

Role of Muslim Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

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Abstract

Acts of terrorism and violent extremism have become rampant in the recent past not only in Pakistan but worldwide. Efforts are on the way to counter terrorism and violent extremism. Mostly such efforts focus on the role of men while neglecting the role of half of the population i.e. the women. Women are influential in families, the workplace, institutions and communities so their role is very important. Acts of terrorism and violent extremism cannot be countered only by law enforcement agencies but by building social capacity to make such acts and actors unacceptable in society. In Pakistan's context, Muslim women can play a very important role in achieving this purpose. Research has shown that women are the first respondents to extremist behaviour. They can play a very effective role in the prevention of the radicalization of young minds. While designing antiterrorism and anti-violence policies gender perspectives should be brought into consideration. Women empowerment can play a key role in identifying extremist behaviour and in the prevention of radicalization of young individuals. This research paper will analyze the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism and will propose a course for the future.

Keywords: role of Muslim women, terrorism, UN resolutions, violent extremism

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Introduction:

Acts of terrorism and violent extremism have become rampant in the recent past not only in Pakistan but worldwide. Despite efforts, Violent extremism and terrorism have increased which is an indication to bring change in approach to counter this menace. Such approaches can range from military interventions whether offensive or defensive, to legislation, and ideological interventions, which promote liberal ideas and encourage pluralistic views. A key challenge is to identify the target group which needs de-radicalization.¹

Efforts have been made at the national as well as international level to counter these terrorist acts as well as violent behaviors. Counter-terrorism policy generally has two dimensions. The first dimension which involves in its law enforcement and the development of a security system/infrastructure treats terrorism/violence as an offence and focuses on corrective measures.² The second dimension involves state authorities as well as the community.³ For this paper, we will focus on the second dimension, especially the role of women. While formulating policies regarding countering terrorism and violent extremism role of women has always been neglected. Women are influential in families, workplaces, institutions and communities and they form half of our population. There is a need to build social capacity to make such behavior and acts unacceptable and in achieving this task, women can play a very effective role. There is plenty of research which shows that women are the first respondents to extremist behavior. Due to their sensitive nature, they can feel signs of radicalization and violent behavior. Pakistan is facing the issue of terrorism and violent extremism for decades. Muslim women can play a very important role in the prevention of violence and the radicalization of young minds.

There is a lack of research on the reasons for terrorism and violent extremism in general but specifically in third-world countries. This is alarming as such acts are more rampant in third-world countries as compared to developed countries. In research, emphasis has been on corrective measures rather than focusing on strengthening roles and participation of different segments of society. Efforts should be made to generate funds to encourage and support research on this issue. Current research has focused on the western world and issues faced by the non-western world have largely been neglected. Recently a trend has been noticed among academicians and experts in this field to advocate a soft approach which focuses on de-radicalization and rehabilitation. Not much has been written on the role of women in such situations. This paper will try to shed light on this topic to fill the gap.

The main research question, the author will be dealing with, is to explore the reasons for terrorism/violent behavior and the role women can play in recognizing and combating it. The researcher will try to explore

strategies to combat violent extremism and will analyze ways to bring a gender perspective into it. This research paper is based on a qualitative study. It primarily studies the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism. An effort has been made to study relevant international documents which have a lasting impact on the issue. Initiatives taken on the national level have also been discussed and analyzed.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism

The terms terrorism and violent extremism can be very subjective and are culture specific. Such terms are always difficult to define. Despite having no consensus on a proper definition there are few points on which everyone agrees. Terrorism is often defined as 'the irregular use of violence by non-state groups against non-military targets and personnel for political ends.'⁴ Terrorism is a multifaceted phenomenon which may have diverse means, motives, and actors in diverse situations. It is a group activity which is also defined as a tactic which includes in its violence, the targeting of civilians, property or government and the intent of creating fear. Terrorism can be political, religious, ethnic etc.⁵ It entails indiscriminate or illegitimate use of violence against non-combatants. Violence is always connected to terrorism so defining violence is equally important. Violence can be defined as 'the exercise of force to physically harm, injure, pain or kill humans.'⁶ It is difficult to define extremism. But experts agree that in extremism there are two key attributes: extremists' political beliefs are not widely shared even among their communities, and they usually lack the means or powers to achieve their goals. From these two elements, their strategy can be understood.⁷ Radicalization is the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs. Ideology and actions are sometimes connected but not always. Radicalization may turn into terrorism but there is no certainty that it always will.⁸

