

VOL. XI ISSUE II, SPRING (JUNE-2026)

GSR

GLOBAL SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW
HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y



Title: Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective

Abstract

Women's radicalization is an underexplored aspect of terrorism and political violence in Pakistan. Current approaches tend to focus on male militancy or focus exclusively on the victimization of women. The interplay between women's agency and the gendered structures that shape decision-making is often overlooked. The article uses the lens of Feminist Security Theory and illustrative examples from Pakistan to explore how the religious and ideological narratives, family and gender-based expectations, cultural norms, and social and digital environments can intersect in women's journey towards radicalization. It proposes a Gendered Radicalization Pathway (GRP) as a framework to conceptualize radicalization as conditional interaction between vulnerability, social constraint, ideological exposure, reinforcement, and agency. The paper argues that agency and vulnerability can coexist. Women in Pakistan, may be influenced by patriarchal structures while also exercising meaningful choice within them. This is a shift from the victim-perpetrator paradigm and enables more gender-responsive prevention and counter-radicalization strategies.

Keywords: Extremism, Feminist Security Theory, Gender, Pakistan, Political Violence, Radicalization, Terrorism; Women

Authors:

Nimra Iftikhar: MPhil Scholar, Terrorism and Political Violence, National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad, Pakistan.

Syed Kaleem Imam: (Corresponding Author)
Former Federal Secretary / IGP / UN Police Commissioner, Pakistan.
(Email: skimam98@hotmail.com)

Pages: 33-39

DOI:10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II).04

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026\(XI-II\).04](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II).04)

Article link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/womens-radicalization-in-pakistan-a-feminist-security-perspective>

Full-text Link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/womens-radicalization-in-pakistan-a-feminist-security-perspective>

Pdf link: <https://www.gsrjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2.pdf>

Global Sociological Review

p-ISSN: 2708-2091 e-ISSN: 2708-3586

DOI(journal):10.31703/gsr

Volume: XI (2026)

DOI (volume):10.31703/gsr.2026(XI)

Issue: II Spring (June-2026)

DOI(Issue):10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II)

Home Page

www.gsrjournal.com

Volume: XI (2026)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/Current-issue>

Issue: II-Spring (June 2026)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/issue/11/2/2026>

Scope

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/about-us/scope>

Submission

<https://humaglobe.com/index.php/gsr/submissions>

Scan the QR to visit us



Google
scholar



Citing this Article

Article Serial	04
Article Title	Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective
Authors	Nimra Iftikhar Syed Kaleem Imam
DOI	10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II).04
Pages	33-39
Year	2026
Volume	XI
Issue	II

Referencing & Citing Styles

APA	Iftikhar, N., & Imam, S. K. (2026). Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , 11(2), 33-39. https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II).04
CHICAGO	Iftikhar, Nimra, and Syed Kaleem Imam. 2026. "Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> 11 (2):33-39. doi: 10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II).04.
HARVARD	IFTIKHAR, N. & IMAM, S. K. 2026. Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , 11, 33-39.
MHRA	Iftikhar, Nimra, and Syed Kaleem Imam. 2026. 'Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , 11: 33-39.
MLA	Iftikhar, Nimra, and Syed Kaleem Imam. "Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> 11.2 (2026): 33-39. Print.
OXFORD	Iftikhar, Nimra and Imam, Syed Kaleem (2026), 'Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , 11 (2), 33-39.
TURABIAN	Iftikhar, Nimra and Syed Kaleem Imam. "Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> 11, no. 2 (2026): 33-39. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-II).04 .

Women's Radicalization in Pakistan: A Feminist Security Perspective



Nimra Iftikhar¹ Syed Kaleem Imam (Corresponding Author)²

¹ MPhil Scholar, Terrorism and Political Violence, National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad, Pakistan.

