

Impact of Violent Extremism and Recruitment of Spouses on Widows in the Coastal Region of Kenya

Halimu S. Shauri

Associate Professor, Pwani University

E-mail: hshauri@yahoo.com

Abstract

Radicalization¹ and Violent Extremism (VE)¹ have been on an apparent increase across East Africa. This has partly been exacerbated by the ongoing insurgency of a myriad of militia groups, especially fanned by the Somalia-based militants – Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State of Iran and Syria (ISIS). In this light, there has risen a greater demand for fighters, especially men to join VE groups with its attendant ramifications on female spouses. In this regard, it is apparent that a lot of focus on the impact of VE and recruitment has been directed to the male recruits and violent extremists. There is a clear gap in literature on what is the impact of VE on widows, especially those whose spouses were recruited and got killed in the process and how do they cope. While it is clear that certain changes occur as a result of male spouses recruitment into VE groups and leaving their wives behind, especially to the category of men married before perceived recruitment, such changes have not been examined. Where such considerations have been done, they did not take into account widows of violent extremists as primary targets. It is against this background that the present study focused on the impact of VE and recruitment of male spouses on widows in the coastal region of Kenya and their coping mechanisms. In order to achieve this, a mixed methods approach was adopted. The study found out a plethora of negative impacts on widows of VE grouped into physical, economic, structural, psycho-social and emotional. With regard to coping mechanisms, the study found that widows of VE have developed livelihood, structural, spiritual, psycho-social and emotional support infrastructure to deal with the negative impacts.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Widows of VE, Coping Mechanisms, Impact of VE on widows, Coast of Kenya.

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Introduction

There has been an apparent increase in radicalization¹ and violent extremism¹ across the East African region. These have been engineered by the ongoing insurgency of the Somalia-based militant group, Al Shabaab and the Islamic State of Iran and Syria (ISIS), (David and Jacob, 2015). Accordingly, this has necessitated integrated regional responses to prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (CVE).¹ These Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) have been very dynamic in their mobilization, recruitment and operations, to also include gender as a consideration (Sjoberg, 2013). In East Africa, unlike in Nigeria, where Boko haram has recruited many young women (ICG, 2016), Al-shabaab are targeting vulnerable young men with the allure of employment and good life (Bombshell and Bakker, 2006). It has actually become more easier to recruit the youth into radical and VEOs (Botha, 2014) as a result of many factors. More specifically, the high (22.2%) unemployment rate of the youth in Kenya (World Bank, 2016), unresolved historical injustices (Mwaruvie, 2011) and feelings of marginalization (Kenya Transitional Justice Network, 2013), especially at the coastal region accounts for these dynamics. The region has also historically suffered exclusion just like the North Eastern (Institute of International Relations and Strategies, 2015) part of the country precipitating recruitment into VEOs.

The push-pull factors of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs are a reality in the world and at the coast of Kenya (Saltman and Smith, 2015; David and Jacob, 2015; Shauri and Wechuli 2017). Indeed, from historical injustices (Mwaruvie, 2011) to marginalization (Kenya Transitional Justice Network, 2013), and the pressure from the irredentist Mombasa Republican Council (Shauri and Wechuli, 2017), radicalization and recruitment have been deepening and young women are also seen as getting involved in VEOs (Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016). Literature show that men mostly serve as militants and carry out attacks, while women are often mothers, propagandists or wives of 'Al Shabaab/ISIS fighters or Jihad brides (Andre, 2014; Daily Express, 2016; Balasubramaniym, 2015). However, this perception is slowly changing since VE itself is dynamic (Pressman 2016), and women are now beginning to be used in some cases as frontline executers (Carter, 2013) of violent extremist plans. Evidently, in September 2016 three young women attacked a Central Police Station in Mombasa County in Kenya (Otieno, 2016). While there was controversy surrounding which terror group these young women belonged to, the message was clear that women are not only becoming targets of radicalization but they have already been militarized and are involved in VE activities like their male counterparts

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(Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016:61). The emerging militarization of women in VEOs therefore is a nascent idea and is adding to the discourse of seeing women not only as bystanders, sympathizers or accomplices to their spouses VE activities but as active participants.

