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Mainstreaming Gender in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): Some Critical Insights for Eastern Africa

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Abstract

The actors and processes that shape radicalization into violent extremism and terror are in a constant state of flux. They may be localized, regional or global/systemic in disposition. In equal measure, the global counterterrorism discourse has evolved over time and space to subsume both the state and non-state domains. Nonetheless, these difficult and rather delicate matters and processes- in both academic and policy terms- have tended to be understood and/or operationalized from a masculine perspective. Is this true? What is the Eastern African experience? With these pertinent questions in mind, this paper provides some critical insights into the extent to which gender can effectively be mainstreamed into processes of countering violent extremism (CVE) and terror, with specific reference to the Eastern Africa region. The ultimate aim here is to address gender-specific issues that can be said to have a bearing on CVE actors, structures and processes both in academic and policy terms, from an Eastern Africa perspective. In the final analysis, the discussion should be useful to actors in both policy and operational realms in as far as CVE in Eastern Africa is concerned.

Introduction

Counterterrorism is now a common watchword in the national and regional security discourses. Radicalization into violent extremism and brutal terrorism and how to counter the same is a nuanced phenomenon that continues to permeate both academic and policy circles around the globe today. State authorities, defense and national security scholars and practitioners, as well as community and/or religious leaders among other actors in the Eastern African region are part of this global debate. Over the past decade or so, they too have struggled to secure state security and survival in a region that is increasingly attracting the interest of international terror groups. As it were, while the merchants of terror and anarchy have crafted dangerous but highly attractive narratives in order to win followers, the community of world nations has continued to counter these narratives while preventing and/or forestalling and containing actual/real-time attacks.

As it is therefore, counterterrorism today is best understood as a multifaceted mix of mainly state-led actions and programs aimed at combating terror through military means on one hand (Nzau, 2015), and a broad array of non-militaristic activities aimed at attacking extremist ideologies from various political, economic and socio-cultural standpoints (Aldrich, 2014). Within this complex maze are many actors, some of whom have appeared to take the lead and more or less condition and/or shape the nature and dynamics of the entire process in a certain direction. This way, some actors' role is thought to be peripheral to the entire process. Subsequently, concerns have been raised both in academic and policy circles that there is need to find ingenious ways to bring on board certain actors whose import to the counterterrorism agenda has hitherto been downplayed and/or overlooked (Fenstmacher et al, 2011).

One such challenge has to do with how to better mainstream gender in as far as the dynamics of countering violent extremism and terror are concerned (Smith, 2008). Against this background, this paper provides some critical insights into the extent to which gender can be effectively mainstreamed into the processes of countering violent extremism (CVE) and terror, with specific reference to the Eastern Africa region (Heydemann et al, 2014). The ultimate aim here is to address gender-specific issues that can be said to have a bearing on CVE actors, structures and processes both in academic and policy terms, from an Eastern African perspective. In the final analysis, the discussion should prove incisive to actors at the policy and operational realms as far as CVE in the region is concerned (Goodwin, 2013).

Some Theoretical Considerations

State-centrism in the international system is not a benign occurrence. The realist domain is quite instructive. The international system is anarchical and anarchy is best managed by states. To the realist therefore, under these circumstances the state becomes the ultimate guarantor of the security of its people. Nonetheless, over time, the realist account of state security and survival has been challenged by other theoretical standpoints that seek to take the discourse beyond the classical military-strategic matrix. The body of theoretical arguments that presents these alternative views is generally known as 'critical theories.' For purposes of this discussion, one such approach is that of feminism. It is critical to point out that feminism is a theory that has been variously applied not only in the domain of international security, but also in other debates in the humanities and social sciences (Davies, 2008).

All the same, a feminist case for international security is made from the premise that for the most part, the actors, structures and processes that permeate the international security discourse as well as operational environments operate from a male-gendered looking-glass.

As such, from a feminist point of view, the realist-centered international security discourse is unduly male-dominated, a state of affairs that leaves out critical actors who are in fact victims and/or active participants in matters to do with security and/or insecurity- the female gender. Yet, over and above the general feminist theoretical orientation, the human security paradigm is a broad theoretical argument that in many ways subsumes feminist concerns within it. Here, the case is made for a broader outlook on security in a manner that brings on board more aspects of security e.g. personal security, food security, energy security, water security and the like (Dyer et al, 2007; Fluri, 2009; Munton et al, 2011).

