

Beyond Securitisation: A Gendered Peace Studies Approach to Violent Extremism in Kenya

Alternatives: Global, Local, Political
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–21
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DOI: 10.1177/03043754261483421

journals.sagepub.com/home/alt



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Abstract

While dominant global policy frameworks and scholarship often understand violent extremism through securitised and state-centric lenses, this article offers a bottom-up reconceptualisation using a peace studies and gendered approach. Drawing on empirical data from Kenya, the study complicates current understandings by framing violent extremism as a continuum of direct, structural, and cultural violence rooted in everyday grassroots experiences. Utilising arts-based body mapping workshops, focus group discussions, and interviews in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kwale, the research centres participant agency and embodied knowledge to explore how local communities define and experience this violence. The findings reveal that participants conceptualise violent extremism as a multi-layered phenomenon driven by systemic governance failures, human rights violations, and marginalisation, rather than merely radical ideologies or non-state militancy. Crucially, these grassroots definitions are highly gendered. Male participants primarily associated violent extremism with state-sanctioned harms, such as police brutality, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings. In contrast, female participants identified deeply embedded cultural and structural harms, highlighting gender-based violence, specifically Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and intimate partner violence, as profound acts of violent extremism. Ultimately, the article argues that violent extremism is an everyday, relational, and embodied phenomenon. It calls for a departure from narrow counter-terrorism frameworks, advocating instead for holistic, peace-oriented strategies that address the foundational structural and cultural dimensions of violence sustaining this continuum of harm.

Keywords

peace studies, everyday violence, violent extremism, Kenya, gender

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Introduction

In recent decades, violent extremism has become a concern for academics and policymakers in governments and states across the globe, with the rise of extremist violence in places such as Nigeria and Cameroon (see [Juma & Sabala, 2023](#)). There has been a significant push by international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) for Member States to focus on violent extremism. At the same time, academics have taken an interest in the topic, with both theory and policy developing in tandem, dominated by conflict and security studies.

Exploration of violent extremism from a peace studies perspective has largely been confined to peacebuilding and programming approaches aimed at prevention and countering violent extremism, as well as the use of peace education to address it ([Ahmend & Shahzad, 2021](#); [Benjamin et al., 2022](#); [Saraiva & Erfe, 2023](#); [Zhou et al., 2017](#)). More recently, scholars such as [Ford \(2020a\)](#) have begun to study violent extremism from a peace studies approach, focusing on the violence-conflict-peace nexus. We complicate current understandings of violent extremism by proposing a theoretical reconceptualisation that frames it as a continuum of violence rooted in grassroots community experiences, thereby moving beyond dominant securitised approaches to both the concept and affected communities. We argue that violent extremism is not an isolated phenomenon but emerges through intersecting forms of gendered direct, structural, and cultural violence and harm. We do this by applying a peace studies and gendered lens to everyday understandings and experiences, incorporating empirical data from Kenya while building on our existing research around the topic ([Aroussi, 2023](#); [Aroussi et al., 2026](#); [Badurdeen, 2023](#)). Drawing on body-mapping workshops, focus group discussions, and interviews conducted in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kwale in Kenya, this article examines why our participants conceptualise and experience violent extremism in ways that challenge dominant theory and policy. We do so by integrating insights from peace studies theory, gender analysis, and arts-based methods. By foregrounding community agency and embodied knowledge, we offer a nuanced, bottom-up understanding of violent extremism. This reframing supports grassroots-informed strategies that address its structural and cultural dimensions. At the same time, we do not seek to redefine violent extremism as a concept, nor to expand its scope to encompass other forms of violence. Furthermore, we do not aim to generalise our findings to other contexts within Kenya or beyond; rather, our objective is to develop a conceptually grounded understanding rooted in community-level perspectives.

The article begins by introducing current conceptual and policy understandings surrounding violent extremism, an introduction of a peace studies framework, followed by a contextual grounding within the Kenyan case. We then describe our methodological approach, including the use of body mapping. The findings section explores participant-led understandings and definitions of violent extremism, which focus on police brutality, extrajudicial killings, gang violence, and gender-based violence. We conclude by reflecting on our findings and their implications for peace studies and the field of violent extremism research.

Understanding Violent Extremism: Global Policy Framings and Conceptual Ambiguity

Violent extremism emerged as a global concern in the early 21st century, yet its conceptual underpinnings remain contested. Initially framed through UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), violent extremism was ambiguously linked to terrorism, promoting a cascade of prevention-focused policies despite definitional vagueness (see ([UNSCR 1267, 1999](#); [UNSCR 1373, 2001](#); [UNSCR 1535, 2004](#)). [UNSCR 2178 \(2014\)](#) specifically linked violent extremism and terrorism and placed focus on “preventing radicalization, recruitment and mobilization.” The

resolution characterised violent extremism in an obfuscated manner as something “conducive to terrorism” while terrorism itself is an ambiguous concept lacking an agreed universal definition and was not defined by the United Nations (Thiessen, 2019). UNSCR 2178 (2014), combined with the US Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, influenced global development of mechanisms and strategies to counter violent extremism, particularly through localised interventions involving communities and non-governmental organisations (UN General Assembly, 2006).

