in conceptualising Islamic feminism as an ideology or movement have further undermined the spread and acceptance of its ideals in Kenya. In many instances, Islamic feminism has been construed as a form of intrusion or unwanted innovation and an attempt by Westerners to pervert what is perceived to be the true way of Islam. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the respondents in this study, including Muslim clerics, did not know or understand what Islamic feminism stood for and had not heard about it, but they were, interestingly, very quick to dismiss the concept as an aberration from pure Islam.

However, a significant number of respondents in the study, namely Muslim scholars and female professionals, including legal practitioners, community activists and security analysts, expressed knowledge of, familiarity with and a willingness to advocate for the tenets of Islamic feminism. According to one female community activist, who is also a legal practitioner, knowledge of Islamic feminism is a kind of professional requisite which compels women to search for more information on the rights of Muslim women. Among the Muslim scholars involved in the study, Islamic feminism was well understood in terms of its merits and demerits, and its traces in the history of the country were also well known. However, it is worth noting that, despite the tremendous changes driven by women in Kenya in the six decades since independence, which have included the enactment of affirmative action and expanded representation for women in the country's legislative houses, gender equality and equity remain distant goals, and Kenyans, including the country's Muslim communities, remain largely

patriarchal. Women continue to bear the triple burden of giving birth, nurturing and providing for their families.

The in-depth interviews with Muslim scholars also revealed that female Muslim voices involved in the generation and description of Islamic knowledge remain subdued, as patriarchy is given doctrinal validation and women are relegated to subordinate roles as citizens, not leaders, within their community of faith. The respondents in the study generally agreed that Muslim women are often reluctant to challenge the normative behaviour of men, particularly if the said behaviour is perceived to be a derivative of or sanctioned by religion. The patriarchal system which engenders women's exploitation has been supported by the teachings women are subjected to in the madrasa in early childhood, which impresses on Muslim girls the absolute importance of obeying their fathers, husbands and brothers at all times. Obedience is established at a very early age as a value that is critical to women's spiritual and social wellbeing.

Yet interviews with female Muslims professionals, including lawyers, security analysts and community workers, revealed that there is an emerging cohort of young Muslim women, between the ages of 22 and 30, who are redefining and questioning the conventional conservative obligations of the Muslim woman. While the young women who were interviewed did not label themselves, or want to be labelled, as 'Islamic feminists', their perceptions and understanding of the obligations of Muslim women marked a clear departure from conventional, conservative dictates – they have embraced modern forms of dressing, uncover their hair, occupy positions of leadership in corporate organisations, run programmes and initiatives, are economically independent, and are more fixated on their careers than on marriage. Seemingly, many of these women have high levels of education: a significant number have university degrees or tertiary college diplomas. Their attitudes, sense of identity and modes of expression, as well as their preferences as Muslim women, demonstrated confidence.

Notably, members of this new cohort of young female Muslim professionals are slowly working towards and advocating for change within the confines of Islam. They are reading religious texts and making individual interpretations of them, and even though they do not consider themselves to be Islamic feminists or label themselves as such, they share the same vision, which is focused on expanding the rights and freedoms of women as envisaged in the Quran. These women are questioning the patriarchal undertones in the practice of Islam and are no longer obeying religion blindly or embracing cultural traditions without question; instead, they are driven by the desire to have a deeper understanding of their religion. For these young, educated Muslim women, the spirit of Islamic feminism is a reflection of the desires and aspirations of the modern Muslim woman. Their image of the modern Muslim woman as someone who has a relatively good education and a career is proving equally attractive to Muslim men who are looking for spouses, according to one of the study's

female respondents. It can be inferred, then, that the Muslim household is incrementally undergoing changes that are giving more prominence to women and promoting female agency as a way of life.

The contribution of Islamic feminism to preventing and countering violent extremism

