

From Vulnerability to Agency: An analysis of Youth Participation in Preventing Violent Extremism in Kamukunji Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract- Youth are often portrayed as vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism; however, they can also function as critical agents in prevention and in strengthening community resilience. This study investigated factors influencing youth participation in violent extremism prevention (PVE) programs in Kamukunji Sub-County, Kenya, despite ongoing interventions by government and non-governmental organizations. The study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data. The study analyzed qualitative data thematically and processed quantitative data using SPSS. Drawing on relative deprivation and stereotype theories, the study examined the impact of peer victimization, trust deficits between youth and security agents, negative stereotyping and limited youth involvement on participation in PVE initiatives. The findings show that distrust of security agencies and peer pressure are key impediments to youth participation and willingness to share information regarding violent extremism. Negative stereotyping and limited opportunities for meaningful inclusion further restrict participation. The study contends that effective PVE requires moving beyond approaches that primarily frame youth as susceptible populations or security risks and instead appreciating their potential agency in prevention. Building trust between youth and security actors, addressing negative stereotypes, reducing peer-related barriers and creating meaningful opportunities for youth involvement may strengthen their contributions to locally grounded prevention efforts.

Index Terms: youth participation, youth agency, violent extremism, PVE, trust deficits, stereotyping, Kamukunji, Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

In this context, violent extremism refers to the use or endorsement of violence by individuals or groups to achieve political, ideological, ethnic, or religious

objectives, often targeting civilians to instill fear and enforce compliance. Related concepts include 'radicalization,' defined as the process by which individuals or groups adopt extremist ideas that legitimize violence and 'extremist organizations,' which are groups that advocate or perpetrate such violence. The origins of violent extremism are multifaceted, shaped by interconnected social, economic, political and psychological factors (Mwangi et al., 2025). According to UNDP (2016), violent extremism is associated with intolerance and the mobilization or exploitation of youth, frequently by older political or religious actors. Stephens et al. (2021) emphasize its behavioral dimension, particularly the use of violence as an expression of extremist beliefs. Therefore, addressing violent extremism requires multidimensional strategies that extend beyond conventional security interventions (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020).

The drivers of violent extremism operate at global, national, community, individual levels and are particularly acute in contexts characterized by inequality, exclusion, unemployment, marginalization and unresolved grievances (UNDP, 2017). Structural push factors include limited economic opportunities, discrimination, conflict, human rights abuses and perceived injustice. At the individual level, loneliness, low self-esteem, personal grievances and the search for belonging increase susceptibility. At the individual level, factors such as loneliness, low self-esteem, personal grievances and the search for belonging increase susceptibility. Religious, political and ethnic differences can further intensify these vulnerabilities (Lowe, 2020).

Young people play a central role in the discourse on violent extremism. Research by the Mandela Institute for Development Studies (2016) and UNDP (2017) shows how political and religious actors exploit youth vulnerabilities, while identity formation and the search for purpose heighten susceptibility to extremist narratives (Lowe, 2020). In conflict zones such as Iraq and Syria, extremist organizations have abducted or coerced youth into participating in violence (Bloom et al., 2016; UN, 2018). Similar patterns are evident in Nigeria, where recruitment into Boko Haram has been shaped by interpersonal and community networks, peer and family influences, socioeconomic vulnerability, and individuals' desire for belonging and recognition (Botha & Abdile, 2019). The same is also being witnessed in Somalia, where Al-Shabaab has leveraged unemployment, instability and radical teachings (Claudia, 2021). In East Africa, similar dynamics have been documented in Kenya, where socioeconomic vulnerability, perceived marginalisation, identity concerns and social influences have contributed to the recruitment of young people into al-Shabaab, including among Somali youth living in Eastleigh, Nairobi (Botha, 2014; Hassan, 2012).

Structural disadvantages further amplify youth vulnerabilities to violent extremism. Unemployment, poverty, political marginalization, corruption and limited educational opportunities create conditions conducive to radicalization. Moreover, digital platforms provide extremist organizations with new channels for targeted propaganda and recruitment (Alava et al., 2017). Peer pressure, indoctrination, discrimination by security agencies, idleness and financial incentives are also associated with youth involvement in violent extremism (Ssenyonga et al., 2019; UNDP, 2016). These findings suggest that effective prevention strategies must address not only security threats but also promote socioeconomic inclusion, civic participation, critical thinking and constructive opportunities for youth engagement (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020).

In Kenya, youth radicalization is further associated with the persecution of minority groups, extrajudicial killings, aggressive security operations and socioeconomic deprivation (Glück, 2017). Extremist

organizations exploit these grievances by offering financial incentives or promising to meet basic needs. Kenya has experienced several major extremist attacks, including the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing, the 2002 Kikambala Hotel attack, the 2012 Machakos bus station attack, the 2013 Westgate attack, the 2014 Mpeketoni attack, the 2015 Garissa University attack, and the 2019 DusitD2 attack, with youth implicated in several of these incidents (King, 2018). Kamukunji Sub-County is particularly significant, as approximately 60% of major attacks in Kenya have occurred in Nairobi, with about half concentrated in Kamukunji (Ruteere & Mutahi, 2016).

