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Focus: Signs

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CASE SUMMARY

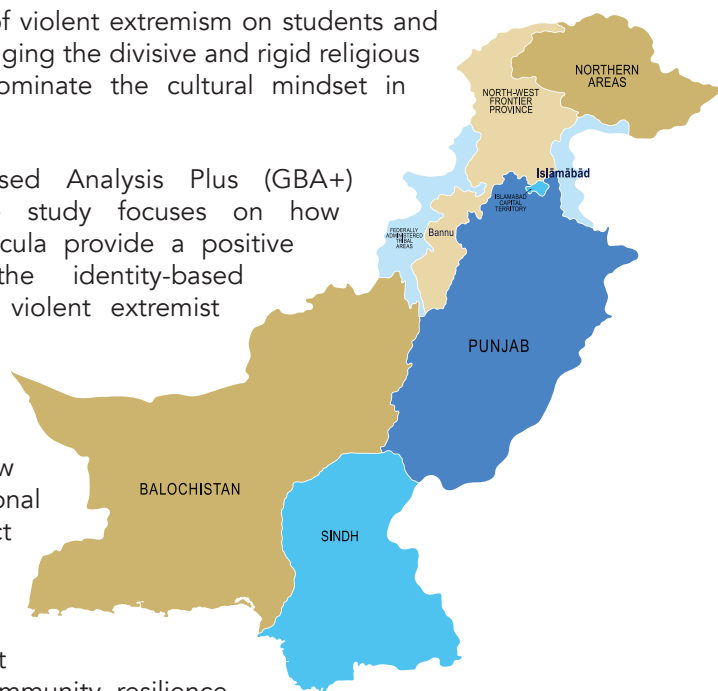
SIGNS OF THE TIMES: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND GENDER IN SHAPING THE CULTURAL MINDSET IN PAKISTAN

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

SUMMARY

Bushra Qadim Hyder, founder and director of the Qadims Lumiere School and College in Peshawar, Pakistan, developed a peace curriculum to promote understanding, acceptance, critical thinking, and open discussion of different ideas. She has partnered with private schools and madrassas to train teachers and integrate peace education into their curricula which has mitigated the impact of violent extremism on students and their parents by challenging the divisive and rigid religious interpretations that dominate the cultural mindset in Pakistan.

Taking a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² this case study focuses on how peace education curricula provide a positive counterweight to the identity-based divisions fostered by violent extremist groups in Pakistan, and respond to signs of violent extremism in the larger Pakistani culture. It discusses how taking a broad educational approach enables direct intervention with students and parents to prevent their joining violent extremist groups, promoting community resilience rather than stigmatizing individuals.



The structure of Pakistan's education sector encourages division and intolerance between students of different, genders, religions, and socio-economic classes, leaving them vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist actors. Increasingly, Pakistani schools – particularly madrassas and public schools – teach a rigid religious and nationalist ideology. By promoting the primacy of conservative religious identity, they undermine other aspects of human identity and foster exclusion and rejection of the "other" as threatening and inferior. This ideology is reinforced by strict gender norms that assert women's subservience to men.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email info@icanpeacework.org.

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-plus/eng.aspx).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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Education systems that encourage divisions and hierarchies between students of socio-economic, religious, and gender identities create a society vulnerable to capture by violent extremist actors. Structural siloing of identity groups; curricula that promote patriarchal gender stereotypes, assert a singular religion as central to national identity, and erase the experiences of minorities; and teaching methods that eliminate complexity and critical thinking all foster division, inequality, and intolerance.
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Gender inequality is reproduced and deepened by class and religious divisions. In conducting a gender analysis, it is important to take an intersectional approach that considers how socioeconomic status and levels of religious tolerance impact attitudes and beliefs on gender equality.
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Signs of rising extremism are not only observable at the individual level, but they also manifest and can be tracked at the societal level, for instance through changes in fashion, decreased communication and socialization between identity groups, and limited ability to question authority figures. While reacting to individual level changes in dress or religious practice can foment stigma, these indicators should not be disregarded as signs at the societal level.
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Peace education provides a counterweight to identity-based divisions by teaching universal messages about humanity, exposing students to religious and cultural teachings of other communities, encouraging critical thinking and discussion, and incorporating elements of arts and literature.
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Personal, preventative, and restorative approaches - rather than punitive or securitized methods - are central to ethical and culturally sensitive work on early warning signs. Addressing signs of extremism in youth requires opening channels of communication with parents and students, providing positive alternatives to concerns about radicalization, and encouraging discussions with mentors, peers, and networks. Rather than labeling and punishing youth for their religious or cultural thought and practices, such approaches serve to build community resilience to violent extremism and resource those who have higher risk factors.
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Transforming signs of radicalization and violent extremism necessitates both interventions targeted at individual attitudinal and behavioral change, such as discussions and direct mentoring, and **interventions aimed at broader structural change,** such as integrating peace curricula and teacher training across the education system.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Divide and Conquer: Education as a Tool for Weaponizing (Gender) Identity

