

Gendered Analysis of “Push and Pull Factors” towards Radicalization and Violent Extremism:

Sheharyar Khan

Abstract

It is important to understand the unique vulnerability of women to extremist ideas and the peculiar impacts extremism has on them. At the same time, it is also important to understand how women can exercise their agency to resist extremism and what are the capacities that they need in order to do this. This study aims to understand the structural realities that shape women’s worldview and behaviour as well as the factors that may help them deal with intense extremism. It is the nuanced understanding of the various factors that determine the interplay between this structure-agency duality that may lead to policy recommendations aimed at reshaping social realities. Given the gendered underpinnings of this agenda, the very promotion of gender equality is a counter-measure to the spread of deep-rooted aggressive ideologies. Women are well placed to help build cohesive communities, inform and lead a prevention response to tensions and demonstrate a clear recognition of the need for a gender sensitive approach to countering violent extremism.

Keywords: Push and Pull factors of radicalization, Female radicalization, women in conflict, women in peace building.

Introduction

The Question of Women’s role in violent conflict and peace building has been much debated in the academic and development literature¹. With the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies prioritizing the inclusion of a “gender-focused” agenda in their wider remits of peace-building, sustaining peace, and security, focus has turned towards the various ways in which gender-specific interventions can advance (or regress) the cause of peace and social cohesion². However, academic research and relevant policy debates on women’s radicalization and resultant participation in terrorism in South Asia remains limited.

The agenda of “Women, Peace and Security” was first initiated in October 2000, when the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325. The resolution focused on the importance of the role of women in the “prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stressed the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security³”.

Moreover, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242, adopted in October 2015⁴, explicitly urges to incorporate the gender dimension in P/CVE programming and encourages Member States and the UN, “to ensure

¹ There is no set definition of peace-building/peace-making. However, peace-building often happens after conflict has ended, or possibly such activities might start even during conflict

² There is no single definition of social cohesion. Broadly, social cohesion refers to individuals within a community coexisting peacefully with each other, regardless of background, ethnicity or religion (See Stanley, 2003). Furthermore, there can be a breakdown in social cohesion, for example which can result because of conflict and violent actions.

³ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12076.doc.htm>

the participation and leadership of women and women’s organizations in developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism,...[and] calls for adequate financing in this regard and for an increased amount, with the funding of the UN for counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism ... to be committed to projects which address gender dimensions including women’s empowerment”⁵.

Even though Pakistan has made substantial gains in its fight against terrorism, the struggle is far from over. According to a report published by Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS)⁶ there has been a consistent decline in the incidences of terrorism in the country. Nearly 370 terrorist attacks were reported in Pakistan during 2019 with 518 fatalities. This presents a 30pc drop from 739 fatalities from nearly 400 terrorism incidences in 2018. Moreover, suicide attacks also declined significantly in 2019, decreasing from 26 in 2018 to nine in the year 2019. These attacks resulted in 295 causalities in 2018, but dropped to 56 causalities in 2019.

However, hard interventions through kinetic operations⁷ (yet successful) alone can’t resolve Pakistan’s terrorism woes⁸. Tackling security issues have mostly meant a reliance on “law and order” and security centric approach⁹ involving Law enforcement agencies of the state.

It is important to emphasize that issues related to internal security and widespread extremism in Pakistan, cannot simply be taken as one of law-

⁵ ibid

⁶ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1525816>

⁷ <https://cgpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CGP-Countering-Violent-Extremism-in-Pakistan.pdf>

⁸ <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/getting-pakistani-counter-terrorism-paradigm-right/>

⁹ https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra_pub/Non-Kinetic-Challenges.pdf

and-order enforcement. In fact, these issues are merely manifestations (though violent ones) of much deeper issues with regards to the relations between and within the state and civil society. The main philosophy sustaining Prevention or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) programs is that the state should not counter terrorism exclusively with kinetic intelligence, police, and military means¹⁰, but the structural drivers of violent extremism must also be tackled¹¹. For long-lasting and tangible changes to occur, further interventions are necessary at the state level, including countering passive backing for extremist groups, tackling extremist ideas and tendencies that marinate in suggestive minds, taking a whole of the society approach, and pre-empting ways in which extremist organizations influence, exploit and recruit capitalizing on the mindset of the communities.

