

Gender Responsive Preventive and Remedial Measures to Prevent Violent Extremism: A Practitioner's Perspective

Mossarat Qadeem

Abstract

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and tribal districts witnessed the worst forms of violent extremism for nearly two decades. While considering the fact that violent extremism necessarily requires intervention mechanisms, it is essential to go beyond the traditional security measures in order to address the root-causes of the phenomenon. This paper develops a four-pillar model (based on-field experience) which provides an indigenous, innovative and comprehensive framework for an effective contextualized implementation of Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE). The article also elucidates the possibilities and limitations related to communities' response to violent extremism with evidence of success and verifiable cases of trend setting initiatives in the field of PVE.

In this community-based approach youth and women play a vital role in analysing the root causes of growing polarization, feelings of alienation and enhancing social cohesion. The paper aims to disseminate a better understanding of ways in which policymakers and practitioners can help further community-based preventive and remedial measures.

Keywords: PVE, Empowering communities, cultural narratives, internal community mechanism for building social cohesion

Introduction

The KPK I grew up in believed in pluralism, tolerance, accommodation and interfaith harmony where people of all faiths and sects had since generations lived peacefully and respectfully, celebrating each other's festivals, and

standing with each other in times of both sorrow and joy. But in the last two decades the same soil has witnessed suicidal attacks, bomb blast, brutal killings, abduction for ransom, displacement and destruction. What happened that transformed the outlook, and the thinking pattern of these communities?

Ignorance and emotional extremism prevail in some areas of Pakistan. Sectarianism and other forms of intolerance have gone well beyond the political realm, and are now becoming the norm. The movements launched from across the border were met with resilience. The implications of instability in Afghanistan also add to the insecurity and polarization of society in Pakistan particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa¹. Intolerance prevails in the society today and it is becoming one where people label, despise and even attack that which is deemed to be variant.

The culture of Violent Extremism (VE) introduced in these communities through various extremist groups and individuals, greatly influenced the hearts and minds of the local people. If the majority was not explicitly supporting or following these extremists' groups commonly known as Taliban, they were not condoning their acts of extremism either. For these communities, acts of VE became a normal routine as the extremist groups justified these acts in the name of religion. For instance, once while carrying out some interviews in Swat, Dilshad² a participant said to me, 'the Taliban are justified in attacking the military personnel because the military is fighting for America'. Many women like Dilshad sympathized or supported

¹Pakhtunkhwa be read as Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal districts.

² The names of individuals in all case studies are not the real name due to the sensitivity of the issues. We can furnish further information to anyone for the purpose of academic research

the extremist groups because they were convinced of the religious cause of the extremists. This propaganda was not limited to Swat only but infiltrated into the comparatively moderate and educated communities of cities like Charsadda, Peshawar and Mardan.

The communities in KPK may be characterized as facing social, economic and political vulnerabilities caused by compounding factors such as structural unemployment, inadequate social services manifested by poor educational and health facilities, weak integration of ethnic, sectarian groups, social problems at the family level, and structural violence against the female Gender.

There is a presence of criminal and terrorist networks/recruiters active in motivating the youth to join them, a high incidence of everyday crime and violent extremism, the inadequate or intrusive presence and actions of security actors, and general neglect. The weak and crumbling legal system was used as an excuse for delayed justice system and the first step by Taliban in every area was to establish a parallel justice system gaining the sympathy of the people.

The Drivers of Violent Extremism in Pakistan.

The growth of extremist tendencies across KPK in particular and Pakistan in general is not linked with only one factor. The fertile ground for VE was growing in many of the areas in KPK and erstwhile FATA, augmented by a number of drivers, both internal and external. Religion, economic degradation, loosening the cultural ties, weakening of state institutions., fading national unity, lack of social justice and corruption paved the way for the extremists. Therefore, it is an overstatement to solely explain the motivation for endorsing or adopting VE in the communities as a result of

theological factors. There are many other factors besides religion and theological reasoning contributing to the phenomenon.

The tendency to seek a universal formula to explain and detect drivers of VE has led to the lack of serious consideration of the impact and uniqueness of local contexts and local actors in shaping the dynamics of the drivers. Many studies emphasize the push rather than pull factors in their diagnosis of the drivers³hence many externally imposed Countering or Preventing Violent Extremism programs and designs sometimes ignore the deep-rooted factors driving VE.

