

**Coastal Muslim Women in the Coast of Kenya: Narrating Radicalization, Gender, Violence and Extremism**

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**Abstract**

*The subject of female participation in violent extremism is contentious. Until police arrested girls from the coast of Kenya who were suspected to be travelling to Somalia to join Al-shabaab, the subject of female jihadist in East Africa was unheard of. This in-depth analysis of some encounters and experiences of Muslim women from the coast showcases the significance of narrating personal involvement and encounters with the extremist violence of the Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Narratives of how they met recruiters and operatives are insightful in their details but because the personal accounts tell the stories of their lives which provide insight and meanings embedded their experiences. Using biographical narratives, this article builds a shift on knowledge about female jihadist, violent extremism and radicalization. The narratives describe the agency of personal experiences of violence, suffering and loss experienced by women in their involvement in violent extremism.*

**Keywords:** Muslim, Narratives, Women, radicalization, violence, extremism

**Introduction**

Personal narratives tell the stories of people's lives as well as provide insight into the meaning of those experiences. These narratives both reflect and are influenced by the relationship within which an individual is embedded. An extensive literature highlights the existence of significant interactions between interpersonal relationships and memory. In particular, autobiographical memories are often based on social experiences and they constitute the instrument par excellence that individuals use in everyday social relationships in order to build a sense of their identity. Furthermore, Conway (2005) argued, memory and self are deeply interconnected in a circular relationship: the self organizes the narratives of autobiographical memories and is in turn transformed to define a "narrative identity" (McAdams, 2006), or a "self-

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narrative” (Fivush and Haden, 2003). This autobiographical self is narrated by the records of organized images of the unique history of the individual (Fonargy et al, 2002). In other words, “memory to some degree is a mirror that may reflect a person’s identity” (Peterson et al, 2010). Memory narratives, not only state the existence of specific remembered events, they also communicate the meaning of those recalled events to the narrator. Thus, linguistic detail about people, mental states and emotions, causality, temporal coherence and so on, through which the meaning of events is expressed, is important. The narrative is also a frame through which events that depart from coherent temporal pattern can be reordered as well as made understandable and communicable. The language of autobiographical narratives therefore serves as an important mediator between identity and autobiographical memories and the language by which individuals express their memories can provide important information about the speakers. As Smorti et al, (2009) stated that autobiographical memory and autobiographical narration are therefore two mirrors through which people reflect on their lives where the continuous-even though partial-flow between memory and narration means these mirrors reciprocally reflect each other. This paper provides an analysis of the narrative accounts of a small group of coastal women who had experienced radicalization and violent extremism (VE) through varied encounters with actors associated with the Somalia based but eastern Africa linked extremist group, al-Shabaab.

This article is all about the stories of encounters with radicalization, violence and extremism experienced by Muslim women from the Coast counties of Mombasa and Kwale in Kenya. These narratives were gathered by the use of ethnographic and biographical fieldwork methods involving female members of Ansar al-Sunna community in the Coastal counties of Kwale and Mombasa. Generally, the narratives depict the existence of Muslim women who have spent periods of time in Somalia and have interacted with the radical and *salafi* Islamist group-al-Shabaab. These women describe themselves as having “been to Somalia and returned.” Invariably, this is interpreted that they were radicalized, recruited and transported or transferred to Somalia where they become associated with al-Shabaab and its violent ideology of jihad. Conversations on their experiences in Somalia, how they were recruited and how they returned appears on the first instance to shed light on what “travelling to Somalia or having been to Somalia” has meant for these women. A meaning that has little resemblance to the dominant narrative that having made the journey to Somalia automatically turns these women into radicalized members of a terror group and therefore violent and extremist themselves. Specifically,

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by examining “their encounters narratives” and pathways to Somalia, this article amplifies their voices and provides them with the space in which their individual stories are heard.

The varied circumstances of the experiences narrated suggest a premature determination of label extremist or violent. This article avoids the over simplification that has been common stating that people who have gone to Somalia and returning to Kenya indicates belonging to an extremist group. Instead, it seeks to understand the vagaries of radicalization and violent extremism and women involvement in it around two issues. One, on the exactness of these females encounters and involvement with al-shabaab’s violence and extremism, and second, how the women tell of their encounters and what meanings can be deduced from these narratives. The deduced meanings from the narratives build into a “shift on knowledge” about women’s radicalization, violence, extremism and jihadist experiences. The narratives collectively depict women’s life struggles, about being young Muslim girls, poor mothers and abandoned spouses. It is to circumstances like these that pushed the women closer and closer to al-Shabaab radicalization and violent extremism. For most of these women the push was mostly out of their effort and desire to uplift their life conditions, their vulnerability ultimately rendering them susceptible to al-shabaab recruiters, human traffickers, extremist operatives’ and ideologies. These women tell their stories through narratives depicting their vulnerable environment, gendered forms of agency, predicament, strategizing and maneuvering to survive.

