Gender, Violence and Violent Extremism in Africa

Synthesis Brief, 2022

A. SUMMARY

Across Africa, reports of violent extremism (VE) in countries ranging from Mali and Nigeria in the West to Kenya and Uganda in the East, and the role played by youth in both violence generally and violent extremism in particular, has led to a growing body of research that seeks to understand the reasons behind this violence and to develop policies that can address it. This includes examining the factors that push youth to join violent extremist groups, what prevents them from joining these groups in the first place and how youth can be resilient within these contexts. There have also been attempts to address the gender dimensions of youth participation in conflict and VE - given that women are also active within these groups.

The collective works in the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-funded research network, "Understanding and Addressing Youth Experiences with Violence, Exclusion and Injustice in Africa," make a substantive contribution to these questions. This pan-African research initiative involved 14 research projects within 12 African countries and was commissioned by the IDRC to better understand and address the variegated youth experiences with violence on the continent. The aim of the research was to seek "solutions in the form of strategies, technologies, and tools to develop more effective policies for combatting the violence, exclusion, and injustice faced by youth, men, and women in Africa." To this end, researchers were tasked to explore the factors that predisposed both male and female youth to engage in (or resist) VE, the strategies and interventions undertaken by State and non-State actors to prevent youth from engaging in VE, as well as to identify the factors that have helped youth to be resilient in these contexts. Gender was examined in all the studies as a cross cutting issue.

The purpose of this brief is to share some of the findings from the research cohort as it pertains to gender, synthesising the varied ways in which a gender analysis furthers our understanding of violence and VE and the attendant policy implications. The focus is on the cohort's body of work that examines women's involvement in VE, although studies encompassing other forms of youth and violence are also briefly addressed. Research outputs from the following organisations and countries were reviewed: the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), in Niger and Mali; the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), in Kenya and Tanzania; Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) in Kenya and Uganda; University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa and Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) in Zimbabwe. Brief mention is made of Tadwein in Egypt. The brief concludes with policy implications derived from the research cohort as well as suggests potential additional avenues for future research and exploration.

B. PROBLEM

In situating gender as a cross cutting issue in a range of pan-African studies, the various studies

commissioned by the IDRC are addressing a well-documented gap in the literature on countering violent extremism (CVE) as well as youth engagement in violence more broadly. In particular, researchers have responded to an overarching shortcoming that manifests in different ways, including, a failure to consider women among actors and perpetrators of violence and VE, and, when women are considered, a failure to differentiate among their varied experiences. Scholars, policy practitioners and activists among others, have all noted that understanding the different ways in which women engage with, are affected by, and are resilient to, violence, including violent extremism (VE), is crucial, and have urged analysts to move beyond facile considerations of women as victims (Donnelly, 2021; Huckerby, 2015; Nwangwu et al., 2021).

Along similar lines, researchers have pointed to the shortcoming of limiting women's agency in contexts of violence. The category of woman is not monolithic, and women's engagement in, and resistance to violence can depend on a variety of characteristics, including socio-economic, ethnic, class and political factors, all with implications on the ways in which interventions geared at CVE and violence more generally can and should include women.

Peace policies that fail to deeply interrogate the varied reasons behind women's involvement as well as the range of that involvement can actually serve to undermine women's empowerment or return women to conditions of dependency, poverty, and gender inequality. Understanding the tangible concrete ways in which women are involved in VE can contribute to more appropriate policy solutions, including a consideration on the potential ways that women could contribute in the efforts to counter VE.

Several studies in the cohort yielded valuable insights around women's engagement with and resilience to violence, affirming many of the findings in the existing literature on violence and gender. Overall, researchers noted that women indeed play multiple roles in contexts of violence, that were both similar to, and different from men. Women also experienced violence differently – for example, in their examination of how the different genders experienced various types of conflict affecting Egyptian youth in Cairo, Tadwein noted that women were more likely to report sexual violence in schools and intimate partner violence, including emotional violence by a spouse. Tadwein also noted the high prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM). Yet, in addition to women experiencing violence in different ways than men, there were also similarities. Like men, women served as active participants, including as recruiters, fighters, and workers within organisations (ISS, UDSM, OSSREA), sanctioned or instigated violence, as shown in research on the role of women and gangs in South Africa (UWC); provided examples of resilience, variously defined, including successfully negotiating their safety in relationships with males gang members (UWC) as well as employed other mechanisms to survive, manage in the face of violence, or reduce their vulnerabilities to violent acts, like female genital mutilation/cutting (FGC/M).