Most existing research focusing on the Pakistani context, mainly quote poverty, poor access to quality education, socio-political marginalization, lawlessness, or weak governance apparatus as the root causes of violent extremism. However, from my experience of working with radicalized and vulnerable young people and communities, in most cases, the push factors are people's rigid worldview, misinterpretation of their socio-economic situation, belief in conspiracy theories, lack of critical thinking, and limited knowledge of religion. Excluded from mainstream society, the majority of young people desperately seek a sense of belonging and find it rewarding to associate with those who share similar worldviews, needs, and grievances. Taking advantage of this, extremist movements prey on young people's vulnerabilities and grievances to channel recruits into their groups through persuasion, pressure, coercion and manipulation, and selective use of text from religious scriptures to influence the minds and hearts of the target group.

³Mohammed Abu Nimmer, *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peace building in Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13*. 2018

This is particularly relevant when examining the narratives that VE movements propagate. While they may seem to be strengthened by fact-based stories, their compelling draw is more about the overarching emotional attraction. Similarly, by understanding the emotional draw of VE groups in any given context, we can identify the social patterns and challenges that are driving recruitment. This requires listening more than speaking and staying rooted to our relationships in the community.

*PAIMAN*⁴ has been working on C/PVE in universities and communities since 2009 and our latest finding⁵ is that radicalization and extremist tendencies within youth in communities and education institutions in particular is on the rise as compared to the past few years. While conducting training with students of Abdul Wali Kahn University Mardan, who had witnessed the lynching of Mashal Khan by a mob of students, I asked if they regretted not doing something to save him at the time. To my surprise, they all responded negatively. I realized that this extremist tendency among educated young people is more dangerous than violence itself⁶. It is an outcome of living within an environment of VE for years. There are multiple reasons for this state of affairs but the most crucial one is that the ideological dimension of extremist propaganda is taken lightly and attempts to mitigate and nullify it are limited.

⁴PAIMAN Alumni Trust, a pioneer organization in P/CVE in Pakistan which has received international recognition and applauds for its innovative model of neutralizing extremist tendencies through community mobilization, active citizenship and community empowerment for building social cohesion and has prevented thousands of youth and women from becoming extremists

⁵ In July 2019, PAIMAN conducted a survey on “attitude, behaviour and perception of students towards violent extremism.

⁶Mossarat Qadeem, ‘Beyond Violence: The Impact of Extremism on Communities’ Jan 31st, 2020. Pg 1 <https://institute.global/policy/beyond-violence-impact-extremism-communities>

Some of the causes that led to multiplication of communities' grievances are:

- The lack of communication between state institutions and communities has encouraged groups to seek violence as a legitimate alternative and disrupt peace and social cohesion. The communities have experienced VE for two decades along with violent extremist groups trying to win their support.
- The decline in acts of terrorism was unimaginable without the use of military force but an inclusive and consistent approach is required for preventing and countering violent extremism effectively⁷. The prevalent weak social cohesion in these communities provide grounds for the extremist groups to exploit peoples feeling of deprivation and non-fulfilment of their basic human needs⁸ to seek their support. The three Ss⁹ of social cohesion are totally missing from these communities and no effort has been undertaken to strengthen social cohesion in these areas.
- In addition, fear, insecurity and feelings of powerlessness and marginalization due to conflict have also weakened the sense of individual civic agency. The operations of extremist groups have so

⁷ Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in June 2014, and Radd-ui-Fassad, launched in tribal areas in February 2017, proved to be successful in debasing and dismantling organisational structure of militant outfits active not only in FATA but in different parts of the country

⁸ Dr. Zahid Yaseen and Dr. Muhammad Muzaffar, 'Extremism in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges, Journal of Politics and International Studies Vol. 4, No. 1, January–June 2018, pg no:38

- ⁹social inclusion: inequalities, polarization and poverty levels
- social capital: levels of trust and civic engagement
- social mobility: the degree to which people can or believe they can change their position in society.

far mostly been followed by militarized counter-terrorism response which have halted the most radical manifestations, but it has to be supported by other state institutions and civil society to sustain the successes achieved. The displacement of tribal elders and communities provided ground for the extremists to penetrate and spread their ideologies in those communities.