The Pakistani education system, through both its structure and content, drives divisions, inequality, and intolerance between identity groups, creating conditions that leave students vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist actors. The educational system reproduces conditions of socioeconomic inequality, maintaining a vertically stratified status quo that conditions madrassa and public school children to accept their lower status in the class structure.³ The siloed system leads to children only meeting and socializing with peers that have the same or similar social class, gender, and religious identities and backgrounds, and allows for little exchange or interaction across diverse identity groups and campuses.⁴ The sheer variety of religious schools has

strengthened perceptions of religious differences and resulted in Muslims not socializing with one another or praying in each other's mosques. Divisive rhetoric can be found both in the textbooks of some ultra-conservative madrassas in Pakistan, which targets certain ethnic groups, glorifies war against India and other non-Muslim countries, and depicts the creation of Pakistan as a "jihad against the infidels,"^{5 6} and in public school curricula, which condemn Christianity and other non-Muslim religions, and do not accurately represent Pakistan's diverse communities.^{7 8}

While there are a few co-educational private schools, the majority are segregated by Islamic sect as well as by gender and reinforce patriarchal norms in their teaching.⁹ All-female Deobandi madrassas espouse conservative social values, particularly in terms of gender relations, and emphasize differences between women and men. Curricula teach young women to be mothers, to transmit Islamist

3. Ullah, H. and Ali, J. (July 2018). Schools and Families: Reproduction of Class Hierarchies through Education in Pakistan, Pakistan Journal of Criminology, vol 10, issue 3, 86-105 ([access here](#)).

4. United States Institute of Peace (2020). The Current Situation in Pakistan. ([access here](#)).

5. Email exchange with Bushra Qadim Hyder, April 2022.

6. Nazar, N. (2021). Physical Punishment, Acceptance of Violence, Tolerance of Diversity, and School Burnout: A Comparative Study of Three Educational Systems in Pakistan, Abo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland ([access here](#)).

7. Syed, S., Saeed, L., and Martin, R.P. (2015). Causes and Incentives for Terrorism in Pakistan, Journal of Applied Security Research, vol 10, issue 2, 181-206 ([access here](#)).

8. Irfan, A. (2021). Pakistan Schools to Re-Open Amid a Controversial New Curriculum Rollout: How the new school curriculum in Pakistan may hurt the very things it is trying to fix, New Lines Magazine ([access here](#)).

9. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2014). Reclaiming the Progressive Past: Pakistani Women's Struggle Against Violence and Extremism. What the Women Say, Brief ([access here](#)).



In the past two years, Pakistan has seen a resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant extremist organization notorious for its brutal attacks on civilians.

The sheer variety of religious schools has strengthened perceptions of religious differences and resulted in Muslims not socializing with one another or praying in each other's mosques.

values to their children, and to act with subservience to their husbands.¹⁰ Beyond madrassas, Pakistani public school textbooks are dominated by a male-centric perspective, with the vast majority of historical figures and personalities mentioned being male.¹¹ Women are shown in a gendered context, portrayed as helpless and pious figures supporting their husbands.¹² By reproducing gender hierarchies, socioeconomic class divisions, and religious intolerance, the Pakistani educational system shapes a society where identity groups and genders are divided and in conflict, rather than one guided by unity, diversity, and equality. This provides fertile ground for activity by violent extremist movements who capitalize on identity-based divisions in their recruitment and retention of members, fostering a sense of “us vs. them” to legitimize acts of violence against their targets.

Warning Signs of a Divided Society

Signs of divisions and growing extremist ideology are visible in Pakistan's larger culture, society, and mindset.

While religious women, including those who support violent extremist groups, wear the burka, many other women have started to wear it as a fashion symbol. In this way, elements from violent extremism seep into the larger culture, blurring the lines for what constitutes radicalization. Religious leaders and teachers are more likely to dress in accordance with their identity group. The dress code for younger children in school has changed with children being asked to wear trousers instead of shorts. Modern textbook illustrations more frequently display girls wearing headscarves. Dressing religiously or conservatively is not inherently extremist, and equating dress with extremism is a fallacy that can lead to stigma at the individual level. However, observing such trends at the cultural level can serve as a proxy indicator for tracking rising levels of extremist ideology in a society.

