

Case 2: Trust Between Community Women and Police as a Resource for Prevention and Reintegration



Country	Kenya	Thematic Areas	
Organization	Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security Africa (AWAPSA)	Policy	Security
Programme	Strengthening Women and Girls' Resilience Against Violent Extremism	Community	Ideology

Summary

Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security Africa (AWAPSA) bridges the relationship between returnees and the local police, fostering trust that is critical for effective reintegration and prevention of further radicalization or recruitment to violent extremism. AWAPSA works with women and youth affected by violent extremist groups by offering support groups, assistance with education and livelihoods development, and training on the signs of radicalization. More than 100 women and girl returnees have been assisted by AWAPSA through mentorship and help with relocation, returning to school, and starting businesses. Through their police canteen programme, they build trust between women community members and the police, and facilitate an exchange of information, so they can better prevent violent extremism.

Context

Al-Shabaab, which emerged from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2007, was among the most active terrorist groups in the world in 2014, according to preliminary data from START's Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Since 2007, Al-Shabaab has carried out more than 1,700 terrorist attacks, killing more than 4,000 and wounding more than 4,000. The number of attacks attributed to Al-Shabaab has increased rapidly from less than 10 in 2007 to more than 800 in 2014.

While the number of casualties caused by Al-Shabaab increased at an even greater rate, the lethality of the group's attacks (2.4 deaths per attack, on average) has actually declined by 11 percent in recent years.²²⁰ As Al-Shabaab's activity increased in Somalia, the group also expanded its activity into Kenya in response to Kenyan forces intervening in Somalia. In 2014, Al-Shabaab carried out more than 80 attacks in Kenya, more than double the number of attacks (37) that it carried out there in 2013. These attacks primarily occurred in Mandera (19 attacks), Nairobi (9 attacks), Mombasa (9 attacks), Garissa (7 attacks), and Wajir (5 attacks).

Mombasa County has been a hotbed of extremist violence over the years. Home to many Somali immigrants, it has long been prone to insecurity. In Mombasa, youth join Al-Shabaab looking for role models as well as jobs and further education. While there are no estimates of how many women and girls have joined Al-Shabaab, the Kenya Community Support Centre reports that over 10,000 youth from the Kenyan coast region have been recruited.²²¹ In 2015, Kenya observed women joining Al-Shabaab, and "Halima" was arrested in Machakos on

²²⁰ START (2017), Annex of Statistical Information: Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 (available at: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/272485.pdf>).

²²¹ Wanyonyi, Diana (2018), "Escape from Al-Shabaab: 'I was turned into a sex slave.'" Deutsche Welle.

3 April. Police claimed she recruited two other Kenyan women, Maryam Said About and Khadija Abdulkadir Abubakar, together with medical student Ummul Khayr Sadir Abdalla from Zanzibar.

Detectives allege that Khadija, Maryam and the Zanzibari were recruited through the internet after meeting in an online forum managed by a Kenyan fugitive in Somalia. They were lured by a Syrian woman with the promise of being married off to ISIS fighters in Somalia and eventually ending up in Syria, which they hoped to reach through Turkey after flying from Mogadishu.

Police officers and AWAPSA spoke to the recruits, who were duped into believing that they will lead a good life. Relatives are often not forthcoming with information to help with investigations until they realize that their kin could be in danger.

For example, three young women were arrested in Elwak on the Somali border, while two other young women, also suspected of travelling to Somalia, disappeared. During the same month, two other young Kenyan women, students, confessed to their families that they had gone to Syria to join ISIS. Following partners and husbands to Somalia is a leading motivator for many women. Others are trafficked to Somalia, lured by the promise of work, educational scholarships, or even marriage, and instead find themselves held captive by Al-Shabaab.