Research has suggested that quite often violent extremism exists when conditions are right for individuals to perceive it as rational regardless of religion or culture. Self-interest is a very important factor to drive someone to violence or terrorism. Violent extremism is caused by a combination of societal ills and feelings of personal powerlessness that lead people to be uncalled for behaviour. Radicalisation is also a factor. Extremists and terrorists manipulate the problems of society to reflect and promote their agenda. Previously focus has been on corrective measures but in the recent past, it has been felt that human development, eradication of poverty and guarantee of civil, political, and cultural rights may help combat violent extremism as well as terrorism.⁹

Lack of consensus on a proper definition of violence and terrorism poses a complex challenge for policymakers and field workers. There is a need to develop a consensus on these issues to make counter-terrorism efforts more effective.¹⁰

Role of Muslim Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Women are agents of social change. They can transform families and can build social capacity by nurturing and bringing up young minds. Given their nurturing and intuitive qualities, the capabilities of women should be used to preserve the family institution and counter violent extremism. Women's natural strengths and capabilities can be very helpful in preventing their family members from going down the path of radicalization. As mothers and wives, women have the most intimate knowledge of their family and would be able to detect any behavioral changes and de-radicalize them. The dilemma is that women are often ignored and are not provided with an opportunity to play a role in such activities. At the state level, no initiative is taken to make awareness among women and to encourage them to take a position against violent behavior.

There is a connection between terrorism/violent extremism and issues concerning women's rights. It has been noticed that in those societies where women's rights are protected, the ideological support for terrorism can be undermined. Resolution of gender-related issues can play an important part in countering terrorist ideology.¹¹ Although no data could be found which can establish in concrete terms the relationship between women's rights and violent behavior, but it is a general perception. For future research, it is recommended that quantitative research should be conducted to establish such connections in concrete terms. States should provide funding for such purposes so that they can formulate their policies on firm grounds.

In combat and war-like situations women can be more vulnerable than men. Especially in patriarchal societies where women are less empowered and independent, there are more instances of being drugged, raped, and physically and emotionally abused. Mostly the reasons for conflicts include issues related to identity, revenge, and ideological and political differences.¹² Faith plays a very important part in determining identity.¹³ Women as mothers and wives can influence their family members and can prevent violent extremism and terrorism. Even in societies where women seem weak and are not empowered their role in shaping families and societies cannot be denied. In the development of effective policies and programmes to address violent extremism multiple roles of women as sympathisers, mobilizers, preventers, and perpetrators should be reflected. The efforts and programmes should be designed to address grievances and pathways which move women towards terrorism and violent extremism and support those dynamics that strengthen their resilience against them.¹⁴

Women, like men, can be targets as well as perpetrators of violent behavior and terrorism. The role which women can play is to nurture an environment that censures extremist behaviors and ideologies. They can encourage their family members, especially children to embrace values of tolerance and inclusiveness. Such initiatives not only help to reduce young

person's vulnerability but strengthen their resilience against falling for extremist ideologies.¹⁵

Due to natural sensitivities, women can notice early signs of radicalization which may include justifying the use of violence to defend a particular religious or political cause; expressing the intention to participate in acts of violence or to instigate others and/or idolizing terrorist personalities. Nowadays social media plays an important role in determining radicalized behavior like frequently visiting radical websites and expressing support for militant groups and spreading their word. Awareness should be created among women that reporting such behavior is in the interests of their loved ones.

