TPM Vol. 32, No. S7, 2025
ISSN: 1972-6325
https://www.tpmap.org/

VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND MASCULINITY: A CASE STUDY OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Masculinity is the socially constructed idea to define a man and in male dominated conventional/tribal societies it is constructed and (mis)used by different groups; right wing fundamentalist to extremists and terrorists. Empirical studies suggest that only a handful of men actively participate in violent extremism however, the majority of violent extremists are men. Fundamentalist and extremist tendencies in any society are stimulated by any existing or possible threat of emasculation and shift of power. In case of Pakistan, it is observed that male-dominated social and political institutions hardly investigate how the masculinity not only forms the decision-making bodies but also the approaches to countering extremism and militantism. Though reluctantly but it has become imperative for the state and society to embrace globalization that resulted into changing gender roles, social values and norms that in turn challenges the established authorities' interpretation of religious text and cultural understanding. It leads them to defend and advocate the conventional practices more aggressively and that further accelerate violent extremist trends in the society. The regional setup has also contributed in promoting extremist violent tendencies directly linked with masculinity. This paper is aimed to investigate the question of masculine violence, its roots and victims in Pakistan.
Key Words: Masculinity, Gender roles, Violence, Extremism, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Given its roots in sociocultural, political, and gendered dimensions, violent extremism continues to be one of the most urgent worldwide issues of the twenty-first century. Although there are many other factors that contribute to extremism, the role of masculinity—a socially constructed identity influenced by norms, power, and expectations—has come to light as a crucial but little-studied aspect, especially in communities where men predominate. Extremist narratives flourish when ideas of masculinity collide with ideas of power, honor, and resistance in environments where traditional gender roles are strictly enforced. A remarkable case study to investigate how gendered identities not only produce violent extremism but also impact institutional responses to it is provided by Pakistan, a country struggling with ongoing militant violence and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

Given its roots in sociocultural, political, and gendered dimensions, violent extremism continues to be one of the most urgent worldwide issues of the twenty-first century. Although there are many other factors that contribute to extremism, the role of masculinity—a socially constructed identity influenced by norms, power, and expectations—has come to light as a crucial but little-studied aspect, especially in communities where men predominate. Extremist narratives flourish when ideas of masculinity collide with ideas of power, honor, and resistance in environments where traditional gender roles are strictly enforced. A remarkable case study to investigate how gendered identities not only produce violent extremism but also impact institutional responses to it is provided by Pakistan, a country struggling with ongoing militant violence and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

As empirical research shows that men make up the majority of perpetrators in extremist groups across the globe, existing scholarship recognizes that violent extremism is disproportionately male-dominated. However, little is known about the ways in which institutions support or contradict these dynamics and how masculinities are weaponized to justify violence. Masculinity is frequently associated with ideas of physical power, tribal honor, and religious authority in Pakistan, a country characterized by tribal traditions, religious conservatism, and postcolonial nation-building efforts. These constructions are used by militant organizations and right-wing groups, who use violence to recover

alleged losses of status or power. Importantly, the state's counter-extremism policies, developed in male-dominated security and political institutions, usually ignore the ways in which masculinist beliefs pervade the issue and its alleged fixes.

The effects of globalization, which have progressively altered Pakistan's social structure, are making this problem worse. Traditional power structures, such as patriarchal religious interpretations and tribal customs, are being challenged by changing gender roles, greater educational opportunities, and changing cultural norms. Conservative groups aggressively seek to restore authority through inflexible gender hierarchies, framing these developments as grave dangers to "authentic" cultural and religious identities. These responses, which portray masculinity as a weapon of intellectual opposition as well as a defense against emasculation, frequently take the form of extremist language and violence. Regional geopolitics, such as cross-border conflicts, militarized nationalism, and the aftermath of Afghanistan's wars, further solidify narratives of hyper-masculine bravery by associating religious militancy and militarism with national identity.

