

ENGENDERING EXTREMISM: WOMEN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN PAKISTAN

Mossarat Qadeem

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This paper illuminates the role of two types of women in the same conservative society: women who support and propagate extremism; and the women working to prevent it. It contests the gender stereotype of women as natural peacemakers and also highlights the political agency of women as change makers leading the process of preventing violent extremism (PVE) at different levels within Pakistan as teachers, media representatives, community leaders, political and religious leaders, and civil society activists. It argues that, in the absence of a National Action Plan (NAP) on 1325, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is nevertheless being implemented by some NGOs in Pakistan in three ways: through empowering women economically; by transforming social attitudes and the behaviour of individuals and communities away from extremism towards tolerance; and by ensuring that sustainable and lasting security is achieved through peaceful means. There is currently no conceptualisation of the role of women in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts by the government of Pakistan, which similarly neglects the role of civil society. This is mainly because P/CVE is considered the domain of the military, which uses force to curb violent extremism. The decline in acts of terrorism¹ was unimaginable without the use of military force but an inclusive and consistent approach is required for preventing and countering violent extremism effectively.²

Drawing on work with PAIMAN in Pakistan, this paper shows how women at various levels of Pakistani society can advance the cause for a more robust strategy on P/CVE.³ My argument is that when a woman's status in a patriarchal, conservative society changes from one of passivity to an active agent, social change occurs. This paper elaborates PAIMAN's women peace and security framework, which is designed and implemented within the local context,

keeping in view the sensitivity of the issue of violent extremism and the capacity and expectations of the communities. I adopt a gender perspective to illuminate the role of women in propagating and preventing violent extremism within the traditional and conservative society of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This paper argues that, in spite of prevalent gender inequality in Pakistan and in the

absence of a NAP, some NGOs using the broad framework of "women, peace and security" have empowered women to use their powers of persuasion and knowledge, and their varied relationships, to spearhead a campaign to prevent youth from becoming extremists, and to lead a non-violent movement against violent extremism at home, in educational institutions, work places, the media and their communities. Through the case

study of PAIMAN's work, the paper highlights women's roles – as policy shapers, educators, religious political leaders, community members and activists – in countering and preventing violent extremism.

THE WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA IN PAKISTAN

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242, adopted in October 2015, specifically recognises the need to engage with women on P/CVE, and urges Member States and the UN, “to ensure the participation and leadership of women and women's organisations 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”.⁴ Yet in security-related policy debates and discourse in Pakistan, women are not considered as rights-holders and activists with complex identities who are operating in difficult security situations as well as in different public and private spheres. The focus is still on women in their role as mothers and wives in the home, mere subjects and the “vehicles” for any initiatives in this context. Women are not seen in leadership roles, nor granted the opportunity to participate in the design and implementation of security related or P/CVE programs and policies. Women do have a voice in health, education and other developmental issues, but there is a deafening and forced silence when it comes to their perspective on peacebuilding and conflict resolution strategies at all tiers, whether in the *aman jirgas* (peace committees),⁵ the 2014 National Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism (not to be confused with a National Action Plan on WPS), or regarding the development of a P/CVE strategy currently.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the founding document of the WPS agenda, is a sensitive issue in Pakistan, because the state believes that referring to 1325 in any activity, or developing a NAP on WPS, is tantamount to accepting that Pakistan is at war and may provide ground for foreign troops to intervene in Pakistan.⁶ In different moots at Islamabad, the officials covertly and overtly maintained that only paragraph six of 1325, which seeks the sensitisation of peacekeeping forces on gender-related issues, is relevant to Pakistan. Although Pakistan has not yet developed a National Action Plan on WPS, when it comes to the Relief and Recovery aspect of 1325, both the Provincial Disaster Management (PDMA) Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA Disaster Management Authority (FDMA) have been applying a gender lens to response planning and implementation in the aftermath of crisis. An example is the gender-sensitive treatment of the displacement of people from Swat and Waziristan due to violent extremist groups or military operations against these militant groups. They have developed standard operating procedures to ensure women and girls' access to relief items and have addressed specific issues related to more vulnerable segments of displaced populations.⁷ However, in so believing, the state is denying women's inherent right to participate even in those processes of decision-making that relate to their own safety, security and wellbeing.⁸

The limits to the WPS framework lie in the overall struggle for gender equality in Pakistan, because women's participation in security related matters and peacebuilding is linked to women's social, economic, and political participation. Implementing WPS concerns will require serious commitment from policymakers and civil society representatives to address the larger issue of gender inequality in the country. Recognising women's agency in peacebuilding, strengthening their voice in peace and security matters, building their