Mothers who observe that their young family members are attracted to terrorist narratives can encourage them to critically evaluate the information received and can make efforts to build their children's resilience. Children should be taught that violence is not permitted under any circumstances by providing them with strong counter-narratives.¹⁶ Proper education and training can achieve this purpose.¹⁷ Secondly, women must take the responsibility to advise their spouses if there is a need. From the Islamic perspective, everyone has a responsibility to enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil, and wives are no exception to it. This is especially relevant when husbands are going to commit violence in the name of religion. Such criticism is not *nushūz* (disobedience). There is a difference between *nushūz* (disobedience) and the religious obligation to advise if their spouse's behavior goes against Islam.¹⁸ Third, women must be empowered to educate their families. They should be told where they can seek help if they face radical behaviour or extremist behaviour. For playing an effective role in de-radicalizing young minds women need pieces of training. The lack of skilled personnel is one of the main reasons for the failure of such initiatives.

International Efforts

The importance of the role of women in international peace and security efforts has been emphasised by the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on 31st October 2000. This resolution asserts the importance of the role of women in the prevention and resolution of armed conflicts along with an emphasis on the protection of women from violence during such situations. This resolution not only stresses on equal participation of women in peacebuilding, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction efforts but asks for the inclusion of gender perspectives in all peace and security efforts as well.¹⁹ Despite the passage of this resolution, the role of women has not been fully explored by policymakers and international counter-terrorism actors. The biggest achievement so far is that the International community has shifted from a reactive to a preventive approach regarding terrorism and violent extremism however there is a need to have a comprehensive approach to address these

challenges from every aspect.²⁰ UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and its companion thematic resolutions UNSCR 1820 (2008), UNSCR 1888 (2009), UNSCR 1889 (2009), UNSCR 1960 (2010), UNSCR 2016 (2013), and UNSCR 2122 (2013) provide a much needed legal framework for promoting gender equality in peace and security at international level. These resolutions ensure the participation of women at all levels of decision making whether it is related to peacebuilding or peacekeeping or reconstruction and rehabilitation. Other important areas pointed out by these resolutions are protecting women from sexual and gender-based violence and improving the prevention of violence against them. UNSCR 1325 urges all parties in conflict to respect the human rights of everyone involved especially vulnerable groups like women and girls.²¹

In 2006 United Nations adopted a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by consensus. Through the adoption of this strategy, the member states agreed to have a common strategic and operational approach to dealing with violence and terrorism. This strategy comprises four pillars: first, to address the conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism; second, to adopt measures to prevent and fight terrorism; third, to adopt measures to build capacity to fight terrorism and extremism at the state level; fourth, to adopt measures to respect human rights of all involved at every stage of the conflict.²² In line with the 2006 United Nations global counter-terrorism strategy, member states have been urged to address not only the more tactical and law enforcement-centric aspects of counter-terrorism efforts but also to consider the 'conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. It is believed that if conditions/factors conducive to violent extremism and terrorism can be eliminated it will reduce such undesired behaviour to a great extent. A great failure is that not much attention has been paid to integrating the gender dimension into international and national counter-terrorism efforts.²³

There is a paradigm shift in the concept of security in recent years. The concept of security has changed from one of state security to human security. Previously the protection of borders and state sovereignty was considered the focus of security whereas the modern concept of security focuses on the security of individuals and communities. This new concept entails poor economic conditions, discrimination, violence, and marginalization of communities as security threats as well. It takes into consideration the actors involved in such issues including non-state actors and civil society. It means such societies should be established that can withstand instability and conflict and women can play a very important role in establishing that kind of society. Gender differences are considered where security is based not only on state security but also on human security. Integrating a gender perspective into the security sector is very important as by doing so not only does operational effectiveness increase but by getting both men and women involved, there are better

