

## TTP Ideological Stance for Women in the NMDs

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### Abstract

*Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) continue to exploit religion to justify unwarranted restrictions upon the female agency in the garb of the 'ideology'. Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) is no exception to this mode of behaviour and thought pattern. This research aims to unravel the untold and often silent narration of female victimisation in the name of Islam by TTP in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs). The psychological scars, physical dislocation, educational embargo on the girls continue to haunt them as recorded in the off-record conversations with the author. This qualitative research analyses TTP's ideological views about women in NMDs, wherein it maintains a highly conservative and restrictive ideological position. Notwithstanding the endeavours of governmental bodies and civil society organisations to advance gender equality and empower women in these regions, the pervasive impact of TTP's ideology persistently presents significant challenges to advancing the welfare and rights of women, which this study dwells upon through empirical data.*

**Keywords:** Female Victimisation, Ideology, Tehrik-e- Taliban, Narrative, NMDs.

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## **1. Introduction: Eco-System of the Ex-FATA Region**

This study is essentially an exploratory drive infused with a strong dose of empirical research. The key argument is: TTP worldview as reflected in their published discourse (offline and online) vis- a-vis women is essentially a political-strategic-religious tool that has been used as a mean of instilling fear, garnering social acceptance and a bargaining chip in negotiations with the state and the civil society actors.

Part one of the study transverses an eco-system of the NMDs that explains how and why violations of rights are often unreported due to various societal constraints on women. Also, discrimination is frequently rationalised in the name of ensuring Islamic principles and preserving traditional tribal justice system.

Second part explains the tactics that TTP militants have adopted to justify restrictions on female right to education, mobility, engagement in business activities and also female participation in governance matters at the community level. In this vein, TTP has been targeting women rights advocates, political activists, and humanitarian personnel with impunity.

Third part of this research undertakes an impact analysis of how the process of the force-based Islamic order has led to the permeation of the Islamic fundamentalist ideology and has resulted in more stringent views about women rights among the male counterparts at certain places. It is unquestionably evident that TTP has exerted a significant ideological impact on the female populace with the lowest literacy rate than the national average in the NMDs, especially following its heightened influence in the border regions.

Although female education is slowly gaining acceptance in NMDs especially in areas that have experienced high levels of militancy; nevertheless, there is still a substantial path to traverse. In the present scenario, the government's role in rejecting the Taliban's anti-educational ideologies is crucial given the Taliban's record of continual denial of girls' access to education. TTP's ideological position regarding women in this region is exemplified significantly by the following: forceful purdah imposition and seclusion, limited educational opportunities, restricted mobility, marriage and family obligations, employment barriers, compliance employing coercion and intimidation.

Erstwhile FATA has been home to conflicts and terrorism for decades. As in any of the conflicts, the children and the women suffer the most, same is the case in ex- FATA. The notion of “Private woman and Public man” is significantly impacting the lives of people specifically the women in the NMDs. Women in NMDs neither have the access nor the “permission” to participate in the cultural, societal and political spaces even though they constitute half of the population.<sup>1</sup> The culture and the self-proclaimed religious values have played a vital role in promoting and practicing gender-based violence.

There is also a major lack of women representation in the electoral process and it is mainly due to the factor that the culture forbids the men to even share the names of their women for voter registration. Even if they are registered, they are not necessarily allowed to cast their votes per their will as they vote for the party or representative of the choice of man of the house. The women are considered as the saviour of the honour of the family, and by interacting with the males, casting votes, getting education and speaking for their own rights brings shame to that

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Syed Hussain, “Females and FATA”, *Tribune*, May 05, 2013, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/544813/females-and-fata>

honour. This is the main reason why women of NMDs are not seen in numbers, whether it is literacy rate or human development index. Consequently, they have limited access to education, healthcare and justice. This research paper incorporates the Theory of Peacebuilding and Intersectionality to showcase the role of women as agent of change especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the NMDs.

