

Gender Dynamics in Countering Violent Extremism: Insights from Local Communities in Isiolo County, Kenya

Zadock Wambua Kavemba, Mumo Nzau, Emmanuel Kondoltiony

National Defence University Kenya

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8100129>

Received: 02 October 2024; Accepted: 10 October 2024; Published: 09 November 2024

ABSTRACT

Countering violent extremism (CVE) has become a significant concern globally, with various strategies being explored to address the root causes of radicalization. In regions like Isiolo County, Kenya, gender dynamics play a pivotal role in influencing both vulnerability to and engagement in efforts to combat extremism. Gender-sensitive approaches have been increasingly recognized for their potential to enhance the effectiveness of CVE interventions by addressing the social, economic, and political inequalities that contribute to radicalization.

This study investigates Gender Dynamics in Countering Violent Extremism: Insights from Local Communities in Isiolo County, Kenya, utilizing a feminist security theory framework. The objective of the study is to explore how gender influences the effectiveness of CVE strategies and to identify the factors that enable women's active involvement in CVE. A mixed-methods approach, including surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, was used to gather perspectives from individuals directly or indirectly affected by violent extremist activities, as well as key informants involved in CVE initiatives.

The study finds that promoting gender equality, fostering inclusive community dialogue, addressing underlying social issues, empowering women in leadership roles, and engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms are critical to enhancing women's participation in CVE. These findings underscore the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach to CVE, which recognizes and tackles the intersecting social, economic, and political factors driving violent extremism.

Key recommendations include implementing governance reforms to promote gender equality, expanding educational and economic opportunities for women, fostering inclusive dialogues, and engaging men and boys in promoting positive masculinity. These insights contribute to broader discussions on gender-responsive approaches to security and peacebuilding, highlighting specific strategies to strengthen women's roles in preventing and countering violent extremism in Isiolo County.

Key Words: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE); Women's Engagement; Gender Equality; Community Dialogue; Women Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism poses a significant threat to global security, exacerbated by socio-economic inequities, political instability, and cultural tensions. These factors create environments where extremists can exploit societal fractures to recruit new members and propagate their ideologies, often leading to violence and unrest (Littler & Lee, 2023; Simangunsong, Stewart, & Debortoli, 2023). However, many counter-violent extremism (CVE) initiatives overlook the crucial role of gender dynamics, which significantly influence both the emergence of extremist threats and the effectiveness of CVE strategies. Recognizing these complexities is essential for developing comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of violent extremism.

In regions affected by violent extremism, gender relations profoundly shape individuals' experiences and responses to security threats. Gender analysis reveals that men and women encounter security challenges

differently; men often take on roles as fighters or recruiters, while women and children face vulnerabilities such as displacement and sexual exploitation (Stevens et al., 2020). Extremist groups strategically utilize gender norms to attract recruits by promising power to disenfranchised men and safety to vulnerable women (Pearson, Winterbotham, & Brown, 2020). Therefore, integrating gender perspectives into CVE frameworks is vital for understanding how these dynamics can either fuel or mitigate security threats.

In local contexts like Isiolo County, Kenya, the integration of gender-sensitive approaches in CVE initiatives can significantly enhance their effectiveness. Understanding community perceptions of gender roles is crucial for fostering inclusive participation in CVE programs. Research indicates that in communities with rigid gender norms, women may not visibly engage in public initiatives but can influence their male relatives' attitudes towards violent extremism (Leung, 2023). By assessing existing gender roles and their implications for CVE strategies, this research aims to identify areas for strengthening gender-sensitive participation. This approach will not only promote equitable involvement but also enhance community support for CVE interventions, ultimately leading to more effective prevention of violent extremism.

Conceptual Clarifications

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): CVE refers to the strategies and initiatives aimed at preventing individuals from engaging in or supporting violent extremism. These efforts seek to address the root causes of extremism, such as social, economic, and political inequalities, and promote resilience in communities vulnerable to radicalization.

Gender Dynamics: Gender dynamics encompass the social constructs and power relations that dictate the roles, behaviors, and identities of individuals based on their perceived gender. Understanding these dynamics is essential for recognizing how they influence participation in CVE efforts and the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Feminist Security Theory: This theoretical framework emphasizes human security and challenges traditional state-centric views of security. It advocates for the inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women, in peacebuilding and security processes, highlighting that gender equality is crucial for achieving sustainable peace and stability.

Gender Equality: Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for individuals of all genders. In the context of CVE, promoting gender equality involves challenging discriminatory practices and ensuring equitable access to resources and decision-making opportunities.