However, despite an international push towards gender sensitive security discourse and policy debates; In Pakistan, women generally figure as “passive” rather than “active” players. The focus has always been in the traditional roles that women acquire in the culture mainly “mothers”, “daughters”, “sisters”, “wives”. Women taking part in extremist or violent movements/organizations is overlooked and goes under the radar for many reasons. Firstly, it’s a societal norm and cultural understanding that just like war, violent extremism is a male domain and women are passive players in this field. This flawed understanding also gives root to the perception that since women are invisible in the public sphere, they must capitalize private

¹⁰ https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Nacta-Journal_Issue2-Final.pdf

¹¹ Frazer, O. & Nunlist, C. (2015). The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism. Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zurich. Accessed at: <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securitiesstudies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse183-EN.pdf>

gatherings to play their role just as sympathizers, fundraisers and facilitators. They are often viewed as victims rather than initiators of violence. Resultantly, academic literature and policy debates on women’s participation in extremist organizations is limited.

Masculine and Feminine Stereotyping in Violent Extremism:

Even though concepts of masculinity and femininity vary across societies, cultures, societies and timeframe, they become more pronounced during periods of political violence and conflict. Masculinity is linked to “violence” and femininity is often perceived to be non-violent, “supportive and complementary”. Under this type of framing, men are perceived to take on roles such as “fighters” and “protectors”, while women assume roles of the “heroic housewife,” “sacrificial mother” and “loving wife. In the context of violent extremism women take supplementary roles and tend to be classified as victims rather than initiators. Femininity also strongly correlates to women’s biological capability to give birth, implying that they are largely life-givers as opposed to life-takers¹².

To analyse the gendered drivers of extremism in Pakistan, it is also necessary to look at the historical context of conflict in the country. Historically, participation of Pakistani women in terrorism and extremist movements can be traced across three waves starting from the Afghan Jihad (1980s), leading to Kashmir jihad, formation of TTP leading to IS linked groups¹³. It should be noted that during the era of Afghan jihad in the 1980s,

¹² Mahmood, S. (2019). *Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan*.

¹³ Mahmood, S. (2019). *Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan*.

women were limited to “secondary” roles¹⁴ such as providing logistical and financial support which evolved with time. TTP was the first terrorist outfit to use women as suicide bombers, with the initial case¹⁵ reported to have emerged in 2010 in Bajaur Agency in erstwhile FATA.

Moreover, when it comes to assessing the motivation of women joining extremist organizations, gender biased explanations¹⁶ are served: men are perceived to join terrorist groups for political reasons, while women’s motivations are personal assumed to be personal, such as, finding a husband, providing/protecting her children or avenging the death of a loved family member.

Viewing violent extremism through a gendered lens, using orthodox explanations dividing men into violent roles and women into non-violent role hamper deeper analysis of their contribution to such outfits. Developing effective countering violent extremism initiatives warrants deeper analysis into women’s motivations and drivers of extremism independent of gender biases and recognition of their agency.

Is that true? Are women really passive actors in the arena of violent extremism? Evidence from the field suggests otherwise. There have been numerous incidences of women radicalization resulting in violence in Pakistan and abroad.

¹⁴ Noor, Saba, and Daniela Hussain. 2005. “Women and Radicalization: An Empirical Study.” Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies. <https://pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/205.pdf>.

¹⁵<https://www.dawn.com/news/593552/explosion-in-bajaur-agencies-khar-head-quarter-several-injured>

¹⁶Nacos, Brigitte. 2005. “The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar framing patterns in the news coverage of women in politics and in terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 28:5, 435–451.

In 2005, Gul Hassan, a known leader of sectarian militant organization Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, (LEJ) revealed to the law enforcement agencies, militants’ his plan to use women suicide bombers for terrorist attacks on individuals and specific locations. Hassan trained his two nieces Arifa and Saba¹⁷, who were students of mainstream schools in Karachi, as suicide bombers, who were arrested in 2005 by law enforcement agencies in Swat. Upon interrogation, the girls revealed that they decided to become suicide bombers after listening to radical speeches of Fazlullah, leader of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan in Swat, through his illegal FM radio broadcasts. Female students of Jamia Hafsa¹⁸ (associated with Lal “Red” Mosque in Islamabad) played a vital role in creating a law-and-order situation which eventually led to the military operation against militants inside the Red Mosque in July 2007. Furthermore, female students of the same madrassa Jamia Hafsa pledged allegiance¹⁹ to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Emir of (ISIS), in a video statement²⁰ released in 2014.

Similarly, in January 2010, an 11-year-old Afghan refugee girl, Meena Gul²¹, who escaped from a suicide bomber training camp in Bajaur Agency (now tribal district in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) along with Farida, a

¹⁷ Women Suicide Bombers: An Emerging Security Challenge for Pakistan Author(s): Saba Noor

Source: Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, Vol. 3, No. 11 (November 2011), pp. 1-3
Published by: International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26351018>

¹⁸ A female Islamic seminary was established in 1992, adjacent to the Lal Masjid Mosque Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. The mosque and its seminaries are overseen by cleric Abdul Aziz Ghazi.