Focus soon turned towards the prevention with the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon’s Plan of Action (POA) to Prevent Violent Extremism (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) providing no clarity of definition yet recognised the diverse nature of violent extremism encouraging Member States and other related entities to concentrate on prevention through a focus on perceived drivers such as marginalisation, socio-economic issues, discrimination, citizenship issues, and other drivers. This generated comprehensive policies and an industry of programming addressing the prevention and countering of violent extremism, focusing on peace, human rights, development, peacebuilding, and gender policy and programming (see Gelot & Khadka, 2024; Saraiva & Erfe, 2023). More Member States turned their focus towards preventing violent extremism, with programming commonly targeting men based on the perception that they were the primary perpetrators of violent extremism (Aroussi, 2021). This framing was later challenged by the 2015 POA, which sought to mainstream gender and incorporate women into prevention mechanisms and programming. However, this inclusion often lacked critical engagement with the underlying gendered assumptions of violence and extremism, reinforcing binary roles rather than questioning them.

These global frameworks have filtered into regional mechanisms, such as those of the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) which offer broader definitions encompassing communal and sectarian violence. The African Union defines violent extremism as criminal acts, and IGAD focuses on violent extremism as “an inclusive term that includes terrorism and all forms of politically inspired, sectarian or communal violence” (IGAD Regional Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, 2018, 3). These policies and mechanisms have filtered down to state programming and to the civil society sector, integrating prevention tools into peacebuilding and other areas of programming. However, the foundation of violent extremism is somewhat nebulous (Thiessen, 2019) based on international community agendas and perceptions that filter through to donor and funding preferences and feed into our current understandings (Badurdeen & Goldsmith, 2018).

Conceptually, violent extremism theory focuses on violence, radicalisation, and victimisation, drawing on foundational elements from radicalism and extremism theories. Aroua (2018) defines extremism as a measure of “how far from the median,” while radicalism refers to “how close to the root.” Neither necessarily leads to violence. Yet contemporary theorisation often assumes that extreme or radical ideas and actions increase the likelihood of violent extremism. This theory gained traction after 9/11, when the discourse centred on Islamic extremism and fundamentalism. These framings have shaped national plans and programming, which frequently link Islamic fundamentalism/ideology as potential pathways toward violent extremism (Hughes, 2020). Despite these developments, there is limited space to engage holistically with contesting views or to unpack everyday forms of violence that may push individuals toward violent extremism. The conceptual and policy plasticity surrounding violent extremism continues to allow for both positive and negative meaning-making by states, international organisations, civil society, and academia, without departing significantly from original understandings (Altiok & Street, 2020). These frameworks mostly focus on the binary, which erases the complexity of lived experiences, realities and most importantly, power relations (Kappler & Lemy-Herbert 2019).

Interpreting Violent Extremism Through a Peace Studies Lens

Peace studies, with its normative focus on understanding violence, conflict, and conditions needed for peace, offers a unique angle to explore violent extremism. Existing literature largely frames violent extremism as direct violence or open conflict against individuals, groups, places/spaces, and structures often associated with liberal states. Yet, as previously discussed, conceptual ambiguity exists, and research beyond the connections between violent extremism and peacebuilding remains limited (Holmes, 2017; Thiessen, 2019). This is an opportune entry point to build on our current understanding and add depth and nuance to the topic through a holistic, people-centred approach that focuses on causes, including structural, slow, and cultural violence embedded within liberal state systems.

Galtung's seminal typology identifies three forms of violence: direct, structural, and cultural (1990). Visible or direct violence manifests in physical, direct actions and behaviour, including injury, loss, misery, and pain. It is both physical and emotional and is implemented by individuals or groups of individuals. This type of violence can be seen as communicative, meaning it has a message directed at specific audiences (Apter, 1997). On the other hand, structural violence focuses on context and unseen violence embedded within social structures and systems. This type of violence may not be directly evident, but the consequences of such hidden violence may result in equal or even greater suffering, exploitation, or deprivation. This type of violence includes, for example, oppression built into legal frameworks, economic frameworks, and systems and structures. Cultural violence or attitude is another covert form of violence that focuses on the cultural and the symbolic, such as religion, beliefs, ideology, and values, and is used to legitimise and normalise structural and direct violence (Galtung, 1990). While foundational, Galtung's framework lacks any gender framing, reinforcing binaries of "masculine war" and "feminine peace" (Galtung, 1969), a critique advanced by scholars such as Confortini (2006). Additionally, his approach fails to recognise that these forms of violence constitute a broader continuum linking intimate, structural, and state-based harms. They are not discrete or episodic; rather, they represent interconnected manifestations of the same system of gendered violence. (Cockburn, 2004).

Extending this continuum, Nixon (2011) introduces slow violence, which is incremental, dispersed harm rooted in historical inequalities and perpetuated through neo-colonial, neoliberal, and racialised structures. Slow violence is "...gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not typically viewed as violence..." (Ibid 2). This violence is a manifestation of the past and a consequence of historical violent structures of inequality, which permeate into present-day structures, including neo-colonialism, neoliberalism, tribalism/clannism, and racism. Davies (2019) suggests an interconnection between structural violence and slow violence, with structural inequalities embedding themselves into structural violence, which then morphs into slow violence, while Väyrynen (2019) emphasises that slow violence "produces collective silence since it is often accompanied with a collective amnesia, and even with a full denial of the violence" (107). Importantly, liberal states often legitimise certain forms of violence such as militarism, misogynistic cultural norms, and global inequality (Nixon, 2011) while neglecting underlying structural and slow violence. Violent extremism, in this sense, can emerge as a response to these legitimised forms of violence, challenging liberal democratic ideals framed by states as threats requiring prevention (Ford, 2020b). Providing a pathway to understanding how these forms of violence are lived and reproduced in everyday spaces and where the effect of international politics is embedded in the mundane, such as in everyday practices and in social relations. It is in this sense that "the international is personal" as power, exploitation, and violence are experienced in the everyday (Enloe, 2014: 343). From a peace studies perspective, these typologies not only act

as potential catalysts for violent extremism but also suggest potential entry points for peace-building and peace. Our research applies these typologies to the Kenyan context to explore how everyday experiences of violence shape violent extremism and inform potential avenues for sustainable peace.

