Case 4: From Sewing Suicide Belts to Sowing Sustainable Peace

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>PAIMAN Alumni Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Programme</td>
<td>Building Sustainable Peace by Engaging Women and Youth TOLANAs in Charsadda district in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province</td>
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### Summary

Established in 2004, PAIMAN works to counter violent extremism by engaging with youth and women. They utilize religious counternarratives, literature, drama, and vocational training to dissuade people from joining violent extremist groups and rehabilitate vulnerable and radicalized youth. Local women and youth who have completed PAIMAN’s positive transformation programme form volunteer peace groups they call “Tolanas,” a word which means “together” in Pashto. Tolanas work with each other and local police and religious leaders to understand local drivers of violent extremism, provide early warning of potential violence, and intervene to promote social cohesion and non-violent conflict resolution. By promoting the culture of volunteerism, TOLANAs provide young people with a sense of purpose and recognition from the community for their service. PAIMAN also raises awareness of women’s important potential role in prevention through training, publishing, policy advocacy, and production of media content. In 2014, PAIMAN developed a television series portraying stories of radicalization to educate a wider audience about the warning signs.

### Context

Since 2015, Pakistan has witnessed a rise in women’s participation in jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS) and ISIS; one women’s wing of AQIS has trained more than 500 women and girl suicide bombers. Before 2015, women were already active members of extremist groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In addition to functioning as suicide bombers, women have played integral roles in fundraising and “domestic radicalization,” by indoctrinating their children and other women with extremist ideology. As recently as 2011, women could easily carry weapons through checkpoints because their roles in extremist groups were not considered. Women are often confined to the home but are susceptible to radicalization and play an integral role in supporting violent extremist groups, for example by raising money or recruiting others.

Neither the National Internal Security Policy nor the 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) for Countering Terrorism adopted in 2014 by the Government of Pakistan addresses the issue of rehabilitation or reintegration of members of violent extremist groups. On the contrary, the first point of the NAP calls for the execution of

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233 The Diplomat (2017), Pakistan’s Women Jihadis: Understanding the nexus between women and terrorism in Pakistan (available at: https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/pakistans-women-jihadis/).
239 Ibid.
convicted terrorists and resulted in a lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty. The NAP does not specify actions required by different government ministries and agencies at various levels, nor does it address the role of other stakeholders such as local civil society, especially women and youth, in building resilience to violent extremism at the grassroots level.

The Pakistani military operates prison-based rehabilitation programmes and has established a number of outside centres. In some cases, the administration of these centres is later handed over to CSOs. Shrinking space for civil society presents a serious challenge to all independent CSOs, but especially to those working on peace and security issues, who are often accused of operating in support of a western agenda. Overcoming this perception requires sustained presence and trust-building efforts with both communities and local police. For example, PAIMAN reports an experience of an NGO communicating vital information about a potential attack to a local police station. The police did not take action due to the lack of trust.\textsuperscript{242} As a result, another terrorist attack occurred that might have been prevented.

Some reasons for joining violent extremist groups are individual: Youth feel excluded and neglected within both their families and communities. Many are vulnerable to finding a sense of purpose with extremist groups. PAIMAN finds that poverty, illiteracy, foreign intervention, power and money are the driving forces for people to join violent extremist groups, as opposed to religion.\textsuperscript{243} The majority of women, however, support extremist groups due to the religious belief that they are contributing to jihad and will be rewarded in the afterlife.

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<th>OBJECTIVES</th>
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<td>■ To provide alternative ideologies to those of violent extremist groups still embedded in religious and cultural tradition</td>
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<td>■ To promote economic empowerment of women</td>
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<td>■ To foster communal social cohesion and citizenship.</td>
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<th>STAKEHOLDERS</th>
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<td>■ Women</td>
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<td>■ Youth at risk</td>
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<td>■ PAIMAN Alumni Trust</td>
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<td>■ Local police</td>
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Programme Strategy and Implementation

Since 2008 PAIMAN has worked in Charsadda, a conservative and remote area of Pakistan, to prevent extremism. They started by working with youth to prevent their recruitment by extremist groups and supported their leadership to develop community dialogues. PAIMAN also promotes the sociopolitical and economic empowerment of women, who are great influencers in their communities.

To reach the women, they first need to engage men and tribal elders. Since women cannot leave the home alone and are often reluctant to speak openly of their experiences, PAIMAN speaks with them in groups and provides a platform to hear their stories and learn about their challenges. Accompanied by local women with whom they’ve worked previously, known as TOLANA peace groups, they take the necessary time to build relationships and gain trust. Building trust in these communities is a gigantic task as NGOs are considered foreign agents. Having a person who already has credibility and recognition in the community lead the work creates an entry point, making the task a little easier.