However, the involvement of male or female recruits in VE notwithstanding, violence remains a vice despite of who perpetrates it in society. Accordingly, VE when meted on the population it has its impact (Kruglanski et al, 2014). Apparently, a lot of focus on effects of VE and recruitment has been directed to the male violent extremists (Sjoberg, 2013) with limited focus, as evident in literature, on its impact on the resultant widows of alleged slain VE spouses. While it is clear that certain changes occur as a result of male spouses' recruitment into VEOs worse is when they get killed and leave their wives as widows. However, the impact of widowhood due to VE, at the coast of Kenya has attracted limited attention. Where such considerations have been done, they did not take into account widows due to VE as primary targets. It is against this background that this study focused on the impact and coping mechanisms of VE of male spouses on widows in the coastal region of Kenya.

There is a growing interest and attention regarding women and violent extremism involvement in Kenya, especially in the coastal hotspots areas of Lamu, Mombasa and Kwale County. This has been orchestrated by young men and women joining VEOs such as Al-shabaab and ISIS. The interest was enhanced when the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) joined the war in Somalia. While research has been conducted on the general phenomenon, especially on push² and pull² factors (Hassan 2012; Saltman and Smith, 2015; David and Jacob, 2015; Shauri and Wechuli, 2017), many of the previous pieces of research have targeted men more than women. Accordingly, there is limited understanding on many VE issues with regard to women's involvement. One of the critical gaps is on the impact of VE and recruitment of male spouses on widows. More specifically, how women's lives change after their spouses have been recruited and killed due to their involvement with VEOs, and how they cope with these changes remains indistinct. There is a need to document the impact of violent extremism and recruitment of spouses into VE on widows using own experiences and testimonies and how they cope with the impacts of VE. Although the nexus between women and violent extremism has been researched in many studies, the approach has been on a secondary basis (Noor, 2015; Roukey, 2009; Balasubramaniym, 2015). Understanding widows of VE can best be achieved by involving them to provide answers to study questions.

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There was therefore need to conduct a more localized, nuanced and contextualized study to understand the impact of VE and recruitment of spouses into radical groups on widows using their own perspective. Further, it was also prudent to understand the coping mechanisms of widows whose spouses were killed due to alleged involvement in VE activities. The study was guided by two key objectives: (a) Finding out the impact of VE and recruitment of male spouses on widows in the Coastal Region of Kenya; and (b) Establish coping mechanisms of VE widows in the Coastal Region of Kenya.

Methodology

Radicalization¹ and recruitment into VEOs are sensitive topics and in most cases treated as special research projects. Owing to the special nature of the research, it required skill, tact and experience. Accordingly, a mixed methods approach was adopted that yielded both quantitative and qualitative information. Triangulation was adopted to enhance precision and efficiency in data collection. The approach encompassed face to face interviews with thirty (30) widows selected purposively from spouses allegedly killed because of their involvement with VEOs.

The selection was done in such a way that approximately ten (10) VE widows were included in each study county, namely Kwale, Mombasa and Lamu. The sampling of widows oscillated from purposive drawing from Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) with VE programmes to help widows and some elements of tracer projects using snowballing to ensure an objective mix of respondents was selected. Face to face interviews with widows who had lost their spouses allegedly through VE and key informants were conducted for about 40 Minutes to 1 hour. Special attention was exercised with unique cases that yielded rich data selected using a fixer from local NGOs working with widows in CVE in the purposively selected study sites.

The study also conducted 21 Key Informants Interviews (KIIs), seven (7) in each county that included religious (Sheikhs), woman and Community leaders, Local County Administrators, Local National Government officials, representatives of Civil Society Organizations working on CVE issues, especially with VE widows in the area and the study area(s) as well as Members of County Assembly (MCAs). Accordingly, 51 participants were involved in the study as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of the Sample per Category and County

County	(i) Violent Extremists	(ii) Suspected Government Spies	(iii) Amnesties	(iv) Innocent	KII	Total
Kwale	3	3	2	3	6	17
Mombasa	2	2	3	3	7	17
Lamu	2	2	1	5	7	17
Total	7	7	6	11	20	51

NB: Categories (i) to (iv) are as perceived by the widows, NGOs and fixers

Data was coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Analysis for quantitative data was done using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data was classified into thematic areas for presentation. The study included the following respondents:

- (a) Widows whose husbands were violent extremists but allegedly killed by security agencies
- (b) Widows whose husbands were perceived to be working as agents of government agencies against extremist groups
- (c) Widows whose husbands were former violent extremists but killed while they had embraced the government amnesty offer; and
- (d) Widows whose husbands were casualties of violent extremist activities but were neither directly nor indirectly involved in violent extremism nor were they spies for security agencies.
- (e) Consenting VE widows to the study

Presentation and Discussion of Results

This section covers presentation, interpretation and discussion of results based on the study objectives. Presentation of results commences with background and demographic characteristics of VE widows. This is critical as it provides a broad framework of investigation and analysis upon which the impact and coping mechanisms of VE widows can be understood. The presentation of results takes the following format:

Background Characteristics of VE Widows

Background characteristics of the respondents provide the basis of analysis and deeper insights, inter alia, into understanding study findings. This section

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therefore delves into answering the basic questions of what are the: Personal Characteristics of VE widows and Socio-economic characteristics of VE widows?