Localising Violent Extremism in Kenya

Kenya's experience of violent extremism is deeply embedded in its postcolonial past, shaped by ethnicised politics and structural violence that continue alongside contemporary threats such as terrorism and religious fundamentalism (Oando & Achieng', 2021). The country's socio-political fabric is a tapestry of diversity in culture, language, religion, and ethnicity, with a population of approximately 58.2 million. Christianity constitutes the dominant faith (85.5%), while Muslims represent 10.9% (CIA World Factbook, nd). Despite relative political stability since independence in 1963, the ethnicisation of politics along tribal lines has perpetuated periodic clashes. These conflicts frequently manifest as agropastoral disputes but intersect with other forms of violence, including the targeting of Kenyan Somalis, gang-related violence, and insurgencies linked to secessionist movements and religious fundamentalism, all of which contribute to contemporary violent extremism narratives. It would be imprudent to frame violent extremism in Kenya as a new phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the embeddedness of historical and slow violence and the responses of both state and society to such violence (Badurdeen & Goldsmith, 2018). Kenya has been dealing with threats of terrorism since the 1980s, most notably the 1998 Al-Qaida bombing of the United States Embassy in Nairobi, which killed over 200 individuals and injured thousands. In recent years, Al-Shabaab has intensified attacks within Kenya, prompting military operations in southern Somalia (Olsen, 2018). Strategically, Kenya has aligned with Western counter-terrorism agendas, emerging as a key ally in the "Global War on Terror" following 9/11 (Lind et al., 2017).

Kenya's National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (2016) defines violent extremism as acts by radicalised persons "prepared to engage in, or actively support, violence in furtherance of radically illiberal, undemocratic political systems or ideologies" (National Strategy, ix). This framing, based on experiences with Al-Shabaab, limits different understandings and approaches to different forms of extremism, such as pacifism (Ford, 2020b). Moreover, these understandings often neglect lived realities, producing stigmatising effects that label communities, particularly Muslim minorities, as security threats, predominantly those who are ethnically Somali, thereby exacerbating the situation (Badurdeen et al., 2023; Lind et al., 2017). Kenya's approach, supported by international actors, positions it as a model for other states.

Our fieldwork took place between 2019 and 2021, during a period when Kenya was facing increased threats from Al-Shabaab (e.g., the DusitD2 attack in 2019 and attacks and ambushes in Wajir, Mandera, and Garissa in 2019), leading to an uptick in counter-terrorism operations, particularly in the coastal regions of Mombasa and Lamu. This meant an intensification of policing practices, including raids, surveillance, and community targeting specifically Muslim and Somali-majority areas, contributing to increased tensions and experiences of insecurity (see Prestholdt, 2026). These experiences of security responses compounded with structural inequalities, marginalisation and socio-economic grievances, shaped everyday life for our participants. This context is critical in understanding how participants interpreted violent extremism not as an independent external threat but as something fixed within broader, everyday experiences of violence and state-society relations. Thus, we believe these approaches warrant exploration from multiple disciplinary angles and at grassroots levels to identify potential disconnects. The following section explores this issue through a peace studies lens to address these gaps.

Methodology

One of this research's unique contributions beyond its interdisciplinary lens is our use of the collaborative and arts-based methodological approach of body mapping. It is an arts-based and collaborative method that allows participants to move beyond verbal expression and communicate their perspectives, understandings, and experiences in a more visceral and somatic way (Aroussi et al., 2023; de Jager et al., 2016). It allows for the creation of visual stories that not only explore but also communicate how a participant lives in and through their body while focusing on a specific topic, such as experiences and understandings of violent extremism. It also disrupts traditional research processes by placing participant agency at the centre and creating a "safe, comfortable and creative space [such that it] becomes...more caring and humanising" (Taka & Jakala, 2024), placing participant agency at the heart of the process and allowing for the deconstruction of concepts (Badurdeen et al., 2025). Our participants span location and experiences of violent extremism, which vary across gender, place, and lived experience of violence; for instance, the majority of our male participants in coastal regions such as Mombasa and Kwale frequently highlighted policing practices, surveillance, and gangs as issues, while many of the women emphasised socio-economic marginalisation and cultural forms of violence and harm such as gender-based violence and gang violence. While there was considerable agreement across participants that violent extremism extends beyond securitised framings, these differences were primarily expressed in the degree and form of violence experienced rather than in fundamentally divergent understandings. This approach enables us to explore the personal and local dimensions of international politics with the aim to understand violent extremism beyond securitised framings, as experienced across a continuum.

Our research spanned 24 months, from 2019 to 2021, in Nairobi and the coastal communities of Mombasa and Kwale. We engaged participants from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, including community members, elders and civil society organisations. All data not related to body mapping were analysed through thematic analysis. This extensive and varied data collection gave us a more rounded and nuanced understanding of violent extremism. The fieldwork was divided into two phases of data collection, followed by knowledge translation activities, including an exhibition of the body maps, where participants presented and discussed their body maps.