Empowerment: Empowerment involves enabling individuals, especially marginalized groups, to gain control over their lives and participate actively in social, political, and economic activities. Women's empowerment is particularly emphasized as a key factor in enhancing their involvement in CVE efforts.

Social Cohesion: Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among community members. High levels of social cohesion can enhance resilience against violent extremism, making inclusive dialogues and awareness campaigns vital for fostering community harmony.

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework integrates perspectives from gender studies, extremism, and conflict resolution to explore how gender influences the effectiveness of countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies in Northern Kenya. Gender is understood as a social construct shaped by cultural and historical contexts, as argued by feminist scholars. Gender norms, roles, and identities influence how individuals experience risks and opportunities, often perpetuating stereotyping (Bradyn & Marsden, 2021). The framework acknowledges the situational and constructed nature of gender, examining how these norms intersect with violent extremism and influence recruitment, radicalization, and deradicalization processes.

Incorporating intersectionality theory, this framework highlights the overlapping oppressions that individuals face, including gender, ethnicity, religion, and economic status. This intersectional lens is critical to

understanding the susceptibility of Northern Kenyan populations to extremist narratives. Feminist security studies further challenge conventional security discourses by emphasizing human security and advocating for the participation of marginalized groups, including women, in CVE efforts (Ng'ayo, 2023). These theories collectively underscore the importance of addressing the root causes of radicalization, including political and economic oppression, from a feminist perspective.

The framework also draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explain the ways individuals affiliate with specific groups to enhance self-esteem or gain social benefits. SIT emphasizes how group membership shapes thought and behavior, particularly in contexts where group affiliation is tied to social status (Tajfel, 1981). The theory's recognition of group power dynamics is essential for understanding gendered experiences in CVE. By integrating feminist perspectives on women's agency and social identity dynamics, this framework challenges the portrayal of women as passive victims and positions them as active agents in preventing and countering violent extremism (Brady & Marsden, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey design to capture a snapshot of the gender dynamics in countering violent extremism within local communities in Isiolo County, Kenya (Creswell, 2014). This design facilitated the exploration of relationships between independent and dependent variables, offering a comprehensive understanding of the problem at the time of the study.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide robust data and a holistic understanding of the research problem (Bryman, 2016). Isiolo County was purposively selected as the study area due to its susceptibility to violent extremism, as highlighted in its County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) (Isiolo County Government, 2023). The county's diverse demographic, encompassing various ethnic groups, enriched data collection and enabled a thorough analysis of gender dynamics and extremism across different cultural contexts.

The target population included men and women with prior involvement in violent extremist activities, along with key informants such as community leaders, security personnel, and representatives from civil society organizations engaged in countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts (Littler & Lee, 2023). Inclusion criteria were established to ensure participants met specific qualifications regarding their experiences with extremism and their residency in Isiolo County.

Sampling techniques involved multi-stage sampling to identify study sites within the county and snowball sampling to locate main respondents with a history of involvement in violent extremism (Cohen & Manion, 2017). Key informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in demographic backgrounds and expertise.

Data collection utilized various instruments, including in-depth interview guides, semi-structured questionnaires, focus group discussion guides, and key informant interview schedules, designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data relevant to the study's objectives (Flick, 2018). Validity and reliability were prioritized, with pilot testing conducted on data collection instruments, employing the test-retest method to assess consistency and accuracy (Polit & Beck, 2017). Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study, with informed consent obtained from all participants and measures implemented to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics for quantitative data and manual coding for qualitative data, with dominant themes identified through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This comprehensive methodology aims to reveal insights into the intricate gender dynamics influencing CVE initiatives in Isiolo County.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study and delves into their implications, interpretations, and comparisons with existing literature. This section synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative data collected, addressing the research objectives and shedding light on the enablers of women's engagement in countering

violent extremism (CVE) in Isiolo County.

Response Rate

The Response Rate section provides an overview of the participation rates among the target population for the study. It presents the number of participants planned for each data collection method and compares it to the actual number of participants who took part in the study. This comparison allows for an assessment of the effectiveness of the recruitment and data collection strategies employed.