The study evaluated how Islamic feminism can make a contribution towards preventing and countering violent extremism from groups such as Al-Shabaab. Feminists have set out to eradicate various forms of discrimination and exclusion which have historically been overlooked but continue to be used to subjugate women. The largest blame is apportioned to patriarchal institutions and practices that have reinforced a status quo maintained by denigrating female agency. The findings of the study show that Islamic feminism is predicated on the belief that patriarchal inclinations in Islam have reinforced the circumstances that have left Muslim women vulnerable to, inter alia, violent extremism. The focus group discussions revealed that Al-Shabaab has established a patriarchal system that oppresses women, reduces them to subservience, and leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Religion and gender are identified as cataclysmic forces that Al-Shabaab uses to recruit and radicalise women and sustain their engagement in violent extremism. Al-Shabaab uses religious scriptures to compel wives to remain obedient and loyal to their husbands. The group also seeks to remove or prevent access to practices or beliefs that are perceived to be likely to promote, trigger or provoke female agency, including education, career pursuits, religious literacy outside the group's ideology or teachings, and women's ascension into leadership positions or financially rewarding roles. Instead, Al-Shabaab's practices implicitly rationalise gender inequalities, encourage female dependency, and demand unquestioning loyalty and obedience from women. Together, these factors have sustained the vicious cycle of violent extremism in parts of Kenya and Somalia.

Bloom & Matfess (2016) have helped to illuminate the nexus between women's increased exposure to violent extremism and gender-based violence in the form of rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery and forced marriage in Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia and Syria. The correlation they identify shows that women are more likely to participate in violent extremism in societies where their roles and status are limited and demeaned than in those where there is gender parity (Ispahani 2016). It is possible, then, to suggest that societies with higher levels of gender equality and equity may be more resilient and resistant to violent extremism than those with higher levels of gender inequality and injustice.

According to the security analysts who participated in the study, the utility of Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy in P/CVE is premised on its advocacy for improved religious knowledge, changes of perspective in Islam, and the premium it

places on the expansion of women's rights, freedom and status in society. At the core of Islamic feminism is an emphasis on the reinterpretation of religious scriptures. Islamic feminists suggest that the root causes of women's oppression and suffering lie in the patriarchal interpretation of religious scriptures. Reinterpretation of the sources of Islam using a feminist perspective is deemed critical to the work of restoring social justice and reviving the intended meaning of Islamic principles. The objective of reinterpretation is to displace the entrenched traditions and misogynistic understandings that have been compounded with the teachings of Islam and have long held sway.

The findings of the study illustrate that Islamic feminism claims its legitimacy and authority from religious scriptures and promotes religious literacy and knowledge for Muslim women so they can read and reinterpret the scriptures for themselves. Kresse (2009) argues that, in Islam, knowledge provides the guidance, orientation and justification for practice. Knowledge forms the basis of a person's decisions on which views they consider to be authoritative and worthy of respect. As a result, those with a solid religious foundation or knowledge are less likely to accept the misinterpretations and misinformation propagated by violent extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab. According to the study's female respondents, Al-Shabaab targets women with little religious knowledge and preaches that its understanding of scripture is the only true way to Islam. For female recruits who join the group, Al-Shabaab's version of Islam appears to be the only true version because they have no other point of reference.

The plausibility of Islamic feminism as a strategy for contesting extremism was also asserted by some of the female community activists who participated in the study. They argued that Islamic feminism, unlike mainstream feminism, is not seeking radical changes in the religious institutions or the culture of Muslim people but is instead seeking the restoration of authentic Islam. According to Ahmad (2015), Islamic feminists only seek the restitution of rights for women that may have been obscured by cultural norms.

The findings of the study also showed an intersectionality between Islamic feminism and proposed changes to the NSCVE which assumes that P/CVE measures are strengthened when women are engaged as change agents. According to female scholars who participated in the study, Islamic feminism indicates that respect for women is both religiously and culturally sanctioned by the teachings and commands of the Prophet. Indeed, it is the general belief of all Muslims that paradise lies under the feet of mothers and that whosoever angers their mother is unlikely to find favour with God. Women also play critical cultural roles as caregivers, nurturers and figures of authority within their households (Majoran 2015). This is a unique and powerful position that allows them to invoke both respect and obligations from men and children, which has proven to be a powerful force in driving change including in the fight against violent extremism. As caregivers and nurturers, women can often detect

the tell-tale signs that daughters or sons have been radicalised from the outset and are well placed to engage in processes of deradicalisation (Idris & Abdelaziz 2017). Moreover, their traditional roles in the home place them in a unique position to shape familial and social norms and promote increased tolerance and non-violent political and civic engagement (Fink *et al.* 2013). The study's focus group discussions suggest that women are also considered to be ardent community mobilisers capable of delegitimising extremists' narratives in their community, and they can also assist security agencies with the design and implementation of CVE programmes to make them more effective (Majoran 2015; Calfas 2016).