Personal Characteristics of VE Widows

The following characteristics were explored among VE widows namely their age bracket, whether or not they had children under their care, and how many children of their own they had and their respective ages. These personal characteristics were considered critical foundation for conceptualizing the impact and coping mechanisms of VE widows in the study areas. From the study findings it is clear that more than three fifths (65.5%) of the VE widows studied were aged between 35-39 years, while over one quarter (30.9%) were between 18-34, with far less than one tenth (3.6%) in the age bracket of 60 years and above. The differential age brackets for the VE widows is critical for the study since VE widows of different age brackets may experience different impacts and coping strategies, which underscored the need for the study upon which this paper is anchored.

Similarly, the study reveals some differentials on whether the VE widows studied had children under their care. Having or not having children was considered important for this study as it sheds some light on the understanding of the impact and coping mechanisms of VE widows. Apparently, most (93%) of the studied VE widows reported to have children compared to less than one tenth (7%) who reported to the contrary.

However, it was crucial for the study to probe further those who had children (93%) to reveal the number of children they had under their care. Results show that those with 1-3 children under their care were more than two fifths (41.3%), those with 4-6 children were slightly over one fifth (20.7%), while those with 7 (+) children and above were over one quarter (31%). It is apparent from the findings that over half (51.7%) of VE widows with children (93%) had 4 (+) children under their care. These are considered large family sizes with obvious corollaries on the VE widows that may also call for differential coping mechanisms, especially under the current hard economic times in the country.

To have a deeper insight into the impact of VE and coping mechanisms on VE widows, a consideration of number of children under their care only was not suffice. Accordingly, this study prodded into the age brackets of such children. Obviously, the needs for children say below five years and those six to seventeen or eighteen and above years may be different. Consequently, the

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coping mechanisms of VE widows involved in taking care of such children may also be different. Findings from the study show that less than one tenth (6.3%) of the children under their care were infants (0-5years), while those 6-17 years were reported to be over one half (52.2%), with over two fifths (41.5%) of the children aged 18 (+) years and above. Cumulatively, over one half (58.5%) of the children under their care were below the age of majority 18 (+) years in Kenya. Notably, the differential age bracket for these children has implications on the impact and coping mechanisms of women victims of VE, especially if they are more in their younger ages.

Socio-economic Characteristics of VE Widows

The second typology of characterization of who are VE widows was answered by measuring their education and occupational status. The focus on education was twin pronged, focusing on both secular and religious education. On one hand, secular education of VE widows was included because of its conceived implication on objective understanding of the subject matter of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs. On the other hand, religious education was included in the study due to its implication on the subjective (religious) understanding of the radicalizing ideology. The variable occupational status was included to shade light on the livelihood strategies that VE widows employ in supporting themselves and their families. Findings of the study on levels of secular and religious education of VE widows are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

