Perspectives on Violent Extremism : Afghan Women

Ruqaia Tabasum

Abstract: *Women are positioned differently in society, their understanding and perspectives of radicalization are also different from men. Loss of lives, physical disabilities, displacement, destruction of houses and infrastructure etc., affect men and women differently. Consequently, women have different approaches towards de-radicalization, conflict resolution and peace building. Most of the available literature brings together the impact of radicalization and violent extremism in the form of gender blind numbers and statistics, and misses woman as the category of analysis. Moreover, women have mostly been portrayed as passive victims of violent extremism, ignoring diverse role she plays as sympathizer, supporter and preventer of violent extremism. Consequently, women remain excluded from decision making at all levels and stages. Their perspective on radicalization has always been ignored. This study charts and assesses the perspectives of women on violent extremism in Afghanistan; and strategies women use to cope with, and counter, radicalization. Radicalization and violent extremism primarily hit against women's rights. Women not only suffer direct physical and sexual violence in the form of flogging, stoning and beating to death, forced marriage and rape etc., but also bear most of the brunt of loss of livelihood and displacement; disappearances, disabilities and killing of family members. Radicalization specifically hits against marginalized segment of the society such as; women, children, religious, sectarian and ethnic minorities. In confluence with patriarchal cultural practices, violent extremism further intensifies oppression and marginalization of women. It enlarges the ambit of patriarchal control over women's body, mobility, health, education, and social, political and economic participation, impeding them from claiming their fundamental human. Peace and women's rights are interconnected. It is an established fact that women enjoy better status in peaceful societies and contribute more to the socio-economic development; while radicalized and conflict-ridden societies relegate women to lower, rather sub-human status.*

Keywords: Women, Radicalization, Violent Extremism, Patriarchy, Countering Violent extremism, Violence, Physical violence, Disability, sexual Violence, Internally Displaced

1. Introduction

Afghanistan has experienced over three decades of foreign occupation, civil war, and insurgency since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979.What followed was a decade of resistance to the Soviet invasion, after which Afghanistan devolved into civil war among rival factions of the mujahedeen and regional strongmen, followed by the Taliban regime arriving in Kabul in 1996 and controlling most of Afghanistan until 2001. Though Afghanistan has been widely considered as "post conflict" since the fall of the Taliban regime, it remains a country plagued by conflict and instability, mostly at the hands of violent extremists and armed opposition groups (AOGs).Since 2001, the total for all categories of direct war violence in Afghanistan approaches 92,000 people. Around 26,270 civilians have been killed, and more than 29,900 civilians have been injured. Afghanistan still ranks 160 out of 162 in the 2014 Global Peace Index, which is composed of 22 qualitative and quantitative indicators encompassing a wide range of issues related to peace and conflict, including social safety and security, political instability, political terror, displacement, domestic and international conflict, internal conflict, relations with neighboring countries, and militarization.

Though violent extremism and armed opposition are often considered as external to the control of the state, policies, resource allocations, and rhetoric from a multitude of state actors can create either an enabling or unreceptive environment for insecurity. In Afghanistan, a number of actors such as religious leaders are instrumental in establishing and maintaining order. They liaise with the government, local communities, and armed local actors or violent extremist groups such as the Taliban. Religious and local leaders often act as norm entrepreneurs, and have the authority to shape or influence local perceptions. While the potential of religious and local leaders to promote peace has been widely acknowledged, it is important to acknowledge that they also have the authority to make their community an enabling environment for insecurity and violent extremism. While establishing sustainable peace and countering violent extremism is a process, the process cannot be successful without engaging these critical actors at all levels and convincing them to support the process. While rights-based and peace building approaches have inherent value, a more practical approach that puts violent extremism into financial and economic terms can demonstrate to local leaders the development, human capital, and economic prosperity their community loses in the context of insecurity, and demonstrate to government actors at the local, subnational, and national level the costs of violent extremism in terms of GDP, revenue collection, investment ratio, and human capital.

