

Understanding the role of Gender Relations in Radicalising and Recruiting Young Muslim Women in Higher Learning Institutions in Kenya

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Abstract

The radicalisation and recruitment of young educated Muslim women is a sensitive and global phenomenon, which is also a major social and security concern within learning institutions. Young Muslims women in higher learning institutions in Kenya have become easy targets for recruitment by violent extremist organisations such as Al-Shabaab and the Islamic States of Iraq and Syria. This is because learning institutions have been identified by these extremist groups as sites of recruitment due to their transitional, permissive, biographical, secular and socialization space. The presence of radicalised young educated Muslim women is a proof that there is a shifting profile of extremists from focusing on the illiterate to the literate and from male to female recruits. The purpose of this article is to explain why young women at learning institutions are targeted for recruitment by violent extremist groups. It argues that young Muslim women are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment in higher learning institutions because the recruiters take advantage of their lower level of religious literacy and use patriarchal constructs in their recruitment narrative by manipulating marriage as a Utopian promise to lure young women.

Keywords: Violent extremism, Gender, Kenya, Higher learning institutions, Recruitment

Introduction

Kenyans have recently been exposed to new challenging realities of security that are varied in scope, sophistication and intense with wide-ranging implications. These realities have been seen through the radicalization and recruitment of young Muslim women in higher learning institutions¹ by Violent

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Extremist Organizations (VEOs)² such as Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State States of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

To be sure, in 2015 Kenya witnessed a clear process of female radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist organizations particularly by the Al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This was evidenced by incidences such as the arrest of three female university students, namely Ummul-Kheir Sadir Abdulla, Khadija Abubakar Abdulkadir and Maryam Said About at the Kenya-Somalia border on their way to join the Al-Shabaab militia (Standard Team, 2015). According to the Kenyan security forces, the three arrested students were travelling to participate in training to become suicide bombers, or to be married to Al-Shabaab militants (Ndung'u, 2015:2). Other media reports suggested that the girls had been recruited via social media platform and had the intention of joining the Islamic State (ISIS) as so-called jihadi brides (World Bulletin, 2015). In the other case, two University students namely Tawfiqa Dahir and Salwa Abdalla disappeared from Nairobi and their disappearance was linked to terrorism (Gisesa, 2015).

The examples cited above form some of the few well-known cases. However, there are other unreported cases of mysterious disappearances of young educated women who were said to be radicalized and may have joined extremist groups. This phenomenon presents a unique challenge that requires an in-depth analysis of how gender relations related to radicalization and recruitment of young educated Muslim women in higher learning institutions works. Furthermore, there is a growing trend in which violent extremist organisations (VEOs) such as the Al-Shabaab and ISIS have turned their focus on women in learning institutions thus engendering the process of radicalization and recruitment. From this it is clear that gender relations³ continues to be used by VEOs to recruit, exploit and radicalize young Muslim women in Kenya. Analysing gender relations is paramount in understanding how and why young educated Muslim women are radicalized and recruited by violent extremist organizations.

Violent extremism is not only an ideological, political and economic problem, it is also a major social and security concern within learning institutions. This is because learning institutions have been identified by violent extremist groups as sites of recruitment where the brightest students in certain academic disciplines are targeted and radicalized. In this sense, it means that higher learning institutions are considered as transitional, permissive, biographical and

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socialization space that is ideal for recruitment. Moreover, the presence of radicalised young educated Muslim women is a proof that there is a shifting profile of extremists from focusing on the illiterate to the literate and from male to female recruits. For instance, one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Kenya occurred in the Garissa University College, where one of the attackers, unfortunately, was a former University student. In this incident, 148 people were killed and 79 injured. Therefore, the fact that it was a University that was attacked makes it relevant for this article to focus on higher learning institutions as a location for radicalisation and recruitment.

The key assumption of this study is that young Muslim women are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment in higher learning institutions because the recruiters take advantage of their lower level of religious literacy and use patriarchal constructs in their recruitment narrative by manipulating marriage as a Utopian promise to lure young women. Hence, the central question being addressed by this study is why young women at learning institutions are targeted for recruitment by violent extremist groups. The article uses gender relations to understand how and why such recruitment of young Muslim women happens in institutions of higher learning.

Methodology

The study used qualitative approach in its research design and data analysis. This approach was considered suitable with respect to clarifying, interpreting and to a certain degree, explaining the phenomenon being examined (Tymstra and Heyink, 1993:293). The findings of the study were interpreted using narratives in line with the objectives.

In terms of data collection, the study used both primary and secondary methods. Secondary data was mainly retrieved from published reports and scholarly publications on terrorism, gender, radicalization and gender relations. The primary data was obtained using semi-structured interviews with Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) who were mostly two young women who have been approached or have had an attempt of radicalization and recruitment. The Semi-structured interviews were found appropriate for the study because they allowed the respondents to share their experiences freely. The method also allowed the researcher to get detailed information and clarification on important anecdotes for the study. The purpose of the KII interviews was to robustly gain insight of the processes, factors and reasons why women were being recruited by violent extremists groups within higher learning institutions

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using examples of real life attempts of radicalization and recruitment. The researcher also tried to interview one key informant who was radicalized and recruited but her journey was intercepted by the security personnel. However, it was impossible to finally interview her as she backed out last minute and she was not interviewed due to security concerns.

Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) comprising of young Muslim women from various Universities within Nairobi were held on the topic. The focus group discussions were conducted using an interview guide with each session lasting for 90 minutes. In general, the two FGDs were employed to get access, encourage discussions and to acquire an overview perspective around the topic of radicalization and recruitment of women in universities by violent extremist groups. It was also employed in order to gain an understanding of the different conceptualization of university as a site of radicalization and recruitment. The first FGD had 13 participants and aimed mainly to understand what generally made young educated Muslim girls want to leave their abodes, for an often-misplaced life full of uncertainty. The second FGD had 8 respondents and the objective was to get a sense of the recruitment process, the methods used by the recruiters and factors that promoted the recruitment of young educated Muslim women at universities.

Universities within Nairobi were purposely identified by the researcher as the site of the study because some of the incidents of recruitment reported occurred in these universities. Six universities were selected for the study from both public and private universities. The basis of selecting these universities was because they are both secular and religious institutions, they have Muslim students, and for logistical reasons.

The target population for this study were young Muslim women who were undertaking their undergraduate studies in different universities in Nairobi. The FGDs and KIIs participants were female students from different ethnic groups and academic fields of study such as Journalism, Medicine, Biochemistry, Education, International Relations, Economics, Peace and Conflict Studies, International Business Administration, Psychology, Nursing, Food and Nutrition, Law, Criminal Justice Studies and Information Systems and Technology. The FGDs participants were selected using snowball sampling method within their institutions with the help of a research assistant⁴ who contacted different students' organizations to select participants who were willing to participate in this study.

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During FGDs, anecdotal stories regarding radicalization and recruitment of young Muslim women by VEOs in Universities came naturally into the conversation. Through these group discussions two participants identified themselves and admitted to have been radicalized by close acquaintances. Furthermore, the FGDs assisted the researcher and her assistant in identifying and accessing the key informants. Therefore, the main benefits of the focus group discussions was that it created a rapport with the informants, initiated a discussion on this issue openly in a forum and generated recommendations to deal with this menace in the Universities. The group discussions were audio recorded and then afterwards transcribed. The transcription were organized and analysed thematically based on the research objectives. However, the semi-structured interviews of the key informants were not audio recorded.

Due to the sensitive and complex nature of this research, the information included along these pages has been carefully chosen not to cause any harm to the group discussion participants and informants' reputation, security and well-being. Names have been changed, as well as some distinctive personal details of the key informants, in order to ensure the anonymity of these young ladies who participated openly and enthusiastically in this research. Giving them new names instead of using codes, is seen as a way of representing their voices as part of their agency and acknowledging that there are many other young women who might find themselves in the same situation. The researcher also takes into account the role that her own identity, as an educated middle aged Kenyan Muslim woman and professionally working in the higher learning institutions (USIU-Africa) played during the FGDs and KIIs. This initially created some confusion and misunderstanding among the participants because some of them thought that whatever they shared with the researcher might end up in the ears of their families and their University administration. However, the shared Muslim identity and social codes despite the generational gap between the respondents and the researcher made it easy to clear any awkwardness that came up.

Furthermore, confidentiality and anonymity was completely guaranteed during FGDs and KIIs. Therefore, all participants were provided with a consent form detailing and disclosing all the relevant information pertaining to the research. A disclosure of what the research will be used for and how the information will be handled was shared. Prior to the activity, the participants were informed about the nature of the study, the expectations related to their participation, the voluntary nature of their participation, and about their rights to either declaim

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to participate or withdraw at any stage if they feel uncomfortable to continue. At the end of each FGDs, the participants were given a debriefing form in case they had any concerns regarding the questions presented to them during the discussion or they may want to seek counselling for support.

This article has four sections. The first section provides the introduction of the study. The second section reviews literature on the concept of radicalization and recruitment, women's radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremist groups and universities as the location for women's recruitment. The third section contains the findings of the research organized thematically based on the analysis of the research objectives, the result of the focus group discussions and key informant interviews during the process of the primary data collection. Finally, the fourth section gives the general conclusion of the research.

Literature Review

Since September 11, 2001, radicalization has increasingly been used as a tool by VEOs to recruit members and to achieve moderate concessions from their targets. As such, radicalization and recruitment have become a major issue for local and global community more so for the policy-makers, security agents, practitioners and scholars in the field of terrorism. This explains the robust research by scholars and researchers with the aim of defining and understanding the nature and causes of radicalization. Odhiambo and others (2015:49) define radicalization as a process by which an individual or a group adopts increasingly extreme political, social or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo, or contemporary ideas and expressions of freedom of choice. For them radicalization can be both violent and non-violent, meaning an individual or a group may be radical without necessarily being engaged in violent extremism or terrorism. However, Ali, Bwana and Juma (2015) posit that if the process leads to violence, it is referred to as Radicalization into Violent Extremism (RVE). Furthermore, Brown and Saeed (2015) and Neumann (2013) define radicalization in relation to forms which include processes resulting in 'cognitive extremism' and those resulting in 'behavioural extremism'.

Hence, radicalization is a slippery concept and open to different definitions, conceptualizations and interpretations. In most cases, the definitions and meaning have been contested by those who see it as anti-Islamic and Western imposition. For instance, Neumann (2013) contends that radicalization lacks clarity. In all, no consensus standard definition has been agreed among the

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academics, experts, policymakers and practitioners. This makes the concept of radicalization problematic despite the fact that it has been widely used in the context of “war on terror”.

Borum (2011:14) argues that many pathways into and through radicalization exist, and each pathway is itself affected by a variety of factors. He further claims that radicalization is viewed not as the product of a single decision but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time. Meanwhile, other scholars such as Odhiambo and others (2015) argue that there is no single pathway to extremism as each case takes different path of radicalization. This is due to the fact that triggers for extremist violence include perceived or experienced discrimination, religious harassment, cultural conflict, social exclusion leading to feelings of alienation and grievances. Despite this, radicalization in Western nations is not generally driven by poverty or religious fanaticism, nor is it caused by political oppression.

