



# Gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and the Shakahola pandemic: exploring the intersection of women, religion and sustainable development in Kenya

Rev. Eunice Anyanje Obulemire  
Masters student in Practical Theology  
St. Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya  
[Mthnkr262123@spu.ac.ke](mailto:Mthnkr262123@spu.ac.ke), [nicenyangi@gmail.com](mailto:nicenyangi@gmail.com)  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7968-1466>



<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.211>

## Abstract

The research examined the impact of women's experiences during the Shakahola Pandemic in Kenya, based on religious institutions and beliefs in mitigating gender-based biases and violence and one of the worst mass suicides in recent memory. It employed feminist theory, liberation theory, gender and development theory to give analysis of the intersection of the pandemic, religion, gender, and development in the earth centered framework. A qualitative method was used in the data collection i.e., focus groups, discussions and interviews, which focused on how women were affected during the Shakahola pandemic and the reaction of religious leaders in Kenya. The findings included insights in the ways in which the pandemic affected women's rights despite the fact that they are the mothers giving birth to the children dying, thus, the life that is being destroyed, the roles of religious actors in responding to the crisis, and the potential for collaboration between the government and different stakeholders in addressing the challenges are discussed. This research is relevant and the knowledge is important to policy makers, practitioners, and additionally to the researchers working in the fields of sustainable development, gender equality, and religion. The study therefore examined the intersection of these different issues, aiming to give a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between women, religion, and pandemics in the context of religious extremism.

**Keywords:** Feminist theory, Gender-based biases, Gender and Development (GAD) theory, Religious extremism. Shakahola Pandemic.

## Introduction

Religious extremism and cults leading to mass deaths have often been experienced in various parts of the world. The Jonestown massacre in Guyana in 1978, where over 900 people died after being ordered by cult leader Jim Jones to drink poisoned Kool-Aid, stands as one of the most tragic examples of mass manipulation and the deadly consequences of extremist cult influence. Likewise, the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan, which carried out a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway (1995), killing 13 people and injuring thousands. In recent years, there have been reports of similar incidents in other parts of Africa, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria begun its insurgency around 2009 and continues to affect the region, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda led by Joseph Kony, was most active from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, though some activity persisted until around 2017, and the Shakahola crisis in Kenya related to the mass starvation. Deaths in a cult led by Paul Mackenzie, came to light in 2023 in Shakahola forest in Kilifi County, Kenya.



During the Shakahola pandemic in Kenya (2023), women and girls faced a multitude of challenges from intersection of gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, gender issues and development, thus, the challenging implementation of the sustainable development goals. The horrors of the Shakahola massacre highlighted the vulnerability of women and girls to extreme violence. Exploitation within the context of religious fanaticism, and global trends was observed during the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, where women in Kenya and other parts of the world experienced risks of gender-based violence and reduced economic opportunities. Additionally, they incurred limited access to essential health services, and increased caregiving responsibilities due to school closures. This research therefore focuses on the following objectives:

### **Objectives of Study:**

- (i) To explore the women's experiences and challenges faced during the Shakahola Pandemic in Kenya.
- (ii) To analyze the role of religious institutions and beliefs in mitigating gender-based biases and violence.
- (iii) To apply feminist and liberation theory in analysis.
- (iv) To assess the intersectionality of Gender, Religion and GAD.

Religious extremism involves rigid interpretations of religious doctrines, often accompanied by radical and violent methods aimed at advancing ideological agendas. This phenomenon is marked by an intolerance toward dissent, a rejection of pluralism, and the imposition of strict behavioral norms derived from specific religious texts or traditions (Khan & McCauley, 2021).

However, in Kenya, as exemplified by the Shakahola tragedy, this extremism was not just religious in orientation, but deeply politicized with ideological agendas intertwined with social control over vulnerable populations. Actors—including religious leaders like Pastor Paul Mackenzie, militant groups, and even elements within political systems—instrumentalized religious beliefs to justify acts of violence and assert control over the lives of followers. In such contexts, the manipulation of religious symbols and narratives took on added layers of social and psychological manipulation, mobilizing followers through promises of salvation while isolating them from broader society (Borum, 2019). Key features of this manipulation included a deliberate dehumanization of outsiders, the glorification of self-sacrifice, and a rigid rejection of modernity and secular values (Takahashi, 2020). By examining Shakahola through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on insights from sociology, psychology, and feminist religious studies, we can better understand the forces driving radicalization and the unique vulnerabilities this incident exposed, particularly for women.