\textsuperscript{242} Remarks by Mossarat Qadeem, GSX Oslo workshop, April 2018.
\textsuperscript{243} ICAN Partner Mossarat Qadeem (Pakistan) Interviewed on BBC Woman’s Hour, (available at: http://www.icanpeacework.org/2013/09/04/ican-partner-mossarat-qadeem-pakistan-interviewed-on-bbc-womans-hour/).
As they learned more, the groups discovered that these women supported violent extremist groups, which their sons had joined. Indeed, some of the women sewed suicide belts and jackets for their sons and other members of violent extremist groups, which was a source of economic support. In addition, women often don’t have significant knowledge of the Qur’an and cannot read Arabic, so extremist groups use gender-specific ideology to recruit women by discussing women’s roles and introducing the concept of “female jihad.” Raising money or pursuing other activities for extremist groups gives women a sense of purpose.

“What I have learned from PAIMAN’s training about women’s rights in Islam, the multiple forms of jihad that I can carry out not to harm others and the harmful impact of violent extremism, I will impart to my three daughters so they are not influenced by any propaganda… or extremists’ narratives in their lives.”

– Gulzar Begum of Rajjar village in Cahrasadda

Therefore, PAIMAN uses the Qur’an and cultural context to provide counter-perspectives to this ideology and discusses the concept of jihad. For example, they translate specific Qur’anic verses into local languages and provide the larger context to help women understand them differently. However, religion has long been perceived as the world of men, so PAIMAN has used the socio-cultural aspect of “Do No Harm”, which is inherent in the code of Pashtunwali (the traditional set of ethics governing the Pashtun). More recently, PAIMAN has drawn upon Pukhtoon literature (e.g. poetry), replete with information and stories of peace, to create new indigenous counter-narratives. By building their critical thinking skills, the women change their thinking and have the tools to persuade others. The fear of losing their sons was also a motivating factor for change. The women started to engage with their sons to bring about an attitudinal transformation and become more productive citizens.

In addition, PAIMAN provides women with an alternative source of livelihood with basic skills training: samosa-making, fabric dyeing, embroidery, quilting, hand printing, and bag-making. The women can produce these products at home, for their sons and male relatives to sell. Simultaneously, PAIMAN teaches the women about their rights, their role, and Islam, as well as about violent extremism, so they learn the signs of radicalization and are better prepared to intervene.

Youth TOLANA members
PAIMAN developed a training manual for women’s roles and community engagement in PVE, effective leadership, media communication skills, and dissemination of alternative narratives and advocacy. They also developed a guidebook demonstrating four livelihood skills: stitching, tie dye, making samosa patties, and cosmetology. For just $2000 USD a month, PAIMAN can engage, educate and provide livelihood skills for over 60 women, who support and influence their families and communities.

PAIMAN positively engages youth and community members to help them understand their problems, feel a sense of responsibility for their communities, and foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion. PAIMAN teaches people to respect each other even if they disagree, without feeling unsafe and disrespected. Through community interaction and dialogue about the problems, they ensure people feel included and their voices are heard. By emphasizing shared values and common goals, they help build a sense of solidarity. They have also asked imams to provide counselling to those returning from violent extremist groups and worked with communities to decrease the stigma and assume ownership of their transformation.

In March 2014, PAIMAN started a drama series with different cases to reach out to the people. In response, they received phone calls from mothers who experienced what they watched at home but did not know it as a process of radicalization. PAIMAN also produced a booklet about how women can communicate with their sons if they observe signs of radicalization.

**Progress and Results**

- Twenty women converted and joined mothers’ TOLANAs (volunteer peace groups) where they promised not to engage in any fundraising, recruitment, or other activity that would support violent extremist groups.

- 60 percent of women stopped sewing suicide belts and pursued other livelihoods; more than 40 percent were convinced after just one encounter.

- Local women teaching in madrassas have approached PAIMAN and asked to use their peace education material.

- PAIMAN works with about 400 young men and boys to move away from violent ideologies.

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Lessons Learned and Challenges

■ Working with youth to broaden their sense of respect and connection with other ethnic and sectarian groups, and to Pakistan as a whole, is important for positive transformation.

■ Community scepticism that former violent extremist group members have changed is a challenge to their rehabilitation.

Sustainability and Potential Application

By including women and youth in their approach to positive transformation (deradicalization), PAIMAN closed the loop and facilitated the emergence of a sustainable, authentic community peace architecture. Working together, these women and youth groups have now been able to prevent attacks in their communities through an early warning and response system, because of trust built both between groups in the community and with local police.