¹⁹<https://www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/541350-capital%E2%80%99s-jamia-hafsa-declares-support-for-islamic-state>

²⁰The statement (in Urdu) can be viewed here:

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2cw1y9>

²¹<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/10608-terror-plans-of-al-qaeda-womens-wing-exposed>

granddaughter of Swat militant leader Sufi Muhammad²², revealed that her two brothers and father were involved in torching and bombing of girls’ schools in Bajaur and that one of her brothers trained female militants in Afghanistan. She said they were forcing her to commit a suicide attack, but she was reluctant to carry out such an attack and escaped from the camp when she got a chance.

In another case in December 2010, a woman suicide bomber blew herself up at a distribution centre of the World Food Program, in Bajaur killing 45 people who had queued for aid and wounding 80 others²³. Official reports stated that the attack was on Salarzai tribe, which had raised a private army “*Lashkar*” in resistance to militants operating in that region. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility of the attack. In August 2011 a female attacker blew up a suicide vest that she was wearing, killing a 60-year-old woman and injuring 17 people at Lahori Gate Peshawar²⁴. In June 2015, a female suicide bomber carried out an attack on a bus carrying students of Sardar Bahadur Khan Women’s University²⁵. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) had claimed responsibility for the bus bombing.

The Pakistani Taliban (TTP) have frequently used female suicide bombers for their assassination bids, including the late Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Qazi Hussain Ahmed, who narrowly escaped on November 19, 2012 when a female bomber exploded herself²⁶ as his convoy passed through Mohmand Agency. Infamous Lal Masjid prayer leader Maulana Abdul Aziz had also

²² https://www.rferl.org/a/gandhara_female_suicide_bomber_pakistan/2260218.html

²³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/593552/explosion-in-bajaur-agencies-khar-head-quarter-several-injured>

²⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/651101/terrorists-use-girl-for-suicide-attack-in-peshawar>

²⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1018631/female-suicide-bomber-responsible-for-quetta-attack>

²⁶ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/467981/former-ji-chief-escapes-attack-in-mohmand>

warned on February 10, 2014 that Pakistani Taliban had 500 female suicide bombers in Waziristan and other tribal areas who were ready²⁷ to attack.

Early 2015 saw the launch of the women wing of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) headed by Afinda Binte Ayesha under the guidance of Umaima Hassan (one of the wives of al-Qaeda chief, Dr Ayman Al Zawahiri). It was named “Al-Qaeda Shaheen Force²⁸” Umaima Hassan had already asked Muslim women in a pamphlet to raise their children in the service of Jihad and martyrdom:

“All the Muslim women of the world should raise their children to love Jihad and die in the cause of Allah. Besides helping to preserve the Mujahedeen and raise their children in the best way, women could go the extra mile and participate themselves in martyrdom missions as suicide bombers.”²⁹”

In September 2015, Bushra Cheema³⁰ traveled with her 15-year-old son, Abdullah, and three younger daughters, Zainab, Aisha and Nabiah to Syria from Pakistan to join IS. Bushra was highly educated and had completed MPhil in Islamic Studies from Punjab University³¹ and was an honorary principal and founder of Noor-ul-Huda Islamic Centre situated in Town Ship, Lahore.

In an infamous voice note, she left a message for her husband from Syria, “I want to die a martyr’s death...if you can’t join us then pray your wife and children die in jihad³²”. Evidence suggests that Cheema was not radicalized

²⁷<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-02-09/pakistan-taliban-readies-500-female-suicide-bombers-cleric-says>

²⁸ <https://crss.pk/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Al-Qaeda-Women-Wing.pdf>

²⁹ “Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Wife Predicts Muslim Spring”, The Telegraph, June 8, 2012.

³⁰ <https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/pray-your-wife-and-children-die-in-jihad/>

³¹ <https://dailytimes.com.pk/95462/the-state-in-a-state-of-denial/>

³² <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153362>

due to her husband joining an extremist group; instead, her examples demonstrates exercise of her agency where she made an independent, political and religious decision to join IS.