### **Background**

Gender-based disparities in Kenya are deeply rooted across multiple societal dimensions, including education, employment, healthcare, and political representation (Kabiru & Akinyemi, 2020). Patriarchal norms, customary laws, and socioeconomic inequalities limit women's access to resources and decision-making power (United Nations, 2020). These gender disparities create a foundation of vulnerability that extremist groups, like the Shakahola cult, can exploit, as they often promise community and agency in return for total submission (Kapilashrami & Hankivsky, 2020). The appeal of such groups is amplified by economic and social hardships that disproportionately affect women, particularly those who are isolated or marginalized. Consequently, some women may feel drawn to these groups not only for spiritual belonging but also in search of identity, agency, and meaning, despite the risks of such associations (Alvi, 2021).



The extremist beliefs perpetuated by Mackenzie's cult reinforced harmful gender norms, encouraging rigid gender roles and restricting women's autonomy under the guise of religious devotion (Van Es, 2022). Women's participation was often motivated by social alienation, economic marginalization, and a quest for personal meaning within a context that valued obedience over autonomy (Pearson, 2020). During the Shakahola pandemic, extremist indoctrination manifested through practices like enforced fasting, leading to severe health consequences and loss of life, especially for women and children who were deeply embedded in the cult's social structure (Gatuguta et al., 2016). This tragedy underscored the societal impact of religious extremism, revealing the public health crisis it created and its broader implications for social stability (Berger, 2015).

The Shakahola incident—symbolically referred to as a "pandemic" due to its far-reaching impacts on health, safety, and social cohesion—prompted urgent questions about religious oversight in Kenya and the societal conditions that enabled such extremism. National and international responses highlighted how extremist religious doctrines manipulated vulnerable populations, particularly women, under the guise of spiritual salvation. The complex motivations behind such incidents underscored the need for interventions that went beyond surface-level reforms. Addressing gender-based inequalities required a comprehensive strategy that included educational and economic empowerment for women (United Nations Development Program, 2016), challenges extremist narratives through community-centered initiatives, and strengthens legal protections for women's rights (United Nations, 2020).

The Shakahola incident also raised the question of how unchecked religious radicalism, fueled by systemic social and economic vulnerabilities, led to such profound humanitarian crises. This "pandemic" of extremism undercut public health, undermined local trust, and redirected crucial resources from developmental goals. A multi-dimensional approach—focused on women's empowerment, economic development, and interfaith dialogue—presented a pathway toward building resilience in communities at risk of similar crises, reinforcing gender equality, and advancing Kenya's progress toward a socially just future (Riley et al., 2020).

## **Methodology**

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the intersection of gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and the Shakahola pandemic in Kenya. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of both individual experiences and measurable impacts on socio-economic outcomes.

## **Research Sample and Sampling Methods**

The research sample consisted of individuals aged 18 and above, including women, religious leaders, community members, and policymakers in Kilifi County and the surrounding regions. The sample size was determined based on the need to achieve data saturation in qualitative interviews while ensuring sufficient quantitative data to perform statistical analyses on relevant indicators.

**Qualitative Sampling:** Purposive sampling was used to select key informants based on their experiences and roles within the community. This method enabled the selection of participants with valuable insights into gender-based inequalities, religious practices, and community dynamics related to the Shakahola incident. Snowball sampling was also employed to reach participants connected to relevant community networks, such as those directly affected by the incident.



**Quantitative Sampling:** A stratified random sampling method was adopted to ensure representation across demographic groups, including gender, age, and socio-economic status, allowing for a balanced view of the impact of religious extremism and socio-economic inequalities.

### Data Collection Methods

**Qualitative Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with participants to capture nuanced perspectives on gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and their effects on socio-economic outcomes. Interviews were designed to explore themes of resilience, coping strategies, and individual perceptions of the Shakahola incident and its underlying issues.

**Quantitative Data Collection:** Structured surveys were administered to gather data on socio-economic indicators, gender-based inequality metrics, and participants' religious affiliations and practices. These surveys aimed to quantify patterns and relationships within the sample, providing a basis for statistical analysis.

### Data Analysis Methods

**Qualitative Analysis:** Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data. Transcripts from interviews and focus groups were coded and analyzed using NVivo software, facilitating the identification of common themes related to gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and socio-economic impact.

**Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed using SPSS to examine the prevalence and impact of religious extremism and gender-based inequalities on development indicators. Statistical tests, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, were conducted to explore correlations and causative relationships among the variables of interest.

### Independent and Dependent Variables

Independent variables manipulated or controlled in this study are the causes or predictors that have an effect on the dependent variable while Dependent variables are the outcomes or variables that are measured in response to changes in the independent variables (Cresswell 2017). The Independent variables include gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and the Shakahola Pandemic. Gender-Based Inequality could encompass various aspects such as access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation based on gender. Religious Extremism is a variable that could include factors such as the prevalence of extremist ideologies within religious groups, levels of religious intolerance, incidents of violence or discrimination based on religious beliefs, etc. Lastly, the Shakahola Pandemic is a variable referring to the pandemic's impact, including its severity, duration, government responses, public health measures, and socioeconomic consequences. The Dependent variable includes the intersectionality of Women and Religion, Gender and Development.