## **2. Theoretical Framework:**

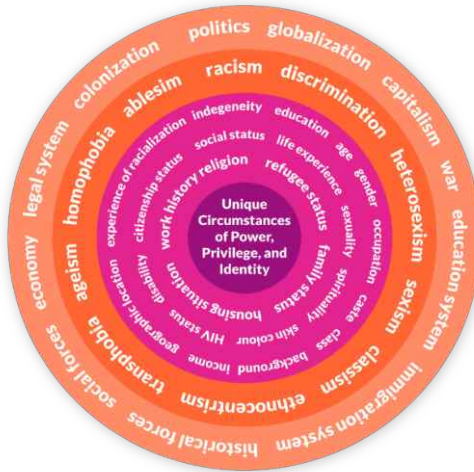
This research paper incorporates two theories; Intersectionality and Peacebuilding. The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, who is a leading theorist in Critical Race Theory. According to Hancock, Harris and Leonardo, the concept of intersectionality was introduced by the women of colour and it was then incorporated into academia.<sup>2</sup> The idea of intersectionality by design is inclusive in nature and helps in identifying and acknowledging the marginalization at different levels. Technically, intersectionality can be defined as, “the understanding that inequalities are interdependent and indivisible from one another: ‘race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena’”.<sup>3</sup> As per Else Quest and Hyde in *Intersectionality in Quantitative Psychological Research II: Methods and Techniques*, there are three assumptions underlying the definition of intersectionality, first that people are characterized by their membership in the society such as on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, religion etc. Secondly when people are categorized on that basis there are certain power dynamics related to each characteristic which leads to a power interrelation

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<sup>2</sup> Hajer Al – faham, Angelique M. Davis and Rose Ernst, “Intersectionality: From Theory to Practice”, *Annual Review of Social Science* (October, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Ashlee Christofferson, “Intersectionality in Practice”, University of Edinburgh, 2021, <https://www.intersectionalityinpractice.ed.ac.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/Intersectionality-in-practice.pdf>

between each category and lastly these social categories are naturally linked to their personalities, as well as to the wider structural systems.<sup>4</sup>



*Adapted from the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women<sup>5</sup>*

Kimberle concluded that the gender inequalities are influenced by the location of individual, therefore it is pertinent to understand the gendered experiences through individual’s identity and the categories they fit into. One of the profound tools of intersectionality is the Gender and Diversity (GAD) Analysis tool, the Islamic Relief Pakistan conducted a GAD analysis and concluded that women face extreme discrimination when it comes to their gender roles and unequal power distribution/relations.<sup>6</sup> This is intensified when the gender intersects with other factors such as disability, social class, and access to healthcare and

<sup>4</sup> Doyin Atewologun, “Intersectionality Theory and Practice”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, August 2018, <https://deltaalphapsi.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Intersectionality-Theory-and-Practice.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Women Friendly Cities Challenge, <https://womenfriendlycitieschallenge.org/intersectionality/>

<sup>6</sup> Rhea Bhardwaj, “Leave no-one behind in humanitarian programming: An approach to understanding intersectional programming”, *Islamic Relief Worldwide*, November 2018, [https://www.islamic-relief.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Learning-paper-1-Leave-no-one-behind-in-humanitarian-programming-An-approach-to-understanding-intersectional-programming\\_web.pdf](https://www.islamic-relief.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Learning-paper-1-Leave-no-one-behind-in-humanitarian-programming-An-approach-to-understanding-intersectional-programming_web.pdf)

education etc. Viewing from the lens of intersectionality approach, its application could help in recognizing and unwinding the complexities within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the NMDs in a way that it addresses the specific needs and challenges of each target group.

The second theory incorporated in this study is Peacebuilding. Women led peacebuilding initiatives have proven to have a long lasting and powerful impact on the society. According to Johan Galtung, peacebuilding is a process of creating and influencing the structural change that, “remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur” and it “should be built into the structure and be present there as a reservoir for the system itself to draw upon, just as a healthy body has the ability to generate its own antibodies and does not need ad hoc administration of medicine.”<sup>7</sup> John Paul Lederach stated that, “Peacebuilding is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities that both precede and follow formal peace accords. Metaphorically, peace is seen not merely as a stage in time or a condition. It is a dynamic social construct.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the Kroc Institute, peacebuilding “aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict.”<sup>9</sup> Peacebuilding becomes a strategic tool when it is interlinked with the

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<sup>7</sup> Oscar Daniel, “Education for Peace What Building peace means”, *Budapest International Research and Critics in Linguistics and Education (BirLE) Journal*, (December 2019), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337192305\\_Education\\_for\\_Peace\\_What\\_Building\\_Peace\\_Means](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337192305_Education_for_Peace_What_Building_Peace_Means)

<sup>8</sup> Oscar Daniel, “Education for Peace.”