² Former Federal Secretary / IGP / UN Police Commissioner, Pakistan.
(Email: skimam98@hotmail.com)

Abstract

Women's radicalization is an underexplored aspect of terrorism and political violence in Pakistan. Current approaches tend to focus on male militancy or focus exclusively on the victimization of women. The interplay between women's agency and the gendered structures that shape decision-making is often overlooked. The article uses the lens of Feminist Security Theory and illustrative examples from Pakistan to explore how the religious and ideological narratives, family and gender-based expectations, cultural norms, and social and digital environments can intersect in women's journey towards radicalization. It proposes a Gendered Radicalization Pathway (GRP) as a framework to conceptualize radicalization as conditional interaction between vulnerability, social constraint, ideological exposure, reinforcement, and agency. The paper argues that agency and vulnerability can coexist. Women in Pakistan, may be influenced by patriarchal structures while also exercising meaningful choice within them. This is a shift from the victim-perpetrator paradigm and enables more gender-responsive prevention and counter-radicalization strategies.

Keywords: *Extremism, Feminist Security Theory, Gender, Pakistan, Political Violence, Radicalization, Terrorism; Women*

Introduction

Women are important political, social and cultural actors in Pakistan, yet their involvement is under-researched in the field of terrorism and political violence. The history of security discussions has been dedicated to militant groups, state reactions and male soldiers. This has led to a partial picture in which women are almost always regarded as passive victims, as dependents, or as an outside force rather than actors capable of interpreting, transmitting, resisting or adopting political and ideological narratives.

Pakistan's experience suggests a more complicated reality. Women have been seen as supporters, facilitators, recruiters, proponents, and in few cases, perpetrators of violence in extremist contexts. Religion, poverty, family pressure, and ideology alone are not the only reasons for their involvement. They arise in a gendered social context and can manifest themselves in various ways among people and between communities.

Feminist Security Theory provides a useful lens because it challenges the dichotomy between security and private life. Tickner (1992) and Enloe (2014) demonstrate the effects of the gendered nature of power relations in the household, community, and institutions, and how they shape security experiences. In the case of radicalization, this perspective directs attention to a central idea: women may be constrained within patriarchal structures but simultaneously have agency within them.

This article thus posits a straightforward idea: that women's radicalization can't be described as victimization or agency, but as agency in and, at times, against gendered familial, religious, cultural and digital structures.



Problem Statement

Research on radicalization in Pakistan have focused primarily on male militancy, organizations and security responses. While there is an increasing body of scholarship on women, religious perspectives are frequently considered in isolation from gender norms, from the structures of family and from the expectations and choices of women. The analytical gap is thus not merely the invisibility of women in the field of terrorism studies, but also the lack of consideration to the contexts in which women read and react to extremist messages.

Research Question and Objectives

Research Question

What is the relationship between religious narratives, gender norms, family contexts and social/digital environments in shaping women's journey towards radicalization in Pakistan?

Objectives

1. To understand the process of women's radicalization in Pakistan by applying Feminist Security Theory.
2. To describe how ideology, gender, family and culture (or digital influence and agency) might work together rather than independently.
3. To offer a conceptual approach with gender sensitivity that is not based on the victim-perpetrator paradigm.

Research Approach

It is a conceptual study that takes a qualitative approach and uses existing literature and the selected case studies from Pakistan to explore the phenomenon of radicalization of women in the light of Feminist Security Theory. The cases are not necessarily representative but rather used to demonstrate certain patterns of relationship among the concepts of ideology, gender norms, family structures, digital influence and women's agency. The study does not claim that any single factor, institution, or exposure causes radicalization.

34 of 39

Literature Review and Research Gap

Male-dominated perspectives on security have always been undermined by feminist scholarship. Gentry and Sjöberg (2007) highlight the different roles women can play in political violence, while Tickner (1992) and Enloe (2014) focus on the impact that gender has on security, power and political participation. Radicalization scholarships also emphasize the processes of personal experience, group dynamics, and ideological influence that create pathways to radicalization rather than a single cause.

Pakistan-focused studies largely examine women's exposure to religious narratives, identity-based motivations, influence of families, social contexts and networks. Women's involvement in ideological mobilization has also been the subject of research on the religious field, particularly in Jamia Hafsa. However, association with an institution or an ideological environment should be understood with care: Just because someone is associated with an institution or ideology does not mean that the institution or environment caused them.