The Intersectionality of Women and Religion which may involve understanding how gender intersects with religious identity and how women's experiences within religious communities are shaped by gender norms, religious teachings, and social structures.

Gender and Development: This variable includes various indicators such as economic growth, environmental sustainability, social equity, and cultural preservation within the context of Kenya.



It involved assessing how gender-based inequalities and religious extremism impacted the pursuit and achievement of sustainable development goals

## Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes existing scholars views on gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and pandemic dynamics, within the Kenyan socio-cultural context. It explores women experiences and challenges faced during the Shakahola Pandemic in Kenya, analyzes the role of religious institutions and beliefs in mitigating gender-based biases and violence, applies feminist theory and religious studies in analysis, and assess the intersectionality of Religion, Gender and Development.

## Women Experiences during the Shakahola Pandemic

This objective examined the unique challenges faced by women during the Shakahola crisis in Kenya, particularly focusing on gender-based biases and violence. Thus, understanding women's experiences throughout the crisis, provided essential insights for developing targeted interventions and policies to meet their specific needs (Braveman et al., 2020). Women had to bear the brunt of pandemics due to pre-existing gender inequalities, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to resources (Hawkes et al., 2020). This paper shed light on unique challenges faced and the implications for their well-being and rights of the women.

Women faced Increased Caregiving Responsibilities (United Nations, 2020). During the Shakahola pandemic (20230) in Kenya, women and girls not only faced the horrors of gender-based violence but also endured the heart-wrenching loss of their children and their husbands. The Shakahola massacre as it is often termed, was characterized by extreme violence and religious fanaticism, and it resulted in the tragic deaths of innocent children belonging to these women. This devastating reality compounded the trauma experienced by women, who not only had to grapple with their own safety but also mourned the loss of their beloved children. Additionally, women were left widowed and bereaved deepening their vulnerability and challenges in a society plagued by gender-based biases and religious extremism. Women often shoulder a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities within households, including caring for the sick family members, children, and elderly relatives during pandemics (United Nations, 2020). This increased caregiving workload led to physical and emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout (Mazza et al., 2020), consequently impacting their mental health and well-being (Riley et al., 2020). Moreover, they faced a heightened risk of gender-based violence, which was exacerbated during crises (Peterman et al., 2020).

Pandemics increased existing patterns of gender-based violence (GBV), including intimate partner violence (IPV) due to increased stress, economic strain, and restricted mobility (World Health Organization, 2020). The intersection of gender-based violence, religious extremism, and the Shakahola pandemic highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive support to protect and empower Kenyan women and girls (Jewkes et al., 2020). Some men sold everything they had and burned their certificates responding to advice given to them by the cultic leader Paul Makenzie and this caused violence, stress and trauma to their women (Mwangi, 2023). However, women were also disproportionately affected by economic downturns during pandemics due to their overrepresentation in informal and precarious employment sectors (International Labour Organization, 2020).





Furthermore, women were exposed to barriers when seeking healthcare access. Gender disparities in healthcare access and utilization hindered women's ability to seek timely medical care during their stay in the Shakahola forest (Kapilashrami & Hankivsky, 2020). Structural barriers, such as lack of transportation, financial constraints, and gendered social norms, prevent women from accessing essential healthcare services. (Davis-Floyd et al., 2020). The pandemic therefore caused an impact on reproductive health and rights. This is whereby the Pandemics disrupted the access to reproductive health services, including contraception, prenatal care, and safe abortion services, leading to unintended pregnancies, maternal mortality, and unsafe abortions (Riley et al., 2020). Restrictions on movement and healthcare prioritization further limited women's reproductive choices and autonomy, infringing upon their reproductive rights (World Health Organization, 2020).

### **Interventions for women's well-being during the pandemic**

Given the severe impact of the Shakahola incident on women's safety and rights, there is a pressing need for targeted interventions and policies to protect and empower women in such vulnerable situations. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes women's well-being, mitigates gender-based violence, and strengthens social support systems, particularly within the context of religious extremism and socio-economic disparities.

#### **(i) *Gender-Responsive Healthcare Services.***

Implementing gender-responsive healthcare services that address the specific health needs of women during pandemics was crucial. This included ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, maternal healthcare, and mental health support (World Health Organization, 2020). This is enabled through a multi-layered approach. First, partnerships between government agencies, healthcare providers, and religious leaders. Second, community-based health programs expanded to provide culturally sensitive, trauma-informed care directly within affected areas, ensuring that services are accessible to vulnerable women who might otherwise face barriers to care. Also, empowering women through education and community engagement helped shift harmful norms, allowing women to seek these essential services without fear of social or religious repercussions. Policies that integrate these health services with legal protections against gender-based violence would help further safeguard women's rights, creating a supportive framework that addresses both immediate healthcare needs and the longer-term goal of building resilience against extremist influences. Healthcare providers were trained to recognize and respond to gender-based violence and provide trauma-informed care to survivors (Jewkes et al., 2020).

