

## **Gendered Perceptions: Exploring Radicalization and Drivers in Women of NMDs**

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to understand the lack of gendered analysis of terrorism in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs). It discusses the spread of radicalization in women of NMDs, amidst the resurgence of terrorist activities especially by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Qualitative data collection method involving semi-structured interviews has been adopted, involving female psychologists, female officers from Law Enforcement Agencies, local women from NMDs and faculty of FATA University. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by using NVIVO software while keeping anonymity. This data led to a three-fold focus: radicalization of women, the urgency of terrorist organizations for visibility through roles played by women and the need for a gendered view of terrorism in NMDs. The significant theme remained that while women hailing from NMDs are not currently involved in active terrorist roles, however, if unattended they can be affected by the radical agenda of TTP and their female recruits.*

**Keywords:** Radicalization, Extremism, Terrorism, Gender, NMDs.

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## **1. Introduction**

Terrorism and conflict, insofar as gender is concerned have evolved dramatically over the past few decades. From the ‘Black Widows’ of Chechnya to the ‘jihadi suicide bombers’ of al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS), women have lately taken up active combatant roles. However, international society remains uncomfortable with the phenomenon, as some critics like Elshtain argue that “women are largely viewed as life-givers instead of life-takers”<sup>1</sup>; leading to a general perception that is overwhelmed by a rather unrecognizable active terrorist role of women in conflict. Consequently, the debate of active women perpetrators of terrorism remains limited in Pakistan’s security landscape as well. Generally, literature is available with androcentric perspectives, with violent roles played by women as an irregularity rather than a norm.<sup>2</sup> There may be numerous and not just one root cause that incites violent acts and notions in the female mind. Some psychologists believe that it is not just poverty, but majorly a feeling of deprivation in women which is coupled with lack of quality education that leads to extreme behaviour. Similarly, the absence of political openness, which prevents women from challenging societal norms, creates frustration that is subsequently exploited by terrorist organizations.

In this regard, where the NMDs and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a whole grapple with a resurgence of terrorist activities, the idea of a renewed role of women cannot be overlooked. This reality is evident in the first-ever reported female suicide attack conducted in Bajaur district in 2010, which left 45 people dead. The female terrorist was affiliated with TTP targeting the food distribution centre of the

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Preesman, “Female Suicide Bombers: An Uncomfortable Truth”, *Kings College London*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/female-suicide-bombers-an-uncomfortable-truth>

<sup>2</sup> Sara Mehmood, “Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan”, *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, and Violent Extremism* (2019): 69-93

World Food Program.<sup>3</sup> Later a couple alleged to be from Uzbekistan, blew themselves up at a Police station in Dera Ismail Khan district in 2011, while a female suicide bomber attacked the former head of Jamat-e-Islami Qazi Hussain Ahmed in Mohmand district, in 2012. Earlier, in the year 2007, a woman allegedly of Afghan origin blew herself up near a Christian missionary school and a military checkpoint in Peshawar, with the TTP suspected to be behind the attack.<sup>4</sup> Recently, Shari Baloch, a female Baloch militant, carried out a suicide attack by targeting a van with Chinese citizens at the Confucius Institute of Karachi University on April 26, 2022.<sup>5</sup> It is imperative that such incidents are not ignored as isolated ones, but instead used to evaluate the state's capability to tackle the possibility of an expanded involvement of women in terrorism.

It is also worth mentioning that to date, no proof of a terrorist act committed by local women of NMDs is available. However, women of foreign origin are reported to be used by TTP and other groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), for conducting suicide attacks.<sup>6</sup> These women are simultaneously used to run media and social media campaigns for outreach and ingress in the local women of NMDs. Meanwhile, access to the internet and social media remains nil to a minimum in this region. Still, the Umar Media Wing' of TTP has remained active since 2007-2008, which is now reported to be targeting women audiences. The significance of social media lies in its affordability and accessibility for spreading ideologies and agendas. Roshanara Choudhry the only British woman convicted of a violent attack, by stabbing a Member of Parliament, was motivated by YouTube videos of radical cleric Anwar Al Awlaki. This 'lone wolf' act, presents a case of indoctrination through internet without direct contact

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<sup>3</sup> Abdul Basit Khan, "Female suicide terrorism in Pakistan in the context of the Karachi University attack", *Arab News*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2079301>

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Basit Khan, "Female suicide terrorism."

