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**Empowering Women in Pashtun Communities: A Catalyst for
Counter Violent Extremism Strategies in Pakistan and
Afghanistan**

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Abstract: This paper examines the critical role of Pashtun women in Afghanistan and Pakistan as agents of implementing Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies. It delves into the securitisation of Afghan women in general, with a focus on the Pashtun belt that stretches across Afghanistan and Pakistan, which has been through multiple stages of securitisation under different actors. By integrating theories from Social Work, Sociology, and CVE, this study constructs the Community-Based Empowerment and Resilience Model (CBERM), a novel approach that bridges elements from these disciplines to address the unique challenges faced by the demographic in question. The research emphasises the importance of trust-building, layered empowerment strategies, cultural sensitivity, integrated resilience mechanisms, and continuous adaptation and learning within CVE practices. By highlighting the experiences and capacities of women from Afghanistan and Pakistan who have lived through and experienced the impacts of the Taliban rule and the War on Terror, and who have been traditionally viewed as passive victims, this paper argues for their active involvement in CVE, presenting them not only as beneficiaries but also as pivotal contributors to peace and security in the region. The findings suggest that through empowerment, more effective CVE outcomes can be achieved and a foundation for peace can be cultivated.

In a region marred by conflict and discord, there are unique perspectives and experiences of women, in particular, in the Pashtun communities of Pakistan and Afghanistan – two neighbouring countries with one ethnic population stretched across both of them.¹ These perspectives and experiences emerge as pivotal elements in countering the scourge of violent extremism. This paper aims to explore the potential of these groups as catalysts in the implementation of Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies by going through the evolution of securitisation of the Afghan identity and, more specifically, of Pashtun women. Further, the paper will examine the current landscape under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and assess the cycle of securitisation through interventions by different actors. The vulnerability of women in tangent with their growth potential, awareness, and capacity building is a key component of this analysis. A group of society often profiled as passive victims and spectators of violence is seen in this research in an empowered light and position. Women’s participation in CVE practices continues to be marginalised, whereas the effects of such practices keep them at the heart of such developments.² To juxtapose the findings of this paper with existing literature, secondary data sources have been employed for this study, with a novel model proposed in the form of the Community-Based Empowerment and Resilience Model (CBERM), by borrowing from CVE approaches and social work frameworks. Finally, this research will summarise policy recommendations that aim to empower the most susceptible yet influential factions of society, thereby fostering a robust foundation for peace and security in South Asia.

Theoretical Framework

¹ Iftikhar H. Malik, *Pashtun Identity and Geopolitics in Southwest Asia: Pakistan and Afghanistan since 9/11*, ed. Camron Michael Amin, *JSTOR* (Anthem Press, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dfnptn>, 53.

² Pip Henty and Beth Eggleston, “Mothers, Mercenaries and Mediators: Women Providing Answers to the Questions We Forgot to Ask,” *Security Challenges* 14, no. 2 (2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26558024>, 108.

Drawing upon major theories of social work, sociology, and CVE, elements of four approaches have been combined for this research to create a juxtaposed, critical, and contextualised model for Afghanistan. The first approach is the *Social Ecology Theory*, whereby multiple factors from the surroundings of an individual come together to form the unique characteristics that shape that individual's identity.³ The second approach is with the *Empowerment Theory*, which necessitates intervention tools to aid in guiding people to build autonomy and take control over their lives.⁴ The last two approaches are the *Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law (TTSRL) model*, and the *Realist Evaluation*, which have been outlined by Amy-Jane Gielen in her paper titled, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and how?". The TTSRL model maps the journey from the root causes to radicalisation, such as social injustice, and the identification of specific CVE interventions. She also presents the *Realist Evaluation*, which focuses on the interplay of context (C), mechanism (M), and outcome (O). This implies that the outcomes are not just produced by the mechanisms of the program alone but also by the interaction of these mechanisms with the context in which they are implemented.⁵ The elements drawn from these approaches for this paper form the conceptual framework of the novel model for CVE in Afghanistan, the Community-based Empowerment and Resilience Model (CBERM). This model is distinct in its analysis due to its holistic and cross-disciplinary elements. These elements are structured as follows:

- a) *Foundation of Trust Building (FTB)*: A CVE model's successful stepping stone is to establish trust within the community. This includes the creation of safe spaces for dialogue and engagement, with a focus on listening to the needs and concerns of

³ Michael Ungar, "A Deeper, More Social Ecological Social Work Practice," *Social Service Review* 76, no. 3 (September 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1086/341185>, 484.