#### **We wanted to be Muhajirat not Jihadist**

The subject of women fighting in jihad has been a controversial topic in classical and contemporary Muslim religious literature. In general, classical authorities did not see women fighting in a jihad except in the most extraordinary circumstances. Today radical Muslims seeking to wide their appeal have modified these conclusions and made it possible for women to participate together with men on the battle field and martyrdom operations. An incident occurred in Mombasa where three young Muslim women walked into a police station, one allegedly brandishing a knife and another throwing a petrol bomb with the intentions of being suicide bombers. Police killed these three women, after claiming that sisters Maimuna and Ramla Abdulrahman and a school friend Tasmim Yakubu were wearing suicide vests under their black abayas (Daily Nation, 13.9. 2016). This incident was cited as highlighting a growing trend of young Muslim girls and women becoming involved in real, perceived or forced

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acts of terror, radicalization and extremism. In the Coast of Kenya, the involvement of girls and females in radicalization and violent extremism was buttressed by the arrest of three other Muslim girls under the accusations that they were planning on leaving the country to travel to the Middle East with the intention of being jihad brides. These incidents raised concerns that women are becoming more and more involved in jihad.

For an issue to gain legitimacy for religious Muslims it must have historical depth. This means that some traditions from the prophet Mohammed or historical examples from his close companions must be pressed into service. With regard to women fighters this can mean that either statements of the Prophet Mohammed enjoining or allowing women to fight must be found, or examples of women close to the prophet must be adduced. Examples of women companions of the Prophet Muhammad fighting in the jihad are also available from both classical and contemporary accounts. For example, the moralist figure "Abd al-Ghani b. "Abd al-Walid al-Maqdisi (d.1203) in his small treatise *Manaqib al-sahabiyyat* [The Merits of the Women Companions (of the Prophet Muhammad) describes two women from the time of the Prophet who fought in his wars (Al-Maqdisi 1994:59)]. Clearly women did take part in the fighting. Modern Muslim feminist have managed to gather more names of women who fought during the time of the prophet. Aliya Mustafa Mubarak in her collection *Sahabiyyat mujahidat* has assembled a list of 67 women who, according to her fought in the wars of the Prophet or immediately afterward in the great Islamic conquests (Aliya Mubarak, n.d). It is hardly surprising that classical Muslim legal literature contain very little material concerning the issue of women participating in jihad. However, changing attitudes towards women in the Muslim world and the emergence of "Islamic feminism" has made the issue far more immediate. From the beginning of the 1990s, Muslim writers discussing jihad have regularly included a section on the issues of women fighting. Probably the most impressive of these has been Muhammad Khayr Haykal whose three volumes *al-Jihad wa-l-qital fi al-shara'iyya* (Jihad and Fighting according to the Shar'i policy) written in 1993 covers in an exhaustive manner all of the major and many of the minor issues of jihad. In his volume two he covers the question of who is eligible for fighting, the definition of which traditionally has been reduced to six categories (David Cook, 2006). While debate on the legality or illegality, or permissibility of women fighting in a jihad continues unabated focus somehow turns to local environment considering that the role of women in radicalization, violence and extremism varies across communities and families.

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Women whose narratives are discussed here did not have explicit intentions to travel to a jihadist-controlled territory. The stories they tell explaining the circumstances in which they found themselves in al-Shabaab territories in Somalia are stories of victimhood. But before we delineate their victimhood it is important to state from the onset that most of them had already come under the influence of the teachings of an exclusivist local *salafi* religious community, the Ansar al-Sunna, who taught and had partaken to the idea of migration or Hijra. Their female members had collectively come to be known as muhajirat, meaning one who “avoids or abandons bad things.” Muhajir has the same root as Hijra, the migration of the prophet Muhammad and his companions from the hostile Mecca to the promising Madina in 622 AD. It consequently identifies migrants from a problematic place to a better one. Hijra intended as migration from the lands inhabited by non-believers to Muslim lands or to contribute to jihad. In the Coast counties, women who have joined the Ansar al Sunna have extensively used the term muhajirah to identify themselves, clearly indicating in this way a discontent with their previous living environment, an impellent drive to move to a place of ideal perfection and the religious motivation for seeking the change. These aspects are core to the inclusion of a significant number of coastal women into a jihadist transnational mobilization. These coastal women were sympathetic to the ideology of Hijra (muhajirat) and the desire to move to areas controlled by other muhajirun (jihadist). Participating or fighting in a jihad was not one of their purposes to migrate. The way they tell their stories suggests that it was ideological inconceivable that they harboured intentions to be fighters in a jihad. In fact, it is evident that; there are several historical examples of women involvement in direct fighting in Muslim societies since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, with some of his close relatives included, but, let us not be mistaken, female jihad has generally been considered differently from its masculine version.

