

Can Fathers Challenge Extremism?

Studying the Violence Prevention Potential of East African Fathers

2017 - 2019

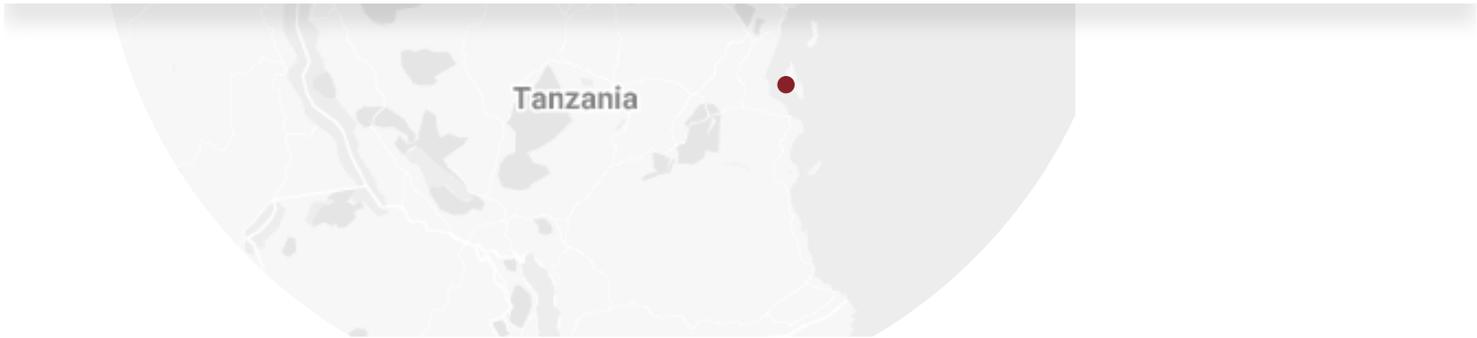
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FUNDERS

USIP United States Institute of Peace

As the first evidence-based analysis of the prevention potential of fathers, Women without Borders' (WwB) Father Study set out to determine whether men with adolescent and young adult children

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and fatherhood contexts; what also emerges is a fuller picture of fathers' safeguarding potential than hitherto has been attempted. The research study was conceived with real-world application in mind. The results seek thus to aid—or indeed act as a foundation for—future programmes attempting to reach vulnerable youth by harnessing the untapped soft power skills of fathers in at-risk communities, including new iterations of WwB's 'FatherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model.

Parental roles and responsibilities in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) have received insufficient attention from scholars and practitioners alike. Where attempts to identify the possible or proven potential of families has been observed in this respect, however rare, the emphasis has tended to rest on the agency of women, and on women as mothers in particular. In stark contrast to their female counterparts, fathers and their safeguarding potential has remained uncharted territory in the field of P/CVE. A number of factors, including the assumption of fathers as barriers to prevention efforts, have had the undesired effect of further isolating them as subjects of enquiry.

Leading up to the completion of its pioneering Father Study, entitled 'Can Fathers Challenge Extremism? Studying the Violence Prevention Potential of East African Fathers', Women without Borders (WwB) spent two years interviewing and surveying some 600 fathers in rural and urban communities across Uganda and Zanzibar. The project was made possible through the generous support of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and WwB's cooperation with its local partners Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum (UMYDF) based in Kampala and Zanzibar Youth Education Environment Development Support Association (ZAYEDESAs) headquartered in Stone Town.

WwB's decision to explore fathers' prevention potential is rooted in close to a decade

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The evident link between the nature of parenting and the susceptibility of the youth to extremist groups dominated workshop discussions in Khujand. The local participants highlighted that a lack of guidance due to the absence of fathers and mothers had increased their children's susceptibility to recruitment by extremists. At the same time, they identified successful communication with their children as the most effective possible remedy. At the conclusion of workshop, the women proposed the creation of schools for mothers to provide women in their communities with the skills that they need to effectively support their children and prevent the spread of violent extremism ('What mothers need is to go back to school').

