Transforming Violent Extremist Masculinity for Preventing Violent Extremism in the Newly Merged Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

*Mossarat Qadeem**

Abstract

> *This paper looks into the reinforcing patriarchal power structures that benefit men over women as well as men over other less-powerful men. These structures shape the ways in which masculine norms contribute to the perpetration and experience of violent extremism in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It also discusses how gender and other identities influence motivations, experiences, and risk factors for those who choose or do not choose to become involved in violent extremist groups. It confirms the interplay between local narratives, ideology, material conditions and power structures in forming violent extremist masculinities and using the same for preventing violent extremism (PVE). The paper delves into the transformative methodology developed by the author to engage men and boys- encompassing community leaders, fathers, religious figures, peace advocates, youth, and others - alongside women and girls.*

Keywords: Violent Extremist Masculinities, Gender Norms, Cultural Narratives, Extremism, NMDs, Terrorism.

* Ms. Mossarat Qadeem is co-founder of PAIMAN Alumni Trust, a pioneer organization on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), interfaith harmony, inclusive peace education, and governance in Pakistan. Currently, she is a visiting fellow at the Centre for Women Peace and Security, London School of Economics (LSE). She can be contacted at mossarat_coco@yahoo.com

1. Concept of Violent Masculinity

Gender is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others. More specifically, gender does not live in the person, but rather in social transactions defined as 'gendered'.[1] Henceforth, adhering to masculine norms emanates from the fulfilment of societal mandates dictating the embodiment of 'masculinity' across the spectrum of one's public and private domains. In the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa factors such as religion, social norms, and historical influences play a significant role in shaping the construct of masculinities. We observe a disparity wherein men and young boys experience greater social pressure compared to women and young girls, necessitating adherence to prevailing gender norms. As a result, male behaviour and their beliefs about gender are more stereotypical than females, making them actively construct and reconstruct the dominant norms of masculinity. These violent masculinities are supported by cognitive templates that stem from patriarchy and are thus linked with structural, cultural and epistemological violence commonly practiced.[2] Moreover, in the face of a challenge to a man's gender identity, there exists a propensity to accentuate traditional masculine attributes, thereby engaging in an exaggerated display of masculinity. Consequently, in addition to these stereotypical masculine traits, extreme forms of masculinity are displayed through "toughness, aggression, lack of empathy, devaluation of women, the need for respect, competitiveness, and homophobia."[3]

"Masculinity" can be defined as encompassing identities, power dynamics (both within male groups and over women), actions at both individual and

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[1] Will H. Courtenay, "Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: a theory of gender and health," *Social Science & Medicine* 50, no. 10 (2000):1385-1401.

[2] Ivana Milojev, "Transforming Violent Masculinities in Serbia and Beyond," in *Peace Psychology in the Balkans: Dealing with a Violent Past while Building Peace* (Springer, February 2012), 57-73.

[3] Maria N. Scaptura and Kaitlin M. Boyle, "Masculinity Threat, 'Incel' Traits, and Violent 39 Fantasies Among Heterosexual Men in the United States," *Feminist Criminology* 15, no. 3 (2020):278– 298.

collective levels, and the norms associated with manhood that are held both individually and reinforced by society. Masculinity is socially constructed, contextual, intersectional, and interacts with numerous other factors.[4] The notion that male identity alone can fully explain participation in violent extremism is a fallacy, instead it is one of the several interconnected elements.

2. Masculinity in Tribal Community of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Traditional masculine norms require that men be stoic, controlled, self-sufficient, independent, and strong. In addition to these traits, however, in Pakhtun culture to be masculine is to be daring, loud and aggressive. Where does this notion of masculinity come from? Pakhtuns are known for their strong sense of identity and adherence to a code of honour known as Pakhtunwali, which is a set of conventions and rules that are fluid and changeable. It is a centuries old code that traditionally served as the backbone of Pakhtun society and includes concepts such as *Melmastia* (hospitality), *Nanawatai* (refuge), and *Badal* (revenge).[5] It is a central aspect of Pakhtun culture and plays a vital role in shaping notions of masculine identity among Pakhtuns. The principle of *Nanawatai*, which entails providing refuge to those in need, reflects the traditional role of Pakhtuns as guardians of their communities and is intricately linked to their notions of masculinity. Similarly, an integral aspect of Pakhtunwali is the concept of *Badal*, or seeking revenge, which mandates that Pakhtun men retaliate if they or their kin have been wronged, as it is closely associated with the preservation of honour.[6] Pakhtun men are obliged to safeguard and uphold the honour of their family, tribe, and community, even