C. RESEARCH FOCI: THE RESEARCH COHORT AND THE EXAMINATION OF GENDER

1. Women as research participants and subjects of analysis

The research cohort was to incorporate gender at all phases and in all processes of the research. One way that many did so was by ensuring that they spoke to both women and men in the research process, disaggregating findings by gender. They focused on women as subjects in their research and analysis – asking specifically, "where are the women and what do they do?" In so doing, they sought to understand the different reasons and motivations that drew women to engage in violence, why and how women experienced violence and were resistant or resilient to it. This took intentionality – researchers made sure that the research team included women, that women were active participants in the research, and that research conceptualisation as well as operationalisation were all gendered. YETT for example, pointed out that intentional strategies for female involvement included the presence of women in research teams to make sure that female

respondents were comfortable, having chaperones available from the community which made it more likely for parents to consent to their children's participation, and holding interviews at times that women could participate. Inclusion of topics that clearly had gender specific policy content, as well as disaggregation of research findings by sex exemplified further efforts. Researchers made sure to speak with women directly, as did ISS for example, interviewing female respondents including current and former members of violent extremist groups (VEGs) as well as those women who had been able to resist joining.

2. Women and Violent Extremism

Ensuring that women were primary research participants, allowed researchers to derive specific understanding of women's roles in conflict settings. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) for example, sought to understand through empirical data, women's involvement in violent extremist groups (VEGs), notably on why they join, the trajectory of their involvement as well as resistance to recruitment. They also explored what factors helped to boost women's resilience, with the goal of designing gender-sensitive responses to prevent and counter VE broadly speaking and women's involvement, specifically. Focusing on katiba Macina in Central Mali and two factions of Boko Haram in Eastern Niger, the research examined women's associations with these organisations, the place and role they play in recruitment as well as operation strategies of these groups. Their research provides some insights into the different ways in which women are affected by, and integrated into VEGs, their strategies for survival within the group and means of escape. They found that while the research did support the dominant assumption that women's involvement in VEG is mostly as a result of coercion, this did not tell the full story. They noted that women played multiple roles within the groups, beyond that of simply victim, including supportive roles. Similar to other authors, they note various motivations behind women's engagement in VE (see for example, Huckerby, 2015). Within Boko Haram, they identified three main avenues for joining: voluntary, coercion by family members and kidnapping by group members. In terms of women who joined voluntarily, their findings again echo those of Huckerby (2015), who found that women join these groups for similar reasons to men, citing, "adventure, inequality, alienation, and the pull of the cause." For women who were voluntarily conscripted, family and marital ties with male relatives who belong to the group was one mechanism through which women associated with the groups. Women also joined groups to preserve their lives or the lives of loved ones, to gain protection within the group, either because they were threatened with death if they did not join, or as a means of protection within high insecurity contexts. Membership in the groups was seen as a way to gain some measure of protection and safety, with collaboration with these groups also providing women the security to continue with economic activities (Abatan & Sangare, 2021). Revenge was another motivating factor; for example, they found that women who had lost loved ones through defence and security forces or traditional hunting groups of the *Dozo* provided information on the whereabouts of these groups to katiba Macina as a way to get revenge. A few participants also shared that they wanted to participate in Jihad and to die as Martyrs. Women also joined to find husbands (Abatan & Sangare, 2021).

Despite the existence of voluntary reasons for joining, ISS researchers also found that women were involuntarily conscripted, fitting the dominant narrative about women's involvement in VE that sees women as victims. At the same time, the line between coercion and voluntary conscription is often blurred, given the interplay between family, patriarchy, and women's "choice." While this research points to some level of autonomy on the part of women, it also reinforces the various ways in which women's lives are nevertheless controlled by or influenced by male figures. Researchers narrated involvement through coercion by family members, where husbands and relatives could also force women to join. Women, then, joined either willingly or unwillingly, through their association with males

in the family, including husbands, boyfriend's relatives or children, evidence of the broader ways in which males can exercise their authority over women, as well as symbolic of "the enmeshing of the violent extremist group into communities and their daily livelihood processes" (Abatan & Sangare, 2021). The researchers provide other examples of the ways in which male authority over women contributed to their participation in these groups; this includes parents who gave their daughters in marriage either willingly (to solidify relationships with the groups and facilitate their implantation) or unwillingly, under duress to protect themselves. Women were also kidnapped by group members, offered as a "reward" or enticement for male recruits, or forced to undertake reproductive tasks within the groups (Abatan & Sangare, 2021).