⁴ Holly Martinez, "What Is Social Empowerment? Empowerment Theory | United Way NCA," United Way NCA, May 24, 2022, <https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/social-empowerment/>.

⁵ Amy-Jane Gielen, "Countering Violent Extremism: A Realist Review for Assessing What Works, for Whom, in What Circumstances, and How?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (May 3, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1313736>, 1162.

women and children.

- b) *Layered Empowerment Strategy (LES)*:** This involves empowerment through a multi-tiered system of education, economic independence, and political representation. This element is established to cater to a two-pronged need for the provision of skills and knowledge, and a sense of ownership and responsibility towards community well-being.
- c) *Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation Mechanism (CSAM)*:** The recognition of cultural diversity, cultural dynamics, and unique traditions is strengthened by this element, which ensures that CVE programs respect cultures and foster wider acceptance and effectiveness.
- d) *Integrated Resilience Mechanism (IRM)*:** Establishing support networks, mental health resources, and platforms for sharing success stories creates a shared narrative of resilience against extremism.
- e) *Continuous Adaptation and Learning Framework (CALF)*:** Forming regular feedback loops and data-driven adjustments that are relevant across time and space ensures a commitment to learning, adaptability, and effective CVE strategies.

Applying this model to the case study of the Pashtuns in Afghanistan requires an in-depth insight into the dynamics of the region concerning the history, culture, and influence of foreign actors.

The Evolution of the Cry for the Afghan Woman

Women in the War on Terror and Western Paternalism

The inception of the War on Terror in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks set forth a complex matrix of geopolitical manoeuvres, where the emancipation of Afghan women became a pronounced motif. The imagery of Afghan women—often depicted in burqas, symbolising their oppression, played a significant role in the

justification of Western intervention in Afghanistan.⁶ However, beneath this expressed concern for women's empowerment, there is a narrative influenced by paternalism and Orientalist perspectives.

The paternalistic relationship between the West and Afghan women reflects a broader stereotype: the Western saviour, possessing modernity and enlightenment, intervening to rescue oppressed Eastern women.⁷ While ostensibly advocating for women's rights, this narrative can risk sidelining the agency of Afghan women, depicting them as passive entities awaiting salvation from an external saviour. Instead of recognising Afghan women as active participants in their liberation, they are often homogenised into a single group, muting their voices, experiences, and resistance.

This “Western saviour” narrative is manifold. Firstly, it can obscure the rich history of women’s activism and resistance within Afghanistan. Long before the Western intervention, Afghan women had been at the forefront of various movements, resisting not just extremist ideologies but also advocating for their rights in spheres ranging from education to political participation. By painting them solely as victims, the narrative can diminish their contributions and resilience.

Furthermore, this paternalistic approach often results in policies and interventions that are out of touch with the ground realities and aspirations of Afghan women. For instance, while much was made of the symbolic lifting of restrictions on women’s education and employment post-2001, systemic challenges like security threats to female students and workers, or the lack of comprehensive legal structures to address domestic violence, remained inadequately addressed.⁸

⁶ Kevin J. Ayotte, and Mary E. Husain. “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil.” *NWSA Journal* 17, no. 3 (2005), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317160>, 113.

⁷ Ruhi Khan, “Afghanistan and the Colonial Project of Feminism: Dismantling the Binary Lens,” London School of Economics (2021), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2021/09/02/afghanistan-and-the-colonial-project-of-feminism-dismantling-the-binary-lens/>

⁸ Hafizullah Emadi, “Women in the Post-Taliban Afghanistan: Dialectics of Oppression and Token

Additionally, the overemphasis on select women's rights issues, often those most palatable to Western audiences, sometimes came at the cost of sidelining other pressing concerns. The focus on visible symbols considered by many as "oppressive", like the burqa, often overshadowed the need for broader socio-economic reforms and security guarantees for Afghan women.⁹

Taliban 2.0 and abandoning the cry for Afghan women

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 has significantly impacted and impaired the rights and freedoms of women and girls.¹⁰ It has come to a point where they are faced with outright restrictions and denial of fundamental rights such as education, work, healthcare, freedom of movement, and expression.¹¹ This has led to increased vulnerability and dependency, in particular, due to the gender-based violence they often face without adequate legal protections or remedies.