- Our education institutions lack the ability to develop critical thinking among youth or provide means of understanding pluralism or discussions about the similarities and differences across faiths and cultures to broaden their worldview.
- There was no national security strategy till 2014 to address the menace of VE at various levels.

Violent Extremism and Communities

Majority communities did not consider the dangerous impact of VE on themselves or their families and communities. Extremist movements have a goal to justify their acts, and in a country where religion plays a central role in everyday lives of many, these extremist movements exploited people's emotional attachment to religion. Women, youth and other community members bought in the extremist propaganda and remained silent for years.

While the extremist groups were busy in strengthening their influence in these communities through various religion based narratives, there was no alternative narrative yet developed by the state or anyone else. Majority of the members of these extremist groups were locally rooted, thus easily making inroads into these communities. They have been deriving their aspirations, strategies and mobilization skills from other extremist groups. They strategically developed an inner circle of followers, recruits and

established strong bonds with larger aims. VE operate in erstwhile FATA in two ways: a direct, indirect engagement and recruitment of individuals using multiple tactics; influencing the mindset of the communities in general through their propaganda and religious narratives. The extremist group can be identified through its association with other extremist groups but identification of the silent sympathizers, facilitators and supporters is the most difficult task. It is this silent group that needs to be engaged and transformed through a process. At the same time majority of youth, women and other community members are not engaged in or attracted to the extremist ideologues. There are some active and vocal members against extremism in their own communities and beyond, unheard by state and policy makers. It is these specific groups that require attention of state and other interested in PVE. The violence-condoning ideologies and terrorizing violence of the few should never make us forget the openness and non-violence of many.

The issue of VE was there in the communities where *PAIMAN* has been working. Many male family members had either joined extremist groups or were their supporters and facilitators along with some female members. Other families had either lost their loved ones to the acts of VE or were missing. The socio-economic and psychological impact was immeasurable but people were reluctant to speak due to the fear of unknown. It was neither discussed nor debated. We realized that a strategic commitment was needed to develop a community-led response to the challenging of hateful extremism.

PVE/Counterterrorism (CT) laws, strategies and practices around the world often lead to human rights violations, making it challenging specially for women thus creating more problems than solutions. “Terrorism” and

“extremism” are ambiguous terms and have been abused politically, generating biases against certain groups and communities. We observe that current PVE/CT strategies tend to be “reactive”, favouring militarized criminal justice approaches. A human-rights-based response at the core of any PVE/CT strategy is needed. Pakistan, as a constitutional state is under obligation for the safety of life and property of its every citizen.

PVE/CT laws, strategies and practices need to be inclusive enough to include. Strategies and programs designed for PVE if developed in a non-participatory manner may offer insufficient legal protection mechanisms. Current approaches often do not allow for effective participation of civil society, and women in particular, although they represent a significant percentage of both the victims as well as actors in supporting VE. Issues such as women’s rights, justice, education, employment, as well as the need to confront structural social injustices and discrimination should be at the core of any PVE/CT approach. There cannot be sustainable peace without the meaningful participation of half of the population.

Understanding Violent Extremism (VE) from a gendered perspective

VE groups in KPK province of Pakistan have been garnering support of women and youth by appealing to them through their messianic messages to join their so-called jihad. These groups have capitalized and weaponized the illiterate and semi-literate women of Swat who were lacking in religious knowledge¹⁰. Previously, no one in Pakistan could have imagined the radicalization of women and utilization of their skills to stitch suicidal jackets, preach extremist narratives or radicalize and build networks of other

¹⁰ Most of the women can recite the Quran without understanding the meaning of the text.

women. The VE groups cleverly exploited gender stereotypes, avoided detection, influenced other women.

Matters concerning the links between women, gender, terrorism, and VE are a relatively recent endeavour in the field of national and international security.¹¹ While women's participation in violent political movements is not unique to the twenty-first century, documentation of group membership, specifically women's involvement, remains inconsistent and unreliable¹². While SCR 2242 and the focus on women in combating VE does, for the first time, shift the prevailing discourse of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda from one of protection to one of participation, the scope for participation is restricted¹³ due to lack of research on women's multiple roles in VE and PVE. In addition, Western perspectives and stereotypes dominate discourse on the topic, drowning out a range of alternative assessments of matters concerning sex, gender, and violent extremism and women's role in P/CVE¹⁴.