Furthermore, Borum (2011:14) says that if radicalization refers to some kind of process of change, there are some who argue that process is often intentionally and systematically facilitated or directed by others. For him those facilitators are sometimes regarded as recruiters, and the facilitation itself is known as recruitment. Recruitment efforts can be part of the RVE process, though not all who are radicalized are recruited (Borum, 2011:14). Moreover, Ashour (2009) argues that radicalization is a process of transformation, meaning there is a gradual change to the process of being recruited which was also one of the findings of this research.

The concept of radicalization has also grown its usage in reference to women and girls. Molly Hennessy-Fiske (2015) holds that “There is hardly any terrorist group at the moment that does not include women in some capacity.” Likewise, Butale (2017) notes that there has been an increase in the number of women and girls joining violent extremist groups globally thus posing a serious threat to international security. Although the trend has grown in recent years, the involvement of women and girls in violent extremists groups has long existed. Their involvement is nonetheless underestimated or underexplored mainly due to the misconception that violent extremism is carried out by men, while women and girls are the victims. Butale (2017) further claims that women and girls have not only been victims of violence but have also been perpetrators, sympathisers and recruiters of violent extremist groups.

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For scholars who have researched on female involvement in VEOs such as Rush and Schafluetzel-Iles (2008:7) claim the reason that many, if not all, terrorist networks are known to covertly recruit women is because of the ease with which females circumvent detection by security agencies especially when carrying out a mission. Rush and Schafluetzel-Iles (2008:13) note that these terrorist networks utilize females “under the assumption that a female is thought of as soft, gentle, and innocent and therefore will arouse less suspicion... [meaning] terrorists were aware of their need for camouflage”. Examples cited by Rush and Schafluetzel-Iles include historical involvement of females in terrorist networks such as Baader-Meinhof Gang (also known as the Red Army Faction), Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), Hezbollah, Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Palestinian Intifada, the Chechnya Rebels, the Taliban and Al-Qaida. In all these groups women were used in suicide missions. It is worth noting that there have been other violent extremist groups that have targeted women at learning institutions such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) of northern Uganda and the Boko Haram of northern Nigeria. On 9 October 1996, a group of the LRA rebels attacked St. Mary's College Aboke, a boarding school in Oyam District, northern Uganda. They kidnapped 139 teenage girls from their dormitories at night, an event similar to the abduction of the 276 Chibok girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014 (Deutsche Welle, 7.10.2016). Reports of the girls who were able to escape from these two groups have indicated that many of the girls were taken as domestic workers, sex slaves and wives of the militants. What we learn from this comparison is that these groups understand the significance of gender roles, gender relations and dynamics by targeting the productive and reproductive role of women.

The debate on women’s radicalization and recruitment is further examined by O’Rourke (2009:681-682) who reports that although men are conventionally the leaders of armed insurrection, women have increasingly become key strategic assets within the realm of suicide terrorism. This is evidenced by the rise in the number of female suicide attackers. O’Rourke (2009) also indicates that suicide attacks conducted by females are substantially more lethal than those conducted by men. Notably, female suicide attacks are considered shocking since such actions violate the gender norms of the societies from which the attackers emerge. The involvement of women in Islamic State (Daesh), Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram indicates that gender roles and relations have been exploited and served as a strategy by these groups to ensure that women go beyond the tradition (domestic and sexual) roles, to more robust activities such as suicide bombers, human shields and recruiters.

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When analysing the profile of a recruit or member of VEOs, in the last two decades, the trend has been gendered and focused on a binary distinction between the perpetrator and the victim. For instance, Brown and Saeed (2015:7) argue that “Muslim men are viewed as security risks, who have been stereotyped as troublemakers and extremists. While Muslim female stereotype oscillates between oppressed victim and violent radical – former remains dominant”. Using the example of Hayat Boumeddiene⁵, Hennessy-Fiske (2015) argues that governments overlook and understate women's involvement in violent extremists groups because female violent extremists have a long history of exploiting gender stereotypes to avoid detection. As such although counter-terrorism measures have become more effective, the Paris attacks show that more needs to be done to curb the growing number of women like Boumeddiene joining militants in Syria. Hennessy-Fiske (2015) further says that women joining Islamic State account for about 10% and 20% of those coming from Europe and from France respectively.

In terms of literature gap, Ogenga (2016) states that while women are increasingly playing key roles in terrorist and violent extremist groups in some parts of Africa; little research has been done to highlight the link between women and terrorism. Ndung'u (2017) argues that women must be prioritised within the context of violent extremism and that researchers and policymakers must widen the lens through which women's connections with violent extremism are viewed. Moreover, Butale (2017) highlights that most research that has been carried out on the motives (push and pull factors) of women joining violent extremist groups focuses on women from Western or European countries. Consequently, few if any studies have attempted to find out the driving force of women joining violent extremist groups in sub-Saharan Africa.