The first phase focused on narrative interviews and focus group discussions to gather background understandings of violent extremism from a broad Kenyan perspective, involving 67 participants and creating the foundation for the body mapping workshops. The second phase, conducted in Mombasa, focused on two, week-long body mapping workshops with Muslim participants (10 men and 10 women) between the ages of 20 and 60. Our participants were varied in their ethnic backgrounds, but all were from communities labelled "hot spots" for violent extremism by either local non-governmental organisations or law enforcement and were drawn from coastal communities near Mombasa or Mombasa itself. We employed critical visual methodology (see Rose, 2001) to this phase, which focused on composition, semiology, and discourse. We focused on content, colour, and spatial organisation for the composition phase, interpretation of symbols and signs for the semiology phase, and further interviews with participants focusing on the interpretation and analysis of body maps by the participants themselves. This was then followed by the researcher's reflections on the body maps and interviews. Narrative inquiry was used in an effort to understand and interpret the personal stories and capture narrative stories across the process to sketch out the bigger story (Aroussi et al., 2020). What emerged were intricate and layered stories of individual experiences, which we captured in a Book of Stories, an art exhibition and presentation of the body maps. This article is based on the second phase of the research, with explicit focus on the body maps. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we have

anonymised our participants, and therefore all the names referenced here are participant-selected pseudonyms.

As a team, we brought a wealth of experience working with marginalised communities in conflict-affected contexts, with a focus on concepts such as violent extremism, gender and peacebuilding. Our team, comprising three academic leads, two Muslim and one Christian woman and mainly outsiders except for Fathima, who lives in Kenya and has extensive experience working with communities affected by violent extremism. We have also collaborated with Xavier Verhoest, an Artist based in Kenya and with established experience in body mapping in the Kenyan context, and we worked with a team of research assistants from Kenya who supported our data collection. We approached this research with respect, care, honesty, and the belief that relationships and trust were essential to working and collaborating with other sentient beings. We applied for ethical clearance in the UK and in Kenya and applied for a research permit from the authorities. We went beyond the procedural and compliance-based approaches, focusing on a more holistic and embodied process. Our emphasis on unpredictable moments and relational approaches embodied our values of mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researchers and collaborators. We encountered various issues that we had anticipated, particularly around experiences of violence. To address these, we worked with a local colleague with a counselling background who was present throughout the workshops, and additional information for support services was provided.

Finally, our study focuses on participants from specific locations in Kenya, including coastal communities identified as “hotspots.” Our aim is not to provide a blanket account of violent extremism across Kenya but to offer in-depth, situated insights into how violent extremism is experienced and understood within particular contexts, which often shape wider Kenyan policy and state-based responses to violent extremism.

Findings

Our body mapping workshops focused very broadly on everyday understandings of violent extremism by exploring perceptions using body maps, drawing, painting, writing, and discussion. This revealed participant conceptualisations of violent extremism as a multi-layered phenomenon, complicating traditional securitised narratives that frame violent extremism primarily through Islamic radicalisation or economic marginalisation (Ahmend & Shahzad, 2021; Holmes, 2017). Instead, participants articulated nuanced, contextually embedded understandings that focus on structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1969; Nixon, 2011). These narratives reveal a typology of violent extremism that is not only highly localised but also profoundly gendered. Generally, these understandings were shared across participants who consistently understood violent extremism as extending beyond securitised definitions.

Drawing on both narrative interviews and embodied insights from body maps, we identified three dominant, gendered findings through our thematic analysis: (1) participant-led definitions of violent extremism, (2) experiences of police brutality, extrajudicial killings, and gang violence, and (3) gender-based violence. These themes emerged across the research and reflected the multi-layered, lived realities shaping local understandings of violent extremism.

Layered Understandings of Violent Extremism: Beyond Securitised Narratives

Initial discussion and workshop exercises teased out perceptions of violent extremism that extend beyond conventional policy frameworks and current conceptual understandings. While participants acknowledged the danger of groups such as Al-Shabaab and potential influences of Islamic radicalisation and economic deprivation, they were not seen as the main push factors towards

violent extremism. Rather, violent extremism was described as emerging from systemic governance failures, including discriminatory policies, socio-economic inequalities, lack of education, and employment opportunities, seen as embedded slow violence which leads to discrimination and stigmatisation, all of which create a cycle that feeds tribalism, clannism and ethnic rivalism. One participant, an activist engaged in community awareness campaigns emphasised that the “government and politicians...are the ones making this community bitter and driving it into violent extremism” (Alian, in discussion with the authors, November 2019) highlighting how structural and slow violence as well as political exclusion can become engrained into specific governmental policies and methods of dealing with the communities becoming cyclical and metastasising into forms of violent extremism. His interpretation points to the interplay of structural inequalities, economic deprivation, and stigmatisation as forms of slow violence that accumulate and feed into cultural and structural harm. These processes, he suggests, form a cyclical pattern that shapes the conditions under which individuals may be drawn toward or pushed into violent pathways.

Participants further conceptualised violent extremism as a continuum of violations of fundamental rights. For instance, Didge framed violent extremism as “a set of beliefs and traditions imposed on me against my will. Denial of education, denial of freedom of expression” (Didge, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). Didge understands violent extremism through the suppression and manipulation of the understandings of innate rights and the power of the individual through cultural mechanisms or forms of violence enacted (un)knowingly through



Figure 1. Didge “Independent Lady” 2019

communities and governmental structures. Her body map (Figure 1) visually represents this suppression through the powerful red lips forcibly sealed with masking tape placed over the lips to signify the restriction of the freedom of speech. Symbolising the silencing effects of cultural and structural violence. This articulation highlights how violent extremism is not restricted to physical harm; it can also manifest through practices and norms that undermine agency and the realisation of basic rights.