<sup>5</sup> Abdul Basit Khan, "Female suicide terrorism."

<sup>6</sup> Interview by the author with a local woman from NMD's.

with any organization. Her experience also shows that Islamic State's online recruitment ideology has a clustered gender-specific propaganda.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, TTP has also channelled a strategy of targeting women through the publication of magazines, both online and print, alongside video and radio messages. Despite the unavailability of internet, they can reach out to society through their women recruits, and radio transmissions.

The question is why do these terrorist organizations want to inculcate radical ideas in women? The recruitment of women is likely to deliver specific advantages to anti-state groups such as the TTP, specifically in NMDs, and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) in Balochistan. It can allow them to evade security measures, expand the scope of their targets, and incorporate an element of surprise into their attacks due to the unexpected profile of the perpetrator. The use of female recruits can be especially appealing to such groups since they often garner high levels of publicity and can be particularly deadly in societies where women's participation in public life is limited.

The use of females for violent extremism is as old as the phenomenon of terrorism. Historically, women typically participated in supporting roles, as informants, stitching suicide jackets, raising finances, and also providing shelter to wanted terrorists.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, the use of female suicide bombers represents both the strengths and weaknesses of terrorist groups. On one hand, it generates the impression of desperation within these groups, such as being unable to achieve their targets through conventional terroristic methods – hence reliance on non-

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad," *Journal of Policy and Internet* 8, no. 1 (2015), 5-33.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Speckhard, "Women in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism", *United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women*, 2021. [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2021/2/PVE\\_TrainingManual-min.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2021/2/PVE_TrainingManual-min.pdf)

conventional methods such as use of female suicide bombers. On the other hand, it also underscores a higher level of commitment and devotion by female operatives of the terrorist groups to their self-perceived goals and objectives.

The direct participation of women in terrorist acts, particularly as suicide bombers, is an aspect that merits serious consideration. It is imperative to understand and acknowledge this trend at the outset and ensure access to state-controlled social media, regulated through the tools of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This will in turn deny space for developing any radical ideas for the women of NMDs.

## **2. 'Radical' to Terrorist: The Debate**

The idea of women conducting violent acts has remained on the radar of numerous states in the world, with the European Parliament overwhelmed with the concept because of the adherence of an increasing number of women to the Islamic State's ideology.<sup>9</sup> The Human Rights Council Report defines radicalization as '*an entire process through which the female may adopt extremist aspirations.*'<sup>10</sup> However, this may or may not be used later for violent goals. On the other hand, some commentators suggest that this process of radicalization may lead females to either facilitate violent acts, act as a 'lone wolf' or also be recruited by some terrorist organization for later conducting violent acts.<sup>11</sup>

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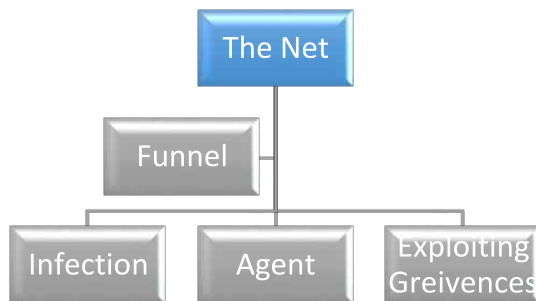
<sup>9</sup> "Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," Special Report, International Crisis Group, March 14, 2016, [https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state\\_0.pdf](https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state_0.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Report A/HRC/33/29, para. 19

<sup>11</sup> Public Safety Canada, "Assessing the Risk of Violent Extremists", *Research Summary* 14, no. 4 (2009).

Generally, numerous patterns of recruitment through spreading radical ideas are illustrated both for men and women by terrorist organizations. The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), outlined a systematic pattern of terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda as follows:

- **'The Net'**: this includes the dissemination of undistinguishable propaganda through the use of social media, and the target is expected to be homogeneously receptive to the message of propaganda.
- **'The funnel'**: entailing a dedicated approach of targeting specific individuals, like women and children by using psychological techniques. The idea is to construct a positive outlook of the group's activities.
- **'Infection'**: This pattern is used to target a set of populations which is not easy to reach. The goal is achieved by inserting an 'agent' for creating a personal appeal, that is direct and facilitated through social bonds between the 'agent' and targets. Such 'agent' uses ideas like marginalization, and grievances alongside social and political frustration as the driving factors towards recruitment.<sup>12</sup> The figure illustrates this pattern:



### *Al-Qaeda: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment*

<sup>12</sup> Scott Gerwehr and Sara A. Daly. *Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2006), 76-80.