One of the researches shows that a startling 9.09 billion USD was incurred for the year of 2014 alone, looking at government costs such as security, reintegration, compensation, refugees and infrastructure as well loss of human capital. This figure is the equivalent of 44% of Afghanistan's GDP or 113% of the total of Afghanistan's 1394 national budget, and amounts to roughly four times the Afghan government's revenue collection target for 1394. What Afghanistan loses to conflict and violent extremism in just one year could feed the entire population for about 1.37 years. Based on the average price of road construction projects in Afghanistan, the cost of violent extremism in one year could be also used to build around 25,973 kilometers of new roads, or finance the construction of over 18 million wells for drinking water.

Women in Afghanistan have undoubtedly suffered in the years when their country was subjected to Taliban rule and continue to suffer in the hands of these violent extremist groups. The literature on violent extremism also reflects a key concern for the impact of violent conflict upon women who, largely as civilians, would appear to carry the burden of many of the negative consequences of armed conflict. This is seen in terms of health outcomes such as maternal and child mortality, increased responsibility as heads of households following the death of male heads, as well as violations of human rights. This research will give us an insight into the perspective of women on radicalisation and violent extremism.

2. Method of the research

For this research, a number of primary and secondary sources of data were utilized. Primary data was collected through key Focus Group Discussions and personal story interviews conducted in Herat, Nagarhar and Bamyan. The paper incorporates this feedback and input from women in three provinces of Afghanistan elicited through FGD's and personal stories. Secondary data was collected through publically available reports and figures, as well as through data collected from institutions including UN agencies and government institutions. The sources of secondary data are noted throughout the report.

3. Research Findings

To define extremism all the respondents that were interviewed during the data collection stated, *Extremism means to impose an idea forcefully along with violence and defined violence as a forceful act which originates from brain appears on tongue and finally leads to killing of people*. Some of them also mentioned suicide bombing to be the ultimate result of violent extremism. While talking about the types of violence, varied responses came from the participants. Most of the women mentioned that the most commonly prevalent violence in the community is violence against women (VAW) and other types of violence in the society are physical, sexual, mental and economic violence.

In Nagarhar, respondents mentioned domestic violence, gender violence, and sexual violence are most prevalent, however, rate of domestic violence is quite high. In government offices, gender inequality is widespread and it is difficult to find one female among 20 male working in a government office. Talking about violence in Nagarhar, respondents mentioned, physical violence is quite high. For example a married woman gets beaten up by her husband, father in law, mother in law and other in-laws. Also the inequality among boys and girls in pursuing education; boys are allowed to go to school while as girls are not, that inequality causes psychological abuse. They further cited that murders, exchange of girls (Badal), force marriage, domestic violence, molestation, marrying young girls with old men in lieu of money and to give away girls as compensation in resolving are quite prevalent in Nagarhar. High dowry paid by the groom makes it difficult for women; in-laws claim those girls to be their slaves after paying dowry to their family. According to most of the respondents violence can be categorized into two types; physical and non-physical. They further elaborated; generally violence is a part of society's structure and everything in the society is obligatory upon people. In Nagarhar, the respondents stated that the main cause of this violence is lack of awareness among people about their rights and others rights. Another reason mentioned was misinterpretation of Quran and Islamic rules and regulations. Some of the respondents felt that a key reason for religious violence was the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and the fact that much of the population is uneducated, meaning that they respond well to religious messaging and are easily radicalized by opportunistic. The causes of violence cited by respondents also included lack of awareness on public laws, low level of education, economic problems and irresponsibility of government and religious experts towards people. People give more priority to culture than the religion in many cases; like the exchange of girls (BAAD) has only a cultural practice and not allowed in our religion, but it is commonly practiced in Nagarghar. Misuse of religion by Mullahs and religious leaders for their personal benefits often results in violence. Also respondents mentioned that when we hear the word extremism, war, fight, murder, injustice and suffering comes to the mind.