- 1 According to the Economic Survey of Pakistan 2014 the losses caused by terrorism during the first nine months amounted to Rs457.93 billion (\$4.53 billion), 31.7 per cent less than the Rs681.68 billion (\$6.63 billion) lost in 2013-14. The financial losses have been calculated on the basis of loss of exports, physical infrastructure, foreign investment, industrial output and tax collection and the amount paid in compensation to victims of terrorism. The cost also includes the amount spent on security arrangements.
- 2 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.
- 3 PAIMAN Trust is Pakistan-based not-for-profit organisation, co-founded by the author, who is its current executive director. It is a pioneer in preventing violent extremism, de-radicalisation and women, peace and security. It is internationally recognised and applauded for its innovative internal community mechanism for preventing violent extremism engaging, empowering and sensitising women, youth and communities. Through its Mothers and Youth Peace groups (Tolanas) it has positively transformed thousands of youth and has prevented them from becoming extremists. The organisation has sensitised 95,000 community members regarding the impact of extremism and ways of addressing it. Its inclusive peace curriculum for preventing violent extremism through classroom practice is unique, and is currently being taught in 10 private schools and six madrasa in Peshawar, Pakistan. PAIMAN conducts research and advocacy in the realm of P/CVE both nationally and internationally. PAIMAN's “mothers for change” program is a flagship initiative in empowering women and mothers economically and socially to become of active members of community with positive thinking. See www.paimantrust.org
- 4 UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015), S/RES/2242.
- 5 Farahnaz Zahidi, “Women and the Peace Process”, *The Daily News*, 7 March 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/849022/women-and-the-peace-process/>
- 6 The government official briefed a delegation of women civil society leaders in September 2010 on Pakistan's official position regarding UNSCR 1325 before their departure for NY to attend the event of the 10th anniversary of the resolution.
- 7 The PDMA and FDMA took extra measures to provide health services, psychosocial support services, food and non-food items to women and girls in the IDP camps in the aftermath of military operations in Waziristan in particular as witnessed by PAIMAN while providing services in IDPs camps.
- 8 Asma Shakir Khawaja, “Women in Security Policy-making: A Case Study of Pakistan”, *Strategic Studies* 37(1) (2017): 90-107.

resilience, and reducing their vulnerability are all imperative.⁹ In Pakistan, the invisibility of women – as victims, survivors, leaders and peace-makers – is the fundamental obstacle to ameliorating the predicament of women affected by violent extremism.¹⁰ In the absence of CVE policy frameworks in Pakistan, civil society especially faces a myriad of obstacles in coming up with interventions acceptable to the government. It also creates a gap between the government and civil society groups in efforts to establish engagement and dialogue to meaningfully address violent extremism. As Youssef Mahmoud has noted, “there is a greater militarisation of public security and diminished equality before the law” although security and human rights should work hand-in-hand for P/CVE, because otherwise there are gaps for extremists to exploit.¹¹ For instance, there is only one female member of the Steering Committee on National Counter Extremism Policy, and no women from civil society with hands-on experience on P/CVE are included in this committee. This means that a full and accurate picture of women’s role in combating violent extremism and preventing radicalisation cannot be realised. It also means that the committee may discount three inter-related phenomena: gender dynamics in violent extremism; women’s roles in P/CVE initiatives; and how both violent extremism and P/CVE differently affect women and girls versus men and boys.

Despite the absence of a NAP, some women-led organisations and researchers can be seen to have carried out the WPS agenda in Pakistan through activities like research, awareness raising, mobilisation of communities, capacity building of various stakeholders including female Parliamentarians, the production of documentaries on issues related to women peace and security as well as networking with women from Afghanistan for building bridges of understanding.¹² Similarly, local



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networks of women such as PAIMAN Mothers/Women *Tolana* (“tolana” is a Pashto word meaning “together”), and *Takra Qabili Khwanday* (Tribal Women Committee) advocate for peace and the inclusion of women in decision making process and planning. Some women-led organisations and PAIMAN in particular have been working around the concept of women’s role in P/CVE since 2008. Civil society organisations did not need a formal action plan to implement this agenda, and we have been raising our voices at relevant forums and working with women at different levels to empower them to help build social cohesion in their communities. PAIMAN’s Mothers/Women and Youth *Tolanas* have been working in the den of extremists, facing dangerous situations and receiving threats from them.¹³ Unfortunately, the government, instead of recognising their struggle and efforts in preventing violent extremism, has instead created more problems for these women and youth *Tolanas* as space for civil society groups has shrunk in the name of security and counter terrorism.

THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND

For decades, acts of violent extremism have taken a toll of human lives and affected communities socially, economically and psychologically in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in particular, and in the rest of Pakistan in general. As Meher Bano, a mother from Khyber Agency, one of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, says, “I haven’t witnessed a single day of peace in 10 years

- 9 Zeenia Faraz, *Women, Peace, and Security in Pakistan*, Peace Brief, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 16 February 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/02/women-peace-and-security-pakistan>
- 10 Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts’ Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women’s Role in Peace-building*, UNIFEM 2002, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/3F71081FF391653DC1256C69003170E9-unicef-WomenWarPeace.pdf>
- 11 Youssef Mahmoud, “In the fight against violent extremism, why is prevention elusive?”, IPI Global Observatory, 11 January 2016, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2016/01/countering-violent-extremism-isis-libya-sahel/>
- 12 PAIMAN formed AMN-O-Nisa a coalition of women for countering/preventing violent extremism in Pakistan. In 2012 it was expanded to Afghanistan to initiate dialogue on a regular basis, to broaden the concept of security and to address the issues and relationship between the two countries from women’s perspective.
- 13 PAIMAN used the word *tolana* and not “peace group” as to use the latter would have put the whole group in danger because the extremists targeted the members of Local Peace committees in many parts of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA.

and I hope that my 18 years old son who grew up witnessing violence and death, trauma and bloodshed, fear and horror will have a positive attitude and be more tolerant".¹⁴ The wave of violent extremism has spread like a contagion into rural and urban areas of Pakistan; so far, the violence has cost the country over 80,000 human lives, caused economic losses of around US\$ 102.5 billion, forced the internal migration of millions of people from FATA and the Swat Valley, destroyed infrastructure, damaged the investment climate, and reduced production and increased unemployment, bringing economic activity to a virtual standstill in many parts of the country.¹⁵

Violent extremism has sapped social cohesion: the trust among communities, the brotherhood and tolerance that were much valued have disappeared from some areas of Pakistan where most are afraid to raise their voices against those who have unleashed so much misery and destruction. However, the majority of citizens are tolerant, loving and resilient people, as shown by a recent World Values Survey that ranked Pakistanis among the most racially tolerant people in the world.¹⁶ People can, however, act as enablers by tolerating or accepting extremism, and some groups may support increasingly radical ideologies. Preventing and countering violent extremism at various levels in Pakistan was and still is considered the state's responsibility, to be tackled through the use of kinetic force.¹⁷ The traditional tools of use of intelligence by security agencies and law enforcement to prevent or disrupt acts of terrorism are now being complemented by a "soft power" approach as early prevention policies under the banner of "Countering Violent Extremism", a broad-brush approach that encapsulates a range of non-coercive tools and programs developed by community organisations and government partners in some cases to counter violent extremism. Only recently has the state begun to take serious, concrete steps toward developing soft

power strategies that could address the multiple dimensions of extremism in the country. Both the National Security policy (NISP)¹⁸ and the Pakistan National Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism are silent on the role of civil society in P/CVE.¹⁹

Women bear the burden of violent extremism

The Pakistan of today is a far cry from what it was 15 years ago. Pakistani women confronted and overcame four important challenges in the early 1990s: increasing practical literacy; gaining access to employment opportunities at all levels in the economy; promoting change in the perception of women's roles and status; and gaining a public voice both within and outside of the political process.²⁰ Many women-friendly laws and ordinances were passed to pave the way for the emancipation of women in the socio-political and economic realms. However, the prevalence of violent extremism has affected the whole process and diminished progress that was achieved after prolonged struggle by, and efforts of, the women of Pakistan.

The rise of extremism made the lives of women in Pakistan in general, and in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA in particular, more miserable and oppressed. The extremists closed 400 private girls schools, burned and destroyed more than 179 girls' schools in Swat in 2009,²¹ 317 boys' and 141 girls' schools in FATA in 2015,²² and closed some 900 schools in all these conflict-ridden areas. In Swat, where co-education was common 60 years ago, intimidation has led many parents to withdraw their girls from even single-sex schools for fear of attack. Incidents where girls and women are subjected to harsh punitive measures for defying the social practices espoused by extremists are not isolated episodes. When extremist groups were active in Swat, women's mobility became highly restricted and they were threatened with grave consequences if they were seen without a male escort in

14 Interview with the author in September 2013.

15 Among the dead are 48,504 civilians, 45 journalists, 5,498 security personnel and 26, 862 militants. See "80,000 Pakistanis Killed in US War on Terror: report", *Express Tribune*, 29 March 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/860790/80000-pakistanis-killed-in-us-war-on-terror-report/>

16 World Values Survey (WVS), Wave 6 (2010-2014). See also Bina Shah, "Religious extremists will never succeed in taking over Pakistan", *The Guardian*, 28 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/28/religious-extremists-will-never-succeed-in-taking-over-pakistan>

17 Since 2001, the Pakistani Army has conducted at least seven major military operations targeted at anti-state extremists, including the TTP and Tehrik Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM). These include: Enduring Freedom (2001-2002); Al Mizan (2002-2006); Zalzal (2008); Sher Dil, Rah-e-Haq, Rah-e-Rast (2007-2009); Rah-e-Nijat (2009-2010); Rah-e-Shahadat (2013); and Zarb-e-Azb (2014-Present). These operations have all focused on challenging militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), with varying degrees of success. The most recent operation, Zarb-e-Azb, for example, achieved tangible victories.