Kenya's initial responses to violent extremism were primarily reactive, emphasizing arrests, detention and the disruption of extremist networks. However, punitive measures alone may be counterproductive, as imprisonment can reinforce extremist beliefs in some contexts (Kruglanski et al., 2016). Recognition of these limitations has prompted a gradual shift toward preventive and community-based strategies that increasingly prioritize meaningful youth participation. Current interventions include awareness-raising, community dialogue, peer-led engagement and collaboration between communities and security agencies to identify and report threats. While some initiatives have demonstrated potential in raising awareness and building trust between communities and authorities, their overall effectiveness remains inconsistent. Studies indicate that such interventions have occasionally improved threat reporting and increased resilience among certain segments of the youth population (Alava et al., 2017; UNDP, 2016). However, significant limitations persist: youth may perceive programs as tokenistic or insufficiently tailored to local contexts and initiatives often struggle to sustain engagement or achieve measurable reductions in recruitment to extremist groups (Mwangi et al., 2025). Despite these efforts, youth participation remains limited (Mwangi et al., 2025). This situation presents a notable paradox: although youth are frequently portrayed as vulnerable to violent extremism, their potential as partners and agents in prevention is often underutilized (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020). Identifying and addressing barriers to youth participation is therefore critical to reducing vulnerability and fostering conditions that support

meaningful youth agency in preventing violent extremism (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020).

1.2 Problem Statement

Kenya has a predominantly youthful population, with nearly two-thirds of citizens under 35 years of age (KNBS, 2019). Despite this demographic profile, high youth unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities continue to marginalize many young people both economically and socially (Ruteere & Mutahi, 2016). Government initiatives such as *Kazi Kwa Vijana* and self-employment policies have sought to address these challenges, yet a significant proportion of youth remain excluded from both formal and informal labor markets (G.O.K., 2013). This marginalization increases vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist groups and undermines cooperation with security agencies (G.O.K., 2007).

At both regional and international levels, frameworks such as the African Youth Charter (2006) recognize youth participation as essential for development, peace and security. Kenya has implemented preventive interventions, including youth-focused programs in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kwale and Kilifi, to enhance resilience against radicalization (African Union commission, 2020). The National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism also underscores the importance of community and youth involvement in addressing extremist threats (G.O.K., 2016). Nevertheless, radicalization and Al-Shabaab-linked violence persist. Between 2000 and 2016, violent extremism reportedly resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and over 2,000 injuries in Kenya (Mukuna, 2019).

The persistent prevalence of violent extremism raises questions about whether vulnerability-centered interventions sufficiently recognize the capacity of youth to contribute to prevention (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020). Evidence indicates that youth can act as significant agents of positive and constructive change in peacebuilding when meaningfully engaged (Lancaster et al., 2018). However, many young people have limited opportunities to participate in decision-making, face negative stereotypes, and remain excluded from platforms meant to facilitate their involvement in peace and security processes (Mbugua et al., 2024). Furthermore, although PVE programs

often rely on voluntary participation and self-selection, youth engagement in high-risk areas such as Kamukunji remains limited, with skepticism persisting despite substantial policy interventions (Mwangi et al., 2025).

The disparity between strong policy commitments to youth participation and persistent skepticism and disengagement suggests that current interventions may not fully address the experiences, relationships and barriers influencing youth involvement. Specifically, peer victimization, trust deficits between youth and security agents, negative stereotyping and limited opportunities for involvement may constrain the capacity and willingness of young people to participate meaningfully in prevention efforts. Investigating these barriers is essential for advancing PVE interventions beyond a vulnerability-focused approach and fostering conditions that support constructive youth agency in preventing violent extremism. This gap constitutes the rationale for this study.

1.3 Objectives

1.3.1 General Objective

To investigate the factors affecting youth participation in preventing violent extremism in Kamukunji Sub-County.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

- i. To examine the effect of peer victimization on youth participation in the prevention of violent extremism.
- ii. To examine the effect of trust deficits between youth and security agents on information sharing.
- iii. To examine the effect of negative stereotyping of youth on their participation in the prevention of violent extremism.
- iv. To examine the effect of limited youth involvement on the prevention of violent extremism.

1.4 Research Questions

- i. What effect does peer victimization have on youth participation in the prevention of violent extremism?

- ii. What effect do trust deficits between youth and security agencies have on information sharing in the prevention of violent extremism?
- iii. What effect does negative stereotyping of youth have on their participation in the prevention of violent extremism?
- iv. What effect does limited youth involvement have on the prevention of violent extremism?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for policymakers and institutions responsible for national and community security, as it provides evidence on the social and relational factors influencing youth participation in the prevention of violent extremism. The findings may inform the development of youth-responsive policies and interventions that address barriers to participation and create opportunities for meaningful youth contributions to prevention efforts.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on security management, violent extremism and youth participation by analyzing the conditions that constrain youth engagement. Furthermore, the findings offer a foundation for examining how interventions can shift from viewing young people primarily as vulnerable populations to recognizing their potential agency in peace and security initiatives.

For residents and stakeholders in Kamukunji Sub-County, the findings may enhance understanding of the factors influencing youth participation and facilitate collaboration among young people, security agencies, local administrators, religious leaders and community actors. Such engagement is essential to build trust, foster community resilience and support locally driven approaches to preventing violent extremism.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The study was conducted in Kamukunji Sub-County, Nairobi County. Kamukunji borders Starehe to the west, Makadara to the south, Embakasi West to the east and Mathare to the north. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, the sub-county had a population of approximately 268,276 people. Administratively, Kamukunji comprises two

divisions, seven locations and nine sub-locations, while its five electoral wards are Pumwani, Eastleigh North, Eastleigh South, Airbase and California. The area encompasses diverse residential and commercial neighbourhoods, including both formal and informal settlements.

The study focused on youth participation in preventing violent extremism, specifically examining four interrelated dimensions: peer relations, youth security trust, stereotyping and opportunities for meaningful participation. Quantitative data were obtained from 48 youth and 16 Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders and community representatives, while qualitative evidence was obtained from 10 key informants and focus group discussions involving actors with relevant knowledge of community security and PVE. The geographical and thematic scope enabled the study to examine how social and institutional conditions may constrain youth participation while also identifying conditions that can strengthen youth agency in preventing violent extremism.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The sensitive nature of violent extremism posed limitations, particularly regarding respondents' willingness to disclose information. Some participants were hesitant to share their experiences and perceptions; therefore, the study provided confidentiality assurances to encourage open and honest responses. Police officers, whose relationship with some youth was marked by mistrust, were also initially reluctant to participate. Their involvement increased after the study's purpose was clarified and confidentiality was assured.

