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Women, War and Terrorism: An African Feminist Critique

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Abstract

This article examines war and terrorism discourses from an African feminist perspective. It focuses on the male-centric nature of war and terrorism discourse. The article argues that although women play critical roles in war and terrorism, their voices are not integrated into counter-terrorism interventions because of the patriarchal nature of war and terrorism. The article critiques the dominant historical, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives that masculinise war and terrorism discourse. It explores three key questions, one: in what ways have men been masculinised into war and terrorism discourse; two: in what ways have women been excluded from war and terrorism discourse; and three: what contributions do women bring to efforts against terrorism based on their lived experiences. This article examines social theories that justify men's dominance in discourse on terrorism. It coins the African feminist theory Nafsi that acknowledges the power and vulnerability that inform women's knowledge and experiences of terrorism. The article is based on a 2021 study in the Majengo slums of Nairobi, Kenya, and uses a narratological approach to capture the knowledge and experiences of mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits to terrorism discourse. It concludes by exemplifying women's continued contribution to fighting terrorism and calls for a gender-inclusive approach to terrorism discourse.

Key words: *exclusion, gender, masculinity, terrorism, war.*

1.0 Introduction

> "*They showed us contempt because we are women and they overlooked the fact that we are the ones who have information, more than the men."* Yasmin, 2020 -2021 female study respondent in Majengo, Nairobi.

Women are often overlooked. This is because society considers them *'irregular'* warriors (Bouta, Frerks, Bannon, 2005). This invisibilisation of women stems from the historical socialisation of the man being seen as heroic and a protector, versus the cowardly woman. This patriarchal socialisation thus plays multiple roles in the concept of war and terrorism protected women

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(Workman, 1996). Moreover, it puts men in a position of being the women's protectors, and when they do not enter this role, they are treated by members of society with mockery and disdain for not being *'man-enough'* (Zur and Glendinning, 1987). Society expects women to uphold their maternal roles and dissociates them from any forms of violence. Similarly, in the war and terrorism discourse, women are viewed through the lens of domesticity (Shapiro and Maras, 2018).

As Christensen and Rasmussen (2015) note, this attitude has historically and continuously positioned men as aggressors, and women as pacifiers. In addition, in both war and terrorism, the enemy is feminised, denoting that they are a weaker gender, easier to kill, destroy, or harm. This feminisation of the enemy results in femininity being mocked and humiliated. As seen in the Afghanistan war, captured boys are made to wear women's clothes and to dance in front of armed soldiers (Rikheim, 2022). In agreement, Workman (1996), states that the practice of terrorism and war is biased towards a patriarchal misogynistic underbelly that views the woman as the man's enemy and equates the war enemy to the crushing of a woman. It calls on the man to kill the woman within him to be able to engage in war, making war and terrorism femicidal in their conception (Workman, 1996). This is despite widespread acknowledgement by both state and non-state actors, that war and terrorism are gendered phenomena (Chinkin, Kaldor, & Yadav, 2020).

This article seeks to challenge these notions that promote war and terrorism as a men's affair and to specifically promote a gendered approach to terrorism discourse. Towards this end, efforts have been made with the passing of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 of 2000 on women, peace, and security, which called for women's full participation in all peace processes, including prevention, management, and resolution. (UN Women, 2017). In addition, the UNSCR 2242 (2015) calls for the integration of women in counterterrorism efforts. The inclusion of women is likely to yield increased effectiveness in efforts against terrorism. As Traoré (2021) and UNODC (2020), note, a gender-inclusive counterterrorism approach renders it both effectual and holistic and promotes broader human rights and development.

1.1 Research Gap and Justification

Until now existing knowledge, literature, and practice on countering terrorism have failed to include the experiences of women, specifically, mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits. These mothers have been viewed by policy actors and practitioners as victims or contributors to terrorism and not as key stakeholders in the fight against terrorism. This is even though women, including mothers, have played crucial roles in supporting antiterrorism efforts. By responding to three key questions, one: in what ways have men been masculinised into war and terrorism discourse; two: in what ways have women been excluded from war and terrorism discourse; and three: what contributions do women bring to efforts against terrorism based on their lived experiences, this article aims to capture the knowledge and experiences of mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits as a contribution to an African feminist perspective towards gender-inclusive counterterrorism efforts.

2.0 Literature Review

Existing literature has continued to link notions of masculinity to violence. This is embedded in socialisation processes that reinforce men's domination in terrorism discourse and peripheralize women. This section explores historical gender-dichotomous approaches to war and masculinised and gender-stereotypical perspectives of terrorism, building towards an understanding of the ubiquitous exclusion of women from terrorism discourse.