18 Ministry of Interior, *National Internal Security Policy 2014-2018* (2014), <https://nation.com.pk/27-Feb-2014/text-of-national-security-policy-2014-18>

19 The twenty point Pakistan National Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism 2014 was created on December 25, 2014, in reaction to 133 children being murdered by the Taliban in Army Public School Peshawar. It was designed with the consent of all political parties, and the blessing of both civil and military leadership, as a comprehensive document detailing ideal steps to rid Pakistan of the menace of terrorism and militancy.

20 National and Provincial Commissions on the Status of Women and Human Rights are in place. Institutional measures have been taken for the inclusion of women with disabilities and transgender people in the policy framework.

21 Figures of the Executive District Officer, Elementary and Secondary Education, Swat. See also Brendan O'Malley, "The threat of political and military attacks on schools, students and education staff", UNESCO, 2009, 2010/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/30.

22 Ahmad Ali Naqvi, Shah Zaman Khan, Zainab Ahmad, "The Impact of Militancy on Education in FATA," *Tigah: A Journal of Peace and Development*, Volume: II, December 2012, FATA Research Centre, Islamabad. Also see: Report of the Ministry for States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON), December 2015.

public places. Most of the female health workers and doctors stayed at home due to fear of extremists and women in need of medical treatment had to travel long distances. Alternatively, they would not travel, so many had no access to basic health care due to the closure of Basic Health Units. Restrictions on women's mobility affected not only their own health but also that of their children. They were not allowed to take part in political activities and were barred from voting in elections in many places. Women became an invisible community in the areas controlled by extremist groups and were stopped from working in public and private sectors. Extremists were engaged in a form of gender apartheid, but few dared to raise their voices against the extremists. Extremism created a deeply hostile environment for women, in which anybody who talked about women's rights was branded as anti-Islamic and pro-western.

Incidents of violent extremism, conflict, and radicalisation of some communities have led to the widespread conscription, detention, disappearance or assassination of men by various Taliban groups, in turn creating a large number of female-headed households.²³ PAIMAN Trust established a camp for internally-displaced persons (IDPs) in Mardan city for 1,700 men, women and children in the wake of military operation in Swat in April 2009.²⁴ Surveys indicate that out of 523 female IDPs 45 were widows, 39 had husbands or sons who had joined Taliban groups, 12 had sons kidnapped by the Taliban and 7 reported their husbands as missing. Women invariably have to bear greater responsibility for their children and their elderly relatives. The very fact that many of the men-folk in this area are absent heightens the insecurity and danger for the women and children left behind, and accelerates the breakdown of the traditional protection and support mechanisms upon which the communities – especially women – have previously relied in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA.

The breakdown or disintegration of family and community networks has forced these women to assume new roles. Women who have never been out of their houses were now forced to stand in queues to get rations for their families or find some jobs to earn livelihood. In the wake of military operation and Taliban's control in Swat there were over 31,740 women-headed households, which needed both economic and psychological support from the government and civil society.²⁵

In nearly all areas hit hard by violent extremism, women are being traumatised mentally and psychologically as a result of different forms of violence. The beating, threatening, and in some cases killing of women by extremists have had a long-lasting impact on women's physiological, psychological, and social well-being. The feeling of insecurity and uncertainty is another mental torture. "When my sons and husband would go out for prayers I would just wait in the door till they returned as my next-door neighbor was killed by Taliban while praying on the claim that he spoke against one of their commanders. You never know when they would decide to kill anyone and why. We were living in a constant agony and it has made me mentally sick. Now I forget things and my memory has become very short", said Shazia,²⁶ a school teacher in Charsadda.²⁷ The extremists' acts of violence can be both direct and indirect. In many places Taliban/extremists took away many young boys by force, leaving the mothers to wait for their return even to this day. For those whose sons were among the Taliban, the suffering was also profound. They worried for their children's lives and suffered, yet lived in communities that shunned and isolated them and, in some cases, even attacked them for their familial associations. They have little or no recourse to, or protection from, any authority.

23 PAIMAN Trust established an IDP camp in Mardan city for 1,700 men, women and children in the wake of military operations in Swat in April 2009.

24 Out of the over 1,700 IDPs, 349 were men, 523 were women and 830 were children.

25 Farhan Sami Khan, "Rapid Assessment Report of Swat District, NWFP, Pakistan", Save The Children, August 2009, http://www.academia.edu/9231924/Rapid_Assessment_Report_of_Swat_District_NWFP_Pakistan. See also Tehmina Rashid, "Women at Risk, Militancy in Pakistan", in Ravi Kalia, ed., *Pakistan's Political Labyrinth: Militancy, Society, Terror* (London: Routledge, 2016): 157-169.

