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Original Article

## Women Terrorists and Violent Actors in the Lens of the Media in Kenya: 1980-2019.

Catheline Nyabwengi Bosibori

<sup>1</sup> University of Bayreuth, 95447 Bayreuth, Germany.

\* Author Correspondence ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0132-4229>; Email: [Cathelinyabwengi@gmail.com](mailto:Cathelinyabwengi@gmail.com).

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the increasing role of women in violence and terrorist-related activities across the globe, stereotypes depicting violence and terrorism as a male sphere continue to shape and, in some cases, prevent the authentic presentation of women terrorists and violent actors. Essentially, war and violence are attributed to men and masculine traits. Accordingly, women are mainly presented as intrinsically vulnerable, coerced actors, or violence victims in violence and terrorism. The media plays an essential role in disseminating information about terrorism and violence to the public. However, it does not operate in a vacuum, and thus, reportage of violence and terrorism at times reflects the prevailing cultural gender stereotypes of war and violence. This paper explores how the media present women terrorists and violent actors in Kenya. It also explores how this presentation impacts security initiatives and counter-terrorism strategies in the country. The paper uses accessible evidence from media reports on various female terrorists, terrorist attacks, and security operations to examine these aspects. It argues that the media labels women terrorists as vulnerable and focuses on their age, physical outlook, and statuses rather than the violent act perpetrated. Such presentation paints an image of irrational, naïve, coerced female terrorists and victims of violence. Accordingly, the paper recommends that the media-mediated images must not influence the implementation of anti-terror and violence policies since they do not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground.

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**INTRODUCTION**

On January 15, 2019, armed men with guns and explosives attacked the DusitD2 Hotel complex in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 21 individuals (Sevenzo et al., 2019). The late Ali Salim Gichunge was identified as one of the bombers in the attack (Abdi & Wambu, 2019). However, several women assailants involved in the planning of the attack were reported. Among these was Violet Kemunto Omwoyo, who hit the Kenyan media headline as an 'al-Shabaab bride' married to the late Salim (Mburu, 2019; Nation Team, 2019). While Violet is mentioned in the attack, very little was aired concerning her membership and role in the Al-Shabaab attack. Much focus settled on the slain men terrorists, their background, and how they joined al-Shabaab and were later involved in the attack. The story of violent Kemunto as an 'Al-Shabaab bride' raises curiosity on how the media presents suspected women as violent actors. This paper using media reports about Kenya, both local and international, examines how the media presents women as violent actors and terrorism and how this reporting impacts counter-terrorism strategies. Evidence is drawn from available and accessible media reports on violence and terrorism in Kenya from 1980 to 2019. The paper argues that the media presents women violent actors with vulnerability and, as victims, coerced or passive actors in violence. This negatively impacts counterterrorism strategies and initiatives.

While terrorism is as old as humankind, the current wave of terrorism is observed to have begun in the late 1970s (Cronin, 2003). This terrorism is marked with fundamentalism and fanaticism often regarded as emanating from the Muslim countries (Jenkins, 1974). Accordingly, it is generally viewed as religious terrorism (Stigler, Cronin & Ludes, 2005). It is worth noting that there is no single universally accepted definition of terrorism. This is because terrorism and related activities are dynamic and subjective at the same time (Cronin 2003).

Nevertheless, there are key features that characterise terrorism. These include illegality, destruction of property, and loss of lives (Ochieng', 2016). It promotes violence, creating an atmosphere of fear and lack of normalcy (Snow and Brown, 2003). These same features are reflected in vigilante groups that use violence to achieve their end goals across countries. Accordingly, in this paper, the term terrorism will incorporate the activities of such vigilante groups.

**Women Involvement in Violence and Terrorism**

The direct involvement of women and girls in violence has been on a steady increase attracting keen interest from scholars, civil society organisations, and International Nongovernmental Organizations. Scholars like Ali (2018); Mwakimako (2018); Badurdeen (2019); and Sahgal and Zeuthen (2018) have written intensively on the theme of women's engagement in terrorism. These scholars contend that the relationship between gender and terrorism is multifaceted. Evidence across the world and specifically in Kenya point out women involvement in terror organisation and vigilantes. Some women voluntarily join terror groups and organisations, while others are forced. A study on al-Shabaab by Badurdeen (2019; 2020), Ndung'u and Salifu (2017), West (2019), and Harper (2019) indicate that women are an essential component of the al-Shabaab terror group's operations. In Kenya, women play significant background roles in Kenya's vigilante groups (Bosibori, 2017; Nganu, 2019; Kagwanja, 2003; Henningsen & Jones, 2013). These groups include *Mungiki*, *Chinkororo*, *Jeshi la Embakasi*, and *Gaza*. Women's roles in these groups range from combat to non-combat. They include but are not limited to intelligence collection, transportation of arms and weapons, suicide bombing, preparing male actors into war, and fighting and recruiting new members.