A closer look at these theoretical tenets actually reveals an interesting synergy with the gender argument herein. From an African standpoint, when talking about energy, water, food and personal security and others, it is mothers, sisters, daughters and the women-folk in general who come to mind (Marry, 2009). The women-folk cook, fetch water and firewood; and in a region that has had its own share of brutal civil war, women and children (and by extension, the girl-child) have suffered the brunt of it- torture, abduction, displacement, rape and death (Davies, 2008). As it is, the domestic realm to which they have mostly been relegated is rarely illuminated in the security discourse, a state of affairs that makes them inferior players in security matters (Marchand, 2009). From this perspective, therefore, the ideas presented by the critical theoretical domain of international security do present a worthwhile framework for mainstreaming gender in countering violent extremism and terror in the Eastern African Region.

Gender and Security in Africa: A Brief Retrospective Account

Gender is a socially constructed aspect of social reality. Over time and space, different societies have ascribed gender roles and with them, different social expectations, prestige,

entitlements, rights and privileges. For the most part, pre-colonial African societies were patriarchal, where male-gendered roles took precedence over female-gendered ones. There were, however, matrilineal societies where the case was the reverse. Here, female-gendered social roles (and hence social expectations, prestige, entitlements, rights and privileges) took precedence. On the whole however, societal defense was a male-dominated affair. This was perhaps due to the naturally ascribed roles of women - the duty of childbearing and early childhood custody and care. It was and remains a sacrosanct duty that preserves societal and/or human continuity and survival.

Traditionally, men took up the role of physical defense and overseeing the preservation of overall societal protection, order and security in the face of different natural and human threats that occurred within varied physiological, geographic and socio-cultural realities of the time. Yet, this is not to mean that members of the female gender had no role to play in the entire process. In fact, folklore and contemporary historical evidence has from time to time come to prove that women actually organized and participated in offensive and defensive warfare in many pre-colonial African societies. Some were great warriors of their people while others were part of powerful secret spiritual societies that gathered, analyzed and transmitted vital intelligence in both times of war and peace. Such was the case with the traditional women's secret societies among the Mende people in today's Sierra Leone, West Africa (Shcraeder, 2004).

Colonialism did however have a momentous effect on African sociopolitical organization. Apart from superimposing the European state and its governance style on the indigenous African one, the colonial system destroyed certain matriarchal societal systems, and further unduly reinforced a patriarchal social structure. The colonial expedition in Africa was racial, discriminatory, exploitative and invariably racist to the benefit of a few. It is noteworthy that the colonial enterprise on the African

continent met resistance, and this resistance involved several well-known female warriors and/or powerful figures of the time. The likes of Mekatilili wa Menza, who resisted British conscription of young Giriama men to serve the Empire; and Syotune wa Kathukye, the female seer who resisted foreign religious beliefs and confiscation of cattle by colonial authorities among the Akamba of today's Kenya (Hobley, 1971). In 1922, when Harry Thuku was arrested in Nairobi, a brave woman by the name Nyanjiru removed her dress and asked the men to give her their trousers because she wondered why they hesitated to protest and storm Kingsway Police Station (today's Central Police Station) where Harry was detained. She was killed alongside twenty three other people, most of them women, when the colonial police and settlers from the nearby Norfolk Hotel scattered the protest (Roseberg and Nottingham 1966).

Three decades later, many more women were involved in the armed struggle for independence and armed resistance to Apartheid in South Africa. They were actively involved in the Mau Mau armed struggle in Kenya, the Algerian War of independence, the liberation struggles in Southern Africa and the Eritrean war of independence, just to mention but a few. During the Mau Mau struggle, the women were instrumental in conveying messages to the male fighters from one place in the forest to another; as well as transportation of essential supplies such as food and clothing (Presley, 1992). Movements such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had a heavy presence of women who were in fact quite active in armed operations. In the Zimbabwean war of independence, women formed an important component of active fighting personnel. During the Ugandan bush war, one Alice Lakwena led a powerful group of rebel fighters in an attempt to capture power in Uganda. The same applied to groups such as FRELIMO, SPLA/M and TPLF among others (Tordoff, 2002).

Yet, while women were active fighters, many more were (and continue to be) victims of

various forms of insecurity on the continent, particularly in the context of civil wars and concomitant ramifications on society-politically, economically, culturally and physiologically. The end of the Cold War ushered in a period of uncertainty and confusion in African political and/or leadership circles. As Cold War superpowers withdrew military and economic aid from the many African political regimes that they had previously 'somewhat blindly' supported for decades, regimes began to collapse and brutal civil wars broke out on the continent- Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Western Darfur. Africa somewhat appeared to be a continent left to its own devices as the international community seemingly turned a blind eye to the happenings of the 1990s (Nzau, 2007).