Additional challenges arose because respondents had limited availability, which the research team addressed through follow-up communication and, when necessary, telephone interviews. Concerns about potential reprisals from radicalized youth also contributed to participant hesitation. To mitigate these concerns, the researcher maintained strict confidentiality and protected respondents' identities, ensuring that responses could not be attributed to individual participants.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Relative Deprivation Theory and Stereotype Theory are employed to explain the transition from youth vulnerability to agency in preventing violent extremism (PVE). Relative Deprivation Theory elucidates how perceived exclusion and unmet expectations generate frustration, mistrust and disengagement. Stereotype Theory clarifies how negative social labeling constrains youth identity, voice and participation (Mwangi et al., 2025). These theories were selected because they address both structural and social-psychological dimensions of youth experience, aligning closely with the research focus on understanding barriers to and enablers of youth participation in PVE. Alternative frameworks, such as Social Learning Theory or Rational Choice Theory, offer valuable perspectives but are less equipped to illuminate the interplay between societal perceptions, group exclusion and the formation of agency among youth in this context (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020). Together, Relative Deprivation Theory and Stereotype Theory provide a foundation for examining the persistence of youth marginalization in PVE processes and the conditions that enable their active contribution to community resilience (Mwangi et al., 2025)

2.1.1 Relative Deprivation Theory

Gurr's (1970) *Relative Deprivation Theory* posits that perceived disparities between legitimate expectations and actual opportunities can generate frustration, resentment and under specific conditions, political violence. The relevance of this theory to PVE lies not in presuming that deprivation inevitably leads to extremism, but in explaining how experiences of exclusion can threaten belonging, control and social connection, thereby creating conditions associated with greater susceptibility to radical attitudes and behaviours (Pfundmair et al., 2024). Youth who perceive limited economic opportunities, civic exclusion, or discriminatory treatment may consequently develop distrust of institutions meant to engage or protect them (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020). Within Kamukunji Sub-County, this perspective facilitates examination of the relationship between vulnerability and agency. Empirical research similarly

indicates that mistrust and strained relations between communities and security institutions can undermine cooperation and information sharing, while community-based engagement can strengthen youth participation in local prevention efforts (Lind et al., 2017; Mwangi et al., 2025). Empirical evidence from Kenya indicates that limited opportunities for young people to influence programmes and decisions affecting them can reinforce perceptions of exclusion and constrain meaningful youth participation (Mbugua et al., 2024). Limited opportunities for meaningful participation, adverse peer experiences, and mistrust of security institutions constrain young people's capacity to contribute to PVE. In contrast, practical examples from community-led programs, such as the Kamukunji Youth Forum (Mwangi et al., 2025), demonstrate that meaningful inclusion, recognition and opportunities to influence community decisions can transform youth from perceived security risks into active prevention participants. Relative deprivation theory provides a framework for understanding how perceived exclusion and unmet expectations can generate grievances that weaken young people's willingness to engage with institutions and participate in collective prevention efforts (Gurr, 1970)

2.1.2 Stereotype Theory

Lippmann's (1922) *Stereotype Theory* explains how simplified, socially constructed beliefs shape perceptions and interactions between social groups. When youth are consistently characterized as violent, delinquent, apathetic, or predisposed to radicalization, these representations influence institutional and community engagement with them. Stereotyping thus functions as more than a perception issue; it restricts access to decision-making spaces, undermines trust and reduces opportunities for youth to demonstrate civic agency (Mwangi et al., 2025).

This perspective is particularly relevant to PVE, as approaches that primarily frame young people as potential perpetrators or victims often overlook their capacity to serve as peacebuilders, peer influencers and early-warning sources (Mwangi et al., 2025). In diverse urban contexts such as Kamukunji, negative labeling reinforces social exclusion and discourages engagement with security and community institutions (Mwangi et al., 2025). While Stereotype Theory

explains how social narratives perpetuate vulnerability, alternative explanations for youth marginalization have also been advanced. For example, some scholars emphasize structural socioeconomic factors, political exclusion, or the impact of peer networks as key drivers of youth disengagement. Others critique the emphasis on stereotypes, suggesting that resource limitations or policy failures may constrain youth agency more than social labeling alone. Nevertheless, recognition and meaningful inclusion remain crucial in fostering conditions for youth agency in preventing violent extremism.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework posits that youth participation in preventing violent extremism is shaped by four interrelated factors: peer victimization, trust between youth and security agents, stereotyping of youth, and opportunities for involvement in community forums. Rather than defining youth participation solely as attendance at PVE activities, this framework conceptualizes participation as young people's capacity and willingness to contribute to awareness creation, information sharing, community dialogue, peer mobilization, and other preventive actions.

To clarify operationalization, this research will measure each factor as follows: Peer victimization will be assessed through survey items and interview

questions capturing youths' experiences with exclusion, harassment, or intimidation by peers. Trust between youth and security agents will be evaluated based on respondents' expressed confidence in police or local authorities, willingness to seek help, and perceived fairness of security practices. Stereotyping of youth will be measured by youths' perceptions of how adults and institutions label them, as well as reported experiences of discrimination or prejudice. Opportunities for involvement in community forums will be determined by the number and nature of participatory platforms available to youth, self-reported engagement in forums and access to decision-making spaces. Youth participation will be operationalized through self-reported involvement in PVE-related activities, such as awareness campaigns, information dissemination, group discussions and leadership roles within community initiatives.

