

## **Countering Ethno-Sectarian conflicts by reaching out to extremist youth through engaging mothers in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

Pakistan is home to multiple types of complex conflict ranging from sectarian, political, religious extremism to ethnic fanaticism. The weaponization of communities, the transformation of youth to become extremists and the influx of money has aggravated the situation in most parts of Pakistan. We engage mothers of extremist youth and build their capacity in critical thinking, dialogue and community peacebuilding. Through the agency of mother we reach out to the extremist youth and help them in de-radicalization in a phased wise manner. We bring in youth from different ethnic and sectarian groups and put them together to think and act collectively to address violent extremism through non-violent ways of engaging and building networks of likeminded youth. The innovative method of working through mothers has helped transform hundreds of youth and we have brought mothers from different ethnic and sectarian groups to work collectively to moderate extremism. We have experienced that ethno-sectarian clashes in some parts of Pakistan can only be resolved by well equipping mothers and youth with tools of conflict transformation at the community level and formation of Mothers and Youth Peace Groups as well establishment of early warning and early response mechanism at the community levels.

### **Introduction & Background**

To understand the ethno-sectarian conflict dynamics of Pakistan is not simple and easy for a variety of reasons. At the same time these differential reasons are very complex, adaptive to changing exogenous factors, they are always in a constant state of change. The challenge, then in such a case is, catching the reality when it changes its shape from one form to another form. In order to understand the phenomena, one has to go back in history and time, just before the partition of the united India.

The struggle for an independent country by the Muslims of India was based on ethnic and religious grounds. The very idea of the country was for religious and lingual homogeneity, not realizing and not taking into consideration that these two basic parameters will ignite uncontrollable conflicts with time. The former capital of Pakistan, Karachi, and by virtue of Karachi, the entire Sindh, witnessed ethnic tensions in the early days of the partition after the influx of Muslims from Muslim minority states of India in the wake of partition. They were given the nomenclature of mohajirs and believed to be better equipped both in terms of educations and skill to fill the void that had been created after middle class Hindu population left for India. Mohajirs not only filled the chasm but they also formed a majority in pockets of Karachi and Sindh. They made exemplary relations with the Punjabi majority and resultantly enjoyed rapid and quality access to resources. It came as a shock to native Sindhis who were lesser skilled and educated and felt a sense a deprivation. This developed suspicion and hatred among the major ethnic groups blaming each other for control of state authority and misuse against the others. Ethnic tensions take the form of subnational movements, by directing and targeting the central authority with regional autonomy, as a weapon (Morris 2001). In this process the regional power contenders then use religious factors as tools, which add the sectarian element to the already existent ethnic conflict.

Notwithstanding the fact that Islam was a binding force to the Muslims of the sub-continent the ethnic diversity could not strengthen the profile of the newly created state and became a liability instead. Various factors are attributed for sowing the seeds of ethnic conflict in Pakistan; chief among them are said to have been the failure of the leadership to take stock of the situation in time and come up with early remedial measures.

### **The basis of Ethnicity and Violent Extremism in Pakistan**

The creation of Pakistan was seen as an evidence of Punjabi domination. The majority of the Pakistani ruling classes, both the military and bureaucracy, was comprised of Punjabis and they had effective control of the state agencies. This dominance in the state agencies gave rise to the salaried class. The local power players, which included land lords, tribal chiefs, village chiefs and land owners, lost their power to the salaried class. To hold on to power and especially local power, they focus on local autonomy and turning their demand into sub-national movements, develop conflict with the central authority (Aziz 1990).

In Sind the majority of the urban population was Hindu. Muslims were mostly either land owners or peasants. The salaried class in Sind was composed of the migrants from India, who by religion were Muslims, but with a different ethnic class and also different language, i.e. Urdu. As discussed above that the Punjabi element was dominant in the state agencies both

civil and military, it was they who truly defined their identity as true Muslims for whom Pakistan was created (Sulehri 2000).