Three main questions are addressed in this study as it attempts to examine how violent extremism and masculinity interact in Pakistan: In what ways can societal norms around masculinity serve to justify acts of extreme violence? How do institutions of the state and society support or contradict these gendered narratives? And who is responsible for this violence, as a victim or as a perpetrator? This paper makes the case that in order to combat violence in Pakistan, the patriarchal structures that legitimate it must be destroyed by examining the political, cultural, and historical foundations of masculinist extremism. By highlighting the pressing need for inclusive policies that address the gendered aspects of extremism and advance just social change, the findings hope to add to larger discussions on gender, security, and conflict resolution.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Through the intersection of postcolonial power systems, gender performativity, and hegemonic masculinity, it is possible to conceptualize the relationship between violent extremism and masculinity. These concepts shed light on how institutions either support or oppose the ways in which societal conceptions of masculinity are weaponized in extremist contexts.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Violence

A fundamental viewpoint is offered by Connell's (1995) thesis of hegemonic masculinity, which is the culturally idealized manifestation of masculine dominance that validates patriarchal power. Hegemonic masculinity is frequently associated with physical strength, authority over women, and religious or tribal affiliation in male-dominated civilizations such as Pakistan (Kandiyoti, 1988). In order to recover alleged losses of honor or power, extremist organizations take use of these ideas by portraying violence as a performative act (Messerschmidt, 2018). For example, it is acceptable to defend "authentic" masculine identities by criticizing "emasculating" factors like globalization and secularism (Nayak, 2006). This is consistent with empirical findings that extremist violence in Pakistan frequently targets modernity symbols, such as girls' schools, in an effort to uphold patriarchal rule (UNCHR&Refworld, 2021).

Connell (1995) offers a critical perspective through which to examine how violence is institutionalized in nations such as Pakistan. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the culturally elevated type of masculinity that validates patriarchal control. Hegemonic masculinity functions by elevating characteristics like violence, dominance over women, and territorial or religious authority while marginalizing alternative masculinities (such as effeminate or queer identities) and femininities (Messerschmidt, 2018). This ideal is intricately entwined with Islamic conservatism, militaristic nationalism, and tribal norms (Pashtunwali) in Pakistan, establishing a hierarchy in which men must continuously exercise authority in order to maintain social legitimacy (Lindisfarne, 1994).

For example, ideas like ghairat (honor) and badal (revenge) are essential to masculine identity in Pakistan's Pashtun-majority areas. The justification for violent revenge against perceived slights, whether they be familial, communal, or personal, is the obligation to preserve patriarchal honor (Benson & Siddiqui, 2014). By portraying jihad as the pinnacle of ghairat against "emasculating" forces like the government, Western powers, or progressive gender changes, extremist organizations like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) take advantage of these standards and recruit young males (Fair, 2018). In addition to being acts of terrorism, suicide bombings and attacks on girls' schools, like the 2012 Malala Yousafzai killing, are also displays of hypermasculinity intended to uphold patriarchal control over women's bodies and education (Zia, 2018).

Hegemonic masculinity is frequently unintentionally reinforced by the state's counterterrorism tactics. Military operations against militants like Zarb-e-Azb, portray terrorists as coward that must be eliminated while exalting soldiers as guardians of the nation's honor (The Express Tribune, 2014). The confinement of conflict resolution as a struggle for masculine supremacy and ignoring peaceful options like dialogue or social reforms feeds violent cycles.

Postcolonial Patriarchy and Structural Violence

According to postcolonial theorists, colonial legacies solidified tribal and patriarchal structures, establishing hierarchies in which authority is equated with masculinity. By enslaving local elites and enacting tribal or religious

rules that oppressed women and minorities, postcolonial theorists contend that colonial regimes solidified patriarchal structures (Fanon, 1963; Spivak, 1988). Tribal customs that put male honor above individual rights were codified in Pakistan by colonial-era laws (such as the Frontier Crimes Regulation), which fueled cycles of retaliatory violence. The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which was established in 1901 by British colonial authorities in Pakistan, gave tribal leaders (maliks) unrestricted control over women's mobility, justice, and land (Hopkins, 2015). These systems interact with religious fundamentalism, as orthodox interpretations of Islam marginalize women and dissenters by portraying men as defenders of faith and culture (Zia, 2019). Violence as a means of preserving power is normalized by such systemic injustices. Following independence, the state kept these systems in place, fusing Islamic legal frameworks (such as the Hudood Ordinances) with colonial-era legislation to produce a hybrid system that normalizes systemic violence against women and dissidents (Toor, 2011).