Women similarly played a range of roles within the groups. These include those that fall within the dominant domestic and reproductive tasks often ascribed to women as well as the more combative ones. Thus, women functioned as washerwomen, cleaners, and caregivers, helping in the conduct of operations to ensure the group survival, but also assisted with recruitment, facilitated the groups' implantation and sustenance within communities, provided operational support, or served as suicide bombers. The authors noted that women's interpersonal skills helped in the recruitment and mobilisation of human resources within families and communities. Moreover, women have been able to leverage the dominant frames that see women as non-threatening or as victims, allowing them to for example, successfully pass through security checks.

The University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) also conducted research on VE with similar findings. While their research looked more broadly at the viability of early warning systems as enshrined with *Nyumba Kumi*, a community-based tool for engaging and empowering youth to play an active role in early warning and CVE in Tanzania and Kenya, also examined were the ways in which women have been able to either fight against or mobilise for violent extremism in Kenya and Tanzania. Sambaiga (2020) found that women performed as agents in their own right, mobilising themselves as well as their communities to promote or counter VE in these two countries. Like Abatan and Sangare (2019) Sambaiga notes that women can play multiple roles (Sambaiga, 2020). Sambaiga's research and that of UDSM more broadly, showed that women were not limited to non-combatant duties; they engaged in frontline combatant missions and operations, as well as played roles in recruitment. On the latter, he pointed out how traditional female leaders, the *Kunwi*, have also aided in the recruitment of these girls as wives for male members of extremist groups, a role they were able to implement successfully due to the respect they command at community level. Ultimately, Sambaiga calls for explicit recognition of women's context-specific realities and further underscores the variable roles that women can play – as these are mediated by structural realities that can vary depending on a woman's life history and specific situation. He stresses women's agency at all levels –both in preventing radicalisation and engaging in VE.

Along similar lines, OSSREA also looked at VE, identifying and analysing the factors that predisposed youth to engage in violent extremism in Kenya and Uganda. They examined the factors that underpin youth exclusion and injustice and contribute to their engagement in violence, extremism and radicalisation, as well as investigated the extent in which mechanisms for countering violent extremism (CVE) in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region are youth inclusive.

Similar to the other two studies, they emphasised the interlinkages among the various factors that drive youth to engage in VE, including religious and economic factors. They also concurred with the others in their notation that predominant social norms that painted women as victims, passive, and peace builders were incomplete. Women not only voluntarily associated with these groups, but also played a range of roles, including as perpetrators of violence, such as suicide bombers, or had active supportive roles within these groups as workers.

These findings are in line with scholars such as Parkinson (2013) and Henshaw (2017) . Clearly women have engaged in a range of combat and non-combat roles, including cleaning, cooking, acting as spies, as well as helping to recruit among other roles within the organisations (Donnelly, 2021) .

3. Gang violence

Several other studies within the cohort looked at women's involvement in violence more generally and also noted the role that women can play in encouraging, fostering or sanctioning violence. Scholars at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa examined gang violence in South Africa. As part of this research, Parker (2020) for example, explored how women navigated their lives living in the midst of gang violence. Parker's work highlights the various ways in which women are affected by and respond to violence. While she uses the term resilience to show that despite the violence, women were nevertheless still able to leverage social networks and survive in the midst of gang violence, her work shows that resilience can be understood as simply just that – surviving – a context in which women were "constantly negotiating their safety." At the same time, her work resonates with Livermon (2021), who has shown that within spaces that are normally seen as threatening, youth can attain some level of agency and resilience– finding within gangs, employment, renumeration and family that might be otherwise missing from their lives. Thus, spaces of danger can also paradoxically, be spaces of comfort.

In another example, illustrating how within the same space, danger and safety are embodied, Parker (2020) shows how a "safe house" where women are able to report incidences of domestic violence, is at once, a safe space but also a space of "danger and stigma," as people within the community know the purpose of the Centre and people who go there are stigmatised. These contradictions are found throughout Parker's work.

Ultimately, women's experiences depend on where they are situated, illustrating that there is no monolithic experience. For example, in discussing a grandmother who encouraged her grandson's girlfriend to stay despite repeated domestic abuse, Parker shows how older women can play a role in enabling domestic violence. Similarly, women play multiple roles: girlfriends of gang members defended the gangs as their family, while other groups of women leveraged social networks, and came together to support each other in the face of gang violence.