In Pakistan the ethnic conflict basically has its roots in the city of Karachi. Language is very critical in the case of Karachi. Before the migration of the Muslims from India, the majority language in Karachi was Sindhi, which was altogether altered with the influx of the migration of Mohajars, who spoke Urdu as their language and did not have to worry about the dominance of their language, as it was at the same time the national language of the country. The changing of the capital from Karachi to Islamabad also deepened the ethnic cracks and then the situation was exacerbated by the migration influx of Pathan and Punjabi workers and finally by the Afghan refugees (Shah and Naeem 2003). This migration further complicated the already complex ethnic and religious landscape of Karachi, with its effects on the rest of the country, as Karachi was the major hub of commercial activities, industry and providing Pakistan with its only commercial sea port.

Being the commercial hub and main industry operator, Karachi gained economic importance. It provided an opportunity for the rest of the country in employment and business. Due to these factors a lot of people from different parts migrated to Karachi in pursuance of a better future (Sohrab 1963). At the same time Karachi was also poor, because of the inefficiency of government to provide for social and municipal services to its population, a problem compounded by excessive migrations. The majority of Karachi is comprised of slums, with no adequate municipal facilities and scarce resources. The scarcity of resources pushed different ethnic groups against each other for control and these ethnic groups formed themselves into organized wolf packs protecting their commercial interests and resource control, through the force of group, the formulation of which was based on ethnicity and language.

These groups provided an opportunity as very useful and efficient tools for governments, both political and military regimes against their political adversaries. They were used for oppressing the opponents, under the cover of state patronage. The groups got access to state power, which meant more control over state resources. A perfect client patron relationship was established between these groups and state agencies.

Karachi's history is evident of an obvious economic success mitigate by violent 'ethnic' and 'sectarian' quarrels. However, such classification is deeply challenging mainly because "Karachi's so-called 'ethnic' and 'sectarian' conflicts originally had little to do with ethnicity and religion. They were primarily 'urban struggles' between the opposing local groups for the control of the most affluent city in the country" (Laurent 2011). These groups include different Mafias, land grabbers and criminals.

The Afghan *jihad* in 80s and ongoing war against terrorism in the northwestern parts of the country also brought to Karachi a flow of arms and drugs along with a heavy population influx from those part of the country. The situation produced a culture of violence in the city, especially in its youth “for whom Russian TT pistols became the hottest commodity in town” (Goodson 2002). Since the beginning of the Afghan *jihad*, in the 1990s, and after 9/11, Karachi’s ethnic conflicts appear to have been succeeded by “sectarian” conflicts. The state failed on various counts such as the legal safety of citizens and protection of life and property. Ethnicity comes out as the new *Pakistaniaat*: source of identity formation, definition and categorization of interests. In the words of *Mohammad Waseem*, “it was not too much of the (Jacobin) state, as primordialists would have us believe, but rather too little of it which produced the mohajir ethnic movement” (Waseem 1996). Violence in Karachi in effect seems a “socio-ethnic phenomenon,” which is intensified by rising extremism at all levels in the city.

### **The Sectarian Element leads to Violent Extremism**

Almost all religious faiths in Pakistan have suffered from the menace of sectarianism in one way or the other and for that they have paid a heavy price. Sunni Muslims who make up the overwhelming majority have seen destruction of shrines of Sufi saints and suicide bombings at funeral prayers. Though sectarianism surged to higher levels for Sunni and Shia followers in the country, the other religious groups including Hindus, Christians and the Ahmadi community who form an estimated 2.3% of the population, who are officially considered non-Muslims by virtue of a 1974 constitutional amendment. Ahmadis were considered Muslims till 1974 when after a special amendment in the constitution, the then prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, following immense pressure exerted by religious fanatic groups, declared them non-Muslims and restrained them against using the word ‘mosque’ or ‘*masjid*’ for their place of worship.

The question of sectarianism did not arise during the days of struggle for Pakistan as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of the country is said to have had embraced Shia Isna Ashri sect but nowhere did his religious faith came into question. On the eve of his first landmark address to the constituent assembly of Pakistan on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1947 he said

*“You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State... I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in due course Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State”* (Allana 1969).