In this study, response rates are presented for both main respondents and key informants. For main respondents, response rates are provided for each data collection method, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The section also includes response rates for key informants from various sectors relevant to countering violent extremism, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: study response rates

Target Population		Data Collection Tool/Method	Number Planned	Number Conducted	Percentage
Main Respondents		Questionnaire	--	90	
		In-Depth Interviews	--	16	
		Focus Group Discussion	--	29	
Total				135	
	Ministry of Interior Officials	Interviews	02	02	100
	National Police Service Senior Officers	Interviews	02	02	100
	County Government Officers	Interviews	02	02	100
Key Informans	Officers from civil society organizations	Interviews	02	02	100
	Officials of youth organizations	Interviews	02	02	100
	Officials of women’s organizations	Interviews	02	02	100
	Community leaders	Interviews	02	02	100
	Religious leaders	Interviews	02	02	100
Total			16	16	100

Source: Field Data 2023

As can be seen in Table 1, the response rate for this study was high, with 90 out of 135 planned main respondents participating, representing a response rate of 66.7%. For in-depth interviews, 16 out of the planned 16 were conducted, achieving a response rate of 100%. Similarly, all the focus group discussions were conducted as planned 29, also achieving a response rate of 100%.

Regarding key informants, all 16 planned interviews were conducted, achieving a response rate of 100%. This included two Ministry of Interior officials, two National Police Service senior officers, two county government officers, two officers from civil society organizations, two officials of youth organizations, two officials of women's organizations, two community leaders, and two religious leaders. Each category of key informants reached its targeted participation, demonstrating a comprehensive engagement across various sectors relevant to the study.

Main Respondents' Demographic Information

The demographic characteristics of the main respondents were collected in order to ascertain the representativeness of the sample. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Main respondents' demographic characteristics

Demographic Features		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	71	78.89
	Female	19	21.11
Total		90	100
Age	21 – 30	65	72.22
	31 - 40	14	15.56
	41 – 50	8	8.89
	51 and Above	3	3.33
Total		90	100
	Completed Primary School	17	18.89
Level of Education	Completed High School	53	58.89
	Completed College	19	21.11
	Completed University	1	1.11
		90	100

Source: Field data 2023

As can be seen in Table 4.2, more than three quarters of the respondents (78.89%) were male. The higher percentage of males compared to females could be attributed to the gender disparities in engagement in VE activities. According to (Okwany, 2020), males are more likely to engage in VE activities due to societal expectations of masculinity, and specific gender roles assigned to males within extremist groups. The skewed representation of females could also be as a result of underreporting by females. According to Rakhshandehroo, Duits, Bergman, Verkes, and Kempes (2023; see also: Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2018), females are typically less likely to self-report their involvement in extremist activities due to stigma, fear of reprisal, or cultural barriers that discourage women from engaging in such activities openly. Furthermore, it is possible that the snowballing methodology used to collect data might have favored access to male respondents over females. This could be due to the fact that most of the initial contacts in the snowballing exercise were males, meaning that they were more likely to refer females than females. Logistical constraints and safety concerns,

as well as cultural norms that limit interactions between male researchers and female participants, might also have contributed to the skewed representation of females in the sample.

Nonetheless, qualitative data obtained through FGDs and in-depth interviews revealed what could be a major cause for the skewed representation of females in the sample. According to FGD participants and some of the main respondents, it is more difficult for females to disengage from VE activities than their male counterparts. They revealed that this could be related to the fact that males are more visible or active within VEOs, leading to a higher likelihood of interaction with intervention or disengagement programs. Their female counterparts on the other hand, are so deeply embedded within VEOs, minimizing the likelihood of their engagement with CVE programs.

Table 2 also shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (72.22%) were aged between 21 and 30 years. The other age groups accounted for only slightly more than one a quarter (27.78%) of the respondents. Notably, only three of the respondents were 51 years old and above. These result correspond with the findings of Okwany (2020), who all found that youth are more vulnerable to VE recruitment. The authors aver that younger individuals, particularly those aged below 25 years, may be more susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist groups due to factors such as identity formation, search for meaning or purpose, disillusionment with mainstream society, and susceptibility to peer influence. They further posit that extremist groups often target youth populations for recruitment, exploiting their grievances, frustrations, and desires for change. As a result, a higher proportion of disengaged individuals are likely to be in younger age groups.

Qualitative data also reveals that older individuals were less likely to have been in the sample because they were less likely to have been disengaged by CVE programs. Qualitative data revealed that older persons are likely to have been involved in VE activities for a longer period, making disengagement less common among this age group. Additionally, older individuals may face greater challenges in disengaging due to entrenched beliefs or social ties within extremist networks.

Regarding the highest level of educational attainment, Table 2 shows that the largest proportion of respondents (58.89%) had completed high school, followed by those who had completed college (19%) and those who had completed only primary school. Only one of the respondents had a university education. The reasons for the higher proportion of respondents who had completed high school only could be related to the fact that according to Idris (2020), extremist groups usually target individuals who have completed high school education but have not been able to get formal employment. VEOs typically exploit vulnerabilities such as unemployment, lack of opportunities, or feelings of marginalization.