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[4] Mellisa Johnston, Jacqui True, and Zineb Benalla, Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya," *Monash University Gender, Peace and Security and UN Women* (2019).
[5] Bruce L. Benson and Zafar R. Siddiqui, "Pashtunwali: Law for the lawless, defense for the stateless," *International Review of Law and Economics* 37 (2014):108-20.
[6] Bruce L. Benson and Zafar R. Siddiqui, "Pashtunwali: Law for the lawless, defense for the stateless."

resorting to violence, if necessary.[7] These vendettas may persist across generations to prevent *Paighor* (taunt) from others within the community. These principles are transmitted across generations, moulding their perception of masculinity from early on. Pakhtunwali thus provides insights into a unique and diversified cultural perspective that differs from other conservative, traditional tribal societies, and it provides the reference points for notions of ideal man - and womanhood.[8]

As previously mentioned, this code of conduct embodies virtues such as courage, integrity, and dominance, which are revered as qualities of the quintessential man. According to Pakhtunwali, men are obligated to personify these masculine characteristics and carry out their duties as protectors, decision makers, leaders, and providers. The enduring cultural significance and ingrained essence of Pakhtunwali serve to reinforce dominant forms of masculinity by shaping the conduct of Pakhtun individuals, both male and female, and influencing their perspectives on traditional gender roles.

In Pakhtun society the virtues of courage and chivalry reverberates through maternal lullabies, interwoven with folk songs and '*Attan*' (traditional dances) extolling themes of valour and might. The obedience and submissiveness of women is considered cultural and ethical and the folk lore like *Tappa*, *Kakari Ghari*, *Da Attan Narey,* and the bridal laments called "*Angai*", particularly reinforce the structures that hold up the paranoia of male hegemony as a naturally constructed phenomenon. The tribal Pakhtun society, in its unconscious adherence to the constructs of masculinity, unwittingly perpetuates a cycle wherein normative social constructions dictate behaviours and perceptions, unthinkingly embraced by both

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[7] Palwasha Kakar, "Tribal law of Pashtunwali and women's legislative authority," *Afghan Legal History Project, Islamic Legal Studies Program, Harvard Law of School,* 2004.
[8] Lutz Rzehak, "Doing Pashto: Pashtunwali as the ideal of honourable behaviour and tribal life among the Pashtuns," *AAN Thematic Report 01/2011*, 2010, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/specialreports/pashtunwali-tribal-life-and-behaviour-among-thepashtuns/.

genders. This insidious stage sets the backdrop for the dissemination of toxic masculinity, its tendrils seeping into every facet of existence, sowing seeds of aggression, violence, dominance, and power.

So, the question arises, what do masculinities have to do with violent extremism? Since the use of violence is closely associated with manliness, this link usually fuels conflict and make armed responses to disagreements appear legitimate, inevitable and natural in this society. However, Pakhtunwali and all other traits of Pakhtun culture and traditions have been in practice since centuries but there was no violent extremism in these areas. It is a commonly known fact that there are myriad contributing factors to violent extremism.[9]

Western media often depicts Pakhtun men as violent, backward, and oppressive toward women.[10] This depiction relies on stereotypes and overly simplistic views of Pakhtun culture, overlooking its intricate layers and subtleties. Such narratives also shape the dynamics of masculinity within Pakhtun society.

3. Literature Review

There is a lack of research on violent masculinities in Pakistan, with most studies focused on Pakistani and Muslim masculinities among migrants in the Global North.[11] Policy-oriented research and analysis on the link between masculinities and violent extremism in merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in

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[9] Mossarat Qadeem, "Preventing and Countering Women's Participation in Violent Extremism in Pakistan: A Practitioner's Perspective," *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, December 10, 2019, https://www.boell.de/en/2019/12/10/preventing-and-countering-womens-participation-violent-extremism-pakistan-practitioners

[10] Bilquees Daud, "Perception of Afghanistan in the Western media," *Afghanistan Center at Kabul University Publication*, April 18, 2020, https://acku.edu.af/perception-of-afghanistan-in-the-westernmedia/.