Terrorism and VE also have a gendered perspective because they are experienced differently by women than men, as victims, perpetrators, and those working to prevent it. Understanding the myriad roles women play in preventing, countering, and supporting VE is important. To counter

¹¹See, for example, Jaques, Karen and Paul Taylor. 2009. "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21:3; NíAoláin, Fionnuala, and Jayne Huckerby. 2018. "Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to – Part I." *Just Security*. May 1, 2018. <https://www.justsecurity.org/55522/gendering-counterterrorism-to/>.

¹²As one example, Alexis Henshaw points to the ways in which movements depreciate and deny the official status of women. Henshaw, Alexis. 2015. "Where Women Rebel." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1007729>.

¹³Sara Meger, 'Instrumentalizing Women's Security in the Counterterrorism Agenda' July 17, 2018. www.Genderandwar.com

¹⁴Darden, Jessica Trisko, Alexis Henshaw, and Ora Szekely. 2019. *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars*. Georgetown University Press

extremist tactics and avoid blind spots it is imperative to integrate gender analysis into policies¹⁵ aimed at addressing the drivers of radicalization, to have a gender responsive, inclusive security and preventive policy frameworks. This includes promoting the participation of women into these efforts to ensure that they are effective and sustainable which protect and promote women's rights.

Involvement of women as 'policy shapers, educators, peacemakers, community members and activists' are essential to PVE. The state needs to recognize and appreciate the role of these women as partners in prevention and response frameworks, as well as change makers.

Recognizing that the role of women varies greatly from perpetrators or victims of violence, to their role as peacebuilders, is an important first step by the state and security actors to take into account in the national security and peace-making process.

Transforming Violent extremism

Pakistan, like many other countries, adopted the traditional security-military-oriented approach based on counterintelligence, surveillance and military operations. The military tactics used, aimed to isolate terrorists and prevent them from gaining access to recruits, supplies, targets and finance. With the use of kinetic force one can kill the militants or disrupt their movements but it cannot eradicate the ideology of VE within an individual or community as a whole. It requires a comprehensive multipronged

¹⁵ For details on this subject see, Mossarat Qadeem, *Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan*, Centre for Women Peace and Security, London School of Economics. November, 2018

response involving civil society organizations, media, private sector and the community.

However, it is clear that civil society actors alone are not able to transform a wider sphere of VE. Yet it is very difficult, if not impossible, for governments to foster a durable ‘positive peace’ without the engagement of the civil society and community members. One of the greatest strengths of this approach is their capacity to support changes in how people respond to VE and to direct attention to the underlying causes of it, necessary for sustainable peace. Furthermore, civil society actors have the potential to play an important role in raising awareness, creating opportunities and means to address VE.

PVE requires actions on multiple fronts, including socio economic development, social justice and accountable governance. Government should develop an all embracing and integrated approach to PVE involving civil society and communities to provide “credible and authentic voices” in PVE.

Dealing with violent extremism at the community level: Best practice from the field

PAIMAN Trust started its movement “Lets Live in Peace” in 2007 at a time when public awareness of the destructive socio-cultural impact of violent extremism on Pakistani society was not yet developed and understood.

PAIMAN built an effective strategy for PVE on a broad base of religious and secular actors within the communities focusing on shared values, social cohesion, and principles of non-violence, minority rights and gender equality. *PAIMAN* learned that approaches to PVE require methods and processes akin to those developed for conflict transformation. Some of the

characteristics of this approach include the inclusion of different stakeholders, local ownership in defining problems and seeking solutions, the building of trusted relationships, the mentoring of young women and men as peer-role models, and the development of innovative small-scale community activities that can be taken up by the wider community. *PAIMAN* then connected these local community initiatives to policymakers at sub-national, national and international¹⁶ levels.

Interventions, that *PAIMAN* employ, are meant to achieve tangible results in terms of cohesion among young persons, their peers, extended families, neighbourhoods and communities. This increased integration into the wider society, advocate for maximum involvement of women and youth in decision making at community and local levels. The process of achieving this is as important as the activities through a constant self-monitoring of the change and results achieved.