By and large Pakistanis were tolerant to other religious sects till 1979 when the former USSR invaded Afghanistan and Pakistan became the frontline ally to the West against communism. Both youth and mullas were heavily indoctrinated against communism; the concept of Jihad was reinterpreted according to the whims of vested interests and the country saw a free flow of weapons and foreign funding. Clergy held its sway during the process and had the backing of both the government of Pakistan and foreign powers opposed to the USSR invasion of Afghanistan. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, these fighters formed anti-Shia militant groups based in the southern districts of Pakistan's Punjab province. The region's poverty and chronic underdevelopment, political marginalization, and stark contrast between wealthy Shia landlords and landless Sunni peasants made it the perfect recruiting ground for extremist sectarian groups. Owing to these parallel developments, Pakistan witnessed soaring Sunni-Shia sectarian clashes between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, when up to 4,000 people are estimated to have died in sectarian fighting (Montero 2007).

The Cold War afforded Pakistan an opportunity for raising the bogey of communism to keep its divergent groups and communities united in the name of either religion or nationalism. With the collapse of the geopolitical order resting on the Cold War, Pakistan has been being sucked into a new reality where the economy is taking precedence over the rest of the factors. Consequently, the grip of religion or nationalism to paper over differences existing between divergent communities is loosening fast. The past 20 years are also a witness to a new kind of phenomenon in Pakistan. On the one hand, democracy is evolving (after undergoing the selection and rejection process), and on the other, societal fractures along ethnic and sectarian lines are surfacing too (Rashid 2013).

Sectarianism in Pakistan found its roots during the days of third military dictator Zia-ul-Haq who used religion for his personal gains and patronized controversial Islamic laws; he also patronized ethnic differences in Karachi, the country's largest city and commercial hub, in order to get rid of his political foes who mainly comprised mainstream secular parties and made it the hotbed of militancy.

Sectarian conflict in Pakistan is the direct consequence of state policies of Islamisation and marginalisation of secular democratic forces. Co-option and patronage of religious parties by successive military governments have brought Pakistan to a point where religious extremism threatens to erode the foundations of the state and society. The various governments allowed religious extremist organizations and jihadi groups, and the madrasas that provide them an endless stream of recruits, to flourish. It failed to protect the judiciary and equip its law-enforcement agencies with the tools they need to eliminate sectarian terrorism (International Crisis Group 2005).

Constitutional provisions to "Islamize" laws, education and culture, and official dissemination of a particular brand of Islamic ideology, not only militated against Pakistan's religious diversity but also bred discrimination against non-Muslim minorities (Zaidi 2005). The political use of Islam by the state promoted an aggressive competition for official patronage between and within the many variations of Sunni and Shia Islam, with the clerical elite of major sects and subsects striving to build up their political parties, raise jihadi militias, and expand madrasa networks.

The anomalous constitutional status and political disenfranchisement of regions like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Northern Areas have turned them into sanctuaries for sectarian and international terrorists and centers of the arms and drugs trade.

Parallel legal and judicial systems which exist in many parts of the country with the blessing of the state undermine the rule of law. The reform of discriminatory laws and procedures has, at best, been cosmetic -- they remain open to abuse by religious fanatics. The complex blend of extremism with religious sectarianism has left state institutions helpless to deal with it in an effective manner. Subjected to political interference, an inefficient police has become even more incapable of dealing with sectarian terrorism.

Pakistan holds the second largest Shia population in the world after Iran that roughly accounts for 15 percent of total Muslim population. It is an open secret in Pakistan that both Sunni and Shia religious groups have been heavily funded and weaponized by Saudi Arabia, GCC states and Iran who settled their perennial animosity against each other on Pakistani soil as they funded their respective rival factions; vulnerabilities in Pakistan during the process grew to unprecedented levels and writ of state weakened with every passing day. There has not been any evidence of militant outfits of non-Muslims in Pakistan; however, militant organizations of both Sunni and Shia factions abound in the country. Sipha-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jesh-e-Muhammad and Sipha-e-Muhammadi are a few among them. However, predominant Sunni militant groups are often blamed for attacks on the minority Shias resulting in reprisal attacks by them. The Shia groups are very powerful in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA from there.