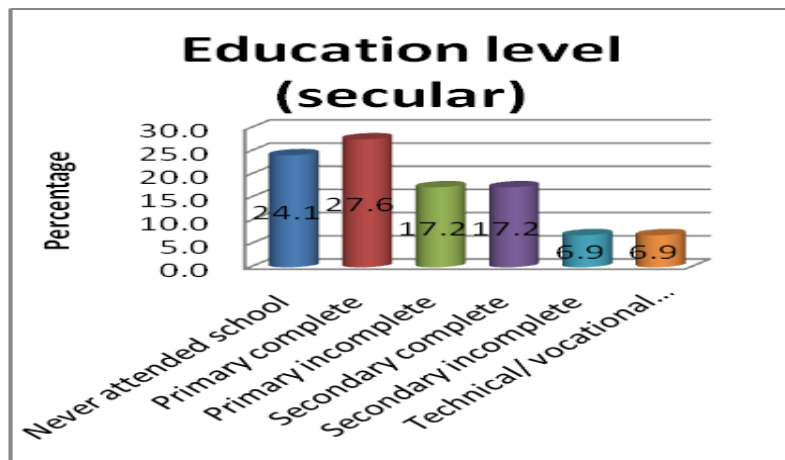


Figure 1: Level of secular education attained

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Findings in Figure 1 show variations in the level of secular education among the studied VE widows. More precisely, over one fifth (24.1%) of the widows reported to have never attended secular schooling and over one tenth (17.2%) as having attended primary education but did not complete, while over one quarter (27.6%) said they have completed primary level of secular education. Given the low levels of secular education, 24.1% never attended and 17.2% not completed primary, the researcher probed of their levels of religious education. Results on levels of secular education are shown in Figure 2.

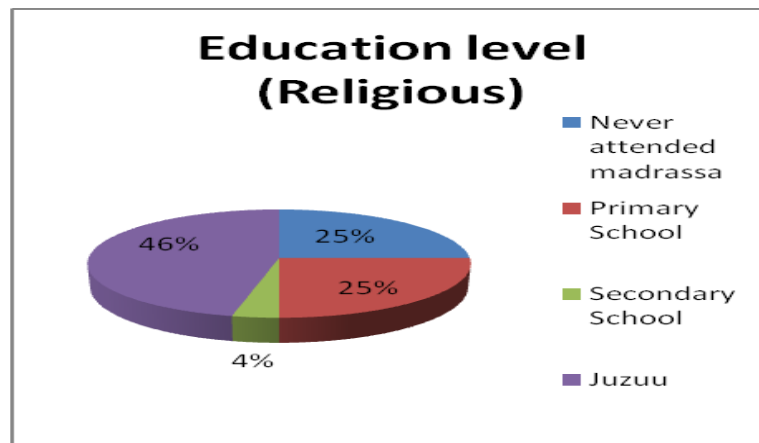


Figure 2: Level of religious education attained

Those who went through religious education, over two fifths (46%) had only basic (*Juzuu*) level of education, which is considered preliminary or entry point into Islamic literacy. This was in addition to one quarter (25%) of respondents who said they never attended religious education. The remaining, one quarter, had attained primary level and less than one tenth (4%) had secondary level of religious education. The low levels (75.8% and 96%) of secular and religious education among respondents respectively are a mirror of the status of both secular and religious education in the country.

Further, the study investigated the means of livelihoods as measured by occupation of VE widows in support of themselves and their children. Results of the study on this variable are carried in Figure 3.

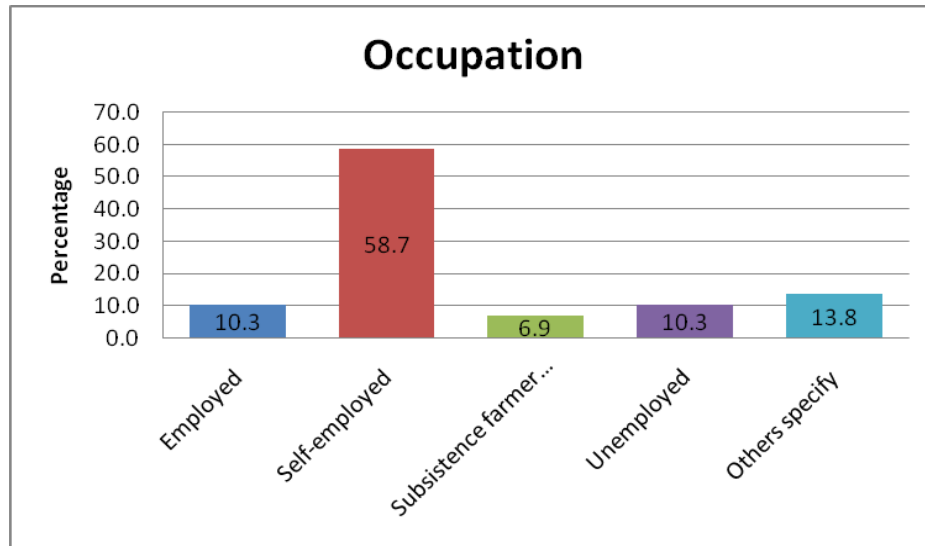


Figure 3: Distribution of VE Widows by occupation

Results of the study in Figure 3 show that over half (58.7%) of the respondents were self-employed engaged in Income Generating Activities (IGAs), while slightly more than one tenth (10.3%) were either employed or unemployed respectively. Those who mentioned subsistence farming or pastoralism and other livelihood activities were 6.9% and 13.8% respectively. The higher (58.7%) percentage of study participants reporting self-employment is a reflection of women livelihood coping strategies in the country as many of them lack formal education, a pre-requisite for entry into formal employment.