While the literature on the phenomenon of female suicide bombing is beginning to take shape in West Africa, that kind of literature has yet to be developed in Kenya, perhaps due to difference in roles and approaches of women in organized terrorism. In West Africa, women—whether coerced or willingly—appear to have taken the role of suicide bombers, with young female suicide bombers causing mass casualties in the Boko Haram conflict. While there have not been female suicide bombers in Kenya, media reports indicate that jihadi brides and other radicalized women are aiding and abetting terrorism (World Bulletin, 2015). News narratives reveal that most of these women were recruited by friends through social media and the internet lured to cross the border into Somalia to join Al-Shabaab, before their arrest by Kenyan

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authorities. The issue of jihadi brides' raises important questions, even though attention has been paid to this broad topic by scholars, however, little attention has been paid by Kenyan policymakers.

Consequently, understanding the role of gender relations in radicalizing young Muslim women in Universities by violent extremist groups is in many ways challenging. This is because of the predominant tendency that views Muslim women as more passive, conservative and inactive in extremism rather than just as active as their male counterparts. What is appalling is that the situation of women's radicalization and recruitment in learning institutions is not unique to Kenya. There are many examples from all over the world, where young women have voluntarily, involuntarily, consciously or unconsciously been recruited into violent extremist groups (European Union, 2017). For instance, many young women have voluntarily left the comfort of their homes in Europe to go and join violent extremist group such as ISIS in war torn countries of Syria and Iraq (Peachey, 2015). There are many girls and women who have been forcefully recruited by terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab in Eastern Africa and Boko Haram in Western Africa. An example of involuntary recruitment is the heart-breaking case of when Boko Haram, a violent extremist group abducted young girls from a Government Girls Secondary School in the Nigerian town of Chibok on 14 April 2014. Even though the Nigerian government negotiated with Boko Haram and some of the girls were released, the whereabouts of some of the girls in captivity is still unknown. This example is useful because it shows how violent extremist groups like Boko Haram targets learning institutions as a location for involuntarily recruitment for political and practical reasons.

In terms of recruitment approaches, Odhiambo and others (2015) contend that the internet, universities and colleges were the major platforms. This is evidenced by the over 40 per cent of al Qaeda terrorist attacks in United Kingdom between 1999 and 2009 which have largely been conducted by university or college students. In contrast, in his analysis of Jihadis brides, Ogenga (2016) points out that, stories of jihadi brides do not tally with the obvious assumptions of the interplay between marginalization and violent extremism. This is so because the jihadi women profiled were young between the ages of 19 and 21, and predominantly Muslim and most of who come from middle class urban families and are typically well-educated. Ogenga (2016) further notes that some of these women are university students which dispel the tier between violent extremism and the lack of education, poverty and political motives.

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In this sense, it can be argued that a university typically is the context that gives way to ideological and political awareness in general, which includes radicalisation as one of the possibilities. University as the set up where first adult socialization takes place beyond family sphere is also related and relevant; it is the place where you get exposed to others and new ideas. That is why, for most women who leave their homes to attend the higher learning institutions, this becomes a transition process because they have to learn to be autonomous and make their own decisions. This transition makes them more accessible, not dependent on their parents for decision-making and isolates them from their previous context. Therefore, during the transition period their experience will be determined by the interactions they have with new ideas and people. This makes the university a location in which recruitment of women is more likely to take place because of the new personal relationships that are formed during the transition period. However, there are universities that have not experienced this phenomenon may be because these VEOs do not see or have entry point to carry out their agendas.

Findings

The findings of this study are based on the analysis of the interviews with key informants, focus group discussions and the literature review. The findings are organized thematically according to issues extracted from the discussions with the FGDs and KII, and the research objectives.

The Process and Factors of Radicalisation and Recruitment of young Muslim Women

Interestingly, most of the University students interviewed both during the focus group discussions and structured interviews were not only aware of the fact that they were an easy target for violent extremist groups but also able to describe what radicalisation meant. The fact that they recognized they were potential targets for radicalization did not make them less at risk because most of them displayed the gender vulnerabilities that VEOs exploited in their recruitment process.

Some of the definitions of radicalization cited by the respondents included;

- a) It is the process of instilling extreme ideas concerning religion.
- b) It is the corruption of one's religious views due to ignorance.
- c) It is a growing trend that involves blanketing ones religious knowledge for example taking the literal meaning of Jihad, for instance to create or get a sense of belonging with society, or friends.

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- d) It is a strong stand with ideas and opinions about certain things about religion.

As seen in the literature review, radicalization is a process of transformation or a gradual change. This was also corroborated by the respondents of the FGDs (Nairobi, June-July 2017) and narratives of the two KIIs (Nairobi, June-July 2017) who said that the process was a gradual one and required a great deal of patience from the side of the recruiters. In answering the question how long the process of radicalization takes, most of the FGDs participants agreed that the process might take long or short time, depending on the interactions and the ability of the recruiters to achieve their goals. However, some believed that it might take one or two semesters (4 to 8 months) radicalize and recruit.

Furthermore, most of them reported that radicalization occurs through socialization and interactions with different members of society both friends and sometimes family members. One of the respondent in the first FGDs said that; “the recruiter would first of all make contact with the target; often a socially active individual with almost excellent grades. They would at first appear as harmless friendly persons. Taking advantage of the fact that most of these individuals do not have proper knowledge on the religion, they start giving the wrong information to them. Eventually they are convinced of the ‘cause’ and then they comply”.

Zuena Yunis, a fourth year Economic student in a Private University in Nairobi was one of the key informants interviewed who have been under the attempt of recruitment. She is the last born in a family of six children. Even though she was born into a moderate Muslim family in Nairobi, she spent some of her childhood life in Wajir town, where she completed her Primary school education. Zuena thereafter returned to Nairobi for her Secondary and University education.