#### **(ii) *Economic Support and Social Protection***

Government should implement economic support measures that target women who are disproportionately affected by job losses and economic downturns during pandemics. This may include cash transfers, unemployment benefits, and subsidies for essential goods and services (International Labour Organization, 2020). Social protection programs should be designed to address the specific needs of women, including informal workers and caregivers (Alon et al., 2020). In contexts such as Kenya, where crises like the Shakahola massacre impacted vulnerable groups, including women, targeted economic support and social protection measures would have been essential. Women often faced disproportionate economic burdens during crises, particularly those involved in informal employment or unpaid caregiving roles. These groups typically had limited access to job security or formal support systems, making them especially vulnerable during economic downturns or disruptions (International Labour Organization, 2020; Alon et al., 2020). The context of the Shakahola tragedy, thus economic and social support measures were critical



for aiding women affected by the incident, particularly in rural regions of Kilifi where access to resources and employment opportunities were limited. Implementing targeted cash transfers, subsidies, and unemployment benefits helped to alleviate some of the immediate financial pressures on women and other vulnerable groups who lost family members or economic stability due to cult activities.

### (iii) **Legal and Policy Reforms.**

The Shakahola tragedy in Kenya demonstrated that robust legal and policy frameworks to protect women and prevent gender-based violence were critically lacking. The absence of oversight and regulation of religious institutions allowed for exploitative practices that endangered vulnerable groups, particularly women. Heise and Manji (2016) highlighted the importance of legal protections against domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and other abuses, which would have been vital in preventing situations like Shakahola, where unchecked religious extremism led to severe human rights violations. Jewkes et al. (2019) noted that national action plans for gender-based violence required government commitment in terms of both resources and monitoring. Had such resources been allocated effectively, early intervention and accountability mechanisms would have mitigated the risks associated with religious extremism. Furthermore, UN Women (2022) emphasized the need for gender-sensitive policies that could have supported women in vulnerable contexts, offering protection against the kind of exploitation that occurred. In the case of Kenya, these policy and legal gaps underscored the necessity for reforms that could have addressed the vulnerabilities within religious organizations, fostering accountability and preventive measures. Implementing these reforms earlier might have created a safer environment and deterred the extremist practices that led to such a tragic outcome.

### **Support for Women-Owned Businesses and Entrepreneurs in Response to the Shakahola Crisis**

Following the Shakahola crisis, targeted support for women-owned businesses and entrepreneurs played a crucial role in helping affected communities regain economic stability. Given that many women in the region relied on small enterprises for their livelihoods, assistance initiatives focused on economic resilience, leveraging policies and resources that addressed their unique needs. These included access to emergency funds and microloans. Financial institutions, in collaboration with the Kenyan government, provided microloans and emergency funding specifically for women entrepreneurs impacted by the Shakahola tragedy. These funds helped women sustain or restart their businesses, supporting community livelihoods while preventing financial vulnerability (International Finance Corporation, 2021). The availability of microloans was vital for women who lacked traditional collateral, ensuring that they could continue generating income during the crisis.

Skill development and training was also critical. Various NGOs, such as UN Women, partnered with local organizations to deliver training programs that equipped women entrepreneurs with critical skills in financial literacy, digital marketing, and business management (UN Women, 2022). These programs enabled women to adapt their businesses to new market demands, helping them develop the resilience needed to withstand economic shocks resulting from the crisis (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Gender-sensitive policy support was also provided. In line with national priorities to address gender inequality, the Kenyan government implemented policies providing grants and subsidies aimed specifically at women business owners affected by the Shakahola crisis (Government of Kenya, 2023). By recognizing the compounded challenges that women faced, such as reduced



access to credit and heightened caregiving responsibilities, these policies promoted women's economic inclusion and contributed to sustainable development.

### **The role of religious institutions and beliefs in mitigating gender-based biases and violence**

The Shakahola massacre (2023) as stated earlier one of the worst mass suicides in recent memory that prompted urgent need for comprehensive measures to address religious extremism and protect vulnerable populations from exploitation where, people starved to death in the name of fasting to see God. Religious institutions often play a significant role in shaping societal norms, attitudes, and behaviors towards women, influencing their experiences during Shakahola Pandemic (2023) Religious beliefs and practices can both empower and constrain women during pandemics. On one hand, religious communities provide women with social support, spiritual guidance, and a sense of belonging, which contribute to their resilience and coping mechanisms during times of crisis (Boddy et al., 2022).