From the feminist perspective, critics hold that mainstream security studies scholars readily acknowledge women according to accepted discourses, as either “victims” or “monsters,” who do not conform to dominant norms for women of passivity and peace.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, women's active political participation in violence is ignored.<sup>14</sup> This neglect fails to see their commitment to violent causes, whether as suicide bombers for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, fighters for the Irish Republican Army, or in nonviolent roles, as recruiters, propagandists, agents, or spies, sometimes in leadership roles.<sup>15</sup> Four concepts are particularly useful to understand these mechanisms: gender identity, gender structure, gender norms, and gender ideology. Radical feminist theory argues that power within a society is inherently unequal and once women have lived in a society prone to conflict and violence, the gaps left by men in conducting violent attacks, either by default or design, may be filled by women.

Meanwhile, religious-centric ideology as a driver of terrorist activities for both men and women was given too much emphasis in the past<sup>16</sup>, often at the expense of ignoring other critical underlying factors. However, it was Botha amongst others who shed light on the importance of individual psychology as a significant factor and component of radicalization and violent extremism. Botha emphasized that in order to further prevent terrorism, it is essential that an improved understanding is developed as to what motivates an individual to turn to violent acts.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, one of the key findings of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, was that

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<sup>13</sup> Rajan Julie, *Women Suicide Bombers: Narratives of Violence* (London: Routledge 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Rajan Julie, *Women Suicide Bombers*.

<sup>15</sup> Rajan Julie, *Women Suicide Bombers*.

<sup>16</sup> Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, “Action Plan Against Radicalization and Violent Extremism,” 2017, 7.

<sup>17</sup> USAID, “The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice,” USAID Policy, 2011, 2.

51 percent of people interviewed cited religious grounds as a reason for joining violent extremist groups and as many as 57 percent of the respondents also admitted to limited or no understanding of religious texts.<sup>18</sup>

Botha also supplemented the idea of individual psychology as being one of the major factors of radicalization rather than religious sentiments. The individual may lose faith in the system, in the government and more importantly in the society as a whole and be driven by a sentiment of anger. One significant finding of Botha's study reveals that this anger then trickles down to young people and other family members.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he also sheds light on socio-economic factors, alongside poverty and marginalization as the drivers of radicalization leading to violent acts. In this regard, there is a need to view the drivers from an individual approach rather than tertiary factors (as resonated in the contents of *The Hague-Marrakech Memorandum*). For instance, in Good Practices 16 and 19, the *Memorandum* suggests that States should employ 'individual risk assessment tools' in the local and cultural context.<sup>20</sup>

In 2007, Martha Crenshaw, also noted that a terrorist organization emphasizes the subjective interpretation of the society and world around it rather than the objective reality. She argued that individual perceptions and beliefs filter the understanding of their social environment.<sup>21</sup> Today, there is a considerable understanding of radicalization being a highly individualized process without one

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<sup>18</sup> UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement," *UNDP Report*, February 07, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement>

<sup>19</sup> USAID, "The Development Response."

<sup>20</sup> The Hague-Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-01/Addendum%20to%20The%20Hague-Marrakech%20Memorandum%20-%20ENGLISH.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The Debate over Old vs. New Terrorism", Prepared for presentation at the *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association* in Chicago, Illinois, August September 30, 2007.

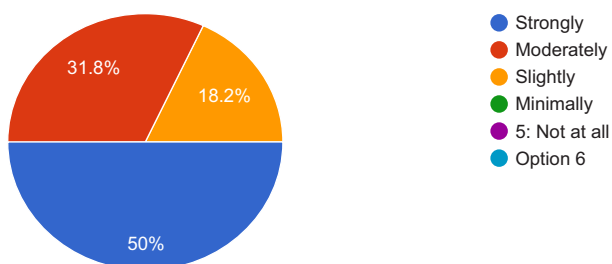


single pathway as its driver.<sup>22</sup> Scholars have drawn on the socio-psychological distinctions within beliefs, feelings, and behaviours to disaggregate the radicalization process. Those who turn to terrorist action only form the apex of a pyramid of a larger group of sympathizers who share their beliefs and feelings.