PAIMAN's approach to building resilient communities focuses on the relationship within communities (social bonding), between communities (social bridging), and between communities and institutions (social linking)¹⁷. We strengthened these relationships through trust building, collective community activities and networks among community members, and civil society groups including media and local administration. In some of the places like Charsadda and Mardan where local administration partnered with local communities provided systems for early intervention

¹⁶PAIMAN has been projecting and promoting positive image of Pakistan through its successful local initiative at UN General Assembly, UNCTED, UNDP New York, Other international forum like GCTF, Hedaya, EU, OIC, Club De Madrid, Carter Centre, Common Wealth Forums etc

¹⁷B. Heidi Ellis and Saida Abdi, 'Building community resilience to violent extremism through genuine partnerships' *American Psychologist* pg. 292, April 2017

through bonding and bridging social networks. In Charsadda one of *PAIMAN*'s members, Fahmida¹⁸, while visiting a house on a routine visit to the community found a number of male dresses on the washing line. She knew that there were only two women and men living in that house. She asked the woman washing clothes why so many male clothes were on the washing line. The woman could not give her a satisfactory answer. Fahmida kept a watch on that house and found out that few strangers visited the house regularly. She informed the local police through a friend and when the house was raided, a cache of weapons was unearthed, hidden under a muddy floor in the room. Here an effective relationship between state agencies and vigilant CSOs group helped secure and stabilize the community.

As a first step *PAIMAN* built its trust by providing health and other social services within target communities of selected districts of KPK and tribal districts. We engaged the local imams, local political leaders, community influentials and provided the space with opportunities to local communities to talk about the contentious issues that were the root causes of VE. For the first time, communities openly discussed VE, its impact and learned about the ways of addressing it. This provided an opportunity for them to engage in dialogue and show resilience.

Analysing the on-the-ground realities in the areas hardest hit by VE further strengthened *PAIMAN*'s belief that there can be no effective prevention of VE and radicalization without active participation of women in their families, communities and broader society. In a traditional and conservative

¹⁸ The names of individuals in all case studies are not the real name due to the sensitivity of the issues. We can furnish further information to anyone for the purpose of academic research.

Pashtun society, it was a huge challenge to bring women out from their homes¹⁹ and involve them in our PVE initiative. We started building relationships with women within each community and attracted them to learn livelihood skills to start earning some money for their families. Dialogues were held to build trust with community elders as well as influential and male relatives of women thus paving the way for them to come out of their houses. The approach was based on political economic context of PVE. Focusing on concepts of self-confidence, competence and empowerment, we started our ambitious program of engaging women in the community.

PAIMAN's integrated approach to empower women socially, economically and psychologically strengthened women's leadership ability to prevent and counter violent extremism at home and in their communities by:

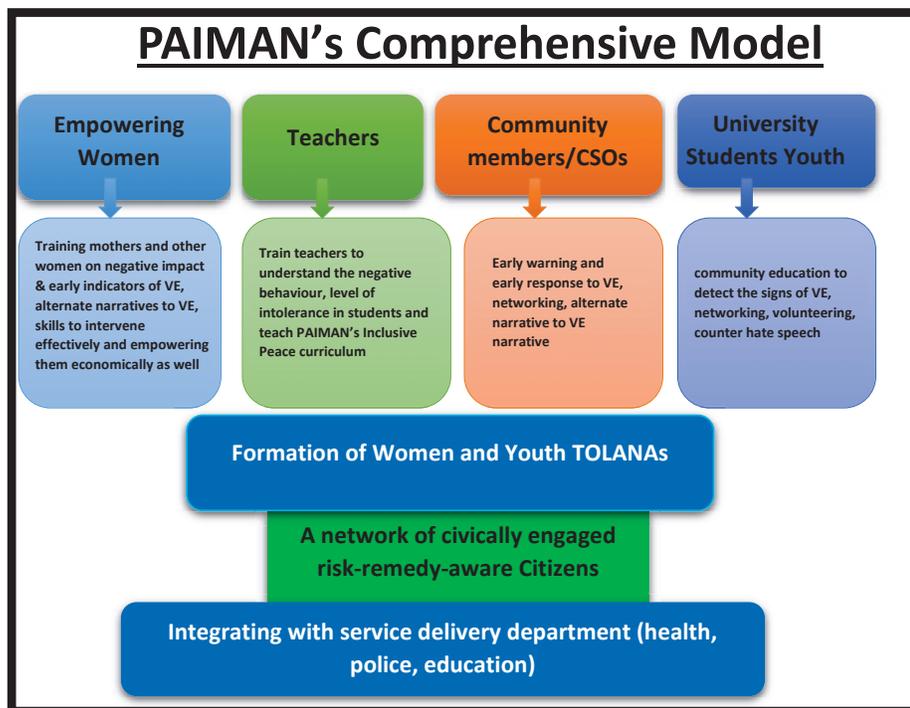
- a) Building the capacity of women in the community in critical thinking, community peacebuilding, early signs of extremism in an individual and community, alternate narratives to extremist narratives, mediation and networking skills and also making them aware of their potential in building social cohesion and PVE;
- b) Providing them with livelihood skills, thereby raising their status and voice in their families and communities and reducing their vulnerability to VE;
- c) Building the capacity of school and Madrassa teachers, women police²⁰, women activists, political leaders of all faiths and women Parliamentarians