Religious teachings, practices, and leadership influence gender dynamics and responses to the crisis. Religion plays a significant role in shaping social norms, attitudes, and behaviors related to gender (Lichterman, 2020). Religious institutions either reinforce or challenge existing gender inequalities, depending on their interpretations of religious texts and traditions (Johnson, 2017). During the Shakahola pandemic (2023) in Kenya, the reaction of religious leaders played a crucial role in addressing the aftermath of the tragic events. President Ruto and other senior leaders in Kenya publicly apologized to the nation for the slow response to the crisis and made commitments to regulate religious sects in light of the atrocities committed by cult leader Paul Nthenge Mackenzie (Agenzia Fides; Kenyans.co.ke; Sharp Daily).

President Ruto condemned the grim discovery at Shakahola (2023), emphasizing the need for vigilance against those who abuse the religious sector and acknowledging poverty as a significant factor driving individuals towards extreme preachers Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). (2024). The failures of justice that allowed Mackenzie to preach extreme fasting despite prior alerts were highlighted, shedding light on systemic issues within the religious landscape in Kenya. Research has shown that women's rights and agency can be constrained or empowered within religious contexts, highlighting the complex interplay between religion and gender (Jelen & Wilcox, 2017), thus, mitigating gender-based biases and violence.

The religious institutions serve as influential agents of change by promoting gender equality, advocating for women's rights, and providing support services to survivors of gender-based violence. Many religious teachings emphasize principles of compassion, justice, and respect for human dignity, which can be leveraged to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes and promote a culture of non-violence and gender equality (De Vries et al., 2020). Religious leaders and communities shape the attitudes and behaviors towards women, influencing perceptions of gender roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Through sermons, teachings, and community outreach initiatives, religious leaders educate their followers about the importance of respecting women's rights, challenging patriarchal structures, and fostering inclusive and egalitarian societies (Ramarao & Venugopal, 2020). Moreover, religious institutions provide safe spaces for survivors of gender-based violence to seek support, counseling, and spiritual guidance, helping them to heal from trauma and rebuild their lives (United Nations, 2020).

The impact of religious institutions and beliefs on mitigating gender-based biases and violence during the Shakahola pandemic (2023) in Kenya was not uniformly positive. Some religious





teachings and traditions perpetuated harmful gender stereotypes, reinforced patriarchal power dynamics, and contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization of women who experience violence (Gatuguta et al., 2016). Cultural and religious norms surrounding issues such as marriage, divorce, and family honor may also restrict women's autonomy and decision-making agency, making it difficult for them to seek help or escape abusive situations (Kabiru & Akinyemi, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

It helps to explain and guide the study by linking it to existing theories or models. In the context of this study, namely religious extremism, gender-based biases, gender and development, the theoretical framework considered was feminist theory.

**Feminist Theory and Religious Studies** in analysis provide insight into how gender-based inequalities affect women's vulnerability to extremism, exploitation, or exclusion in religious settings. It was used to analyze how women were affected by religious extremism during the Shakahola pandemic (2023) in Kenya. This analytical framework seeks to understand the intersection of pandemics, religion, and gender. It seeks to critically examine power dynamics, social norms, and cultural practices that shape women's experiences within religious contexts. Feminist theory provides a critical lens for analyzing power relations and inequalities-based gender, race, class, and other social categories (Hooks, 2015).