In Pakistan, laws and practices that deny women autonomy are examples of structural violence, defined by Galtung as systematic harm ingrained in social, political, and economic institutions (Galtung, 1969). For instance, tribal codes that see women as male property justify karo-kari (honor killings), but police and courts frequently brush these cases aside as "private family matters" (Amnesty International, 2022). Similarly, progressive activists and religious minorities are disproportionately the targets of blasphemy accusations, which feeds a culture of fear that upholds extremist and patriarchal power (Saeed, 2016).

Religious nationalism also overlaps with postcolonial patriarchy. In the 1970s and 1980s, the state's support for conservative clergy (such as during Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies) militarized Islam by conflating religious militancy with masculinity. Supported by Saudi Arabia and the United States, the Afghan jihad increasingly militarized Pakistani society by portraying the mujahid (holy warrior) as the ideal Muslim man (Abbas, 2004). This tradition is still prevalent today, as organizations such as TLP (Tehreek e Labiak Pakistan) entice marginalized men with financial rewards and a mission related to "defending Islam" (Fair, 2018).

Crucially, Pakistan's postcolonial administration places "security" above equity and redirects funds from healthcare and education to military budgets. In places like Balochistan, where official brutality against ethnic minorities is justified as preserving "national integrity," this neglect makes poverty and radicalism worse (Akhtar, 2019). The weight of structural violence falls on women and children in these regions, who also have limited access to justice, sexual violence, and displacement (Amnesty International, 1999).

Gender Performativity and Violent Masculinity

Extremist violence turns into a ritualized performance of masculinity, as explained by Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which holds that gender is reinforced through socially created acts. Violence is accepted as a way to establish authority, settle disputes, or elevate one's social standing in militaristic environments (Enloe, 2000). The conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir have molded Pakistan's history of military nationalism, which has institutionalized hyper-masculine bravery and connected religious militancy to national identity (Abbas, 2004). The Taliban and other extremist organizations take advantage of this by presenting jihad as a responsibility associated with masculine honor in order to recruit young men (Siddiqa, 2007).

Based on historical gender, ethnic, and class inequities, these theories show that violence in Pakistan is structural rather than incidental. State institutions, which are influenced by the same structures, neglect to address the underlying causes of violence, while hegemonic masculinity and postcolonial patriarchy legitimize it as a means of preserving power. Therefore, combating extremism necessitates tearing down patriarchal notions that link dominance and masculinity and rethinking governance through inclusive, egalitarian policies.

Manifestation of Violent Extremism in Pakistan's Society

In Pakistan, the postcolonial patriarchy has generated a system where colonial-era legal and social structures reinforced traditional gender roles, embedding male authority into institutions like the judiciary, military, and religious bodies (Toor, 2011). In addition to that structural violence systemic inequalities that deny marginalized groups access to rights and security (Galtung, 1969) has create an environment that is conducive to extremism. This intersection offers a critical lens through which to examine the manifestation of violent extremism in Pakistan, especially in mob violence incidents.

Hegemonic masculinity's emphasis on "honor" and collective identity is frequently reflected in Pakistani mob violence. For example, blasphemy-related lynchings, like the 2021 murder of Priyantha Kumara in Sialkot, provide as an example of how primarily male mobs carry out hyper-masculine acts of violence in order to establish their moral and religious supremacy. The legal framework as the Hudood Ordinance tin the post-colonial Pakistan institutionalized patriarchal norms. Under Zia-ul-Haq, this system blended with politicized Islamization, using blasphemy laws (Section 295-C) as a tool to silence minority voices and dissent (Toor, 2011). As structural tools, these laws facilitate vigilante masculinity, in which mobs pose as religious defenders and circumvent the government to implement justice (Aljazeera, 2023).