<sup>9</sup> “What is strategic Peacebuilding?”, *Kroc Institute*. <https://kroc.nd.edu/about-us/what-is-peace-studies/what-is-strategic-peacebuilding/>

concept of intersectionality in a way that it works at all levels of the society and establishes long lasting relations to ensure durable peace.



*Strategic Peacebuilding Path<sup>10</sup>*

### **3. Contextual Understanding of Women Status in NMDs: Role of Customs, Traditions and Islam-Manipulated by the TTP**

Women, such as Hina Shah Nawaz, who try to challenge the patriarchal society by practicing their right to work and marriage are murdered in the name of protection of honour.<sup>11</sup> The prevalence of honour killing is so much so that all the families have witnessed at least one honour killing, which largely remains

<sup>10</sup> John Paul Lederach and Katie Mansfield, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies

<sup>11</sup> Razeshta Sethna, "FATA's forgotten women", *Dawn*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1334803>

undocumented or unreported as it is considered “unhonourable” to bring the women’s data to police station. The deprivation of these basic rights and needs lead to women being the most neglected part of the society and the criminals living their free lives because their crimes are not being reported. Not only this, the woman in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the NMDs are victim of practices such as *Swara*, *Badala-i-Sulh* (‘exchanged’ to settle feuds), *Valvar* (‘exchanged’ for money), *Ghag* (being forcibly ‘claimed’) and other honour related crimes.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt in the fact that most of the interior areas of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan face the same circumstances as above, but the probability of occurrence of these cases is lower as compared to that of the Western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the NMDs. One reason could be that the legal practices are not identical to rest of Pakistan but they follow the Islamic and traditional customs and laws.<sup>13</sup> And it is an open secret that the feuds and fights are quite common within the tribe and families. These feuds have always been resolved through the Jirga system. The people of NMDs believe and trust the Jirga system more than the courts or other legal options. These jirgas are comprised of the elderly tribesmen, who are respected throughout the tribe. There are no women representative in the issues as it is believed that this is a man’s job, even in the issues related to honour, dowry, and marriage etc. This idea not only reinforces the basis of a patriarchal society but it also restricts women’s role in relation to a man. These customs and traditions help in maintaining the essence of the tribe but they are also found to benefit the powerful in the tribe and they pose a greater threat to the marginalized part of the society especially the women and young girls. Since the cases are reported to the elders in a tribal setting, the cases even the murder

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<sup>12</sup> Razeshta Sethna, “FATA’s forgotten women.”

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Naseem Akhter, “Rituals and Challenges regarding Women in EX – FATA Areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”, *Al Nasr* 2, no. 3 (October – December 2023).



cases are not reported and charged in the record, and moreover the rulings in these jirgas do not hold any legal value under the national and international law.

Another factor why the cases remain underreported is that the tribal values are based on the social values of Pakhtunwali and *Ghairat* (honor).<sup>14</sup> The concept of *Ghairat* is basically attributed to manliness; so much so that one can kill someone in the name of honour and it can be justified in front of the Jirga because as per the custom the father, brother, cousin or even relatives have the right to kill the women in their family if they have any suspicion that their daughter or sister is in a romantic relationship with a man outside marriage.<sup>15</sup> The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported more than 300 cases of honour killing in 2022, however unfortunately yet not so surprisingly no one knows how many women were subject to honour killing, domestic violence and terrorism in NMDs.<sup>16</sup> The reason is that there is enough space for such acts in the customary laws and Jirga rulings, hence, the heinous act is prevailing since decades as there is no *Badal* (revenge) in the killings in name of honour of both men and women. So much so, that killing in the name of honour is not even considered a crime but a legitimate action to restore the *Ghairat* of the family and tribe and if someone fails to do this (which is rare), he is considered to have lost his honour and respect within the tribe. Hence, the basic right to life of women in NMDs is subject to obeying the social norms and protecting the honour of the tribe. Although the teachings of Islam are quite clear on the matter of adultery and Islam holds both man and woman equally accountable and punishable, but as per the custom usually women are subjected to punishments.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Maqbool Khan Wazir, "Violence against Women: Violation of Right to Life of Women in FATA", *Pakistan Journal of Criminology* 2, no. 2 (April 2010).