With a clear mandate in mind, Women without Borders thus set out to pursue the first in-depth research project on mothers' prospective role in the PVE sphere. In 2015, we published our study findings under the familiar title, 'Can Mothers Challenge Extremism?' (Schlaffer and Kropiunigg 2015). We observed 1023 mothers' attitudes towards, perceptions of, and experiences with radicalisation and violent extremism in their families and communities in Pakistan, Palestine, Israel, Nigeria, and Northern Ireland. The research revealed that although mothers are best suited and situated to recognise and react to early warning signs of radicalisation due to their place at the heart of the family, often they lack the appropriate space, structures, and training to develop the necessary competence and confidence to assume their prevention role. On the basis of the study findings, WWB advanced its 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model that had already been running as a pilot programme in various countries since 2013.

To return to the fathers, we have found in both our research and work on the ground that fathers often are an obstacle to mothers' efforts. A high number of participants cite their husbands' relationship to them and their children as a chief contributing factor to tension and unrest in the home. Many fathers, we have come to learn, present a challenge to family cohesion due to, inter alia, poor communication skills, physical and mental absence, a propensity for authoritarian fatherhood stances, and

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and Linz. The study explored their perspectives on fatherhood and the degree to which they exercised the 'fair share' principle at home; a just distribution of domestic duties between husbands and wives. By and large, the project participants reinforced their commitment to being active fathers but expressed a degree of ambivalence that most put down to growing up in patriarchal societies in which men do not commit to everyday household and parenting duties. In having to navigate roles that most thought had yet to be more clearly defined, a number of fathers expressed feeling torn when asked how much family involvement and support they deemed to be appropriate. While the fathers had in common a desire to spend more time with their families, perceived societal expectations, as the study revealed, led many to prioritise their jobs. All fathers felt that it was their duty to be positive role models to their children. The vast majority nevertheless struggled to reconcile Austrian parenthood models with those that represent the norm in their countries of origin.

In studying the violence prevention potential of East African fathers and asking 'can fathers challenge extremism?', we hope ultimately to advance a programme that brings fathers into the fold and leads to a more complete Parenting for Peace approach. WwB's FatherSchools, as the programme has come to be known in its pilot iterations, promises to be more than just a mitigating measure. To our mind, fathers could become unlikely male role models in vulnerable communities where notions of masculinity often are linked to violence and parenting tends to remain the preserve of women. In this vein, fathers could be viewed as a missing puzzle piece in a family-based and whole-of-community security architecture. We would venture to suggest that parents, as a united front, have the strongest intervention potential in protecting adolescent and young adult children from being attracted to radical messages and recruiters. Ultimately, sensitising fathers to their 'parenting for peace' responsibility and engaging them through FatherSchools could be a significant step in supplementing and building on the impact of MotherSchools around the world.

As the first evidence-based analysis of the prevention potential of fathers, WwB's Father Study set out to determine whether men with adolescent and young adult

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experiences with radicalisation, and perceived barriers to realising their prevention potential.

Applying a multiple step and mixed methods research approach, WWB's study pursued the above questions by engaging fathers across Zanzibar and Uganda. The research team conducted semi-structured interviews and processed the resulting discussion transcripts using a qualitative data analysis (QDA) method. The findings subsequently were applied to develop contextualised survey questionnaires for each country. These surveys were disseminated to over six hundred fathers in both countries. Our results are presented in the following report, which draws on all qualitative and quantitative data collected in the course of the research project. This research study's evaluation of East African fathers offers a more complete understanding of fathers' overlooked prevention potential than hitherto has been attempted.

This study concludes that survey fathers consider violent extremism to be an everyday reality shrouded in secrecy, contend that their children conceivably could be impacted as victims or perpetrators, and perceive youth involvement in extreme political groups to be the most common criminal activity. Despite identifying a lack of parental guidance as the greatest risk factor, fathers exhibit split self-confidence and decidedly are ambivalent towards and insecure about a number of parenting and security issues; they are evenly divided on key topics like their innate parenting talent and ability to recognise early warning signs of radicalisation. Yet the fathers' conviction that both parents are viewed as the chief discussion partners for their children when problems arise points to their access and authority as effective intervention and prevention actors. Not only are fathers most highly in favour of receiving training in parenting skills and support from social organisations when contemplating their children's safety; they also issue a clear mandate: at present and above all others, fathers are the ones who need to increase their engagement to safeguard the youth.

