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# Women's Roles in Countering Extremism

## *Integrating Gender Security into Pakistan's National Security Policy*

### Executive Summary

Pakistan struggles with Violent Extremism (VE) even though there has been structural and functional progress under counter terrorism measures such as National Action Plan (NAP). Women's role in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and the overall gender perspective remains neglected in the existing approaches. Thereby, this policy paper suggests to systematically integrate women's skills, experiences and expertise in Pakistan's next National Security Policy (NSP). This would not only make the National security framework more comprehensive but will also ensure social resilience and reduced radicalization. This policy paper recommends revising the NSP by integrating the gender perspective; building capacity for women across regions; increasing women's participation in P/CVE policy and decision making and in the community peacebuilding.

### Introduction

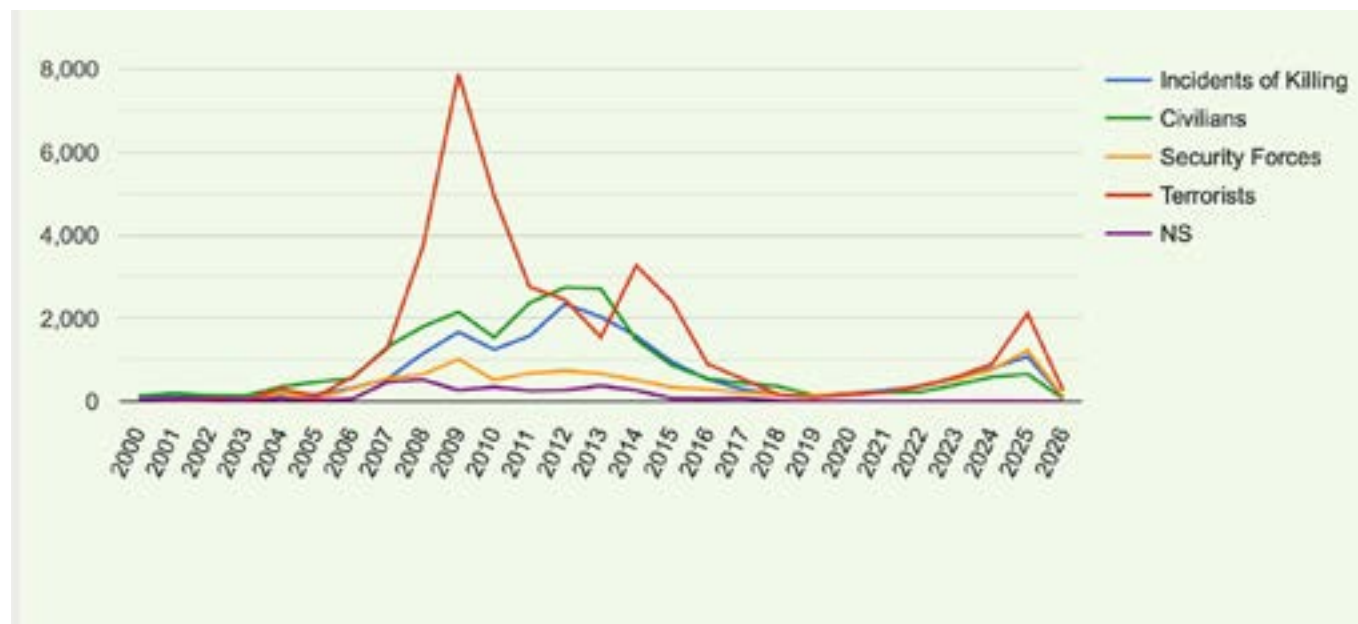
Pakistan, since the early 2000s, has faced multiple waves of violent extremism as a result of insurgent movements, sectarian violence and cross border militancy. Although,

National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and other government agencies have reported a decline in terrorist events yet extremist tendencies are not only persisting but are picking up the momentum again. Militant violence has increased by 34 per cent while the terrorism related casualties increased by 21 per cent in the year 2025.<sup>1</sup>

The landscape of violent extremism in Pakistan has demonstrated significant variation over different periods and regions. Balochistan has gone through a widespread wave of violence in name of ransom, sectarian attacks and insurgent and counter insurgent violence. Since the War on Terror, the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has seen violence in name of Nifaz e Shariat and resurfacing of Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The determinants of violence in Urban and Rural Sindh are different. In most of Karachi the street crimes, kidnappings and violence for ransom and gang violence is rampant while in Rural Sindh the dacoits rule with fear while the landlords (Wadairay) are involved in systematic yet widely unreported violence against the lower socio-economic classes. Punjab has mostly scene terrorist activities in South Punjab with sporadic events in the bigger cities of the Central Punjab. These activities are characterised by a mix of sectarian violence, Islamist militancy, and targeted attacks.

<sup>1</sup> "Pakistan Witnessed 34 Per Cent Increase In Terrorism In 2025: PIPS Annual Security Report", Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, January 1, 2026, accessed from <https://www.pakpips.com/article/8741>.