By the time this dark phase was thawing away in the late 1990s and early 2000s, hard lessons and burning concerns had emerged with respect to the place of women (including the girl-child) in the entire regional security-insecurity matrix. It was a grim state of affairs that needed powerful academic/theoretical and policy interventions. Women and young girls had been captured and turned into sex slaves and serfs in various armed non-state outfits and ragtag armies that participated in these conflicts. Rape and other forms of sexual assault had been turned into weapons of war that represent the hallmark of forcing a victim into total submission. It was soon realized that any recipe for African security in the 21st century (be it in the military-strategic context and at national, regional and/or international level) could not materialize without factoring-in the role and/or place of the female gender (Falola and Njoku, 2010).

Gender and the Repertoires of Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Eastern Africa has had its share of terrorism. Earlier terror attacks in the 1970s and 1980s were few and far apart. The Entebbe hijacking of July 1976 is one such incident. Four years

later, on New Year's Eve in 1980, a bomb exploded at the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi. Apart from these two incidences, no major terror attack was known in post-independence eastern Africa. Nonetheless, the decade of the 1990s appeared to be ushering-in a new age of ideological fundamentalism. The presence of terror groups such as Al-Qaeda begun to be felt not only in the Middle-East but also in the western world and soon, Africa. The August 7th 1998 bombings on the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which left over 250 people dead, were a clear sign that the scourge of terrorism was real and active in Eastern Africa (Nzau, 2015).

Three years later, on September 11th 2001, the catastrophic attacks on US soil proved that terrorism had attained global proportions and the only logical thing for the community of world states to do was to counter it by taking the war to them, hence the Global War on Terror (Spalek and Lambert, 2007). Meanwhile, following many years of state collapse and total war in Somalia, by 2005, there were clear signs that international terrorist organizations had an eye on the expansive ungoverned space that the war-torn country availed. By early 2007, an off-shoot of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which had links to global terror networks such as Al-Qaeda, had started to be associated with isolated but increasing grenade attacks in Kenya and later Uganda in July 2010. These were accompanied by incursions and kidnappings in the region over this period. Inside Somalia, while an Ethiopian (and later African Union Mission in Somalia- AMISOM) onslaught against the ICU had helped Somalia's newly established transitional federal government (TFG) establish its presence in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, the terror activities of Al-Shabaab have remained an eye-sore not only to the process of full stabilization of Somalia but also in neighbouring states, more so Kenya (Ibrahim, 2010; Nzau, 2010).

The repertoires of terrorism in Eastern Africa are many and varied. Terror organizations

capitalize on physical harm as a means to achieve psychological and emotional trauma for purposes of influencing the political, economic and/or socio-cultural realms and mind-sets at various levels (individual, state and international) to their advantage or for certain political, religious and/or ideological persuasions that they represent. Over this period, terrorist groups have employed various tactics and means to achieve their goals. The hurling of the grenade; the planting of improvised explosive devices on roads; gun and grenade attacks on soft targets (learning institutions, shopping malls, transportation vehicles, markets, public gatherings, bus termini, villages, hotels and churches) as well as suicide attacks on police and military installations. These attacks have recently been “stepped-up” to involve airborne attacks on transportation planes. True enough, on February 2nd 2016, a Djibouti-bound plane owned by a Somali operator, Daalo Airlines, made an emergency landing back at Mogadishu Airport shortly after take-off, after a bomb exploded in-flight. A week later, Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility (BBC, Africa: Accessed on 2nd February 2016).

Governmental and intergovernmental agencies and institutions in the region have in equal measure sought to counter the advances of terrorist groups. The counter-terrorism agenda was for a long time dominated by purely militaristic and legalistic prescriptions that for the most part, aimed at direct prevention and containment of terror attacks. Over time however, there has been the realization that a purely “hard power” approach to counterterrorism is necessary but not sufficient to fully reverse the deep-seated sources of terrorism. In these discourses, the place of the male and female genders in terrorism and counterterrorism processes in the region has remained largely unexplored (Marry, 2009). For starters, terror attacks in the region have been orchestrated by men; and the structures and processes that have been put in place to counter these terrorists are also male-dominated (Marchand, 2009).