The literature therefore indicates several influences that are studied one by one. In this paper, they are all brought into a single analytical frame. Its contribution is to treat the processes of women's radicalization as a gendered interaction among structural conditions, ideology, interpersonal networks, the reinforcement through the digital, and individual agency.

Feminist Security Theory

Feminist Security Theory expands the concept of security beyond the military and the state (Tickner, [1992](#)). It investigates the difference gendered-power relations make to individual lives. It also focuses on how seemingly private spaces such as families, schools, religious institutions, and communities can have an impact on the politics and security of a particular individual (Enloe, [2014](#); Tickner, [1992](#)).

This approach to radicalization for women does not succumb to two polarized simplifications. The first one posits that women who enter the sphere of extremist environment are just manipulated victims. The second is the notion of participation as an independent decision from social pressures. A feminist security approach allows for an investigation of agency and constraint at the same time (Sjoberg & Gentry, [2013](#); Tickner, [1992](#)). This separation is especially important in Pakistan where familial allegiance, religious identity and community expectations and gender role expectations may be strong forces of obligation and belonging. The same environments can offer resilience to extremism or, in certain situations, exposure and reinforcement of ideology.

Gendered Pathways to Radicalization in Pakistan

Religious and Ideological Narratives

Pakistanis have a sense of identity, belonging and moral direction from religion; it is important to recognize that it is not religion itself that is the cause of extremism. It is important to analyze the use of religious narratives to justify exclusion, hostility, or violence. In the case of Mullah Fazlullah's radio tapes in Swat, the potential for using religious language and the local language to mobilize women emotionally and materially is well explained. (Ali, [2013](#)). Women who used to listen to his daily broadcast handed over their gold jewelry willingly for the construction of a madrassa in Fazalulla's village (Khan, [2007](#)).

Women may also be addressed through gender-specific narratives that frame them as guardians of faith, educators of future generations or sources of family sacrifice. This can link together ideology and roles with social value. Jamia Hafsa is a vital case of this process. Female students of the madrassa were not simply passive followers; they actively participated in the processes of ideological mobilization and collective action within the arena. The wife of Maulana Abdul Aziz was openly supporting the Taliban against the United States and its allies (Sengupta and Sarfraz, [2007](#)). Al-Huda International has also become part of a global debate regarding the reinforcement of extremist ideas. Some of the organization's students, Tashfeen Malik, and others, were involved in a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California (Khalid, Akbar, & Khan, [2023](#)). The analytical question is not simply religion, but how religion might play a role in shaping gendered expectations and political grievances.

Gender and Family Structures

Family is both a private relationship and a social institution. Women's reaction to the adoption of extremist convictions by family members might be shaped by expectations of loyalty, obedience, honor, and sacrifice in Pakistan. Women also play a part in the dissemination of extremist narratives among male family members. Highly educated women in Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) madaris are serving the cause in Pakistan. Female students in madrassas are taught to persuade their male family members to join the jihad movement. (Khalil, [2019](#)). Some may resist; others may remain silent, provide support, or adopt similar narratives. These responses are not necessarily coercive nor a free choice.

Gender stereotypes can also be exploited by violent organizations. Women's direct participation is not a new phenomenon, as in the past, women have been seen to shift from supportive to direct roles. While some women still must play only supportive roles, radicalized women in Pakistan have now adopted a new persona.

The trends have changed from women just stitching a suicide jacket to wearing one and carrying out attacks themselves. In 2007, a burqa-clad woman blew herself up in front of a Christian school in Peshawar. In 2010, the first-ever TTP-affiliated female suicide attack was reported in Bajaur that left 45 people dead (Khan, [2022](#)). In 2019, a female suicide bomber attacked a hospital in Dera Ismail Khan, leaving 9 people dead (Mahsud, [2019](#)).