Once with the group, women perform various roles including supporting operations, gathering intelligence, facilitating financial transactions, and recruiting new members. Women returnees report exploitation and abuse, and have physical and psychological scars. Women left behind by their male family members are often left with no livelihood and become more vulnerable to early and forced marriage and violent extremist recruitment. There has also been an increase in women's participation in violent extremism in Kenya, as extremist groups in Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa, and Lamu counties are all actively recruiting them. Religion is often used as a recruitment tool, and women's lack of knowledge about Islam leaves them vulnerable. A needs assessment conducted by AWAPSA indicates that women serve as brokers, connecting recruiters to potential recruits. The secretive recruitment targets widows and desperate women during wedding ceremonies and burial occasions as well as at selected salons and marketplaces. The groups increasingly use women as suicide bombers, including during the attack on the central police station in Mombasa in September 2016.

If and when women and girls return to Kenya, they are afraid of their communities and the police. In fact, many have been arrested and remain in jail, even for speaking on the phone with friends in Syria or Somalia. Security forces view all returnees as criminals. Kenya's National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism, which was launched in 2016, addresses disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration, and advocates for increasing government capacity in these areas. While the strategy identifies psychosocial support, reconciliation of families, skills building, and community engagement to reduce stigma, it fails to incorporate a gender perspective and thus neglects challenges and needs specific to women and girls.

The National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) maintains full control over the implementation of the National Strategy, and despite a significant gap between its capacity and the goals stated in the strategy, the NCTC exerts tight control over which CSOs can work on the topic and what programming they can do. Last year, the government wanted to grant amnesty for some youths returning from Al-Shabaab; however, due to the lack of a legal framework, there was mistrust and uncertainty over what would happen. The youths disappeared.²²⁷

²²² Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security (AWAPSA).

²²³ SDE (2016), Terror: How jihadist group ISIS agents are recruiting gullible youths (available at: www.sde.co.ke/thenairobi/article/2000163081/terror-how-jihadist-group-isis-agents-are-recruiting-gullible-youths).

²²⁴ Advocacy for Women in Peace and Security (AWAPSA)

²²⁵ The East African (2018), "Somalia: Al-Shabaab - Inside the Ranks of Women Fighters," (available at: <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/ea/Al-Shabaab-women-fighters-/4552908-4285476-irtk4iz/index.html>).

²²⁶ Remarks by Sureya Roble, GSX Oslo workshop, April 2018.

²²⁷ Ibid.

Established in 2016, AWAPSA is a national organization with almost four million members that aims to empower women politically, economically, and socially, and advocate for women in leadership positions so that they can work on crucial issues like security. In order to incorporate civil society and women’s perspectives into policies at the national level, AWAPSA works with the authorities, particularly the NCTC, which is the coordinating body for all CVE work in the country. In addition to supporting the creation of country-level strategies on CVE, AWAPSA is part of a coalition developing a Women’s CVE Charter as a supplement to the National Strategy, integrating missing gendered dimensions and practical guidance for implementation.

OBJECTIVES

- Build trust and rapport between communities, the police, and other security actors
- Rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees from violent extremist groups, especially women and girls

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDERS

- AWAPSA
- Community leaders
- University students
- Survivors of terrorism
- Women leaders
- HAKI Africa
- Human Rights Agenda
- Coast Education Centre (COEC)
- Moving the Goal Posts (MTG), a Kenyan sport for development organization

SECONDARY STAKEHOLDERS

- Sisters without Borders (SwB)/Maendeleo Ye Wanawake Organization
- Local police
- National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC)
- Anti-Terror Police Unit
- Ministry of Gender
- National Gender and Equality Commission

Strategy and Implementation

Since 2016, AWAPSA has worked with more than 100 women and girl returnees, some of whom need to relocate because they cannot return home due to community stigma. For instance, if they have children or HIV, the stigma is compounded. Through referrals from partners and word of mouth, and informed by its public support desk, AWAPSA is able to reach families in need of this support. AWAPSA engages the affected families and individuals through its own presence in the community and professional resource persons who offer psychosocial support.