Women have been historically enshrined as innocent civilians in the popular imagination

(Steflja & Darden, 2020). Despite the growing roles of both men and women as violent actors, gender stereotypes continue to shape and, in some cases, prevent the authentic presentation of women terrorists and violent actors. Throughout history, women have been regarded as “gentle” creatures whose roles could only be motherly and wifely. Regardless of nationality, culture, and religious differences, these two aspects have been viewed as natural and as a universal purpose of women (Wojtowicz, 2013). Activities related to terrorism are aspects of the public and masculine sphere, thus the widespread assumption that terrorist and violent actors are male (Ortbals & Staudiger, 2018a; 2018b; Eisthain, 1995; Bardall et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2001). There is a presumption that women do not use violence to exercise their political will because of traditional notions of femininity, motherhood, peacefulness, and stability (Banks, 2019). Women terrorists and gang members go unnoticed because their participation in terrorist organisations and violent groups challenges these deeply held assumptions about violence and women.

Many women’s narratives and definitions assume that women are inherently peaceful because of their motherly roles. These roles within the family put many women in positions to act as agents of violence prevention. However, these narratives do not consider that women may use this position to perpetrate violence. Assertions about women’s involvement in violence and violent group have been plagued by stereotypes of women as pawns or victims. For many, acknowledging that women can be terrorists or being able to unleash violence is a contradiction. This is primarily attributed to the small number of women terrorists and violent actors, gender stereotypes that put women at the periphery of violence and terrorism. These stereotypes and focus on the smaller numbers ignore the realities that a single violent act from one terrorist or violent actor can cause property loss, lives and threaten the country’s peace. This reality implies that even the smaller number of women terrorists is worth attention in terrorism and related activities.

### **Media, Women, and Terrorism**

Apart from academia, media houses, companies, and journalists play a critical role in disseminating

information on violence and terrorism. Most media attention has been on acts of systematic terrorism committed by violent groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab, among other local vigilantes in various countries. How the media reports on social dynamics and events influence how the public receives, perceives, and acts on information. This is because the media is the only source of information in scenes and areas where the citizenry cannot reach or access physically. However, it is essential to know that media reporting does not manifest in a vacuum. The media coverage of social issues is directly affected by cultural and social context (Brodie, 2019). Thus, to what extent does the media coverage of violence and terrorism reflect the prevailing culture and stereotypes about gender in society?

The relationship between the media and terrorism is symbiotic. Spencer (2005) contends that the media provides terrorism with the oxygen of publicity. On the other hand, terrorists offer what contemporary media crave most (Nacos & Bloch-Elkon, 2011). These include exceptional, dramatic, and frightening events that attract a large audience. Martini (2018) notes that the media plays a crucial role in reproducing, creating, and reinforcing discourses. The news is often narrated through specific frames of interpretive structures that set certain events within their product contexts. These are culturally specific and are constituted by the interaction of sources, media, and audience. It is against this context the author argues that the media displays great interest in stories of women terrorists because these women contradict the prevailing beliefs about violence and the women (Martini, 2018). In this way, the stories of women terrorists are exceptional and thus can attract a larger audience.

The common frames and lens within which the media presents women who engage in terrorism are victimisation or lack of rationality (Kannan, 2012). In so doing, the presentation removes their capacity to be active agents in terrorism and violence. How some media cover women, violent actors reflect and manifest dominant expansive truths and support the dominant culture by creating a consensus that appears to be grounded on reality and common sense instead of ideology (Gentry & Sjobergy, 2016). The media’s reactions to women’s