### **3. Radicalization and Women in NMDs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**

General literature on trends of radicalization in women of Pakistan focuses on poverty, marginalization, lack of access to quality education and poor government machinery as main factors/drivers. However, during a discussion by the author with a female psychologist, it was also noted that, especially for women in NMDs, the drivers may also be linked to the historic nature of conflict in the tribal areas and their experiences of being displaced from their homes.

Q1: To what extent do females in conflict-prone regions experience the impact?  
22 responses



The graph illustrates 22 responses to the author regarding the impact of conflict on women. 50 percent of respondents including illiterate, semi-literate and literate women believe that the impact is strong and none believe in ‘no impact’.

These women are witnesses to events like the Afghan war of the 1980s, the formation of TTP in the 2000s and the activities of Daesh and its affiliates in the tribal areas. They are privy to how Daesh and IMU gradually changed the roles of

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<sup>22</sup> Stated in Para 15 of Human Rights Council’s report A/HRC/31/65

women, mostly of foreign origin, from non-violent to violent actors. Their female recruits were also tasked to run propaganda campaigns to attract support from the local women of NMDs.

In Swat, the then emir of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e- Shariat-e-Mohammadi and later leader of TTP, Mullah Fazlullah, diversified the role of women through his radio broadcasts, and propagated violent sentiments. He urged women to stitch suicide jackets for men, act as informants and raise funds for terrorist operations, sometimes by selling their jewellery as well. According to a 2019 field study by Dilawar Khan, Mullah Fazlullah was considered as a fatherly figure by women in Swat. They were not only influenced themselves but some ever persuaded their sons and husbands to join his 'Jihad'.<sup>23</sup>

It is also debatable if the local women of NMDs can be used as active perpetrators of terrorism, especially by TTP. However, the question is regarding 'when' and not 'if'. This is true because, after the merger of erstwhile FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and numerous kinetic operations, terrorism was tackled to an extent, however, radicalization as a phenomenon, particularly in women was largely ignored. In the highly patriarchal society of NMDs, women are privy to ideas inculcated by the men of their household, local madrassah and especially tasked women that propagate the extremist message of terrorist organizations. Considering the significance of these women, TTP published a magazine titled 'Sunnat-e-Khoola' in 2017, which glorifies the role of TTP and encourage the females to join their ranks.<sup>24</sup>

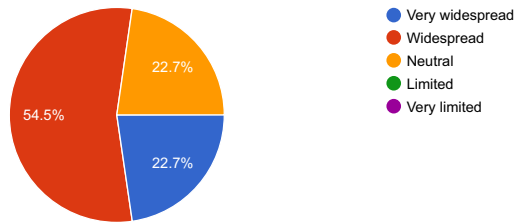
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<sup>23</sup> Shahid Dilawar, Asghar Khan and Nawaz Khan Jadoon, "A Gender Approach to Militancy (Extremism) in Pakistan- A Case Study of North Western Region", *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies* 18 (2019), 165-168.

<sup>24</sup> Amina Khan, "Sunnat-e-Khola or the way of Khola", Issue Brief, Institute of Strategic Studies, 2017.

Following the footsteps of Daesh and Al-Qaeda, TTP has adopted the pathway of print and social media to spread their radical ideas to the women of NMDs in particular, where they desire to establish a strong foot-hold once again. Nonetheless, with foreign women employed to influence local women of NMDs and the presence of TTP-affiliated families, the probability of ingress of radical ideas is reasonably high.

Q3:How extensive is the influence of social media and print media in leading to radicalization?  
22 responses



The graph illustrates the ‘widespread’ impact of social and print media in propagating radicalization in women, none of the responses indicated ‘minimum’.

In light of the above, the deductions from discussion with the respondents of research are detailed below:

**a) Relating to TTP’s Propaganda:**

As discussed earlier, according to the Radical Feminist Theory, once women have lived in conflict-prone environments, they may be radicalized to the extent of filling gaps left by men. In conversation with a local woman hailing from NMDs, it was revealed—that, *“Local women may relate to TTP’s ideology in some way, as they were relieved earlier by the Taliban who restricted women from working outside of their homes, especially those working in fields. Due to minimum literacy and limited religious knowledge, they can easily believe in conspiracy theories and distorted interpretations of Islam. Women are generally excluded from the*

*mainstream society of NMDs and whatever information they may receive from the men of their household and local madrassahs will-influence their hearts and minds”.*

**b) The ‘Infection’ Model:**

According to the UNODC’s ‘infection’ model TTP through its media and propaganda campaign can easily reach out to the local women of NMDs by creating social bonds and sharing ideas of marginalization, and grievances alongside social and political frustration.