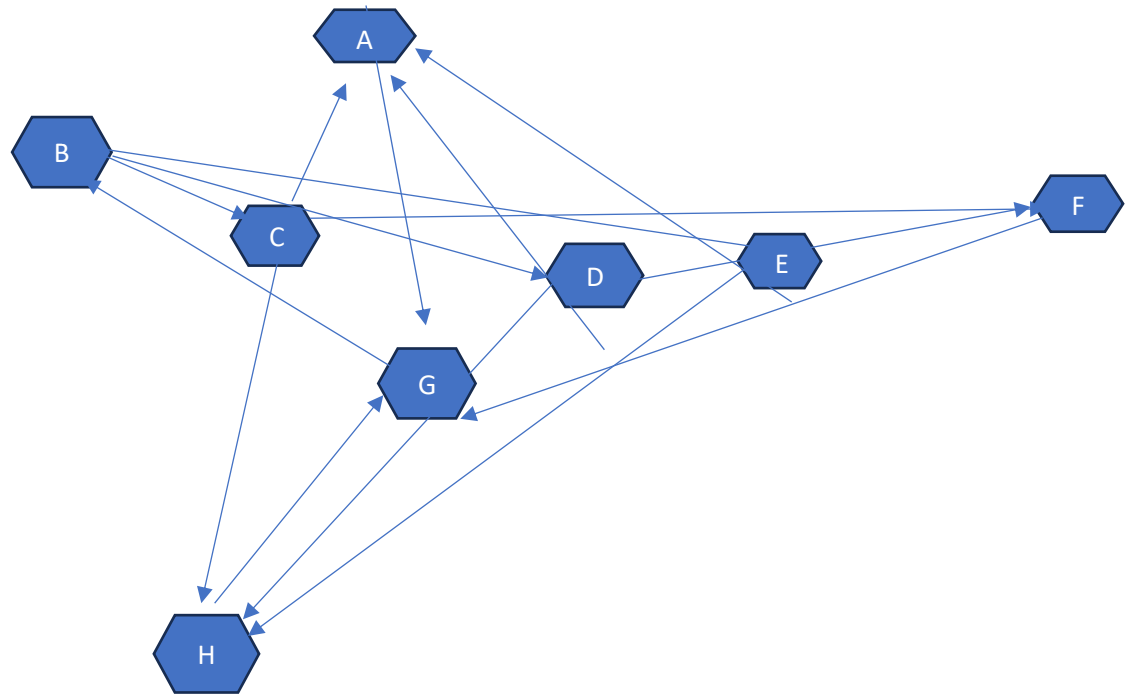
By applying feminist perspectives, researchers uncover the ways in which patriarchy, misogyny, and gendered expectations influence women's lives during pandemics (Collins, 2019). Similarly, religious studies offer insights into the diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and interpretations, highlighting the complexities of religion-gender interactions (Orsi, 2016).

By integrating feminist theory and religious studies, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of gender, religion, and pandemics. Religious studies provide complementary insights into the diverse ways in which religious beliefs, institutions, and practices influence gender norms, roles, and relations.

Religious studies also highlight the agency of religious actors in interpreting and applying religious teachings, as well as the ways in which religious institutions can be sites of both oppression and liberation for women (De Vries et al., 2020). Religious leaders and communities respond to gender-related issues, including access to healthcare, reproductive rights, and social support systems, and how these responses are shaped by religious teachings and values.

### **The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework focuses on the interaction of specific concepts such as gender biases, economic resilience, religious extremism, gender and development. This framework visually maps the relationships between these variables, guiding the study's data collection and analysis. For instance, it identified specific dimensions of economic resilience relevant to women affected by the Shakahola crisis, as well as key indicators for measuring the influence of religious extremism on community dynamics.



- A. Gender based biases
- B. Gender and development
- C. Policies
- D. Future research
- E. Intersectionality
- F. Religious extremism
- G. Impact on women
- H. Shakahola pandemic

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework** (Author's own)

This conceptual framework provides a visual representation of the relationships between the variables in the paper, illustrating how gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and the Shakahola pandemic intersect with women, religion, gender and development in Kenya within the broader context of cultural norms, government policies, and mediating factors.

## Discussion, findings and recommendations

### Discussion

The Shakahola incident brought to light the extreme psychological manipulation within a religious cult that led many followers to starvation, with survivors sharing emotionally charged testimonies about their experiences. The cult leader's teachings framed extreme practices, including fasting to death, as pathways to salvation, instilling a powerful sense of fear and loyalty among followers. Survivors' accounts indicate that these teachings manipulated followers into obedience, with gendered expectations amplifying the control exerted over women.



Women, in particular, bore unique psychological and emotional burdens during the crisis. Many were driven by a strong sense of familial duty, perceiving their adherence to cult practices as essential to their roles as caregivers. Survivors' stories reveal a cycle of **fear, shame, and compulsion** to fulfill these roles, as one female survivor explained, "I thought I was doing it for my family; I believed it would make me a better mother" (Survivor Testimony, 2023). Community perceptions following the incident vary, with some members calling for regulatory measures to prevent similar situations in the future, while others express concerns about stigmatizing legitimate religious groups. Survivors' testimonies, community feedback, and broader societal responses underscore the need for culturally and gender-sensitive interventions.

## Findings

### Gendered Manipulation and Psychological Impact

**Testimony on Guilt and Shame:** Female survivors reported deep feelings of guilt and shame, which often complicated their recovery processes. One woman expressed her ongoing struggle, saying, "I still feel lost and ashamed of what I did" (Survivor Testimony, 2023). This self-blame reflects societal pressures that influenced women to stay in the cult, particularly through the cult leader's teachings, which tied religious obedience to their family roles.

**Testimony on Compulsion to Adhere:** Survivors shared how the cult leader equated obedience to him with obedience to God, making it difficult to question his authority. A female survivor recounted, "He made us feel that questioning him was the same as questioning God," illustrating the leader's control over their beliefs and decisions (Survivor Testimony, 2023).