[11]Mwenza Blella, "British Pakistani Muslim masculinity, (in) fertility, and the clinical encounter," *Medical Anthropology* 37, no. 2 (2018): 117-30.

particular is very limited. Some studies conducted on this topic have mostly focused on men's experiences with aggression and violence in the context of Afghanistan. Take, for instance, Andrea Chiovenda's ethnographic research, which delves into the impact of warfare on Pakhtun men and the evolving landscape of masculine norms.[12] He posits that a diverse range of frameworks is necessary to accurately capture the spectrum of masculinities within the Pakhtun community. Likewise, Mosawi highlights the dual role of Pakhtun men as both perpetrators and targets of gender-based violence, often stemming from notions of honour. He illustrates that honour-related mistreatment is prevalent, yet often misconstrued in men's everyday experiences.[13] While studies on indigenous masculinities in Pakistan have predominantly scrutinized this phenomenon through religious and social media perspectives, scant consideration has been given to how Pakhtun men's ideal of masculinity are practiced, transformed, emphasized, and deinstitutionalized.[14]

4. Methods

The paper is developed on the basis of a rapid review of literature on the confluence of violent extremist masculinities and efforts to transform them in merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A qualitative methodology was adopted and further enriched by the author's decades long first-hand experience and observation of practices and norms in this area of study. In-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) allowed the author to gain a deeper understanding of the notion of violent extremist masculinities, its link with violent

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[12] Andrea Chiovenda, *Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020)

[13] Sayed M. Mosawi 2020. "You must keep your 'honour', a man without 'honour' is no man at all': Honour, masculinity and violence in Afghanistan." in *Men, Masculinities and Honour-Based Abuse* edited by Mohammad Mazher Idriss (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2020), 128-49.

[14] Maleeha Aslam, "Islamism and Masculinity: Case study Pakistan." *Historical Social Research* 39, no. 3 (2014): 135-49.

extremism and pathways for transforming this notion for preventing violent extremism (PVE). The data not only helped to explore the nuances of the constructions of violent extremist masculinities among Pakhtuns in the merged districts, but also gave an insight on how to utilize Pakhtunwali more positively for addressing violent masculinities.

Throughout the research, ethical guidelines were rigorously followed and informed consent from every participant was secured.

5. Link Between Weaponization of Masculinity and Violent Extremism in the Newly Merged Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The mere fact that most known violent extremists are young men, it therefore places gender at the centre of the analysis. Patriarchy (an ideological framework that informs behaviour) is central to violence, and so masculinities have to be treated as a possible catalyst of violent extremism. Violent extremists and terrorist groups exploit and manipulate gender norms, stereotypes and power dynamics in their recruitment, ideologies, and operations across the tribal belt of Pakistan. The entrenched patriarchal hierarchies, favouring certain men over women and even privileging select men over others, effectively mould the contours through which masculine norms intertwine with the propagation and manifestation of violent extremism in this area. This insidious phenomenon frequently extols aggression as a definitive mechanism for asserting dominance and command. This deleterious manifestation of masculinity not only fosters the radicalization of individuals but also perpetuates unrelenting cycles of violence and oppression within the communities.

In the NMDs, violent extremist groups found fertile grounds to exploit the traditional notions of masculinity that are closely tied to one's perception of identity

by offering a sense of purpose, belonging, and validation to individuals who feel marginalized or disenfranchised within their communities. This area has experienced decades of conflict, militancy, and instability, which have exacerbated existing social tensions and inequalities. In this context, violent extremist groups have always exploited notions of masculinity to recruit disenfranchised young men who seek a sense of belonging, purpose, and empowerment through violence. Violent extremist groups glorify masculine traits of strength, bravery, and aggression, framing participation in militant activities as a way for men to assert their masculinity and defend their communities or religious beliefs. This weaponization of masculinity leads to fuelling a cycle of violence and extremism in the region.

An interviewee said, "With weapons in hand I can deter any powerful tribal elder and Malik who kept us subservient for generations. It is a symbol of power and strength which are essential for achieving success and respect in various contexts, particularly for youth from humble backgrounds like me."

These extremist groups in the NMDs manipulated the notions of masculinity, glorified aggression and attracted youth in particular to adopt violence as a pathway to honour and strength. This link reinforces a cycle of radicalization, where the glorification of violence as a masculine ideal further fuels extremist agendas and perpetuates societal harm.

Moreover, leveraging the unwavering dedication of the Pakhtuns to Islam, extremist factions establish their affiliation with the faith, employing narratives and myths to exalt a formidable worldwide Islamic masculinity. These organizations reference notions such as "global jihad" and "global Islamic masculinities" within their ideological constructs.