**c) Social Media as the Driving Force:**

It is worth mentioning that, to date, access to social media or internet is limited in NMDs.<sup>25</sup> There are many students from NMDs studying at various universities who have travelled to either Peshawar or Islamabad to attain higher education. When they travel back to their hometowns, limited or no access to the internet creates numerous hurdles for them and they consider it a human rights violation, which often generates antagonistic sentiments in the youth, including men and women.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, in this scenario, TTP is also reported to use print media and other social media pages which can be accessed once students travel outside their hometowns to spread their radical ideas. These tools are cheap and effective for gaining a foothold in these areas. Hence, both men and women who are gaining access to unfiltered extremist content on the internet may also fall prey to TTP’s propaganda.

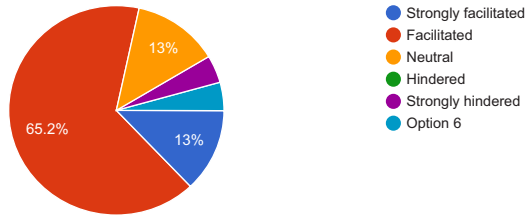
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<sup>25</sup> Zulfiqar Ali, “FATA tribesmen enticed by the allure of Social media”, *Express Tribune* October 24, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1207785/winds-change-fata-tribesmen-enticed-allure-social-media>

<sup>26</sup> Faculty Member - FATA University, Interview by the Author.

Q4: To what extent media has facilitated the connection between radical ideologies and the execution of violent actions?

23 responses



**d) Role in Narco-Terrorism:** Interestingly, women are reported to be used (no reports of local women of NMDs) for transporting illicit drugs from NMDs to Peshawar and elsewhere by terrorist organizations. It was reported in The News in 2023, by the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF), that six women were alleged to be involved in trafficking drugs of more than 26kg, with 87 capsules filled with heroin recovered from a female who was bound to deliver the drugs to handlers in Peshawar who were travelling to Oman. *“Women are used both for transporting drugs and to play reconnaissance and intel gathering roles.”*<sup>27</sup> In a traditional tribal society like the NMDs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women are not usually searched at check posts, providing them a significant advantage on male counter parts.

**e) Lack of Quality Education:**

According to a baseline survey of the Provincial Government, literacy rate amongst women in NMDs is fairly low. Only 22 percent of the female population is educated to the secondary level, whereas the rest have not received any education at all. There are numerous barriers to female education in the NMDs, with cultural factors being the most significant. Professor Jahanzeb Khan, Vice Chancellor of FATA University, notes that he is frequently approached by people asking him to prevent women from

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<sup>27</sup> Anti-Narcotics Force Official, Interview by the Author.

attending the university. He emphasizes that women should be allowed to pursue higher education regardless of such baseless objections. However, despite efforts and a number of initiatives, the number of female students in the university is still quite low. Even today, the major sources of education in NMDs are madrasas and local clerics. According to a survey conducted by the Merged Areas Governance Program (MAGP) of the planning and development department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 52 percent or more people are illiterate in the seven merged districts, and 22 percent of the literate people have received only primary education. South Waziristan is on at the top of the districts' list with 62 percent illiteracy rate. The female literacy rate across all seven districts is at a dismal rate of 7.8 percent. Most girls quit education after primary classes, due to a shortage of middle and high schools. There are more than 4000 government primary schools, but the government is yet to establish 551 middle schools out of which 213 were supposed to be built for females in the districts.<sup>28</sup> There is thus plenty that still needs to be done to provide equitable education opportunities to the women in NMDs.

**f) Financial Independence:**

Women of NMDs are financially dependent on the males of their households, like most women in other parts of Pakistan. However, due to the uncertain environment of NMDs, these women were deprived of a political and economic understanding of their surroundings altogether. During an interview with a philanthropist working for the social and economic development of women in NMDs, it was ascertained that if these