This connection is highlighted by the lynching of Mashal Khan at Abdul Wali Khan University in 2017. Peers attacked Mashal, a secular student who opposed extremism, by framing his progressive opinions as "un-Islamic"—a narrative

that stems from patriarchal concerns about intellectual opposition endangering established power systems (Khan, 2019). Hegemonic masculinity is frequently replicated in Pakistani universities, creating settings where the use of violence as a means of policing ideological conformity is common. Similar to this, the lynching of a Christian couple named Shama and Shehzad in Kot Radha Kishan in 2014 is an example of structural violence: local elites took advantage of these laws to seize their property, and their poverty and status as a religious minority left them open to false accusations of blasphemy (Foreign Policy, 2014).

Additionally, postcolonial patriarchy upholds systemic injustices. Mobs demolished Christian homes and churches during the 2023 Jaranwala riots, which took place in an area where Christians are economically marginalized and caste-based (biradari) hierarchies are deeply ingrained. Land changes during the colonial era and post-independence Islamization programs disenfranchised religious minorities, making them permanent outsiders. This is a reflection of institutionalized patriarchy, in which societal control is maintained by power brokers shielding hyper-masculine vigilante groups.

Crucially, Pakistan's postcolonial security state's militaristic masculinity serves to further these dynamics. A nationalist narrative that associates violence with "protecting" Islamic identity is linked to the public's exaltation of violent organizations like as TTP (Tehreek Taliban Pakistan and TLP (Tehreek Labaik Pakistan). This is similar to colonial tactics of using tribal patriarchs to quell opposition. As a result, a societal narrative that elevates male aggression as a kind of sacred duty supports both extremist organizations and mobs.

The more legal reforms needed along with the gender-sensitive education, and economic empowerment as means of destroying the trinity of postcolonial patriarchy, structural violence, and hegemonic masculinity.

The Role of Religious and Political Parties

In Pakistan, religious and political parties have paradoxically fueled or countered violent extremism and violent masculinity, using legal frameworks, ideological narratives, and electoral politics to further their agendas. Religious parties like Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), Jamat-e-Islami (JI), and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have historically used sectarian rhetoric and blasphemy laws to gain power, which often encourages vigilante violence. For example, TLP, which was established in 2015 to defend blasphemy laws, has organized violent protests to pressure governments into upholding Section 295-C, which stipulates the death penalty for blasphemy (Herald, 2018).

With its leaders publicly encouraging members to "behead blasphemers," the TLP incited widespread rioting in 2018 following the Supreme Court's acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman wrongfully accused of blasphemy (Dawn, 2018). Similar to this, JUI-F and JI have resisted legislative changes aimed at reducing violence related to blasphemy, characterizing such initiatives as "anti-Islamic," thereby establishing mob justice as a religious obligation (Haq, 2019). As seen by the 2021 Sialkot lynching of Priyantha Kumara, in which TLP supporters first justified the mob's behavior, these groups frequently confuse religious identity with hypermasculine aggression, presenting violence as a way to protect communal dignity (DW, 2021).

Mainstream political parties, such as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), have alternated between opposing and pacifying extremist organizations. Although the National Action Plan (NAP), which included measures to control hate speech, was introduced in 2014 by the PPP's administration (2008–2013) to combat terrorism, alliances with organizations such as JUI-F that opposed the NAP's provisions on madrassa reforms hampered its implementation (Abbas, 2014). Notwithstanding its pro-business stance, the PML-N has frequently given in to religious pressure. In 2017, it changed the Electoral Reforms Act to permit candidates to mention their religious affiliation, which allowed organizations such as the TLP to win seats in parliament (Dawn, 2017). However, the appointment of a Hindu woman, Krishna Kumari, to the Senate in 2018 drew criticism from religious groups as well, underscoring the conflict between patriarchal-religious narratives and inclusive governance (Dawn, 2018).