Enablers of Women’s Engagement in Cve

In this section, we delve into the enablers of women's engagement in CVE activities within the context of Isiolo County. Through a feminist lens, we explore the factors that facilitate women's participation, agency, and leadership in CVE initiatives. By examining the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders, including community members, policymakers, and civil society actors, we uncover the pathways through which women contribute to CVE efforts and identify strategies to enhance their meaningful involvement.

Table 3: Participants Perceptions on enablers of women’s engagement in CVE

Enablers of Women’s Engagement in CVE	Frequency	Percentage
Promoting gender equality	84	62
Fostering dialogue	84	62
Addressing underlying social issues	81	60
Empowering women in community leadership	77	57
Engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms	74	55

Source: Field data 2023

The data in Table 3 presents a comprehensive overview of the perceived enablers of women's engagement in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Among the respondents, there appears to be a strong consensus regarding the fundamental pillars necessary for effective CVE efforts. Foremost among these enablers is the promotion of gender equality, identified by an overwhelming 62% of participants. Similarly, fostering dialogue emerges as a critical strategy, with an identical percentage of respondents emphasizing its importance.

Addressing underlying social issues is also highlighted by a significant majority, with 60% of respondents acknowledging its importance. Furthermore, the data in Table 3 indicates a recognition of the pivotal role of women in community leadership, with 57% of participants emphasizing the importance of empowering women in decision-making positions. Finally, engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms emerges as a key enabler, with 55% of respondents highlighting its significance.

Promoting Gender Equality

The high percentage of respondents (62%) identifying promoting equality as an enabler of women's engagement in countering violent extremism (CVE), as indicated in Table 3, underscores the recognition by study participants of gender equality as a fundamental principle in CVE efforts. This finding suggests that there is a strong consensus among participants regarding the importance of creating a level playing field where women have equal opportunities, rights, and access to resources in CVE initiatives. This finding reflects an understanding among participants that gender disparities and inequalities can exacerbate vulnerabilities to radicalization and recruitment to violent extremist groups. According to Key Informant 16 “promoting equality is not only essential for enhancing the effectiveness of CVE efforts but also aligns with broader objectives of sustainable development, peacebuilding, and social cohesion”.

Numerous studies also emphasize the significance of gender equality as a foundational principle for effective prevention and response strategies. For instance, Githinji (2015), highlights the critical role of gender equality in mitigating the drivers of violent extremism and promoting sustainable peace. Relatedly, Idris (2020) underscores how gender inequalities can exacerbate grievances and vulnerabilities that contribute to radicalization, emphasizing the need for gender-responsive approaches in CVE programming. Rothermel and Shepherd (2022) also demonstrate how empowering women and promoting their participation in decision-making processes not only enhances the inclusivity and legitimacy of CVE initiatives but also strengthens community resilience and social cohesion.

By analyzing qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews and FGDs, the study was able to identify the multifaceted initiatives that were being implemented by various actors in Isiolo County, to promote gender equality. One significant strategy is enhancing access to education for girls, which the study established, was being implemented through initiatives such as scholarships and school feeding programs aimed at overcoming barriers like financial constraints and nutritional deficiencies that often impede girls' attendance. According Key Informant 03 (Personal Communication, September 15, 2023) “both the National and County governments are providing bursaries to girls to enhance enrollment. We also have school feeding programs to improve retention and completion rates.” Economic empowerment was also identified as another pivotal avenue, with vocational training and entrepreneurship programs tailored to women and girls. This was captured by one FGD participant, who said: “some NGOs are providing women with small loans for their businesses, and also training them on business skills” (FGD participant C04, Personal Communication, September 11, 2023).

Another strategy of promoting gender equality that is being implemented in in the study area, as identified by study participants, is improving access to healthcare services, particularly in areas such as reproductive health and maternal care. It emerged during FGDs and interviews that the Isiolo County government has been enhancing healthcare infrastructure, training providers in gender-sensitive care, and implementing community health outreach programs. This is an effective strategy because similar strategies have worked elsewhere (Stephens, Sieckelinck, & Boutellier, 2019). Encouraging women's political participation was also identified as another strategy that is being implemented by various actors, especially non-governmental organizations.