Knowledge and Perception of Respondents on Violent Extremism Issues

Understanding the impact and coping mechanisms of study participants, requires an analysis of their knowledge and perceptions on VE issues. To achieve this, a number of questions were posed to the study participants and it is clear from the survey that most (90%) of the respondents had heard about radicalization and VE respectively, compared to one fifth (10%) who had not heard. The higher (90%) percentage indicating they have heard about radicalization is a clear testimony of the level of awareness on radicalization and VE in the study area.

However, awareness may not be enough if people do not perceive their vulnerability to radicalization and VE. On vulnerability, the study reveals also

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that of the total VE widows studied, over half (58%) said that male youth are at a high probability of joining radical and VEOs, while others mentioned adult males (21%), all people (14%) and female youth at only 7%. The mention of male and female youth (58%) and (7%) respectively is a mirror of the gendered recruitment to VEOs in the country.

Further, when participants were asked about their perception on VE, over four fifths (86%) said that it is a bad idea. The later finding suggests that VE widows perceive violent extremism as something unacceptable in society possible because of its negative impacts on the family or the violence and killings associated with it. This finding corroborates that of United Nations (2013) and that of Shauri and Wechuli (2017) that it is harmful to community's co-existence.

From qualitative analysis corroborating the quantitative responses VE was perceived to be bad because it destroys homes through dislocation of families, causing sufferings and widowhood, loss of loved ones in alleged disappearances, abductions and deaths. *Destruction* of religious faith was mentioned in that recruited was said to be based on lies and hence goes against religious teachings and principles. This was reported to be killing religious morality. Furthermore, VE was thought to spread fear and insecurity in the study areas.

Impact of VE and Recruitment of Male Spouses on their Widows

Understanding the impact of VE and recruitment of male spouses on their widows may best be abstracted by looking at the role VE widows may be playing in the process. In this regard, this study asked the respondents on whether they played any role in the recruitment of their husbands into VEOs. Findings of the study depict that over four fifths (82%) of interviewees said that they did not play any role, while only over one tenth (18%) were affirmative.

However, the majority (82%) of those who said that they played no role were categorical that their husbands never involved them in such matters. However, qualitative results reveal that participants noticed changes in their husband's behaviour but they thought that their spouses had become more religious. Apparently, religiosity is assumed to be associated with non-involvement in vice behaviours possible explaining why VE widows never interrogated or suspected their husbands on such changes in behaviour to mean they were radicalized or actually recruited into VEOs.

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On the other hand, those who said that they played a part (18%) some acknowledged that they used to pressure their husbands to meet their domestic and social needs that could have pushed them to the allure of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs. It was also found that some of the widows made lots of financial demands on their spouses. The participants echoed that the pressure to meet such demands was reported to be even more during social functions such as wedding ceremonies, where women's expenses skyrocketed. The pressure to meet their wives demands was said to push men into the allure of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs because of the promise for financial gain. From field observations, it was clear that some self-blame was evident on some respondents as they narrated their stories during the interviews on how they could have possibly pushed their spouses into VE activities.

Conversely, when we asked the study participants whether there are any benefits accruing from their spouses joining VEOs, the response was a categorical no for all (100%) of them. All (100%) interviewed respondents said that they have not seen any positive impact on their families coming from their husbands, when they were alive and even in death due to their alleged involvement with VEOs. Qualitative results and field observations of the households visited show that the lives of the widows were not better even when their spouses had been alleged to have joined VEOs. Indeed, one participant reiterated aptly that "there are no benefits in joining these groups but VE spells only misery, death and widowhood...it has made my life change negatively." From the discussions with the VE widows, the expectation was that when one joins VEOs then their economic wellbeing will improve. From the narrations of household hardships including difficulty in meeting basic needs, food, decent housing or rent, medical fees and school fees for children, the thought of economic gain is challenged.

From the explanations, inter alia, by the VE widows on why their spouses joining VEOs is a bad idea and that no benefits accrue (positive impact), it was prudent to interrogate further whether the opposite is true. Indeed, one of the objectives of this study was to find out the impact (positive or negative) of VE and recruitment of male spouses on women victims in the Coastal Region of Kenya. Accordingly, women victims reported a plethora of negative impacts grouped in this paper into four major themes.