2.1 The Gendered Dichotomies of Men, Women, and War

War is about gendered processes of socialisation and imbalanced power relations skewed in favour of men. Micheletti, Ruxton, and Gardner (2018) observe that war has traditionally been majorly a purview of men, with men being the combatants and women playing supportive roles. Workman (1996) further claims that the characterisation of manliness and womanliness has contributed to the constitution of war as a male affair that requires masculine traits and the subservience of women.

Ferguson (2020) adds that men's propensity to war is one of protectionism, they lean towards protecting what they consider to be their own.

What men claim to be protecting may be authority, opportunities, positions, power, resources, children, or women, against the perceived other, the enemy (Ferguson, 2020). This reveals that men's engagement with war is about winning, dominance, power, and control. As Amman and Staudacher (2020) posit, African men are often associated with abuse of power, domination, and violence with expectations placed on them to live up to these perceived ideals of manhood.

This notion emerges strongly through gender-differential socialisation processes. According to Ferguson (2020), man is socialised to be brave, to fight against the enemy, to feminise them. In this regard, a male child, the American Psychological Association (2018) states, expresses frustration through violence, which is encouraged, and as they grow older, acts of violence translate to power over another, a show of might and dominance. Prugl (2003), observes that in most societies, men are discouraged from showing cowardice even when they are fearful, and they are pushed into war and rewarded for their toughness. Violence is what separates boyhood and manhood; it is the bridge that needs to be successfully crossed.

Men, Prugl (2003) continues, are enculturated towards this through rites of passage from boyhood to manhood, which signify bravery, honour, courage, skill, and discipline, all of which are characteristics required on the battlefield. Men thus achieve their masculinity through destruction and violence. States legitimise violence through wars and justify men's involvement. This explains why most militaries are male-dominated. Christensen and Rasmussen (2015), argue that states practise structured masculinised socialisations of war, by asking men to join the military as a noble cause, to protect their countries because they possess both rational thought and the physical stature to fight.

The practice of war has also been about men protecting people, especially vulnerable groups such as women and children, and property, from their enemies. Chuter and Gaub (2016) observe that in pre-colonial Africa, in some communities, young men were sent out to war, to protect the interests of their in-groups or for social-cultural reasons such as cattle rustling. Additionally, Løvgren (2015) postulates that the violence of young African men is seen as their revolt against structural and systemic challenges in African societies, which frustrate and humiliate them. Their engagement in violence earns them respect because they are responding to societal expectations of them (Løvgren, 2015).

War also gives men a shared identity. It is something that they do together as men, away from the women but presumably for their sake. LaMothe (2017) submits that an invitation for men to go to war gives them a sense of purpose, a shared identity, a mission to fulfil, and a chance to protect their own.

However, when it comes to women and war, the discourse shifts. Where young men's engagement in war is viewed with pride, Løvgren (2015) asserts that women's involvement in violence is seen as increasing their social vulnerabilities. This is a misconception because historically women have also played active roles in war practices. This has been as sympathisers, encouragers, financiers, and fighters. As war supporters, as Prugl (2003) indicates, women have historically and culturally bolstered the 'man of war' by encouraging them with song and dance on their way to the battlefield and celebrating and honouring them with gifts when they come back victorious. Women also contribute to violence by taking up supportive roles that contribute to the continuance of wars. As the ICRC (2003) notes, women become the heads of households when the men go out to war. Women also engage in war as active combatants.

Regrettably, when they do, they are considered sexually inadequate or dysfunctional as a justification for their war engagement in what Sjoberg and Gentry (2008) term the whore narrative. This sexualisation of women involved in war provides a plausible societal explanation for what is considered *'abnormal*'. This singular sexualised lens of women's engagement in war disenfranchises them from engaging in discussions on resolving wars because war is seen as a male affair. This same male-centric war thinking is also prevalent in terrorism discourse.

2.2 The Masculinisation of Terrorism

According to Banks (2019), the history of terrorism (1880 to date) portrays the terrorist as male. On the other hand, Rapoport (2014) proffers four gender-neutral waves of terrorism, namely the anarchist wave (the 1880s) that focused on the assassination of key political leaders; the anti-colonial wave (1920s) that targeted colonial masters and had a nationalist agenda; the new left wave (the 1960s) characterised by both a radical and nationalist agenda with an underlying short-lived revolution agenda; and the religious wave (1980s) that saw an intersection of religious and ethnic identities and a return to the use of the term terrorist as an identity marker.

In his inputs, Rapoport (2014) provided a broader outlook on terrorism, but Parker and Sitter (2015) introduced a new perspective and proffered that instead of waves, these are strains, specifically, the four horsemen of terrorism. In this way, they masculinised the terrorism discourse. In inferring from this, the maleness of terrorism is not likely to disappear even with the next strain of terrorism and instead, there needs to be a deliberate attempt to infuse women's knowledge into understanding and addressing terrorism. As Tunde (2015) reflects, women's involvement in terrorism can be traced back to the 19th century in groups like the Russian Narodnaya Volya, the Peru Shining Path Group, and the Palestinian Hamas, thus their exclusion from terrorism discourse is unjustified.