Islamic feminism advocates for female agency and empowerment through education. Enhanced social and economic opportunities strengthen the prospects of Islamic feminism as a strategy to counter violent extremism, as improved quality of life, including access to knowledge about religion, financial capacity and social support networks, helps to cushion women from the strategies that terrorists' recruiters have designed to exploit them (Idris & Abdelaziz 2017). This view is also affirmed in the United Nations' (2015) Plan of Action for preventing violent extremism and by Couture (2014), who argued that empowering women would naturally have a positive outcome on all CVE indicators. This view was validated in the study by women activists supporting programmes that help female returnees: they indicated that Al-Shabaab often targets women who are hopeless, desperate or going through an identity crisis, and they argued that, to find a more effective solution, the government needs to invest in religious education and support economic inclusion.

There was general consensus among the security experts involved in the study that Islamic feminism provides responses to the existing ideological gaps relating to gender in existing P/CVE measures in Kenya. The national government's deradicalisation programmes have, for some time, remained oblivious to the ambiguities within the ideological stances professed by Al-Shabaab. Moreover, attempts at gender mainstreaming have been superficial and have not engaged with the practice of Islam. The continued disproportionate allocation of resources to hard-power approaches has reinforced the perception that women are solely the victims of violent extremism, and the confinement of Muslim women's voices to the level of policy implementation and the lack of women's involvement in policy formulation have further limited the government's ability to fight terrorism. The need for a comprehensive P/CVE strategy, one that incorporates nuanced responses to the ways violent extremist groups exploit gender constructions, has been acknowledged by the government, but its development has been bogged down in bureaucracy, and relevant policies remain unratified or, at best, underfunded or uncoordinated, which has led to disjointed stakeholder interests, goals and outcomes. As a result, it is difficult to certify that female returnees have gone through deradicalisation processes and are ready to rejoin mainstream society. This has, in turn, led

to calls for a fresh, comprehensive gendered approach to the development of P/CVE strategies, one that can provide detailed insights into the drivers and impact of violent extremism in Muslim communities, as well as available responses.

Conclusion

The findings of this study prove that Islamic feminism is a viable alternative strategy for countering and preventing violent extremism, even though it may seem preposterous to some. As a strategy, Islamic feminism possesses certain principles and values that empower Muslim women and helps to make them less vulnerable to Al-Shabaab recruiters. Stereotypical gender constructions constitute the vulnerabilities that have partly contributed to the exponential growth of women's participation in Al-Shabaab activities, and this study has shown that the group leverages them to motivate women and define their roles and status in ways that support Al-Shabaab's aims.

The study's findings show that spousal influence, the desire to be a good Muslim wife, fear for one's life and the lives of one's children, financial dependency and unemployment, as well as the thrill of adventure and romance, are often related factors that have motivated women to join and remain in Al-Shabaab. Additionally, the desire for redemption arising from feelings of violation and impurity, stigma and identity crises have equally endeared women to Al-Shabaab, with recruiters consistently posing as providers of second chances. Al-Shabaab has leveraged religion and femininity in relation to all the aforementioned factors in order to amplify or create women's sense of obedience or obligation, their desire for validation, and/or their belief in the possibility of securing greater or divine rewards.

The findings of the study further demonstrate that, although roles for women have expanded in Al-Shabaab, precedence is given to supportive roles which lie within the domestic sphere, and women are primarily expected to take care of their families, be good spouses, procreate and provide logistical support that includes nursing wounded fighters. Similarly, the logistical roles accorded to women – including their involvement in the recruitment of new members, the collection of intelligence, the promotion of propaganda and weapons smuggling – are premised on exploiting culturally feminine values that are deemed to give the group operational and tactical advantages over the security forces. Due to cultural stereotypes, women are more often treated as victims than as perpetrators, and security forces tend to deal with them more lightly than they do with male operatives. The study has also revealed that the mistreatment of women, in forms including rape, sexual slavery, physical abuse, denial of access to formal education and leadership positions, and restricted movement, are highly regulated as part of a general strategy to control female behaviour.

