



WORKING PAPER

Enhancing Women's Roles in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan

Based on Round-Table Meeting Recommendations
July 26, 2019

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INTRODUCTION:

Studies 'show that the best predictor of a nation's peacefulness is not its level of democracy or wealth, but rather the level of physical security enjoyed by its women¹.' The role of women in regards to violent extremism has been limited to that of a passive supporter or a helpless victim. This is purely for a lack of imagination and research as women have always played integral roles in times of conflict. Despite women's social, political and cultural contributions being heavily downplayed, they hold immense power to counter and prevent violent extremism. This non-binding recommendations document focuses on women and gender aspects in countering violent extremism (CVE). It was produced on the basis of a round table meeting held by Media Baithak on 26th July, 2019 in Karachi, Pakistan. (*The list of panelists is attached herewith*)

For the purposes of this paper violent extremism will be defined as any practice that infringes on the human rights of another group purely on the basis of them being part of that group, i.e. believing in a different faith, belonging to a different gender, being of another race for example. Due to a dearth in the literature surrounding the role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism in Pakistan, it is in this regard that their contributions and roles will be explored.

The recommendations presented in this document address: (1) general practices on women and gender in the CVE context; and (2) advancing women roles in CVE. This list of recommendations is not intended to be exhaustive.

KEYWORDS

Counter extremism, women, peace and security, counter radicalization, CVE, non-violent extremism, PVE, disengagement

¹ Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli and Chad Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia Press, 2012)

KEY CONCEPT:

Fundamentalism is the desire for a controlled and uniform identity, as witnessed in all fundamentalist groups and societies. It is the belief that the social/cultural/religious ‘in-group’ one is a part of is superior and that everyone in that group follows a certain set of rules to be worthy of being a part of said group. As an opposing reality, areas of gender equality are indicative of a society that does not suffer from violent extremism. Since women are the first to suffer due to any fundamentalist ideals, this places women as more willing agents of change as compared to men, as it is usually a woman’s autonomy that is the first to be usurped in areas of conflict.

However, it would be misguided to assume that the only role women can play is that of peace-builders or helpless victims. Women can be perpetrators of violence for all the same reasons that men are and this must not be discounted when pursuing the de-radicalization of any community that is experiencing violent extremism. Women are seen as posing less of a security threat and therefore have increased access in sensitive areas, an assumption both human rights organizations and fundamentalist factions take advantage of.² Scholars have pointed ‘out that the increase of female suicide bombers is most pronounced in groups operating in societies that relegate women to a lower social status than that of men. Indeed, their lower status “leads them to being oblivious in the eyes of society, thereby, ruling them out of suspicion” and hence less likely to get caught.’³ Though women may be the first to be able to recognize extremist thoughts and ideologies in members of their family, they cannot be expected to exert the influence that western think tanks assume for them to have. A report stated that in a fundamentalist and male dominated society it is an unrealistic expectation to imagine women as being able to hold sway in preventing violent extremism without gender equality being pursued as a whole.⁴

Before trying to recruit women as ‘agents of change’ their safety must be the primary priority, as ‘terrorist groups are exacting a heavy price from women and girls, from inflicting sexual violence, challenging basic human rights and impeding socioeconomic development by, for example, attacking girls’ schools and educators.’⁵ In many extremist communities the women who spoke about their roles and spheres of influence, lamented that they had little to no control in their proximity and were often hugely disrespected by the men and children in their families, unheard and lacking social capital. In these circumstances, for women, survival is the main focus

² Violent extremism reopens the conversation about women and peace
<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2018/violent-extremism-reopens-the-conversation-about-women-and-peace.html>

³ Raghavan and Balasubramanian, “*Evolving Role of Women*,” 202

⁴ C de J Oudraat, Preventing and countering violent extremism: the role of women and women’s organisation, in NC Fink, S Zeiger and R Bhulai (eds), *A man’s world? Exploring the roles of women in terrorism and violent extremism*, Hedayah and Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016, http://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULL.pdf

⁵ Nicola Jones, Janice Cooper, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and David Walker, “The fallout of rape as a weapon of war,” ODI, June 2014, <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8990.pdf>

for themselves and their children and therefore silence and denial in the face of growing fundamentalism is their only choice.