The notion of masculine power and dominance, similarly to war discourse, strongly emerges in terrorism discourse. Dier and Baldwin (2022) assert that masculinity epitomised by societal expectations of manhood and what it should look like translates into male power, dominance, entitlement, and privilege over other men and women and a normalisation of misogyny that propositions men as innately superior to women, in terrorism discourse. Direct engagement in terrorism has also mainly been a male affair and this can be explained through socialisation processes that link men to violence. As Noonan (2018) observes, terrorist actors have tended to be male with men conducting 2,335 terror attacks between the period 1982 and 2016, and only 217 attacks attributed to female terrorists in comparison.

This, says Noonan (2018), is not coincidental but enshrouded in the concept of masculinity that conditions men to show heroic characteristics by displaying their courage, strength, and efficacy by engaging in terrorist acts. Additionally, Noonan (2018) puts forward that this concept of manhood has defined terrorism as a man's world because it is where men get to assert their agency, establish their political identity, and reaffirm their masculinity. This need for male establishment of authority fits in well with terrorist agendas. Dier and Baldwin (2022) note that terrorist groups offer hypermasculine imagery that provides men with an opportunity to reclaim their honour, sexual prowess, social status, economic power, and political relevance.

In this way, terrorism provides a meeting point between masculinity and disenfranchisement that supports men's traditional roles as protectors and providers (UNDP and UN Women, 2020). Additionally, Dier and Baldwin (2022) reflect that it re-establishes their manhood and gives them a sense of belonging to the brotherhood, and a restoration of pride and identity which is often emasculated through economic, political, and social disenfranchisement as seen in Afghanistan with the Taliban, and in Somalia with al-Shabaab and ISIL.

For men, their dominance in the terrorism discourse is key as it gives them power and relevance in society through a falsified notion of brotherhood on one hand, and one of causing pervasive fear and destruction on the other.

2.3 Gendered Stereotypes and Presumptions of Womanhood

The perceived social benefits of terrorism for men, feed into the continued justification of women's exclusion. Pearson (2018) justifies the maleness of terrorism discourse by submitting that women are aligned to their female characteristics of being caring, chaste, and maternal. This is in contradiction to terrorism which is associated with concepts of manhood like bravery, dominance, power, and subordination of fellow men and women.

The viewing of women from a feminine perspective as mothers, and nurturers, denies them agency to be key actors in terrorism discourse. Noonan (2018) observes that when women engage in terrorism, it is often sensationalised and overemphasised, as it is considered a rarity, going against the norm, against what is acceptable of a woman, and this lessens her identity as a female terrorist and a woman.

Emphasising this, Kaufman, and Williams, (2013) state that when women are deeply involved in terrorism, as combatants or suicide bombers, it is seen as an abomination that goes against expected gender norms, with conclusions peremptorily made that a male figure must have influenced her extremely violent behaviour. In agreement, Talbot (2001) proffers that the terms 'woman' and 'terrorism' are viewed from an opposing perspective, with women involved in terrorism viewed as not being feminine enough to take up a role that is a presumed preserve of men.

Yet, violent extremist organisations negatively utilise women's agency as an assertion of male power to suit their needs. As Makanda, et.al (2018) observe, male terrorists use women to accomplish their mission because women navigate better, evade detection, and spread terrorist propaganda. Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai (2016) reiterate, that in terrorist groups, girls and women are often relegated to sexualised or household roles as seen in ISIS and Boko Haram.

2.4 The Resultant Blind Spot - Women

Terrorism discourse has invisibilised women. Repo (2006) alleges that security has historically and consistently been masculinised, and men's views and opinions are taken as superior, universally acceptable, and shared. Similarly, state policies on terrorism are gendered with the male perspective being dominant and the delegitimization and depoliticization of women's experiences in this arena considered standard practice (Repo, 2006).

As the OSCE (2013) indicates, the misconception of women as too timid to be involved in terrorist acts has resulted in their exclusion from the policy sphere addressing terrorism. Moreover, Davis, West, and Amarasingam (2021) submit that when it comes to the knowledge sphere, women's role in terrorism has not been sufficiently captured because it is viewed as women going beyond the spaces where socialisation and patriarchy have confined them. The reliance of policymakers and practitioners on available written data makes knowledge political, resulting in women's knowledge of terrorism often being left out and rendering efforts against terrorism ineffective (Davis, West, and Amarasingam, 2021).

