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ABSTRACT

We are interested in the politics of stigmatised bodies at the intersection of race and gender, seen as threats and/or victims. Using the case study of Kenya, this essay examines how the recent history of the War on Terror and counter-terrorism measures have shaped policy, practice, and scholarship on security to brand Black Muslim Women in Kenya as terrorist suspects. It asks how Black Muslim women are alienated in security studies due to their gender, race, religion, and class.

KEYWORDS

Black muslim women; security studies; counter-terrorism community; global war on terror

Introduction

Debates on the role of race and knowledge production in security studies have been part of academic activism for decades. However, the Black Lives Matter protest movement has recently amplified these debates. There has been a burgeoning of security studies scholarship in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The spread of terrorism around the world, including in Kenya and the Horn of Africa, has further increased theories and empirical research to comprehend the *War on Terror*. Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in the security sector have produced knowledge on the perpetrators of these terrorist attacks and their families, and profiled them using complex approaches that alienate Muslim communities from the broader society. Research shows that counter-terrorism narratives and interventions have globally racialised, militarised, and securitised a group of people as potential terrorists because of their race and religious affiliation (Van Es 2019; Groothuis 2020; Younis 2020).

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At the global level, the politics of representation in knowledge production in security studies generally alienates gendered lived experiences (Olonisakin and Okech 2011;). The construction of Muslim women as passive, invisible victims of a repressive ideology (Islam) and perceived extreme patriarchy is evident in mainstream scholarship, policy and practice (Zine 2002). They are considered victims who lack agency and need liberation and rescuing by outsiders (Abu-Lughod 2013; Munyi, Mwambari, and Ylönen 2020). The academic canons construct African women in general as victims, especially in societies that have aced war (Mwambari 2017a), yet analysis from their lived experience shows their agency in building peaceful societies (Mwambari 2017b; Ali & Arno 2020). In diaspora contexts, Black Muslim women face an additional layer of racism, and misogyny; as well as possessors of identity and defenders or explainers for their communities (Hussein 2019). Muslim women have transitioned from victim to suspect, especially when they fail to follow the gendered norms and expectations of the Western societies; they are automatically seen as accomplices of Muslim men, not victims (ibid). The veil (burka or the hijab) that was once perceived as a sign of

oppression against Muslim women has been politicised and now stands for terrorism (ibid). Meanwhile, Muslim men are generally constructed as the perpetrators of terrorism, violators of women's rights, and profiled as suspects. This idea was espoused in the post-9/11 security discourses on the War on Terror when the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. Initially, the West/white saviour mentality argued that these attacks were to save women and children. But they increasingly became also labelled as suspects as well. This discrimination has expanded to European contexts where campaigns and laws have been instituted to stop Muslim women from wearing a veil. For example, in France, the veil became a concern for political discourse and discrimination as terrorist attacks increased in European cities (Bullock 2002).

In Africa, as the war on terror expanded to other contexts in Eastern and Horn of Africa, the primary targets of counter-terrorism programs created in powerful states were the less powerful Muslim communities in Christian-dominated countries like Kenya and Muslim-dominated states like Somalia (Whitaker 2010). For instance, for over a decade, the United States has considered the Horn of Africa – Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan – a major source of terrorism (United States Institute of Peace 2004). Increasingly, it became more than that, for example, 'the Somalinisation of terrorism and counter-terrorism in Kenya' rather than fight against terrorism through policy, research, and practice (Mwangi 2019). Yet, we have seen violent extremist groups recruiting suicide bombers from other communities in East Africa that are not Somali or from an Islamic family background.

Kenyan context

Decades of discrimination in counter-terrorism measures on international and regional levels have thus, shaped how Kenyans perceive Muslims, especially women. In Kenya, the Muslims are a minority in both their religious and ethnic identity. In recent decades they are increasingly considered second-class citizens. In particular, Muslim women are not only a minority based on their religious and ethnic identity but also because of their gender since the patriarchal socially constructed roles and relations determine their status. Besides, the media's patterns of portraying terrorists as Muslims, states and their international allies' policies on counter-terrorism have fuelled the suspicion and alienation of Black Muslim Women in security studies and practice. They are branded as suspects because they are the mothers, sisters, spouses of terrorists, and security officials harass them and treat them as accomplices. In these societies and security studies, Muslim and Black women are racialised categories that overlap based on the religious (Muslim) and ethnic/race identity. Often, this duality of being Black and Muslim is constructed further by their class/social status determined demographically as a minority which has historical roots and has been part of the state formation process leading up to contemporary state security responses to violent extremism (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom 2017).