A terrorist attack in San Bernardino³³, California, U.S.A on December 2, 2015 resulted in the killing of 14 persons and 22 individuals seriously injured. Perpetrators were American born Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife Tashfeen Malik. They targeted a San Bernardino County Department of Public Health training event and Christmas party where at least 80 employees had rented a banquet room. Tashfeen malik³⁴ (29 years of age) was a highly educated woman who got her degree in Chemistry,

A prominent case of a young medical student Noreen Leghari³⁵ gained national headlines in 2017. Affiliated with IS, Noreen was recruited to undertake a suicide bombing mission targeting a local church during easter celebrations. When arrested by the authorities before conducting the attack, Noreen admitted to being influenced by IS propaganda online. After leaving her home, she had married Ali Tariq³⁶, a militant from Lahore who was killed in an encounter with law enforcement agencies. This further provides evidence that terrorist groups have evolved in their recruitment methods, strategies, and target audiences.

On the contrary, militants evolving policy of using burqa clad female suicide bombers to effectively attack their targets without detection is a serious

³³<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/08/us/tashfeen-malik-syed-rizwan-farook-radicalization/index.html>

³⁴<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1007081/who-do-we-blame-for-tashfeen-maliks-radicalisation>

³⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1327453>

³⁶ <https://tribune.com.pk/article/48864/naureen-laghari-pakistans-very-own-is-bride>

cause of concern for security agencies. The ability of the burqa clad women to breach security poses a big challenge to authorities.

The key questions that need in-depth investigation is as to why did women act so radically, and what compels them to support and join extremist/terrorist organizations? What are their motivations, vulnerabilities, and gendered drivers that may contribute to security threats and fragmentations of social cohesion which increase the impact of violence and security threats? What are the contexts and factors which cause mobilization of women especially young women, and what roles women/young women can play in preventing violent extremism?

Analysis of the “Push and Pull” factors.

At a macro level, a combination of academic studies has identified a number of “push” and “pull” factors which influence recruitment into violent extremist groups³⁷. Structural “push” factors create a favourable topography for the spread of violent extremism, and these include prolonged and unresolved conflicts, underdevelopment, relative deprivation and lack of access to education or employment, and human rights violations. These are then combined with adjacent “pull” factors such as the material and financial benefits of joining extremist groups, perceived social status, and appealing ideologies and recruiters. Studies focusing on youth recruitment into violent Islamist organizations have also uncovered the propagation of youth-

³⁷ Hedayah and GCCR. (2015). Policy Brief: Thinking Outside the Box: Exploring the Critical Roles of Sports, Arts, and Culture in Preventing Violent Extremism. Hedayah and Global Center on Cooperative Security.

specific discourses³⁸. These involve a combination of exploiting regional sensitivities through tailored media/social media statements, with the discursive construction of a cohesive “identity”. Thus, “believing” youth are placed at the centre and vanguard of a millenarian battle against the “enemies of Islam” and “apostates” to create an “Islamic state”³⁹. Moreover, warrior references from Islamic and jihadist history are mobilized in contrast to traditions emphasizing tolerance, moderation, and pluralism/coexistence.

Drivers of Radicalization:

Academics, researchers and practitioners are of the view that there isn’t a certain set of root causes that can effectively explain how women or men could be radicalized leading to violent acts. However, various observed indicators have been recognized dependent on context.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has investigated various “push” and “pull” factors that foster and propagate extremism. “Push” factors are socioeconomic, political, and cultural in nature⁴⁰. Factors include: high levels of social marginalization and fragmentation, poorly governed or ungoverned areas, cultural threat perceptions, endemic corruption and elite impunity⁴¹. Pre-existing,

³⁸ Cheong, P. H. and Halverson J. R. (2010). Youths in Violent Extremist Discourse: Mediated Identifications and Interventions. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33: 1104–1123.

³⁹ Pauline Hope Cheong & Jeffrey R. Halverson (2010) Youths in Violent Extremist Discourse: Mediated Identifications and Interventions, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33:12, 1104-1123, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2010.523862

⁴⁰ “Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism,” USAID (Feb. 2009), p. 9; “The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency,” USAID (Sept. 2011)

⁴¹ <https://www.cipe.org/resources/drivers-violent-extremism/>

protracted and violent local conflicts that can be exploited by violent extremist organizations seeking to advance their own agendas.⁴²

Furthermore, USAID states that “Pull” factors work on an individual level and have a direct impact on recruitment and radicalization⁴³. They include: social status and respect from peers, a sense of belonging, adventure, and self-esteem, and the prospect of achieving glory and fame. “Pull” factors also include interpersonal relationships, the appeal of a particular leader which can often lead to cult following, and the attraction and membership of social networks. Practically, “pull” factors work in conjunction with “push” factors to have influence. The USAID⁴⁴ identified five main individual “pull” drivers: (1) reasonable and specific political, economic, and social grievances; (2) ideological; (3) economic gain; (4) personal factors; and (5) coercion.