When gender vulnerabilities have been exploited on the basis of a religious rationale, Islamic feminism can serve as a suitable antidote. This study has revealed that female recruits who join Al-Shabaab often have little religious knowledge or formal education and are less cognisant than others of their rights and freedoms as Muslim women. The patriarchal assumptions shaping the implementation of Kenya's NSCVE policies have led to further failures to develop solutions to the gendered strategies that have been exploited by Al-Shabaab to motivate and sustain female engagement in violent extremism. Although Islamic feminism is in its nascent stage in Kenya, it provides an apt alternative strategy for countering the narratives Al-Shabaab uses to recruit and radicalise women and sustain their engagement with violent extremism. The study's findings have shown that there is an emerging cohort of young Muslim women who do not label themselves as Islamic feminists but seek out and pursue the same values – these women are advocating for change within the confines of Islam, producing individual reinterpretations of the religious scriptures, and seeking more rights and freedoms for women on the basis of how they understand those rights to have been originally constituted in the Quran. The rise of young Muslim women in Kenya with financial freedom, successful careers, knowledge based on religious studies and improved roles within marriage provides anecdotal proof that Islamic feminism can reduce the gendered vulnerabilities that have been and continue to be exploited by Al-Shabaab. However, more empirical studies are required to explore how Al-Shabaab has exploited the femininities of Muslim women perceived to have higher education, more religious knowledge and higher economic status. This may need to begin with examining how women have exploited their femininities to remain relevant in violent extremist groups.

References

Abdo, D.M. (2012), 'My Qarina, my self: the homoerotic as Islamic feminism in Alifa Rifaat's "My World of the Unknown"', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16(4): 398–415. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.681260

Afshar, H., Aitken, R. & Franks, M. (2005), 'Feminisms, Islamophobia and identities', *Political Studies*, 53(2): 262–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00528.x

Agutu, N. (19 January 2020), 'Five terror suspects arrested in Kiambu, US passport recovered', *The Star*. https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2020-01-19-five-terror-suspects-arrested-in-kiambu-us-passports-recovered/

Ahmad, A. (2015), 'Islamic feminism – a contradiction in terms?', Fes India Paper, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/indien/11388.pdf

Ahmadi, B. & Lakhani, S. (2016), 'Afghan women and violent extremism: colluding, perpetrating or preventing?', United States Institute for Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/11/afghan-women-and-violent-extremism

Ahmadi, F. (2006), 'Islamic feminism in Iran: feminism in a new Islamic context', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 22(2): 33–53. https://doi.org/10.2979/FSR.2006.22.2.33

Ali, F. (2006), 'Rocking the cradle to rocking the world: the role of Muslim female fighters', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1): 21–35.

Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jesperson, S., Reddy-Tumu, S. & Winterbotham, E. (2015), 'Drivers of violent extremism: hypotheses and literature review', Royal United Service Institute. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf

Al-Sharmani, M. (2014), 'Islamic feminism: transnational and national reflections', *Approaching Religion*, 4(2): 83–94. https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.67552

Amoroso, V. (11 October 2017), 'Kidnapped: inside Al-Shabaab's abduction of women and young girls', Best of Africa. https://thebestofafrica.org/content/kidnapped-inside-al-shabaabs-abduction-women-young-girls

Aslam, M. (2014), 'Islamism and masculinity: case study Pakistan', *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 39(3): 135–49.

Attwood, C. (25 May 2017), 'The sex slaves of Al-Shabaab', BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-40022953

Badran, M. (2011), 'From Islamic feminism to a Muslim holistic Feminism', *IDS Bulletin*, 42(1): 78–87. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00203.x

Badurdeen, F.A. (2018), 'Women and recruitment in the Al-Shabaab network: stories of women being recruited by women recruiters in the coastal region of Kenya', *The African Review*, 45(1): 19–48.

Badurdeen, F.A. (2019), 'Roles, motivations, and recruitment pathways of Kenyan women recruited into the Al-Shabaab', in Mazrui, A., Njogu, K. & Goldsmith, P. (eds), *Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya: Between the Rule of Law and the Quest for Security* (Nairobi, Twaweza Communications), 151–68.

Bigio, J. & Vogelstein, R. (May 2019), 'Women and terrorism: hidden threats, forgotten partners', Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/report/women-and-terrorism

Blanchard, E. (2003), 'Gender, international relations and the development of feminist security theory', *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(4): 1289–312. https://doi.org/10.1086/368328

Bloom, M. (2011), *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press). https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812208108

Bloom, M. (2013), 'In defense of honor: women and terrorist recruitment on the internet', *Journal of Post-Colonial Cultures and Societies*, 4(1): 150–94.

Bloom, M. (2017), 'Constructing expertise: terrorist recruitment and "talent spotting" in the PIRA, Al Qaeda, and ISIS', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(7): 603–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1237219

Bloom, M. & Matfess, H. (2016), 'Women as symbols and swords in Boko Haram's terror', *Prism*, 1, 105–21.