From our experience of teaching classes in International Relations and Security Studies in Universities in East Africa, we have witnessed how colleagues and students discussing terrorist attacks casually refer to veiled/*hijabi* Somali female students on campus as terrorist suspects. Furthermore, we have observed that higher learning institutions can turn into spaces that encourage stereotypes against Black Muslim women. This is because learning institutions have also been identified by violent extremist groups as sites of recruitment due to their nature as transitionary, permissive, biographical, secular, and socialisation spaces (Abu-Lughod 2013). Textbooks are equally used to associate Muslims as the main sources of terrorism with such ideas circulating from the global north to the global south contexts, including Kenya (Ide 2017).

The attacks from foreign violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab have affected Kenya and shaped its security policy interests and international relations (Munene 2011; Purdeková 2019). Even though the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Daesh has not acknowledged any direct attacks, it has aggressively radicalised and recruited young Kenyan men and women to join its cause by appealing to them ideologically and tapping into the existing societal

inequalities and rampant corruption (Botha 2014). For almost a decade, sporadic attacks have had a devastating impact on Kenya`s infrastructures, as well as its political, socio-economic, and security interests, making it embrace the global counter-terrorism strategy of targeting the minority Muslim and Somali refugees' communities as terror attack suspects (Botha 2015). It also adopted an androcentric, militaristic, racialised, elitist, and top-down approach to conceptualising and responding to violent extremism (Aroussi 2020, 3).

Initially, the Kenyan government security discourse on counter-terrorism ignored the gendered dimensions of violent extremism until it manifested itself with the radicalisation and recruitment of women and young girls by both the Al-Shabaab and ISIL/Daesh. It also ignored other violent local groups that are not always branded as terrorists but nevertheless capitalise on recruiting youth into violence. Prior to the rise of terrorism in Kenya, extremist groups such as the *Mungiki* and the Sabaot Land Defence Forces (SLDF) indoctrinated youth into violence (Muthoni 2011). However, the responses of the Kenyan government never racialised and securitised them along with their religious identity, but they were ethnicized and framed as criminal gangs, not necessarily terrorists. Women affiliated with these local groups were not racialised, securitised, victimised, and criminalised.

Yet, in its militaristic counter-terrorism approach, the Kenyan government security discourses on counter-terrorism mirrored the global war on terror, which constructed Muslims as terrorists. Furthermore, from the perspective of Kenya's Somali and Muslim populations that have been worst affected by Al-Shabaab violence in recent years, the military operation and a raft of other security responses in Kenya were the latest turns in a situation of persistent marginalisation, unequal citizenship, and the use of state violence against minority populations (Lind, Mutahi, and Oosterom 2017, 122). Even though Somali as an ethnicity and Islam as a religious identity are two different categories of security framing, they overlap since an individual can represent those dual identities. Following this model, Muslim women have found themselves being racialised as Muslims/terrorists, securitised through surveillance, and criminalised because of their family membership, gender roles, and relations such as mothers, wives, widows, and sisters. Since they are targeted because of their family affiliation, it accentuates a security harm as their private lives are securitised.

Towards transformation

In order to transform the way Black Muslim women's agency is understood and studied in international security scholarship (Okech 2011), it is essential to articulate that there is no singular, unitary 'Muslim woman' that can represent the experiences and grievances of the diversity of women who identify as Muslim (Aziz 2012, 192). Black Muslim women come from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, hold diverse political viewpoints, and adopt beliefs ranging from staunch secularism to religious orthodoxy. Their experiences should be studied with an intersectionality approach of their gender, race, age, religion, nationality, and class. Their experiences and knowledge about their community should be placed at the core of counter-terrorism measures and international security theorisation, instead of the periphery.

It is this transformational agenda that has started to guide for instance, non-state actors' interventions. For example, in Kenya, non-state actors have recently invested in Muslim women's roles as mothers and in women-led organisations to prevent/counter violent extremism, following the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 in 2015, which advocates for the deliberate outreach to women in counter-terrorism projects. This initiative might be a powerful tool to empower women to take a more active role in their community, but the problem is that they are excluded in designing this engagement. Apart from their role and capabilities as mothers in preventing and countering violent extremism, the knowledge of Muslim women should be considered to avoid epistemic injustice. The complexity of their situation, that is, being racialised and securitised as terrorists, should not be interpreted as lack of agency. Their exclusion should also be

acknowledged in security studies.

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Disclosure statement

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