Since the Taliban's rise to power, girls have been barred from secondary schools and universities, affecting an estimated 1.1 million girls and an unquantified number of women.¹² The Taliban's decree necessitates women to wear hijabs (headcovers) and not to leave their homes unnecessarily. Travel beyond 72 km requires a male escort (mahram; a man who is related to a woman either by blood or marriage).¹³ The right to work has been revoked, with men replacing women as government workers, and bans have been imposed on women working with NGOs and UN institutes. This has dire implications in a

Recognition," *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 3-4 (2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26505359>, 250.

⁹ Kevin J. Ayotte, and Mary E. Husain, "Securing Afghan Women," 126.

¹⁰ Naheed Farid and Rangita De Silva De Alwis, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: A State of 'Gender Apartheid'?", 2023, https://spia.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/SPIA_NaheedRangita_PolicyBrief_07.pdf

¹¹ Nada Al-Nashif, "Afghan Women Suffer Extreme Discrimination, Restrictions and Violence - Deputy High Commissioner | Ohchr," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, June 19, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/06/afghan-women-suffer-extreme-discrimination-restrictions-and-violence-deputy-high>.

¹² UNESCO, "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn! | UNESCO," [www.unesco.org](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn) (UNESCO, January 18, 2023), <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn>.

¹³ Emma Graham-Harrison, "'I Daren't Go Far': Taliban Rules Trap Afghan Women with No Male Guardian," *The Guardian*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/15/taliban-rules-trap-afghan-women-no-male-guardian>

country where food scarcity is rampant, with 95% of households experiencing insufficient food consumption.¹⁴ Further, healthcare access is hampered by women being required to wear hijabs and niqabs (face coverings) to provide medical treatment, only allowing women to be treated by female doctors, which is problematic given the shortage of such professionals, and mandating a mahram for travel to healthcare providers.¹⁵ This grim situation is further worsened by the fact that female health workers are employed in urban centres, and pregnant women often pass away on the way to reach a doctor from a distant rural area.¹⁶

Gender-based violence is rampant, with domestic violence and forced marriages going unpunished. The Taliban's measures have terminated institutional and legal support structures for women facing such violence.¹⁷ Such circumstances, which have turned women and girls into a social group facing persecution, have called for Tan and Ciger (2023) to propose that these are grounds for refugee status under international conventions.

However, this research proposes that the injustices against women, although amplified under the Taliban in Afghanistan and its neighbour Pakistan, in its Pashtun-populated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa KP province, predate any extremist group governing them. It is a fetishisation of the rights and security of Pashtun women to satiate the narratives of responsibility of different parties involved across different points in time.

¹⁴ Nikolas Feith Tan and Meltem Ineli-Ciger, "Group-Based Protection of Afghan Women and Girls under the 1951 Refugee Convention," *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (July 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020589323000283>, 798.

¹⁵ Chantelle Lee, "What's the Status of Healthcare for Women in Afghanistan under the Taliban?," *Frontline* (PBS, August 9, 2022), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/healthcare-women-afghanistan-under-taliban/>

¹⁶ Anastasiia Carrier, "In Afghanistan, Women Are Dying on the Way to the Hospital or inside It," *PassBlue*, December 19, 2023, <https://www.passblue.com/2023/12/19/in-afghanistan-women-are-dying-on-the-way-to-the-hospital-or-inside-it/>

¹⁷ Belquis Ahmadi, "How the Taliban enables violence against women", *United States Institute of Peace*, December, 7, 2023, URL: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/12/how-taliban-enables-violence-against-women#:~:text=Any%20perceived%20violation%20of%20these,to%20cruel%20treatment%2C%20including%20torture>

There are further layers to this securitisation of the Pashtun woman, which this paper also refers to as the *burqa-security nexus*. This term refers to the complex interplay of the symbolic use of the burqa (veil) with the geopolitical narratives around the security of Pashtun women. This nexus illustrates how the burqa has been wielded as a tool of both oppression and liberation, subject to the prevailing political forces in Afghanistan. The security or insecurity of women is inextricably tied to haunting blue veils. In the demography of the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, these women have historically been portrayed as the embodiment of their communities' insecurities. This representation has endured through varying regimes and foreign interventions, creating a cycle where the "security" of Pashtun women becomes a mirror reflecting broader political and cultural dynamics. Under Taliban rule, cultural and religious edicts have served to both suppress and, paradoxically, highlight their plight, often justifying interventionist narratives. The NATO/US presence and the subsequent resurgence of the Taliban have continued this pattern, with each entity using the status of Pashtun women to legitimise their stance, be it for 'liberation' or 'protection'. This dynamic has securitised their existence, linking their everyday lives to the geopolitical agenda and often overshadowing their agency and the rich tapestry of their social roles within Pashtun society. Whether it is the West freeing the Pashtun woman from the 'shackles' of the burqa¹⁸ or the Talib putting her in one, the central CVE approach lies in policing Pashtun women and dictating their freedom or protection, respectively.