Nonetheless, the study reveals that the aforementioned initiatives are hampered by weak governance structures and corruption, which undermines the delivery of essential services and erodes public trust in state institutions. This was a common theme in all FGDs and interviews with main respondents. For instance, one FGD participant said: “the county government spends most of its budget on allowances, leaving very little for development. That is why Isiolo does not have hospitals and good schools like the rest of Kenya” (FGD Participant B02, Personal Communication, September 04, 2023). Another respondent said: “These people (government officials) are moving around in big cars, and attending seminars in big hotels, yet there are no hospitals in the County. If they could prioritize their budget expenditure, all of us would benefit from devolution, and Al Shabaab would find it very difficult to recruit here” Main Respondent 073, Personal Communication, September 27, 2023).

Such sentiments can lead to feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, creating fertile ground for extremist narratives that promise alternative governance and justice systems. This research underscores the critical role of gender dynamics in shaping effective CVE strategies, particularly by incorporating local perspectives and addressing the socio-political challenges faced by communities in Isiolo County.

Fostering Dialogue

As shown in Table 3, fostering dialogue emerges as a critical strategy in the fight against violent extremism and the promotion of social cohesion. With 62% of respondents identifying it as an enabler, fostering dialogue represents a cornerstone for community resilience and conflict prevention. The identification of fostering dialogue as a significant enabler of women's engagement in CVE reflects the recognition among respondents of the critical role communication plays in addressing the underlying drivers of violent extremism. This finding underscores the recognition by study participants of dialogue as a cornerstone of CVE efforts.

The identification of dialogue as an enabler aligns with existing literature on CVE, which emphasizes the importance of community engagement and participation in countering violent extremism. According to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2014) fostering open and inclusive dialogues enables communities to create spaces for discussing grievances, address misconceptions, and build mutual understanding and trust. Similarly, Pearson, Winterbotham, & Brown, (2020), aver that dialogue allows for the exploration of shared values, aspirations, and concerns, ultimately promoting social cohesion and resilience against extremist ideologies. The authors emphasize the value of dialogue as a means of challenging extremist narratives, deconstructing stereotypes, and promoting alternative perspectives that emphasize peace, tolerance, and coexistence. Moreover, Nonet, Gössling, Tulder, and Bryson (2022) suggest that inclusive dialogue processes, involving diverse stakeholders including women, youth, religious leaders, and civil society, are more effective in addressing the root causes of conflict and fostering sustainable development.

The study established that regular community forums and discussions serve as platforms for individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together and engage in open dialogue in the study area. Facilitated by community leaders or civil society organizations, these forums provide opportunities to address grievances, share perspectives, and build mutual understanding. The study also confirmed that interfaith dialogue forums are also conducted regularly in the study area, to promote tolerance and counter extremist narratives. According Key Informant 01 (Personal Communication, September 12, 2023), “by bringing together religious leaders and members of different faith communities, these dialogues create spaces for dialogue on common values, fostering respect and solidarity among religious groups”.

The study further established that youth and women are engaged in community dialogue forums. As explained by one female respondent, “youth and women also participate in community dialogues, and our views are usually considered and integrated into CVE efforts” (Main respondent 037, Personal Communication, August 31, 2023). Nonetheless, the study reveals that while youth and women are participating, there's a notable absence of forums specifically led by them, and that men tend to take the lead in the dialogue forums. This could indicate a need for more inclusive and diverse leadership within these dialogue spaces. Recognizing and addressing this imbalance can lead to more equitable and representative discussions that better reflect the perspectives and experiences of all community members. This finding brings to the fore highlight a crucial aspect in fostering inclusive dialogue to counter violent extremism: the need for more diverse and

representative leadership within these dialogue spaces. Women and youth are actively participating, which is a positive sign, but their voices may not be fully heard or empowered if men consistently dominate the leadership roles.

Qualitative data reveals that women and youth in the study area face systemic barriers to socio-economic and political participation. For instance, one participant at a women's FGD said: "women are relegated to subordinate roles, like home keeping. Girls school enrolment is still very low, and this limits their economic opportunities" (FGD Participant E02, Personal Communication, October 1, 2023). Related sentiments were expressed by an interviewee, who said: "women still face challenges in CVE activities because generally, women in Isiolo are less educated than men. Girls school completion rates are very low, so women cannot engage with confidence" (Main respondent 09, Personal Communication, August 7, 2023).

Addressing Underlying Social Issues

As can be seen in Table 3, a significant proportion of the respondents (60%) identified addressing underlying social issues as an enabler of women's engagement in CVE. Respondents mentioned several underlying issues that they perceived to be drivers of violent extremism in the Northern Kenya region, and which they felt if addressed, could mitigate vulnerability to VE recruitment.