The extremist tendencies that have solidified in the two largest Muslim sects Sunni and Shia since two decades has given rise to a mushrooming of madrassas and mosques across the length and breadth of Pakistan. The increase of rightist, traditional and religiously conservative bourgeois class considers the construction of a mosque a divine right and questioning such an act tantamount to questioning the authority of God and his divine supremacy. This rapid increase in the number of mosques and madrassas is not only limited to the divine, but brings in along

a lot more. They run charitable programs and commercial activities and thus slowly spreads their tentacles to the neighborhood and its resources for revenue generation. Interestingly the majority of these madrassas are found in the unplanned, unregulated parts of the city for two major reasons:

1. These places are inhabited by the poor working class, whose dilemma is more children and less to feed them. Thus a madrassa is seen as a blessing, which provides them with food, clothing and education coupled with rudimentary form of worldly education, though some well-organized madrassas have now started imparting modern education also.
2. The second factor is the absence of government regulations, which can check the mushrooming growth of such madrassas

The two major religious political parties that have control and run them are JUI Fazal-ur-Rehman and JUI Sami-ul-Haq. The leadership of the contemporary Islamic movement has fallen to Pashtuns, by waging a jihad in Afghanistan and then spreading it all over the country. In this process madrassas have acquired importance for recruiting, learning and ideological guidance and support. As most of these madrassas are Sunni, the Shia response was also in shape of madrassas and then transforming itself in a political party Tehrik Nifaz Fiqah Jafria.

The different land mafias use them by financially supporting them and in return they can grab any public land overnight by establishing a mosque or madrassa. This had led to severe Sunni-Shia sectarian violence not only in Karachi but also in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (former North West Frontier Province) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas FATA.

The menace of sectarianism has practically taken over the entire country and barely any region is free from it. Jhang, Dera Ghazi Khan, Lahore, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi, Bhakkar, Bahawalpur and Pakpattan in the Punjab province have witnessed bloody attacks mainly on Shia and Ahmadi minorities and Peshawar, Hangu, Kohat and Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Similarly Gilgit-Baltistan and the provincial capital of Baluchistan are severally affected by sectarian violence. The Shia Hazara minority in Baluchistan has witnessed ferocious attacks and tens of hundreds of members of the Shia Hazara community have been targeted so far (South Asian Terrorism Portal 2012).

## **Pakistan's Current Ethno-sectarian Landscape and Violent Extremism**

Owing to sectarian and class divides among the population, Sunni and Shia extremist groups have traditionally been active in the southern regions of Pakistan's largest province, Punjab. In the mid-2000s many sectarian organizations regrouped with Taliban in the tribal region along the Pakistani-Afghan border. But resurgent Sunni-Shia violence has a broader geographic base: in recent years, fighting has spread beyond FATA to include the urban centers of Karachi and Lahore, the south-western Baluchistan province and the northern Gilgit-Baltistan region. Due to the social, ethnic and linguistic diversity of Pakistan's Shia population, sectarian violence has varying dynamics in different parts of the country. Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and financial hub, was worst hit by sectarian violence in 2011, with 36 attacks – roughly 32% of all sectarian incidents recorded in Pakistan – claiming 58 lives (PIPS 2012).

According to a report by the Criminal Investigation Department, an anti-terrorist police unit, more than half of the 246 terrorists arrested in Karachi between 2001 and 2010 were affiliated with sectarian groups (*Express Tribune* 2010). In Baluchistan sectarian attacks are directed against the minority Hazara community, whose members are Shia. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the targeting of Hazaras, starting with the killing of the chairman of the Hazara Democratic Party in January 2009 (in the prior decade, from 1998 onwards up to 700 Hazaras were killed in Baluchistan for sectarian reasons) (World Socialist 2012).

Sectarian violence poses a grave threat to Pakistan's security and stability, primarily because conflict between mainstream religious communities threatens to involve and radicalize greater swathes of the Pakistani population than any other kind of militancy. It has taken toll of Pakistani population and has badly affected the socio-cultural fabric of the country.