Peer victimization and stereotyping reinforce vulnerability through exclusion and diminished social belonging, while mistrust of security agencies discourages cooperation and information sharing. In contrast, constructive peer relations, institutional trust and meaningful participation opportunities strengthen agency (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020). The framework therefore examines the conditions under which vulnerability inhibits or is transformed into active youth participation in PVE.

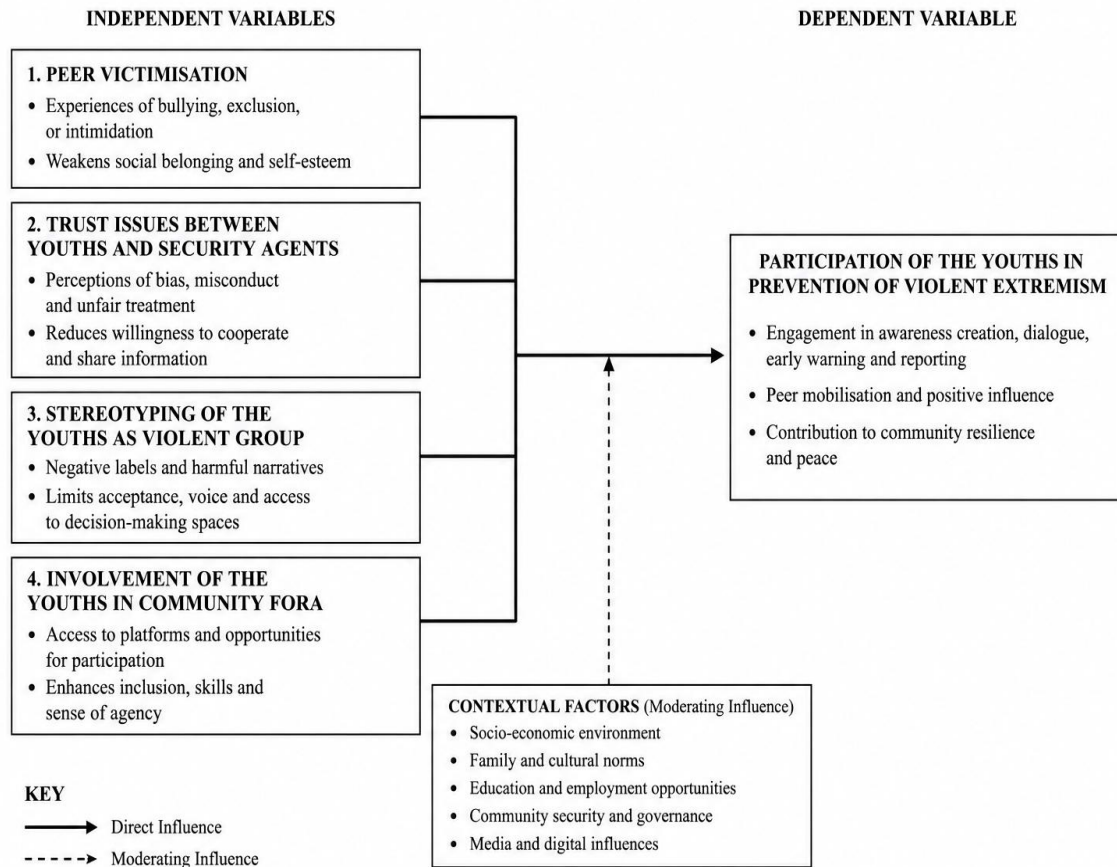


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

2.3 Empirical Literature

2.3.1 Peer Victimization and Youth Agency in Preventing Violent Extremism

Violent extremism is a multidimensional phenomenon arising from an interaction of situational, sociocultural and individual factors rather than any single causal factor (Allan et al., 2015). Peer relationships are particularly influential during adolescence, shaping identity development and behavioural socialization through interpersonal and social-network processes (Kornienko et al., 2016).

Peer victimization may lead to social isolation and weaken attachment to conventional community structures, thereby diminishing the social resources that facilitate youth agency.

McGee et al. (2017) link peer victimization to an increased propensity for violent or criminal behavior, while Ssenyonga et al. (2019) highlight the

significance of peer relationships in adolescent identity formation. In Kenya, June et al. (2023) report that peer-victimized youth in Kakamega exhibited social withdrawal and reduced engagement in community activities. Collectively, these findings indicate that victimization may both heighten vulnerability and reduce participation in protective community networks (Sahgal & Kimaiyo, 2020).

Peers may also serve as important preventive resources. Williams et al. (2015) found that peers are often well positioned to recognize behavioral changes associated with radicalization, although fear of repercussions can discourage reporting. Thus, peer networks are not inherently sources of vulnerability; with safe reporting mechanisms, positive peer leadership, and trusted community structures, they can support prevention and early intervention. This dual role is central to understanding the transition from vulnerability to agency.

2.3.2 Trust between Youth and Security Agents

Trust is fundamental to youth participation in preventing violent extremism (PVE), as effective prevention often relies on voluntary cooperation, dialogue and information sharing (Mwangi et al., 2025). Friedman et al. (2004) observed that perceptions of police bias and unresponsiveness diminish youth willingness to cooperate, while White (2021) underscores the broader impact of perceived police misconduct on police-community relations. When youth perceive interactions with security agencies as unfair, coercive, or discriminatory, they may view engagement as inherently risky.

Conversely, procedural justice characterized by fairness, transparency, and respectful treatment can strengthen institutional legitimacy and cooperation (Rosenbaum, 2015). Kochel et al. (2013) similarly demonstrate an association between perceived police legitimacy and willingness to cooperate and share information. In Kenya, Lind et al. (2015) identifies mistrust as a significant constraint on youth reporting of suspicious activities.