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Physical Impact

Many VE widows narrated stories of physical torture meted on them and their children allegedly by the Kenyan state security agents. Physical impact was reported to include death of spouses, sickness such as, stomach ulcers, high blood pressure and physical injuries. Physical harassment allegedly by the police including rape, threats, physical beatings as the widows were considered suspects, sympathizers or collaborators by security agents were also cited. These are interesting findings in that Carter (2013) observes that “women are raped or sexually abused by the insurgents themselves as a recruitment tactic”, the narration that this was also allegedly committed by security agents expands this human rights violation discourse. Narratives from the widows also attest to them alleging witnessing their spouses being physically abused, being shot or killed, either by security forces or violent extremists in front of them and their children. The act of witnessing a loved one and a husband for that matter being executed was really traumatizing to the widows who were in pain and tears during the interviews to narrate their stories. Indeed, the United Nations, (2013) draws attention to the fact that as a result of V.E, “women continue to be primary witnesses of first hand pain and trauma as they witness their husbands who join militia groups dying.”

Psycho-social and emotional Impact

The traumatizing experiences of witnessing a loved one being killed, beatings and harassment allegedly by security agencies coupled with frustrations born out of automatic widowhood and single parenthood comes with it superfluity of other negative impacts. Study participants for instance reported heartbreaks, emotional torture, challenges of assuming family headship and responsibilities that come with it, mistrust on their claims of innocence that they were not aware of their spousal involvement in VE activities, exclusion characterized by stigma, rejection/isolation/discrimination from their own and husbands families and their neighbours.

Similarly, others reported stress, depression, lack of sleep, denial, suicidal thoughts, threats of remarriage by Al-shabaab friends of their “martyred” spouses, loneliness, family dislocations, disappearances and lack of information on the whereabouts of spouses allegedly ceased for interrogation by security agencies. These findings confirm the observations made by Sindh, (2015) who said that VE has a greater psycho-social impact on women and this ranges from marital problems, stress, under and unemployment and general psychological abuse. However, Winterbotham and Pearson (2016) allude to this fact too but

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attest in their study that psychosocial support for women victims is not forthcoming.

However, during the study we also probed participants on how they felt about all these impacts that they were experiencing in their lives. Results of the study can be categorized into two. First, VE widows said that they were hurt when they learnt that their spouses were associated with VEOs without their knowledge. As a result, they felt bad, bitter and above all duped by the very person they thought they knew well and loved.

Second, VE widows said that they felt weak and cheated emotionally, in love and religious faith, stressed, depressed and above all sick. In some instances, the latter manifested itself physically, where respondents reported to have had stomach ulcers and high blood pressure, hitherto absent in their lives predate their spouse's involvement with VEOs.

Economic Impact

The absence of a breadwinner and ensuing widowhood due to VE meant that many families sunk into an economic crisis. In fact, many participants reported inability to meet basic needs for their children and themselves. This stemmed from financial inability to pay for rent or repairs of the family house to lack of food and finances to settle bills, pay for ill-health and school fees for their children. Consequently, we heard reports from the respondents that children slept hungry or in unsecure dwellings, dropping out of school or sick with no medical attention. Given an earlier finding of this study that most (93%) of the respondents had children and that over half (51.7%) had 4 (+) children and with over half (58.5%) of the children being 17 years and below, the economic impact of VE widows is even poised to worsen. This reiterates the position held by Sindh, (2015) who posits that extremist violence puts women in a precarious economic position and limits their potential to fulfil their family's basic needs.

Structural Impact

Study participants reported several negative impacts bordering on politics and touching on the security infrastructure around mitigation of radicalization, recruitment and violent extremism. Ranstorp and Hyllengren (2013) observe that women are the most likely affected by violence and extremism. More precisely, some interviewed VE widows said that they were treated as suspects on something they had no knowledge or idea about; some were arbitrarily arrested, others were beaten and harassed allegedly by security agencies, hence

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having their rights and fundamental freedoms violated. Additionally, some cited a feeling of insecurity and fear (for themselves and their families) from both security agencies and Al-shabaab returnees. Indeed, cases of harassment, fear of rape from harassers, alleged disappearances and kidnappings were recorded. Some participants also cited lack of support from Islamic religious institutions. This can probably be attributed to the fear by such institutions to be associated with VE activities and groups, especially the consequences that come with such associations.

