



After Al-Shabab

USAID support group helps women cope after loved ones join terrorist group



A member of the support group speaks with USAID at COEC's Mombasa office.

** The names of mother and son have been changed to protect identities.*

Aisha Mohammed's son, Khamis, received a scholarship to Saudi Arabia to become an Islamic teacher, or so he said. But, after three months, Aisha had not received a phone call from him. When she finally reached him, the call did not go as she had expected. Her son sounded uneasy and not happy to hear from her.

"He warned me against calling him; he said it was not safe for him to talk to me, and if need be, he would reach out to me," Aisha said.

Eventually, she would learn he was a member of al-Shabab.

"It's been three years now since I last saw or spoke to my son, and I still feel sad because I cannot imagine what kind of life he lives. He left me with so much pain and many questions, because I will never understand why he chose that life," she said.

Aisha is one of many mothers and wives who tell their stories secretly, covered head to toe in hijabs and niqabs, at a discreet location in Mombasa County. Many are in a state of perpetual mourning, stricken with a very specific form of grief that can be expressed only in the safe company of those most familiar with it.

With USAID support, Coast Education Centre (COEC), a local community organization, leads a support group for mothers and wives of men recruited into terrorist organizations.

Aisha has been attending the support group since March 2015.

"Joining a support group has been the best thing that has happened to my life, getting to talk and share my feelings with women going through the same situation has eased my burden. I don't feel like I have a secret anymore; the load is lighter," she confided.

COEC came up with the idea for the support group while working on another project targeting youth and violent extremism.

"We witnessed clerics and youths being killed, and youths being recruited. We interviewed young people in different communities, and got a lot of information on how women suffer when their spouses or sons die at because of al-Shabab," COEC Programmes Coordinator Halima Mohammed said. "This has stressed women, since the major support in their lives was their sons or husbands, and now they have no one to depend on."

At the first few meetings, only three women attended. Soon after, the word spread, and now more than 30 women attend groups across Mombasa, Kwale and Kilifi counties.

At each session, women share their feelings and experiences. A trained psychologist works with the group, and the women individually, to overcome their grief and focus on their own personal development, including coping with extreme pressure from society.

“These women get interrogated by the police regularly,” Halima said. “Other people in the community detest these women, and say they’ve been irresponsible with their own families. Entire families are judged. No parent wants to see their child isolated for a mistake his or her brother has done. A few of the women have even been forced to relocate to avoid their children being labelled as a bad influence.”

A 2015 assessment by the USAID Strengthening Community Resilience against Extremism Conflict activity noted women and girls were reluctant to speak about extremism. They often referred to extremism as “mambo ya vijana,” which means “issues of male youth” in Kiswahili. Young women shied away from interviews, insisting these issues would be better discussed with men.

To the contrary, the assessment found women have an important role to play in the movement against violent extremism, because they are in a better position to observe changing behaviors of their children or significant others.

“While the observation of this change may be instinctive for many, the awareness and understanding of the process of radicalization is not. Even if mothers recognize the signs, they often lack the skills needed to intervene. Women need to be equipped and supported in their efforts to prevent their children from joining extremist groups, and also to build their own capacity to reject the influence of extremism and violence,” Halima explained.

She also mentioned that high adult illiteracy rates pose a big challenge to women, as they don’t have the skills or confidence to recognize extremist misinterpretations of Islam.

“Husbands or sons take advantage of women who didn’t complete their Islamic studies, and twist matters to suit their needs,” she said.

The organization has also begun soliciting community feedback to develop a women’s charter with recommendations on how to counter violent extremism. Early results have already provided insight on how young people are recruited.

“The reasons for recruitment are not about poverty or unemployment anymore, since those recruited are educated and literate. So, ideologically, illegal groups are messing around with their minds,” Halima said.

A healthy civil society can act as a counterweight to violent extremist groups. COEC is one of eight local organizations receiving USAID assistance to strengthen its advocacy and operations to counter violent extremism. In the coming months, COEC will begin linking the women with small savings and loans services to help them start up their own businesses, building their self-reliance and ability to provide for themselves and their families. Ultimately, COEC hopes to empower these women to speak out and to share their stories to prevent the radicalization of other husbands and sons.

Learn more about Coast Education Centre [here](#).