Women talking about violence mentioned that violence in families can be perpetuated by both men and women, it starts when families start discrimination between boys and girls. Sometimes structure of the society causes violence, like men and women are not treated in the same way in terms of rights. Financial dependence of women on men is leads to a type of economic violence; women are not receiving Nafaqa in proper way while Islam has given this right to women. Physical violence like beating, hitting and physically abusing women is also commonly found in Herat.

All women respondents mentioned that inappropriate customs are main reason of any kind of violence. They cited that a girl was stoned to death in Ghor province by decree of Ulama and religious leaders advanced very recently. They further claimed most of the awareness raising programs are implemented in the center of the province while it is better to extend such programs into districts and to more remote areas, where women fall prey to the violence more frequently. All the women respondents suggested involving men in advocacies carried out for women's rights at the grass root level to ensure better results.

The most important reasons cited by the majority of the respondents regarding the cause of violent extremism or joining the extremist group is lack of education, lack of awareness of religion and legal right. All the respondents mentioned that if a person is not aware and educated, he will behave in a way which leads to violence. All the respondents confirmed that there were awareness raising programs in Herat about violent extremism but still the rate of violence is high and the reason is that this awareness programs were not comprehensive.

All the respondents mentioned that violent extremism doesn't have any religious aspect but sometimes religion has been exploited by the people. The religious preachers are also responsible for violence; for example some of the religious leaders have passed a decree that women are not

allowed to have access to social media, which is violation of their rights. Violent extremism is an acute type of violence and the respondents mentioned that this violence originates from improper customs, illiteracy and poor culture. They also stated that low level of awareness among people is a main factor of VE as when a religious leader is not aware of Islamhe propagates false information and that leads to people to join violent extremist groups. Insecurity and conflict are other important reasons cited by the respondents, for violence at the community level.

Recently witnessed incidents of violent extremism by Herat people are the killings of two religious leaders, because of political issues and also the efforts of Iran and Pakistan to have influence over Afghanistan, in general and Herat in particular.
Respondents also were of the view that sometimes personal grievances are reasons for violence. Recently, a traffic police was killed and later it was revealed that he was killed because of his partial mediation in a case. They also mentioned that violence can be attribute to a particular group like the current generation in Afghanistan has grown up in violence. Violence usually is perpetuated by men and fewer women are involved.

When asked about, what comes to your mind when you hear word extremism, all the respondents unanimously cited, war, injustice, insecurity, threat, insults and beating.

One of the respondents quoted, "Extremism is a political issue and in Afghanistan it was always perceived to be connected with religion which is not true. Extremism means not to accept other people's ideas."

A woman responded in this regard said "Sometimes when I hear this word, it motivates me more to fight against violence and struggle for independence. Extremism is a driver of violence.

Radicalization in Afghanistan resulted in killing a lot of people and left financially dependent widows and orphans. It is estimated that since 7 October 2001 around 31,000 civilian have been killed and over 40,000 have been injured seriously including women and children. Decades of war and conflict has affected Afghan civilians among which women and children are the most vulnerable. It is reported that mental disorders has affected more women and disabled, which can be attributed to consequences of conflict and violent extremism. During this study respondents mentioned a number of ways in which radicalization has affected their life. Some of the respondent mentioned that they lost their husbands; Taliban killed their husbands and survival became very difficult for the whole families both emotionally and financially. Suddenly there was no one in the family to earn money and all the financial responsibilities came to these women. Without any skills they went out for in search of work and faced a lot of hardships. Physical disability is another impact of radicalization which affected a lot of women. Radicalization and violent extremism has left a lot of people physically challenged in Afghanistan. In suicide attacks and explosions, people get injuries and some of them lose their limbs, hands, eyes, ears and other parts which makes their survival