Pearson (2018) asserts that in terrorism studies, women are made invisible because even when they lead or engage in terrorist acts, their engagement is not equated to female agency and power, instead it is viewed as going against the norm. The media, which has a huge following that influences mindsets and beliefs has also excluded women. Sjoberg (2009) observes that media reports and scholarly works on terrorism in the last decade which inform discourse and response, have not included a gender dimension, the contributions of women to terrorism, and the implications of terrorism on women. When women are mentioned, they are referred to as women terrorists not just terrorists making it an out-of-the-norm discussion.

Davis, West, and Amarasingam, (2021) note that out of 3,442 journal articles on terrorism published between 2007 and 2016, only 232 focused on women in terrorism with 448 in the period 1996-2020. Although this indicates a slightly increased interest in scholarship on women and terrorism, women-specific knowledge on this issue still evidently remains peripheral.

The removal of women from discourse and narratives on terrorism by state actors, violent extremist organisations, and scholars is systematic. It portrays women as helpless spectators and victims. As UNDP and UN Women, (2020) posit, it suppresses their roles as combatants and military leaders as this goes against socialised and normalised gender roles because acts like aggression, strength, and violence are considered a man's domain.

This, indicates Sjoberg (2009), enables society to continue their idealisation of femininity and womanhood to meet societal expectations and contributes to a lack of proper interrogation of the role of women in terrorism and their role in addressing it.

Studies reveal that it is also important for knowledge on terrorism to be shared extensively with women as well. Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai (2016), note that in France, mothers knew that Salafists were radicalising their sons who were vulnerable due to economic and social marginalisation, they knew the Salafists' strategies, location of radicalisation, and timings, but were unaware of the official channels to direct their knowledge to, resulting in a lost intervention opportunity.

Despite the exclusion of women from the field of terrorism, as noted above. There is still an opportunity to include the voices of women including African women. As Wight (2009) reflects, the field of terrorism is still faced with a myriad of challenges including a lack of definitional agreement, almost no access to actual terrorists, the secretive nature of security agencies working on terrorism, over-focus on policy due to the availability of funding for this particular aspect and a lack of objectivity due to its emotive nature borne out of political and personal interests.

It is within this quagmire that a gender-inclusive lens can be added to enhance the effectiveness of efforts against terrorism. This requires a capturing of women's voices, including mothers of al-Shabaab recruits who bring in diverse nuances based on their lived experiences. Women can and have contributed to terrorism both positively and negatively and leaving them out of the terrorism equation, renders efforts to address terrorism ineffective.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This article uses a dichotomous theoretical framework, the first one looks at theories that have furthered and entrenched women's inclusion in war and terrorism discourse, and the second, a grounded African feminist theory coined in this article, *Nafsi* African feminism, which aims to reclaim the place of women in terrorism discourse.

3.1 Social Contract Theory

Laskar (2013) states that the social contract theory as advanced by Thomas Hobbes takes further the notion of protection and preservation, embedded in an absolutism of authority and power, domiciled in one man or a group of men. The man has the sole responsibility of not only protecting the woman but also preserving his position of power in society.

Pateman (1998) adds that the social contract theory is one of men's freedom, women's suppression, men's leadership, and women's subjugation, effectively establishing men's political rights over women's agency. Although the social contract theory comes across as one intent on maintaining social order, it disenfranchises women's voice and agency. It reinforces women's exclusion from war discourse. In this way, women's contribution not only to war but to war prevention and resolution is disregarded.

3.1.1 The man of war – theoretical underpinnings

In war discourse, Young (2003) proffers, that man is portrayed as the protector, the one that ensures the woman is safe from external threats and dangers, and the woman is perceived as the one that needs protection. This relegates the woman to a position of powerlessness, and neediness, reliant on the man's protection. Young (2003) reemphasises, that the man, in war discourse, is viewed from a patriarchal frame as authoritarian and paternalistic and the woman as subservient and obedient to the man, appreciative of man's protective nature. This is a fallacy, as in reality, when men go to war, women are left to head households and protect the family members left behind, especially the most vulnerable, children, the elderly, and those with disabilities. The social contract theory, though, expounds on how this idea of male protectionism is advanced and justified.

3.1.2 The 'man of terror' – theoretical underpinnings

Terrorism discourse continues the same trajectory and foregrounds men as the main actors. Theoretical perspectives on terrorism and masculinity help us to understand why man is the main actor in undertaking terrorist acts as literature reveals. These include theories like toxic masculinity and the development of machismo, aggression theory, social constructionism theory, and social learning theory.

They portray societal expectations of men to be aggressive, powerful, and antifeminine. These theoretical perspectives also highlight, as Pearson (2019) notes, that the focus on the *'man of terror'* renders the woman invisible in discussions on terrorism and how best to deal with it. This article focuses on the social learning theory.