Finally, study subjects reported feelings of insecurity and were fearful of the repercussions of their husbands' involvement with VEOs. Insecurity and fear probably stemmed from how government security agencies would view them either as suspects, collaborators or sympathizers of VEOs, especially returnees from the Al-shabaab fighters. Consequently, therefore participants were caught up in double jeopardy situations pitting them against security forces on one hand and Islamic Jihadists, on the other.

Coping Mechanisms for VE Widows

Despite the negative impacts on VE widows, inter alia, occasioned by spousal involvement in VEOs and consequent deaths, respondents were observed to be continuing with their lives. Given that one of the objectives of the study was to establish coping mechanisms of the respondents, we attempted to ask them to share their stories of how they were managing life amidst all the aforementioned negativities of VE.

Findings of study show diverse coping mechanisms extracted during interviews with study participants that fall into four major thematic areas. The first is psycho-social and emotional support infrastructure. These are coping mechanisms, which manifested themselves at a personal, psychological and social level of respondents to mitigate the negative impacts associated with it. Top on the list was the report that most of them cried out their anger during the death of their husbands and whenever they encountered challenges in life. In fact, crying is a psycho-social and emotional strategy for anger management among grieving people including VE widows. Other psycho-social and emotional mechanisms mentioned included seeking for advice and counselling, self-encouragement to be resilient, seeking help from family members, seeking assistance and sharing with friends and reliance on own family and that of the late husband for support. All these efforts support the observations of Shauri

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and Wechuli (2017) on community co-existence that has been impacted by radicalization and violent extremism at the coast of Kenya.

The second coping mechanism used by women victims of violent extremism is livelihood support infrastructure. Given the fact that women victims reported challenges meeting basic needs of their families coupled with many (65.6%) mentioning being self-employed, financial support in form of loans from *Chamas* (group savings) was top on their list of livelihood support. In fact, this was considered by many respondents as a possible mechanism to financial security and independence with capacity to ensure the ability to provide and fend for their family needs. As a matter of fact, many participants reported to be engaged in economic activities, hitherto, a preserve of men. This finding corroborates those of Shauri and Obeka (2017) on their observation that women in the coast of Kenya are breaking the cultural barriers of gender by involving themselves in careers that were traditionally reserved for men. In this study, many respondents mentioned that they were now involved in Income Generating Activities (IGAs), selling for instance water, firewood/charcoal, clothes and even food items in the local market to fend for themselves and their families. Some changed the schools their children used to attend, from private to public, while others cited looking for casual jobs/work and many others mentioned washing clothes for a fee. However, despite their struggles to meet family needs, study participants faced additional challenges in looking for financial independence. Quite a number of them reported sexual harassment by people and in places where they sought for livelihood support. This revelation implies that women face double sexual harassment threats from those who help them and those as mentioned by Carter (2013) when he observed that women are raped or sexually abused by the insurgents themselves as a recruitment tactic.

The third is structural support infrastructure. This is support from organized entities with a mandate to help and support vulnerable populations. Indeed, respondents said that they received support from the national government in form of relief food and fees through the Constituency Development Funds (CDF). Some mentioned to have received support from County Governments through bursaries and others mentioned assistance from Civil Society Organizations.

The fourth coping mechanism is spiritual support infrastructure. A keen and interesting observation in this study was that amidst all the negative impacts

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respondents experienced, they displayed some semblance of normality of life in our initial encounter and during the preliminary parts of the interviews. Indeed, participants were observed to be calm and exhibited resilience in conducting themselves despite the negative impacts and consequences, inter alia, associated with their late husband's involvement with VEOs. However, when we probed further on what makes them strong amidst all these challenges, the study reveals that VE widows relied on constant prayers (day and night) for courage, protection and guidance. The study also found that VE widows had accepted what befell their families and "*Subra*" (patience) that the Almighty is in control and knows why they have to endure such pain and sufferings. This notwithstanding, field observations reveal the VE widows broke down and cried during the interviews as they shared their tribulations. Whenever this happened, they were left to cry and in some cases a repeat interview was arranged to continue the interview when they had calmed down. Referrals were also made to local organization to provide psycho-social and emotional support to such respondents within the framework of research ethics. The display of calmness and resilience that was observed among VE widows during the survey therefore was a mechanism to cover their sufferings possible to avoid exclusion due to their association with VEOs.