Comparative Analysis

Pakistan's CVE Efforts

In Pakistan, in line with global trends, the CVE efforts in the Pashtun regions have progressively recognised the importance of integrating women into policymaking around

¹⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2013), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wpmnc>, 35.

it.¹⁹ The national P/CVE guidelines developed after 2014 emphasise a bottom-up approach. The bottom-up approach signifies an audience-oriented approach to countering violent extremism.²⁰ This involves a wide range of actors from different societal levels. Despite implementation challenges, there is a growing acknowledgement and recognition of the need for gender-sensitive approaches.²¹ Women, while active in policy-making, still face barriers in the security sector, hampering their full participation.²² The National Action Plan (NAP) and National Internal Security Policy (NISP) have tentatively begun to address gendered aspects of security policy.²³ These efforts, however, seem to lack a concrete roadmap for the integration of women's concerns into said policy and its implementation mechanisms. The engagement of women in CVE efforts is indispensable, as their participation brings unique perspectives and capabilities to the table, which can aid in the efficacy of policies and their cultural appropriateness.

Lessons for Afghanistan

The Pakistani model highlights the significance of including women in CVE practices, which is crucial for Afghanistan. Pakistan can serve as a platform for Afghan women, showing potential for collaboration, especially among women's rights advocates. The involvement of Pakistani women in CVE can guide and inspire engagement strategies for Afghan women. Women in Pakistan, while facing barriers, are not under a restrictive regime like the Taliban and therefore can serve as a contextualised example for Afghan women's potential roles in CVE. Collaborative initiatives between Pakistani and

¹⁹ Pip Henty and Beth Eggleston, "Mothers, Mercenaries and Mediators," 113.

²⁰ Sharyn Rundle-Thiele and Renata Anibaldi, "Countering Violent Extremism: From Defence to Attack," *Security Challenges* 12, no. 2 (2016), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26465607>, 54.

²¹ Pip Henty and Beth Eggleston, "Mothers, Mercenaries and Mediators," 121.

²² UN Women, "Preventing Violent Extremism: Integrating Gender Perspectives (Global, Jordan, and Pakistan)," UN Women – Headquarters, September 25, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/10/preventing-violent-extremism-integrating-gender-perspectives>.

²³ Sheharyar Khan, Ayyaz Mallick, and Khadija Ali, "Resilience, Community Security, and Social Cohesion through Effective Women's Leadership: A UN Women Research Study" (UN Women, 2022), <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/pk-UN-WOMEN-RESEARCH-STUDY.pdf>

Afghan women could lead to the development of more effective and culturally attuned CVE strategies. Engaging Afghan women in CVE efforts under the Taliban does, however, pose unique challenges due to the severe restrictions on their freedoms and rights. Unlike their Pakistani counterparts, Afghan women are constrained by policies that limit their movement, education, and participation in the public sphere.²⁴ However, Pakistani women sharing religious and cultural contexts with Afghan women could play a pivotal role in forming support networks and empowerment narratives. By leveraging their freedom and shared understanding, Pakistani activists can help bridge the gap, offering a model for community engagement and resilience that resonates within the same cultural framework. This cross-border engagement on CVE could play an instrumental role in providing Afghan women with the advocacy and support necessary to navigate the complexities of living under Taliban rule.

²⁴ Sultan Barakat, "Setting the Scene for Afghanistan's Reconstruction: The Challenges and Critical Dilemmas," *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993389>, 807.

Policy Recommendations

Applying the Community-Based Empowerment and Resilience Model (CBERM) to the challenges faced by Afghan women under the Taliban in conjunction with Pakistan's CVE framework involves multiple layers of intervention. These include:

Foundation of Trust Building (FTB)

This component would necessitate discreetly mapping trusted community networks that can operate beneath the visibility of the Taliban, to disseminate and provide education materials, essential information, covert support, and safe spaces. Trust networks would be expanded through the integration of local matriarchs and female educators who can operate within their social constraints to facilitate secret learning circles. These circles would employ culturally resonant tools. One such tool is localised storytelling (qissa khwani), a traditional form of knowledge-sharing in Pashtun culture²⁵, which could be repurposed to subtly include empowering narratives and rights education.