3.2 Social Learning Theory

Pearson (2019) says the social learning theory indicates that man's role in terrorism is a result of bolstered socialisation into a culture of violence as heroism and prowess. In agreement, Nabavi and Bijandi (2012) advance that behaviour is learned and fortified through frequent interactions within a given social context. Banarjee and Bandura, (2007) in addition, allege that, in social learning theory, learning takes place through observation, imitation, modelling, and experiencing what occurs around them. They state that the process of social learning reinforced over some time requires attention to, retention, and reproduction of, the learning acquired, and a motivation to adopt this learned behaviour.

This results in those who have gone through the social learning process adapting particular behaviours like violence and acting on them through terrorist acts. As per the social learning theory, the observation and experience of violence are linked to the domination, power, respect, and reverence given to the individual committing the violence (Hughbank and Hughbank, 2007.) As Hughbank and Hughbank (2007) argue, in terrorism studies, violent behaviour is learned through observation and interaction toward the achievement of a defined goal.

The radicalisation process that entices individuals to join terrorist groups through frequent interactions with recruiters also models social learning. This, according to Pritchett and Moeller (2022) is through collective persecution of the presumed enemy and a focus on retaliation based on perceived shared grievances.

This article will, in its discussion section, draw on examples from the Majengo slum of Nairobi to show how the social learning theory was used to advance terrorism.

African Feminist Grounded Theory – Nafsi (Essence of Being) Feminism

The *Nafsi* African feminist theoretical perspective claims that women's knowledge is borne out of a convergence of their power and vulnerability which makes it unique and of added value to terrorism discourse. Lorentzen (2021) observes that in terrorism discourse, women have mainly been viewed as victims rather than knowledgeable contributors. This article coins the '*Nafsi'* (essence of being) African feminist theory through a grounded theory approach. *Nafsi* African feminism connotes that women's knowledge of terrorism is based on their lived experiences including both their power and vulnerabilities.

In an African context, the woman's power is linked to her societal responsibilities. Women's role as nurturers of their homes and children, coupled with the challenges they experience in their daily lives, influences not only what they know about terrorism but also how society views what they know as women.

Her vulnerability is based on her dire life experiences including patriarchy, poverty, sexual and gender-based violence, homelessness, drugs, and substance abuse. This is complicated further by the social context in which she resides, for instance, the informal settlement of Majengo, Nairobi where the mothers of the male al-Shabaab recruits live. The broader society looks at the woman through a vulnerability lens and as a result fails to acknowledge her power as a knower when it comes to terrorism discourse.

As indicated by the 2021 research undertaken in Majengo, Nairobi with mothers of al-Shabaab recruits, their knowledge of terrorism is influenced by their context and their lived experiences. *Nafsi* African feminism espouses that the vulnerability of the women in Majengo that invisibilizes them, combined with their power, provides a holistic view of women's knowledge of terrorism.

Through an exploration of this power and vulnerability, *Nafsi* African feminism will, through the women's knowledge, seek to influence and inform terrorism discourse in the discussion and findings sections.

4.0 Methodology

This study was undertaken in Majengo, Nairobi in 2021-2022 and covered the period 1998-2018 when several young men left the area to join al-Shabaab in Somalia. The informal settlement of Majengo, Nairobi has been described as a 'hotbed of terrorism' and a human resource base for the Somalia-based al-Shabaab violent extremist group (Wario, 2018). Muslim sectarianism has been identified as the entry point for al-Shabaab into Majengo, Nairobi who used religious narratives based on their erroneous interpretations of Islamic teachings (Metre, 2016). In 2009, Majengo, Nairobi hosted al-Shabaab's in-country branch through the Muslim Youth Centre at the Pumwani Riyadh Mosque, which resulted in youths from the area leaving for Somalia in their hundreds (UN, 2012).

An African feminist approach is used in this article to highlight the exclusion of women in terrorism discourse. It adopts African feminist narratology as its method to capture and validate as knowledge, the experiences of mothers in Majengo, Nairobi. These are women whose sons left Majengo, Nairobi to join the al-Shabaab terrorist organisation in Somalia. As Keetley et.al (1995) argue, this approach gives power and agency to the subject to represent her own views that inform broader societal experiences without losing her unique voice.

African feminist narratology not only captures the subject's standpoint based on her lived experiences but is also cognisant of their political and social-cultural contexts (Hunsu, 2015). According to Code (1991), it examines social-cultural limitations that influence women's ways of knowing. The African feminist autobiographical method foregrounds the exclusion of African women from terrorism discourse because of the dominance of men as knowers.