Other participants adopted broader humanistic definitions. Malenga 001 describes violent extremism as “any forceful or violent activity that someone does to harm another human being” (Malenga001, in discussion with the authors, November 2019), decoupling the concept from its securitised association and situating it within universal rights discourse, focusing on intentionality and the violation of boundaries. This opens the understanding of violent extremism towards violence at a more human level rather than the narrower securitised understanding. Similarly, Rambo takes this to a deeper, more intimate level of understanding, stating, “violent extremism is like when somebody hurts you deep inside. Violent extremism can be both physical and mental, such as being in an abusive marriage” (Rambo, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). She highlights intimate and relational dimensions of violence, echoing feminist critiques of narrow, state-centric understandings. It is also the destruction of trust and care. Her framing highlights the intensely personal forms of violence that not only erode trust, safety, and dignity but are not often considered as elements of violent extremism.

Finally, and going back to a more current understanding of violent extremism, Muzammil recognises violent extremism as a trap/dilemma or an illusion on a pathway of your life, which is meant to disrupt or distract you. You have your support network and family who try to guide you, but violent extremism pops up in your path and tries to throw you off, as illustrated in Figure 2.

More broadly, Muzammil’s metaphor of a dilemma or “trap” (Muzammil, in discussion with the authors, November 2019) is an interesting angle to understand violent extremism as something to be “nudged towards” or “fall into” by forms of violence that manifest and drive one

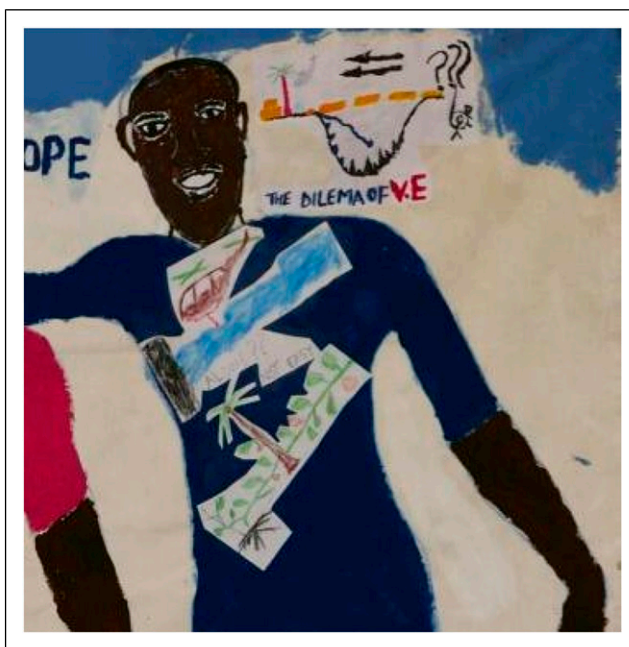


Figure 2. Muzammil “My Expectations” 2019

towards the trap, as illustrated in [Figure 2](#). His interpretation captures violent extremism as a moment of vulnerability shaped by broader socio-economic and political pressures, a disruption that pulls individuals away from supportive networks and into harmful trajectories.

Our findings indicate, in this context, that violent extremism has many layers in Kenya. It is more than simply prescribed Islamic radicalisation and violence against the state and, subsequently, the citizenry. It is at the intimate and interpersonal level to a more macro, governmental level, but what cuts across is the acknowledgement that elements of violent extremism can be seen in and supported by cultural and structural contexts and policies. This reinforces the need to understand violent extremism as cutting across everyday spaces and relationships where structural, cultural and intimate (direct) forms of violence are experienced. The following sections will unpack two unique findings from our research, which are particularly gendered, emerging from our workshops: police brutality/extrajudicial killings and gender-based violence.

Collectively, these narratives reveal that our participants view violent extremism not exclusively as extremist ideology or organised militant activity but as a continuum of violence/violations that span intimate, communal, and structural domains. Violent extremism, in their view, encompasses the aggregate impacts of marginalisation, discrimination, coercion, and interpersonal harm. The following section shows the markedly gendered nature of these interpretations, while male participants tended to highlight the failures of the state and the violence of security forces, female participants, discussed further down, emphasised cultural, bodily, and domestic forms of violence as constitutive of violent extremism. In this sense, participants challenge the securitised understanding of violent extremism not as a singular phenomenon but rather conceptualise it as a multi-layered, embodied, and relational phenomenon rooted in everyday experiences of inequality and harm where gendered experiences intersect with marginalisation, state power, and cultural norms.

Police Brutality and Extrajudicial Killing

Police brutality and extrajudicial killing, alongside gang violence emerged as some of the most urgent and emotionally charged themes (alongside gang violence, but due to limitations, we will focus on police brutality and extrajudicial killings) articulated by participants, particularly among men. While global and national violent extremism discourses commonly frame violent extremism as perpetrated by non-state actors, our participants consistently located the Kenyan state through its security apparatus and mechanisms, such as the Anti-Terror Police Unit (ATPU), as a central actor in producing the direct, structural, and cultural violence they identified as forms of violent extremism. Their accounts highlight how state actions not only constitute violence but also generate the social conditions under which alienation, resentment, and vulnerability can deepen.