She narrates:

I had known Adam since childhood. I would term what we had as puppy love but love nonetheless. We had officially started dating in the last bit of High School. Adam was an ordinary young man. He dressed casually in jeans, listened to music, but he was a good Muslim. He would fast and pray. He was your day to day boy next door. He finished high school one year before me. When we both met at the University, I realized that he was not the same way person I knew.

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He was now more religious. I dismissed it at first because I thought he was changing for the better, but in time I realized what was going on. He first started with sending Quranic verses and he would interpret them using the words of known scholars. Then the videos from you tube came, showing how beautiful life was in the Islamic State. His dressing was now made up of black *kanzus* and turbans. He had changed! We would not have a proper conversation at any time. It was mostly arguments because we never saw eye to eye on the matter. I finally thought I had had enough when he out rightly suggested we do '*Hijra*⁶' to Syria. He had become so fanatical of the whole topic. He asked to marry me, because he well knew, marriage would bind me to him and it would make skipping town easier.

As he was radicalizing me, I was de-radicalising him because my strength was my knowledge in Islam. You see, since I was in Primary School I attended schools with both Islamic and Secular Curriculum. I also attended Madrasa (Islamic school) when I was young. However, his weakness was that he was not very knowledgeable in Islam and he was not able to explain very well his ideas using the Islamic knowledge even though he was convincing and *MashAllah* a very bright fellow. Were it not for the Islamic knowledge I had I probably would have fallen prey because Allah gifted him with proper speech; Very charming and charismatic.

I broke it off with him and threatened to tell his family of his plans. He eventually did not go. He got a stable job, and finished university. He attempted to reconnect with me a year later denouncing all his plans, but I had already moved on and did not want the relationship again. He later got married and now lives a good life, living the life of a normal young Muslim man.

It is apparent that personal connection is an important element in the process of recruitment. However, social media has been used as the medium for these personal connections due to its significant influence on the younger generation. Some of the social media platforms explored included:

Twitter

It is interesting to note that the participants of radicalized pages on twitter use names that are anonymous mostly starting with '*Abuu*' (father of) for the males

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and 'Um'(mother of) for females. The name of the user would thus appear as 'Abuu-so and so' or 'Um-so and so'. These pages form networks for socialization, and a web for staying connected even though participants may come from different countries. It actually makes people follow each other's idea despite their geographical location. They can also seek out new unsuspecting persons and slowly initiate conversations; mostly in form of an interested suitor. The pages often announce 'victories' for the Islamic State such as conquering or hostile murders of antagonists.

WhatsApp

Even though it is an instant messaging service for Smartphones, WhatsApp is considered as a social media in Kenya. Most of the FGDs respondents reported that the WhatsApp was used when random numbers start messaging a person and at first pose as harmless persons looking for friendship. These numbers are often international and most young ladies fall prey because of the excitement that comes with being acquainted with persons in other countries. The conversations intensifies with time especially when the woman start developing an interest in her new suitor. Slowly, the recruiter changes the tempo of the conversation to a more serious topic; Islam. Although hesitant at first, the victims may eventually give in especially if trust and companionship has been fostered beforehand in the conversation. Quranic verses and sayings of the prophet (peace be upon him), not well interpreted are sent to this unsuspecting young woman and if she is rid of Islamic knowledge, she may end up believing it all. Sometimes, the WhatsApp message comes from known WhatsApp groups.

YouTube

This being a database with a wide array of videos, ISIS has managed to create their own videos that applaud and explain the significance of their cause. This acts as a back-up of their story and, a proof of their words. Zuena, one of the key informant confirmed that her recruitment process involved a lot of videos. Her recruiter would send links of the YouTube videos on WhatsApp to back up previously sent verses and prophetic sayings. The suffering of Muslims in places like Palestine is also used majorly by these recruiters as a form of emotional blackmail.

Moreover, it can be argued that the trajectories of recruitment of students do not only take place in the university but also in the different social and religious places and interactions in which the female students live. An example of this socio-religious place is the Mosque. It is also speculated that mosque gatherings

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are a basis of radicalization. One of the FGDs respondents claimed to have reportedly attended a lecture at a mosque where one young woman spoke heatedly about the youth going up in arms to fight disbelievers of Islam. She was hinting to the youth to join radicalized groups. Furthermore, scholars such as Neumann (2007) claim that there is an interactions of these different social places as locations of recruitment. He gives an example of where a young Muslim University student who might feel a sense of isolation may come into contact with a radical group that might provide a social forum through these social places such as the mosque or university to develop personal and social relationships.

Marriage: A factor in the Recruitment of young Muslim Women

During the focus group discussions and key informant interviews, it was clear that there are numerous factors that facilitated recruitment. One of these factors was marriage. This was supported by the findings which singled out religious ideological narratives, patriarchal constructs in the recruitment narrative and manipulation of marriage as Utopian promise to lure them to radicalization. All the respondents emphasized that young Muslim women in universities were often subjected to a lot of peer, cultural and social pressure to get married. They reported that the recruiters often use the Hadith (prophetic saying) that says: The Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) said: "If a woman prays her five daily prayers, fast her month of Ramadan, guards her chastity and obeys her husband, it will be said to her: Enter paradise by whichever of the gates of Paradise you wish". This, for most young women in the universities who adhere strictly to these tenets (prayers, fasting and chastity) would be a golden ticket to paradise because the only one she has not yet achieved is marriage. She is promised a pious and handsome man who is nothing short of the companions of the prophet (peace be upon him) in character and goodness.