Is this state of affairs by design or just mere coincidence? For the most part, the fundamentalist narrative is heavily masculine. The repertoires of Islamic and Muslim identity are truly a masculine affair (Lambert, 2008; Aslam, 2012: 91). It therefore comes as no surprise that in the realm of extreme Islamic terrorist ideology “rewards” such as that of “seventy-two virgins” go to men, while there are no such “rewards” for women. It is critical to note that some of these convoluted theological and/or cultural misinterpretations do not represent the Holy Word of God as espoused in the Quran and Sunnah (Aslam, 2012: 92). Yet, it is a fact that women have been accomplices to terror and that they are actively involved in the transportation of terror materials and the gathering and dissemination of information that has been used to facilitate the launching of terror attacks (Carter, 2013).

As such, the role of women is not direct, but rather indirect and/or proxy. The case has been made for instance, of one Samantha Lethwaite also known as the “White Widow” who is believed to have been an Al-Qaeda terror mastermind operating mainly in Somalia and Kenya. Others are wives of terror masterminds while others have been lured from their habitual places and/or countries of residence to join terror groups and related movements in places far-off e.g. ISIS in Syria (Carter, 2013). Women also become victims of ostracization especially when they find themselves in hostile settings where and when it is suspected that their spouses are involved in terror activities (Brown, 2008; Lambert, 2008). All in all, terrorism and the efforts to counter it in Eastern Africa, just like in most of the world, are male-gendered and masculine-dominated.

It is critical to note however, that acts of terror are not the preserve of global terror groups such as Al-Qa’ida, ISIS, Al-Shabaab, or Islamic Maghreb. Localized armed non-state groups such as *Interahamwe* in Rwanda, *Mungiki* in Kenya, Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in

Uganda, *Janjaweed* in Western Darfur and the many *Maji Maji* in the DRC have unleashed untold terror on locals which has been variously categorized not just as acts of genocide and/or war crimes and the like, but also acts of terror. Whether it is Al-Shabaab or *Interahamwe*, each time such groups strike, society bleeds (David, 2005). Women and men alike are the innocent victims of the senseless acts carried out by these groups. It is interesting that just like *Boko Haram*, groups such as ISIS and LRA are known to kidnap young women who are forced into being the fighters' wives and/or sex objects (Ranstorp and Hyllengren, 2013). As such, it is imperative upon scholars and peace practitioners to be aware of the fact that terrorism in Eastern Africa, just like in other parts of the globe, is both inward or localized and outward or regionally and globally-oriented in disposition.

Mainstreaming Gender in Eastern Africa's CVE Agenda: Gains, Challenges and Prospects

In any discussion on security especially in light of the dangers posed by radicalization into violent extremism and terror, the place of the female gender cannot be overlooked. In the African context particularly, women may appear to have been relegated to the domestic sphere, yet the story of radicalization into violent extremism is closer home- in feminine circles. The merchants of radicalization into terrorism are today targeting not only young teenage boys but also young girls and mature women (Smith, 2008: 9). It is no secret that women and young girls are increasingly being recruited to join international extremist and brutally violent terror movements such as the Islamic State of Iran and the Levant/Syria (ISIL/ISIS), Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab (Goodwin, 2013; Gowrinathan, 2014). It is noteworthy, for instance, that a substantial number of suicide bombings in Nigeria today have been orchestrated by women (Alao, 2013). The "Chibok Girls" phenomenon is a case in point, in which young girls that had earlier been

kidnapped by Boko Haram have returned from captivity only to carryout suicide attacks in parts of northern Nigeria (Zenn, and Pearson, 2014). It should also be noted that reports have been made in Kenya of young girls having been lured into joining Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Given these developments, the question of mainstreaming gender in countering violent extremism is gaining currency not only in Eastern Africa but also in the wider UN-led global counterterrorism agenda. These developments have been informed from the premise that terrorism and the processes of countering it, though male-gendered, do not operate in a vacuum (Aldrich, 2012). These processes are shaped, facilitated and otherwise permeated by factors that fall beyond the male-dominated framework they have been traditionally accustomed and/or conditioned to (Aldrich, 2014). The Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda operatives and recruiters in the Eastern African region come from somewhere; they have been born and raised in families where there are mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, wives, daughters, female acquaintances and friends. More importantly, the *Sheikhs* (male Islamic religious figures come from certain families (Brown, 2008; Munton et al, 2011). Hence, the piety and religiosity associated with the womenfolk is critical to any formidable CVE (Appleby, 1999).