Participants emphasised the expansive powers the ATPUs were given under the guise of countering and preventing further terrorism and extremist activities. These powers were exercised through raids, arbitrary arrests, and lethal violence in communities labelled suspect by the government, particularly in coastal and Somali-majority neighbourhoods. The brutality of these raids caused great distress and stigmatisation in the communities, leading many to consider them as indiscriminate and retributive. For the majority of participants, these experiences blurred the line between counter-terrorism responses and co-production of violence. For example, Muzzamil attended the Technical University of Mombasa at the time when Sheikh Aboud Rogo, a Kenyan radical Islamist cleric (who was on the US and UN sanction list for alleged support of Al-Shabaab militants), was killed in a drive-by shooting in the city of Mombasa in 2012. During this timeframe, there was a high level of radicalisation among the youth in the region, a rise in protests, and increased counter-terrorism responses, including raids on mosques and the gunning down of prominent Muslim clerics. One of these imams was Abubakar Shariff, known as

Makaburi, who was shot dead by the security forces during the raid on Masjid Musa in the Bamburi area of Mombasa. Muzzamil lost one of his friends during this raid (Muzammil, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). However, while these experiences can act as a push factor towards joining violent extremist groups, our findings illustrate a direct correlation and understanding linking police brutality, extrajudicial killings and violent extremism to not just a state response but a co-production. This is further supported by research demonstrating harmful policing practices in Kenya, not just cases of individual misconduct, but reinforced through organisational hierarchies and institutional incentives within the police force (Mutahi et al., 2023), highlighting how state violence can be structurally produced rather than an exception.

Arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances were typical and devastated families, with family members going missing, heightening the sense of insecurity. Aden, who lived in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood, described how security operations intensified following the DusitD2 attack in January 2019. "They (police) have taken away people from our community, like our brothers and sisters, about whom we have never heard again]" (Aden, in discussion with the authors, May 2019). Enforced disappearances generated long-term trauma not only for families but for entire communities, creating an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and powerlessness that participants directly linked to violent extremism.

Mikatos described the disappearance of a young relative, "He was arrested by the police and put in the car. When we got the news, we frantically searched for him in all police stations—we didn't find him. We even approached the high-ranking officers, but even today, we are in the dark about his whereabouts...They are arresting Kenyan youths without reason. If a friend of yours decides to betray you he will just point you out to the police and claim that you are an Al-Shabaab member—you'll never be seen again]" (Mikatos, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). This underscores the structural and cultural dimensions of this violence by eroding trust within communities, weaponising suspicion, and reinforcing perceptions that legal protections were inaccessible or irrelevant to marginalised communities.

Walid, a soft-spoken and introverted man, tells of his direct experiences of police brutality both in Mombasa and Tanzania: "The other day, I was at my shop when a policeman killed a boy member of a gang. He shot him eight times, and he died just at our place. The policeman did it, although he himself is a thief...the police are very brutal to our communities and to the common people and individuals." He goes on to describe another incident, "Some time ago, I was arrested in Tanzania in a case of mistaken identity on suspected violent extremism charges. There, while in Tanzanian police custody, calamities and disaster befell me. They beat me there in jail, and before I slept, I swear they would put guns in my nose and everywhere. The brutality made me think I should have died" (Walid, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). His statement emphasises the arbitrary nature of the killing, the rife nature of corruption and reflects the large-scale reach of securitised and heavy-handed policing practices.

Walid's body map (Figure 3) captures the barbarity of his experience most strikingly through his defensive body position and use of colours, texts, and the splattering of red paint, which mimics blood splatter. While Walid's body map invokes the direct and physical nature of violence exerted against him, it also indicates the structural violence he experienced through structural mechanisms, such as the police, that legitimised the actions against him. His body map also implies hope and highlights his good heart and intentions, which he teases out in his map, in his demeanour and actions.

Similarly, Alian, a budding actor and engaged member of the community in Mombasa, described the cumulative effect of harassment, extortion, and coercion. He states,

In my community, there is police brutality, harassment, corruption, and tribalism. In school, I had a good Somali friend. One day, we were going to the mosque when two guys kidnapped him, and he was never



Figure 3. Walid “Kisauni, Where I Stay” 2019

seen again. After that, I hated policemen. I was terrified that they might even shoot me. There was another incident where the police came to my maskani (place where men often hang out, talk and drink coffee or chew cat) and started beating us for two hours and asking for somebody that we didn't know. We had to lie and say that we knew him just so that they would stop beating us. We were then taken to police cells. After we were released, one of my friends became so embittered that he decided to join a gang as revenge. Unfortunately, he was killed shortly afterwards. But police officers will go to a maskani and demand that they pay, let's say 10,000 shillings a week, so that they are not harassed whenever there's a police operation. So, the maskani youths will have to up the beatings and robberies to get the 10,000 shillings. So, imagine! We are discouraging violence and crime and the police officers are the ones that are encouraging it through harassment and extortion. No wonder people say radicalisation will never end in this country (Alian, in discussion with the authors, November 2019).

These practices not only normalised violence but also entrenched cycles in which crime, state extortion, and community frustration became mutually reinforcing. In his experience, police corruption contributed to the persistence of radicalisation.

Ethnic profiling further compounded these harms. Somali participants described being singled out for surveillance, harassment, and derogatory assumptions linking them to Al-Shabaab. Amy, a vibrant young woman interested in comedy and directing, states, “We are singled out and held guilty of killing people. Sometimes people make jokes about Somalis that are painful. They are like ‘ah, you are Al-Shabaab’” (Amy, in discussion with the authors, November 2019).

Amy had other fateful experiences of racism and police brutality based on her ethnicity when she was travelling from Wajir to Nairobi by bus; she states, “I was stopped, harassed, and even

slapped by a police officer. He accused me of carrying fake identity documents. Because I was a Somali, he stood me aside from the other passengers and accused me of wanting to go to Nairobi to kill people” (Ibid). Such experiences illustrate the intersection of ethnic, religious, and gendered vulnerabilities that shape how communities encounter state and gendered power.