26 Names used in this paper are not the real names of those interviewed.

27 Interview with the author in April 2002.

“I am the army of Allah”

In Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA, women also took active roles in facilitating extremist groups' activities, acting as informers, fundraisers and supporters. They facilitated the recruitment process of young boys by convincing mothers to send their sons for jihad. In March 2008, one Friday afternoon in Qambar village of Swat, Beguma's husband turned on the radio and they all heard a man speaking in strong forceful voice, directly addressing the people of Swat on the importance of jihad, as the sixth fundamental of Islam.²⁸ He quoted from the Quran and narrated incidents from the Holy Prophet's Life. "It was like a prophet or saint directly talking to us" said Beguma. "He was imploring both men and women to come forth and participate in jihad especially against the American and all the infidels because Islam was in danger. Listening to him made my blood boil. I wanted to fight for Islam. But being a woman, it was not possible for me to fight jihad alongside men. No one would allow it. What could I do to help out this man of God, the supporters of Islam, I asked myself? Yes, he had said, they needed money to further the cause of every Muslim. But I did not have any extra money. I was ready to do anything for them. I decided to give them my jewellery. I made a bundle of whatever I had and handed over to the leader of Taliban myself." It did not end here. She convinced her sister-in-law and even her neighbours to help the Taliban in their cause as they would be laying down their lives for Islam. She collected all the jewellery (mostly rings) from the women and donated them to the Taliban in charity. She said if somebody else had heard Fazlullah they would have done the same thing as he was so convincing and appealing.²⁹

In another case, Nazneena, a sister of a police officer, volunteered to be an informer for the extremist groups. She would spy on her brother and share information with the local Taliban.

This led to a fierce attack of Taliban on one of the police stations headed by Nazneen's brother in which he survived but the station was destroyed; some thirty paramilitary soldiers and policemen were captured, then released on the promise that they would quit their jobs.³⁰ Similarly women volunteered to stitch jackets that would later be filled with explosives by extremists such as the Taliban.

Why did women act so radically, and what compelled them to support the extremists? These are the questions that we asked to the so-called extremists and radicalised women. Their answers were both simple and complicated. Some of the common push factors reported included dissatisfaction with the existing justice system, the death, detention or abuse of family members at the hands of the security forces, drone attacks, and a lack of understanding of Quranic text, religious traditions and the Sunnah. The pull factors 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. The extremist groups appealed to the mothers, school and madrasa teachers, local activists and other women in the community by using the text of the Quran without contextualising it, manipulating male relatives, and capitalised on gender-specific push and pull factors with targeted messaging through FM radio and propaganda material.³¹ It was not only illiterate poor women who were influenced by sermons and speeches of extremist leaders but also educated women also felt that they have to contribute to jihad. One astonishing revelation was that usually women follow the instructions and advice of their male kin; their role in society is linked to a wider context of gender roles. One of the women, Gul Sanaga, confided in me that in the context of supporting extremist groups, some women in Swat in particular took decisions on their own without even

28 The five fundamentals or pillars of Islam are: 1) The Profession of Faith – The *Shahada*; 2) Daily Prayers – *Salat*; 3) Alms-Giving – *Zakat*; 4) Fasting during Ramadan – *Saum*; and 5) Pilgrimage to Mecca – *Haji*. The rest of the teachings fall into the category of detailed explanations of and elaborations upon the five basic principles. However, in most cases Jihad is being taken as a sixth pillar and extremist groups in Pakistan appealed in its name to attract people. Jihad in Arabic means "exerted effort". The spiritual struggle within oneself against sin is best form of Jihad. Religiously, jihad is the expending of utmost effort in upholding and defending justice, killing of innocent people who have not harmed anyone is not Jihad at all. The condition for Jihad is that the call for jihad has to come from the state. It means the state has to declare war against the enemy. God has not given permission to fight non-believers or those who rejected the faith – only those who transgressed against them. The Quran says, "God does not forbid you, regarding those (non-Muslims) who did not fight you because of your religion, and who did not drive you out of your land, that you be good to them and treat them justly. Allah only forbids you regarding those who fought you because of your religion and drove you out of your homes, and came to the help of those who drove you out, that you should befriend them. Any of you who befriend them (and be their allies) are transgressors" [60:8-9].

29 Mossarat Qadeem, "Impact of Conflict on Women in Swat", PAIMAN Publication, 2010. (source available from author on request)

30 Ayesha Nasir, "In Pakistan, Swat Valley police give up in face of Taliban attacks", *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 February 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2009/0205/p07s02-wosc.html>. Also see PAIMAN's publication, "Impact of violent extremism on women in Swat" January 2009.