involvement in violence classified as terrorism perceive women's roles in terror groups not as terrorism but as women's terrorism. This involves examining a woman terrorist not based on the violent act committed but using their statuses, gender, background, affiliation to other terror members, among others. Also, this terrorism is considered as women partaking out of defence or coercion. Women as violent and terror actors are at once characterised as abnormal personalities motivated and beyond the audience of female perpetrators (Gentry & Sjobergy, 2016). The media's coverage of women terrorists and violent actors focuses on women's possible motivations, while men terrorists' motivations are subsumed by terror groups and their political goals and organisations (Banks, 2019). In so doing, the media focusing on women in this way is beneficial to terror groups. It extends beyond the terrorist act to social conditions, discrimination, and hardships experienced by the given terror or violent group (Hearne, 2009). Beliefs about women involved in terrorism are shaped by embedded patterns of what constitutes proper feminine behaviours. Against these beliefs, women are depicted by media as interlopers in a male domain (Nacos, 2005). This is evident in the media's inability sometimes to explain women terrorists and suicide bombers' motivations.

In media reports, much focus is given to details of women's appearance, status, religion, and age. Particular attention is given to personalised images as a depiction of evil, vampirism, and lesbianism. The attention to women's physical appearance emphasising the beauty, sweet and peaceful nature dramatises the contrast between these women and their violent acts (Martini, 2018). The image created shifts the focus from violent acts to the looks of the women in question. The display of religious and traditional attires (dress code) reinforces the construction of aberrant women. This reporting portrays women terrorists and violent actors as bad Muslims because good women Muslims confine their religious practices to private space (Hussein, 2019). There is also a tendency to downplay information that explains the women's violent acts (Easteal et al., 2015). Typical media reportage of women violent actors in the mad, sad, and bad representation of these women is informed on how the society does gender (Easteal et al., 2015). The

gendered behaviour derived from our culture about femininity regarding women who kill as extra deviant. Violence is incompatible with the conception of a good woman who is supposed to be naturally emotional, a mother, or a passive and cooperative wife (Easteal et al., 2015). Women violent actors challenge the deeply held assumption about women and their capacity to nurture others (Easteal et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly, the media portrays women as violent perpetrators as emotionally unstable or insane victims of violence, deviants, and bad mothers.

Martini (2018) writes that there are aspects of labelling in the media reporting of women as terrorists and violent actors. Using words like 'jihadi brides' is typical labelling of women terrorists, which puts them at the periphery of terrorism (Martini, 2018). This labelling attaches a woman's project to a man's agenda, thus acknowledging women's agency only within marriage frames. Describing women terrorists as daughters of Jihad, Islamic State in Iraq, and Syria (ISIS), Al-Shabaab, and other terror organisations paint women's image as children. Accordingly, these women do not understand the conflict, are naive, and are easily manipulated. Also, the media employs specific words when reporting about women terrorists and violent actors. Terms such as lured, enticed, used, and groomed are passively used. For example, as of February 20, 2015, the Guardian reported that 'women are lured by ISIS' (Malik, 2015). In this way, women emerge as objects and victims of male terrorists who contrastingly exercise their agency.

Kenya has had its share of terrorism and violence, and the media has been essential in disseminating information about these terror and violent attacks. Informed by the preceding discussion, this study examines how the media present women terrorists and violent actors in Kenya. It also explores how this presentation impacts the country's counter-terrorism and violence strategies and initiatives. The study's central argument is that the media efforts to disseminate information to the public on security, violence, and terrorism have created and promoted a male-dominant approach to violence and terrorism in Kenya through some reports and programs both locally and internationally. The media's portrayal and presentation of women terrorists and violent

actors paint a picture of women victims or coerced actors of violence. An image of women vulnerable to violence and need protection is painted more than women who would be a security threat. This leads to gender-blind counter-terrorism strategies.

## MEDIA IN KENYA

The Kenyan media involves media houses, companies, and journalists. Such include the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and several other private companies like Royal Media Services (RMS), Standard Group, and Nation Media Group. Besides these, other individual reporters and investigative journalists disseminate information from diverse aspects of Kenyan life. It is worth noting that the Kenyan media has been vital in disseminating information on security aspects in the country. These range from peacekeeping operations, terror attacks and rescue missions, and stories of suspected and terrorist and violent actors in the country. Reports on these issues involve news on televisions, radios, documentaries, and special programs that focus on security and violence. Some of these programs include *Case Files*, *Inside Story*, and *Jicho Pevu* by Kenya Television Network (KTN), and *Special Assignment* by Citizen TV. Nonetheless, reporting on violence and terrorism in Kenya is not limited to the Kenyan media alone. International media companies and journalists have disseminated information about violence and terrorism in the country. Such include media companies such as Cable News Network [CNN], Aljazeera, British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], the independent, among others. How does the media in Kenya present women, and how does it impact counterterror strategies?