## Major Terrorist Activities - Data Sheet for Pakistan<sup>2</sup>



Last updated: 2025

Source: Pakistan, South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed from <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/major-incidents/pakistan>.

Pakistan has formulated a counter terrorist approach focusing on military/kinetic operations, peace deals, border security, intelligence sharing with international and national security forces, and institutional strategy aimed at empowering NACTA and CTDs (Counter Terrorism Departments). Though very comprehensive in its approach, it still lacks the gender perspective.

Pakistan's NSP 2022-26 took the major factors into account for facing the radicalization challenges<sup>3</sup> that lie in identity grievances, relative deprivation, unemployment, and extremist ideologies. However, the varying challenges as outlined above require women to play a strategic role. The NSP 2022-26 does place human and financial security at its core, however it still does not categorically treat gender as a measurable security domain or emphasize women's inclusion in Counter Terrorism (CT) institutions through quotas or measurable indicators.

It is also important to note that violence and conflict impact men and women differently. In traditional societies men are more prone to be directly targeted, recruited, trained and instrumentalised for acts of violence. Women on the other hand not only have to face direct violence but are also subjected to displacement, widowhood, mobility constraints, livelihood and financial insecurity. Yet their role as unofficial mediators, educators, peacemakers, mobilisers and caregivers is noteworthy. In Pakistan, this type of women's role is of critical significance as family structures are central to social life and women's influence can

prevent escalation<sup>4</sup> in many cases. However, this is only possible if gender security is emphasized upon and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS)<sup>5</sup> agenda is integrated into national security strategies and policy.

The NSP 2022-26 as well as our conflict transformation architecture is mainly 'reactive' in nature while the gender inclusive P/CVE requires it to be preventive and proactive in nature. Such a policy would require education and curriculum reforms, youth engagement and community based response building.

### Objective and Methodology

This policy paper is qualitative in nature and aims to assess the current state of gender integration in Pakistan's counter-extremism architecture. This paper briefly reviews the empirical evidence of Pakistani women's contributions to P/CVE, and offers actionable policy recommendations. It draws on primary and secondary sources of data collection and analysis and has made use of policy documents, academic research, UN and NGO reports, and civil society practice.

<sup>2</sup> Datasheet – Pakistan, South Asia Terrorism Portal, accessed from <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/major-incidents/pakistan>.

<sup>3</sup> Mudrasra Sabreen, and Samia Maqbool Niazi, "Role of Muslim Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism," *Journal of Islamic and Religious Studies* 7, no. 1 (2022): 35–48.0

<sup>4</sup> Muna Khayal Khattak, "Engendering Violence: An Analysis of the Women Peace and Security Agenda in Pakistan," *Insights of Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus Studies*.6

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Parliament\\_as\\_partners\\_supporting\\_the\\_Women\\_Peace\\_and\\_Security\\_Agenda\\_-\\_A\\_Global\\_Handbook.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Parliament_as_partners_supporting_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_-_A_Global_Handbook.pdf)

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

### Traditional VS Feminist Security Studies

In security studies, masculinity is usually associated with military based solutions and authority while femininity is associated with victimhood and dependence.<sup>6</sup> This simplistic understanding can have policy implication for counter-terrorism. In such scenarios, women's capability to mediate, influence, build narratives and use of community intelligence are often overlooked. Women are thereby treated as primary security actors who have the ability to impact the radicalization pathways and enhance resilience.

In recent decades, security studies have marked a shift away from purely state-focused models to include human security, thereby prioritizing the safety of individuals and communities. The Feminist security scholars have argued that traditional approaches often marginalize women's voices and strengthen the patriarchal assumptions, thus limiting their influence in policy and decision making roles.<sup>7</sup> This understanding discourages the notion of 'women as instruments' and promotes the idea that acknowledges women's autonomy and political agency.

### Women's Agency in Prevention and Counter Violent Extremism

Research and empirical evidence shows that women have been wrongly serotyped to be naturally peaceful. On the contrary women can be supportive and opponents of extremism based on their context and/or agency.<sup>8</sup> Because of their central role in traditional family setups, women are able to detect behavioral changes that lead to radicalization. Such women are also in position to offer counternarratives and suggest and encourage disengagement.

Empirical evidence shows that women can act as preventive actors in roles of mediators, early warning agents and educators; targets or victims of coercion, violence, displacement and gender based violence such as rape; and participants as the helpers, recruiters or recruits of violence and acts of terrorism.<sup>9</sup>

### Intersectionality and the Gaps in Existing Pakistan's National Security Landscape

Reduced female labour force participation, institutional and structural discrimination, patriarchal societal norms and restricted political participation and influence overall limit women's involvement in public life<sup>10</sup>, which conse-

quently impacts women's ability to participate in national security efforts.

Pakistan took a step in the right direction by focusing more on 'citizen and human security' in its NSP 2022-26. This paradigm shift away from the 'state centric' security approach offers a more inclusive and broad view of traditional and non traditional security threats. The NSP views national security as comprehensive and citizen-focused, aligning with human security principles of safety, dignity, livelihoods, and social cohesion. However, practical implementation is still limited in terms of gender and prevention outcomes.