Extremist groups in Pakistan use females to generate vast media coverage and maximize psychological impact. Due to gender stereotypes women easily evade suspicion at security checkpoints with less scrutiny. The Feminist Security theory also demonstrates that extremist groups often take advantage of gender norms. The extremist networks present radicalized messages as a significant part of religion, sacrifice, and motherhood. This makes participation seem not just acceptable but honorable to women. However, it must be taken into account that a limited number of female perpetrators should not be taken as a broad generalization of women.

Social and Digital Reinforcement

In Pakistan, family members, teachers, peers, religious figures, and community networks are considered a significant part of everyday life. They have the capacity to play an influential role in shaping how individuals interpret their surroundings. In Pakistan, close-knit social structures can boost ideological beliefs and encourage obedience. Digital platforms further fuel this process as these spaces stretch access to ideological narratives outside of immediate physical networks.

Social media platforms have largely been exploited to recruit women at a global level. Feminist Security Theory highlights that women are deeply invested in their relationships and social structures. These interpersonal networks can facilitate exposure to radicalized narratives. (Tickner, [1992](#))

In 2017, Naureen Leghari, a second-year medical student was arrested by counter-terrorism authorities. She had spent 2 months in Syria and received training for using weapons. She was arrested due to involvement in planning a terrorist attack (Umm-Al-Arifteen, [2025](#)). This incident raised serious concerns among Pakistani authorities. Such violent narratives are directed towards women as supporters, migrants or partners in ideological projects.

However, the term 'digital exposure' should be studied separately from the term 'radicalization'. When paired with active grievance, identity needs, trusted relationships, and/or repeated reinforcement, online content gains greater meaning. It is not simply the access that is relevant, but also the social significance of what is encountered.

Constrained Agency

According to the Feminist Security Theory vulnerability does not necessarily mean an absence of agency in all cases. A woman can be socially influenced and at the same time choose her own actions. She could agree with some and not with others. Women can also experience oppression from patriarchy and yet be a part of patriarchy (Enloe, [2014](#); Tickner, [1992](#)).

This view goes beyond the victim/perpetrator dichotomy. Female stakeholders can be supportive, facilitative, recruiting, perpetrators, peace builders or voices of resistance. Analytical task is not an analysis of a single set of roles, it is an understanding of how these roles are developed and changed within a specific social and political context.

Proposed Gendered Radicalization Pathway (GRP)

The Gendered Radicalization Pathway (GRP) proposed here combines the key findings in the literature. It does

not serve as a predictive model or generalize women. GRP does not mean that those women who have been exposed to these factors are destined to become radicalized.

Figure 1

Gendered Radicalization Pathway (GRP)



The path does not follow a straight line; it changes depending on the situation. The process can be disturbed by protective relationships, alternative narratives, or institutional support. It advocates that women's agency and vulnerability can co-exist at all stages of the radicalization process.

37 of 39

What the GRP Adds

The GRP includes gender in existing models and shows how gender changes the way these situations work. It does not delve into the question of why women are radical, but why structural conditions, stories, relationships and women's agency interact. It asserts that, in different contexts, social structures may have constricting, identity-generating, exposure and resistance-promoting roles.

This also means that women should not be the target of prevention strategies only as a vulnerable group. Women have the potential to be agents of radicalization, but they can equally be agents of resilience and prevention.

Discussion: Beyond the Victim–Perpetrator Binary

This paper utilizes its findings to have a closer look as to why some women become a part of extremist groups. Viewing women only as helpless victims ignores their ability to make political and ideological choices. However, 'women are the sole perpetrators' is another oversimplistic definition of women, as it ignores how power balances treat men and women differently.

It is helpful to separate the ideas of agency and autonomy. Agency simply means having the power to make choices and act whereas autonomy is being free from rules or control. A woman can have one but not the other. Studying them separately gives us a new way to understand women in extremist groups in Pakistan.

This also changes how we try to prevent extremism. Instead of just asking why a woman became radicalized, the questions should be: What stories was she told? Which relationships carried out these stories? What limits or pressures affected her choices? What type of agency did she exercise? What were the protective

interventions that were lacking? These questions may provide policymakers with hidden and unexplored motivations of radicalized women in Pakistan.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

First, adopt gender-sensitive prevention. Counter-radicalization strategies should note that women can face ideological, familial and social pressures differently than men, and that women should not be treated as a homogeneous group.