31 Arabic is not our language and the majority of women in Swat have read the Quran without translation and without understanding the Arabic text. The Taliban know this, and appeal to the religious sentiments and fervour of these illiterate, semi-literate, and even educated women using the Quranic verses.

telling their male relatives. This shows how women were following the instructions of the extremist leader in their area to the extent that they broke the centuries' old tradition of taking permission from their male relatives regarding their mobility outside the home.

ENGAGING WOMEN TO COUNTER AND PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In 2008 when PAIMAN started its work of engaging and empowering women and youth to become active community leaders so as to help address the issues of violent extremism, neither the concept of "countering" nor "preventing" violent extremism were yet coined. Similarly, the role of women in addressing the issues of violent extremism had not found its way into the discourses and debates of the international arena. The WPS agenda was developed long before the P/CVE agenda and only recently have the Security Council, the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and the Committee's Executive Directorate (CTED), recognised and paid attention to significant role played by women in countering and assisting in terrorism and violent extremism.³² PAIMAN labels its activities in terms of prevention, participation, protection (3Ps) and relief and recovery (2Rs) program due to the sensitivity around Resolution 1325 in Pakistan.

PAIMAN developed an integrated approach to empower women socially, economically and psychologically to work for preventing and countering violent extremism at multiple levels: a) by building their capacity in critical thinking, dialogue, community peacebuilding, early signs of extremism and also making them aware of their potential in influencing and guiding their children's lives, and in preventing them from engaging in extremist activities; b) by providing them with livelihood skills, thereby raising their status and voice in their families and communities and reducing their vulnerability to violent extremism; and c) by building the capacity



There can be no effective prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation without the involvement of women as educators, influencers and positive agents of change in their families, communities and broader society.

of school and Madrassa teachers, police women, women activists, political leaders of all faiths and women Parliamentarians to actively participate in the P/CVE, peace and security agendas of the country at multiple levels.

PAIMAN developed a series of training manuals using Resolution 1325 as a framework for its women peace and security initiatives for P/CVE in the context of Pakistan and used it for its trainings of women political leaders, women community leaders, activists, media representative, youth, civil society groups and government officials. In the training we do refer to 1325 but explain Pakistan's position on it. PAIMAN also advocated with Provincial Disaster Management Authorities and local administration for the inclusion of women in planning, implementation and decision making in post disaster and conflict situations as well in the local Peace Committees and with Home Department to include and train women police as first respondents in Police laying the foundation of WPS in the realm of P/CVE.

32 In its resolution 2242 (2015), "the Council urges Member States and the United Nations, including CTED, in collaboration with UN Women, to conduct gender-sensitive research and collect data on the drivers of radicalization for women and the impacts of counter-terrorism strategies on women's human rights and women's organizations in order to develop targeted and evidence-based policy and programming responses". See UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, "Role of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism", United Nations, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/womens-role/>

Mothers leading the movement for change

Analysing the on-the-ground realities in the areas hardest hit by violent extremism further strengthened PAIMAN's belief that there can be no effective prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation without the involvement of women as educators, influencers and positive agents of change in their families, communities and broader society. In a traditional and conservative Pukhtun (Pashto) society, it was a huge challenge to bring women out from their homes. For this, we had to build trust with community elders, influential and male relatives of women to pave the way for them to come out of their houses. PAIMAN started its journey by focusing on self-confidence, competence, and the empowerment of women/mothers. After learning marketable livelihood skills, women would start contributing to their family's income within a short time. This infused a new confidence in these mothers, and we found that a child respects the mother more when the mother's position is not challenged by her husband or friends or society as a whole.

During the process of livelihood training, we used the Quranic verses in its context to help transform the mindset of these mothers. The basis of our transformative methodology is Quran and Sunnah, as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) insists that mother's role is vital in the upbringing of their children in accordance with the values of true Islamic teaching that does not preach hatred or violence. After receiving PAIMAN's training these mothers became members of PAIMAN's Mothers Peace Groups and started reaching out to other women. The decision to engage primarily with mothers was based on PAIMAN's prior research. We found the mother to be the last person to know that her son has joined an extremist group because she had no clue of his changing behaviour and attitude.³³ Quite a significant literature is available

stating that within families, mothers are often able to recognise early signs of radicalisation including anger, anxiety, withdrawal and socialising with a new group of friends.³⁴ But we realised that she can only do so if she is given orientation on the sign of behavioural and attitudinal changes as well the skill of dialogue. In FATA and Swat, mothers have been living with radical sons and didn't realise it. While working with mothers in Swat, I met Zeenat, a mother who claimed that her 17 years old son Wazir was innocent, hiding somewhere because of the fear of agencies who are chasing her and him for no reason. I learnt from one of the officials in the area that Wazir was wanted because he was suspected of detonating a remote control device from his roof top killing seven military personnel.