Trust should be conceptualized as an enabling condition for agency, rather than simply the absence of conflict between youth and security agencies. Youth who perceive security institutions as legitimate and responsive are more likely to participate in community policing, early-warning mechanisms, dialogue, and information sharing. In Kamukunji, examining this relationship is essential to determine whether security-community relations facilitate youth partnership in PVE or reinforce disengagement.

2.3.3 Stereotyping and the Construction of Youth as a Security Risk

Negative representations of youth constrain their participation by framing them primarily as vulnerable, delinquent, or a security risk. Messias et al. (2008) contend that stereotypes limit youth voice and reinforce marginalization, while Zeldin (2004) demonstrates that excluding youth from community governance diminishes their contribution to collective problem-solving. Devlin (2006) also links labeling to exclusion from civic spaces and the perpetuation of mistrust.

These dynamics extend beyond interpersonal attitudes to encompass broader societal influences. Boonzaier and Kessi (2018) demonstrate that public and media representations shape youth identity and civic participation, while King (2018) warns against discourses that depict youth primarily as passive or problematic. Within PVE, such representations risk creating a paradox in which young people are identified as central to the problem of violent extremism but are simultaneously denied meaningful roles in developing solutions.

Reframing youth as partners, knowledge holders, and prevention actors is essential for fostering agency. Reducing stereotypes can broaden opportunities for youth leadership, peer mobilization, and participation in local security and peacebuilding structures. The central issue is not only how communities perceive young people, but also whether these perceptions translate into meaningful opportunities for participation in PVE.

2.3.4 Opportunities for Meaningful Youth Participation in PVE

Youth participation strengthens resilience against violent extremism by fostering belonging, leadership, civic responsibility and collective efficacy. Checkoway (2012) contends that participation develops young people's citizenship and leadership capacities, while Richter and Panday (2007) demonstrate the value of structured youth engagement in enhancing civic involvement. Participation thus serves as a key mechanism for transforming vulnerability into agency.

The mere existence of community forums does not guarantee meaningful participation. When adults dominate decision-making or youth involvement is limited to consultative roles, young people may be present but remain institutionally marginalized. Despite policy emphasis on youth inclusion, meaningful participation can be constrained by socio-cultural factors, educational disparities, information accessibility and access to resources (Njenga et al., 2024). Head (2011) identifies these structural barriers to youth participation, while Abwaku (2017) links exclusion from community dialogue to disconnection that extremist actors can exploit. Evans (2007)

therefore emphasizes inclusive platforms as protective mechanisms that reinforce youth-community relationships.

Emerging approaches highlight the potential of youth-led interventions. Savoia (2020), in evaluating the Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Challenging Extremism Initiative, found that integrating online and face-to-face engagement enhanced youth participation and their capacity to recognize and challenge extremist narratives. These findings suggest that effective PVE should extend beyond including youth in established forums to empowering them to co-create interventions, mobilize peers, generate counter-narratives and influence local prevention priorities. Meaningful participation is thus both an outcome of agency and a mechanism for its development (Mwangi et al., 2025).

2.4 Research Gap

Existing literature offers substantial evidence on youth vulnerability, peer relations, police-community trust, stereotyping and civic participation (Checkoway, 2012; Zeldin, 2004). However, these dimensions are often examined in isolation, and much of the PVE literature still frames youth primarily in terms of risk and vulnerability rather than agency (Zeldin, 2004). As a result, there is limited understanding of how these factors interact to enable or constrain young people's active participation in preventing violent extremism. An additional contextual gap is evident in Kamukunji Sub-County. Evidence from other settings does not fully account for how peer victimization, security-sector mistrust, negative stereotyping, and access to community forums interact within Kamukunji's unique urban social environment. Furthermore, research has focused little on how addressing these constraints could reposition youth from subjects of PVE interventions to partners and agents of prevention (Njagi, 2025)

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the four factors within a unified analytical framework to determine how they influence youth participation in PVE in Kamukunji. This approach shifts the analytical focus from solely identifying factors that make youth vulnerable to violent extremism to examining what enables or constrains their agency in prevention. The

findings aim to provide a stronger empirical foundation for designing locally grounded, youth-centered PVE interventions.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive research design was adopted to examine youth participation in preventing violent extremism in Kamukunji Sub-County. This approach was appropriate as it enabled the establishment and interpretation of existing experiences, perceptions, relationships and participation patterns without manipulating study conditions. The design provided a robust foundation for analyzing how young people experience PVE processes within their daily community and institutional contexts.

Aligned with the study's vulnerability-to-agency framework, the research design examined youth participation from two interrelated perspectives. The first addressed conditions that constrain participation, such as peer victimization, mistrust between youth and security actors, negative stereotyping and exclusion from community forums. The second explored opportunities for agency, including youth voice, willingness to participate, engagement with community structures, and relationships with PVE actors. This approach moved beyond viewing young people solely as vulnerable, instead analyzing the circumstances that enable them to contribute actively to prevention efforts.

The study generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Questionnaires identified patterns in respondents' experiences and perceptions, while key informant interviews and focus group discussions explained these patterns within the local context. Integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence captured both observable participation trends and the underlying social and institutional dynamics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design offered an empirical foundation for examining the transition from conditions that constrain youth participation to those that enhance youth agency in PVE.

3.2 Target Population

The study focused on individuals whose experiences, roles and interactions were directly relevant to youth participation in preventing violent extremism (PVE) in Kamukunji Sub-County. The population included members of sub-locational youth groups, Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders, other key community members, National Government Administrative Officers (NGAO) and security actors. Key informants comprised the Deputy County Commissioner (DCC), seven Chiefs, the Officer Commanding Police Division (OCPD), and a representative from the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC).