According to Mossarat Qadeem (practitioner), some of the common push factors⁴⁵ include dissatisfaction with the existing justice system, drone attacks, the death, detention or abuse of family members by the Law enforcement agencies and a lack of understanding of Religion and religious traditions. The pull factors⁴⁶ were the promise of a paradise for mothers of martyrs, assurance of easy access to justice, guarantees of just and equal distribution of resources, the promise of sharia enforcement, and others. A common practice used by extremist groups involves using text from

⁴² ibid

⁴³ ibid

⁴⁴ ibid

⁴⁵ Qadeem, Mossarat. 2018. “Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism In Pakistan.” London School of Economics (Centre for Women Peace and Security). <http://www.lse.ac.uk/womenpeace-ecurity/assets/documents/2018/wps16Qadeem.pdf>.

⁴⁶ ibid

religious scriptures without context to charm the mothers, school and madrasa teachers, local activists and other women in the community. It should be noted here that contrary to popular perceptions the influence was not only limited to illiterate women only, educated women also felt an obligation to fulfil their duty to contribute to Jihad.

Academic research has identified various ideological “pull” factors as well. These include pull factors such as religious ideology, ethno-religious and nationalist goals and aspirations⁴⁷, the rejection of “Western” political and economic systems⁴⁸, the perceived justness of the group’s goals, and

<p>Political Drivers (Push)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of social marginalization and fragmentation • Poorly governed or ungoverned areas • Corruption and elite impunity • Dissatisfaction with existing justice system • Perceived justness of extremist organizations goals 	<p>Personal/Identity Drivers (Pull)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social status and respect from peers • Sense of belonging and self esteem • Adventure and prospect of achieving glory • Desire for social and political agency • A desire to find protection from domestic abuse
<p>Socio-economic Drivers (Push)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guarantees of just and equal distribution of resources • Financial rewards • Stability • Poverty and lack of education (weak) • Lack of opportunities and hopelessness for the future 	<p>Religious/Ideological (Pull)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promise of paradise for mothers of martyrs • Out of context use of text from religious scriptures. • Enforcement of a particular brand of religion. • Pan-Islamic Religious Ideology.

⁴⁷ KARLA J. CUNNINGHAM (2003) Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26:3, 171-195

⁴⁸ <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5881d4e44.pdf>

selective incentives provided by extremist organizations⁴⁹ (e.g., stability, security, financial rewards, opportunities for advancement).

Furthermore, analysis of literature propagated by extremist organizations shows that the focus is usually placed on issues of identity, existential threats, cultural domination or oppression, narratives of victimization and threats by foreign intervention⁵⁰. Interestingly enough social indications such as poverty, unemployment, service delivery, and economic opportunities are not given attention. In summation, violent extremist groups present a world view in which the international system as against their way of life and link local grievances as manifestations of greater international political dynamics.

The Curious Case Study of Radio Mullah:

While we can garner some information about violent extremism and women at the larger level, zooming into specific communities provides interesting perspectives and nuances. Women have been seen to play active roles in the promotion of political violence and conflict. In contrast to popular perception of women being passive victims of war, fundamentalist strains (such as the Tehreek-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNFZ) in Swat, Pakistan to ISIS recruitment in Pakistan and among Muslim diasporas in the West) have actively recruited and mobilized women to the cause of violence⁵¹. In doing so, they have drawn upon discourses of idealized

⁴⁹ Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor, “Female Terrorism: A Review,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (2009): 499–515.

⁵⁰ <https://www.cipe.org/resources/drivers-violent-extremism/>

⁵¹ Akhtar, Aasim Sajjad. 2010. “Islam as Ideology of Tradition and Change: The “New Jihad” in Swat, Northern Pakistan,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30 (3): 595-609.

femininity, religious duty, and utopic sublimation to attract female recruitment⁵².

For example, in Swat, a combination of local political and historical factors combined with general patriarchal negotiations led to women supporting Mullah Fazlullah⁵³ during his rise to prominence. Thus, both Sufi Muhammad and later Fazlullah articulated their extremist politics in the name of “Sharia”. This played on historical memories of the era of the State of Swat before its merger into Pakistan, when the legal code was called “Shariat” and was perceived to be more efficient than the Pakistani judicial system. On the other hand, in his early days, Fazlullah strongly advocated for women’s rights under Sharia law through his radio program. He took up issues of domestic abuse against women while also promising his women supporters that he would provide their sons with an education and social mobility⁵⁴. Although ironically, Fazlullah and his group would eventually turn to extreme patriarchal violence himself, initially they garnered much support from women who donated generously to his cause.