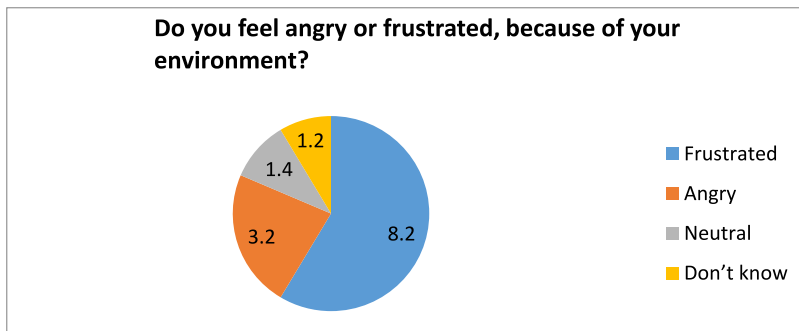
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<sup>28</sup> Mohammad Ashfaq, "Survey paints bleak picture of literacy in tribal areas", *Dawn*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1643451>

women were educated or empowered economically, their chances of being radicalized or inculcating those ideas to their children would be minimal.

**g) Understanding of Radicalization:**

Due to the experiences of local women of NMDs living in an environment of prolonged conflict marked by radical extremism, the probability of relating to or aspiring to radical ideas is fairly high. The author interacted with illiterate, semi-literate and literate women hailing from NMDs, and concluded that most women have a sense of frustration towards their social and economic environment. In this regard, the unit of analysis was women, and the indicator was frustration. 59 percent of women felt frustrated while 23 percent had a feeling of anger.



Consequently, it can be ascertained that illiterate, semi-literate, and literate women all can be radicalized either through direct propaganda, or through social media and publications. TTP published its third online magazine in 2023, titled 'Banat-e-Khadeejatul Kubra', which focused on women and their role as a warrior. The title page of the magazines features a female warrior woman in black, sitting

on a white horse, ready to shoot an arrow.<sup>29</sup> The release of this magazine in Urdu shows that they are trying to reach a much larger audience.

In this regard, it is important to understand that radicalization and terrorism should be considered as a gendered phenomenon. This is because the factors and drivers are experienced differently by both men and women. It is significant to understand how women are not just isolated individuals in a traditional society like Pakistan, particularly in NMDs. They play multiple roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters in a household and have a long-term impact on the younger generation. Hence, inclusive policy frameworks which are gender-responsive will ensure a sustainable solution against women's participation as active perpetrators of terrorism. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 also calls for women to take a leadership role in developing strategies to 'counter violent extremism and radicalization'. It is pertinent to mention that despite the evolving role of female terrorists in Pakistan, women remain overwhelmingly underrepresented in national, regional, and international security institutions limiting their ability to effectively influence the formulation of relevant definitions and strategies.

Nonetheless, it is not just the motivation of women in NMDs that is behind their violent acts but also the individual perceptions and how they assess the situation based on temptation. As argued by Walter Laqueur, even if better control can be achieved over the radical motivation for terrorism, there will still be a few isolated individuals for whom the temptation to employ terrorism - if the opportunity remains - will be hard to resist. Root causes can be tackled but understanding and dealing with the drivers and enabling factors of terrorist

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<sup>29</sup> Sarah Zaman, "Pakistani Taliban release new magazine geared towards women", *Voice of America*, 2023.



activities may defuse the situation in NMDs. The government needs to break the link between motivation and actual terrorist acts, by filling the gaps of socio-economic deprivation, and illiteracy with a whole of community approach.

#### **4. Pakistani State Response: Exploring the Potential of Artificial Intelligence**

The overwhelming kinetic approach to counter violent extremism in Pakistan has largely proven to be somewhat counter-productive. Although the state had successfully snubbed the menace through kinetic operations like Rah-e-Raast, Zarb-e-Azb and Rad-ul-Fasaad, still the resurgence of terrorism, especially in NMDs is a point of concern.<sup>30</sup> This scenario also has a link with the Government in Afghanistan, which is reported to have backed TTP and its affiliates on its soil. It also owes to the cessation of talks between TTP and the Government of Pakistan, along with the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. There are also concerns about the influx of TTP militants in the NMDs, who are reorganizing and expanding operations with enhanced capacity. These militants are gaining a foothold in Balochistan as well that has paved way for an alliance between TTP and Baloch Militant Organizations.

Another problematic concern is the use of social media by terrorist organizations to spread radical ideologies. However, denying access to internet and social media altogether is counter-productive. It is proposed instead to use the tools of Artificial Intelligence (AI), in order to monitor and curtail the spread of radical views and provide access to internet and social media in NMDs. Lessons can also be drawn from across the world where AI tools are being employed to deal with the issue of radicalization.