outcomes in the decision-making process as well.²⁴

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan and The Role of Muslim Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Muslim countries including Pakistan have developed national strategies based on the challenges they face. These strategies can be categorized into two groups: multi-axiom strategy and de-radicalization strategy. In multi axiom strategy, the state deals with violent extremism and terrorism from multiple angles targeting the grass root level. This strategy tries to eradicate the causes of extremism by using security mechanisms, diplomacy, legislation and promoting moderation. Security mechanisms are more focused on corrective measures whereas through diplomacy states cooperate and occasionally form groups to deal with violent extremism and terrorism. A good example of diplomacy is the establishment of the Contact Group on Countering Extremism at the United Nations Security Council in 2015. Legislative measures include the enactment of laws which declare such actions illegal and award punishments. Promoting moderation counselling and media campaign can be proved as effective tools. The Second strategy, de-radicalization, is based on rehabilitation programmes by education, counselling, and family support for violent extremists. Education, counselling whether religious or otherwise and family support both financial and psychological can be applied in different ways. Although not many studies can be found which can measure the effectiveness of these programmes, but they form a very important part of the national strategies of Muslim states.²⁵

In Pakistan, violent extremism and growing religious militancy have roots in socio-economic deprivation, inequality, and the failure of governance. All these factors should be taken into consideration before designing policy to counter violence and terrorism. Agenda of social uplift and economic inclusion of marginalized communities (including women) must be included in such policies.²⁶ Globalization is also linked with terrorism and violent behavior to some extent.²⁷ Pakistan has made efforts to combat terrorism but lacks a cohesive anti-terrorism strategy. One of the main reasons is the lack of specialized skills and trained personnel.²⁸

Though Pakistan has endorsed UNSC Resolution 1325 but fails to implement it in true spirit. CEDAW along with the BEIJING declaration provides a legal basis for women's role in peace and security issues and Pakistan being a signatory of CEDAW has an international obligation to involve women in such initiatives.²⁹

Pakistan being an Islamic republic denounces violence and promotes tolerance as per Article 2-A of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973. It further provides that the Objectives Resolution of 1949 shall be considered an integral part of the constitution. The resolution explicitly declares that the Islamic

principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice shall be fully observed. Muslims living in Pakistan shall be enabled to lead their lives by the teachings and requirements of the Holy Quran and Sunnah. Thus all the citizens of Pakistan, irrespective of their gender should be faithfully loyal to the state, its ideological norms and constitutional obligations. By the eighteenth constitutional amendment mandate to deal with women's affairs was devolved upon the provinces. Provincial governments and legislatures should pay heed to such issues so that policies and laws compatible with national and international priorities can be developed.

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973 provides for equality (Article 25) for all men and women, non-discrimination based on gender, and full participation of women (Article 34) in all spheres of national life. This indicates the significance of women, concerning Islam, in the socio-political context and within domestic paradigms. It is the constitutional responsibility of State institutions to empower women of all ages and maintain their human dignity, integrity, and economic stability. Islam also encourages the participation of women in economic and political spheres of life. Reference to the wives of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Khadijah (RA) and Ayesha (RA) are the best examples of participation of Muslim women in economic and political affairs.

Islam believes in the principle of guardianship and the institution of “motherhood”. These principles can play a positive role in the reconstruction of social structure in Pakistan and can promote social justice, equality, mutual respect, and inclusion. Islam promotes the concept of dialogue based on reason and discourages the use of force. Elimination of “*fasād*” from our social structure is the ultimate form of *Jihad* in the present-day world, which can only be made possible through the development of values by way of education and dialogue. Islam encourages peaceful dialogue and women being the social nucleus of every family, whether in the shape of mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters; must play their role in the formation and reformation of society. Islam teaches peaceful co-existence and promotes diversity. The empowerment of women can contribute to the creation of a space for non-violent attitude and peaceful resolution of disagreements. Women being biologically as well as psychologically more patient than men should play an effective role in leading their families to promote peace, and tolerance and discourage violence in all forms.