difficult. In some families male members (bread earning members) lost their body parts to this VE and the whole family responsibility came on the shoulder of women hand. These women had to earn money to keep their families going. But these women had no education and skills to work, which effected their financial condition and children's education and health. Violent extremism also increased forced migration all across Afghanistan. Whole families migrated from one place to another where they faced a lot of problem in terms of educating their children and jobs. Most of the migrated children couldn't go to school and grew up without education. These violent extremist groups didn't allow women to go out of their homes; incase a woman was found out of her home she was beaten on the streets. Conflict in Afghanistan has resulted in both, internal and external displacements. During Taliban regime, external migration was the dominant form of displacement while after transitional government run by Hamid Karzai, external migration rate came down and the trend for internal migration was elevated. The reason for such internal displacement was mainly random wars in the provinces and remote areas. Women who forcefully migrated to another places faced a lot of socio-economic problems. After migrating to different places, they had no house to live and no enough budget to rent a house for the family. They also lost their property, farm lands, and jobs which made them financially weak and vulnerable to many other social evils. Apart from financial problems, IDPs also faced problems in raising their children in new places. They couldn't take care of their children's health, education and nutrition.

Women in Afghanistan faced all types of violence due to violent extremism and sexual violence is the most brutal among all of them. Extremist groups were forcing young girls to get married to them. They were lashing and beating women in public in case found out of their homes. In some areas the extremist groups did not allow the girls to go to school. Women were beaten up and stoned if they were not following the proper dress code (*Chadr)* or if women were going outside of the houses for work. Especially during Taliban era, women were threatened and even beaten up if they were wearing clothes other than Chadari (Coveing from head to toe).

4. Sexual Violence Story

"While narrating her story of sexual violence Sara told us: "It was a regular day and her mother had gone to her aunt's house. She and her two little sisters were in the house and she helped her younger sisters to go to sleep. She was planning to wash clothes and preparing things for washing clothes in yard suddenly somebody knocked on the door. It was a man on the door asking for water and food. Sara thought, he is a regular traveler so she brought food and water for him in the compound. Though very scared of all this, she gave him food and went inside her house. This man had three other men with him. Sara recalled and said, when she closed the door, this man along with three others came after her and entered the house by force. All these men were having long beard and looked very dangerous which was enough to frighten this young girl. One of them asked her, where are the other family members and when she couldn't answer the guy slapped her hard. There was no one in the

house except for the two small kids. When she told them there is no one in the house, they didn't believe her and searched the whole house. When they couldn't find anything they forced her to go with them and to which she resisted a lot. One of the beasts started beating her and she fell on the ground. They were talking to each other in some different language and laughing at her. They finally attacked her and tore apart her clothes. They raped her brutally and then she got unconscious. After that all she remembers is that she was in her mother's lap and everyone looked at her in pity. She overheard her brother saying, it was better if she was dead.

Note: For a few minutes interview was paused because she couldn't control the emotional outbreak.

Sara further narrates, she does not have any friend now in her life because no one wants to be her friend in the locality. When she tries to make friends with girls, they reject her when they get to know about her life. She feels lonely all the time and says, it is very difficult to live life. All her relatives do not like her and behave very rudely with her. Her mother is dead now and all her relatives have boycotted her and no one is talking to her. She lives with her brother and her sister in-law who always taunts her about the incident and making her survival difficult.

While expressing her grief, Sara says, "What was my fault? What did I do? I tried to kill myself but I couldn't do it". Her aunts blame her for the incident and don't let her visit their homes. They all claim she is a bad example and if she visits them, it will have bad effect on their sons. Each time she tries to forget about her past experience and reintegrate with the society, she is being mistreated by the people surrounding her and she fails to cope up with society due to the bad behavior that she gets from people. She is not going anywhere as she thinks everyone knows about the incident and if she goes out people will tease her. Sometimes, when she goes to some party and see people talking to each other, she always thinks, they are talking about her. Sara is mentally distressed and said, she is just waiting for death to come. After that incident, when she meets a man, she faints out of fear and every night she has terrible nightmares."