In light of this the participants of the meeting stressed that women's role to C/PVE cannot be explored without first understanding how their position in society should be solidified so as to make their influence potent within the community. The discussion focused on how to not just empower the women in extremist societies but also how to help both men and women unlearn the rigid gender stereotypes that enable and confine them to participate in violent extremism.

DISCUSSION REFERENCE

In a Pakistani context, enhancing women's role in society so that they can be a legitimate point of defense in the struggle against extremist forces is an uphill battle. Purely because many of the misogynistic and sexist ideologies those extremist factions thrive in are already normalized parts of our accepted culture. Therefore women's' contributions to prevent these elements from flourishing in society must be measured in accordance with their social, cultural and political capacity.

The recruitment of children into extremist sectors of society is also a potent threat to peace in any region and the lack of women's autonomy is one of the reasons this is so easily possible in Pakistan. UN Security Council Resolution calls for equal participation of women in decision-making related to peace processes, protection of women from violence, in particular sexual violence in armed conflict situations, and gender mainstreaming in conflict management and peace building efforts⁶.

STRESS DISUCUSSION

It would be unrealistic to imagine that women in society can be empowered as a whole without there being a significant representation of women from all backgrounds of life in the political, social and cultural spheres and especially in positions of leadership. There are several questions that were posed to social stakeholders in the round-table conference in order to curate the recommendations required for a change in public policy. Some examples of the research questions; how to access the most number of women while ensuring that all demographics of women and non-men are represented? What would empowerment of women look like in the ground realities of Pakistan? How do we facilitate women in their role to counter violent extremism? In what ways can unlearning gender stereotypes help counter violent extremism? How can we more accurately measure women's role in preventing and countering violent extremism?

⁶ Women's human rights and gender-related concerns in situations of conflict and instability
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/PeaceAndSecurity.aspx>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The panelist discussion regarding the influence women can exert in preventing and countering violent extremism had some controversial points of discussion but overall the panel was in agreement regarding the fact that the role women play in a community to protect it from violent extremism is significant.

1. It has been understood from development projects not related to violent extremism, that women reinvest more of their earnings back into the community than men do, through the same logic one can conclude that awareness regarding violent extremism and how to prevent it will also be better distributed if it is brought to women.
2. Linked to the same point is that it is vital in projects pertaining to P/CVE that early warning signs be recognized. If women are made aware of the red flags to look out for in family members that are inclining towards radicalization, they will be in a better position to halt the process or warn the relevant authorities of the same.
3. In terms of a security point of view the state and civil society must encourage more women from joining police and security forces, not only does this empower other women to be a part of a profession previously assumed to be a man's domain but also trains them to deal with the discrimination and sexism that they face on the job and in life.
4. Parents must be made aware of the rights of women and taught how to empower their daughters by giving them decision making powers in the home so they are confident in any environment and not hesitant about reclaiming space professionally, in the public and private spheres. This will challenge outdated gender stereotypes and gender roles which allow the dominance of one gender over another, a form of violent extremism itself.
5. Men must be trained to accept, understand and encourage women to be as much a part of the professional, cultural and familial domains as they are, and with the same level of authority and respect that they are afforded.
6. Violence against women is a form of violent extremism and to think that one is not connected to another is a fallacy. Studies have shown that domestic violence is one of the first signs of violent extremism, however since violence against women is such a readily accepted part of our culture, it is not seen as a red flag. Therefore women and men both must be given the awareness that violence towards any being is not their right or an acceptable cultural norm. When violence against women is understood to be abhorrent in society, so will other violent extremisms.