Excessive security measures, such as curfews in Somali-majority areas, also produced indirect but severe consequences. According to Nour, curtailing the freedom of movement under the guise of security in Mandera had deadly consequences. For example, one of his relatives could not make it to hospital when in labour due to the curfew and instead died attempting to give birth (Nour, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). This account highlights how structural violence, manifested through state policies enacted in the name of security, can have life-threatening effects far removed from the immediate concerns of countering extremism.

This bottom-up experience reveals how our participants in this context experience and conceptualise police brutality and extrajudicial killing as forms of violent extremism perpetrated by the state. Their experiences reflect a continuum of direct, structural, and cultural violence that disproportionately affects men, who are most readily profiled as suspects in violent extremism-related policing. This gendered exposure shapes community perceptions and highlights Enloe’s “the international is political.” In this context, state action becomes not merely a response to violent extremism but an integral part of the ecology of violence that communities identify as violent extremism.

Gender-Based Violence

One of the most unexpected findings from our research was that gender-based violence experienced by our female workshop participants was considered, by them, to be a form of violent extremism. This differs significantly from how our male participants experienced and understood violent extremism. This finding deviates from the structural and slow forms of violence, which manifest themselves into what our male participants see as violent extremism perpetrated by actors of the state (e.g., the police) or through state structures and policies. This female conceptualisation of violent extremism points towards a cultural form of violence perpetrated through religious and cultural identifiers and practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Most of our female participants highlighted FGM, particularly those from Somali backgrounds, as being the most extreme level of violent extremism and direct violence enacted through cultural norms rather than state security practices.

Habiba, a 20-year-old university student from Tana River, explained her experience of FGM as a child, “I was just 10 years old then, but even today, I recall the ordeal I went through. A week after the procedure, I was playing with stones when I began to bleed” (Habiba, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). She lost so much blood that she fell unconscious. “I can still feel the pain deep inside. It is the people of my community who are responsible—people who have never been punished for their crime, but I have to live with it” (Ibid). Her procedure was done illegally and in secret, and when she was bleeding profusely, her family could not take her to a hospital. She believes she is alive today because of a miracle.

Habiba’s experience of gender-based violence and journey of recovery and recognition is depicted in [Figure 4](#) through the representation of barren, dormant trees devoid of foliage which flow towards her outstretched body. This embodies her awakening into confidence and resistance, represented in the placement of her arms, signalling openness and resolve to fight cultural practices that oppress women. She is strong, and her resolve is shining through. The Somali flag, aptly placed across the area of her body where she feels violated, has written the phrase in blood red, “NO TO FGM,” indicating the violation and the danger of such a procedure. Habiba states, “I hate the practice in my community...some communities have even stopped FGM in Kenya, but,



Figure 4. Habiba 'Stand strong' 2019

for us Somalis, it is still there. It is an act of violent extremism. I wish I could have the power to stop these people" (Ibid). Habiba framed FGM as "an act of violent extremism" because it violates bodily autonomy, causes lasting physical and emotional harm, and is sustained through community complicity and silence.

Yusra speaks of similar experiences in which the custom of FGM is deeply rooted within specific communities and still widely practised in northeastern Kenya. She went through the ordeal herself when she was in her primary school. "It happened when I was travelling to my grandmother's village for the first time. I was told that the next morning I would be circumcised so that I will not have eyes on men" (Yusra, in discussion with the authors, November 2019).

Yusra said generations in her village have been practising FGM, so it was futile for her to resist at that age. She underlined that no one raised any concern for her as it is an ingrained, though violent, practice in the community. Her uncle, who she thought might prevent it, emphasised that it is necessary for all girls. She states, "He told us no, you can't escape from this thing, and it's a must for you to do, especially you ladies, you have to go through. From that day, I said if there was no one to stop that thing on me, I can stop it for somebody else. It is my fight now to stop FGM" (Ibid). This is highlighted in Yusra's body map (see Figure 5), where she depicts the village, her

culture, and her journey in fighting FGM. The crossed arms indicate her powerful resistance to FGM. Her journey is depicted by a grey bus travelling towards security and a light blue home. Yusra's narrative underscored how violent extremism emerges from gendered expectations that seek to control women's desires, mobility, and futures.

The women defined FGM as one of the most prolific forms of violent extremism experienced due to the extreme level of physical and direct violence against females at a young age. The physicality of which is coupled with cultural ideologies that promote gender inequality, subjugation, and oppression of women. They understand it as a form of gender-based violence and as a continuum.

Our women participants also identified other cultural practices, such as forced marriages, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence, which were seen to feed into their understandings and experiences of violent extremism, but not with the propensity of FGM and cuts across ethnicity. For our participants, such practices sustained for generations (on a continuum) in the name of culture and customs undermine the growth of girls and perpetually relegate them to the exploitative structures of patriarchy, which, within this context, has the proclivity toward direct and physical forms of violence at young ages. Habiba challenged such traditions when she rejected a marriage proposal from a much older man. Many of our women participants condemned gender norms restricting women's right to education and choosing what to do with their bodies or lives. Habiba said that in her conservative Somali community, girls are typically denied education and forced into early marriages because of the fear of engaging in relationships with young men. At the same time, Amy stated, "A Somali is expected to do all household work and look after children. She can't go out, earn a living or make friends, just clean, and this must



Figure 5. Yusra 'Story' 2019

change” (Amy, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). She bemoaned how she and other women are struggling with the patriarchal system in Kenya and their communities.

The notions of masculinity and power play a part in the suppression of women’s agency, even by educated men. Rambo described her experiences of violence at the hands of her abusive husband, a police officer. “My husband was a police officer, so he thought it was okay to beat me whenever he wanted. I had to suffer quietly for months with a kid as young as 2 months old” (Rambo, in discussion with the authors, November 2019). When she decided to run away, her husband misused his power to arrest her.