Surveys have been conducted in Pakistan which show the effect education has on violent tendencies and interestingly it varies by gender. Educated women are less likely to support terrorism/violence as compared to similarly educated men. Uneducated women are more likely to support terrorism violence as compared to uneducated men. One of the factors which terrorist groups survive is sympathy within the population. Even without

active participation, support can be extended through passive activities like condoning violent behaviour, harbouring terrorist groups and offering financial, logistical, or operational support. There is a need to explore the relationship between gender, education, and terrorist tendencies.³⁰

The Programme on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) conducted four surveys between 2007 to 2009 in collaboration with START (the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism) and USIP (the United States Institute of Peace). In these surveys, respondents were questioned on a range of issues related to terrorism. Research has shown that girl education has a positive effect on the child and maternal health, and it also reduces support for terrorism. Increased education among women will lessen the support for terrorism by perpetrators' families and communities. Educated women can play an important role in preventing their family members from joining terrorist/violent activities. A strategy to educate women and train them to articulate and express their views should be adopted at the state level.³¹

Participation of women should be guaranteed at the policy development and design level, by doing this, gender considerations will be addressed at this stage. The presence of gender advisors is recommended. A gender perspective should be integrated into evaluations of counterterrorism and counter violent extremism programmes, to assess their differential impact on men and women. Evaluations of programmes and workshops should have a gender dimension, noting the participation, leadership, and impact of and on women. Follow-up events then can be organised to address gender gaps and to ensure that women are included in peace-building efforts. Recruitment, training, and retention of female law enforcement officials, including police officers, investigators and interrogators should be enhanced. Gender expertise among law enforcement agencies should be enhanced. Female detainees and combatants should be facilitated in rehabilitation and reintegration. They may need special assistance so programmes for rehabilitation should cater to gender sensitivities and considerations. The adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325 was a breakthrough in acknowledging the impact of armed conflict on women and the role women can play in addressing peace and security issues. It encourages them to participate at all levels of decision-making in the conflict prevention, armed conflict, and post-conflict phases.³²

There are several *aḥādīth* in which Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) has asked Muslim men and women to seek Knowledge. For instance, there is a *Ḥadīth* that seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim man and woman. On another occasion, the Prophet (PBUH) re-emphasized the words "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave". These sayings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) indicate that women must seek knowledge themselves and perform a vital role in the upbringing of their families. The Muslim woman is an agent of change in both domestic and social contexts; capable of promoting peace and tolerance following the Quranic command of *Amar bil Ma'rūf* and

Nahī ‘an al Munkar.

After all the above discussion, our suggestions are as follows: A movement should be started to disseminate information among women about the role they can play in countering terrorism and violent extremism. Media, both electronic and social, should be used for this purpose along with training workshops and seminars. Islamic teachings should be made clear regarding such behavior and acts. Religious counselling and re-education are effective tools to impart religious teachings. A mechanism for reporting such behavior should be developed which guarantees the anonymity and security of the reporter. A gender perspective should be taken into consideration before making state policies.

Paigham-e-Pakistan is the national narrative which outlines Pakistan’s stance regarding terrorism and violent behavior. In the twenty-first century, the magnificent challenges faced by Pakistan are terrorism and sectarianism. Before discussing the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism it is important to have a look at this national narrative. Following are the main points of Paigham e Pakistan:

1. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan is the agreed-upon the constitution which is based upon Islamic and democratic values. It is based upon a social contract between all units of Pakistan that has been unanimously endorsed by the religious scholars of all schools of thought. Therefore, by the requirements of the constitution, no law which is against the dictates of the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah* shall exist in Pakistan.³³ No one has the authority to instigate any armed activity against the state of Pakistan and its institutions.³⁴

2. Use of force against the state for any purpose, be it implementation of *Shariah* or armed struggle against the State, is completely prohibited. The use of violence and terrorism to settle ethnic, geographical, religious, and sectarian disagreements are contrary to the injunctions of *Shariah*. Defense against the Constitution of Pakistan and imposition of one’s ideology on others by force are also against the teachings of *Shariah*. Such acts are tantamount to creating disorder in the country which is a crime. All possible administrative, educational, intellectual, and defensive measures should be taken for the stability and defense of Pakistan.³⁵