### Media Presentation of Women Terrorists in Kenya

#### *Women as Vulnerable Individuals*

Most of Kenya's newspapers, radios, and television reports present women as vulnerable. In Kenya, under the Act of Parliament of August 2011, the National Gender and Equality Commission recognises pregnant women, widows, orphaned children, and people with disabilities as a vulnerable group. In this sense, vulnerability implies that individuals need extra care and cannot protect

themselves fully, especially in war and terror attacks. With this categorisation, when women violent and terror actors are arrested, some media reports present them with vulnerability. More focus is given to aspects like widowhood, pregnancy statuses, and motherhood. For example, Samantha Louise Lewthwaite is one of the most visible terrorist women who has been involved in at least two of Kenya's terror attacks. Samantha Lewthwaite was reported to have coordinated and executed the Westgate mall attack and the Garissa University attack killing 67 and 147 people, respectively (West, 2019). However, media reports on Samantha Louise Lewthwaite depicted her with widowhood statuses. Instead of identifying her with the real name, nonetheless, she has been commonly called 'the white widow.'

Reporting about Samantha Louise Lewthwaite, the BBC news as of June 6, 2014 headline read that "white widow: Kenya probes Samantha Louise Lewthwaite sighting". The France 24 media house wrote, "Was UK's 'white widow' involved in the Kenya mall attack? (Ball, 2013). Such a question paints a picture of doubt on the participation of Samantha Louise Lewthwaite in the attack. The Reuters's headline read, "Kenya widens mall attack probe, alert for UK' White Widow' (Macharia & Bigg, 2013). Evident in all these media reports is the presentation of Samantha Louise Lewthwaite as a widow. Many of these media reports ignore her formal names and capitalises on her widowhood. The term white widow promotes sympathy towards Samantha Louise Lewthwaite. This is because, generally, widows are regarded as helpless and vulnerable. Therefore, in the Kenyan context, she should be protected, helped, and thus not anticipated to be involved in violence and terrorism as an actor and supporter. Again, painting the picture of a widow extends sympathy to the children of the violent actors. Such implies that arresting her will leave the children as vulnerable orphans. Such sympathy may even spill over and impede the legal processes when such actors are arrested. Justice may not be served based on the act committed but on sympathy for the actor and the children. In this way, the terrorist may be set free, thus endangering the lives of non-combatants.

Some media headlines take away the exact story and the violent actions involved. These include

headlines like “My unborn baby is not kicking- says a woman held over Al-Shabaab links (Otieno, 2019).” This is because much sympathy is channelled to the pregnancy status of the lady and the unborn baby. Pregnant women are also regarded as vulnerable and caregivers in traditional Kenyan societies (Okafor, 2000). Their status call for treatment with a lot of care and respect. This is because a pregnant woman is regarded to be swinging between life and death (Hlatshwayo, 2017). As such, all efforts must be made to protect the mother and ensure safe childbirth. Against this backdrop, there is a natural shift to pregnancy when a woman is in a compromised situation. It is important to note that pregnancy has been exploited to transport weapons in Kenya. For example, as of August 11, 2016, the NTV reported Venessa Wambui, a woman gangster in Nyeri county. Venessa was pregnant when she was found hiding two pistols and several rounds of ammunition in a matatu (Komu, 2016).

Additionally, while Kenya has not registered many cases of pregnancy exploitation in the transportation of arms and weapons, lessons can be learned from other countries on the security implications of blindly extending humanitarian benefits to pregnant women. For example, in 2014, the HILL reported that five women disguised as pregnant executed Tel Aviv’s attack. One woman was Yasmin, an Arab lady disguised as a pregnant Jewish lady (Rudee, 2014). Yasmin dressed as a pregnant woman not just because her “belly” would fit explosives but also because she would not be subjected to a thorough search at a checkpoint. This is because motherhood is viewed as life-giving, while terrorism is life-taking. Women are viewed as inconspicuous thus, to sum it up, pregnant women are seen as the face of innocence in every conceivable way. While Kenya has not registered a faked pregnancy case, such examples from other countries should be an eye-opener on how pregnant women are presented in the media and how this may impact Kenya’s counter-terrorism strategies.