The article uses a descriptive research design based on primary data from personal conversations (interviews) with 21 mothers of male al-Shabaab recruits and two focused group discussions with women, directly affected by terrorism, in Majengo in 2020-2021. Purposive sampling was used to assess the respondents based on social relations due to the sensitivity of the subject matter. The article includes inputs from relatives, neighbours, state actors, civil society, and media representatives in Majengo, Nairobi to strengthen the argument for women's inclusion in terrorism discourse. The article also captures secondary data by interrogating existing literature. The data was analysed using the NVivo software tool that coded the information and led to the emergence of themes that informed the study's findings.

The 2021-2022 study observed ethical considerations and sought consent from all the respondents. The language utilised and the location for the interviews was at the discretion of the respondent, who also had the option to stop the conversation or request that certain information not be revealed. Due to the securitised and sensitive nature of the study, the names of respondents have been anonymised. The data collected was validated with respondents through focused group discussions to ensure it was a true reflection of the information shared.

5.0 Discussion and Findings

This study revealed that in Majengo, Nairobi, social learning processes were significant in promoting terrorism. Through this study, the mothers also reveal their knowledge of the terrorist organisation, al-Shabaab, and the strategies they used to mobilise the young men of Majengo to join and travel to Somalia. In addition, the mothers knew the whereabouts of the al-Shabaab recruits,

their sons, after their departure to Somalia and continued communicating with them. The study also shows that women's knowledge, including that of mothers, goes unnoticed, creating gaps in counterterrorism efforts.

5.1 Mother's Knowledge of al-Shabaab Recruitment Strategies

A sense of brotherhood. Al-Shabaab recruiters inculcated a sense of brotherhood**.** As Saidi, one of the al-Shabaab recruits' shares,

> "The recruiters' teachings at the Mosque were intense. Fathers were urged to sacrifice their sons to go to Somalia to support their Muslim brothers. They were convinced that if their sons died, they would die as martyrs and arise as heroes on judgement day. If Ahmad Iman, the main recruiter, at the time, told you to do something, and your mother told you not to, you would follow him. During that time, we, young men looked up to him. He was our role model. It was difficult to listen to our mothers." (Field notes, 01 May 2021).

Hope vs Discrimination: The recruiters used the discrimination and marginalisation narrative to convince the young men to join al-Shabaab. Nadia shares,

> "One time there was a nationwide police recruitment. My son was among the potential recruits. Most young Muslim men were informed that they did not qualify. The al-Shabaab recruiter used this opportunity to go to areas where young Muslim men used to spend their time. He lamented to them that the government was deliberately discriminating against Muslims. He called on
> Muslims to learn to depend only on themselves. He told the youth that he could take them somewhere where they did not need a national identification card or academic qualifications. A country where they could wear uniforms, and the only requirement was a desire and passion to handle a firearm. He reemphasized the notion that the Kenyan government did not care about Muslims. In this way, the recuiter managed to get a lot of youth to join al-Shabaan in Somalia.

In addition, the recruiters gave promises of a better life, taking advantage of the situation of poverty and other social challenges including crime, early marriage, school dropouts, drugs, and substance abuse, to manipulate the young men to join al-Shabaab.

Religion and religiosity: The radicalisers also used religion and religiosity as entry points as shared by the mothers in the study. Jamila said, *"My son used to love religion a lot. He duped me that he was going to further his religious education. Then he left and went to Somalia."* (Field notes, 10 April 2021). Latifa, a mother, adds

> "The radicalisation of young people took place inside the mosque where there were extreme Islamic teachings. They became deeply religious. The al-Shabaab recruiters had the support of the young people. They promised them job opportunities, a sense of belonging, brotherhood, and a deepened Islamic faith.

> During that period, young people would sleep together at the mosque, and the mothers believed that their sons had transformed for the better." (Field notes, 27 March 2021).

Trust-building: The al-Shabaab strategically employed the element of time to build trust with the community members and the young people. Respondents noted that it was after one and a half years, that young people began disappearing from Majengo, Nairobi, one after another. They claimed they were heading to Somalia to fight 'Jihad,' the holy war, as their contribution towards the implementation of Sharia law. The al-Shabaab, in line with the social learning theory, took time to indoctrinate their recruits. Shaheema, a mother, remarks

> "I did not realise at the time that after the evening prayers at the Mosque, some men would invite my son to go to 'Maratib' to spend the night there. This is where meetings of *'shura'* to radicalise them would happen. My son spent many nights there attending these lessons. This is how he ended up going to join al-Shabaab in Somalia".

Meeting of needs: The al-Shabaab also used generosity to lure in the youth. They did an in-depth context assessment and identified and met the needs of the young people. Shariff, a study respondent, submits,

> "When the al-Shabaab recruiters came to the Mosque, they made the sessions lively to attract young people. Food was provided on trays in plenty. They took the young people horse riding and swimming. Others were sponsored for religious education to Kisauni and Nguluni for a period of three to six months and returned as radical Muslims." (Field notes, 26 June 2021).