The agency and vulnerability of Pakistani women are affected and shaped by province, sect, religion, ethnicity and urban/rural context.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the women belonging to religious minority groups are more prone to targeted attacks of blasphemy, targeted attacks and GBV; women in conflict zones in KP and Balochistan are more exposed to forced displacement and extremist violence. Such varying dynamics underpins the necessity for a context specific P/CVE frameworks that fits the local realities.

### International Normative Frameworks: WPS and P/CVE as Complementary Agendas

The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) has recognized that including women in P/CVE programs will improve legitimacy and sustainability, and thereby enhancing the trust and access for vulnerable populations. The participation of women, in line with UNCR 2242 and WPS agenda, must be treated as a functional component integrated with community structures.<sup>12</sup> WPS, grounded in rights based principles, has an extensive framework to integrate gender perspectives into Pakistan's NSP implementation<sup>13</sup> ensuring protection, prevention and evidence based accountable policy design.

### Policy Recommendations

After critical policy and literature review, the paper suggests the following set of recommendations to be adopted in short, mid and long term.

1. The National Security Division (NSD) along with NACTA must establish gender specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) by embedding gender benchmarks. These benchmarks could revolve around

<sup>6</sup> Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Muna Khayal Khattak, "Engendering Violence: An Analysis of the Women Peace and Security Agenda in Pakistan," *Insights of Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus Studies*.6

<sup>8</sup> Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, *Women and the Prevention of Violent Extremism* (New York: UN Women, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Sana Khalil and Angela Warner, *Invisible Labor, Visible Barriers: The Socioeconomic Realities of Women's Work in Pakistan* (2025).26

<sup>11</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2242 (2015), S/RES/2242 (October 13, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000), S/RES/1325 (October 31, 2000).

- Including gender analysis in NACTA's annual threat assessments
  - Targeting high risk districts by introducing and measuring the gender- responsive P/CVE programs.
  - Increasing budget allocations for women led prevention programs.
  - Increasing the quota for women in the security coordination committees at the federal and provincial levels.
  - Monitoring and evaluation regarding women's recruitment and retention in intelligence units and CTDs.
2. Gender Audits must be institutionalised by producing and submitting an annual report before Parliament, for evaluation and assessment purposes. The assessment must gauge NSP and NAP for their implementation from a gender perspective. It should also, evaluate budget allocations for expenditures on gender sensitive programs and identify the gaps in institutional representation and participation. The report must also have recommendations to fill the gaps identified. The oversight provided by the Parliament can increase the transparency and may also ensure prioritization of integration of gender in security policy.
  3. The relevant security agencies, such as Police, CTDs and NACTA must constitute Focal Points for Gender Security. These focal points must monitor the adherence to the gender KPIs, coordinate gender responsive training, liaise with relevant civil society actors and should also produce quarterly progress reports.
  4. Pakistan's Police Academy and the CTD should revise their curriculum. The aim behind revision should be to highlight women's role in early warning and prevention; identification and recognition of the indicators responsible for radicalization; recruitment of women and its patterns in extremist groups and to highlight the balanced approaches for cases involving women in such groups.
  5. Scholarships and fellowships should be introduced for higher and advance studies in Security Studies for all genders.
  6. Leadership incubators should be established and connected to Universities, think tanks and government institutions. This will create a new cadre of gender aware policy makers.
  7. There should be steps for developing digital reporting platforms which are secure, anonymous and quick in response and have coordination with local police.
  8. The Government must also provide legal and psychosocial support to the women who are victims or perpetrators of violence and/or terrorism.
  9. There must be mandatory refresher courses and inter-agency trainings on gender perspectives for the police, CTD and NACTA officials.
  10. A Gender and Security Advisor Council should be established and should be chaired by NSD while the council should consist of NACTA, National Commission on Status of Women (NCSW) and provincial women's commissions, Human Rights Ministry, Home Departments (all provinces), academic experts and civil society organizations with experience in P/CVE. The Council would review policy proposals, advise on benchmarks, conduct field consultations, and recommend provincial adaptations.
  11. There should be coordination cells established in all the provinces. These cells should establish linkages between police, social welfare and human rights departments, commissions on women, education authorities and civil society activists.
  12. Gender-Sensitive Data Protocols should be developed by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and NACTA. These protocols should monitor radicalization trends, recruitment patterns, rehabilitation and reintegration by gender.

All the policy recommendations must be accompanied with an effective monitoring and evaluation framework that can ensure audits, community based surveys and gender sensitive impact assessments. This shall ensure meaningful institutional reforms and not mere symbolic compliance.

## Conclusion

Pakistan has made substantive progress in terms of CVE. There is yet, a lot remaining to be done when it comes to gender integration and preventive measures which are crucial for sustainable results. The correct use of women's agency and their leadership complements security efforts and help close gaps between enforcement and prevention. Strengthening gender security within the NSP is a strategic necessity for the resilience of Pakistani society.

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