Women were easily influenced by the jihadi sermons of extremist leaders whose notion of jihad transcended gender, and who used a convergence of propaganda, media attention and intellectual and theological ignorance to construct a hybrid role for women in their idea of an Islamic society. To counter this extremist strategy, it was crucial to educate women on 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 and encouraging resilient communities. We also knew that women-led community activities would fly "under the radar", of extremist groups and PAIMAN can carry out its women- and mother- led C/PVE work silently without any threats and obstacles.

Their newly-gained knowledge and economic empowerment gave the mothers the confidence to communicate openly with their sons and help foster deeper mother-son relationships. Representatives from PAIMAN approach the sons of these transformed women, and the sons are then convinced to join PAIMAN's positive

33 117 of 345 mothers that I interviewed said their sons were innocent but I found out from military officials, local community members, and friends that they all were part of extremist groups but the mother didn't know about it.

34 Alethea Osborne, "The mother's role in preventing violent extremism", *TRTWorld*, 26 February 2018, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/the-mother-s-role-in-preventing-violent-extremism-15180>

transformation program.³⁵ Bringing about metamorphosis in mothers, transforming them from celebrants of their sons' martyrdom in suicidal attacks to agents of positive change in the community, was a tedious and uphill process. For mothers, it was extremely difficult in a patriarchal and conservative society to convince other women and men around the negative impact of violent extremism or the exploitation by certain groups in the name of religion, but they continued their effort. Today, the Mothers *Tolanas* hold community sessions with other mothers in their respective communities and teach and preach non-violent ways of addressing the menace of extremism. These groups are instrumental in identifying vulnerable and extremist youth for PAIMAN's positive youth engagement and transformation program. They are actively involved in the challenging task of reintegrating extremist youth transformed by PAIMAN. Applying their knowledge of early signs of extremism in individual and community, these women 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 not to give call for jihad, 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.

It was through the active participation of these empowered mothers and women at the community level that PAIMAN has been able to transform the lives of, and re-integrate, 1450 extremist and vulnerable youth. The transformation of these youths is a phased process that includes psycho-social counselling, self-reformation, building critical thinking, explaining the impact of violent extremism and role of youth in preventing violent extremism, offering a counter-narrative in the



PAIMAN has reached 23,198 women in different parts of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA, building their capacity and sensitising them to the importance of their role as women preventing violent extremism in their home and community.

context of religion and culture, promoting active citizenship and providing livelihood skills training as per the choice of individual participants. Our findings have been that the training increased trainees' self-esteem, agency, and empathy, and that participants were less likely to support violent ideologies and exhibit personal violent intentions. The majority of them admitted to a total transformation of their hearts and minds. Many shared that in the form of *Tolana* they have found a cause to live for and work for. As Ahmad Hassan from Swat said: "I had tunnel vision regarding Islam before undergoing PAIMAN's training but today I feel more enlightened and empowered because now I can really talk to people what peace and jihad in Islam really mean".³⁶

Through the 23 Mothers *Tolana* (with a total of 1,500 members), PAIMAN has reached out to 23,198 women in different parts of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and FATA, building their capacity and sensitising them to the importance of their role as women preventing violent extremism in their home and community. Ms Gul Fahmida member of PAIMAN's Mother *Tolana* from Charsadda says: "I had always thought that a simple woman like me cannot do anything to address issue of violent extremism in my community because this is the job of the government. I never thought that as an ordinary woman, anyone would take me seriously. But thanks to PAIMAN for giving me the knowledge and the skill that now I have used to prevent my son from becoming radicalised. I shared this experience with my other sisters in the community and now I can proudly say that I have done and am doing something for my community".³⁷

35 PAIMAN works with girls in the communities and female students of selected madrassas and schools using its inclusive peace curriculum. It also holds orientation sessions with local imams, male and female elected representatives, members of civil society including NGOs, media personnel and government officials regarding aspects of violent extremism.

36 A participant's perception after undergoing PAIMAN's Vulnerable Youth Training (12-18 April 2015)

37 Spoken in a press conference held at Charsadda in January 2016.



Once women have the confidence, knowledge and skills they can play a significant role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism at various levels.

P/CVE through interfaith harmony and education

In Pakistan, the leadership of mosques, churches, temples, and other religions, all of which play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviours, is dominated by men. In the same context, female madrassa teachers, politico-religious female leaders and non-Muslim activists have a large constituency of women and female youth. Building on the ability of women to reach across the lines of difference in tense environments, they have worked to encourage nonviolent protests, and mobilise communities to join their campaign for inter and intra-faith harmony. Their engagement with the theological aspects of gender roles in peace holds the promise to change discourse and preconceptions about how women of faith can be involved in building social cohesion across religious divides.