The power dynamic: Through the teachings of al-Shabaab, the young people in Majengo began to feel empowered. They wanted to restore Majengo to its Islamic religiosity. As Saidi recalls,

> "The young men started going out for *'operations*'. They would go to drinking dens, pour out the illicit brew, and demolish the dens. One time, they went to the Mashimoni area, beat up, stabbed, and chased out female sex workers. The youth claimed that they were reclaiming Majengo as an area that lives up to Islamic ideals." (Field notes, 01 May 2021).

Resultantly, those joining terrorist groups see it as a response, a reclamation of power that enables them to regain their status, and their rightful place in society.

5.2 Mothers' Knowledge of Their Sons' Intentions to Join Al-Shabaab

The study revealed that some of the mothers of al-Shabaab recruits were aware of their son's plans to go to Somalia. This information is important in supporting prevention efforts against terrorism through an exploration of how the mothers knew. Hadija expresses,

> "I had heard that my son's friend had gone to Somalia and died there. I told my son that I did not want him to meet the same fate. He said he was only going to Nguluni to study religion for three months and come back. I said no, but a month after our conversation, he came to me and told me that he wanted to go to Somalia. He said there is no joy in this world, and it is better for one to go to Somalia and die there, they would have died fighting for their religion. I told him there is no 'Jihad,' that the war in Somalia is amongst Somalis fighting each other. My warnings did not bear fruit, he still left for Somalia soon after." (Field notes, 20 March 2021).

5.3 Mothers' Knowledge of Their Sons' Departure to Somalia

The mothers shared that after their sons had left for Somalia, they knew. This information is useful in tracking the routes taken and the specific locations to support prevention and early intervention in counterterrorism. Manar says,

> "My son told me, mama, I am going to Madrasa. He never came back home. Later, I heard rumours that he had gone to Somalia. After about five days, I received a phone call from an unfamiliar number. When I picked up, it was my son. We spoke and he informed me that he had travelled to Somalia. Since he left, I have never laid my eyes on him again." (Field notes, 21 April 2021).

Aisha similarly shares, *"My son called me after three days. He told me that he had left for Mombasa to go and study religion."* (Field notes, 23 April 2021). Munira shares a similar script, she says,

> "My son's friend came to my house and informed me that my son, Hassan, had gone to Somalia. He had requested his friend to inform me after a few days. He had paid rent for his house before he left and his friend told me, I could go and stay there. I refused. I did not want to talk about it. I was in shock. I was unable to speak." (Field notes, 27 March 2021).

Hadija says

> "My son was 23 years old when he left. On that day, as I was heading to the market, I met a young man, a friend of his. He told me my son had sent him to me and that he would come to my house later. At the market, I had an uneasy feeling in my stomach. When I got back, the young man came over. He informed me that my son had travelled to Somalia for three months. He had given him Kenya shillings six thousand to give to me. I went into shock. I broke down and cried." (Field notes, 20 March 2021).

5.4 Mothers Continued Communication with Their Sons

Following their sons' departure to Somalia to join the al-Shabaab violent extremist group, some of the mothers were in communication with them. This information is useful to support early intervention efforts that include rescue, repatriation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of al-Shabaab recruits. The study showed that 99% of the women kept in communication with the youths from Majengo, Nairobi after they had joined al-Shabaab in Somalia. Ubah indicates,

> "My son called me after two years. In all this time, I had neither seen him nor heard from him. I remember it was raining when he called. He greeted me and told me he had gone to Somalia. I was so surprised by the call. I was unable to utter a single word."

5.5 Women's Knowledge of Terrorism Disregarded

Some of the Majengo women, including mothers whose sons had gone to Somalia, tried to raise their concerns to security actors and community leaders to take preventive measures but were largely ignored. This speaks to the endemic practice of leaving women's voices out, considering their knowledge as mere opinion, and ignoring it, yet this knowledge is critical in rendering efforts to address terrorism effective. Several women in Majengo, Nairobi made attempts to report the matter to the authorities and to get their voices heard but this went largely ignored. Salma says,

> "My son called me from Somalia after one and a half years. I reported this to the Anti-Terror Police Unit (ATPU). I thought they would assist me to find my son. Instead, I was picked up from my house and taken in for interrogation. After this, they published my son's photo in the news articles and labelled him a terrorist. I told the ATPU that this was wrong, as I feared that my son would be killed if anyone came across him, and I would not get the chance to bury my son. They ignored me." (Field notes, 21 April 2021).

Aisha adds

> "In 2008 when the young people started going to Somalia from Majengo, Nairobi. We gathered as Majengo women to raise our concerns on al-Shabaab through a peaceful demonstration that was covered in mainstream media. We were accused of being prostitutes and making unnecessary noise. We went to government offices to report. This was before the issue got out of hand. They said …what are you telling us? And ignored us." (Field notes, 23 April 2021).

