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Gender and Violent Extremism

Martine Zeuthen and Gayatri Sahgal



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Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies
Whitehall
London SW1A 2ET
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7747 2600
www.rusi.org
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Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, there has been an increasing interest in understanding the participation of women in violent extremist activity. In the Kenyan context, interest in the subject emerged following an attack on the Mombasa police station by three women in September 2016. While the attack was the subject of some controversy, as it was not immediately clear which specific group the women belonged to, the incident itself drew attention to the need for a deeper understanding of the role of women in violent extremism (VE). Particularly, it underscored the importance of interrogating their involvement in VE through a different lens, one that did not classify women's roles into broad categories of either victims or peace-builders.

To address this gap in understanding, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) funded by the European Union, in partnership with the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA), supported the development of four academic studies led by Kenyan researchers. The studies were later published as a special issue of *The African Review*.¹ On 6 June 2018, insights from the research, along with lessons for policy and programming, were discussed at a research seminar jointly organised by RUSI and IFRA. Presentations on the research findings were given by Hassan Mwakimako (Pwani University), Fatuma Ahmed Ali (United States International University), Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen (Technical University of Mombasa), and Halimu Shauri (Pwani University).

The seminar was chaired by Mutuma Ruteere, Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies (CHRIPS), and Martine Zeuthen, Team Leader of RUSI's STRIVE (Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism) programme, with key addresses given by Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, Director of IFRA, Hanina Ben Bernou from the EU, and Kim Ramoneda, First Counsellor of the French Embassy.

The key themes discussed during the seminar included the process of recruitment of women into violent extremist organisations, the narratives on women's experiences while in extremist organisations and the gendered impact of VE. In discussing these themes, several recommendations were made for strengthening countering violent extremism programming efforts. The following paper discusses the key themes and the lessons for policy and programming that emerged during the seminar.

1. For more details, see *The African Review*, 'Special Issue Violent Extremism and Gender in Kenya' (Vol. 45, No. 1, 2018), <<http://journals.udsm.ac.tz/index.php/ar/issue/view/286/showToc>>, accessed 22 August 2018.

I. Key Themes

THE CONVERSATION ON the role of women in violent extremism (VE) centred around three main themes exploring the issues of radicalisation, recruitment of women into VE, and the gendered and often differential impact of VE on women's lives.

Recruitment Dynamics in the Coastal Region of Kenya

The presentation by Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen focused on the issue of women's recruitment into violent extremist groups and the role of women recruiters. Badurdeen interviewed six women who were recruited into violent extremist groups in coastal Kenya. Adopting a biographic approach that drew on rational choice theory and the victimhood approach, Badurdeen reported that a majority of the female recruits in her research were involuntarily recruited. In five of the six cases, economic vulnerabilities were identified as the factors that made such women particularly susceptible to involuntary recruitment. However, despite the similarity in these women's backgrounds, recruiters crafted individual strategies to lure potential recruits. In some cases women were offered job prospects, while in others they were told that they would be able to start their own business. In developing their strategy, recruiters were found to build trust relations which were then strengthened through the provision of psychosocial and financial support. In addition, power differences also explained to a large extent why recruiters were able to lure and convince the women recruits. The recruiters exercised this power in part by the positions that they held in society and/or with respect to the female recruit – for example as an employer – or by cultivating a feeling of dependency and in doing so constraining the space available for exercising individual agency.

Badurdeen also explored the reasons why female recruiters may have joined violent extremist organisations. Based on the narratives of the women recruits, Badurdeen concluded that, unlike the involuntary nature of women's recruitment into VE groups, most women recruiters seemed to be motivated by a diverse range of factors. Some appeared to be motivated by economic incentives while others were said to be more ideologically inspired. However, extremist organisations seemed to employ women recruiters for strategic reasons. As per the narratives of the women recruits, women recruiters were in a better position to recruit both men and women due to their links within the community, their ability to build trust relations and their capacity to take advantage of prevailing gender stereotypes that tended to cast women as mere victims, not perpetrators of VE.

Recruitment Dynamics in Higher-Learning Institutes

In her paper on the process of radicalisation of women in higher-learning institutes, Fatuma Ahmed Ali highlighted how gender norms were employed to recruit women into VE. Ali began her presentation by stressing how the subject was of a deeply personal nature. In her role as an

educator she initially found it difficult to understand the motivations that may guide educated women to join violent extremist groups. Through a combination of key informant interviews and two focus group discussions with female students at various universities in Nairobi, Ali found that many of the students interviewed were conversant with the process of radicalisation and recognised how they may be targeted by extremist groups. The process of recruitment was described as gradual and tailored to the vulnerabilities of specific individuals. So gradual was the process that some respondents spoke of how many such instances escaped the notice of both teachers and administrators.