In some areas of Pakistan, women have little or no participation in the public domain as they are often restricted to their homes, increasing their vulnerability to violence and exploitation⁵⁵. In Swat, this was capitalized on as the message of Mullah Fazlullah directly reached women in their homes

⁵² Zakaria, Rafia. 2015, March 24. ISIL’s feminine mystique. Al-Jazeera America, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/3/isils-feminine-mystique.html>

⁵³ Mullah Fazlullah referred to as “Radio Mullah” was the leader of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who was killed in 2018 by a US drone attack. Fazlullah was the son-in-law of Sufi Muhammad, the erstwhile leader of the religious fundamentalist Tehreek-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNFZ) movement in Swat, Pakistan. Fazlullah rose to prominence as a fiery radio preacher in the and soon went onto form his own TTP faction, eventually becoming the organisation’s leader in 2013 (BBC report: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24847165>).

⁵⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/23/the-rise-of-radio-mullah/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/women-peace-and-security-pakistan>

through media such as radio. However, the lack of mobility of women, which has also been created by violent extremism for example Taliban restrictions on women in Swat, has impacted household income and access to facilities, such as health care and education⁵⁶. Thus, both localized political-historical factors in Swat and generalized patriarchal oppression contributed to women’s active involvement in Fazlullah’s rise. In other areas of KP or FATA/Newly Merged Districts, local social and political factors might interact differently with women’s roles in society.

An environment of a general “*gendered suppression*” within familial structures can make women amenable to extremist narratives and actions. Many examples can be provided in this regard. The case of women’s support to Mullah Fazlullah and his fundamentalist movement in Swat is perhaps most famous. Here, there was already a historical memory of the Swat state whose legal code was called “Shariat” and was generally considered to be more efficient than the subsequent criminal justice system of the Pakistani state. However, Fazlullah specifically targeted women through his popular radio broadcasts through, initially, taking up issues of domestic violence, asking men to desist from domestic suppression, and following the “true” teachings of Islam. Women not only actively gave support and material resources (such as their own jewellery) to the Fazlullah movement but also encouraged their children to join the movement. In this regard, women’s quest for identity and prestige combined with more prosaic concerns regarding their sons’ economic prospects. Thus, support of conflict among women combined ideological support and aspirations to material advancement in light of prevailing social and economic situation.

⁵⁶ ibid

Similarly, women who have become ideologues of violent extremism are often those who, while in a subaltern state within familial structure, have demonstrable leadership qualities. These women with a desire to prove themselves in the world, find in extremist narratives of religion a two-fold purpose. On one hand, demonstration of religious expertise and public piety becomes a medium for asserting their authority and increasing their prestige within familial and community structures. On the other hand, resort to religion as a medium of mobility also, paradoxically, reinforces gendered roles and causes minimal disturbance in prevailing norms/values of gender hierarchy. As such, the “prestige” and “identity” gained through resort to fundamentalist narratives of religion and public piety/religious expertise works both to debunk and reinforce prevailing social/gendered hierarchies in the same moment.

In the case of women who move from mere propagation of extremism narrative to becoming part of militant organizations, the issues of identity, family, and prestige can be seen with even greater intensity. Thus, for example, an expert who has worked in the Pakistani state’s deradicalization program narrated how actively taking up the extremist cause and/or joining a militant network is often a case of rebellion against family norms.

This can take a number of forms. It can manifest itself as an avenue for proving one’s mettle for leadership and autonomy. Another main avenue is that of freedom of choice, especially with regards to choosing of partners. In this case, the position offered by groups such as ISIS to females is crucial. Female adherents are offered a chance not only at heavenly redemption, but for becoming a very building bloc of a utopia on this earth: the Islamic State. Their status as wives of current fighters and mothers of future “pure” generations of the Islamic state thus offers the promise of a utopic (and

fascistic) sublimation within the larger body politics of the Islamic state. As one respondent aptly summarized when asked about women’s motivations for joining violent conflict: “*girls feel that they are unwanted.*”

Violent organizations and terrorist groups also consciously target the most vulnerable groups in any social structure with the promise of “political emancipation”. This includes women and various lumpen groups in society such as unemployed youth, criminal elements etc. The promise of social prestige and personal – including, sexual – agency is a large part of these organizations’ appeal, and women’s participation in these conflicts.