The study population comprised 288 individuals: 168 members of sub-locational youth groups, 110 Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders and key community members

and 10 key informants. This composition was designed to integrate perspectives from youth, community, administrative and security actors involved in youth engagement or PVE interventions. Such diversity was essential, as youth participation is influenced by both individual experiences and interactions with community structures and state institutions.

Within this population, youth represented the primary group of interest. The remaining categories provided contextual and institutional perspectives necessary to understand the environment in which youth vulnerability, participation and agency are shaped and negotiated.

Table 3.1 Study Population and Sample Size

Participant Category	Population	Sample Size
Deputy County Commissioner (DCC)	1	1
Chiefs	7	7
Officer Commanding Police Division (OCPD)	1	1
Nyumba Kumi Cluster Leaders and Key Community Persons	110	16
Sub-locational Youth Groups	168	48
National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC)	1	1
Total	288	74

The final sample included 74 participants: 48 youth representatives, 16 Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders and key community members and 10 key informants. Youth constituted the largest respondent category, reflecting the study's emphasis on their lived experiences and participation. Perspectives from community, administrative and security actors contextualized these experiences and offered insight into the institutional and relational conditions shaping youth agency in PVE.

3.3 Sampling Design

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct knowledge, experience, or involvement in youth, community governance, security, or PVE-related activities in Kamukunji Sub-County. This method was appropriate because the study required respondents who could provide information grounded in their experiences of the

phenomena under investigation, rather than individuals without a connection to the study context (Singh & Masuku, 2014).

Youth respondents were drawn from sub-locational youth groups to capture experiences of participation, exclusion, peer relations, interaction with security actors and engagement in community initiatives. Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders and key community persons were included because of their proximity to community-level security and social dynamics and their interaction with young people within local governance structures.

The DCC, seven Chiefs, OCPD and NCTC representatives were selected as key informants because their mandates positioned them to provide administrative, security and policy perspectives on youth engagement and PVE. All 10 identified key

informants participated in the study. The resulting sample of 74 integrated youth-centered evidence with community and institutional perspectives, maintaining young people's experiences as the principal analytical focus.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

The team collected data using semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interview guides, focus group discussion guides and observation. These instruments were chosen to capture both measurable patterns and the underlying experiences and meanings associated with youth participation in PVE.

The team administered semi-structured questionnaires to 48 youth respondents and 16 Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders and key community members. The questionnaire generated information on peer-related influences, youth-security relations, stereotyping, participation in community forums, and willingness to engage in PVE activities. Including both structured and open-ended items enabled respondents to indicate patterns of experience and provide contextual information.

Key informant interviews were conducted with the DCC, seven Chiefs, the OCPD and the NCTC representative. These interviews provided administrative, security and policy perspectives on youth participation, institutional approaches to community engagement, youth-security relations, and the implementation of PVE interventions. Their accounts were particularly useful in comparing institutional understandings of youth participation with experiences reported at community level.

Focus group discussions complemented individual responses by providing a forum for participants to discuss shared experiences and differing perceptions of youth involvement in PVE. Discussions focused on peer influence, interactions with security actors, stereotyping, participation in community forums, and opportunities for youth to exercise greater voice and responsibility in prevention initiatives. When FGD participants were drawn from the sampled respondents, their contributions were treated as qualitative elaboration of the questionnaire evidence rather than as additional data points. Observation

enabled the researcher to note relevant contextual and interactional features during fieldwork.

Primary evidence was supplemented with secondary material from academic literature, government reports, policy documents and publications from relevant institutions, including the ministry responsible for internal security, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC). Incorporating these sources allowed for comparison between reported experiences and institutional or documentary perspectives, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the local PVE environment.

3.5 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Content validity was assessed to determine whether the research instruments adequately captured the study's key dimensions, including peer-related influences, youth-security relations, stereotyping, participation and youth agency in PVE. The instruments were reviewed for relevance, clarity and alignment with the study objectives and we made necessary adjustments before field administration.

The instruments were piloted with selected youth, Nyumba Kumi representatives and Assistant County Commissioners (ACCs) who were not included in the final study. The pilot assessed the clarity, interpretation, sequencing and consistency of questions across respondent categories. Ambiguous or repetitive items identified during the pilot were refined. This process improved the instruments' reliability by ensuring consistent question comprehension and administration, while excluding pilot participants from the final sample.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative questionnaire data were checked for completeness, coded, classified and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Because the study is descriptive, the analysis primarily relied on frequencies and percentages to identify patterns in peer-related experiences, trust and interaction between youth and security actors, stereotyping, participation in community forums, willingness to participate in PVE and related aspects of youth engagement. Results were presented in tables

and graphical displays, where appropriate, to support interpretation.

The team analyzed qualitative evidence from key informant interviews and focus group discussions using thematic analysis. The team reviewed, organized and interpreted responses around recurring issues and patterns relevant to the study objectives. Particular attention was given to accounts explaining how peer relations, institutional trust, stereotyping, community inclusion, and opportunities for participation shaped young people's roles within PVE initiatives. Thematic analysis was appropriate as it enabled interpretation of experiences and perceptions within their social and institutional context (Ivan, 2021).

The final stage involved triangulating evidence from questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observation and documentary sources. Analysis compared quantitative patterns with participants' explanations and institutional accounts to identify areas of convergence, divergence and contextual complexities. Triangulation was used not only to confirm findings across sources, but also to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of youth participation.