<sup>15</sup> M. Maqbool Khan Wazir, "Violence against Women."

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, "State of Human rights in Pakistan: 2022", *Government of Pakistan*, 2023, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2023-State-of-human-rights-in-2022.pdf>

Mutating some principles of conservative societies in Pakistan, there are additional barriers for women in the NMDs. Some of these barriers include accessibility to education and work. This is due to the strict observance of *pardah* in some areas of the NMDs especially in the districts of Orakzai, North and South Waziristan. Access to education and work in the NMDs needs to be prioritized by the Government of Pakistan to improve the access of women to schools, colleges, universities and workplaces. The Holy Quran itself as well as Hadith and narrations encourage both men and women to educate themselves so that they are able to ponder upon the creation of Allah, but the literacy rate of the NMDs is less than 8% with only 3% literate women in Bajaur.<sup>17</sup> As per the 2023 census, only 40,000 girls attend primary schools, this number then reduces to 4,500 and 1,450 in middle and high school, respectively.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. Role of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan:**

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan was established in 2007 and is considered as one of the deadliest organizations in Pakistan that has great physical and psychological impact on the people especially living in then FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The major kinetic operation conducted against the TTP was Zarb-e-Azb that left the TTP completely dismantled by 2016. The government initiated the deradicalization program and was able to integrate the population of then FATA into the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province by 25<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment.<sup>19</sup> There is not much reported and factual data available prior to 2010 about the attacks conducted by TTP, however, as per Global Terrorism Database, the group was

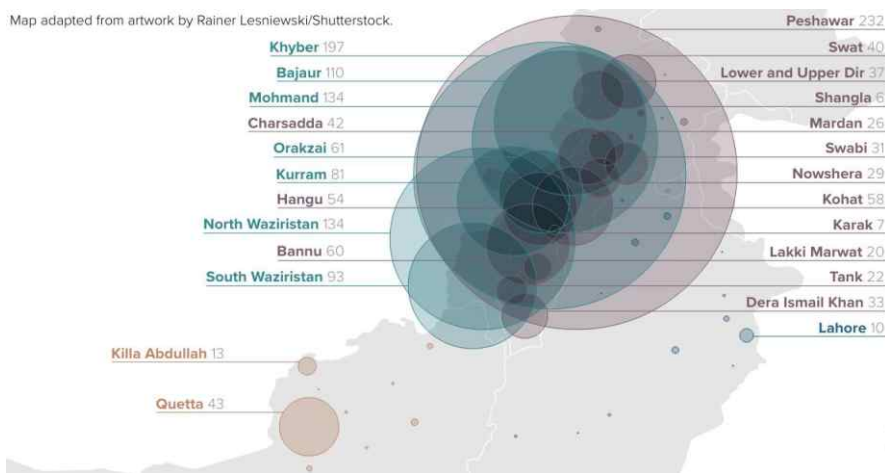
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<sup>17</sup> Umair Khan, "Tribal Literacy Quest", *The Nation*, November 21, 2023. (Available at: <https://www.nation.com.pk/21-Nov-2023/tribal-literacy-quest>)

<sup>18</sup> Umair Khan, "Tribal Literacy Quest."

<sup>19</sup> Amira Jadoon, "The evolution and potential resurgence of the Tehrik – e – Taliban Pakistan", *United State Institute of Peace*, May 2021, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr\\_494\\_the\\_evolution\\_and\\_potential\\_resurgence\\_of\\_the\\_tehrik\\_i\\_taliban\\_pakistan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494_the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf)

responsible for 269 reported cases essentially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and ex-FATA during 2007-2009. TTP dispersed post 2010 and was able to significantly impact the Punjab, Balochistan, Sindh and obviously with strong foothold in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and ex-FATA. The group was responsible for 800 attacks in ex-FATA, 727 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 98 in Balochistan and 108 in Sindh during 2010 – 2020.<sup>20</sup> The following figure breaks down the TTP linked attacks in their respective districts:



As the organization had a strong foothold in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and ex-FATA, to enhance their presence it attacked the urban concentrated areas to escape the security operation in the northwest. This tactic helped the organization to regroup, radicalize and recruit educated people from the urban areas. During and post Zarb-e-Azab, the attacks mainly focused on the police, military departments and educational institutions. However, the successful implementation of Pakistan military operation, internal dispute within the TTP, dissociation with the Islamic

<sup>20</sup> Amira Jadoon, “The evolution and potential resurgence of the Tehrik – e – Taliban Pakistan.”