### ***Emotional Appeal to Images of Traumatized Women***

Some media outlets raise negative activism against security operations through shallow coverage of women injured during security operations and

counter-terrorism initiatives. Such coverage negatively impacts counter-terrorism and violence operations. Evidence is drawn from *Operation Linda Nchi (Protect the country)*, *Usalama Watch* (safety watch) operations, and operations against Kenya’s vigilantes. While *Operation Linda Nchi* was a government security response in which Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) were sent to Somalia for peacekeeping. The operation began in 2011 following constant Al-Shabaab terror attacks in the country. In 2012, The KDF soldier joined other African forces in Somalia under African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). In *Operation Linda Nchi*, Women soldiers were initially part of the operation. An interview with a KDF officer in Nairobi who was part of *Operation Linda Nchi* revealed how the media covered the operation made their work hard. He explained that the media capitalised on covering images of women and children injured during the operation. Women soldiers’ roles were phased out after domestic criticism due to media coverage of women injured in action (Bouka & Sigsworth, 2016). Little efforts were made to find out who caused injuries to these women and why they were injured. Even when deployed, the women have pushed away from physically engaging with the enemy. This is based on the cultural sensitivities about women in harm. While these sensitivities are informal, they constitute pervasive practices that keep women from combat roles. Indirectly propagated in this is the concealing of women violent actors who receive immunity based on gender and privacy rights not to be searched by male soldiers.

The criticism is reflected in the media’s coverage of the *Usalama Watch* operation in the country. *Usalama Watch* was a terror-response operation aimed at flushing out Al-Shabaab terrorists from Nairobi. The operation was carried out in 2014 in Media Eastleigh estate, Nairobi. Most media reports about *Usalama Watch* focused on Somali women as victims of violence and police brutality. For instance, Ngwatilo Mawiyoo’s reporting on *Usalama watch* Operation focused more on women who made claims of harassment from the police during the operation (Mawiyoo, 2016). Also, eNews Channel Africa’s (eNCA) coverage of the operation brought out more women victims than widespread abuses on Somali communities in Kenya (eNCA, 2014). While the operation targeted both men and

women, most of the images and interviews presented were from vulnerable women. Such images portrayed the operation as violence against innocent and powerless women. International media houses such as Aljazeera reported about the *Usalama watch* operation too; however, the report was marked with a large picture of a woman who looked threatened and afraid (Halakhe, 2014). Even when the title was on the precarious state of the Somali ethnic group in Kenya, the picture of the woman takes the audience's attention (public). Thus, painting a picture of precarious women as opposed to Somalis being precarious.

In cases where a man, terrorist, or violent actor has been killed, the media often broadcasts the images of their mothers, wives, and children moaning. Such images capture the attention of many readers and grant the media the large audience it requires intention could be to thrive. However, the attention captured reflects the statuses of women related to the violent male actor instead of the violent action that the person in question committed. For example, BBC reported about the crackdown of Gaza violent group members in Nairobi Kayole slums, and their caption read, "I have lost my two husbands in two years (Olewe, 2019)." This caption had a picture of the alleged wife of the Gaza member killed in the police operation against Nairobi's violent groups. The woman is presented weeping, carrying a baby in one hand, and wiping tears using the other hand. A glance at the picture and the caption paints a widow and a single mother whose breadwinner has been killed thus left vulnerable. In this way, the media has stereotyped her on how they present her rather than examine her role in the group because they would not possibly want to cause more 'harm' to her. This is because she is a grieving woman who would rather empathise than do something that would worsen her situation.

Very little is done to discuss this woman's association with the two slain husbands beyond the husband-and-wife relationship. The possibility of her membership in Gaza is assumed. This is the case despite evidence that most Gaza members marry each other and that women play a significant part in ensuring the group's mission's success (Ndungu, 2017). For example, the late Clare Njoki, normally known as the Gaza queen, was a wife to the Gaza leader (ibid). In an interview with the author in

Kayole on September 17, 2020, a male Gaza ex-member noted that women such as the late Njoki and Minaj were very significant in transporting weapons, keeping the group data, and locating areas to be robbed and a victim to attack. They were also very key to the collection of intelligence. It is worth noting that Njoki was a member of the group and a wife to the gang leader at her death. Another interview, an ex-member in Gaza on June 14, 2021, revealed that Njoki was a member of the Gaza before she became the wife to the group leader, and her membership never ceased after this marriage. This then challenges the popular notion that women join insurgency because of their husbands.