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responsibility taken seriously by Ugandan and Zanzibari fathers alike; they also desire greater involvement on the part of both fathers and mothers.

FINDING II | Fathers on the Fence | Between rejecting the archaic and resisting the modern

When viewed as a collective, the survey fathers are more of one mind than not but appear to be decidedly ambivalent towards a number of parenting and security issues. Though not overly fatalistic or overtly archaic, they are evenly split on key topics like their innate parenting talent and ability to recognise early warning signs of radicalisation. A trace of generational disconnectedness appears also to be simmering below the surface.

FINDING III | Divergent Parenting Contexts | Concerned city dwellers versus relaxed islanders?

Issues of extremism, the youth's susceptibility to recruitment, and fatherhood shortcomings look to be more pronounced in the Ugandan context; Zanzibari fathers seem to be less concerned about these issues, perceive threats to be fewer or lower, and are more measured in their responses. A heightened sense of urgency on the part of the fathers across Uganda may help to explain their greater tendency to be fatalistic and account for expressions of lower confidence in the role of fathers, their comparatively limited faith in the resilience of the youth, and low trust in relatives and the community.

FINDING IV | Generational Discontinuity | The possible link between parents' decline in taking responsibility and dwindling community cohesion

Opting for a generational and traditional worldview in parenting matters, East African fathers are caught up in a logic defined by a causal relationship between greater divisions in communities and a decline in adults taking responsibility for the youth's wellbeing.

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FINDING VI | A Culture of Crime and Violence | Degrees of community affectedness, pathways into terror, and children's potential allies

The survey men appear to be highly aware of, concerned about, and affected by community violence. They see that most children who embarked on 'extreme and deviant activities' were involved in 'extreme political groups', ahead of engaging in 'armed conflict', 'taking drugs', and 'demonstrations'. Since men are impacted more gravely, with fathers generally leading in this respect, their sons are at considerable risk of eventually getting caught up in a life of crime, either as a victim or perpetrator. Yet the participants' conviction that both parents are viewed as viable discussion partners for their children when problems arise could suggest that fathers have the access and authority to act as potentially effective intervention and prevention actors.

FINDING VII | The Youth in Danger | Real and imagined risk factors, community grievances, role models, and alternatives to violence

That a 'lack of parental guidance' tops the list of perceived youth risk factors reinforces how central parenting becomes to fathers when contemplating security concerns. Socioeconomic grievances also figure prominently, and psychological factors are deemed equally perilous. Further accentuating risk exposure, chief community problems include poverty, a loss of traditional values, and unemployment. Despite this gloomy outlook, children apparently prefer role models who operate within the law. Fathers rank third and can be understood as their 'natural' role models. Adding to this optimism, a range of extra-curricular youth activities look to be readily available.

FINDING VIII | The Undecided Father | Torn between open communication and authoritarian forms of discipline

Largely in favour of 'soft' disciplining, at first glance fathers appear to have a functioning culture of communication with their children. Upon closer inspection, they look to fall short and do not consider themselves to be the frontrunners in the

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trustworthy community security architecture

Fathers view themselves as the principal missing puzzle piece in a whole-of-community prevention framework. A clear mandate on the part of the survey men surfaces: above all other actors, fathers are the ones who need to increase their engagement. Evidently aware that the complex undertaking of successfully raising and protecting the youth nevertheless cannot rest in the hands of family members, religious leaders, and teachers alone; they also desire greater involvement of state-run institutions and civil society organisations, albeit to a lesser degree. Yet fathers least trust these public entities (along with friends), which alerts us to a correlation between degrees of desired engagement and perceived levels of trustworthiness.

FINDING X | Fatherhood Two-Point-O?

Open, receptive, and eager to upgrading their parenting and safeguarding skills

The participants' instincts tell them that fathers should increase engagement with vulnerable children through positive action rather than threats, and it appears to be second nature to accept parenting advice predominantly from private sources (fathers, religion, and mothers). Fathers seem to lack yet desire training in parenting skills and support from social organisations above all else when contemplating their children's security; they are less eager on skills that benefit them as opposed to their sons or daughters. Most fathers acknowledge that their children are not immune to extremism and are unequivocally open and receptive to receiving support and training.

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