Further, in the live and/or active terror cells (as well as moribund ones) though dominated and operationalized by male-gendered standard operating procedures, rules, norms and mannerisms, the female gender is subtly but intricately connected (Appleby, 1999). This is another way of saying that in any discussion about the process of countering the processes and narratives that inform radicalization, the place of the female gender cannot be underestimated. The female gender in Eastern Africa, therefore, has a special role to play in dismantling ideologies that justify terrorism by undoing the theological manipulation of historical and political issues that inform it

(Bjorgo, 2011). The womenfolk are in some form of contact (direct or indirect; conscious or unconscious) with the networks and/or individuals that either catalyze or promote violent extremism (Spalek et al, 2011). Mainstreaming gender in CVE is to afford the male and female gender alike the material, moral and institutional grounds and/or abilities to identify individuals who are susceptible to extremist narratives and to help effectively address the grievances that lead them to find extremist ideologies palatable. As such, the sisters, mothers, wives, nieces, daughters and *Sheikahs* are critical towards building community resilience to the narratives and/or repertoires of radicalization into violent extremism (Plalek, Basia, and Lambert, 2008; Bartlett and Miller, 2010). Thus, the need to make CVE processes in the Eastern African region more participatory, humane and all-encompassing is now and there is no turning back (Briggs, 2010).

Gains

At this juncture, the next key question to ask is: what gains have been made so far in the direction of mainstreaming gender to counter violent extremism in as far as the Eastern African region is concerned? Perhaps, the answer to this question is “not much.” Not much has been done to ingrain the role of the female gender, especially the Muslim woman towards challenging extremist narratives; and how to identify and handle the individuals that are purposefully targeted for radicalization into extremism. Despite their dismal participation in as far as CVE is concerned, the untapped potential that lies in the female gender is slowly being realized and/or recognized.

Challenges

It is well known that in a male-dominated societal outlook as the case is in Eastern Africa, mainstreaming gender in CVE cannot materialize without the full cooperation and participation of the male gender (Bartlett and Miller, 2010). The nuances of gender mainstreaming not only

in the broad counterterrorism debate but also in other processes of governance remain shallow. It is critical to note that Eastern Africa is a wider region with separate countries, administrative structures, cultures and subcultures. Hence, the existence of different ecologies of national and intra-national administration and different levels and/or structures of operationalization, all of which should meet the same goal: to ingrain a well-gendered process of countering violent extremism in the wider Eastern Africa region.

This leads to the question: is the region, including Somalia, speaking the same language on this and are states affected the same way? In answer, there is need for well premised inter-state and intra-agency and/or inter-organizational cooperation on the same (Briggs, 2010). As it is, to roll-out certain community-level, sub-regional or regional CVE programs requires the marshaling of a considerable amount of human and material resources in order to support and sustain the goals of CVE programs and processes, as well as to effectively monitor, improve and actualize them. Inter-state cooperation on this front is indeed wanting. Many cases have been reported of terror operatives who have been radicalized in another country, only to launch attacks in neighboring countries and beyond. Eastern Africa cannot therefore tackle these issues in isolation. Best practices and incisive guidance from places yonder (North Africa, Europe, Middle-East and the America's) are of the essence here.

Prospects

Despite the policy, human and material challenges afore-discussed, there is much optimism and promise in the female and male genders, in as far as CVE processes in the region are concerned (Ranstorp and Hyllengren, 2013). This optimism lies in the fact that the society's mothers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, daughters, aunts, and nieces in Muslim and other socio-cultural settings hold the key in raising awareness on the perils

of falling prey to radicalization (Dyer et al, 2007); building resilience against extremist narratives among youths in Eastern Africa; and to working together with parents, teachers, Sheiks and Sheikhas, in providing an enabling environment to handle the radicalized youths and give a promising future to the de-radicalized ones (Bjorgo, 2011). This paper contends that these goals are attainable and prospects in this direction are not hard to imagine.

Conclusion

This paper set out to provide some critical insights in as far as the gains, challenges and prospects of mainstreaming gender in countering violent extremism in the Eastern Africa region is concerned. After assessing the theoretical and

policy domains that permeate the debate, the authors delved into an assessment of the place of the female gender in CVE in the region. The study came to the conclusion that there is much promise in the female gender with respect to confronting and reversing the effects of radicalization into violent extremism in Eastern Africa. The problem is not the Islamic faith (Baran, 2005) but rather the convoluted and misinformed cultures and/or subcultures through which the ideologies behind extremist narratives are told in different places and under varied circumstances in the region. It is imperative that more policy efforts, resources and cooperation be invested in mainstreaming gender into CVE in Eastern Africa. This will go a long way into adding value into the process of enhancing peace, justice and security in the region.

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