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<sup>30</sup> Beenish Sultan and Gareth Boyd, *Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorism: A Prism of Stabilization and Peace Building Efforts* (Islamabad: NDU Pakistan, 2017)

The UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) released an official report in 2021, regarding the probable use of AI by states especially in South Asia and South East Asia, for countering radical and violent extremist material online. The extensive report identifies AI tools, some employed by major powers and others still in the developing stages, which may facilitate state-centric de-radicalization and counter violent extremism programs. These tools allow the state to be proactive rather than reactive. Some of these tools along with their respective applications are discussed below:

- **Social Network Analysis (SNA)<sup>31</sup>:** SNA may be employed in order to understand and model network structures to identify behaviour of individuals. This is significant for analysing social media networks, like Facebook and Instagram, by encoding network data and setting up nodes, which later correlate in pairwise relations.
- **Image and video matching “hashing” technology:** This technology uses digital fingerprints to prevent the sharing of online duplicates. It can help identify similar violent content online at a much faster rate. An example of such software is PhotoDNA, which was initially developed for identifying child sexual abuse material online, later Facebook and Google used the software for tackling online extremist and radical content as well.
- **Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT):** This AI tool is used for publicly available data and its interpretation. Interestingly, all kinds of data including print, television and social media can be duly interpreted and analysed. For social media, Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT), is its

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<sup>31</sup> Karl M. Van Meter, “The Development of Social network analysis in the French speaking world”, *Social Networks* 27, no. 3 (2005): 275-282.

subcategory that can allow states to analyse and also respond to radically meaningful trends.<sup>32</sup>

- **Tools for Predictive Analytics:** These tools allow state machinery to act pre-emptively instead of reactively towards radical and violent extremist data. An AI model would be fed large amounts of data about a particular terrorist organization and even an individual. Through analysing the data, the tool will make predictions and suggest a course of action to tackle the threat posed by the entity in the future. This can also be used to monitor the behaviour of individuals on social media platforms. Although radicalization is a complex phenomenon, and its process is usually a very personalized experience, still by analysing activity on social media, patterns of individuals and organizations can be identified. The European Union funded *Real-time Early Detection and Alert System for Online Terrorist Content* (RED-Alert) Project is one example of a tool aiming to detect early stages of radicalization while seeking to cater for high privacy and security standards. RED-Alert uses Natural Language Processing (NLP), SNA and complex event processing to collect, process, visualize and store online data related to terrorist groups, including early stages of radicalization based on social media content. Meanwhile, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the British intelligence and security organization, had also announced the use of these AI tools for identifying radical individuals and fake accounts which spread misinformation and malinformation. As a regional example, Pakistan can learn from Sri Lanka, where researchers identified malinformation and misinformation through

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<sup>32</sup> James A. Piazza, "Fake news: The effect of social media disinformation on domestic terrorism", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways towards Terrorism and Genocide* 15, no. 1 (2022).

AI tools. 1600 online articles were fed to the tool which came up with 97 percent accuracy in identifying malinformation.<sup>33</sup>

There are AI tools like Moonshot, which can not only remove harmful content but also generate de-radicalizing and positive information as a response. The content in response can also be curated through civil society cooperation to tailor it according to the local, cultural and even linguistic contexts. Hence, it is also a fact that identifying and removing radical and violent extremist content online or in written publications may not be the only solution but a step in the right direction along with other efforts by the Government of Pakistan, wherein NMDs can be used as a case study.

## **5. Materials and Methods**

This research has been conducted by following the case study methodology of research by adopting qualitative research techniques. The initial literature review involved a search equation of violent extremism and the role of women in its spread in NMDs. More than 3140 articles were found on Google Scholar related to the theme, with 2345 related to the role of peace education and public sector development and its link with violent extremism and radicalization in women of NMDs. Hence, the theme of state and civil society-centric de-radicalization efforts targeting women in NMDs was chosen.

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<sup>33</sup> “Countering Terrorism Online with Artificial Intelligence: An Overview for Law Enforcement and Counter-Terrorism Agencies in South Asia and South-East Asia,” Joint Report UNICRI & UNCCT, 2021, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/countering-terrorism-online-with-ai-uncct-unicri-report-web.pdf>



Agencies were consulted. The major cons of these interviews were the issue of anonymity of the females and the limited accessibility to a large sample of respondents. Hence, initially, their interviews were planned to be transcribed and analysed through NVIVO software, but due to secrecy their videos or audios were not acquired. Meanwhile, the frequency of the word 'radicalization' mentioned in interviews conducted by female psychologists suggests that radicalization amongst women in NMDs is the single most significant theme.