PAIMAN has helped build the capacity of madrassa teachers, female activists of other faiths, and female leaders of religious political parties and formed a coalition called *Women of faith building social cohesion in Pakistan*. Through this coalition, women belonging to different faiths overcame the three major obstacles to their participation in interfaith dialogue: the lack of access to religious education in other non-Islamic faiths; the lack of representation in interfaith dialogues and forums; and lack of capacity and resources to communicate and engage with other women. The training gave them the confidence and knowledge to carry out their work of building social cohesion collectively through dialogue, community

inclusion of women in decision making at all levels. Through sharing experiences and knowledge and holding discussions, they discover similarities and differences in their respective positions as women and as believers. The members of the coalition are working today to promote inclusion, equality and interfaith dialogue in their communities, providing a platform for all voices to be heard, regardless of personal religious belief. They celebrate each other's religious festivals and support each other in case of any incident of violence against one or the other community.

For example, Zareen, a member of PAIMAN Interfaith group whose son Adil was involved in extremist acts against the *Ahle Tashee* (a Shia sect) procession during the month of Muharram in Peshawar, decided to help her son understand the negative impact of his actions. Zareen, together with other members of the group, decided to guard a procession of *Ahle Tashee* in order to avert the attack planned by her son and his friends. After seeing their mothers, they left the place without harming anyone. Afterwards, the mothers carried out dialogues with their sons and helped them in overcoming their prejudices against the Shia communities. Today, Adil is one of the most active members of Youth *Tolana* and leads the campaign of interfaith/inter-sectarian harmony, tolerance and social cohesion in Peshawar.

PAIMAN regularly trains female teachers from elite school and religious schools in an inclusive peace curriculum that PAIMAN developed. Using experiential learning methods, theatre, sports, creative writing and art the teachers hold classes with students of the two distinct and different streams of education to provide them with opportunity to learn and act together and help them overcome their biases towards, and misunderstandings regarding, each other. These teachers are instilling the values of pluralism, harmony and love in the students who see violence as a normal way of life around them. The

235 teachers trained so far has reached out to more than 6,400 students in these selected schools and madrassas have not only helped to prevent the youth from adopting extremist ways but also provided them with confidence, knowledge and understanding, so that tomorrow they don't become "identity seekers, protection seekers, and rebels" with the vigor to cast their views on wider society.³⁸

CONCLUSIONS

The decades-long struggle of PAIMAN Trust and other women-led organisations to counter and prevent violent extremism in some of the most volatile regions of Pakistan using innovative methods should be given due recognition by the government, donors and international community. There is no need to debate whether women are relevant to P/CVE. This paper has highlighted that once the women have the confidence, knowledge and skills they can play a significant role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism at various levels in Pakistan in spite of myriads challenges and obstacles.

Other groups can take lessons from initiatives like PAIMAN where women take the ownership of a non-violent movement against violent extremism by engaging with extremist youth, vulnerable communities, religious leaders, police and political leaders. While observing the transformation of radicalised women to moderate, effective community mobilisers and leaders for a positive change, PAIMAN realised that these women need guidance and mentoring along with continuous support to keep their confidence intact. The paper also points to the fact that bridging the gap between soft and hard power results in a highly effective approach to P/CVE. Women should be at the centre of any policy and agenda related to prevention and countering violent extremism. Women can provide critical support to any type of P/CVE Action Plan and programming in their capacities as

socio-political leaders, religious scholars, educationists, as leaders of CSOs, and as mothers and wives. The experience of PAIMAN reveals that once women are empowered socially and economically in a culturally and ideologically appropriate way they can act as peace educators in family and community and can work at grassroots level in every home, neighbourhood and village, changing our culture of violence, providing new and creative ways to engage in conflict resolution, and encouraging social justice. PAIMAN's innovative and indigenous model of empowering women to counter and prevent violent extremism through community engagement is time tested with verifiable data of success and positive impact can be replicated not only in the country but in the region and globally. However, unfortunately, these efforts by women and women's groups have remained either limited or under-utilised.

While working with women from different sectors and at various level of our society we have realised that women become very effective in preventing extremism even if engaged in roles that give them opportunities for providing leadership beyond the traditional roles. These women's groups are playing a significant role in countering and preventing violent extremism through outreach and awareness raising, facilitating engagement between women and other important actors at the community level and advocating at local and national levels for inclusive policy frameworks regarding peace and security. There can be no effective prevention against violent extremism and radicalisation without the involvement of women as educators, influencers and positive agents of change in their families, communities and broader society, far beyond their traditional roles.

38 Quoted in Tony Haigh, *Radicalisation and De-radicalisation of Terrorists* (Maxwell Publishing, 2011), 19.

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Centre for Women, Peace and Security, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

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