6. Violent Extremist Masculinity and Gender Dynamics

Rigid gender norms in the NMDs have always restricted women's ability to participate fully in social, economic, and political realms. For centuries, women have been rendered invisible and voiceless, resigned to their circumstances. The presence of violent extremist masculinity in this belt deeply affects women and gender dynamics. In such environments, where toxic masculinity and extremist ideologies dominate, women encounter increased dangers of violence, discrimination, and marginalization. The weaponization of masculinity within extremist ideologies manifests itself in the form of increased gender-based violence, including the subjugation and control of women and the enforcement of rigid gender roles. This reinforced patriarchal structure further perpetuates cycles of violence and oppression.

Women are often depicted either as victims, subject to direct/targeted violence and male-dominated decision-making, or as a potential force for preventing violent extremism. However, empirical data on women and violent extremism in the NMDs is particularly limited. In this conservative and tradition-ridden society, women mobility has always been limited. With coming of extremist forces nothing much has changed for the elderly women; however, it is the young female demographic that has suffered significantly as restrictions on their mobility affects their education and overall development.

Women in NMDs have been involved in violent extremist groups both directly and indirectly. Many women with whom the author engaged[15] shared that some of them actively supported and encouraged their male relatives to join the

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[15] Author's organization engaged radical women from the merged districts to understand early signs of violent extremism in individual and community, ways of preventing it and alternate narrative to extremist narrative etc.

jihad, a narrative propagated by violent extremist groups that found resonance throughout society, largely due to the widespread lack of deep religious understanding among the populace. This narrative holds sway over ordinary tribal women and girls, who often possess limited knowledge of religion and therefore rely heavily on local imams and other purported religious scholars for guidance and interpretation of religious texts. Religious viewpoints, regarding the duty and rewards of jihad, are being woven in a compelling narrative that intertwines obligation and incentive. This narrative, bolstered by societal pressures, creates a formidable matrix of motivations for women and girls. Consequently, they face a unique challenge in scrutinizing narratives propagated by violent extremists, particularly when these narratives purport to derive from Quranic teachings. This situation was exploited by the extremist groups who called on women to contribute to jihad by sending their sons, and supporting it in all form. Many women would stitch clothes for members of violent extremist groups, cook food, raise funds,[16] and provide them shelter at times. For some women, the conviction that the men in their families have been engaged in "God's work" was deeply ingrained, instilled by male relatives and local religious leaders. Some of the women were either coerced or manipulated into supporting extremist causes through propaganda or the influence of their male relatives. This further entrenches gendered power dynamics, as women's roles were instrumentalized to serve the goals of extremist movements. For instance, a female interviewee proudly said, "When my son joined the extremist group, it elevated his prominence in our community and people would respect and fear him as well." Membership in these groups thus enabled these men to circumvent the conventional constraints of age and wealth, swiftly attaining the pinnacle of hegemonic male status.

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[16] Mossarat Qadeem, "Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan," Working Paper**,** Women Peace and Security Center, LSE, August 16, 2018 http://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2018/wps16Qadeem.pdf

A male interviewee said, "In NMDs, since generations it has been men who are called to fight to protect their families and communities, particularly women and children. As a consequence, we men have to exhibit certain characteristics, such as mental and physical toughness, stoicism, and courage. When we feel that we lack these to a sufficient extent we try to overcompensate for these feelings of inadequacy by resorting to violence to show that we are 'real men'." [17]

Another male interviewee from Khyber district provided another perspective: "No matter how oppressed women are, they still hold some influence over their sons and husbands, particularly their sons. When women speak about hardships such as loss of income, dependency on others, insecurity, and separation from family, men listen. Sometimes men need to hear these concerns from their mothers or wives and want to heed their advice. However, women often lack the confidence to voice their concerns or are too afraid to persuade their male relatives not to join extremist groups."

7. Can Violent Masculinity be addressed?

Addressing violent extremist masculinity and its links to violent extremism in the NMDs requires concerted efforts to promote positive masculinity, social cohesion, and peacebuilding initiatives, that prioritize gender equality and human rights.

Efforts to promote gender equality, challenge harmful gender stereotypes, and empower marginalized communities, including women and youth are the most difficult tasks. However, they remain are crucial for fostering resilience against extremism and building an inclusive society in the NMDS.

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[17] Participant in a Focused Group Discussion, FGD arranged by Author in Bara, Khyber district, September, 2023.

