**[Women & militancy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1664100/women-militancy)**

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The writer is author of Pakistan: In Between Extremism and Peace.

THE ‘war on terror’ radically transformed the affected countries. Religious, sectarian and ethnic conflicts led to the collapse of social cohesion. In conflicts, women suffer the most, directly and indirectly. They may be victims, sympathisers, or perpetrators with support and operational roles.

When women lose male family members, a desire for vengeance may push them to associate with violent extremists, eg the Chechen ‘Black Widows’ who carried out suicide attacks in the 1990s’ Chechen-Russian conflict. According to a study, 85 per cent of female suicide attacks until 2009 were carried out by secular organisations.

The narrative of religious extremist groups is against female education and empowerment. Al Qaeda initially held rigid views about employing women directly in violence, preferring support roles for them. However, in 2010, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula issued a call to Muslim women to join the Yemen jihad. The emergence of the militant Islamic State group further liberalised the participation of women in conflict.

Economic insecurity may also drive women towards extremist groups, because joining them elevates their status as mothers or brides. Post-9/11, conflict zones witnessed a rise in fighters marrying jihadi brides, further attracting foreign women to such areas. Technology has enabled extremist outfits to specifically target women for radicalisation. In 2004, Al Qaeda launched Al Khansaa, and the TTP Sunnat-i-Khola in 2017; both were online magazines for women.

Mothers can be the first line of defence.

Pakistan lacks a gender-responsive approach to security and countering violent extremism. Although Balochistan and Punjab have laws to compensate civilian victims of terrorism, women who have lost male bread earners often face red-tapism when seeking compensation. All provinces should have uniform compensation laws, ensure more transparency, and simplify procedures so widows are not dragged into litigation.

Owing to communal restrictions and cultural constraints, women’s participation in community rehabilitation and reintegration is low. Yet, the grave challenge posed by extremism warrants a role for mothers in preventing violent extremism (VE). Similarly, although statistically women’s presence in the criminal justice system has increased, it falls far short of what is needed for them to play a significant role in areas of social cohesion. Consider that only 519 (17pc) out of 3,005 judges in the country are women (in the UK and US, women judges constitute 32pc and 35pc respectively). The 5,731 women in the police constitute only 1.2pc of total police strength.

Section 73 of the KP Police Act authorises the IGP to constitute dispute resolution councils for out-of-court settlement of petty disputes, but the law is silent on the inclusion of women in the councils. In KP, 106 DRCs have 1,686 male and 50 female members, meaning women constitute only 2.88pc of them. Section 47 deals with the formation of public liaison councils; it too is silent on the inclusion of women. On a total 2,146 PLCs, 15,993 members are male and only 41 — 0.257pc — are female.

As per the 2017 census, women constitute 49pc of the total population; on the Global Gender Index, Pakistan ranks 153 out of 156 countries. In the Senate, females constitute 18.3pc. In the provincial assemblies of KP, Punjab, Balochistan and Sindh, women constitute 18.55pc, 19.67pc, 16.92pc and 18.45pc respectively.

The newly merged districts offer ample opportunities to understand the pains of women who experienced turbulence during militancy. But strong cultural barriers make access to them impossible. The incorporation of the role of women in the National Internal Security Policy (2018-2023) is a step in the right direction, but needs concerted efforts to be converted into reality; lack of women experts in areas of social cohesion and VE is another challenge.

In Pakistan, the role of the family in preventing extremism is yet to be realised. There are instances where families, including parents, were unaware of their children’s involvement in extremism. Families must be engaged meaningfully in nurturing non-violent behaviour, deradicalisation and rehabilitation. In patriarchal societies, men are cast in the role of head of the household. But women’s child-rearing responsibilities in such societies mean they can be the first line of defence against extremism. However, families won’t be able to play an effective role without capacity building. So far, neither investigators nor researchers have tried exploring why the institution of the family has failed to protect members from extremist tendencies.

Enacting women-friendly laws is easy but establishing a women-friendly environment and institutions in a patriarchal society is difficult. Enactment of laws in isolation, non-availability of resources for implementation, and weak capacity of the enforcers undermine the rule of law and need immediate attention.

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