One recurrent theme in all interactions with study participants was that of economic marginalization. There was a general consensus among study participants that addressing the high levels of poverty and limited economic opportunities in Isiolo County and the northern Kenya region in general, would reduce vulnerability to recruitment into violent extremist groups. For instance, one female respondent said: "the main driver of CVE in Northern Kenya is poverty. Our youths are vulnerable to recruitment by Al Shabaab because they are promised a regular income, which they otherwise cannot have" (Main respondent 023, Personal Communication, August 20, 2023); Similar sentiments were expressed by a former member of a violent extremist (VE) group "It is not easy for us to get employment in Kenya because the government has refused to give us national identification (ID) cards. We now have no choice but to seek employment in Somalia, where nobody asks for an ID. Definitely Al Shabaab does not ask for an ID." (Main respondent 011, Personal Communication, August 14, 2023)

The abovementioned sentiments are congruent with Okwany (2020), who avers that lack of sustainable livelihood options exacerbates vulnerabilities, particularly among marginalized communities such as pastoralists and women-headed households. Gelot and Hansen (2019) also posit that economic marginalization creates fertile ground for recruitment by extremist groups offering financial incentives or promises of a better future. The perception that the country has encountered economic marginalization affirms the findings of Kitonny (2011), who says that northern Kenya is vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment to VEOs a history of political exclusion, poor educational opportunities, and economic inequality

The study also established that competition for pasture is a major underlying issue that study participants felt should be addressed. According to Isiolo County Government (2023), the County is largely arid or semi-arid, with livestock production as the economic mainstay. However, regular draughts have resulted the various communities in the County to compete over scarce pasture and water resources (Kumssa, 2021; Okwany, 2020). This is compounded by the County's diverse ethnic composition, with the pastoral communities, including the Borana, Samburu, and Turkana, frequently clashing over access to grazing land and water points. According to Kumssa (2021), this often leads to intercommunal tensions and conflicts. Guyo (2021) and Maina (2020) further argue that ethnic rivalries and resource disputes fuel grievances, which extremist groups may exploit to mobilize support and sow discord.

Qualitative data confirmed the information obtained from secondary sources, with one key informant averring "one of the biggest drivers of conflict in this region is competition for pasture and water. Here in Isiolo, things can flare up any time, especially during draught. Usually, extremist elements take advantage of such flare ups to plant discord and hate among communities" Key Informant 13 (Personal Communication, September 30, 2023). Another key informant said: "sometimes politicians take advantage of the competition for resources to sow seeds of discord among the different communities, further fueling disenchantment" Key Informant 08

(Personal Communication, September 25, 2023).

Addressing these underlying social issues, particularly those affecting women, is crucial for fostering greater engagement in CVE efforts and building resilience against violent extremism in Isiolo County.

Empowering Women in Community Leadership

The recognition of empowering women in community leadership as an enabler of women's engagement in countering violent extremism (CVE) as shown in Table 3, reflects a growing acknowledgment of the pivotal role women play in promoting peace and security at the grassroots level. This finding resonates with existing literature highlighting the importance of gender-inclusive approaches in CVE initiatives.

Research from various conflict-affected regions globally underscores the positive impact of women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts (Mofya, 2022; Shepherd, 2015). According to Asante and Shepherd (2020), women often bring unique perspectives, skills, and experiences to the table, contributing to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions to violence and extremism. Eddyono and Davies (2018) also argue that empowering women in leadership positions not only enhances their agency and socio-economic status but also challenges traditional gender norms and promotes gender equality within communities.

In the context of this study, it emerged that several strategies are being implemented to empower women in community leadership, fostering their active participation in decision-making processes and promoting their roles in countering violent extremism (CVE). Some of these strategies include leadership training programs organized by various NGOs. According to one key informant "Our NGO offers leadership training programs tailored specifically for women here in Isiolo County. These programs aim to equip women with the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to take on leadership roles within their communities." (Key Informant 05, Personal Communication, September 26, 2023). The informant further said: "the training sessions cover topics such as conflict resolution, negotiation, public speaking, and project management, empowering women to effectively engage in community development initiatives and CVE efforts". Another key informant said: "I know an organization that runs mentorship programs, where aspiring female leaders are paired with experienced mentors who provide guidance, support, and encouragement as they navigate their leadership journey" (Key Informant 013, Personal Communication, September 29, 2023).