To transform violent masculinities, it is essential to create safe spaces within NMDs that facilitate conversations, reflections, and accountability, fostering a shared journey among men to address the issue of violent extremism. Additionally, these spaces should focus on promoting the positive aspects of being a man. Discussions about violent extremist masculinities have been notably absent in this region. This absence stems from a lack of awareness that such masculinities are detrimental not only to men but also to women, girls, and the entire community. Without recognizing the harmful impact of violent extremist masculinity, these communities have not initiated essential conversations or interventions. Consequently, the pervasive effects of these harmful masculinities continue to undermine social cohesion and overall well-being. Addressing this issue requires raising awareness and fostering dialogue to highlight the broader negative consequences and promote healthier, and more positive masculine identities.

Addressing violent masculinity requires a multifaceted approach that targets both individual attitudes and broader societal structures. For effective transformation of violent extremist masculinities, a deeper understanding is essential. This understanding must encompass the ways in which harmful masculinities, gender inequality, and violent attitudes and practices, as well as young men's identity construction and trauma from their own experiences of violence, influence their engagement in violent extremism.

The path away from violent extremism is a complex process involving identity, beliefs, psycho-social dynamics, and practical considerations. Transforming violent extremist masculinity is challenging in regions where such behaviours are considered normal expressions of manliness by the majority. Effective interventions must be strategically designed to align with the cultural and religious context of the merged districts. There are best practices and proven

initiatives from the same region that can serve as examples for transforming violent extremist masculinities and PVE. While these models can be adapted to changing circumstances, they largely help in understanding the harmful impact of violent masculinities on the progress, development, security, peace, and stability of the NMDs.

Linking interpersonal work to policy reform and structural changes in government institutions and local level entities is essential for comprehensively addressing the social and cultural drivers that connect men and extremist violent masculinity. This approach acknowledges that the roots of violent behaviour are deeply embedded in societal norms and structures.[18] By integrating efforts to reshape masculinities within the broader framework of peacebuilding, we can leverage these initiatives to catalyse significant institutional change at different levels. This, in turn, supports strategic movement-building for gender responsive policies creating a more conducive community for women's socio-economic and political empowerment. When these efforts are aligned with policy reforms and institutional changes, they create a supportive environment that reinforces positive behaviours and attitudes. For instance, policies promoting gender-sensitive education and training within police and other security agencies can help dismantle the cultural underpinnings of violent extremist masculinities and encourage more equitable practices.

8. Transforming Violent Masculinities to Prevent Violent Extremism

Transforming extremist masculinity to PVE requires comprehensive and multifaceted strategies that address root causes, promote positive alternatives and non-violent expressions of masculinity. A holistic and inclusive approach is

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[18] Hannah Wright, "'Masculinities perspectives': Advancing a Radical Women, Peace and Security Agenda?" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 22, no. 5 (2020): 652-674

required to tackle the complex drivers of violent extremism, including extremist masculinity.

A multi-sectoral collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector is a pre-requisite for addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of violent extremism, leveraging diverse expertise and resources. Since the notion of violent masculinity is psychological, social and cultural, interventions should be focused on both the individual and community.

An evidence-based approach to transforming violent masculinities and PVE needs to be adopted. This method uses research and data-driven strategies to address the underlying factors contributing to extremism. It includes interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, social and emotional learning programs, community engagement, and counter-narrative strategies. These interventions are informed by rigorous evaluation and monitoring to ensure their effectiveness. By targeting individuals at risk, promoting alternative narratives, and fostering cross-sector collaboration, this approach aims to dismantle extremist ideologies and encourage non-violent expressions of masculinity, contributing to peaceful coexistence.

9. State-Society Relationship

The lack of trust between the state and communities of merged districts exacerbates grievances, marginalization, and feelings of disenfranchisement, creating fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root and flourish. To address it, the state needs to develop an inclusive policy and legal framework grounded in the reality of NMDs that address discrimination, marginalization, and human rights abuses, including those based on gender. This can help create an environment that is less conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

One effective approach involves transparent and inclusive governance practices that prioritize community engagement and participation in decision-making processes. The state should prioritize initiatives that address the socio-economic grievances of marginalized communities, such as improving access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities and other basic services. Building trust also requires fostering upon communication channels between state institutions and local leaders, religious figures, and civil society organizations. These stakeholders play a crucial role in bridging the gap between the state and communities, advocating for their needs, and facilitating dialogue and cooperation. By demonstrating accountability, responsiveness, and a genuine commitment to addressing community concerns, the state can gradually rebuild trust and foster resilience against violent extremist ideologies, promoting a more inclusive and peaceful society in the NMDs.