5.6 Women's Knowledge of Money Intricacies

The study shows that there were some financial transactions between the al-Shabaab recruits and their mothers. The movement of money aids in tracing the whereabouts of terrorist organisations and supports prevention efforts and the fight against terrorism at large. The state, however, did not speak to the women in Majengo to gather their knowledge on the financial aspects of terrorism to

understand better the terrorist economy. According to Asma, the government is intimidating and very secretive. She recalls,

> "Each time my brother called me, I warned him not to, as I was afraid of being arrested and taken in for questioning. He would urge me to go to Somalia. My brother used to send my mother money. I feared that this would get us into trouble with the government. I lived in fear, as security personnel would randomly trail me. I was never taken in for interrogation on my brother's whereabouts." (Field notes, 17 February 2022).

5.7 Mothers' Efforts to Address Terrorism

Some of the mothers acted. They tried to intervene and find their sons, but the authorities did not give them the needed support. Actions against terrorism need a collaborative approach to be effective. Zainab stresses

> "I did not keep quiet. I heard rumours that young people were leaving Majengo, Nairobi for Somalia and that they were mostly transported at night. On that night, when my son did not come back home by 9:30 p.m., I went to my neighbour Amina and requested her to take me to the police station to check if my son was there. I was worried because my son had left the house without a sweater. Upon arrival at the Shauri Moyo police station, the police officer checked and informed me that my son was not there. He told me that perhaps he had gone to Somalia as there had been several cases. He did not seem overly concerned. I left and went to the California police post and did not find my son there either. I told my friend we should go back home, and in the morning, go back to Shauri Moyo police station and maybe we will find a policeman that is more eager to assist." (Field notes, 17 February 2022).

Shaheema shares,

> "I never gave up on finding my son after his departure to Somalia. I tried different contacts. One day, a woman called me and invited me to go to Nyayo house at 3:00 p.m. for information on my son's whereabouts. When I got there, I met with security actors and other parents, both Christian and Muslim, whose children had travelled to Somalia. We were all sharing, how our sons came to join al-Shabaab, how they looked, and their ages. They told us that now that they have these details if they got any information, they would let us know. There were about twenty parents. That is the last time I heard from them." (Field notes, 10 April 2021).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The gendered show of manhood in war and terrorism has in some instances been taken to the extreme. Gruesome violence, subjugation, raping, and mutilation of women have been seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan-South Sudan wars (Trenholm et al,

2013, Ferguson, 2020). This makes it difficult to bring a gender dimension into discussions on violence including terrorist violence, as women's engagement is still considered out of the norm.

The downside of the projection of the man of war, the man of terror is harmful to both men and women. It propagates toxic masculinity and denies men protection even when they suffer sexual violence during war (Rikheim, 2022). These gender-blind spots result in a situation where there are no winners, only losers. When there are skewed gender lenses, they hamper the effectiveness of efforts to address terrorism.

Despite being systematically side-lined, women are not just waiting on the side-lines but are acting with limited financial, and technical support. Women have set up organisations to address the challenge of terrorism including the Moroccan Association of Victims of Terrorism, Djazaïrouna in Algeria (Fink, Zeiger and Bhulai, 2016), Women without Borders in Austria, Sisters Against Violent Extremism in India (WWB, 2023), PAIMAN Trust in Pakistan (Peace Direct, 2020), Women Without Walls Initiative in Nigeria (WOWWI, 2023), and the Gender and Responding to Violent Extremism Network (GARVE, 2020).

Women are not only active participants in terrorism but are also critical actors that need to be considered in all efforts to address terrorism, including decision-making, prevention, and response actions (Daniel, 2022). This article explored three key questions, one, it showed how through social learning and social contract theories, men are socialised into war and terrorism discourse; two, it revealed the ways that women have been excluded from war and terrorism discourse, and through its study findings, it made visible the knowledge of women on terrorism based on their lived experiences.

The study revealed three key aspects by capturing the knowledge of women in Majengo, Nairobi based on their lived experiences. One is that women in Majengo hold critical information that would have aided in prevention and response efforts, and informed policy formulation against terrorism. Two, that despite having this information, the women's voices are largely ignored by the *'powerholders'*, the decision-makers, and mainly men. Three, this exclusion of women's voices from terrorism discourse has resultantly rendered efforts to address terrorism ineffective.

The mothers' knowledge is potentially beneficial to government actors, including security agencies, researchers on terrorism, civil society actors, and community leaders. It can aid prevention and early intervention efforts on terrorism. Yet, because of women's exclusion from terrorism discourse as knowers, their knowledge remains imperceptible. The inclusion of women in terrorism discourse will enable a gender-informed response that considers the differential impact of terrorism on women and men and enhance the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts.

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