Nonetheless, this study established that efforts to empower women in community leadership are faced by challenges posed by deeply entrenched cultural belief systems, fueling the perception that women's primary roles are within the household. This conclusion was informed by qualitative data which revealed that women leaders sometimes face stigma. For instance, one key respondent said: "women who participate in our programs sometimes face stigma due to stereotypes and discrimination, especially when they seek leadership positions" (Key Informant 05, Personal Communication, September 26, 2023).

Engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms

The finding that 55% of respondents mentioned engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms reflects a growing recognition of the pivotal role men and boys play in promoting gender equality and addressing harmful stereotypes. In Isiolo County, as in many other contexts, traditional gender norms often perpetuate inequalities and contribute to the marginalization of women and girls. By involving men and boys in efforts to challenge these norms, communities can foster more inclusive and equitable societies. Engaging men and boys in discussions about gender roles, power dynamics, and harmful practices can lead to greater awareness and understanding of the impact of traditional gender norms on individuals and communities. It can also encourage men and boys to become allies in the fight for gender equality, advocating for change within their families, communities, and institutions.

The finding aligns with existing literature, which highlights the importance of involving men and boys in gender equality initiatives. Research has shown that engaging men and boys can lead to positive outcomes, including reduced violence against women, improved health and well-being outcomes for all genders, and

increased support for women's empowerment (Dworkin, Fleming, & Colvin, 2015; Jewkes, et al., 2015). Moreover, studies have emphasized the need for comprehensive approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality and involve multiple stakeholders, including men and boys, in efforts to challenge harmful gender norms (Peacock & Barker, 2014). The authors argue that awareness campaigns, empowerment programs, and the involvement of male champions of change are effective strategies for promoting gender equality and challenging harmful gender stereotypes. Similarly, fatherhood and parenting programs, peer education, and collaboration with community leaders and institutions have been recognized as key approaches for engaging men and boys in efforts to transform gender norms and promote gender equity (Dworkin, Fleming, & Colvin, 2015; Jewkes, et al., 2015).

This study finds that the strategies being implemented in Isiolo County to engage men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms aligns with existing literature. The study found that initiatives such as education and awareness campaigns, empowerment programs for men and boys, and the promotion of positive fatherhood practices are being implemented in Isiolo County. For instance, the study found evidence of community-based education and awareness campaigns, organized to sensitize men and boys about the negative impacts of traditional gender norms and practices on women and girls. According to one key informant from one of the implementing organizations, “these campaigns aim to foster a deeper understanding of gender inequality issues and promote empathy, respect, and solidarity among men and boys towards women's rights and empowerment” (Key Informant 08, Personal Communication, September 27, 2023). A related program, being implemented by a different organization, involves identifying and supporting male champions of change within communities, to promote gender equality and challenge traditional gender norms. According to one key informant from the implementing organization, “the identified male advocates are empowered to actively speak out against gender-based discrimination and violence, and to serve as positive role models for other men and boys” (Key Informant 014, Personal Communication, October 2, 2023).

Nevertheless, engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms is faced with challenges similar to those faced by the efforts to empower women in community leadership: deeply entrenched traditional gender norms. According to one key respondent: “our culture is deeply ingrained, and challenging these norms can be met with resistance from both men and women who have internalized these beliefs” (Key Informant 014, Personal Communication, October 2, 2023). Another key informant said: “expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity can limit individuals' willingness to challenge traditional gender norms. Men may feel pressure to conform to rigid ideals of masculinity, which discourage expressions of vulnerability or emotions associated with femininity” (Key Informant 014, Personal Communication, October 2, 2023).

DISCUSSIONS

The findings from the study illuminate the significant enablers of women's engagement in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts in Isiolo County, revealing a multifaceted interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors. The consensus among participants that promoting gender equality is fundamental underscores the urgent need to address the entrenched gender disparities that hinder women's participation. This recognition aligns with existing literature that advocates for gender-responsive approaches to CVE, positing that gender equality not only enhances the effectiveness of interventions but also fosters community resilience and social cohesion.

Fostering dialogue emerged as a critical strategy, with a notable 62% of respondents underscoring its importance. The study's findings corroborate existing research that emphasizes the role of open and inclusive communication in mitigating grievances and building mutual understanding. Community dialogue forums, including interfaith discussions, provide vital platforms for diverse voices, yet the lack of women-led initiatives highlights a significant gap in inclusivity. The need for equitable representation in leadership within these dialogue spaces is paramount to ensure that women's perspectives are adequately addressed and integrated into CVE efforts.