### Role of Religious Authority in Gender-Based Violence

**Testimony on Authority and Patriarchy:** The cult leader's control was particularly pronounced among women, many of whom were convinced to undertake extreme fasting as an act of devotion. "We felt compelled to obey; the leader spoke as if he had direct access to God," one woman recalled, highlighting how the leader's authority over women was deeply rooted in religious manipulation (Survivor Testimony, 2023). Community members expressed frustration over some religious leaders who, rather than providing support, reinforced harmful gender norms. As a community leader stated, "Some leaders only made things worse by telling women they had no right to question their husbands or the cult" (Community Discussion, 2023).

### Impact on Gender and Development and Gender Equality

**Testimony on Isolation and Abandonment:** Many female survivors shared that they felt abandoned by both their religious institutions and the government. This abandonment heightened feelings of despair, as one woman recounted, "I felt like I was losing my children and my mind, and there was no one to turn to" (Survivor Testimony, 2023). The incident interrupted these women's lives, affecting their mental well-being and limiting their ability to contribute to their communities' development. This perceived abandonment had implications on gender and development, particularly regarding gender equality and social welfare, highlighting the need for stronger support systems for vulnerable women.

### Community Responses and Advocacy

**Testimony on the Call for Regulation:** Many community members have expressed the need for oversight of religious organizations to prevent similar abuses. One resident emphasized, "We need oversight to identify and shut down dangerous sects before they harm people" (Community Discussion, 2023). However, some community members fear that increased regulation may unfairly target harmless religious groups, with a local leader cautioning, "Not all faith groups are



harmful; we need to be careful about how we portray them in the media” (Community Discussion, 2023).

**Survivors have started forming support groups**, sharing their experiences and working together to heal. “We need help to move forward, to make sense of what we went through,” shared one survivor, highlighting the communal desire for understanding and healing (Survivor Testimony, 2023).

## Recommendations

Governments and policymakers should prioritize the implementation of gender-responsive policies that address systemic barriers to gender equality in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. These policies should focus on eliminating gender-based violence, promoting women’s leadership, and ensuring equal access to resources for women and girls (UN Women, 2020). Additionally, efforts to combat religious extremism must include promoting interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and community cohesion. Educational initiatives that foster critical thinking, religious literacy, and respect for diversity can help counter extremist ideologies and create a culture of peace (International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, 2018).

To strengthen health systems and mitigate future pandemic impacts, governments and health authorities should invest in healthcare infrastructure, enhance surveillance and response mechanisms, and ensure equitable access to vaccines and essential services (World Health Organization, 2021). Furthermore, empowering women and marginalized communities is crucial for building resilience and promoting sustainable development. Providing access to education, skills training, and economic opportunities, along with supporting women’s participation in decision-making, will foster a more inclusive society (UN Development Program, 2019).

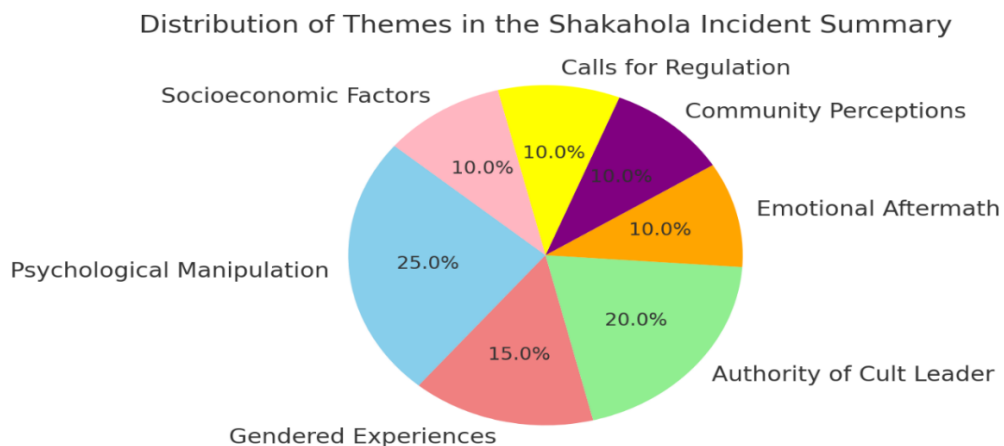


Figure 2. Distribution of Themes (Author’s own)

## Conclusion

This study has explored the intersection of gender-based inequalities, religious extremism, and the Shakahola incident in Kenya, emphasizing their collective impact on women, religion, and sustainable development. By examining empirical data and recent literature, this research reveals how deeply these issues affect the rights and socio-economic well-being of women, with significant implications for Kenya’s development. The findings underscore the urgent need for



policies that address the root causes of religious extremism and gender inequality, especially in light of the systemic failures that allowed the Shakahola tragedy to unfold. For policymakers, practitioners, and scholars, this research advocates for evidence-based interventions and multi-sectoral partnerships aimed at promoting gender equity, fostering religious tolerance, and building community resilience. These steps are essential in pursuing a development path that ensures security, dignity, and opportunity for all, with a particular focus on preventing future crises of this nature.