Second, families and communities should be engaged as spaces for both risk and resilience. Prevention should be able to build trustful relationships, increase community awareness, and invent locally credible alternatives to extremist narratives.

Third, strengthen religious and digital literacy. There should be more opportunities for women and young girls to have access to critical skills of assessing manipulative ideological claims, misinformation and online recruitment.

Fourth, include women as prevention partners. Women scientists, teachers, religious scholars, community leaders and practitioners should be involved in counter-extremism and peacebuilding programs and activities.

These measures should build upon other socio-economic, education, political inclusion, justice, and community trust initiatives. Gender sensitive policy is not the panacea for structural reform; it is the means of ensuring that reform involves everyone.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is conceptual in nature with literature review and selected illustrative cases. It does not make causal statements, nor does it assert that the experiences described reflect that of Pakistani women in general. There are also some cases reported, where the distinction between association, ideological influence and direct causation should be taken care of.

In the future, GRP testing should be conducted by interviews, comparative case studies, and longitudinal analysis. Specific focus needs to be paid to protective factors, women who have been exposed to extremist narratives who are nonetheless resistant to them, and variations across region, class, education, sect, age, and family structure.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, women joining extremist networks is not just about religion, culture, or personal choice. Simply labelling women as either victims or perpetrators does not produce influential outcomes. The fact that their personal journeys towards radicalization can be based on both vulnerability and agency should be considered.

Feminist Security Theory helps us see how private and public life connects. The private sphere of family life can affect politics, ideas about gender can force people to act a certain way, and technology can spread security narratives far outside local communities. The new GRP framework brings all these ideas together, but it does not mean a person will definitely turn to violence.

The biggest lesson here is that we shouldn't just look at women when they become victims or criminals. We need to see them as political and social actors throughout the whole process. This is a huge change for Pakistan. If anti-extremism programs only treat women as people who need to be protected, they will fail to see the whole picture. These programs should help women understand, speak out against, and resist extremist ideas. A true gender-focused approach does more than just give women a seat at the table; it completely changes the goals of security policy.

References

- Ali, M. (2013, December 23). The rise of 'radio mullah.' *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/23/the-rise-of-radio-mullah/>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Enloe, C. (2014). *Bananas, beaches and bases*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957282>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Khalid, I., Prof. Dr. Akbar, M., Prof. Dr., & Ahmed Khan, W., Dr. (2023). Exploring radicalization among women in Pakistan: Causative factors and impact. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 4(IV). [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2023\(4-iv\)06](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2023(4-iv)06)
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Khalil, L. (2019, June 25). *Behind the Veil: Women in jihad after the caliphate*. Lowy Institute.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Khan, A. (2007, November 20). *Revolt in pakistan's NWFP: A profile of manlana fazlullah of swat*. Jamestown. <https://jamestown.org/brief/revolt-in-pakistans-nwfp-a-profile-of-maulana-fazlullah-of-swat/>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Khan, A. B. (2022, May 10). *Female suicide terrorism in Pakistan in the context of the Karachi University attack*. Arab News PK. <http://www.arabnews.pk/node/2079301>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Mahsud, I. (2019, July 21). *Female suicide bomber strikes hospital in Pakistan, 9 killed*. PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/female-suicide-bomber-strikes-hospital-in-pakistan-9-killed>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Sengupta, S. (2007, July 24). The red mosque fueled Islamic fire in young women. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/24/world/asia/24madrasa.html>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Sjoberg, L., & Gentry, C. E. (2013). *Mothers, monsters, whores: Women's violence in global politics*. Zed Books Ltd.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Tickner, J. A. (1992). *Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security*. Columbia University Press.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Umm-Al-Arifeen, S. (2025). *The case of noreen leghari: Balancing legal enforcement and rehabilitation in Pakistan*. Elsevier BV. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5787362>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)