Often, it is also these parts of society which are not versed in the more traditional lineages of religious/Islamic thought. As several scholars (such as Shahab Ahmed) have pointed out, violent Islamists’ organizations’ modernist interpretations of faith in fact go against the grain of much traditional Islamic thinking about authority, rule, and rebellion. Inter-generational and intra-familial fault-lines find an avenue for expression through regressive and violent interpretations of religion.

Thus, suppression within prevailing familial structures, being misfit in reigning social hierarchies, opportunities for gaining identity and prestige, and a break from more “traditional” and hierarchy-cantered interpretations of religion, opens the avenue towards reactionary and violent assertions of the same. As Olivier Roy points out, this must be understood less of a “Radicalization of Islam” and more as the “Islamisation of Radicalism⁵⁷”.

⁵⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis>

The Role of Madrassas:

In order to better elucidate the linkages between social cohesion and women’s leadership, it is also important to investigate religious educational centres specifically targeting women; most importantly, how women are attracted towards and exposed to religious narratives which can potentially manifest into violent extremism. The number of madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan has had a mushroomed growth since the 1970s, with three million students currently enrolled in around 32,000⁵⁸ madrassas run by boards of different religious sects/orientations. In the last two decades, there has been a concerted effort by the state to register and regularize madrassas, through identifying funding streams, modernizing curricula, and incorporating them into the mainstream/public educational system. Conversely, the number of madrassas for female students has also increased.

According to a study, it is often believed that middle income families choose the education of madrassas, because of poverty or lack of educational opportunities and economic opportunities for girls. However, this explanation is not cogent. Most of the middle-income families choose madrassa education as a complement to – rather than to substitute for – secular education. The aim is often to preserve the customary values through women in the family, through encouraging piety and “family-oriented” values⁵⁹. Moreover, madrassa education for girls also serves to increase their social status through expanding sphere of Islamic knowledge, community contacts, and even possible opportunities for employment. However, the promotion of customary values hinging on patriarchal codes can also hinder

⁵⁸<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/10/682917845/pakistan-wants-to-reform-madrassas-experts-advise-fixing-public-education-first>

⁵⁹ <http://www.iefpedia.com/english/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Masooda-Bano.pdf>

women’s agency, choice, decision making and access to and control over resources. Modernity and globalization have also played a fundamental role in creating an intense sense of consternation within the middle-income families with regards to their customary values and ‘Muslim’ identities. The education of madrassa allows girls to raise their statuses, reproduce their identities within the social patriarchal expectations and gain access to economic opportunities such as performing the role of religious teachers within their communities⁶⁰. The emphasis on young girls being conscripted as religious teachers comfortably maintains patriarchal privilege through private domain, reproducing private roles of low-income and middle-income families as charity workers or teachers⁶¹.

Furthermore, Al-Huda, which is popular amongst urbanized middle- and upper-class women, has utilized the religion-nationalist discourse (above) to create two binary spheres, in which subjects are either submerged within the realm of this discourse or completely outside of it. The processing of ‘otherizing’ those who do not subscribe to the religion-nationalist discourse forms the basis of potential manifestations of violent extremism. The ideology of the institution “Al-Huda” mostly coincides with that of the conventional clerics as they advocate for a patriarchal system by arguing that gender roles are natural. They put forward the idea that it is a favour from God that women have been granted the responsibility of the household

⁶⁰ Kirmani, N. (2011) Interactions between Religion, the State and Civil Society in Pakistan: Some Implications for Development. Working Paper 65. Religions and Development Research Programme. University of Birmingham, Birmingham. UK. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08ae7e5274a31e0000842/working_paper_65.pdf

⁶¹https://read.dukeupress.edu/cssaame/article-abstract/8/1_and_2/54/34190/Women-Religion-and-the-State

as working outside is a strenuous task. Interestingly, the mission statement of Al-Huda reveals the same stating that the Centre seeks to ‘prepare them (women) for their future roles as wives, mothers, sisters and beneficial members of society,’ thereby strengthening patriarchal privilege and restricting women to the private domain.

A prominent scholar Rex Hudson⁶² explained the phenomenon of women radicalization through Erikson’s theory of negative identity which focuses on individuals who are “oppressed” “disappointed” by the failure of their own hopes, dreams and aspirations assume a “negative identity” which is a rejection of any role which they are expected to fulfil by their society, family or community. Terrorists engage in terrorism as a result of feelings of rage and helplessness over the lack of alternatives. Applying this theory to women’s radicalization it explains the Lal Masjid/Jamia Hafsa uprising and the subsequent standoff between the government and Jamia Hafsa in Islamabad in 2007.