Regardless of the specific strategy followed, recruiters often used patriarchal constructs as a recruitment tactic. The idea of marriage and the need for conforming to societal expectations were important recruitment strategies. Within this narrative, higher education was typified as problematic by recruiters in that it would reduce women's marriage prospects by delaying the possibility of an early engagement. Apart from preying on their impulse to conform to societal expectations, recruiters also took advantage of the need that some Muslim women felt for more religious education. Muslim women students with secular education were often targeted by recruiters who offered them religious instruction and an opportunity to assert their religious identity.

Ali also found that the institutional context could play a role in fostering recruitment and radicalisation, even if such spaces were secular in nature. For Ali, the threat of radicalisation was likely to be higher in institutions which did not have as many controls on the influence of outside actors and agents and the messaging that they were able to disseminate. However, the establishment of controls for Ali did not imply that institutional contexts should be tightly controlled, but that there should be more spaces for intellectual debate and dialogue within the university, and external parties and agents should be subjected to official scrutiny.

Narratives of the Role of Women in Violent Extremism

In a similar vein to Badurdeen, Hassan Mwakimako noted in his presentation that most of the nine women he interviewed were recruited involuntarily. Mwakimako also employed a narrative-based approach and argued that the experiences narrated by the respondents made it difficult to categorise them as extremists. The women who were interviewed told of being unemployed, single and abandoned by their families. However, in the telling of their stories the women used gendered tropes to describe their experiences. Such tropes subscribed to prevailing stereotypes of women as 'non-participants or then involuntary participants in VE', to quote Mwakimako. Within this perspective, the women who were seen to be part of violent extremist groups were viewed as having 'transgressed' the norms of femininity and womanhood. Thus, in adhering to these notions, the women in Mwakimako's study described their condition using the victimisation narrative. According to Mwakimako, all the women he interviewed evoked images of tragedy, vulnerability and loss in relaying their experiences. They explained their 'encounter' with violent extremist groups through gendered conceptualisations that highlighted their vulnerability and denied their agency, even when the converse was likely to have been the case, such as when

describing the circumstances of their escape. Based on these narratives, Mwakimako asserted the need for a nuanced perspective of women's engagement in VE.

Impact of Violent Extremism on Women

In a departure from the other three papers, Halimu Shauri explored the impact of VE on women. While this has been the focus of much policy and programming work, Shauri's work was interesting in that he looked at the gendered impact of extremism and argued that this impact often differed when it came to the experience of women versus men.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 widows of violent extremist offenders, Shauri found that the majority of the widows, many of whom were quite young, were left with the responsibility of raising their children with little or no help from the state. Apart from such vulnerability, many of the women were also victims of harassment and abuse by security officials and suffered from psychological problems such as depression. As a consequence of these experiences, the women were riddled with feelings of insecurity, anxiety and helplessness as they found themselves caught between security agencies and VE actors. However, in coping with these problems, the widows interviewed had adopted several strategies. Chief among these were the reliance on social networks and familial ties, participation in savings groups to assist with financial security, and government bursaries and grants. Additionally, the women also relied upon spiritual support and constantly prayed as a measure for relieving stress and strengthening their mental resolve. Despite such strategies, Shauri concluded that there was no clear approach to mitigate the impact of VE on women. More therefore needed to be done to alleviate some of the vulnerabilities experienced by widows.

Concluding Address

In her concluding address, Martine Zeuthen drew on the summary paper that she co-wrote with Gayatri Sahgal for the special issue of *The African Review*, and argued the importance of the four studies in deepening understanding of the gendered pathways into VE. In particular, she noted that while women have always been found to be adversely affected by VE and in some contexts are known to have contributed to peace-building efforts, women's agency as perpetrators and supporters of violence has received relatively little attention. Consequently, very little research and policy debate exists on how gender norms construct and compel women's involvement in VE activities.

The research conducted by the presenters, according to Zeuthen, has been insightful as they have contributed to this perspective by interrogating the extent of women's agency in recruitment, the meaning and motifs they appropriate in making sense of their experiences, and lastly the coping mechanisms women employ when dealing with the consequences and impact of VE. In contributing in such ways, the studies offer important insights, but are far from conclusive. Further research is therefore needed to address this critical gap in the literature as well as to strengthen policymaking and programming that seeks to address violent extremism from a gender-specific perspective.