10. Community Engagement

Dialogues and forums within communities should be organized on a regular basis to discuss the harmful effects of extremist masculinity and explore alternative, positive expressions of masculinity. It is crucial to encourage open discussions that involve diverse voices, including youth, religious leaders, elders and also women and girls in a culturally responsive manner. Promoting dialogue and cohesion among various groups of men is invaluable as it embraces an intercommunity and intergenerational approach. By engaging individuals across the ideological spectrum and facilitating interactions between groups that would otherwise never meet, this strategy helps build trust and foster strong, mutually beneficial relationships. Regardless of ideological or political orientation, such community engagement instils a sense of community and collective responsibility that is essential for addressing violent masculinity. As rightly said, "It is critical to start with sensitizing men by engaging deeply at a local level to build men's gender

awareness and create equal partnerships among women and men for sustainable and equitable action and peace."[19]

Small steps should be taken to raise awareness among men in the NMDs about social and gender justice, human rights, and their role in addressing violent masculinities. Adopting a whole-of-society approach, government and civil society groups should collaborate to mobilize and strengthen the social activism of individuals and institutions to transform patriarchal and violent extremist masculinities, as well as local oppressive systems, which are deeply ingrained in the individual, socio-economic, institutional, and political structures of NMDs. As one interviewee said, "If one person speaks out against violent extremist masculinity or the oppression of marginalized groups and women, they are labelled as '*Zinkha*' (transgender) and face isolation. We need robust platforms and the support of government agencies to bring about mental, psychological, cultural, and structural change in this region."

PAIMAN orchestrated an intellectual symphony with men and boys, coordinating profound dialogue to dismantle the entrenched negativity and extremist masculinity ingrained within them. [20] Working in the tribal region for years and understanding the cultural and psychological dynamics of the area, PAIMAN, through series of workshops and community sessions, taught men and boys to navigate the world through a lens of service, balance, bravery, introspection, and accountability. By fostering a sense of service, they learned the value of contributing positively to their community and supporting others. Bravery encouraged them to stand up for justice and challenge oppressive norms, while introspection allowed them to reflect on their own behaviours and attitudes

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[19] "Transforming Violent Masculinities to Move the WPS Agenda Forward," *Peace Women,* 30 October 2015, https://www.peacewomen.org/node/95466

[20] PAIMAN Trust is a national level organization working around women peace and security and preventing violent extremism across Pakistan since 2008.

critically. Accountability equipped them with the skills to take responsibility for actions that harm others and advocate for the rights and well-being of others.

Through this holistic approach, the men of NMDs understood that active participation and peaceful interactions are crucial for building a just and harmonious society. This awareness emphasizes the role each person plays in promoting social justice and gender responsive systems, helping to dismantle violent masculinities and fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity.

While PAIMAN cannot claim to have transformed the entire community, it has however successfully sown the seeds of realization and understanding regarding the harmful impact of violent masculinities in parts of NMDs. Through its efforts, PAIMAN has reached men, boys, women, and girls, raising their awareness about the detrimental effects of such behaviours. This newfound awareness has sparked a movement within the community, with individuals carrying forward the message and working towards positive change. By fostering dialogue and encouraging non-violent behaviours, PAIMAN has laid the groundwork for a socially cohesive society in parts of merged districts. Although the journey towards complete transformation is complicated and difficult, the initial steps taken by PAIMAN have been crucial in shifting mindsets and inspiring collective action. When young boys joined PAIMAN's Youth TOLANA[21] initiative to PVE in Mohmand district and voiced their concerns about the harmful effects of extremist masculinities, they were criticized as being weak or unmanly for choosing nonviolent methods of expression. Sakhi Jan said, "Keeping and carrying weapons is a tribal tradition and is considered as an honour but using it to

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[21] Women and Youth TOLANAs are PAIMAN Community Peace structures in selected merged and other districts of KP to engage and empower communities, create awareness regarding violent extremism, it early signs and ways of addressing it, mediate local feuds and advocate with government authorities regarding issues affecting women, youth and other venerable communities.

kill our own people is a great dishonour and inhuman as we learned from PAIMAN's workshops."

11. Peace Education:

For the long-term transformation, a curriculum should be introduced in educational institutes (both schools and Madaris) that instils values of tolerance, pluralism, inclusivity, and non-violence in minds of youth. This curriculum should also foster critical thinking to resist extremist narratives that glorify violence and aggression as masculine ideals. It is time to introduce inclusive peace education in our education institutions to strengthen students' ability to build healthy relationships, be resilient, respect other human's dignity and be collaborative with others. This will enable them to be cooperative so they can contribute to peacebuilding and social harmony in the long run, developing a sense of social responsibility needed in the 21st century.[22]

12. Youth and Women Empowerment:

Youth empowerment programs should provide opportunities for young men to engage in constructive activities, develop leadership skills, and challenge harmful gender norms. Both government and NGOs should offer mentorship, vocational training, and recreational activities that promote positive forms of masculinity while fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. These programs can help young men build confidence, develop a strong sense of identity, and cultivate a commitment to community service.