The ability of women to negotiate relationships with violent males is also captured by Vuninga (2020) again within the context of gang violence in South Africa. For Vuninga, female respondents in relationships with gang members showed levels of agency, successfully negotiating power and maintaining relationships with the gang members, including their significant other. In fact, Vuninga's research goes one step further, suggesting that females, through the interaction of materialism and socially and culturally grounded expectations of gender relations actually encouraged male violence: In her words, "women in intimate relationships with youth gangsters have the agency to maintain relationships with gangsters and ... they possibly abuse the young men with whom they are in a relationship by manipulating their gangsterism and sociocultural beliefs of manhood" (Vuninga, 2020, p. 1). Vuninga's research raises questions about how abuse is conceptualised and defined as well as turns on its head, traditional assumptions about who is responsible for abuse. For Vuninga, women could also be abusers, where abuse is expanded to include "psychological and moral abuse." As she writes, "material expectations of girlfriends are directly and indirectly linked not only to the exploitation and abuse of male youth gangsters but also to the gang-related crimes they engage in" and that these same expectations shape "what it means to be a man, a gangster and a lover" (Vuninga, 2020, p. 12) . In short, male violence is a response to the expectations of masculinity from girlfriends. This masculinity could also be said to be an extension and reflection of 'gangsterism' more broadly, which itself is an ingredient in the construction of masculinity. Whether understood as simply boys being

"naughty," or exhibiting delinquent behaviour as community members protectively described them, or whether gang members were defined as dangerous and deadly, gangsterism could be seen as a passage to manhood (Maringira and Masiya 2018:168).

Understood in this context, men, in providing for their women, were subscribing to patriarchal, culturally rooted gendered roles and expectations, that women leveraged and used to their own ends. However, the abuse is two-way; while women are seen as psychologically and emotionally manipulating men, to meet their material demands (a form of abuse), the expectation from the male gangsters is that in return, women should also meet their expectations. Those who do not can face physical, emotional, and psychological abuse from their partners. Finally, Vuninga acknowledges that admitting to being abused would be difficult for men, as this would go against their social and culturally grounded perceptions of self and identity. By interrogating normative expectations of what abuse looks like within relationships, as well as women's roles in motivating violent behaviour, Vuninga also ascribes agency to women. However, the work also fits in with themes that blame women for the actions of men, and in a way could also be said to undermine male agency. Nevertheless, this research again points to the importance of expanding perceptions about the roles that women play and questioning our dominant and conventional understandings (and related advocacy) around gender roles, expectations, and their implications on how we understand the interaction between gender and violence.

D. POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH STUDIES

Understanding the reasons why women participate in VE is instrumental in ensuring the development of appropriate policy recommendations that can address the factors that facilitate women's recruitment as Huckerby (2015) among others have noted. Awareness of the various ways in which women experience conflict and moving beyond the binaries of victim or perpetrator allows for the development of more nuanced policies. Similarly, understanding the factors that contribute to women's resilience in conflict settings and ability to resist joining groups can provide opportunities to reinforce and scale up these resilience factors.

A top finding was the need for inclusive solutions, as relationships were so central to women's involvement or non-involvement in VE. Marital and familial relationships helped to determine whether women joined or refrained from joining, thus, addressing women's involvement cannot be done in a vacuum. Moreover, understanding the dynamics within these relationships and the ways in which gendered relations increase women's vulnerabilities is important for programming geared at redressing these vulnerabilities. Second, as key stakeholders, women need to be involved and included at all levels in shaping policy to address VE. Policies to counter VE also need to be dedicated - OSSREA researchers for example, pointed to the need for government to move away from ad hoc programmes, with CVE becoming a foundational part of national action plans with dedicated budgets and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Another salient critique was the need to engage seriously with the idea that one size does not fit all; and that government needs to stop imagining that youth are homogenous, and instead design programmes and interventions that are tailored to the specific ranges of experiences. The research also points to a role for the State: Tadwein's advocacy work for example shows how working with the State can help to ensure the development of policy that can address violence against women, as well as uptake of research findings. It also speaks to the importance of collaboration with other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) on a common goal.

Finally, the authors suggest the need for broader and more flexible policies that enable women to leave these conditions without undue punishment or burden and that would facilitate their return back to their families without fear of rejection. The researchers note that there are a variety of ways in which women have been able to be resilient to violence. Chief among these is women's ability to

leverage assistance from social actors like family members, and traditional and administrative authorities, among others (Abatan & Sangare, 2021). What helped facilitate escape, were family assurances that the escaping couple would be accepted back by their village community or guarantees from traditional and administrative authorities that they would be looked after following surrender. The researchers overall do an excellent job in problematising facile binary interpretations that paint women as either victims or villains through illustrating the multiple ways that women engaged with violence, and potential policy implications to address the issues raised. In so doing, the IDRC research cohort have provided us with studies that have contributed to the discussion on expanding our understanding of the roles that women can play within conflict settings.

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