5. Ways to Counter Violent Extremism

During this study respondents came up with a variety of suggestions and recommendations as a solution to combat violent extremism. The shortest way to reduce violence according to them is raising awareness among the community people and also advocate for elimination of improper custom that lead people to join extremist groups. Awareness raising among people on their rights according to Islam and government laws could be the best thing to combat violent extremism at the grass root level. Respondent mentioned level of education among boys and girls should be increased, especially the Islamic education for both men and women should be imparted to decrease violence. Another solution is to provide job opportunities for both men and women in order to improve the economic level of people. Government should hire honest people in high position to make it accountable to people. Civil societies should be more active at the grass root level to increase awareness among people and religious leaders should be

involved in the process of countering violence in the society. Everyone is responsible for countering violent extremism like young generation, common people, police, civil society and Mullahs. The best way to avoid violence is that all should take part in eliminating and countering violence. Respondents also mentioned that VE is a common issue in our society, so everyone like Mullahs, general public, youngsters, civil society, and students should get together and work as a team to prevent it. Also, through school curriculum young generation should be informed about violent extremism. Every organization like public or private should take part in order to eliminate violence in the society, especially government and civil societies should make plans to counter VE. There are some factors like the gap between government and people by which the public does not trust the government, that gap should be filled.

Governmental institutions, CSO and public can together play important role in countering violent extremism. Government is responsible for countering violent extremism, so it should motivate public, CSO and religious leaders to work with them in order to remove violence and extremism. Also, people involved in violent extremism should be severely punished by the government.

One respondent quoted *"I am completely against the idea of patience and accepting other groups like Taliban in a country; tolerating Taliban means killing people and violating human rights and finally leading to backwardness."*

In addition, awareness raising programs like workshops, and seminars about laws and the government's policies regarding punishment of violence related crimes should be conducted. A lot of women shared that changing mindsets of people by conducting workshops, sessions, documentary screening can bring the changes in the society.

A women quoted, "The holy prophet in his last sermon emphasized on women and children's rights so we should implement Islamic guidelines to prevent violence against the mankind"

Overall views were, Violence can be controlled by the government with the cooperation of people. Since violence evolves in families and the role of the families in countering violence becomes very important. Also the government should strive for establishing rule of law at the grass root level. Patience, tolerance and acceptance of extremist views do not help in reducing violence and Government should try hard to address it. In order to counter violent extremism, discrimination based on any type should be removed and Government should involve youth, CSO and religious leaders, general people and families as they play vital role in the society. Good governance is also a main actor for reducing violence and government should motivate people to fight against violent extremism through various awareness campaigns. A society with low level of awareness does not accept female education and also cherishes male dominance in families, for them it is not considered as extremism. Awareness raising through holding sessions, screening documentaries, bringing the perpetuators of violence to court, can reduce violence at the grass root leveland change

the mindset of people. Also, enhancing and generating more employment opportunities, especially for women employment can reduce violence. Preaching's prohibiting violence through after-prayer Khatibs' sermons can help in reducing violent extremism. Those religious leaders who provide wrong information and exploit youth in increase extremisms should be punished. The laws should be reformed in order to make them supportive for people in general and women in particular. There are some groups, individuals and activists who can help to counter violent extremism, but unfortunately they are barely accepted in the traditional society of Afghanistan Those groups should be confirmed and accepted by religious leaders in order to help the community.

One of the respondents quoted, "In my idea we should be more careful in our political policies with other foreign countries. Pakistan has always tried to expand extremism in Afghanistan, so our government should have a specific policy against that. Also official registration to Madrasas, should be provided very carefully."

Since Afghan society is a patriarchal one, women are perceived to be inferior to men. However in recent times, efforts are made to make the voices of women get heard. Women can raise awareness among their children on violent extremism and those children are the future of the country. Women play crucial role in raising their children and while bringing them up, women can orient their children on violent extremism. They can encourage their children to continue their studies and work for peace building rather than joining any of the militant groups. They can sensitize children on violent extremism and its consequences at the very early age, so when children grow, they will follow these teachings. As we all know, women have important roles in a family, they can educate and inform their children, both boys and girls about equality, human right and many other things necessary to counter VE. If each woman as a mother plays her part, that can bring a huge change in the society at large. Unfortunately sometimes women are not heard in family and community, in such cases, religious leaders' should provide vital support to women. Religious leaders in almost all afghan communities play important role, they can preach about women right during sermons and also condemn male dominance on regular basis.In order to make Afghanistan a place free of violent extremism rule of law should be established and enhanced and serious punishment should be given to the violators. The traditional justice system should be removed; influence of Jirgas and councils to be reduced. People who are aware of women's rights should be assigned as heads of these Jirgas, since most of the members of these Jirgas are illiterate, their decrees and decisions lead to violence. The respondents further mentioned that Justice Sector is corrupt and only those people can get justice who has money, it should be more accessible to everyone in order to prevent violence.