The prophet himself, according to authoritative collection of his traditions and a large number of Muslim jurists and clerics in the following centuries have made clear that women had to be excluded from the battlefield. This account for reasons why all the women who told their stories did not refer to their journeys as those intended to enable them go to fight in a jihad. A rationale for such position has been the need to give priority to the “women of paradise” the prize reserved to jihadi fighters fallen in battle and a powerful encouragement to combat without fear to die, over the “women on Earth,” who tied the men to the material world and could distract them from celestial aims and intrepid fighting. According to the Ansar al-Sunna another compelling reason for the

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exclusion of women from the battlefield in Muslim societies is the willingness to preserve them from the situations at odds with the traditional principles of modesty and the related legal obligations, as public mixing of genders and free circulations of women without an escorting male relative. This justification is also consistent with the differentiation of statuses between women and men in those societies, which is instrumental to the survival of the traditional patriarchal social order. The risks associated with a possible increased role of women in fighting might explain why some ideological fathers of the Ansar al Sunna in Kwale, while recognizing the participation of women in jihad in Somalia as a prescription of sharia, clearly stated that this type of combative jihad was not yet for their women. Because fighting was not the pre-occupation of these coastal women, the most relevant explanation to account for the reason they were in Somalia was the notion of Hijra-relocating to the abode of Islam, where they would be at peace to practice their faith.

#### **Why Women Stories? Narratives as rational and Providing Meanings**

The narratives told by these Muslim women about having been to Somalia tell a holistic life narrative that change with individual life experiences. Their personal experiences of violence say something about the significance of their narratives to them as individuals, the communal, and to national memory leading to an understanding of violent extremism.

This article places a high priority on stories told by local women because amongst the Coastal women these stories occur in their local, particular, mundane, and everyday lives of individuals. They are set up in a particularly ethno-national and religious conflict. Their stories are located in everyday localized memories with significance in “evaluating and calibrating violent extremist and radicalization responses in such contexts” (Brown, 2012). The stories are important because in them they showcase that the story-telling process is relational and gives personal meanings, stories reflect narrative agency, and they reflect different gendered experiences.

They expose plots, themes, and characters and they are communicated to others. Even the stories told by those who have suffered atrocities and gross evils are situated inside a multi-layered web of human connections. Unravelling the web exposes threads of harm that may go some way to understanding motivations to harm others or how to redress the damage done. For example, Mariam Majenia 33-year-old woman from Mombasa who has been to Somalia

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tells of the circumstances that made her find herself there and her encounter in a multi-layered narrative that:

My husband said he left to go and work in Saudi Arabia. Then he called to say that, he would like me to join him there. We had not discussed this before he left. We had just gotten married. He called to say some people were going to contact me and help me to join him in Saudi Arabia. The people who came for me did not take me to Saudi Arabia, they drove towards Malindi. I was drugged. I did not know where I was taken. We crossed the ocean for days. They raped me so many times (Narrative no. 4, Kwale, 11.7. 2017).

In her narrative above Mariam alludes to efforts at looking for work, effort made by her husband who like many other youths in Mombasa due to lack of jobs, they offer themselves to travel abroad, mostly in the Middle East in search for work. In this case, it is a reliable beginning to explain recruitment and how it is connected with human trafficking. The alleged husband in this case is deceiving the wife, lures her and exposed her to human traffickers. The narrative also alludes to al-Shabaab working with human traffickers to capture sex slaves. In what Mariam explains “they raped me so many times” refers to being abused not only when she was captured and during her transportation, but even when she arrived at the destination (an al-Shabaab camp) she continued to suffer the indignation of sexual abuse. Like Mariam Majeni almost all other stories told by these women are mainly about-facing danger and being harmed. Indeed, storytelling increasingly is used in this context as a way to respect speakers for whom violence has had a major impact. Allowing them to tell their stories also means enabling them to make a life narrative of themselves turning the concern not just with the story but with storied forms of knowledge (Kreiswirth, 2005: 380). Most women narrate a series of stories told within social, cultural, and political contexts. Mwanamisi Hassan who also went to Somalia and returned, for example tells of her difficult childhood, a fiancée who betrayed her and the circumstances that led her to find herself in Somalia in an al-Shabaab camp.