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[22] Mossarat Qadeem, "Peace Education: A Remedy for Preventing Violent Extremism in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2021)

Similarly, women and girls should receive vocational training and be connected with market opportunities to earn a livelihood. Additionally, these programs should focus on developing their leadership skills and raising awareness about their rights as outlined in Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan. This dual approach not only empowers women economically but also educates them about their legal and religious rights, enabling them to advocate for themselves and participate more in society.

By addressing both young men and women, these empowerment programs can contribute to a more balanced and equitable community. They help dismantle harmful gender norms and create an environment where both genders can thrive, support each other, and work towards common goals of social justice and economic stability.

13. Cultural and Religious Narrative:

Transforming violent masculinities requires challenging the prevalent belief that death is not a loss but a justified sacrifice. In this mindset, the killer of the martyr is seen as infamous rather than victorious, and death inspires rather than instils fear in the next generation of fighters. Developing counter-narratives within religious or cultural contexts is challenging, but crucial for PVE. This involves emphasizing the positive aspects of cultural narratives and religious texts. However, this task is complicated by the fact that extremist groups often promote higher, more abstract ambitions than mere material welfare. The crucial starting point for any initiative aimed at transforming violent masculinity in the NMDs is to engage religious and community leaders in a dialogue to develop alternatives capable of challenging extremist interpretations of religious or cultural norms,

while promoting inclusive and peaceful values in the long term.[23] Empowering these influential figures with platforms to showcase positive masculine role models from within the communities of merged districts, embodying traits such as empathy, cooperation, and non-violence, offers alternative pathways for young men to aspire to. This effectively counters the allure of extremist ideologies. It is vital that religious leaders be sensitized to their role as social actors who have the moral authority to deconstruct ideology, provide counter offers to vulnerable members of the society, and address local political, economic and ideological drivers of violent extremism.

Both religious and community leaders should be oriented to the importance of their role in addressing violent masculinity. They must speak the language of youth and explore every avenue to connect with them spiritually, psychologically, and socially because in the tribal context these leaders are usually alienated from youth. This will enhance their credibility and trust among community members which is a pre-requisite for effective prevention of violent extremism.

Religious, social, and community leaders ought to leverage religious texts and cultural traditions, such as Pakhtunwali, to advocate for interpretations of masculinity grounded in principles of peace, tolerance, and reverence for human rights. This approach serves to confront extremist narratives while emphasizing values of compassion and collaboration.

PAIMAN Trust engaged three key groups: Mullahs, local influential men, and the media. After crafting religious narratives to counter extremist ideologies

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[23] Michael S. kimmer in ' The Gendered society', RW Connell, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept' have explored the intersections of masculinity, violence, and extremism, providing insights into how traditional notions of masculinity can contribute to violent behavior and how alternative masculinities can be promoted.

using Quranic texts and the practices of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him), PAIMAN enlisted local religious leaders and renowned scholars to review and refine them. Likewise, cultural narratives emphasizing the positive aspects of Pakhtunwali were reviewed and refined by local intellectuals and leaders. Both sets of narratives were then disseminated through local media and mobile text messages.[24] PAIMAN developed a narrative around Islamic faith and Pakhtun culture that emphasizes that to be masculine is to understand one's values of respect for others, where bravery is associated with protecting the weak and needy. Expanding upon the well-known adage that Pakhtunwali is law for the lawless, defence for the stateless, PAIMAN reinterpreted it in a more affirmative light, framing it as a safeguard for women and marginalized communities against the influence of violent masculinity—a significant tenet of Pakhtunwali.

PAIMAN wove its religious narrative around the question of what it means to be a man in Islamic society. Having muscle, money and power and application of violence is not the concept of masculinity in Islam. Rather, Islam teaches that men should be kind, modest, and empathetic, as exemplified by the practices of the Prophet.[25] By promoting this alternate narrative of masculinity, communities could realize that Islamic teachings challenge extremist ideologies that distort the religion to justify violence and aggression. By highlighting the Prophet's example of shared manhood, communities were encouraged to reevaluate their perceptions of masculinity and question the narratives propagated by extremists.