State of Khorasan and emergence of various break away factions resulted in TTP losing significant operational capacity, yet the organization continued with the ideology of implementing Sharia throughout Pakistan. As Ehsanullah Ehsan in an interview with Al-Jazeera said that “We cannot say that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar [a TTP splinter group], or other anti-Pakistan groups are completely finished. . . . They definitely have a set-up and perhaps they have gone silent as part of a plan”.<sup>21</sup> This statement was a reflection of the attacks TTP conducted during the 2018 election against the politicians. Even though the number of attacks reduced, there was an increase in attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and NMDs (from 21 in 2019 to 28 in 2020),<sup>22</sup> which is a drastic low from the attacks during 2010-2016.

TTP primarily focuses on two main agendas, first the implementation of Sharia throughout the country and secondly to challenge, falsify and deconstruct the Western narrative of democracy, human rights and capitalism. They believe that education, women empowerment and even health is a Western agenda.<sup>23</sup> For this purpose, they have not only advocated against the polio vaccination drive but have also attacked and killed Polio workers and even the Police officials allocated to workers for security reason in Bannu, Buner, Lower Dir district and other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.<sup>24</sup> In 2021, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, which has somehow given the confidence and support to the TTP in Pakistan as the group claimed at least 32 attacks only in the first two months of 2021. In February 2021, four female development workers were attacked which is suspected to be linked with the outside actors.

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<sup>21</sup> Asad Hashim, “Pakistani Taliban down but not out, says ex – spokesperson”, *Al-Jazeera*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/3/exclusive-pakistani-taliban-down-but-not-out-says-ex-spokesman>

<sup>22</sup> Amira Jadoon, “The evolution and potential resurgence of the Tehrik – e – Taliban Pakistan.”

<sup>23</sup> Female Civil Society Activist, Interview by the Author, 10 January, 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Female Civil Society Activist, Interview.

Beyond the hard-core radicalization tactics through physical attacks and threats, TTP is using a softer component through its media wing; Umar media. The organization shares guidance, updates and magazines through its channel via the social media channels specially the Telegram.<sup>25</sup> One group titled on the organization's name shares the messages from the spokesperson of TTP, another group titled, "Taliban Magazine" is in Urdu and shares downloadable issues on monthly basis that covers the activities of TTP throughout the month, third group named "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan" in Urdu is a backup group and lastly the group "Mazloom Aqsa" usually shares and celebrates the raids carried out by TTP.<sup>26</sup>

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan was able to exploit the years of misgovernance and denial of justice for women in the tribal belt by tribesmen. The fact of the matter is that the State of Pakistan was unable to protect the women of this area for decades under the tribal and customary laws and *Riwajs*, the women in ex-FATA welcomed the TTP leadership in the region with the hope that they will provide them their rights given under the Islamic rules and principles.<sup>27</sup> Even though the Taliban had the same agenda as the tribesmen such as limitation to their movement, education and empowerment but the Taliban empowered them in a sense that they advocated that women have an active and important role to play.<sup>28</sup> The women continued their support to the Taliban and encouraged their men to align themselves with the Taliban, not knowing that the Taliban will enhance their oppression in the coming years. The Taliban engaged the women via radio and

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<sup>25</sup> Joshua Bowes, "Telegrams role in amplifying Tehreek – e – Taliban's Umar Media propaganda and sympathizer outreach, *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, January 30, 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/01/30/telegrams-role-in-amplifying-tehreek-e-talibans-umar-media-propaganda-and-sympathiser-outreach/>

<sup>26</sup> Joshua Bowes, "Telegrams role."