The idea of marriage and conforming to expectations was important theme that highlighted one of the factors in recruitment. Most of participants said that marriage was used to easily recruitment women at the university because it is constructed as an institution that assures them protection, financial and social security. For most of the respondents, the fear that higher education might delay their possibility of marriage as they have to get married within certain age bracket created a sense of urgency and obsession. Additionally, it was reported that most of the respondents were eager to change their social status from Miss to Mrs as some of them stated jokingly. When discussing the priority between marriage and education, one of the FGDs respondents said that "If I get a man

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who will marry and protect me, why should I stress myself with studies/education?"

Apart from the personal gain in marriage, there was also financial benefit where those recruited are promised money and better living conditions for their families. This is more lucrative for those who are not financially well-off. Moreover, the recruits are promised a beautiful afterlife if one submitted fully to the course. This was done by giving wrong and exaggerated information to the targeted young women who have a desire to get married. The new recruits were in turn expected to pull in members of their 'peers' by luring them with promise of a 'better life' especially in the afterlife because they will get a reward from Allah and also for fulfil their duty as good Muslims.

Even though most of the Muslim women who go to the university whether they are from conservative or liberal or moderate family background, majority are not yet married but some might be married. Therefore, their desire to get married is a way of seeking to conform to the tradition and expectations of their society. It can also be argued that, at the same time they defy it by joining VEOs and not within the confines of their families. From the findings, the other factors that promoted radicalization included:

Strong patriarchal systems

Being from Islamic backgrounds Muslim girls are dominated largely by the men in their life and from a young age, it is inculcated into them that a man is a protector, a provider and a leader. With the promise of marriage from recruiters, this theory is then realized. The recruiters pose as leaders, protectors and brave warriors on the path to please their Lord. This may suffice as a reason to migrate for these young women because they will be following their protectors and providers. One of the group discussions participants in the second FGDs said that, "the recruiters first propose marriage and then with the alliance the woman will follow the man wherever he goes". Therefore, there is a strong indication of manipulation of gender relations and roles by the violent extremist groups in their radicalisation and recruitment process.

Need for independence

Most women grow up with intense protection and supervision from their parents, siblings and society at large. Joining these groups is somewhat a step towards independence (although in real sense this might not be the case) the young women are provided with an opportunity to make a serious decision such

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as doing '*hijra*' on their own. They are convinced that they will truly be able to make a difference if they go to serve in an Islamically ruled land as they are led to believe that the worldly life is trivial and temporary anyway.

The following are findings to the question why women are needed by these recruiters:

- a. The primary purpose for recruiting women is to marry them off to the *jihadis* so as to get companions for the men that are in places such as Syria.
- b. Violent Extremist Organisations mostly recruit young women with specific knowledge of sciences that would be useful to the group such as medicine, pharmacy, midwifery in order to heal the wounded Jihadis. Women in careers such as teaching are also recruited by VEOs like ISIS so as to provide basic education for the children that are born there. It can be argued that in some ways VEOs value women with education and this is one of the reasons they target learning institutions.
- c. For spying or information gathering activities VEOs may require women because they raise less alarm and suspicion than the men especially in this era of war on terror.
- d. Women are great influencers and in that case, they are able to bring more people on board to support the cause of Jihadis. For example, this is specific to the Kenyan women at universities because they convince their friends to join them in doing *Hijra* (migrating for a noble cause). This is difficult when it comes to men as they are generally more reserved than women. The reported incidences have shown that women have joined in groups as they have convinced each other while men have joined violent extremist groups individually. So, there is that collective versus individual aspect of membership when it comes to the gender dynamics.

The Role of Gender Relations in the Radicalisation and Recruitment of Muslim Women

In regards to the role of gender relations in radicalising and recruiting Muslim women in Kenyan universities, what is interesting, is the perceptions that these

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university students have of their religion, their future and their social ambition which is determined by their understanding of their gender roles and gender relations. When it comes to the perceptions of religion, many of the students interviewed believed that to be a good Muslim, one should be equipped with Islamic knowledge in order to practice it as prescribed. Therefore, the ones that lacked this knowledge like Sharifa, one of the key informants felt that she was religiously illiterate and she needed to catch up. This explains why women become vulnerable to distorted interpretation of Islamic knowledge, which can be used to radicalise and recruit them.

During the research it was noted that, most of the participants understood gender roles as the characteristics and behaviours believed to be appropriate for men or for women. Gender relations were conceptualised as how the different gender interacted with each other and their expectations in those interactions. For instance, some of the FGDs respondents believed that getting married was one of their gender roles which reflected their social ambitions in conforming to this social expectation because of its future benefits of acquiring new status, social protection and respect. Hence, it can be argued that understanding their own perceptions on gender roles and the expectations about their social and religious lives is critical because this demonstrates their ambiguous position as female and student. These two positions are contradictory in terms of their ambitions in getting married and pursuing their education. Eventually, this contradiction is cleared because getting married becomes more appealing to these young women due to the expectation of their society.

In the cases of the young women who were recruited, radicalized and eventually joined violent extremist groups, none of them had ever returned from either Somalia or Syria.⁷ The assumption here was that it was difficult to return or escape from Syria because of the distance, language, race and gender barriers. Hence, it was difficult to verify the truth of the above-mentioned promises that lured young women into radicalization and recruitment. Since there was a clear role of gender relations at some point, several of them interpreted these factors as an emancipatory.