### *Women's Comfort Roles in Terror and Violent Groups*

Women in violent groups are only regarded as joining through romantic adventurism. There is a tendency by media houses to link women as violent actors to wifely and the sexual roles in violent and terror groups. When reporting about women violent actors, media reportage focuses on the relationship between the violent female actor and the violent male actors in the group in question. Reporting on three women members of Daesh/ISIS terror group, Juma (2015) wrote that 'three alleged Daesh jihadi brides appear in Kenyan courts'. Such perception of women as "comfort actors" in violence and terrorism gives rise to titles like al-Shabaab brides, jihad brides, wives of al-Shabaab, daughters of al-Shabaab, and *Alshababes* all describing women in violent groups such as al-Shabaab in the country. Such was the case with the three women found crossing the Kenyan border to Somalia in March 2015. Most media reports mainly referred to them as "*Alshababes*" merely interpreted as the girlfriends of Al-Shabaab (Sunday Nation, 2019). Also reporting on three women members of the Daesh terror group, Juma (2015) wrote that 'three alleged Daesh jihadi brides appear in Kenyan courts.'

In the 2019 January DusitD2 complex attack, Violet Kemunto, one of the planners, was always identified with her male accomplice. The Standard Group reporting on Violet Kemunto had a headline "Violet Kemunto: al-Shabaab bride did not mind devil-worshipping make money" (Mburu, 2019). Another story about her whereabouts by NTV held that "al-

Shabaab bride Violet Kemunto escaped to Somalia (NTV Kenya, 2019).” KISS FM reported about her arrest with the headline that ran, “It is over: Violet Kemunto, the flashy al-Shabaab bride arrested (Kerongo, 2019).” Also, Citizen TV referred to her as the wife of a terror suspect, while the Kenyan referred to her as Ali Gichunge’s wife. In explaining the relations with her family, the Standard Group pointed out that “Violet Kemunto is a case of a broken and estranged family with few kinship links” (Wambu, 2019).

In examining all the above reporting by media houses, one thing is clear that almost all of them focused on the Al-Shabaab bride aspect of Violet Kemunto. None of the media houses presented her story without associating her with al-Shabab and bridehood. Violet Kemunto’s story is reported mainly in two ways: 1) the fact that her father died while she was in school. This paints an image of a partial orphan. The fact that the media focuses on her broken kinship brings an image of a woman whose association with that Al-Shabaab was to seek a sense of belonging and love other than a rational personal decision. Therefore, in the eyes of society and the public, she was a vulnerable individual whose actions were externally driven. 2) The idea that she was married to a member of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group. This paints an image of a woman who innocently fell in love with a terrorist. Minimal efforts are made towards addressing her role in the attack. Such presentation portrays women as coerced or irrational actors whose actions are determined by external parties or forces. Additionally, it shows that women fight not because of ideology but because of association with violent male actors.

Additionally, KTN reports on the stories of women ex-al-Shabaab members. The documentary under the program *KTN HOMEGROWN* reads, “al-Shabaab wives tell rough handling within the insurgent (KTN News Kenya, 2019).” Women in this documentary are portrayed as participating in Al-Shabaab because of their husbands other than any other reason, which could be founded on a rational personal decision. The stories are only told from the point where the women are already married. This raises a concern about whether no women joined the groups before marrying the group members. Presenting the story from the single

marriage point depicts the marriage as that which occurred suddenly prehab through coercion. This then serves to portray the women as victims of violence as opposed to rational actors. Many of the respondents in the documentary decried the children left behind by the slain women ex-members. The documentary brings out a picture that mothers are significant in children’s lives, and therefore regardless of the situation, they should be allowed to be with them.

Combining the significance of motherhood in a child’s life in telling the stories of slain or detained Al-Shabaab members takes away the story’s exact point. It brings sympathy towards children who have been left because and women violent actors who had no alternative other than to join the violent groups. The sympathy of this nature and such emotional reporting by the media about these women impedes the desired legal processes on these violent actors and presents a humanitarian aspect that violent groups will keep exploiting for their course’s success-motherhood. Such sympathy has also been exploited in other countries. For example, as of February 14, 2012, the Guardian reports that in petitioning for the release of Osama Bin Laden’s wife, the brother to the wife noted that the children were innocent and already traumatised. He also noted that his sister was a “housewife” who only spent her married life raising their children.