Bodman, H.L. & Tohidi, N.E. (1997), *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity* (Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner). https://doi.org/10.1515/9781685856236

Bozkurt, V., Tartanoglub, S. & Dawes, G. (2015), 'Masculinity and violence: sex roles and violence endorsement among university students', *Procedia – Social Behavioral Sciences*, 205, 254–60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.09.072

Brown, K.E. & Saeed, T. (2015), 'Radicalization and counter-radicalization at British universities: Muslim encounters and alternatives', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(11): 1952–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.911343

Brugh, C.S., Desmarais, S.L., Simons-Rudolph, J. & Zottola, S.A. (2019), 'Gender in the jihad: characteristics and outcomes among women and men involved in jihadism-inspired terrorism',

Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 6: 76–92. https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000123

Calfas, A. (2016), 'Why women are the missing link in countering extremism', *Fair Observer*. http://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/women-counter-extremism-middle-east-north-africa-99121/

Challgren, J., Kenyon, T., Kervick, L., Scudder, S., Walters, M., Whitehead, K., Connor, J. & Flynn, C.R. (2016), *Countering Violent Extremism: Applying the Public Health Model* (Washington, DC, Georgetown Security Studies Review).

Cherono, S. (18 January 2020), 'Kenya: how wife of Dusit terror mastermind eluded the police', *Daily Nation*. https://allafrica.com/stories/202001180107.html

Couture, K. (July 2014), 'A gendered approach to countering violent extremism: lessons learned from women in peace-building and conflict prevention applied successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco', Brookings Institution Policy Papers. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Women-CVE-Formatted-72914-Couture-FINAL2.pdf

CTED (Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate) (February 2019), 'Gender dimensions of the response to returning foreign terrorists fighters: research perspective'. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/feb_2019_cted_trends_report_0.pdf

Dufour-Genneson, S. & Alam, M. (2014), 'Women and countering violent extremism', Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

The Economist (3 February 2018), 'Al-Qaeda chick lit: how to please your holy warrior'. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/02/03/al-qaedas-chick-lit-how-to-please-your-holy-warrior

Fink, N., Barakat, R. & Shetret, L. (April 2013), 'The roles of women in terrorism, conflict, and violent extremism – lessons for the United Nations and international actors', Centre on Global Counter Terrorism Cooperation. https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/44300

Fink, N. & El-Said, H. (2011). *Transforming Terrorists: Examining International Efforts to Address Violent Extremism* (New York, International Peace Institute).

Fransen, R., Naraghi Anderlini, S. & Holmes, M. (2017), 'National action plans on preventing violent extremism: a gendered content analysis', ICAN. https://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/GSX-2017-PVE-NAPs-Analysis-1.pdf

Frazer, O. & Nünlist, C. (2015), 'The concept of countering violent extremism', *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, 183: 1–4.

Gan, R., Neo, L.S., Chin, J. & Khader, M. (2019), 'Change is the only constant: the evolving role of women in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)', *Women & Criminal Justice*, 29(4–5): 204–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2018.1547674

Haner, M., Cullen, F.T. & Benson, M.L. (2019), 'Women and the PKK: ideology, gender and terrorism', *International Criminal Justice Review*, 30(3): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567719826632

Hashim, I. (1999), 'Reconciling Islam and feminism', *Gender and Development*, 7(1): 7–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/741922938

Idris, I. with Abdelaziz, A. (2017), *Women and Countering Violent Extremism* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1408). Birmingham: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

Inch, R.K. (2017), 'Jihad and hashtags: women's roles in the Islamic State and pro-jihadist social networks', *MA Research Paper*, 13, 2–35. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/sociology_masrp/13

Institute for Economics and Peace (November 2019), 'Global terrorism index 2019: measuring the impact of terrorism'. http://visionofhumanity.org/reports

International Crisis Group (2019), 'Women and Al-Shabaab's insurgency'. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b145-women-and-al-shabaabs-insurgency

Ispahani, F. (2016) 'Women and Islamist extremism: gender rights under the shadow of Jihad', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 14(2): 101–4. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1184445

Jackson, R., Smyth, B.M., Gunning, J. & Jarvis, L. (2011), *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (London, Palgrave Macmillan). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-35980-2

Jacoby, T.A. (2015), 'Jihadi brides at the intersections of contemporary feminism', *New Political Science*, 37(4): 525–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2015.1089028

Jama, F. (2010), 'Somali women and peacebuilding', *Accord*, 21: 62–5.