Rambo’s account of abuse by her husband displays how intimate partner violence could be intensified by institutional power. When she left, her husband used his position to have her arrested, illustrating how cultural, structural, and direct violence connect in women’s everyday lives.

These narratives reveal a situated and gendered understanding of violent extremism that deviates from dominant frameworks. We see that male participants understand violent extremism primarily as state-sanctioned direct and structural violence through police brutality and extra-judicial killings, while women identified violent extremism as culturally rooted and structurally supported and something that regulates and controls women’s bodies and social roles, illustrating a shared but differentiated continuum of violence. Finally, this finding highlights the importance of a gender-sensitive and peace studies approach to the topic of violent extremism, as our research shows that violent extremism is experienced not only through the mechanisms of the state but also through patriarchal norms, intergenerational practices, and intimate power relations that shape women’s everyday lives.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to explore how the communities where we conducted our research in Kenya conceptualise and experience violent extremism through a peace studies lens and with the support of body-mapping as an arts-based research method. While earlier studies on violent extremism explore the topic from a securitised lens (see [Holmes, 2017](#); [Zhou et al., 2017](#); [Ahmend & Shahzad, 2021](#)), focusing on the push-pull factors leading to violent extremism or responses to violent extremism (see [Saraiva & Erfe, 2023](#)), they have not explicitly addressed violent extremism from a peace studies angle. Peace studies, being normative, allowed us to explore experiences and relationships, such as how our participants understand violence, conflict, and, ultimately, peace. Exploring this topic from this perspective allowed us to investigate the holistic and grassroots understanding and experiences of violent extremism by considering the typology of violence through the participants’ body maps and experiences, which are more than push-and-pull factors, allowing us to begin building a more rounded and holistic understanding of violent extremism. Understanding relationships allows the colourful tapestry of life to peek through as we begin to comprehend the experiences of people and communities in a more human manner ([Vaittinen et al., 2019](#)) and locate violent extremism not in the actions of non-state extremist groups alone but in the structural, cultural, and direct forms of violence that shape their daily realities.

This research fundamentally challenges dominant, securitised narratives that reduce violent extremism to the actions of non-state militant groups or radicalised ideologies. Our findings suggest that our participants’ understandings and experiences do not align with current scholarship and policy, as violent extremism is not exclusively seen as an external extremist group, such as Al-Shabaab. Instead, violent extremism is defined by our participants as multilayer, nuanced and directly linked with the consequences of what our participants deem as the state’s ineffectiveness in addressing slow and structural issues/violence, such as discrimination, which

filter down into everyday life. It is conceptualised as an everyday, relational, and embodied phenomenon emerging across a continuum of gendered harm and violence (Cockburn, 2004), rather than a discrete category of securitised or political violence.

Crucially, this continuum is profoundly gendered, exposing the inadequacies of conventional, one-size-fits-all policy responses. Male participants intimately associate violent extremism with state-sanctioned violence, illustrating how draconian counter-terrorism measures such as police brutality and extrajudicial killings frequently reproduce the very insecurity they claim to resolve. By blurring the lines between state protection and state-produced violence, these actions disrupt the foundational assumption that the state acts solely as a security provider. Conversely, female participants locate violent extremism within pervasive cultural and structural norms, identifying practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and intimate partner violence as extreme and direct forms of harm. These profound revelations further disrupt the assumption that violent extremism is exclusively tied to armed militant groups, highlighting instead how patriarchal traditions and state apparatuses actively co-produce extreme violence in everyday spaces. Our findings in this context thus suggest that various forms of violence are present within society and the state structures, which filter down to the most intimate levels in life and are understood as forms of violent extremism. Yet this violence is not directly connected to violent extremist groups, which contradicts current understandings of violent extremism. It is thus relational and an intersecting continuum of harm (see Kappler & Lemy-Herbet 2019). This underscores the value of applying a peace studies framework, which enables us to explore a more expansive and relational understanding of violence, one that accounts for slow, structural, cultural, and intimate forms of harm often excluded from violent extremism discourse.

Ultimately, our study exemplifies the need to explore violent extremism from different disciplinary angles, as well as the importance of attempting to understand the everyday and gendered experience of violence and how these experiences link to and shape how violent extremism is conceptualised on a continuum. Our findings point towards a need for reconsideration of scholarship and policy around resilience to violent extremism that goes beyond securitised frameworks and weaves in the everyday realities and interpretations of those within communities most affected. Recognising the typologies of violence experienced within communities (be it by the state, by cultural institutions, or within intimate relationships) is essential to develop more grounded, contextually appropriate, and peace-oriented approaches to understanding and addressing violent extremism, opening up more just and transformative pathways for addressing the structural and everyday conditions that sustain this continuum of violence.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through a generous British Academy Tackling the UK's International Challenges Programme 2018 grant. The authors would also like to thank our partner, the artist and curator, Xavier Verhoest, for his contribution to the research and particularly the body mapping workshops. We would like to express thanks and gratitude to all the participants in our study for their commitment and contribution to the research. We would also like to recognise and convey our appreciation to the Technical University of Mombasa and particularly Vice Chancellor, Prof Layla Abubakar and to all the research assistants who supported the project during the planning, data collection and analysis especially Mariam Zahur and Muslima Essak. Finally, we would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback during the revisions of this article.

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Funding

This work was supported by the British Academy (Tackling UK international Challenges award IC310).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was received through Coventry University and the Technical University of Mombasa.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was offered to all participants and is discussed in the methodology section of the paper.

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