¹⁹Mossarat Qadeem, *Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan*, Centre for Women Peace and Security, London School of Economics. November, 2018

²⁰*PAIMAN* trained police women and men in PVE and community policing and as first respondents.

to actively participate in the P/CVE, peace and security agendas of the country at multiple levels. All these women who underwent *PAIMAN*'s trainings then become members of *PAIMAN* Peace Group called Women "Tolana", a Pashto word meaning "group".

PAIMAN based its initiatives within Islamic framework, took guidance from Quran and the *sunnah* to reach out to vulnerable women, youth and to help transform their mindset²¹ to become active citizens with positive attitude. To counter extremist strategy, it was crucial to educate women in Islamic teachings and texts that promote tolerance and gender equality and help them in understanding their role in promoting a culture of tolerance and peace encouraging resilient communities.



²¹ 'Islamic Perspective: Muslim Women Building Peace in Pakistan, in a book 'On the Significance of Religion in Conflict and Conflict Resolution', by Christine Schliesser, Pauline Kollontai, and S. AyseKadayifci-Orellana, Routledge 2020.

TOLANA

PAIMAN's Peace Groups TOLANA, is an internal community mechanism which helps promote practices of peace and prevent VE through cohesive bonding and information sharing. *Tolana* is an innovative model of empowering women, men and youth in the communities to build social cohesion through mediation, interfaith/intra-faith dialogue, and building understanding amongst divergent groups. Both Women and Youth TOLANAs together teach and preach non-violent ways of addressing the menace of extremism in their respective communities. Applying their knowledge of early signs of extremism at individual and community levels, *Tolana*, have played an incredible role in preventing youth from joining extremists group, identified groups distributing radical propaganda material, effectively engaged radical women in positive community work, convinced local imams to speak about value of tolerance and peace in Friday prayers, and are further promoting social cohesion and pluralism by providing alternative community activities for youth and other members of the community to express their grievances and envisage a productive and constructive future. A group of five radical women in Qanbar, Swat were transformed through *PAIMAN's* positive engagement program. These women who were the informers, facilitators and fundraisers of Molana Fazlullah became active women peacemakers in their community and would share their own stories of ignorance and working with extremist groups and its negative impact to sensitize and educate other women regarding harmful impact of VE. These personal narrations of success paved the way for *PAIMAN* to engage women in the patriarchal communities to prevent VE. The role these women played in resolving conflict within pro-and anti-Taliban families, helping communities to reject Taliban's propaganda and

build social cohesion in a fragmented community. needs to be acknowledged to derive the lessons for policy formulation and implementation.

Each *Tolana* creates awareness through interactive theatres, posters, pamphlets, text messaging, radio talk shows and peace poetry, poster competitions in schools and madrassas.

PAIMAN Women *Tolana* contributed immensely to community reconciliation, trauma healing and stabilization during the most difficult and uncertain time in our area because of the trust that they built within their communities. They worked with school management committees, teachers and parents in disseminating peace messages and organizing student peace groups in madrassa and schools.