Notably, the analysis did not equate vulnerability with passivity. Peer pressure, mistrust, stereotyping and

exclusion were examined as conditions that could restrict participation, while voice, inclusion, constructive youth-security relations, community involvement and willingness to participate were treated as expressions or enabling conditions of agency. This analytical framework connected the empirical findings to the study's central proposition: effective PVE requires attention to both the vulnerabilities affecting young people and the conditions that enable them to participate as active contributors to prevention.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

The analysis examined youth participation in preventing violent extremism (PVE) through four interrelated dimensions: peer relations, youth security trust, stereotyping and opportunities for meaningful participation. The quantitative analysis comprised 64 questionnaire respondents, 48 youth and 16 Nyumba Kumi cluster leaders and key community persons, while evidence from 10 key informants and focus group discussions provided contextual interpretation. Rather than treating vulnerability and agency as mutually exclusive conditions, the findings show how social and institutional relationships can constrain or enable young people's participation in PVE.

Table 4.1 Peer Relations and Participation in PVE

Statement	Agreement (%)
Peer victimization affects participation in PVE	55
Witnessed bullying among peers	65
Fear of ostracization prevents reporting suspicious activities	60
Peer pressure influences the decision to participate	58
Comfortable discussing extremism concerns with peers	45
Peer support encourages engagement in PVE	50

Peer relations emerged as an important social context within which participation in PVE is negotiated. More than half of respondents associated participation with peer victimization (55%), fear of ostracization (60%), and peer pressure (58%), while 65% reported witnessing bullying. Only 45% felt comfortable discussing extremism-related concerns with peers. Collectively, these findings suggest that participation may carry social costs where disclosure or engagement

is perceived as conflicting with prevailing peer expectations.

Peer influence was not uniformly constraining, however half of the respondents indicated that peer support could encourage engagement in PVE. Qualitative accounts similarly described peer relationships as capable of discouraging disclosure through fear of labelling and exclusion, but also as

potential sources of encouragement and collective responsibility.

The significance of peer relations therefore lies in their dual character. The same networks that reproduce vulnerability through conformity, intimidation, or exclusion can potentially support agency when participation becomes socially accepted and

reinforced. This shifts the analytical focus from viewing peers primarily as sources of radicalizing influence towards recognizing peer networks as potential infrastructure for youth-led prevention.

4.2 Youth–Security Trust as a Condition for Participation

Table 4.2 Youth–Security Trust and Information Sharing

Statement	Agreement (%)
Trust issues affect willingness to share information	80
Trust local security agents to handle sensitive information appropriately	70
Fear of reprisal prevents reporting suspicious activities	60
Security agents are approachable and youth-friendly	45
Information shared with security agents will remain confidential	55
Past negative experiences affect willingness to cooperate	65

Trust was the most prominent relational issue identified in the study. Eighty per cent of respondents indicated that trust affected willingness to share information, while 65% associated previous negative experiences with willingness to cooperate and 60% identified fear of reprisal as a constraint on reporting suspicious activity.

The findings reveal a more nuanced pattern than a simple absence of trust. Although 70% expressed confidence in the ability of local security agents to handle sensitive information appropriately, only 55% believed that information shared would remain confidential and 45% regarded security agents as approachable and youth-friendly. This suggests a distinction between confidence in institutional capability and confidence in the interpersonal and protective conditions surrounding engagement.

Qualitative evidence reinforced this distinction. Participants referred to profiling, dismissal, fear of

implication and uncertainty about protection after sharing information. Security actors also acknowledged reluctance among young people to disclose information. These accounts locate non-participation partly within the relationship between youth and security institutions rather than solely within individual attitudes.

Trust therefore functions as an enabling condition for agency. Young people may possess relevant information and willingness to contribute, yet exercise limited agency where engagement is perceived as unsafe or consequential. Confidentiality, protection, respectful interaction and credible channels of communication are consequently integral to meaningful youth participation in community-based PVE.

4.3 Stereotyping, Recognition and the Legitimacy of Youth Voice

Table 4.3 Negative Stereotyping and Youth Participation in PVE

Statement	Agreement (%)
Negative stereotypes affect youth engagement in prevention efforts	70
Society views youth as potential troublemakers	68
Negative stereotypes discourage participation in community initiatives	65
Youth opinions on extremism prevention are taken seriously by adults	30
Media portrayals influence treatment by security agents	60
Positive recognition encourages participation in PVE	75

Stereotyping emerged as both a participation barrier and a question of legitimacy. Seventy per cent of respondents indicated that negative stereotypes affected youth engagement, 68% perceived that society viewed young people as potential troublemakers and 65% associated stereotyping with reduced participation in community initiatives. Only 30% considered youth perspectives on extremism prevention to be taken seriously by adults.

The latter finding is particularly significant because it distinguishes participation from influence. Young people may attend community activities or be consulted without their perspectives acquiring sufficient legitimacy to shape decisions. Youth exclusion can therefore persist even where nominal opportunities for participation exist.

Conversely, 75% indicated that positive recognition would encourage engagement in PVE, the strongest

positive agency indicator in the study. Qualitative accounts similarly linked dismissal and negative labelling with reduced confidence and willingness to participate.

These findings position recognition as a mechanism connecting vulnerability and agency. Where young people are predominantly constructed as potential offenders, vulnerable populations, or security risks, their legitimacy as prevention actors may be diminished. Recognition of their knowledge, experience, and contribution potentially alters this relationship by positioning youth as credible participants in community security rather than merely subjects of intervention.

4.4 From Consultation to Meaningful Participation

Table 4.4 Youth Inclusion, Participation and Leadership in PVE

Statement	Agreement (%)
Lack of involvement in community awareness forums affects participation	55
Youth are rarely invited to community meetings discussing PVE	65
Youth perspectives are sought in awareness programmes	55
Community leaders do not adequately value youth input in decision-making	52
Lack of youth involvement contributes to ineffective prevention strategies	60
Willing to participate if given leadership roles	70

The findings reveal an important distinction between opportunities to be consulted and opportunities to exercise influence. Sixty-five per cent of respondents indicated that youth were rarely invited to community meetings discussing PVE, while 52% considered youth input insufficiently valued in decision-making. At the same time, 55% reported that youth perspectives were sought in awareness programs.