Under PM Imran Khan's tenure (2018–2022), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) took a posture that was incongruous. Khan's government negotiated with the TLP in 2021, releasing arrested members and agreeing to debate blasphemy law reforms in parliament, despite Khan's public condemnation of extremist violence and his description of the Sialkot lynching as a "day of shame" (CNN, 2021). The negotiations and release of the TLP was considered as capitulation to extremists. By proposing conditioned mainstreaming of militants and frequently reinforcing toxic masculinity, PTI's rhetoric subtly supported extremist narratives (Dawn, 2023). Imran Khan's statement in an interview regarding the causes of increasing rape violence against women was also considered a rape victim blaming (BBC.com, 2021). In the meantime, secular PPP groups and progressive parties like the Awami National Party (ANP) have continuously resisted Islamic fanaticism. Although threats and regional politics continue to limit their influence, the ANP leadership has pushed for de-radicalization initiatives after being singled out by the TTP for supporting secular education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hussain, 2013).

The situation is further complicated by institutional and legal complicity. Due to pressure from religious parties, blasphemy laws have been maintained and are being used as instruments of structural violence. As an example of how religious organizations institutionalize patriarchal standards, the 2021 Domestic Violence Bill encountered opposition from the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), which rejected it as "un-Islamic" (Zia, Hassan, 2023). Some parties have achieved small progress in spite of these obstacles. Forced conversions were made illegal by the PPP's Sindh

government in 2016, and minorities were given legal safeguards under the PML-N's 2017 Hindu Marriage Act, however implementation is still lax due to religious opposition (bbc.com, 2017).

Laws, like the Hudood Ordinances (1979), which conflate rape with adultery and disproportionately punish women for sexual violence, and the Qisas and Diyat laws (1990), which permit perpetrators of "honor killings" to avoid punishment through familial forgiveness, institutionalize gender inequality (Zia, 2018). Religious groups like Jamat-e-Islami (JI) and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which portray gender equality measures as "un-Islamic" dangers to social morality, have upheld these laws along with discriminatory practices in inheritance and divorce under Islamic family law. JI has continuously resisted changes to the Hudood Ordinances, for example, claiming that reforms influenced by the West will destroy the fabric of Islamic society.(The Express Tribune, 2011).

Similar to this, progressive laws like the 2016 Women's Protection Act, a PPP-led reform that partially protected rape survivors from Hudood-related prosecutions, have been blocked by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), a constitutional body predominately composed of conservative clerics, on the grounds that it is "against Sharia" (Dawn, 2016).

Ambivalence has been displayed by mainstream political parties. Although the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have occasionally supported gender reforms, their initiatives are frequently thwarted by their affiliations with religious organizations. JUI-F and JI fiercely opposed the PPP's 2011 Anti-Women Practices Act, calling it a "foreign agenda" and making forced marriages and wani (tribe bride trades) illegal (DW, 2011). TLP and CII pressured the PML-N to suspend the Domestic Violence Bill in 2020, arguing that it would "disrupt family harmony," even though the party had just passed the historic 2017 Hindu Marriage Act and 2018 Christian Marriage Act (Minsitry of Law and Justice, 2017, Mustafa et.al, 2021). However, by excluding marital rape and caving in to TLP's demands to maintain patriarchal definitions of "morality" in legal proceedings, the 2020 Anti-Rape Ordinance, which established special courts for gender-based violence, was lessened in its impact (The Guardian, 2020).