Katz, J. (2015). 'Where do the women fit in? A theoretical analysis of Western women's participation and role in the Islamic State', Master's thesis, Swedish Defense University. https://frivarld.se/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Masters-thesis-Jessica-Katz.pdf

Kresse, K. (2009), 'Muslim politics in postcolonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the periphery', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15: 76–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01543.x

Langholtz, H.J. (2021), 'Implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions on the women, peace, and security agenda in Africa', The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and The Peace Operations Training Institute (POTI). https://cdn.peaceopstraining.org/course_promos/wps_africa/wps_africa_english.pdf

Littleton, J.B. (2016), 'Muslim masculinities: one of the battlegrounds for understanding and subverting terrorism', Evergreen State College. https://sites.evergreen.edu/middleeastproject/wp-content/uploads/sites/196/2016/05/Muslim-Masculinities.pdf

Majoran, A. (2015), 'Mothers and wives: women's political role in countering violent extremism', The Mackenzie Institute. https://mackenzieinstitute.com/mothers-wives-womens-potential-role-countering-violent-extremism/

Mathenge, O. (7 September 2016), 'Strategy to counter violent extremism launched to improve traditional methods', *The Star*. https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/09/08/strategy-to-counter-violent-extremism-launched-to-improve-traditional_c1416558

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2006), 'Muslim women's quest for equality: between Islamic law and feminism', *Critical Inquiry*, 32(4): 629–45. https://doi.org/10.1086/508085

Najmabadi, A. (2006), 'Gender and secularism of modernity: how can a Muslim woman be French?', *Feminist Studies*, 32(2): 239–55. https://doi.org.10.2307/20459085

Ndung'u, I., & Salifu, U. (2017). 'The role of women in violent extremism in Kenya', Institute of Security Studies, East African Report.

Ndung'u, I. & Shadung, M. (2017), 'Can a gendered approach improve responses to violent extremism?', Institute for Security Studies, Africa in the World Report.

Nelly, L. (2014), 'The neglected sex: the jihadis' exclusion of women from jihad', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26(5): 780–802. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.772511

Nuraan, D. (2015), 'Are Muslim women in need of Islamic feminism? In consideration of a re-imagined Islamic educational discourse', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 37(3): 311–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2014.944096

Othman, N. (2006), 'Muslim women and the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism/extremism: an overview of Southeast Asian Muslim women's struggle for human rights and gender equality', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(4): 339–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2006.05.008

Parker, C. (28 November 2017), 'ISS today: a female al-Shabaab ex-commander who escaped speaks out', *Daily Maverick*. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-11-28-iss-today-a-female-al-shabaab-ex-commander-who-escaped-speaks-out/#.WmOij6iWbIV

Petrich, K. (14 August 2018), 'Al-Shabaab's Mata Hari network', War on the Rocks. https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/al-shabaabs-mata-hari-network/

Phelan, A. (2020), 'Special issue introduction for terrorism, gender and women: toward an integrated research agenda', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759252

Sjoberg, L. (2016), 'What, and where, is feminist security studies?', *Journal of Regional Security*, 11(2): 143–61. https://doi.org/10.11643/issn.2217-995X162SPS66

Spencer, A.N. (2016), 'The hidden face of terrorism: an analysis of the women in Islamic State', *Journal of Strategic Security*, 9(3): 74–98. http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.3.1549

Stern, O.M. (2019). 'The invisible women of Al-Shabaab', Rehabilitation Support Team, Adam Smith International. https://www.orlystern.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/

Striegher, J.L. (2015), 'Violent-extremism: an examination of a definitional dilemma', 8th Australian Security and Intelligence Conference. https://doi.org/10.4225/75/57a945ddd3352

Theuri, N. (2013), 'Gender and contextual perspective in countering violent extremism (CVE): examining inclusion of women and contextual factors in online approaches to CVE'. Master's thesis, Malmö University.

Tickner, J.A. (2001), *Gendering World Politics* (New York, Columbia University Press).

United Nations (2015), 'Plan of action to prevent violent extremism: report of the Secretary General'. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/816212?ln=en

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) (2017), 'Journey to extremism in Africa: drivers, incentives and tipping point for recruitment'. https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/

US Department of State (2019), 'Country Report on terrorism 2019', Bureau of Counter-Terrorism, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/

Warner, J. & Chapin, E. (2018), 'Operational overview of Al-Shabaab's suicide bombers', in Warner, J. & Chapin, C., *Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of Al-Shabaab* (West Point, NY, United States Military Academy), 7–12.