I grew up in very difficult conditions, I was an orphan. I was under the care of my uncle who did not treat me very well. I faced a lot of difficulties in the family. I had a fiancée, he did not work, but one day he said to me that he has found work. He travelled away for one year. I had not finished school when he left but when he returned I had completed

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my primary school. I did not continue with school after that because I could not afford it. When my fiancée returned he asked me to accompany him. Because I was tired of the life I was living I accepted and he said that we were going to lead a good life (Narrative no. 5, Mombasa, 11.7.2017).

The two stories highlight women joining with men they already knew and were in relationship with. This happened with many other women challenging the idea that they were joining as jihad brides. These were not going to get married rather they were already married to the men who lured them into al-Shabaab extremism. Mwanamisi story is evident of the significance the relational dimension of storytelling which comes out she recounts her stories to others in a specific social setting that enables her to claim a narrative identity, one that “is shaped by a subjective relationship to one’s whole life story (Smyth, 2008:78). Identity is relational in the sense that it is influenced by personal perceptions and other’s responses. Accounts of stories about particular people give meaning to what it signifies to suffer from victimhood. Certainly, narrators have their own interpretation of their story, whereas the spoken or written word is often open for interpretation. Mwanamisi Hassan goes on to explain life with others in an al-Shabaab camp in Somalia. The stories below tell of communal living in the camp. It mentions of powerful women who took care of the rest, the kind of roles women performed to facilitated the jihadist, but most important the extent to which sexual abuse was common.

There were many of us, young girls...there was an older woman who took care of us. While talking to others I realized I was in Somalia. It was very difficult for me. We were overworked, we used to cook, wash clothes, many of us were raped, and others got sick and died (Narrative no. 4, Kwale, 11.4.2017).

In narratives of radicalization, violence and extremism there is a range of different emotions including embodied pain, shame, distress, anguish, humiliation, anger, rage, fear and terror. The coastal women told emotive stories that elicited diverse reaction including a pattern of active interest, excitement, shock, distress, and shame (Schaffer and Smith, 2004). The stories are not neutral, they are contextual and contested. For example, the theme and idea expressed by most women that they were abducted by people who had promised to offer them jobs creates an active interest of what happens next. Some of them are young girls and the promise that they have found work



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abroad is at the first instance exciting for the individual. The abruptness in which the narratives changes to express the shock of being drugged, locked up in a dark room, blindfolded and raped elicited distress and shame. Let us listen to the story of another encounter with al-shabaab, again emphasis is on sexual abuse, of rape and abandonment as told by Sharonna:

I was a student; I dropped out of school in form two. I was experiencing difficulty with fees. We used to hang around in our neighbourhood, a group of girls and mostly talked about our issues, lack of employment and the difficulties we were facing. A man and a woman who offered to give us jobs approached us. We did not discuss the kind of work but they told us to meet them somewhere (place name withheld deliberately). We were four girls. When we arrived a van was already ready with four unoccupied seat reserved for us. We boarded and we were told we should be taken to Malindi to work. Between Kilifi and Malindi we were given water to drink, I think it was drugged and we lost consciousness. When I gained consciousness I found myself in a dark room. I was blindfolded and there was another woman in the room. Then some men came and raped us my friend and me. We stayed there at night then some men came and sprayed us with something and we lost conscious again. The next time I woke up I found myself in a forest under a tree. Two men come and told me that my work will be to cook for them. They said they were many men and I should not ask questions. I lived in the forest cooking for them. Out of the rape I got pregnant and had a child. I stayed in the forest alone. An old man passed by the forest, he was looking for roots for his herbs and he found me with my child. He was surprised and asked what I was doing in that forest. He convinced me to accompany him. He said the people I was cooking for were probably Al-shabaab. He said I was in Somalia (probably Boni Forest) (Narrative no. 1, Mombasa, 5.7.2017).

These coastal women told their stories for a variety of reasons that seem to matter for them. Aspects of their narratives reveal the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings (Arendt, 1973). For most women, these happenings include those of their “darkest times” but also instance of “illumination, uncertain flickering, and often weak light” that men and women kindle (Arendt, 1973:9). According to this idea of storytelling, as human, we give meanings to our actions by showing how and why they are significant to us. In doing so, there is a disclosure of the self. In this

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narrative Mwanajuma discloses herself as a rebel girl going against the wishes of her parents and gets married to a husband who was already being suspected. A disclosure characteristic of Mwanajuma Bakari's narrative follows below:

I had a fiancée, whom I introduced to my parents and he introduced me to his parents. My parents did not like him, they asked for his background and he was hiding something. My parents did not like the idea of our friendship and asked me to stop it. I was in love and did not listen to them. He asked that we get married without delay. Within 7 days of our marriage he said he was going to be travelling he had found a safari "*nimepata safari*" to go and work in Saudi Arabia. After three days he called to say that he was going to send some people who were going to pick me and send me to where he was. It was very dramatic, he called and said I should go to Malindi Town and directed me to a car in Malindi. He was calling on a private number (hidden). I was surprised why he was calling me on a private Number. I was given a soda and lost consciousness. When I woke up I found myself at a place with many other girls. There was a lady there who was like the controller of the group. It was like a camp for boys and girls. We never met, except when the boys need to have satisfied their sexual gratification with us, they used to rape the girls. I was very young and most of the boys wanted to abuse me, every boy was always asking to sleep with me. The woman who was taking care of us protected me against them. She also helped me to escape. She told me that my husband had sold me to a sex ring. I was not taken far it was in a forest nearby (Narrative no. 2, Mombasa 4.5.2017).

Life stories like this by Mwanajuma provide a glimpse into human agency, motivation, and choice (Baines, 2011: 482). Like others, Mwanajuma's story helps us to recognize how they arrived at each situation. They provide some sort of self-clarification especially important considering that most of these women had to deal with terrible traumas caused by experiencing sexual violence. This meaning-making process is important because the majority of the women stories contain the narrative of "who I am" (or who are we) and the narrative of "how we have gotten here." Compare for example the story of Fatuma Juma about how she found herself in Somalia:

I am from Mwembe Tayari, I was jobless, I was looking for work, and sometimes I used to get work as a housemaid. One day a woman came

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and said she was going to offer me work as house help. Things did not turn well. I was abducted and sent to Kiunga (Narrative no. 3, Mombasa, 3.5.2017).

Fatuma Juma like most of the other women cannot recall the identity of her abductors. She knew that she was going to be employed; that her trouble with finding work was finally over, yet this story is threaded through by other stories, for example on about “what this means”, to be desperate for work, or to be a destitute and be taken advantage of (Walker, 1998:113). This predicament of what it means is expounded by another woman, Rukia Rama who explains what her ordeal means for her in a long narrative, that;

I am 34 years old. I got married in 1997 and was divorced in 2004. I have studied up to form 2 and dropped out of school in 1996. I have 2 children aged 20 and 17 years. I live with my children. I travelled to Somalia in 2011; I was told that I was going to work. There was an agent who was recruiting people to go and work outside the country and I gave my name. I was asked to prepare a birth certificate, because I did not have one, a passport was arranged for me. I left home in Tiwi knowing that I was going to find work. I travelled to Mombasa and then went to Nairobi. I flew from an Airport that I did not know, but it was a small airport, the plane was not big either, it was at night. When we alighted at the airport I did not know where I was. I was with other people; I did not know who they were. Others were from Kisauni; others had joined from Nairobi. We were all female. There were about twenty females. We travelled by road, by lorry for some hours. This was in July 2011. We were shocked we did not know where we were, but it was not in Saudi Arabia. We had heard stories about Saudi Arabia, but this place did not look like the Saudi Arabia we have heard of. We knew things had become difficult, things had turned bad. We were overworked, things had really turned bad. “Unatumiwa nakilamtu” meaning [everyone was using (sexual abuse) you]” We were staying in a camp. Our work was looking for firewood and cooking. The people who received us were women. They told us that that was the work we had come to do. The woman was a Somali. The people (the men) who were in the camp were mixed (mchanganyiko). They were Kenyans, Sudanese and Tanzanians (Narrative no. 4, Kwale, 11.4.2017).

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The women of these narratives live in communities where identity is entrenched in religious, ethnic and cultural norms. Most were born into cultures where the dominant narrative defines intersecting identities. The stories they told are open to interpretations and each retelling to a new audience paves the way for possible new meanings. Most stories are telling of great suffering, yet some stories are indicative of the human ability to transcend violence. The narrative by Rukia Rama exactly fits into this kind of a story where violence is experienced in personal ways because it affects the body, mind, self-identity and personhood. As she narrates her story there emerges an interesting relationship that she established with one of her tormentors, the al-Shabaab soldiers. Against the background of violence, sexual abuse and extremism, some men of the al-Shabaab had compassion towards their women captives. There were some who are reported to have gone against the group to help these captive women. These details are told at a personal level by Rukia Rama that;

These men told us we had not arrived for work but they were Muslims and Muslims have a right to fight in the jihad and the women also have their place in the jihad. It does not mean that women had to fight but their help was also needed, like cooking or doing other work, they will be helping in the jihad while others have gone to the war. I made friends with some of these people, the men. I had to explain my condition, that I was looking for work to help my child, I had a young child, so I was explaining myself more to one of these men. It was not difficult to speak with them since I was cooking for them. I asked one of the soldiers for help. I convinced him for almost a week, he was from Mombasa. He was elderly about 45years. He was like my boyfriend nobody else knew about our relationship. He helped us to escape. He was on night shift and he smuggled us out at night and escorted us for a very long distance to ensure that if it was discovered that we had escaped then we shall have covered a long distance to make it impossible for them to find us. He ensured that he “took us very far away from the camp”(Narrative no. 6, Kwale, 15.8.2017).