AWAPSA assists them with returning to school or opening their own businesses and convenes them in small groups for mutual support. These informal peer support counselling groups for returnees, including women, help prevent a return to extremist groups. Before initiating mentorships, AWAPSA designed a curriculum highlighting key issues, with the women’s participation. The Ministry of Gender has a microfinancing component, which provides seed money and technical support to groups of 40 women. As a result, AWAPSA is able to refer girl returnees to vocational training to finish their education. AWAPSA also collaborates with some private sector entities to provide financial assistance to the returnees. The socioeconomic support is critical to their recovery.



AWAPSA brings together women from the community with police to engage in direct dialogue

AWAPSA has learned that unstable homes with missing father figures is a driving force for youth to join extremist groups. High poverty levels among the Mombasa coastal communities is also a contributing factor, along with the marginalization of the region by the government. In response, AWAPSA has hosted community forums for youth in university and launched a mentorship programme to provide additional support that also bridges religious differences between Christians and Muslims. Women receive training on psychosocial support skills and are then able to offer peer counselling. They conduct trainings on countering the religious narrative of violent extremist groups, which also promotes critical thinking skills.

AWAPSA holds dialogues with women to sensitize them to the issue of violent extremism, focusing on its impact; the important role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism; and the true, non-violent meaning of jihad. They also developed the “Walking with the Police Forums” to build trust between women and local officers, who have often victimized women and created a lot of fear. In these forums, the police go into the community to meet with local people to discuss the issues affecting that particular area and find ways of addressing the challenges they face. The sessions are moderated by an expert and cover topics including the effects of violent extremism, the role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism, and the importance of psychosocial support. This has laid the groundwork for AWAPSA’s reintegration programming by encouraging the returnees to disclose their experiences and inspiring them to becoming living examples for those who have faced similar difficulties.

Women and men can assume leadership roles and create a community policy to ensure safety. It also promotes an opportunity for early warning and response to incidents of violence and recruitment. In addition, AWAPSA has developed a relationship with the Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU), which considers them a knowledgeable resource. ATPU comes to them to gather information from women religious leaders, who provide counselling to women who have experienced trauma as a result of joining extremist groups.

Progress and Results

- 268 women and girl returnees shared their stories with police by meeting twice a month at the police station. The dialogues revealed important information on recruitment efforts, messaging, channels of communication, and transformation signs, and can be used for early warning and counter rhetoric efforts. For example, they explained how they were lured by the promise of a job and identified the emerging ideology of Jihad al Nikah.
- Other police stations have approached them for training to implement similar programmes.
- 40 women and 10 men have benefited from the peer mentoring sessions.
- 30 youth have initiated businesses and received tenders from the county government.

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- Establishing MOUs between the police and the community members enhances data sharing and prevention planning.
- It is critical to cooperate with law enforcement and find a balanced amount of criticism, as too much will negatively impact the relationship.
- Both women and the police lack religious knowledge, which is important for counter-narratives.

Sustainability and Potential Application

The rehabilitation and reintegration work that AWAPSA undertakes is embedded within existing multifaceted programmes to address violent extremism and promote peace and resilience, which engage diverse stakeholders at the community and national levels. Therefore, the organization is able to identify, build trust with, and meet the needs of returnees while also facilitating an enabling environment in the community through relationships with law enforcement, community leaders, women scholars, and other key stakeholders.

This case demonstrates the importance of civil society-led initiatives due to their greater accessibility and flexibility, thus filling a critical gap that responds to both security and humanitarian needs of society. However, such initiatives face an incredibly challenging and precarious operational environment that often leaves women practitioners and other civil society actors at risk of legal prosecution for their engagement of returnees potentially affiliated with terrorism. This ambiguity is a threat but also provides a space for responding to otherwise unaddressed needs in a timely and efficient manner that bypasses bureaucracy.



Sureya Roble (left), AWAPSA, with Halima Mohamed of the Coast Education Centre (COEC)