Qadims Lumiere School and College

Bushra Qadim Hyder is the founder and director of the Qadims Lumiere School and College in Peshawar, Pakistan.¹³ She teaches boys and girls from ages 3-16 and works with both male and female teachers. In 2009 she witnessed the impact of violent extremism and trauma on her students and was inspired to develop a peace curriculum to provide a positive alternative to the divisions Pakistani violent extremist groups have created.¹⁴ To transcend the identity and gender-based divisions that strengthen and are reinforced by violent extremist groups, Hyder's teaching incorporates universal messages about humanity. Rather than questioning religious dictates directly, her peace curriculum emphasizes the potential of religion to

10. Ibid.

11. Masud, H. (2017). Curriculum, Textbooks and Gender Stereotypes: The case of Pakistan, Education International ([access here](#)).

12. Ibid.

13. Facebook page for Qadims Lumiere School and College ([access here](#)).

14. Hyder, B. (2015). Fear and Hope in Peshawar. Inclusive Security ([access here](#)).

broaden one's mind, the importance of critical thinking, religious debate, and asking questions, and the focus on a practical application of the Qur'an. She introduces the topic of gender and raises awareness about gender roles.¹⁵ A key component of the curriculum is the inclusion of diverse perspectives within literature, the arts, and religion to support values of respect, empathy, and critical thinking.¹⁶

The Impact of Pluralistic Teaching

Hyder has started partnering with other private schools and madrassas to integrate peace education into the curriculum. Based on her trusted relationships with educators, she has since trained teachers from eight schools in the peace curriculum. While she has invited public schools to join them in select activities, the set curriculum of public schools restricts the time and openness of teachers to adopt her curriculum. When students from private schools and madrassas come together, they engage in art competitions, peace theaters, debates, competitions, and sports which foster trust and communication between them.¹⁷ Recognizing the influence of mothers with their children, Hyder engaged them from the beginning, inviting them to speak to her classes so her students could learn how others had been affected by hatred and intolerance.¹⁸

[Hyder's] teaching emphasizes the potential of religion to broaden one's mind, the importance of critical thinking, religious debate, and asking questions.

The Role of Trust and Networks in Detecting Extremism

Hyder's initiatives originate from her own assessment of her community's needs and demonstrate that work addressing signs of violent extremism can be both locally-driven and avoid securitizing and stereotyping women's roles. In 2017, Hyder heard reports from older students in her school that several boys wanted to join the call for jihad to support the Rohingya in Myanmar. She asked their mothers if they had observed any of these signs and when they had, Hyder invited the mothers and youth to a meeting. Hyder reviewed the different stages of jihad in Islam with them, using examples from the Prophet Muhammad's life, and



The peace curriculum builds capacity for critical thinking and reasoning among students and illustrates a positive alternative to masculine concepts of duty and honor.

verses from the Qur'an.¹⁹ She argued that becoming a martyr may be an easy path but results in death, whereas staying alive and doing good work is the true jihad; it's difficult but more beneficial to Islam. The students stayed.

Hyder's affiliation with PAIMAN Alumni Trust provides another example of the role of women's networks in noticing and addressing signs. Using the format of mothers' peace groups, they have educated and sensitized 15,000 female community members on the Quran and signs of violent extremism, building trust and connections between the women. The peace groups are able to contribute to community reconciliation, trauma-healing and stabilization during difficult and uncertain times in their area. They work with school management committees, teachers, and parents in disseminating peaceful messages and organizing student peace groups in madrassas and schools.²⁰ Rather than stigmatizing individual youth for displaying "at-risk" behavior, Hyder and the women's networks take a broad educational approach, akin to public health preventive models, to resource students with knowledge and skills and increase their resilience to violent extremism.

15. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

16. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Education, Identity, and Rising Extremism. From Preventing Violent Extremism to Promoting Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism (PREP). ([access here](#)).

17. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) (2017). Bushra Qadeem Hyder on Fighting Extremism with Education in Pakistan. ([access here](#)).

18. Ibid.

19. Interview with Bushra Qadim Hyder, January 2022.

20. Qadeem, M. (2016). Women's Participation in Transforming Conflict and Violent Extremism. UN Chronicle, Volume 52, Issue 4. ([access here](#)).