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[24] Ten religious and ten cultural narratives were disseminated via mobile text messages and local media. Additionally, an eight-part drama series highlighting the heinous impact of violent extremism and the role of women and youth in preventing it was produced. This series was aired in March 2014 on Khyber TV in Pashto and later on DAWN TV and Waseb, dubbed in Urdu and Saraiki.

[25] The Prophet Muhammad's character and behaviour provide a blueprint for the ideal Muslim manhood which he demonstrated through kindness and compassion towards all, regardless of their social status or beliefs. His humility and modesty were evident in his interactions with women in particular and others in general, and his empathy extended to understanding and addressing the needs of those around him.

This shift in perspective is extremely important to foster critical thinking and dialogue within communities, leading many individuals to question the validity of extremist interpretations of Islam. By emphasizing the values of kindness, modesty, and empathy, Islam offers a counter-narrative that promotes peace, understanding, and cooperation among people of diverse backgrounds.

Ultimately, this alternate narrative of masculinity can serve as a powerful tool for countering extremism and promoting a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of Islam. It not only challenges harmful stereotypes but also reinforces the timeless values of humanity and decency that lie at the heart of Islam.

A poignant anecdote captures this dilemma: "I do not fully grasp the concept of jihad," Jameela Bibi form Mohmand district shared, "but the messages I receive from my family and the mosque's loudspeaker depict it as a religious obligation. Upon contemplating the tragic toll of innocent lives lost, a profound realization dawns after attending PAIMAN's community sessions: the distortion of religious texts to manipulate us becomes glaringly apparent. We are acutely aware that Islam unequivocally prohibits the taking of human life, particularly that of our own community members but we remain silent."

A local political leader from Khyber district during an interview elaborated: "Effective communication skills and deep religious knowledge are crucial for persuading someone to abandon a misguided path in life. One must be able to present logical and compelling arguments. Unfortunately, many men, youth, and women lack these essential skills and knowledge. It is not enough to simply tell someone to give up acts of violent extremism; one must continually explain why renouncing violence is necessary. Those who are ideologically committed and brainwashed are difficult to persuade and may never be convinced to abandon violence. Nevertheless, we must persist in our efforts, as the use of religious and

positive cultural narratives shared by PAIMAN has opened new avenues of understanding for all of us." This type of effort helps in promoting interpretations of masculinity rooted in peace, tolerance, and respect for human rights, reinforcing messages of compassion and cooperation.

14. Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing violent extremism by transforming extremist masculinity requires a multifaceted approach that tackles root causes and promotes positive alternatives. It demands a collaborative effort across sectors and levels of society, utilizing evidence-based interventions and fostering community engagement. To effectively address the complex drivers of violent extremism, a multi-sectoral collaboration involving government agencies, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector is essential. This collaboration leverages diverse expertise and resources to address the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of violent masculinity, focusing on both individuals and communities.

An evidence-based approach informed by research and data-driven strategies is crucial for transforming violent masculinities and preventing extremism. This approach includes interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, social and emotional learning programs, community engagement, and counter-narrative strategies, all rigorously evaluated to ensure effectiveness.

Recommendations:

1. *Strengthening the State-Society Relationship*: Develop inclusive policies and legal frameworks that address grievances, discrimination, and marginalization, while prioritizing transparent and inclusive governance practices. Fostering

trust and collaboration between the state and its citizens in the merged areas is essential for a more cohesive and resilient society, that is less susceptible to the influences of extremism and violence.

2. *Inclusive Policy Frameworks*: Integrate a gender perspective - including a focus on masculinities - across all counterterrorism and CVE policy and programming

3. *Promoting Community Engagement*: Facilitate inclusive dialogues and forums within communities to discuss the harmful effects of extremist masculinity and explore alternative expressions of masculinity.

4. *Investing in Peace Education*: Introduce inclusive peace education in educational institutions to foster critical thinking and promote values of tolerance, pluralism, and non-violence.

5. *Empowering Youth and Women*: Provide opportunities for constructive engagement and leadership development, while also offering vocational training and raising awareness about rights and gender equality.

6. *Cultivating Cultural and Religious Narratives*: Engage religious and community leaders to develop alternative narratives grounded in peace, tolerance, and human rights, while countering extremist ideologies.

7. *Collaborative Effort*s: Ultimately, addressing violent masculinity requires a coordinated effort across multiple sectors, including education, healthcare, law enforcement, and civil society. Their collective focus on transforming violent masculinities holds the promise of long-term positive change fostering a more inclusive and peaceful tribal society.