3. Pakistani society should be built on the foundations provided by the Constitution of Pakistan like tolerance, brotherhood, mutual respect, and justice. Hatred, racism, bigotry, and intolerance should be curbed.³⁶

Paigham-e-Pakistan is a good initiative but there is a need to initiate more such programmes. There is a lack of research on the reasons for terrorism and violent extremism in general but specifically in third-world countries. Efforts should be made to generate funds to encourage and support research on this issue. Current research has focused on the western world and issues faced by the non-western world have largely been neglected. A gender perspective should also be included in the national narrative.

Productive opportunities should be provided for young people both men and women so that their energies are used positively. Children and young minds should be told from the school level that interaction and engagement with people of other cultures are desirable, and debate is a healthy and productive activity. Young people, both men and women should be made aware of the wrong use of social media. Women should be empowered so that they can play an effective role in the uplift of their families as well as society.

Conclusion And Recommendations

Islam gives dignified status to women and protects their rights. Women play a diverse range of roles in conflicts including terrorism and violent extremism. It's a wrong perception that all women involved in conflicts are victims, they can be peace builders, perpetrators, or preventers. Awareness should be created about the values of Islam as well as the law of the land to well inform them so that they can play a positive role in countering terrorism and violent behavior. A gender perspective should be taken into consideration while designing counter-extremism and terrorism programmes. The inclusion of both, men, and women, will make the decision-making process more effective and result oriented. Currently, focus of the research in the areas of violent extremism and terrorism in western countries. Research should be conducted on the problems of developing and underdeveloped countries as well. The programmes designed should not only focus on the eradication of the evils of terrorism and violent extremism but also the reasons for such behaviors. Women are agents of social change and can prove very effective in building capacity in society to make such behaviors unacceptable but for this purpose, they need awareness as well as empowerment.

Recommendations:

- Based on the above discussion following are our recommendations:
- Women should be empowered so that they can contribute to bringing change into society. Empowerment of women will make them capable to play an effective role. Protection of women's rights should be a priority targeted area as it is pivotal to progress in any society.
 - Violent extremism and terrorism can be countered by religious teachings. Women should be given leadership roles in religious authorities so that their perspectives can be heard and included in the religious narratives.
 - It is very important to build a national narrative based on gender perspective to counter violent extremism and terrorism.
 - Policy-making authorities should keep gender differences in consideration while framing policy.
 - Young minds should be made to realize that there are peaceful solutions to grievances and resorting to violence or terrorism should not be an option. Alternative remedies should be provided to address grievances.

- Progressive construction of gender is the need of the time. Regressive constructions lead to violent behaviors.
- Pieces of training should be provided to women to detect radicalization and intervene.
 - Reporting mechanism should be developed which ensures anonymity and security.
- Research should be conducted on developing and underdeveloped countries to understand the reasons for extremism and terrorism.
- These recommendations should be considered while formulating and executing policies. The role of women in general and Muslim women in specific, in countering terrorism and violent extremism is an evolving field. With continuing work more solutions to the problem will surface. One thing that should be kept in mind is that solutions to such problems are always culture-specific and should be approached as such.



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³² Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Barakat and Liat Shetret, The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors: 5-11, at <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/44300>, Last visited 15th April, 2018.

³³“Constitution of Pakistan, Article 227: Provisions Relating to the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah,” accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.infopakistan.pk/constitution-of-pakistan/article/227-Provisions-relating-to-the-Holy-Quran-and-Sunnah>.

³⁴ Researchers of Islamic Research Institute, IIUI, *Paigham-e-Pakistan* (Prof. Dr. Muhammad Zia ul Haq Director General, Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad, n.d.).

³⁵ [CSL STYLE ERROR: reference with no printed form.].

³⁶ Researchers of Islamic Research Institute, IIUI, *Paigham-e-Pakistan* (Prof. Dr. Muhammad Zia ul Haq, Director General, Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad, n.).