<sup>27</sup> "Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West", *Crisis Group*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/321-women-and-peacebuilding-in-pakistan.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Author's conversations with the groups of women from Bajur, Wazirsitan and others, 2019, 2021 and 2023 – Islamabad and Peshawar.

announcements and other outreach channels. The women gave up their jewellery and savings for Taliban as a form of Jihad, hence they were considered as facilitators and fundraisers.<sup>29,30</sup> Then they were given the task of “raising the Jihadi Generation” in a way that introduce their child to the ideology of TTP.<sup>31</sup> And lastly women have also been reported to volunteer and participate as suicide bombers in TTP’s attacks.

However, TTP has not been able to convince majority of women from the NMDs to convert to their cause completely. The fact of the matter is, since last two decades or so women have been victim of TTP’s so-called ‘purifying Islamic ideology’ leading to the cracks in the TTP’s support base. TTP is also trying to expand its zone of influence in the adjacent towns and areas of the NMDs. In late December 2023 in Bannu, an unidentified group of militants torched a government-run girls’ higher secondary school, spreading fear among residents of renewed militant violence in the area. The unidentified attackers inscribed a note on the school gate, warning against reopening the educational institution.

Here are the key inferences drawn from the author’s semi-structured off-record interviews with females belonging to:

1. TTP influence came through coercive tactics in the name of the ‘Islamic system’ through religious propaganda and violence, eliminating tribal elders who questioned them.
2. TTP destroyed educational institutions particularly girls and barred non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for the social development works

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<sup>29</sup> Umme Hassan – Head of the Jamia-i-Hafsa (Female Seminary), Interview by the Author, August 2022, Islamabad.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Mehmood, “Pakistan’s women Jihadis”, *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2017. (Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/pakistans-women-jihadis/>)

<sup>31</sup> Umme Hassan, Interview.

further sliding and isolating FATA's citizens from the rest of Pakistan as governance system became almost non-existent.

3. Despite continuous 'fear/pressure' by TTP upon women in the NMDs, women of the area remain 'resilient' and have developed ways to secure education, etc.
4. Finally, "*The entire face of our society became a victim of the circumstances of not our making, ... everything was drastically affected.*"<sup>32</sup>

To ensure the maximum reach of its ideological imprint, TTP has launched three online magazines since 2017 especially for women. First magazine was published in 2017 titled, "Sunnat-i-Khaura" (Literally translated to The Way of Khaura). Khaura was an early follower of Prophet Muhammad PBUH. This magazine is comprised of the interview of wife of Fazlullah Khorasani and an article by Pakistani female doctor entitled "My journey from ignorance to guidance".<sup>33</sup> The prior encourages child marriages to avoid the "moral destruction of society" if the young boys and girls are left unmarried for too long. Editorial urges women to invite 'like-minded' sisters to secret gatherings and to learn how to use weapons and grenades. This marked the shift in the ideological stance of the TTP vis-à-vis women, wherein women are seen to be 'nurturer of the Jihadis and be prepared to physically undertake 'holy pursuit-Jihad' for ensuring a 'Just Islamic Order'.<sup>34</sup>

Then in 2023, TTP published the second online magazine titled, "Khawateen ka Jihad", (translated as The Holy War of Women), which stressed upon the women to support the jihad. This magazine is considered to create the

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<sup>32</sup> Author's off record conversation with the brother of girls from the NMD.

<sup>33</sup> "Jihadi Glamour: TTP Launches Women's Magazine", *AFP*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1349061>

<sup>34</sup> Female Peace Activist, Interview by the Author, January 5, 2024, Peshawar.

space and environment for their upcoming third online magazine entitled, “Banat-e- Khadijat-ul-Kubra” (translated to Daughters of Khadijat-ul-Kubra). The latest issue reinforces the patriarchal values and customs of the tribal society and encourages women to serve and support their men.<sup>35</sup> The name of their recent publication holds great significance for Muslims, as Khadijat-ul-Kubra was the first wife of Prophet Muhammad PBUH and holds noteworthiness in the history of Islam. The attribution of the magazine with Khadija RA applies that as daughter of Khadija RA, all Muslim women must follow so and so practices. According to Afiya S. Zia in an interview, the magazine only focuses on maintaining the patriarchal status quo.<sup>36</sup> It is pertinent to note that the magazines are not published in Pashto rather in Urdu, to reach a wider audience.