Layered Empowerment Strategy (LES)

Creating adaptive strategies, such as creating home-based micro-enterprises that align with the Taliban's restrictions on movement, would foster economic independence. Digital literacy and secure online vocational training platforms can connect women with global support communities, allowing them to engage in global marketplaces and educational forums covertly. International partnerships can be created to facilitate remote work opportunities. Further, local and digital enterprises both in Afghanistan and Pakistan could aid economic independence. Utilising traditional Pashtun embroidery and handicraft skills, for instance, could appeal to Pakistani marketplaces while adhering to cultural norms.²⁶

²⁵ Ehsanullah Pamir, Asadullah Waheedi, and Khalid Ahmad Habib, "Some Aspects of Pashtun Culture," *Randwick International of Social Science Journal* 4, no. 3 (July 31, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v4i3.710>, 744.

²⁶ Imran Ali et al., "Women's Empowerment Through Craft, Entrepreneurship and Technology In Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan", *Research Gate*, (2017). DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26933.50404, 43.

Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptation Mechanism (CSAM)

This element requires a deep understanding of Pashtun traditions and religious sensitivities. CVE programs should be embedded within the fabric of culturally accepted practices²⁷, such as women-led religious study groups that also serve as spaces for resilience- building against extremist ideologies. This could also involve reinterpreting cultural symbols and narratives in a way that reinforces women’s rights and resilience against extremism.

Integrated Resilience Mechanism (IRM)

Resilience against extremism is bolstered by establishing a covert support infrastructure, relying on existing social bonds, and discreetly incorporating mental wellness into the fabric of (women's) daily routines and communal gatherings.²⁸ Mental health support must be embedded in everyday interactions, with a focus on training local women to provide peer support. This is of utmost importance to curb the “suicide pandemic” in Afghanistan as a result of the Taliban regime’s restrictive laws that mainly affect women.²⁹ This mechanism should leverage existing familial and social structures to offer psychological aid, maintaining the utmost discretion.

Continuous Adaptation and Learning Framework (CALF)

The fluidity of the political situation demands constant vigilance and adaptability. Real-time adaptation is critical. This means having a dynamic, responsive strategy that monitors the socio-political climate and adjusts the delivery methods of education and empowerment initiatives to ensure they remain effective and, above all, safe for participants. This approach requires flexibility, discretion, and a deep understanding of the

²⁷ Farangiz Atamuradova and Sara Zeiger, “Researching the Evolution of Countering Violent Extremism,” *Hedayah*, 2021, <https://hedayah.com/app/uploads/2021/09/Full-Edited-Volume-RC2019.pdf>.

²⁸ Hedieh Mirahmadi, “Building Resilience against Violent Extremism,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668, no. 1 (October 21, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216671303>, 137.

²⁹ Yogita Limaye, “Afghan Women in Mental Health Crisis over Bleak Future,” *BBC News*, June 5, 2023, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-65765399>.

cultural and political landscape to effectively empower Pashtun women and advocate for their rights.

Conclusion

The Community-Based Empowerment and Resilience Model (CBERM) offers a comprehensive approach to counter violent extremism, with a focus on the empowerment of Pashtun women. Through the establishment of trust, empowerment strategies, cultural sensitivity, resilience-building, and continuous adaptation, the CBERM seeks to transform the role of these vulnerable groups from passive victims to active participants in CVE efforts. This model addresses the challenges faced by the Pashtun communities in Afghanistan while correlating them to the bordering communities in Pakistan. This paper attempts to provide a framework for the analysis of CVE initiatives as community-centred and bottom-up approaches, with gender-mainstreaming at the core of such initiatives. The coining of the burqa-security nexus in this paper is a symbolic representation of the burqa's imposition by the Taliban, which is contrasted against its use by external liberators as a symbol of oppression that they seek to remove. This can oversimplify the cultural significance and personal choice involved. This nexus has been an instrument for various actors to assert control over Pashtun women's bodies and choices, perpetuating a cycle of securitisation that overlooks women's agency and freedom of choice. The CBERM approach challenges this by placing women at the centre of CVE strategies, recognising their potential to catalyse change from within their communities. It is important to understand that for a successful CVE strategy, one must talk to Pashtun women rather than about them.

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