Laws that discriminate against women are openly used as a weapon by religious groups to promote violent masculinity. For instance, misogynistic speech portraying Western feminism as a conspiracy to corrupt Muslim women was part of TLP's 2021 rallies against France over blasphemy accusations and later they filed FIR for committing blasphemy against women rights activists and women march participants (Voice of America, 2021). Similarly, JUI-F brought attention to how religious organizations mistake gender diversity for immorality by opposing the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018), a measure that would have given transgender people legal recognition. Using hypermasculine rhetoric to rally conservative support, JUI-F leader Fazlur Rehman criticized the law as promoting homosexuality (Dawn, 2022). In rural Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where feudal and tribal patriarchs collaborate with religious organizations to retain control over land and resources, these parties also oppose changes to inheritance rules that deny women the right to vote (Toor, 2011).

The conflict between progressive and regressive forces is visible in recent legislative initiatives. The ground-breaking Sindh Domestic Violence Act (2013) and the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (2016) are still not well enforced because of opposition from local police and male-dominated tribal councils, or jirgas, which put "community honor" ahead of women's rights (NCSW, 2017). According to a 2017 assessment by the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), Diyat laws enable more than 70% of cases of gender-based violence to be dropped due to pressure from family or society (NCSW, 2017).

The combination of political collusion and legal discrimination sustains a society that normalizes aggressive masculinity. The structural injustices allow gender violence against women in the name of"familyhonor,"and underage marriages of girls is a norm unchallenged. Threats from religious organizations and the state's unwillingness to challenge patriarchal authority hinder the efforts of progressive voices calling for reforms within parties like the PPP and civil society organizations like the Aurat March. Legal and cultural frameworks will continue to support violence and discrimination against women and minority genders unless political parties consistently place a higher priority on gender justice than on electoral expediency.

CONCLUSION

A systemic intersection where theoretical frameworks materialize in oppressive behaviors is revealed by the interaction of postcolonial patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and structural violence in Pakistan. Theories such as Galtung's structural violence (1969) and Connell's hegemonic masculinity (2005) explain how colonial legacies and military nationalism give rise to power systems that mainstream gender-based discrimination and violent extremism.

For instance, performative hypermasculinity is reflected in blasphemy-related mob violence, such as the 2021 Sialkot lynching and the 2023 Jaranwala riots, where male-dominated mobs demonstrate religious and moral supremacy to make up for social disenfranchisement. Similar to how religious groups (such as TLP and JI) use Islamized legal frameworks as a weapon to stifle women's autonomy and minority rights, gender-discriminatory laws such as the Hudood Ordinances and Qisas and Diyat statutes institutionalize patriarchal authority. According to Saadia Toor (2011), postcolonial patriarchy solidifies these dynamics by fusing Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization with colonial-era

administrative structures, resulting in a legal-political framework that gives preference to male authority. Cases like the "honor" killing of Qandeel Baloch and the systematic failure to bring criminal charges against those responsible demonstrate this theory-practice link in vivid fashion, demonstrating how cycles of impunity are sustained by structural injustices and cultural norms of aggressive masculinity.

It takes a multifaceted strategy to break this loop. In order to ensure judicial independence in the face of political and religious meddling, legal changes must first repeal or alter discriminatory laws (such as Section 295-C, Hudood Ordinances) and implement already-existing protections like the Women's Protection Act (2016) and Transgender Rights Act (2018). Second, to undermine extremist narratives, educational reforms should incorporate critical religious literacy and gender-sensitive curricula, especially in public schools and madrassas. Third, initiatives for economic empowerment that focus on underprivileged groups, such job quotas for religious minorities and land rights for rural women, can lessen their susceptibility to radicalization and vigilante violence. Fourth, political parties need to break with extremist organizations; mainstream parties like the PML-N and PTI should put human rights ahead of electoral expediency, and international organizations like the UN and EU might require financing to be contingent on concrete anti-extremism reforms. To change cultural norms, grassroots initiatives like the Aurat March and media campaigns opposing toxic masculinity need to be strengthened. The symbiotic relationship between patriarchal hegemony and state involvement must ultimately be broken down in order to replace it with inclusive governance that prioritizes justice over power in order to eradicate violent extremism and gender oppression.

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