Certainly not all people in al-Shabaab believed in its policy of deceiving women to support the group. The story telling of such violent experiences is significant because it “allows for victims to ‘take back’ their self-pride, their self-worth, and assume their place as an intrinsic part of the new post-conflict order” (Simpson, 2007:95). The restorative potential of storytelling can be used as a method that permits survivors to “renegotiate their social marginalization and

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insist on their innocence and social worth (Baines and Stewart, 2011:247). The telling of these stories occurred in different places, sometimes on the grass or mat, under a mango tree, or around the fire or kitchen table, wherever it was culturally accepted to do so.

#### **Violence Narrative as Agency**

Most stories narrated by these coastal women express agency. While this sounds obvious, stating it is important. It is commonly assumed that individuals who find themselves in “situations of subordination, oppression, or marginality may find themselves targeted for normative narratives that are already given, coercive, not negotiable, and disadvantaging (Walker, 1998:198). For example, typically women are assumed to be victims and sexual objects and men combatants and aggressors. Yet in some narratives some men have helped victims of sexual aggression to escape and find refuge for them sometimes at great risk to their own life’s and safety. Asha Khalfan narratives put this in perspectives. Initially she thought she was safe and escaping the al-shabaab. And then she was sexually abused by men whom she thought they were going to help her. She states;

For two days we were travelling by car, after that we travelled on foot for three days. I was not sure where we were going. We reached a river and I asked to go and relive myself in a nearby bush. At the bush I meet an old man who asked me what I was doing there. I said we were going to Saudi Arabia for employment. The old man was surprised and he told me that I was in Kiunga and if I crossed the ocean I will be in Somalia. The old man who was grazing his camels convinced me not to cross the ocean unless I wanted to go to Somalia, my friends did not try to find out where I was and I think they crossed. The old man took me to his home. He was living alone with his three sons. These sons bothered me; they asked why I was there and why their father brought me there. They said their father was unable to help me in anyway. They did not like me to stay there. I was desperate and in need of help to get back home. They offered to help in exchange for “something”, all three boys demanded to have sex with me. I had no alternative, they raped me and in return they gave me money about Kenya shillings 2500 and took me to the stage where I boarded a car and headed home (Narrative no. 5, Kwale, 10.8.2017).

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Violence reduces the capacity to express moral agency and to make deliberate, meaningful narrative. This inability to realize a narrative coherence is significant because separate parts of the story might make sense to an individual, and they might not be able to integrate all the disparate parts in a way that is personally satisfying. In some circumstances the women explained the pain of experiencing sexual abuse, but in others, while still in pain they went along with the abuse in order to survive their ordeal. Halima Rashid explained herself this way:

I made friends with some of these people, the men...I asked one of the soldiers for help...I convinced him for almost a week. He was like my boyfriend (Narrative no.6, Kwale,15.8.2017).

Obviously, it is not easy for these women to include stories of trauma into a personal understanding of one's self. Yet, certainly, these stories contribute to who a person is, even though many of these women want to forget these aspects in order to move on with life. What this means for gendered narratives is that of shifting the focus from women as victims of radicalization, violence and extremism to women as agents of change and transitions (Reilly, 2007).

### **Silence and silencing**

So far, the emphasis on the narratives has been on finding the expressing voice by women victims of radicalization and violence. Yet, some women who have suffered from these consequences stay silent fearful in discussing their shame. In this section, silence is examined. Four distinctions are drawn: silence caused by repression or shame; self chosen silence to retain self-respect; the silence a community adopts as a strategy of survival; and silence as agency. The argument is that depending on motivation, silence may be a source of oppression, empowerment, pragmatism or agency. Silence takes varied cultural forms. Traumatized women say "traumatic experiences often cause the survivor to question their view of reality, robbing them of their sense of integrity and wholeness and leading to the loss of self-esteem" (Kleck, 2006:345). Further the force of memories often torments traumatized victims, particularly when emotions of shame or guilt are overwhelming. The narrative becomes stuck in the past. Both guilt and shame can immobilize, trapping victims. However, sometimes shame promotes change. Bahati Saidi expresses her initial silence after returning from Somalia:

I have not told my mother, because women like to talk, she might talk about it. So far the only person I have spoken to about my ordeal and an

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experience is my father. I told my father but only after we got help from the government Amnesty program, I was given a motorbike and I thought it would have raised suspicion in my family. So I explained everything to my father, so that he does not have any suspicions. My father was not sympathetic at first, I made him understand that it was an unfortunate thing that happened to me and that I was beginning a new life. My father has not spoken about this to anybody; this is a secret between us. I am close to my mother but I cannot trust. If I tell this she will not keep quiet about it, this is too heavy for my mother. I can tell her other things but a weighty issue like this; I cannot share with my mother (Narrative no. 6, Kwale, 15.8.2017).

#### **Self-Chosen Silence as strategy for survival**

To understand the significance of gendered narratives as presented by these women, it is useful to grasp something about withholding truth, that is, deliberate intentional silence. Telling one's story or withholding one's story can both be acts of empowerment. For a number of these women silence was a deliberate act of empowerment. The motivations not to speak are varied. Some women thought that by speaking they would betray their fellow comrades in armed struggle; some did not want to expose their own humiliation in being violated. These various reasons are understandable because "telling of pain is an act of intimacy" (Ross, 2003:6). To be a witness to emotive testimonies is to acknowledge suffering through attentive listening. While the accounts give voice to pain through words, gestures, and emotional expressions, intentional silence has specifically gendered connotations for a women interviewed. "Silence should not be mistaken as having nothing to say" (Baines and Stewart, 2011:249). Barika Ali expounds on this phenomenon in her testimony about her eventual escape and finding her way home:

We did not know where we were but we had to find our way... We met people on the road and we asked for help...we did not want to explain ourselves clearly...we only said we had been promised we were taken for employment, but we did not know where we were. A woman helped us; we explained to her the truth but asked that she does not explain this to anybody. She was a woman like us so we explained to her but... agreed that it had to be a secret to all of us (Narrative no.8, Mombasa, 5.5. 2017).

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In other context, women's deliberate silence indicates a fear for personal safety if one spoke the truth. Survivors of violent extremism like these Muslim women who experienced such abuse while in Somalia are reluctant to speak of their humiliation under the al-shabaab captivity. However, when they do speak, the enduring reality of their experiences and survival was articulated in their uttered words, but also in those pregnant pauses and sobbing during the conversations.

In the process of collecting these narratives there were also many moments of silence where silence was appropriated by these women as a cultural norm. Narratives were in many occasions posed with pragmatically understanding of silence. It was used simply as a strategy for coexistence or what has been referred to "the culturally acquired knowledge of how to live with difference" (Eastmond et al, 2012:508). In a couple of narratives, women remain and maintained silence as a conscious act. This type of silence is an awareness of the need to keep the peace, because silence was seen as promoting civility. These consensual silences avoid the issues that are personally painful and potentially socially disruptive. For example, Mwanalima Bakari tells of how she and her friends were rescued and given help but still maintained their silence and requested others to maintain for them a similar silence:

Eventfully, we were assisted... but we did not tell them that we had been with the al-shabaab. We said we had been promised jobs, but we did not speak the truth to them about what had happened to us, we did not trust that they would not harm us. They helped us to get home. When I arrived home I did not open up and tell anybody about what has happened to me. I did not tell my parents because I was not sure of what they could withstand, maybe they would have 'hated' me; maybe they would have reported me to the authorities (Narrative no. 8, Mombasa, 5.5.2017).

Interestingly silence can be a crucial part of both courtesy and agency. In all circumstances, there are devious forms of silencing that distort agency, where the speaker is framed falsely in terms of the conflict situation. When the person doing this misframing is in a powerful position, such as in most gendered relationships, those who speak are not validated and this disrespectful dismissal happens frequently for women. Women may keep quiet to avoid being humiliated. Without the equality of the status as listener and speaker, gendered power blocks dialogue. Mutual recognition as equals is important when giving



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voice to those who have been silenced or have needed to keep silent to stay safe. Intrinsic to the strength of truth-telling is listening, when those unaccustomed to being in a listening role step back from their dominant positions to hear the story. The strength does not lie in a new power relationship, but in the restoration of dignity that comes from being listened to and having one's story acknowledged.