TTP has always mutated its approach and tactics and finds innovative ways to engage the women and youth whether it was through radio or social media in today’s times. TTP is also cautious of its actions especially since merger, as they want to maintain the status quo. They are promoting a “soft version” of Taliban by encouraging women to get education, but at the same time they believe that education such as “engineering and sciences” is unnecessary for women.

Now the TTP is spreading the propaganda through social media channels just like ISIS, which is that women are perceived as a strategic demographic because they have the ability to exert influence over their sons. If women are converted to the militant cause, they can encourage their sons - or daughters for that matter - to join it as well. TTP has floated multiple pages, groups and profiles that share the updates and information on daily basis. One question arises how these

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Zaman, “Pakistani Taliban Releases New Magazine Geared Towards Women”, *Voice of America*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistani-taliban-release-new-magazine-g geared-toward-women/7187254.html>

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Zaman, “Pakistani Taliban.”



groups and pages are still active, the answer to this is simple that the Taliban use these groups to share the links of other groups through these pages and virtual spaces, so if Facebook or Twitter blocks one page or profile, the other is immediately active and has been shared with the target audience.<sup>37</sup>

## **5. Women as Peacebuilders in NMDs:**

Historically, women have played a vital role in peacebuilding since centuries and will continue to do so. Peacebuilding is a long and rigorous process, comprising years of efforts and resilience by the members of society. Same is the case with the women in NMDs, despite strict rules, regulations, customs and traditions, women of NMDs have shown resilience by standing against the Taliban. To discourage young girls and women from education, the TTP attacked various girls' schools and colleges. As a way out, teachers started teaching at their homes to continue the education of girls.<sup>38</sup> There were other minor yet significant acts that women did as peacebuilders such as attending the funerals, which was against the custom, but they showed their resilience through this act. Despite threats from TTP, women continued their support to the NGO workers especially in health and education sectors.

To mention one such case is of 25-year-old Farida Afridi, who was killed by Taliban in 2012. Even though she died, the organization she co-founded; SAWERA (Society for Appraisal & Women Empowerment in Rural Areas) is thriving today by providing “skill based” training to young girls and women in

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<sup>37</sup> Manam Hanfi, “Social Media as a Source of Radicalization: A Case study of Pakistan”, *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 4, no 1 (2022).

<sup>38</sup> “Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan’s North West”, *Crisis Group*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/321-women-and-peacebuilding-in-pakistan.pdf>

Balochistan and NMDs.<sup>39</sup> Even though the organization has once been bombed and has received numerous threatening calls, it continues to work towards empowering women and advocating for their rights. Another organization, named WEO (Women Empowerment Organization; Supporting women to Lead) is providing quality education to girls and boys in a protective environment in the NMDs. So far WEO has 12 schools in running, of which eight are newly established and 4 are rehabilitated. They have enrolled more than 2000 students and have provided learning kits and other educational documents.<sup>40</sup> The Social Protection and Gender Mainstreaming Unit in the Planning and Development Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government also organized a three-day regional moot in Peshawar to enhance the role of women in peacebuilding.<sup>41</sup> The moot included women youth leaders, social workers, religious leaders and the governmental officials from the Social Welfare, Education, Local Government Departments and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on Status of Women. The objective of this moot was to debate on issues regarding building a resilient society, highlighting the role of women as peacebuilders by empowering local government, civil society organizations, and women and social workers from the NMDs.

Women are agents of change, but the situation in the NMDs due to the tribal system and centuries old traditions creates hurdles for women to participate in the peacebuilding activities. It is a long journey to integrate women as peacebuilders in the NMDs, especially with the TTP resurging and engaging women with new tactics. Since the districts have been merged, government, NGOs and the civil

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<sup>39</sup> Anum Mehmood, "Empowering Women through Vocational Training centers in Pakistan, *Borgen Project*, October 25, 2023, <https://borgenproject.org/vocational-training-centers-in-pakistan/>

<sup>40</sup> List of Projects by Women Empowerment Organization, <https://www.weopak.org/projects.php>

<sup>41</sup> Munir Khan Afridi, "Moot arranged to enhance women's role in peacebuilding", *The News*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1155567-moot-arranged-to-enhance-women-s-role-in-peacebuilding>

society are making a commendable effort to empower women by advocating and raising awareness about their rights. Yet, it is a long run, as just last year when the village councillors and other women were invited at the Jirga Hall in Jamrud to guide them on approaching courts on matters related to inheritance and other rights, the event was suddenly called off as the tribal elders called it an attack on their “honour”.<sup>42</sup> The emergence and introduction of the provincial and federal laws are still fairly challenging for the tribesmen.