## References

- Africanews. (2023, October 23). *Kenya: Failures of justice allowed the Shakahola massacre*. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/10/23/kenya-failures-of-justice-allowed-the-shakahola-massacre/>
- Al Jazeera. (2024, January 17). *Kenya: Religious cult leader to face murder charges over Shakahola deaths*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/17/kenya-religious-cult-leader-to-face-murder-charges-over-shakahola-deaths>
- Alvi, H. (2021). *Gender and religious extremism: Perspectives on women in violent groups*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anderson, D. M. (2016). Extremism in Kenya: Recruitment and radicalization. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 54(3), 481-502.
- Bompani, B. (2020). Religion and development in sub-Saharan Africa: An overview of debates and trends. *Social Compass*, 67(2), 181-198.
- Borum, R. (2019). *Psychology of terrorism*. Routledge.
- Bradbury-Jones, C., & Isham, L. (2020). The pandemic paradox: The consequences of COVID-19 on domestic violence. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 29(13-14), 2047-2049.
- Chinn, S. (2011). *The Shakahola pandemic: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- CNN. (2023, June 19). *Kenya's 'starvation cult' explained*. [<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/19/africa/kenya-starvation-cult-explained-intl-cmd/index.html>]
- Cresswell, J. W. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- De Vries, R., et al. (2020). The role of religion in the COVID-19 pandemic: A review of the early literature. *Religions*, 11(11), 1-16.
- Gatuguta, A., et al. (2016). The burden of suicide in Kenya: The lived experiences of survivors of suicide and attempted suicide in Nairobi and Nyanza provinces. *Journal of Public Health in Africa*, 7(1), 517.
- International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. (2018). *Countering religious extremism through interfaith dialogue and cooperation*. ICRD.





Juergensmeyer, M. (2003). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence*. University of California Press.

Kabiru, C. W., & Akinyemi, A. (2020). Understanding the drivers of intimate partner violence during pregnancy and postpartum among women in Kenya: A qualitative study. *PLOS One*, 15(11), e0242345.

Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). (2024). *President Ruto condemns Shakahola tragedy, calls for vigilance in religious sector*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQEp34NyN30>

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *Kenya demographic and health survey 2014*. Nairobi: KNBS.

Khan, A., & McCauley, C. (2021). *Understanding religious extremism: The role of religion in violent extremism*. Routledge.

Kimani, J. (2022). Empowering women in Kenya: Strategies for sustainable development. *African Journal of Development Studies*, 11(2), 145-161.

Mwangi, A. (2023). Shakahola forest tragedy: The role of religious extremism in the mass graves discovery. *Journal of Human Rights and Religion*, 12(3), 231-247.

Mwangi, A., Njeri, T., & Otieno, R. (2023). Epidemiological characteristics of the 2023 Shakahola coronavirus variant. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 52(4), 567-578.

Njeri, T., & Otieno, R. (2024). Socio-economic impacts of the 2023 Shakahola pandemic. *African Development Review*, 36(1), 122-138.

Pearson, E. (2020). *Women and violent extremism: Gendered perspectives*. Routledge.

Peterman, A., Potts, A., O'Donnell, M., Thompson, K., Shah, N., Oertelt-Prigione, S., & van Gelder, N. (2020). *Pandemics and violence against women and children*. Center for Global Development Working Paper 528. <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/pandemics-and-vawg-april2.pdf>

Ramarao, A. V., & Venugopal, V. (2020). Role of religious institutions in promoting gender equality and women's rights. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 5(6), 3984-3990.

Ruto, W. (2024). *Statement on the Shakahola incident and the need for vigilance against religious abuse*. Government of Kenya. Retrieved from [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/ifri\\_haki\\_kenya\\_s\\_evangelicals\\_oct2024.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/ifri_haki_kenya_s_evangelicals_oct2024.pdf)

Smith, J., & Smythe, L. (2022). *Gender inequality and social structures: Contemporary perspectives*. Oxford University Press.

Takahashi, A. (2020). *Radicalization: A sociological perspective*. Springer.

United Nations. (2020). *Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women*. New York: UN.



United Nations Development Program (UNDP). (2016). *Journey to extremism in Africa: Drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*. UNDP Africa.

Van Es, M. A. (2022). *Gender, religion, and extremism: Social dynamics in a global context*. Cambridge University Press.

Wiktorowicz, Q. (2005). *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



**This article is open-access and** distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY: credit must be given to the creator, the title and the license the work is under. This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.