II. Recommendations

IN THE DISCUSSIONS that followed the presentations, a number of policy implications emerged. Some of the key lessons and considerations for policy implementation are as follows:

- **Integrating gender into countering violent extremism (CVE) policy frameworks.** One of the strongest recommendations that emerged was the need to integrate gender concerns into strategic frameworks such as county action plans. During the discussions it was noted that while there has been increasing interest in addressing the problem of VE at the county level, county governments also needed to understand the gender dimension of recruitment and radicalisation. This was key to ensure that CVE strategies were tailored to the different approaches employed to recruit women and men and the differential impact of VE on women compared to men. In addition, county governments needed to adopt a gender-sensitive perspective in designing deradicalisation and disengagement efforts. This would imply that security officials adopt a sensitised approach that does not begin from a stereotypical perspective that only views women as ‘victims’ and men as ‘perpetrators’, but instead recognises their agencies and individual trajectories into VE. While steps were already being taken by some counties, such as Mombasa, a pioneer in mainstreaming gender issues, these efforts need to be strengthened and expanded further.
- **Strengthening the engagement between security agencies and the community.** Given the significant trend of involuntary recruitment, several participants argued the importance of improving public knowledge, cracking down on illegal organisations that front for extremist outfits, and improving the channels of communication between security agencies and communities. However, in improving public knowledge there was also a need to ensure that the re-victimisation of involuntarily recruited returnees was avoided and that both security officials and communities understood the blurred boundaries between voluntary and involuntary recruitment.
- **Addressing the problem of disinformation and inciteful messaging within university contexts.** The significance of creating more platforms for communication and dialogue emerged as a key issue. In taking a more active role, universities, it was argued, needed to be careful to not ‘over-regulate’ or limit the space for students to exercise their freedom of expression and dialogue. More platforms were required to encourage critical debate and discussion around issues of religion, state excesses and historical injustices in order to demystify and debunk extremist narratives. Additionally, given that the threat of VE was dynamic in nature, further efforts were required to educate university administrators on recruitment dynamics and strategies to address the problem of recruitment and radicalisation within university contexts.
- **Considering the risks involved when designing programmes to address the impact of VE on families.** During the discussions, participants debated the benefits of providing

counselling services and economic support to widows and families of violent extremist offenders. The types of support included the provision of livelihood options, distribution of bursaries, as well as psychological and counselling support, among others. The provision of such services, however, was recognised as presenting a risk in terms of the type of adverse incentives it could create by extending preferential treatment to families whose members were seen to have engaged in illegal activities. From a security standpoint as well, it could be problematic if targeting was not done appropriately and if there continued to be links between the families of such offenders and VE groups. To mitigate some of these risks, it was recommended that programmes should be designed in concert with the community and consider the interests of security actors.

- **Continuing to advance the evidence base on the dynamics of recruitment and radicalisation.** There was an agreement among participants that while the findings of the study provided some important insights on the dynamics of women's involvement in VE, these findings were far from conclusive. In particular, it was highlighted that there was a need to explore the patterns of voluntary recruitment, the variations and similarities between the recruitment patterns adopted by different extremist groups, as well as the construction of masculinities within extremist narratives and their use in recruitment practices.
- **Conducting research in a sensitive manner and adopting appropriate methodologies.** In investigating these issues, there was a need to explore different methodologies, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, social media analysis and social network analysis, among others. In selecting between these different approaches, however, researchers needed to be mindful of the fact that individuals associated with violent extremist groups constituted a hidden population and thereby constructing a robust sampling frame was likely to be difficult. Qualitative approaches relying on ethnographic research in place of more quantitative methodologies were therefore more appropriate in investigating such issues. However, in adopting a qualitative focus, researchers were recommended to follow a rigorous approach that also considered the time and patience needed to develop trust-based relations with those associated with violent extremist groups.

About the Authors

Martine Zeuthen is a Danish anthropologist with extensive experience coordinating international development projects and evaluations in fragile environments, in particular Africa and the Middle East. Martine is currently heading RUSI's work in the Horn of Africa. Over the past five years she has contributed to building the RUSI portfolio and is now leading a number of projects, including the EU's Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE – II) project in Kenya.

Gayatri Sahgal is a Research Manager with RUSI's Nairobi office and has worked in South Asia and the US as well as the Horn of Africa region – Kenya and Somalia. Gayatri has extensive experience in managing and leading research projects in the field of countering violent extremism, governance, state-building and public service delivery. Currently, she is leading the Monitoring and Evaluation and Research component of the EU's Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE – II) project in East Africa.