Also, news headlines present women as tools of violence. A tool in this regard implies something that cannot decide when and how it should be used. It is under the control of somebody who decides its usage. Media reportage of violent attacks regards women as being “used” by men violent actors. This paints the image of women as tools of violence, thus less evil or innocent. Reporting about the three women who attacked the Mombasa police station, the Cable News Network (CNN) wrote that ‘Al-Shabaab has used women to carry an attack’ (Mukoto & Duggan, 2016). Such reporting shows the three women in question were either coerced or irrational actors in the attack.

#### ***Daughters of Terror Groups: Naive and malleable Women Terrorists and Violent Actors***

Aljazeera documentary on Kenyan women Al-Shabaab fighters regards them as “Daughters of al-Shabaab (Aljazeera, 2019).” The use of the term

'daughter' to describe these violent women brings an image of a child. Basically, in the traditional African setup, family ties come along with the roles and positions. The respect, responsibility, and perception of the individual's ability to make decisions depends on gender. Ideally, fathers and mothers in a family set up were the most respected, followed by the sons and the daughters in that order. This is because in the traditional African setup and generally in the African social context, a boy child is highly valued compared to a girl child. Boy children are regarded as heirs to the family property and thus can continue the lineage. Informed by this background on doing gender in Africa, the ascription of the name 'daughter' to Al-Shabaab women fighters brings out one clear image—these women fighters are not rational actors in the group because they are only 'daughters.' Also, it paints a picture of the vulnerability of these women fighters. This is because, in Kenya, children constitute part of the vulnerable individuals in society. More explicitly, the girl child (daughters) is seen as more vulnerable and victims of war and violence, thus needing more protection and attention. Additionally, the term "daughters of Al-Shabaab" points to the presence of fathers in the group who control and guide these women [daughters] on what they should do. At the same time, it creates an impression of Al-Shabaab being the father or parent of these women. Perhaps this would be attributed to the idea that Al-Shabaab is a male-dominated group. In this way, any woman in the group is regarded as a daughter of the group. In a patriarchal society, men own and control both the productive and reproductive labour of women.

### ***Physical Appearance and Dress Code: Pretty and the Islam Attire***

Media reportage of violent women actors focuses on their physical outlook, such as beauty. In 2017 there was a heightened crackdown of members of the Gaza violent group in Nairobi. Many of its members, both men and women were killed by police officers, involving a severe shooting between the Gaza members and the police. The media reportage of the women Gaza members killed focused more on their beauty than their role in the group. There was the constant use of the word 'prettiest thug' and 'prettiest gangster' in the presentation of these slain women violent actors

evident in the following media reports. Reporting about the killing of these women, African Exponent wrote that "Kenyan police shoot to death another pretty gangster, Marsha Minaj" (Lepapa, 2017). Reporting about the events that took place during the funeral of one of the women, AllAfrica's headline read that "police arrest three after the funeral of Nairobi's prettiest thug (Gitau, 2017b)." Nairobi News wrote that "Nairobi's prettiest thug buried in the unusual ceremony (Gitau, 2017a)." These media reports used the term "prettiest thug" to describe the two women involved in violent activities. For example, Clare Njoki was a female member responsible for the group's data, photography and storage, and transportation of arms and weapons to the required attack destinations. Instead of identifying Clare with her real name and her role in the group, all the media reports emphasise her physical looks and beauty. The 'prettiest thug' description overshadows Clare Njoki's exact plight in Gaza.

Also, in reporting the three women who attacked police officers in Mombasa Central Police station on September 11, 2016, some media houses focused on the women's physical outlook in question. The Independent's headline read that 'Kenya terror attack: Mombasa police shoot dead three women dressed in Barqus (Withnall, 2016).' This headline by the independent paints two significant pictures. First, the headline is not clear on whether the women in question were attacking the police station or were victims of a shoot-out in the attack. Secondly, Barqus is traditional attire for women in the Islam religion. In this way, focusing on their dress paints a picture of religion regarding violence and terrorism. The latter sends a message to the audience that these women were Muslims. This elicits a negative attitude to killing the women in the story, especially from the Islam community who may feel abuse of the religion and victimisation as violent actors. In this way, the report fails to tell the audience who precisely the three women were in the attack and generate a conflict along religious lines in discussing violence and terrorism in Kenya's public space.