The Role of Radical Publications:

In line with latest trends in international Jihadi recruitment TTP released *Sunnat-e-Khaura*, a 45-page, English-language magazine (named after a historical Muslim female fighter). First of its kind this English magazine’s target audience were women. The magazine urged women to wage Jihad and distribute the groups propaganda⁶³.

⁶² Rex Hudson, “The sociology and psychology of terrorism: who becomes a terrorist and why?”, Federal Research Division, Washington 1999, p. 58.

⁶³ Sara Mahmood. “Pakistan’s Women Jihadis: Understanding the nexus between women and terrorism in Pakistan”. The Diplomat. April 06, 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/pakistanswomen-jihadis/>.

The launch of exclusively English “*Sunnat-e-Khaula*⁶⁴”, is in line with TTP’s latest social media strategy which bolsters its presence on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter to effectively disseminate its message and develop an enhanced following. The magazine taps into the “pop culture” and targets educated English speaking urbanized women from the civil society and urging them to adopt a jihadi way of life.

The first issue of the publication opens with an editorial featuring the interview of the unnamed wife of TTP leader Fazlullah, in which she propagates underage marriages as a way to fight the evils of society, and extols the virtues of being married to the militant leader at the age of 14. The magazine also features a story by a female doctor about her journey from “ignorance to guidance” in which she traces her decision to shun her western education, and embrace the Islamic way of life. The magazine urges women to jihad by pen, organize secret religious gatherings at home, and learn to operate weapons and grenades. It also includes an advice column for would-be “*lady jihadists*”.

Conclusion:

The conflict landscape in Pakistan is replete with examples of increasing number of groups that use women as weapons to carry out their nefarious activities. The increasing number of women in combat roles indicates militant organizations see a tactical, strategic and operational advantage in employing women to achieving their targets. This necessitates equivalent counter-terrorism responses and measures from law enforcement agencies

⁶⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1349061/jihadi-glamour-ttp-launches-womens-magazine>

as the tactical level and a strategic shift at the policy level. Prevention responses and interventions from the state need adequate adaptation as well.

These varied examples and responses therefore necessitate a Pakistan-wide approach towards further targeted research on security, social cohesion, violent extremism, and women’s leadership. Such a project can usefully illuminate the effects of conflict especially with regards to women, the opportunities this has presented for the emergence of women’s leadership, and the specific regional, social, and conflict histories which have produced outcomes varied according to class, ethnicity, and region.

The hyper-masculinized vision of counterterrorism in our country is not equipped to respond to the evolving and ever-changing strategies employed by terrorist organizations and will not ensure security to Pakistan’s citizenry. Hard intervention alone against terrorist actors will not lead to a just and violence-free society unless structural inequalities are addressed in parallel.

Identifying a single pathway to women’s radicalization and terrorism is not possible and would be reductive. Each and every case needs to be analysed to develop a holistic framework which takes in account a combination of factors which include indicators like identity, world view, personal ambitions and trajectory, psychology, the wider societal and cultural contexts, and an enabling environment.

- The government of Pakistan should develop and promote a WPS framework, especially resolution 2242 which motivates women to take a leadership role in countering violent extremism.
- For sustainable peace and security, the government of Pakistan should prioritize women’s empowerment centered around Pakistan's

P/CVE initiatives. Moreover, special effort should be made in including women in security-related policy making decision-making as they are underrepresented in national and regional security institutions limiting their input in strategies, approaches and policy.

- The role of women in prevention of radicalization cannot be stressed enough. It is important to understand the multiple ways in which conflict affects women and the resultant variety of roles that they can play in countering or preventing violent extremism, playing a part in or supporting militant outfits and their life altering experiences as victims of terrorism or conflict.
- There is a dire need to look beyond women’s role in conflict in a traditional and narrow focus on their role as “victims” or “peacemakers”, recognizing their agency that they routinely practice reflected in diverse role they play in supporting, mobilizing, and actively participating in violent extremist organizations and conflict.
- Pakistan needs a comprehensive, inclusive, and integrated prevention policy which caters to the changing dynamics of militant landscape in the region which is gender responsive. A well-integrated state level program is the need of the hour which investigates in depth, drivers of female radicalization and creates framework which promotes and encourages participation of women in these programs resulting in effectiveness, sustainability, and protecting/upholding women’s rights.
- Unless the enabling environment which provides a breeding ground for recruitment is not addressed achieving “peace and security” will remain an elusive goal.

Sheharyar Khan is Executive Director National Dialogue Forum, Institute for Progressive Policy Research. he can be contacted at sheharyar.khan@gmail.com.