Tolana members keep an eye on their surroundings ; look after early signs of VE within the family and in the community. One such story is the exemplary courageous deed of *PAIMAN*'s Women *Tolana* member Shagul²² in Swabi. She noticed that her younger brother Gul Zareef had started coming home late and had become very silent. She inquired repeatedly about his late coming and noticeable silence but he refused to respond. Remembering early signs of behavioural changes in youth from her *PAIMAN*'s training she started observing his movements and behaviour. She followed him one night and found that he visited a house in the nearby street. She discussed the situation with members of Women and Youth *Tolana*. Some members of Youth *Tolana* started visiting the same house and found out about strangers coming and delivering lectures, luring in the youth to

²²The names of individuals in all case studies are not the real name due to the sensitivity of the issues. We can furnish further information to anyone for the purpose of academic research.

join their mission. Shagul along with other Mothers of *Tolana* reported this to community elders. They approached the owner of the house who was initially reluctant to speak but after looking at the crowd, he let the elders in and handed over negative extremist propaganda material and three strangers who had already lured five young men from that community. This case was then handed over to the local police. An invisible women community peace group's early warning helped in saving many boys of that area from becoming prey to extremist group. These examples of family and community-level interventions are a call to give local women and youth leaders a greater role in pushing back against VE in their communities.

This holistic community approach for building social harmony has received international recognition and applauds for its cost-effectiveness, adaptability in any context and sustainability as the community takes the ownership of the initiatives. It is being replicated now in Bangladesh, Iraq, Afghanistan and Nigeria.

From the concept and vision, today *Tolana* has become a movement and is working against all odds in a non-violent manner to address violent extremism in vulnerable and affected regions of Pakistan.

PAIMAN's initiative itself is a sustainable long-term solution and can be adapted in other locations worldwide. *Tolana* youth members become role models, have a positive impact on young people in particular persuading them to work on voluntary basis within their community for building social cohesion. The establishment of a community structure like *Tolana* consisting of women and youth members, mentors, multipliers, local influential and the whole social environment has lasting effects.

Our Challenges:

- In most of the areas where we work, civic space is limited. The narrative of western-based scholars and NGOs that claim women are being ‘instrumentalized’ further exacerbates the situation as it denigrates the expertise, innovation and courage of women at the frontlines of the struggle against violent extremism, that offer critical lessons and solutions.
- ▶ Many organizations working in the realm of PVE remain ‘**under the radar**’ of extremist groups and many face threats from them.

Recommendations:

- With the support of CSOs “safe spaces” should be created where people from different backgrounds and with different interests are able to meet and exchange practices and policies. Policies will be validated by lived realities and citizens will become aware how policies that influence local security are developed and executed. These dialogues will lead to mutual understanding between communities and the authorities and improvement of security-related policies.
- A coordination body of the CSO organizations working on PVE needs to be established at national and sub national levels under the leadership of the government, which will provide a forum where policy dialogue and implementation strategies can be discussed and developed. This can be further taken down to district levels and participation of elected representatives at different levels should also be ensured. Such an arrangement can provide direction for policy,

integration of efforts and a single cohesive narrative as national policy.

- Dialogues between security forces and communities is crucial in the context of Pakistan as it will help build confidence, demonstrate the promise of what is possible and work with communities and civil society groups as trusted partners.
- Governments can help by ending stifling regulations on CSOs and allowing citizen groups to peacefully speak and organize around sensitive topics. They can give them a real seat at the table in policy development and ensure they have access to the resources and information they need to fully contribute. That is fundamental to the “whole of society” PVE approach. They can go a step further by proactively reaching out to build ties with communities targeted by VE.
- Civil society actors are desperate for the implementation of a preventive agenda that they are both a part of and which recognizes their daily realities where the struggle against extremism is one of several societal challenges. With this in mind, civil society should be part of an agenda that focuses not on what we are against, but what are we for²³—peace, prosperity, equality and resilience.
- For the state of Pakistan, it is vital to merit the importance of youth and women groups as a soft approach to engaging communities in PVE and to avoid the securitization and essentialization of youth and

²³ SanamNaraghi, ‘Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices A Gendered Lens on PVE’ in Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann edited Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13. Pg 31

women and the collective solution they develop to build social cohesion in their communities.

- Donors funded many of the CVE specific or CVE relevant initiatives in Pakistan are usually for short duration. If we seriously want to prevent VE then long-term integrated programs coordinated through a result and evidence-based strategy are needed.

Mossarat Qadeem is a renowned practitioner in the field and Executive Director of PAIMAN Alumni Trust.