The three women's unclear presentation is also noted in Juma' (2015) coverage of their story. The Voice of America reported that the rights of the three women attackers were violated (Yusuf,

2016)). The heading 'Kenyan Police Accused of Executing 3 Women After Attack' does not bring out these women's image as violent actors despite the physical evidence of their police station's attack. Running away from capturing the exact story right from the heading reveals the media's reluctance in acknowledging women as violent actors in the country. Also, the story focuses more on the violation of the attackers' human rights by the police than the attackers' motive to bomb a police station.

### Missing Stories of Women Terrorists

Some violent women actors are never reported. Their male counterparts overshadow their stories and roles in the attacks, or the reporters choose to ignore them. For instance, in the 1980 bombing of the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi, a man and woman were involved as perpetrators (Mugo, 2013). However, the woman's details are overshadowed by the primary focus on the male counterparts. It is important to note that this woman helped the Moroccan assailant execute the bomb (Mugo, 2013). Although a lot has been well scripted about the man, very little is known about the woman. The media reportage of the woman described her as only to have had a German accent (Mugo, 2013). No more information is given about her. In this way, the media focused more on the male attacker than the lady; thus, concealing one actor in the attack.

Additionally, in the 2019 DusitD2 attack in Nairobi, several women were involved. However, in media reporting, the women are only mentioned by their names. The more significant part of the story is channelled into examining the lives of the violent male actors involved in the attack. The invisibility of women violent actors in media reportage indirectly supports the stereotype that violent and terrorist actors are men. Mentioning women fighters in this story's coverage as by-the-way shows that women are less guilty and more innocent in the world of violence and terrorism; thus, they should not be given more focus. In reality, this is not true. Women play a significant role in collecting intelligence, mapping places to be attacked, transporting arms and weapons to the places to be attacked, and in some cases, participate in a suicide bombing.

### CONCLUSION

Apart from the growing body of literature on women, violence, and terrorism, the media has emerged as a potent tool in disseminating information about violence and terrorism worldwide. However, in reality, the media does not operate in a vacuum, and its reportage and coverage of violence and terrorism reflect the prevailing gender stereotypes about war and violence. In Kenya, how the media presents women fighters in headlines and stories portrays women as victims, coerced, irrational, and invisible actors in violence and terrorism. The violent women actors are presented with their statuses such as motherhood, pregnancy, and widowhood. The focus on these statuses attracts sympathy to the women involved and overshadows the violent act committed.

Also, most media reports focus more on the relationship between women and violent male actors in violent groups. This gives rise to the description of women in violent groups as 'al-Shabaab wives,' 'Al-Shabaab brides,' 'Jihad brides,' 'Alshabaabes,' and 'daughters of Al-Shabaab.' Examining women as violent actors from their relationship with violent male actors and not their roles and motivations in violence and terrorism paints women as less evil, victims of violence, or people perpetrating violence out of emotions and the love for their husbands. This takes away the rational actor aspect of these women fighters. Media reportage also presents women as tools of violence as opposed to actors in violence. There is always the tendency to portray women as 'used' by violent groups or violent male actors to unleash violence. This paints a picture that women cannot control their abilities, make decisions, and decide when and where to partake in violence and terrorism -their male counterparts control them.

Finally, the invisibility of women fighters in the reportage of violence and terrorism events propagates the long-held narrative- men as the only suspects and actors in violence and terrorism. This conceals significant actors in terrorism-women, thus informing gender blind-counter terrorism and violence initiative and strategies. This impact is the case because the media is the eyes and the ears of the people in scenes they cannot physically reach. In this way, how the media presents women as violent

actors impacts how people process this information and use it in policy formulation and execution in matters of violence and terrorism. The gender-skewed reportage by the media depicting women as vulnerable and victims of violence raises negative activism against various security and counter-terrorism initiatives. Such reporting and its impacts create a humanitarian excuse, which creates a security gap exploited by violent groups to plan and execute their attacks.

The preceding discussion shows that if we continue seriously looking only at male terrorists and the violent actors, we are bound to miss the gendered consequences of both female terrorists and the impact that the presentation of female terrorists has on counter-terrorism strategies and initiatives. Portraying women as interlopers in a male domain will ultimately prejudice the efficacy of counter-terrorism and violence policies. Thus, this paper recommends that the media's umpired images of female terrorists and violent actors should not influence counter-terrorism and violence policies and initiatives because they do not always reflect reality.

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