

Gender, countering violent extremism and women, peace and security in Kenya

Headline Facts

Women in parliament ¹	Female labour force participation rate ²	Female literacy rate ³	Child marriage (% women 15-19 years) ⁴	Women's experience of physical violence in lifetime ⁵	Women in Police Force ⁶
21.8%	64.1%	78.2%	13.2%	39%	14%



Gender equality in Kenya

Kenya ranks 109 out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, with a score of 0.671.⁷ There are significant inequalities between males and females in education attainment, health outcomes, representation in parliament, and labour force participation. Women and adolescent girls are the most vulnerable group in Kenya, particularly to poverty: female poverty is exacerbated by gender-based violence (GBV), harmful cultural attitudes, and beliefs around gender roles, norms and female empowerment. Limited control over benefits from land and other resources, as well as unpaid childcare and domestic work, constrains women's successful participation in the economy, particularly as producers and market actors.⁸ Women make up 80% of farm labourers and manage 40% of the country's smallholder farms, yet own only 1% of agricultural land.⁹ Women's ability to access the justice system is limited by legal costs, traditional justice systems, illiteracy and ignorance of rights.¹⁰

Legislation

Kenya has signed international agreements relating to women's rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Legislation to address GBV includes the Matrimonial Causes Act, Sexual Offences Act, Children's Act, Protection against Domestic Violence Act, and Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act. Two action plans have been issued (2016-19; 2020-24) for implementation of the country's commitments on women, peace and security (see box).

Gender-based violence

GBV is common in Kenya. The 2014 Demographic Health Survey found that four in every ten women aged 15-49 were victims of violence before their 18th birthday. Physical, sexual and emotional violence are the most common forms of violence experienced by women in Kenya, followed by economic abuse. Women and girls have been targeted in electoral violence, seen both in 2007 and 2017.¹¹ Western Kenya and Nyanza region, and Nairobi, reported the highest levels of physical and sexual abuse committed by spouses, while Busia, Kiambu, Machakos, Meru, Nakuru, Samburu and Vihiga counties reported the most cases of violence against women overall.¹² Worryingly, a government survey found that five in every ten women aged 15-24 believed and accepted that men had the right to beat up women.¹³ The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a spike in incidents of GBV,¹⁴ largely due to prolonged periods of lockdown (most perpetrators live with the victims) and increased stress.

As well as passing legislation to address the problem (see box) the government has also set up a toll-free helpline for victims of GBV: as of 2017, over 47,000 cases had been reported through the helpline.¹⁵ Other initiatives include Gender Desks in police stations and Gender-based Violence Recovery Centres in major hospitals. Despite this, there are numerous challenges, such as a lack of facilities and resources for survivors, cultural attitudes that tolerate gender-based violence, and a lack of access to justice.

Women and violent extremism

Kenya is a target country for Al-Shabaab. Despite being based in Somalia, since 2011 Al-Shabaab has increasingly carried out attacks in Kenya, and actively recruits there. Between 2011 and 2019 there were 265 Al-Shabaab led attacks in the country;¹⁶ an estimated 10% of the group's militants are thought to be Kenyan nationals.¹⁷ Al-Shabaab appears to actively (and forcibly) recruit women in Kenya,¹⁸ including through social media, religious indoctrination in schools, marriage, employment incentives, and abduction. Factors driving women's support for the group largely reflect those of men: ideology, grievances over socio-political and economic circumstances, etc. – economic pressures are an especially strong motive for women.¹⁹ Groups like Al-Shabaab are adept at exploiting vulnerabilities due to lack of economic opportunities, lack of access to justice, insecurity, and GBV.

Women play diverse roles in Al-Shabaab, including carrying out acts of violence such as suicide bombing, although the group uses women for these far less than Boko Haram.²⁰ Women also play many supporting roles: intelligence gathering, recruitment, fundraising and financial transactions, transporting goods, and domestic chores.²¹ Al-Shabaab treats Kenyan women differently to Somali women: moral codes are enforced more strictly for the latter, meaning they are more likely to be wives while Kenyan women are used as sex slaves and for domestic labour.²² Women returnees from Al-Shabaab face many challenges: there are negligible rehabilitation and reintegration services; they face stigma from their communities (and even their own families); health and trauma issues due to their experiences; fear of arrest by the authorities and of reprisal attacks by Al-Shabaab; and economic hardship²³ – all of which make them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.²⁴

Women and countering violent extremism (CVE) in Kenya

In Kenya, women are largely missing from countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Despite the diversity of women's roles in Al-Shabaab, gender stereotypes persist: women are typically viewed as victims, or as mothers, wives, etc. who can steer their men away from extremism.²⁵ As a result, they have been left out of Kenya's CVE agenda.

Women can play many roles in CVE: they can be returnees/recruiters who, if supported, can help others reject VE/defect/reintegrate; they are ideally positioned to detect and report on signs of violent extremism, especially because women themselves are often the first targets;²⁶ they can be critical interlocutors with government/security agencies, helping shape CVE policies and programmes.²⁷ Women's rights organisations can also play these roles. Having women represented in security agencies builds trust with communities and allows access that would be difficult for men.²⁸

Donor funding and pressure has led to the CVE agenda in Kenya becoming 'an industry'.²⁹ Civil society organisations (CSOs) are shifting to CVE in order to secure funding. Not all are suited for this, and it is detracting attention from other vital development areas. Women-led and women's rights CSOs are particularly suffering, squeezed between the heavy-handedness of the security forces and the funding pressure from donors that sees CVE being prioritised over other issues.³⁰

Women, peace and security

In March 2016, Kenya developed an action plan to support the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) on women, peace and security. The plan focused on four pillars: prevention; protection; participation and promotion, and relief and recovery. Whilst praised for its inclusivity, the plan was criticised for its silence on women's active agency in extremism, and how this should be addressed.³¹ Nonetheless, the plan did lead to some increase in women's involvement in security matters and decision-making: the number of women in local peace committees increased from 14% in 2013 to 29% in 2018; and women in the national police service rose from 8% in 2015 to 14% in 2020.³² In May 2020, the government launched the Kenyan National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2020-2024 (KNAP II). KNAP II identifies duty-bearers' strategies and recognises the role and agency of women and women-led community organisations in peace and security issues. Building on lessons from the first KNAP and with an eye on emerging issues, it specifically targets critical security priorities in the country, including climate change, violent extremism, GBV, forced migration and human trafficking, and humanitarian disasters.³³



Women at the Kalobeyei refugee camp have received the psychological support they need to regain a sense of normality after fleeing conflict and sexual violence.

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