Notably, radicalization process entailed both men and women in that; men and women radicalize and recruit each other. Men radicalized women using patriarchal narrative and religious discourse to persuade them. Women were also involved in radicalizing and recruiting other women. However, it was clear that men and women did not go through the same decision-making process and

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narratives. Perhaps, that is where the gender role and relations became critical, for example, women were offered ideal type marriage (personal/material gain) while men were promised martyrdom (economic and spiritual gain). However, from the findings of this research, women did not only join for personal reasons but also sometimes for political and spiritual reasons as they are promised that they will share with the men their martyrdom status and the glory of the Caliphate as it was during the times of the Golden Era of Islamic Civilisation.

Following the above argument regarding the radicalisation process of both men and women, it can be argued that the process of recruitment differed across genders. This can be seen in different promises given to both genders. For example, the male recruits are promised a beautiful afterlife and economical gain (money). One of the respondent in the second FGDs noted that the binary discourse of protector versus protected was used by violent extremist groups in radicalizing and recruiting young men. This means that young men are burdened with the idea that it is their responsibility to protect Islam from its enemy. Here, Islam included not only the generic Islamic religion or way of life but also people who practiced the religion and especially women and children. One respondent from the FGDs said that, "The men have a responsibility to protect and defend Islam. It is their duty to protect any Islamic community around." However, for the women their promise rests in personal and social benefits.

It can be argued that VEOs in their initial process, focused on radicalizing and recruiting young men in Kenya or East Africa. This brings out the masculine perception of who is a terrorist/extremist which explains why most of the Countering Violence Extremism (CVE) interventions were gender insensitive. With growing involvement of women, this has significantly changed. The main reason that men returnees and those who were lured into recruitment and radicalization refused to come forward was for security reasons. On the other hand, while for women, beside security concerns most of them failed to report due to the prescribed gender relations/roles, the conservative backgrounds and fear of social discrimination. For instance, one of the KII Sharifa mentioned that "what will you say you were doing when you were being radicalized and recruited by VEO?"

University as a circumstantial and permissive space/location for radicalising and recruiting young Muslim women

One of the major findings here was the idea of the university as a secular space, leaving room for private initiatives in terms of religious education and policies of

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university towards religion and the associations. It was noted that students from private and public institutions did not have the same exposure and experience with radicalization and recruitment. This was because private institutions which consider themselves as secular have a policy that do not allow the formation of ethnic and religious associations for students in their institutions. However, this is not the case in the public institutions because they have a policy that allows students to form associations based on their religion or ethnicity. Even with this, the process of radicalization and recruitment was the same in both institutions. Therefore, it can be argued that despite the policies of university towards religion and students associations, the character of university as a secular space, leaves room for private initiatives in terms of social activities such as religious education. Moreover, the university becomes a space of freedom, due to this secular characteristic. For example, in public university former alumni who were shocked and concerned with the issue of radicalization and recruitment of young Muslim women formed the *Labbayk* Sisters Foundation to empower and create a networking platform for young Muslim women.

The university as a space of freedom can be used for social activities which can be the drivers to radicalisation and recruitment. This is so because the university is also a circumstantial and permissive space that facilitates a process of religious and gender identity creation and socialisation. Conversely, the university was also a place where religion was suppressed especially where people were not allowed to express their religiously identity. Respondents disclosed that the religious/moderate binary dominated their lived experiences as female Muslim students and as participants in the public sphere. Based on this, some students appointed themselves to educate others on the right way on their premises. Such was the case of the second key informant interviewed who has been under the attempt of recruitment Sharifa Hassan, a third year Law student in a Public University. She is the first born in a family of four children. She was born and raised in Nairobi by very liberal parents; Sharifa attended private British system schools for both her primary and secondary school education. Sharifa recounted that when she joined the university; a sister called Razia approached her and gave her a lecture on her dress code which she described as anti-Islamic. Sharifa further says that: "Razia used Islamic teaching to explain to the importance and the roles of a woman in Islam. MashAllah we all admired her level of iman (faith) and knowledge in Islam".

Sharifa like most of the FGDs participants except the other key informant Zuena who was knowledgeable, admitted that their knowledge of Islam was not very

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good. Therefore, this lack of religious literacy made her admire her colleague Razia who professed strong belief or religious practice and knowledge. She admired the fact that Razia was an intelligent Law student with a vast knowledge of Islam. As such, within the context of admiration and desire to be transformed she was radicalized. Before long she started wearing hijab, then Abaya (Buibui), after that the socks, gloves and the niqab followed. Sharifa also said that some months later, Razia convinced her about moving to an Islamic country that practised Islam to the letter. Before, even finding out which Islamic country they were supposed to move to, Razia disappeared without a trace. So, fortunately, she was not recruited but radicalised. When asked if she ever found out about Razia, Sharifa said that she thinks that either Razia moved to this ideal Islamic country or she was caught by the Kenyan security personnel.

The other key finding was the security response from the universities to threats of terrorism/extremism, radicalisation and recruitment. As observed by the researcher, most universities are focusing on strengthening their physical security as a means of counter-radicalization policy. For instance, after the incident of Garissa College University, security/counter-radicalisation policies and practices such as terrorism drills and armed police has been adapted. However, little investigation had been carried out to understand the process of radicalization and on how students' community can be empowered to be resilient. That said, integrating issues affecting students both as the victims and perpetrators of terrorism may require addressing human security issues. In all, most universities lack educational/training strategies to deal with extremism as they have laid emphasis on hard approach of physical security, intelligence and surveillance.