Addressing underlying social issues, particularly economic marginalization, is imperative for enhancing women's engagement in CVE. The consensus among participants regarding poverty as a principal driver of vulnerability to violent extremism aligns with broader findings that link economic disenfranchisement to

susceptibility to radicalization. The study highlights the necessity of targeted interventions that provide sustainable livelihood opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups, including women-headed households. Additionally, the competition for scarce resources exacerbates tensions and vulnerabilities, indicating that addressing environmental and resource-based conflicts is essential for fostering peace and stability.

Empowering women in community leadership is recognized as a critical enabler, reflecting a growing acknowledgment of women's roles in peacebuilding. The study's findings resonate with global research that illustrates how women's participation in decision-making processes contributes to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions to conflict. However, challenges such as cultural beliefs and stigma associated with women in leadership positions persist, hindering progress. The implementation of leadership training programs and mentorship initiatives is crucial for overcoming these barriers and facilitating women's empowerment within their communities.

Engaging men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms is also vital for promoting gender equality. The findings reveal a significant recognition of the role men can play as allies in the fight against gender-based discrimination. Educational campaigns and the identification of male champions of change are effective strategies for transforming harmful gender stereotypes and fostering a culture of respect and solidarity. However, resistance rooted in traditional beliefs poses challenges to these initiatives, necessitating a nuanced understanding of the cultural context in which these efforts are situated.

Overall, the study emphasizes the interconnectedness of gender dynamics, social issues, and community engagement in enhancing women's involvement in CVE initiatives. By addressing these enablers and challenges holistically, stakeholders can create more inclusive and effective strategies that leverage women's contributions to building peace and resilience against violent extremism in Isiolo County.

CONCLUSION

The main findings from this study underscore the interconnectedness of efforts to promote gender equality, empower women in community leadership, and engage men and boys in challenging traditional gender norms, particularly within the context of countering violent extremism (CVE).

Firstly, the study highlights a strong consensus among participants regarding the importance of gender equality as a fundamental principle in CVE efforts. Recognizing that gender disparities and inequalities can exacerbate vulnerabilities to radicalization, respondents emphasized the need for creating a level playing field where women have equal opportunities, rights, and access to resources.

Efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Isiolo County are multifaceted, encompassing initiatives such as enhancing access to education, economic empowerment, and healthcare services. Strategies such as scholarships, vocational training, and healthcare infrastructure improvements aim to overcome barriers that hinder women's participation and leadership roles in the community.

Furthermore, fostering dialogue emerges as a critical strategy in CVE and social cohesion efforts, with respondents highlighting its importance in addressing underlying drivers of violent extremism. Community forums and interfaith dialogue platforms provide opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage in open discussions, share perspectives, and build mutual understanding.

However, the study also identifies significant challenges that impede these initiatives. Weak governance structures and corruption undermine the delivery of essential services, eroding public trust in state institutions and hindering progress in promoting gender equality. Moreover, deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and societal norms perpetuate gender disparities and discrimination, posing obstacles to efforts aimed at empowering women and challenging traditional gender norms.

RECOMMENDATION

In light of these findings, the study emphasizes the importance of comprehensive and sustained efforts to

address these challenges.

Strengthening governance is essential for fostering gender equality and social cohesion. This can be achieved by implementing governance reforms that enhance transparency and accountability, ensuring that all genders have equitable access to resources and decision-making opportunities. Such reforms would help to create an environment where everyone, regardless of gender, can contribute to and benefit from governance processes.

Enhancing access to education and economic opportunities, particularly for women and girls, is another key recommendation. Expanding educational programs that focus on vocational training, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy will empower women and promote their economic independence. These efforts will also contribute to the overall economic development of communities by ensuring that women are equipped with the skills and resources needed to succeed.

Promoting women's political participation is crucial for achieving gender equality. Encouraging and supporting women's involvement in political processes through leadership training, mentorship programs, and the creation of gender-sensitive political environments will help women become more active participants in governance and decision-making. These efforts will also inspire future generations of women to pursue leadership roles in politics and other areas of public life.

Education and awareness campaigns are recommended to raise awareness about gender equality and the benefits of social inclusion. By targeting schools, workplaces, and community centers, these campaigns can promote a broader understanding of the value of gender equality and encourage individuals to support more inclusive practices in all areas of life.

Fostering inclusive dialogue is vital for building peace and social cohesion. Facilitating forums for discussion among community members, government, civil society, religious leaders, and local stakeholders provides a platform for addressing issues related to gender equality and peacebuilding. These dialogues will help to bridge gaps in understanding and foster collaboration among different sectors of society in promoting social harmony.

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