From the foregoing, the study observed that respondents showed signs of resilience despite the challenges and frustrations that they were going through. This was evident and it supported the Government of Kenya and United Nations Development Program, (2015) when they reported that women play an important role in the community and as a result they are considered their backbones. This implies that societies that endeavour to build the capacity and resilience of women significantly reduce social pathologies. Since this study sheds light on VE widows and that Ranstorp and Hyllengren (2013) observe that women are the most likely victims of violence and extremism, this paper therefore reiterates the importance of any efforts to leverage the position of women, especially with regards to mitigating violent extremism. The importance of women in CVE is also captured by their voices of powerful co-existence as presented in Shauri and Wechuli (2017).

Conclusion

This paper was based on two objectives. Accordingly, two sets of conclusions are drawn from the findings of the study. First, it is now clear from the findings of the study that respondents were categorical that they do not draw any direct and tangible benefits from their husbands' radicalization and recruitment into

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VEOs. Further, most (86%) of the VE widows said it is a bad idea. However, most of the participants interviewed were candid on their reports of the negative impacts, which were categorized in this paper into physical, psycho-social and emotional, economic and structural. In sum, respondents were observed to be a segment of the community that was deeply suffering in silence without any form of structured intervention. In fact, the study discovered that those who want to intervene, individuals or body corporate, dread the stigma that is associated with VE, especially the fear of being misunderstood as being sympathizers or accomplices to VEOs by the security forces or misconstrued by members of VEOs and security as a spy or accomplice respectively.

Second, in the absence of a formal structured approach to mitigate the negative impacts of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs of male spouses on their widows, the study found out how the participants cope with the situation. There are four support systems that respondents use to cope with the attendant challenges and frustrations. They include livelihood, psycho-social and emotional, spiritual and structural support infrastructure. Despite these elaborate individual and social efforts to cope with the negativities of the VE widowhood challenges, this paper concludes that there is no clear and elaborate formal infrastructure to mitigate the negative impacts of VE on the study participants.

In an attempt to understand the survival mechanisms of these respondents there was need to target, inter alia, their coping mechanisms. The second issue raised was on how best they think VE widows should be assisted to cope with the negative impacts of radicalization and recruitment of their spouses into VEOs. Four key suggestions, bordering on policy and practice, emanate from the interviews with the participants as packaged in the following thematic areas. First, respondent's reiterated the challenge they face in meeting basic needs for their families. In this, participants echoed the need for special consideration to promote their welfare. Indeed, many of them were found to have low levels of education and they were either unemployed or in micro self-employment activities. There is need therefore for policy consideration, at the national and/or county level, to cover the welfare of VE widows and their families. The policy should address basic needs of such families and enhance living conditions of the VE widows and their families.

Second, based on unemployment and self-employment findings of the study for respondents, it was suggested that social policy and practice should be focused

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on promoting their economic independency. In fact, many of them said that if they are helped to start Income Generating Activities (IGAs) they will be able to manage their families well and cope with the negative impacts of losing their spouses. Accordingly, this study recommends capacity building of VE widows through awareness and education on the impact of radicalization and recruitment into VEOs and entrepreneurship skill development, especially in business start-up and growth.

Third, most of the participants interviewed were found to have suffered psychosocial and emotional trauma. It was thus suggested prudently that a strong psycho-social and emotional support framework be instituted in the affected areas to help VE widows and their families heal and successfully reintegrate into society. Practically, this should entail trauma and general counselling, de-radicalization and spiritual counselling, and creation of psycho-social and emotional support networks to facilitate de-stigmatization and inclusion of these VE widows in community activities as normal citizenry.

Finally, most of the interviewed participants cited insecurity and fear, stemming from alleged harassment from security agencies and Al-shabaab returnees, impacting negatively on their lives. It was viewed prudent therefore by the participants that adequate security is ensured for the VE widows and their children. More so, security operations touching on VE widows and their families should be guided by the rule of law and respect for human rights principles and fundamental freedoms.

Notes

1. Radicalization and Violent Extremism definitions adopted from the National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya, by the National Counter Terror Centre, Government of Kenya, 2017.
2. Push and Pull factors to violent extremism as discussed by Hassan, (2012): *Understanding drivers of violent extremism: The case of Al-shabaab and Somali Youth* (27/2/2018; 8:20):<https://ctc.usma.edu/understanding-drivers-of-violent-extremism-the-case-of-al-shabab-and-somali-youth/>

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