Given this scenario, the Government of Pakistan needs to play an active role in including the women leaders and change makers at the policy as well as ground level to transform the NMDs from conflict zone to peaceful areas. First and foremost, the political participation of women must be made mandatory. The participation does not only mean a woman standing in the electoral process but the registration and casting of vote by women per their choices. Second, the media needs to play a vital role in portraying women as positive negotiators instead of reinforcing the stereotypes associated with women.

Engagement of youth and integration within the rest of the society can break the repressive chains created by TTP. One major reason why youth is more inclined towards joining TTP is that youth is either unemployed, underpaid and detached from the societal and state setup. There is an urgency to initiate programs that integrate the youth from NMDs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa first and then in rest of the country. The women networks working in NMDs also need to work together with the support of INGOs, local and provincial governmental functionaries to de-radicalize the society for sustainable peace and prosperity.

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<sup>42</sup> Jamaima Afridi, “Tribal Women pursuing inheritance rights in face of opposition”, *Voicepk*, June 30, 2023, <https://voicepk.net/2023/06/tribal-women-pursuing-inheritance-rights-in-face-of-opposition/>

The ultimate goalpost should be to continue the drive towards women empowerment in NMDs that will ensure safe and secure access to education, appreciates attendance of young girls from primary to college, prohibits child and early marriages, and open up economic avenues in alignment with the customary and traditional norms of the society.

## **6. Conclusion:**

In conclusion, there is an immediate need to address the customs and traditions without disrespecting any culture and tribe but at the same time to counter the gender discrimination and exclusion from spaces especially educational institutions and workplaces. It is the need of the hour that Government of Pakistan take strict action on honour killing and child marriages. If these two problems are addressed initially, they could help the society in progressing towards development and empowerment without hurting the essence of the tribal culture and traditions. The Constitution of Pakistan provides equal rights to men and women regardless of age, gender and ethnicity, it is therefore necessary to uphold the constitutional values as countrymen.

From the overleaf discussion, it is clear that the role of ideology specifically fused with religion remains critical both for the VNSAs (TTP) and State. TTP is a very innovative and adaptable organization especially when it comes to mutating their ideational footprint. TTP continues its radicalization drive through various means, consequently the Government of Pakistan also needs to take initiatives that counter radicalization through same effectiveness by using social media and integrating the youth and women in the society.

For the state, task is to curtail the setting-in of this trend of female agency as facilitator, fundraiser, and instituter of Jihad. There is urgent need to understand the sensitivity of the situation and understand that female sufferings in the NMDs need deeper introspection and an inclusive CVE. Women belonging to the NMDs and beyond should be envisioned an agent of moderating extremism and societal peace. The task of national security experts is to tap into the potential of women to reclaim a moderate and progressive Pakistan. The state must invest in female education & economic empowerment to build an equitable and secure eco-system. In short, women are agents of change, and they can play a vital role in peacebuilding in the NMDs. Thus, it is pertinent to understand that an integrated approach is needed to counter TTP's so-called 'Pure Islamic Order' ideological narrative and repressive tactics in the ex-FATA regions.

In crux, TTP-Ideology-Women equation remains a complex, and somewhat ignored and unaddressed subject in the Islamabad's CT and CVE policy planning and practices. There is need to enhance inter-agency cooperation, invest in capacity building, sharing of data and undertake regular policy appraisals. All of this cannot be delivered in the absence of positive state-society equation. Renewing of the social contract between the 'people and state' is critical to eradicate TTP's inhuman ideological moorings and tactics from the NMDs. The present research affirms that TTP regard women sufferings (in the NMDs) as an 'exaggerated fact' and people in the mainland including policy circles situate it as a 'conveniently ignored reality'. This research study maintains that reality is much more complex and contextual realities ranging from patriarchal culture, economic, educational and legal discrimination and exploitation of female agency needs to be registered and acknowledged for proactive peace within and beyond the NMDs.