This apparent contradiction is analytically revealing. It suggests that youth engagement may occur selectively or at the level of consultation without necessarily extending to decision-making. Participation is therefore not adequately captured by attendance or consultation alone; its substantive value depends on the extent to which young people can influence priorities, decisions, and actions.

This interpretation is strengthened by two further findings. Sixty per cent associated insufficient youth involvement with ineffective prevention strategies, while 70% expressed willingness to participate if afforded leadership roles. Qualitative accounts similarly described limited access to leadership, generational disconnects and community mobilization approaches that did not always accommodate diverse youth perspectives.

The findings therefore challenge interpretations of low participation as evidence of youth apathy. Instead, they point towards a participation deficit partly embedded in the architecture of community engagement itself. Agency becomes more substantive where youth move beyond being recipients of sensitization or consultees towards participating in

agenda setting, decision-making, community mobilization, information sharing and leadership.

4.5 From Vulnerability to Agency

Taken together, the findings indicate that youth vulnerability and agency are relational rather than fixed conditions. Across the four dimensions, participation was shaped by the character of relationships surrounding young people: relationships with peers, security actors, community leaders and the wider social environment.

Four interconnected processes emerge from the evidence. Peer support can transform social pressure into collective efficacy; institutional trust can transform reluctance into cooperation; recognition can transform negative labelling into legitimate voice; and meaningful participation can transform consultation into influence. Conversely, ostracization, mistrust, stereotyping and exclusion restrict the space within which young people can act.

This pattern is illustrated by the strongest findings across the dataset: 80% identified trust as relevant to information sharing, 75% indicated that positive recognition encourages participation, and 70% expressed willingness to participate when provided with leadership opportunities. These results suggest that constrained participation should not be interpreted simply as an absence of willingness. Rather, willingness and agency are mediated by whether the surrounding environment provides safety, legitimacy, voice and meaningful opportunities for action.

The study therefore advances a relational understanding of youth agency in PVE. Agency is not simply an individual attribute that young people either possess or lack; it is enabled or constrained through interactions with peers, institutions, community structures and prevailing social representations. In this sense, vulnerability and agency can coexist: a young person may experience stereotyping, mistrust, or peer pressure while simultaneously possessing the willingness and capacity to contribute to prevention.

The transition from vulnerability to agency consequently requires more than incorporating youth into existing PVE activities. It entails changing the

conditions of participation. This means strengthening supportive peer networks, building credible and protective relationships with security actors, recognizing youth knowledge and experience and creating genuine opportunities for leadership and influence.

The central contribution of the findings is therefore a shift from understanding youth principally as populations at risk to recognizing them as actors with capacity. Within community-based PVE, meaningful agency emerges when young people are not merely reached, sensitized, or consulted, but are trusted, recognized and accorded sufficient influence to shape preventive action.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The study shows that limited willingness to engage does not fully explain constrained youth participation in preventing violent extremism (PVE) in Kamukunji Sub-County. Rather, broader social and institutional conditions significantly influence youth agency.

Peer relations operate in two directions: pressure, victimization and fear of ostracism restrict participation, while supportive peer networks can legitimize and reinforce preventive action. Therefore, peer influence should be recognized as both a source of vulnerability and a potential resource for collective agency.

Trust between youth and security actors constitutes a critical condition for participation. Concerns about confidentiality, potential reprisals, approachability and prior negative experiences may discourage information sharing, even when young people recognize security actors' institutional role. As a result, agency depends not only on willingness to cooperate but also on whether engagement is perceived as safe, credible and respectful.

Stereotyping further restricts participation by diminishing the legitimacy attributed to youth perspectives. Conversely, the strong positive response to recognition indicates that young people are more

likely to engage when their knowledge and contributions are valued. Youth willingness to assume leadership roles further shows that limited participation should not be equated with apathy.

Overall, the findings indicate that youth agency in PVE is relational rather than solely individual. Supportive peer relations, institutional trust, social recognition and meaningful opportunities to influence decisions collectively strengthen youth agency. Facilitating the transition from vulnerability to agency requires a shift from viewing youth primarily as populations at risk to recognizing them as legitimate partners in community-based prevention.

5.2 Recommendations

i. Local PVE structures should institutionalize meaningful youth participation by assigning youth representatives defined roles in planning, decision-making, implementation and oversight processes. Assess participation based on the influence young people exercise, rather than solely on attendance at sensitization activities.

ii. Security and administrative actors should strengthen trusted youth–security engagement mechanisms by establishing confidential reporting channels, implementing safeguards against reprisals and unnecessary profiling and facilitating regular non-crisis dialogue with young people. Engagement should prioritize sustained relationship-building rather than limiting interaction to periods when security information is required.

iii. PVE interventions should utilize peer networks as prevention platforms by supporting credible youth groups and peer champions to promote dialogue, challenge harmful peer norms and mobilize joint responsibility. This approach would reposition peer influence from a source of vulnerability to a mechanism for youth-led prevention.

iv. Community and PVE actors should adopt recognition-based approaches to youth engagement, positioning young people not only as beneficiaries or potential security threats but as contributors of local knowledge, leadership and preventive solutions. Youth agency should be demonstrated through

tangible opportunities for voice, responsibility and influence.

v. Collectively, these measures would shift community-based PVE from primarily focusing on reaching and sensitizing young people to trusting, recognizing, and enabling them to actively shape prevention within their communities.

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