WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Women have continued to experience the worst consequences of all types of conflicts. It is in no doubt going by results from numerous past research efforts. For Example the case of the Kenya woman is no different and stark reality of the circumstances has brought into sharp focus in the PEV 2007/2008 triggered where 1300 people lost their lives, thousands injured, more than 500,000 displaced and women & girls raped in the process and traumatized todate.

With regard to the women now joining the fight in Syria, particularly with ISIS but also other extremist groups, the UAE-based think-tank Hedayah indicated that women and young girls have been recruited primarily through social media and for some, the notion of marriage is an important factor. Although the estimated number of foreign women who have joined ISIS is only 10% of the total Western men fighting, it is still significant that women are joining an organization that a majority of the world deems oppressive towards women and extraordinarily violent.

Women in Mombasa County were not much affected by the PEV process but ever since the terror attacks, women have witnessed the first hand pain and trauma after seeing their sons, husbands or brothers being recruited to join extremists groups. It's painful and sad after all the hardship she had to endure their sons, husbands or brothers end up dead in some country .The reasons for their recruitment is not about poverty or unemployment anymore since those recruited are educated and literate so ideologically illegal groups are messing around with their minds. We have long seen extremism as a male problem only; politics too has long been viewed as a strictly masculine profession for too long. Today, however, women and girls involvement in these two opposite spheres is evident; hence the growing interest of the extremists focus has an interest to the girls as their companions.

As violent extremism and radicalization are still often considered a male issue, the question of women and girls extremists is characterized by bias and misconceptions. In situations of conflict and violence, women are often seen as passive, victims, helpless, subordinate and maternal. Such assumptions reinforce gender stereotypes. As a result, women are neither considered to be potential extremists, nor perceived to be as dangerous as their male counterparts if they were to be involved in extremism.

Although the tradition of respect for women makes them strong candidates to fight extremism, it also makes them targets for radical proselytization. Extremists have sought to actively involve women and girls in their work, knowing well about the influence they can potentially exert on people around them.

At home, mothers are often the first to observe the early warning signs of extremism in their families. While the observation of changing or changed behavior of their children may be intuitive for many, the awareness and understanding of the process of radicalization is not. Even if mothers recognize extremists in their children they often lack the skills needed to intervene. Women need to be equipped and supported in their efforts to prevent their children from joining extremist groups, and also to build their own capacity to reject the influence of extremism and violence.

At the community level, outside the home, women and girls can be voices of tolerance and can provide a strong counter narrative message to extremism in their communities. This has been evident in West Africa especially in Nigeria, where women do this through their work in interfaith organizations, hosting

local community events to promote tolerance, and counter radicalized interpretations of religious teachings. They work as religious leaders in their communities, pro-actively providing counsel and guidance to vulnerable youth and young women in their learning institutions. At the county and national and levels, the empowerment of women and girls in media outlets is critical for countering the appeal of extremist messaging. Their very presence in this most public of spheres, including social media, provides a powerful mitigating influence to extremist messaging.

Education provides critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills that are essential to understanding how individuals are radicalized and how to counter such extremist messages and narratives. Moreover, education instills the self-confidence that is needed for women and girls to contribute to the creation of healthy, resilient and peaceful communities.

It is clear that there is a high demand by women and girls for knowledge and skills to prevent violent extremism. Women's and girls' active participation in society, as educated and empowered individuals, as teachers, mentors, role models, journalists, faith leaders, healers, and community leaders builds resilience to the influence and spread of violent extremism.

Past implemented a program with a slogan dubbed "**A Call Back Home"** which targeted the youth to prevent extremism and promote community cohesion through continuous dialogue during screening forums called moonlight shows where we developed a DVD documentary which we interviewed key opinion leaders on preventing extremism and promoting community cohesion and the misinterpretation/ misconception of the religious teachings to the youth which can be showcased during COEC's activities.

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, peace and security stressed the importance of women's role, equal participation and full involvement in this area and urged states to increase women representation at all levels of the decision making process for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict. There is need to advocate for new instructive on women roles in counter-terrorism effects. The mis-conception that women are not involved in extremism or terrorist radicalization has often shaped counter terrorism strategies, excluding women from decision making process and their significance under representation among law enforcement officers and security meetings. Intelligence operations on getting information should be enhanced to include women. Gender equality and women empowerment should not be valued only to the extent that it helps national security. Gender equality should be promoted in its own right and women should be empowered to participate fully in society. This is because women have been frequently victims of both terrorist attacks and counter terrorism measures.

Women are major victims as they are wives of terrorists, mothers of terrorists and generally the home makers where the so called terrorists *hibarnet* - hence there is need for forums for advocacy, training and information. Muslim women have a unique viewpoint on the challenges faced by the community they live in – whether that is a threat of violent extremism, anti social behaviours or young people feeling isolated and discouraged. Women are also uniquely placed to solve these problems, challenges, unacceptable behaviours and support those in need.

Women throughout history have been both the vehicles and drivers of positive change and Muslim women have been no exception. All women, whether Muslim or not, have similar aspirations and expectations as their male counterparts. The public perception and unequal needs need to be challenged and addressed both with the Muslim and wider communities. Kenya is at a crucial juncture as it tries to contain and combat militant violence that has devastated communities, families and lives across all provinces. Muslim women are frequent targets of radical ideologies and terrorism, giving them unique perspective on how to counter violent extremism in their communities and homes – but despite the potential to be powerful participants in creating and implementing policies aimed at reducing the appeal of radicalization and extremism, women are instead often marginalized in security decision making process. Women are part of civil society which is not about representation but participation of as many diverse voices as possible that need to be heard. Credible messengers of counter narratives and playing a role in countering violent extremism by doing what they do

best mainly using political space for the kind of activities which we are mandated (Women Rights). We need to build a Civil Society and Government to facilitate ways to exchange experiences and strategies together through engagement and a search for a common language.