Written transcripts of interviews conducted revealed that despite the violent role played by women amidst the surge of terrorism in Pakistan, the security landscape is still overwhelmed by male-centric lens. Women are not just victims of conflict, they can be in fact active perpetrators of terrorist activities, even in a traditional society like NMDs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (local women not involved yet). It is drivers like social media influence, gaps created due to the lack of development and access to quality education which accentuates the link between radical mind and the actual conduct of terrorist activities.

## **6. Recommendations:**

During the course of the study and within the ambit of themes identified, recommendations to deal with the issue of women acting as active perpetrators of violent acts and also spreading radical ideas in the local women of NMDs can be viewed with a two-fold focus:

### **Women Centric Peace Programs:**

- i. Economic empowerment of women through cottage industry and imparting knowledge for skill development will be the key. Women can be actively

involved in making traditional handicrafts, clothes and embroidery, if actively supported by the state. In this regard, influential community leaders can also be taken on board to gain confidence and support of the local people.

- ii. Myths regarding glorification of radicalization and extremism as pathways to gain equal status as men must be actively debunked by the state and civil society.
- iii. It is crucial to engage women from all segments of society, including mothers, sisters, daughters, and any roles that have been socially and culturally assigned to them.
- iv. It is important to point out here that the government cannot accomplish the aforementioned tasks alone and must seek the support of civil society organizations, public-private partnerships and media.
- v. As a policy option, female officials from law enforcement agencies should be deployed at checkpoints to inspect female family members, so as to mitigate their possibility of violent actions or transporting drugs.

### **Exploring Artificial Intelligence:**

As a developing field, AI is bound to touch numerous areas of our lives and our society as a whole. Generative AI, Chat GPT is being widely used in Pakistan from academia to the political sphere. This technological revolution in AI can be used to switch from a reactive approach to a pre-emptive one. The following are some recommended actions in this vein:

- i. Data mining and machine learning can be used to develop network representation methods, allowing for the mapping of communities, identifying main actors or groups within a community and further applications such as classifying, linking predictions, detecting anomalies and clustering.

- ii. Insikt Intelligence, a tech start-up active in this domain, can be employed to detect potential online threats through NLP and SNA techniques performed on open-source content acquired from social media and other sources.
- iii. While it is not likely to stem the flow of misinformation and disinformation in its entirety, the identification of fake or bot accounts created to spread fake news or to steer debates in certain directions, presents a possible entry point for protecting women who use social media.

## **6. Conclusion**

The explorative study was based on an interpretive research design to understand the radicalization of women in NMDs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews of psychologists and female officials of law enforcement agencies alongside discussions with local women of NMDs. The qualitative data was analysed through a case study approach of NMDs while viewing its pros and cons. The objective of the study was to identify the lack of gendered analysis of terrorism in Pakistan and view radicalization as a process that can lead to violent extremism among the women of NMDs.

This study has demonstrated that women in NMDs are vulnerable to radical ideologies and can easily spread them throughout the society because of their central role in a traditional household. Media and social media are indeed major drivers of speeding up the process of radicalization. Instead of restricting it altogether, regulation of internet through AI tools should be provided in NMDs.

Considering the significant role of women, TTP has also published women-focused magazines both in English and Urdu in order to motivate them towards violent acts and picking up arms against the state. Hence, it is crucial to counter



these ideologies through women-specific peace programs and gendered security policies with the help of AI. As a starter, predictive analytics should be used in NMDs, to monitor individuals and organizations to predict their future patterns and operations. In this way, the drivers which create a link between radicalization and the actual commission of the act can be identified and dealt with beforehand.

In a nutshell, both men and women may equally lean towards violence, so it is important to treat the two equally. The issue of female radicalization, especially in a traditional society like the NMDs is subject to bias and misconceptions. Women in NMDs are indeed subordinate and passive, but the idea of being radicalized due to their experiences of conflict and concerted media campaigns of terrorist organizations cannot be ignored. Denying internet altogether may not serve the purpose, but responsively controlling and monitoring it through AI could be helpful. Nonetheless, a concerted strategy that aims at female education, mainstreaming women in NMDs and also providing government-sponsored skill-based knowledge and jobs is key to addressing issues of radicalization and extremism in the region.