7. Domestic violence also plays a role in increasing the chances of violent extremism in society as the children who are witness to watching their mothers being physically, psychologically and financially abused will channel that violence somewhere else in society. This is why violence against animals is such a common phenomenon in children in Pakistan as that is one of the ways the child translates the violence they are witness to. There must be public services messages, punishments and a culture of support for the women who endure this in their homes and ways to rehabilitate them, their children and their abusers to become better members of society.
8. The role of a mother has to be elevated in society so that her respect is not simply confined to waxing poetic about their abstract nature. The value of women as mothers must be raised in a capitalistic sense, just as the value of men contributing to society is appreciated. As mothers, women are in charge of the next generation of citizens and if her role must be confined to that within the home, then that role must be given the material and social value that it brings to society as well.
9. Women will be best aware of the ways in which violent extremism affects them; this is why they must be involved in the design and implementation of all CVE projects and especially at the grassroots level.
10. Women must not be discounted from the processes of de-radicalization as it is intellectually dishonest to believe that women are not a part of violent extremism. Many women and girls are recruited into extremist factions as they do not match the security profile of being a threat to peace due to gender stereotypes.
11. Women must be empowered socially and financially so as to garner the independence and authority they need in society to be heard and to exact influence. For this reason CSO's and the state are advised to increase their investment towards setting up small, home-based businesses that encourage financial sovereignty for the women of Pakistan so that they are better able to ensure that extremist elements do not infiltrate their family or communities.
12. Rape is used as a method of control during war and in communities that practice violent extremism. There must be a movement across the world that assures girls and women that they will not be stigmatized or shamed for the trauma that they have endured but instead protected and rehabilitated so that these girls and women are certain that they will be met with security and respect, which will incentivize them to leave these factions should they have a chance to escape them.
13. Recognize that lack of access to education for girls and women, restrictions on mobility, profession, autonomy regarding reproductive health are all forms of violent extremism. Engage community leaders to understand the merits of empowering women in their locality and encourage them to use their privilege and platform to educate others about the rights of girls and women.
14. The media is responsible for feeding into harmful stereotypes regarding gender and due to their not being a demand of seeing empowered, emancipated and independent women

on television, media houses are less inclined to invest in such a depiction. Media houses must use their power to dismantle outdated gender roles and perceptions and instead focus on showing not just women who can stand up to the violence they face at home, but also the violence they face and witness in society. This will encourage a norm in society that not only accepts a woman who can stand up for herself, but also expects her to.

About the Working Paper:

This working paper is based on 10 days of desk-based research and policy recommendation proposed in aforementioned round-table. It was prepared for the GNMI ©. The views and recommendations expressed in this working paper are those of the speakers and experts of the round-table, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of GNMI, its partner agencies or the federal or provincial governments of Pakistan. The GNMI Research desk provides rapid syntheses of key discussion and of expert recommendations in response to specific topic of discussion on governance, social development, humanitarian and conflict issues. Its concise working papers draw on a selection of the best recent literature available and on input from national experts. Each GNMI Research desk working paper is peer-reviewed by a member of the GNMI team.

About the Global Neighborhood for Media Innovation:

GNMI- Global Neighborhood for Media Innovation, a non-profit organization, registered under society act of 1860, bridges the gap between media and society. It promotes the nationwide access to media advocacy, learning and literacy in the spectrum of news, entertainment and infotainment, through intellectual and cultural engagement. It is committed to become the center of developing media and civil society. GNMI works under the areas of media awareness, cultural development, providing learning resources, advocacy and social justice.

List of panelists

1. Mr. Iftikhar Shalwani
Commissioner Karachi
2. Mr. Farooq Sattar
Politician
3. Ms. Aliya Sarim
Social Activist
4. Syed Shahryar Asim
Program Host - AAJ TV
5. Ms. Zofeen T. Ebrahim
Investigative Journalist
6. Ms. Zakeya Malik
DSP Traffic
7. Mr. Abu Rashid
Drama Writer
8. Ms. Amna Dawood
Lawyer
9. Ms. Urooj Ahmed
Social Activist
10. Ms. Rutaba Khan
Clinical Psychologist at CPLC-CRC
11. Mrs. Rafia Dawood
Social Activist
12. Ms. Adilah Khan
Journalist – SAMMA TV
13. Ms. Sadia Asim
Director Program – Hum TV