Media, family and police can be good source to spread awareness at grass root level and hence in countering VE. Also an important road map should be given to religious leaders by ministry of Haj and Religious affairs to preach about peace in the mosques rather than extremism. Preaching through sermons in mosques is the best way to eliminate extremism. Also it shouldn't be confined to cities; religious leaders in rural areas should also implement this, because mostly violence happens in rural areas. Encourage Police, civil society, Mullah, government and school teachers to counter violent extremism at grass root level by sensitizing the people. Government should implement better policies and develop the security system efficiently.

To counter violent extremism it is important to sensitize elders, religious leaders, scholars and Mullas, on this issue. People have faith on them and they are obeyed in the society. For example, if a Mulla, while delivering the Jumma sermon, talks about CVE, it will have an impact on a larger group of people. Some awareness raising programs should be planned to inform people about the ill effects of VE in the society. If we encourage people for education and encourage Mulla's to deliver after prayer sermons on human rights, it definitely will have a positive impact on elimination of violence in the society.

All the women respondents suggested that the civil society and government should work together and also get support from Mullahs, elders and religious leaders to counter violent extremism. Awareness among people should be increased through different types of media, TV and radio stations should be used raise awareness among people about their rights.

6. Conclusion

Decades of violent extremism has created a huge gap between the people living in Afghanistan and rest of the world. Loss of the family members, disabilities, sexual violence, migration, displacements are the most common negative impacts of violent extremism. It has badly affected the family structure and also the family life in Afghnaistan. Women who have lost their husbands generally faced economic problems and their children couldn't attend schools. During this study many respondents mentioned that they were bound to take the economic responsibility of their families and in that struggle they ended up taking jobs like, cleaning dishes, laundry and washing cars for other people in order to feed the families. Children were victims as well, during an age where they should have been in schools, were going for hard labor. Some of them had to work on streets in order to make the ends meet. Consequently, illiteracy or lack of education is a reason of less job opportunities for such children in future. Lack of health and education services are the other the other side affects that affected women and children most.

7. Acknowledgement

References

[1] William Byrd, "Lessons from Afghanistan's History for the Current Transition and Beyond," United States Institute of Peace, 2012, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR314.pdf

[2] Thomas Barfield, "Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History," Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010

[3] Neta C. Crawford, "War-related Death, Injury, and Displacement in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001-2014," Costs of War, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 22 May 2015

[4] Retrieved from https://knoema.com/GPIR2015Jul/global-peace-index-gpi-2016?country=1000000-afghanistan

[5] Emily Winterbotham et al., "Wartime Suffering: Patterns of violation in Afghanistan", Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, October 2011, http://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/1123E-Legacies-of-Conflict-Wartime-Suffering-2011.pdf.

[6] Neta C.Crawford,"Updates on the Human Cost of War for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001 to mid-2016", Cost of War, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 29 July 2016, http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE_FINAL.pdf.

[7] Ghulam Dastagir Sayed, "Mental Health in Afghanistan: Burden, challenges and way forward", The international Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Washington, DC, August 2011, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/HEALTHNUTRITIONANDPOPULATION/Resources/281627-1095698140167/MHinAfghanistan.pdf.

[8] FGD_Herat_Women_02

[9] FGD_ Nagarhar_Women_02

[10] Individual Interview- personal story_Bamyan-01

[11] Individual Interview- personal story_Bamyan-02