In order to establish the relationship between radical student politics and radicalisation, we need to understand that the university is indeed a place for radical ideas. Therefore, scholars such as Neumann (2007) argue that there can be no doubt that universities have always been 'hotbeds' for radical thought, and that it is a place in which individuals are prone to experience feelings of isolation and vulnerability. However, he concludes that the significance of particular locations can easily be overrated but he recommends that governments need to prevent violent extremists from establishing fixed physical centres, such as higher learning institutions, radical mosques or bookshops, which serve as magnets and attract 'seekers' with no prior links into extremist structures. In answering the central question, why are young women at learning

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institutions targeted for recruitment by extremist groups, the following are some of the reasons of what is unique about learning institutions for Kenyan women:-

Freedom

For most of these young women, freedom is a new idea and therefore they are curious to explore what the world has to offer. Out of curiosity most of them fell into the wrong hands and end up being misled. Considering that most of them were used to being monitored, freedom hit them hard which made them vulnerable because of having too much free time in the absence of guardians.

Sense of belonging

There is a lot of exposure in formal learning institutions to new friends and acquaintances. When these girls come into contact with new friends who might be extremists, there are high chances of them being recruited especially if they are misinformed about the religion. In order to avoid being left out these girls are bound to conform to the new trend of 'being a true Muslim'.

Religious Discourse within universities

The fact that religious discourse is not affected by the current intellectual tools makes it more difficult to generate counter-discourses or simply, diverse interpretations. The other interesting and perhaps controversial point is the fact that religious literacy –particularly for Islam– is not part of university/academia curriculum, has as a consequence that academic/critical tools regularly used in other topics (politics, economy, sociology) are completely alien to religious discourse where the authority argument tends to prevail over a rational discussion.

Pressure to get married

Girls in the age brackets of 18 to 24 have a lot of pressure from the society with respect to settling down and starting families. Therefore, the girls that are targeted are mostly single and when they witness their friends getting married, they are also socially pressured to get married and fulfil their societal obligation.

Conclusion

Radicalisation and recruitment of young educated Muslim women is a gendered, sensitive and global phenomenon. Young Muslims women in higher learning institutions have become easy targets for recruitment by radical groups such as ISIS and Al-Shabaab. Most are being radicalized in a progressive way and by taking advantage of the transitional space they are in. Despite this, there is lack

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of empirical data and evidence to show how many women have joined or returned from the different violent extremist groups. Most of the participants mentioned that they personally knew someone who had been radicalized and recruited. Furthermore, no research has also been carried out to examine the radicalization and recruitment of young women in Kenyan universities in depth. So far most of the research carried on youth and radicalization, only focused on men; however, there are recent studies that also look at women.

In this research, the university as a location for radicalization and recruitment has been understood as a secular space, leaving room for private initiatives in terms of religious education and socialization where recruiters target those students with low religious literacy of Islam, usually good students in fields like education, nursing and medicine. Religion and marriage have been used to radicalize and recruit young educated Muslim women in universities within Nairobi and its environs. Many of the respondents believed that education makes it difficult for them to get married. Even with this, the university as a socialization place is seen as an important place to meet men/future husband. That is why recruiters promise women marriage especially marriage to a rich Arab man who hopes to marry an educated girl and more interesting if married to a jihadi they will share the rewards in the afterlife.

Recent trends in radicalizing of young Muslim women in universities have included recruiters who pose as marketers or sellers of Islamic women's clothing. A recent example is that of a suspected recruiter who continuously texts niqab wearing Muslim girls on Instagram asking where they purchased their Niqab from. She later asks for voice notes and slowly tries to gain confidence. Friends are also made to recruit each other because they can set good example for one another. Emotional blackmail as a tactic used by recruiters was also elusive. With this, men recruited ladies as wives and then imposed radical ideas on them. The other trend includes the use of influential international Islamic scholar and social media as a platform that allows the recruiters to get to young unsuspecting women in search of spouses. In tackling radicalization and recruitment, the respondents offered some policy recommendations such as a networking venue for mentors and young women to be set-up in higher learning institutions in order to provide proper guidance to curb further damage on girls. The girls should also connect with each other by forming elaborate associations as a way of reducing the number of girls lost to radical course. Since, religious literacy and marriage were the main entry points; it was recommended that young women be properly taught about what Islam

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says on religious roles of women and marriage in Islam. Furthermore, the promotion of Islamic Feminism was recommended as a way to learn and understand the role of gender within the framework of Islam.

Notes

1. In this research the term higher learning institutions refers to both public and private Universities in Kenya. Therefore, the researcher interchangeably uses both terms that is higher learning institutions and Universities to mean the same thing.
2. According to USAID (2011:2) Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) are organizations that advocate, engage in, prepare or otherwise support ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives. Therefore, throughout this article the terminology Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) will be used.
3. In this article, gender relations refers to how men and women, boys and girls interact, communicate and their expectations within the society.
4. In this study, the researcher worked with a research assistant Ms Amina Mahat. She would like to thank her enormously for her effectiveness and efficiency during the research process. The open and friendly personality of the research assistant made it possible for the researcher and the participants to have a good and cohesive ambiance. Her intuitive logical mind and the telepathy with the researcher was an important element during the data collection process.
5. Hayat Boumeddiene is the suspected accomplice of Amedy Coulibaly who is the main suspect of Montrouge Shooting in Paris, France. She is also wanted by France since 2015 for association with ISIS.
6. The definition of Hijra is the moving from one place to another to make a living or new residence. It is now used by militant groups to denote moving to Somalia (to join al Shabab), to Iraq (to join ISIS) (Ali, Bwana and Juma, 2015).
7. Most of the participants mentioned that the young women who were radicalized and recruited to go to Syria, even though Somalia was mentioned as part of the trajectory. (Nairobi, June-July 2017).

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