#### **Conclusion**

Violent extremism has long been a predominantly male occupation. One of the most disturbing developments in the knowledge of VE today, however, relates to the seemingly increasing involvement of women in radicalization, violence and extremism. Until recently women have largely played a peripheral role in VE, such as providing secondary support to the fighters. However, recent developments in the world reveal a disturbing trend. Women have started to transition from supportive roles to active involvement in operational roles. Over the last decade, research on VE have revealed very little about women's involvement in it. Thus far, our understanding of women and VE has escaped systematic analysis. The majority of studies on women and VE portray women as victims; only a small handful of works examined women's role as the perpetrators of violence or having experienced violence themselves. What is published falls into one of two categories, either the research is of poor quality, or it is based on spurious journalistic accounts with a veneer of academic integrity. Because most studies on the subject of women and terror and violent extremism rely so heavily on secondary sources, especially on media reports, these studies tend to suffer from the classic problem of stereotyping women as either pawns or victims. The involvement of women or the roles they actually play are thus rarely analyzed with any seriousness. In the terrorism world, the lack of solid ethnographic works is compounded by the self-promotion of an army of self-appointed experts, who rely exclusively on internet propaganda from terrorist. We are absolutely in need of more research that engages with the phenomenon, with the problem as it really exists not as we would characterize it, or caricature it. The engagement of women in the VE to date remains largely characterized by theoretical speculations based on subjective interpretations of anecdotal observations. Researchers rarely examine the conditions that influence female involvement in violence beyond simplistic motivational concerns that center on their sexual function- the gratification of male terrorist and extremist or superficial gender stereotypes. With the increasing use of female in VE, innovative violent groups are succeeding at exploiting gender stereotypes to their advantage. Female violence is typically

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seen as an aberrant and unnatural occurrence; it becomes a method by which women might contribute to the good. The value of understanding how women get involved, what roles they play inside VE groups is thus crucial to understanding how to combat the lures of violent mobilization.

The primal scene emerging out of these women's narratives is that of a spectacle of sufferings that solicits sympathy. Except for two women who have resemblances of the global jihadi inclined Ansar al Sunna characteristics, the majority of these women narrate and depict themselves as poor and disenfranchised and therefore objects of sympathy a fact that sounded more like an intentional strategy by women. Female participation in VE- ranging from organizational support to "active participation" is a double crime because it transgresses "conventional notions of gender and power and deviates from "prescribed forms of femininity." Depictions of female VE have revolved around the gender norms that women are perceived to transgress: they are cast as sexually deviant monsters (abjective) or fragile victims (victimization). These conventions, which constitute the major poles of sentimental narratives, are consistent with the stories told by females captured in here. They explain through silencing by the narrator that women should be excluded from traditional understanding of violence and conflict. Abjection strips female VE of political agency by attributing their VE to the "erotomania" of "disgruntled females" who were neglected by the society, their fathers and husbands. In their stories, it is the victimization trend that has shaped far more representation of the encounters that these Coastal Muslim women experienced. The coastal women representations of themselves comprise of images of tragic individuals, poverty, gender inequality, sexual assault and more. Themes of motherhood, love for family and suffering in the face of violence feature heavily in their tales of loss, dishonour, humiliation and coercion. Yet, along these experiences are also the strategic marriages among jihadist, which appear to have been intended to cement the ties between the actors and created strong bonds of kinship. In these cases, women were expected to play crucial role in linking together the VE network and keeping the men firm in their commitment to jihad.

This study has observed that Coastal women's involvement in VE was not static but dynamic. Accordingly, some women are recruited into VE organizations by boyfriends and husbands, making the "male or female accomplice" a significant feature that characterizes the involvement of the female in VE action. This notion is obviously accompanied by the assumption that women are incapable

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of consciously choosing violence extremism, eliciting a common reaction that “it must have been a man that made her do it.” In this study rumours abound of men seducing women into committing violence through sexual misconduct. While the narratives often portray VE women as merely victims or pawns of men without any political motivation of their own, the reality is far more complex. We can no longer continue with the argument that men force women into VE activities but emphasize that men in these women’s lives do play a crucial role in mobilizing them and facilitating their entrance into the VE activities. From the discussion with these women from the coast counties, one can see that they certainly believed that they were equally inspired by ideology and commitment to the cause. In fact, from the perspective of the Coastal women who engaged in VE, there is an inclination to argue that for some, their involvement becomes a way to contribute to the “good of the faith” as in many of the cases there are situations where despite the great pain some had to endure, and they also took great pain to emphasize their personal agency in getting involved. This article has considered historical analysis of the contentious issue of the involvement of women in past and current jihadist struggle and analyzed the narratives and stories told by coastal women and argues for a more nuanced relevance of the dominant discourse that having travelled to Somalia would have no other interpretation other than a willingness to be jihad bride, an extremist, al-Shabaab member or sympathizer.

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