The basis of ethno-sectarian crisis is the growing extremist tendencies which has been taught and preached in the schools, madrassas, educational institutions, at home and being practiced across communities in Pakistan.

## **Breaking the Nexus between Ethno-sectarian Crisis and Violent Extremism**

As is evident, Pakistan is home to multiple types of complex conflicts ranging from sectarian, political, religious extremism to ethnic fanaticism. The weaponization of communities, the transformation of youth to become extremists and the influx of money have aggravated the situation in most parts of Pakistan

Understanding the nature of ethno-sectarian conflicts and the concerns and strife of all stakeholders has been an imperative for PAIMAN. The geographic spread of this strife is across Pakistan and it varies in form and types but the basic causes of this violent extremism have been the same - lack of awareness, lack of opportunities, religious intolerance, lack of social justice, exploitation in the name of religion, foreign interference, flow of fund and resources, illiteracy and lust for power by the politico-religious elites. The extremism though is deep-seated in minds and hearts of certain populations of Pakistan but we as a nation never tried to come up with a holistic and comprehensive strategy to address it.

PAIMAN started its movement to address this menace of extremism through engaging the communities and mobilizing them to manage and transform the conflict. While trying to find a solution to growing extremist tendencies we felt that there is a constant need for us to question our own beliefs, and the beliefs of those around us. It creates a healthy atmosphere of intelligence and skepticism, and prevents people from coming to unreasonable conclusions. We always think there is more rationality and evidence for our beliefs than there is and that our belief is supreme as compared to theirs. This all matters because we never question our beliefs and hence the community becomes increasingly divorced from reality. In the context of Pakistan the religious leaders claim to be acting in accord with a divine principle, such as God's will and hence their authority is never challenged. When it comes to disputes, religionists can come to deny any chance of compromise.

Though it is an uphill task to improve the current dismal scenario, nonetheless PAIMAN has devised innovative means to counter the situation effectively. One of our main targeted areas has been to develop an extensive network of supporters at all levels of society and government functionaries. Since 2007 we have created a vast network of people who are not only familiar with the rationale and objectives of this strategy but are readily working to ensure that the goals are met. The success of the linkage established between the local communities and government functionaries is reflected in successful interventions leading to need assessment and accomplishment of the needs specified.

PAIMAN (means Promise) under its flagship program 'Let's live in Peace' conducts conflict transformation and peacebuilding training courses with youth from Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa and FATA on a regular basis and has so far built the capacity of 5,825 youth in the skill of community peacebuilding, conflict analysis and transformation, community early warning and early response mechanism, UNSCR 1325. The trained youth then form Youth Peace Groups called TOALANA in their respective areas and address issues of extremism through community engagements. PAIMAN is dedicated to talking with youth and women and pulling them out of social

isolation and vulnerability besides providing them with jobs and try to keep them away from the false promises of radicals in the Taliban and other groups.

PAIMAN's non-violent movement for addressing violent extremism is based on philosophy of Ghafar Khan<sup>(1)</sup>, who said, "There is nothing surprising in a Muslim and a Pashtun to subscribe to the creed of non-violence. It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred ago by Prophet Muhammed (Peace be Upon Him) all the time he was in Mecca<sup>(2)</sup>" We send sayings of Ghafar Khan, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela as text messages from time to time to all our peace practitioners and the communities we are working with. These messages help in sensitizing them to the importance of building tolerant and violence free communities through non-violent ways. Some of the key messages are: The Holy Prophet taught us 'that man is a Muslim who never hurt anyone by word or deed, but works for happiness of God's creatures. Belief in God is to love one's fellowmen" (Khan and Zhwand 1981).

## **PAIMAN's Model of Engaging Mothers**

### *Why mothers*

Mothers are strategically located at the core of their families and are, therefore, typically the first to register signs of behavioral and attitudinal change in their sons and deal with their fear, resignation, frustration and anger when their sons, daughters, or husbands exhibit tell-tale signs of violent ideologies. Women in Pakistan hold enormous sway over decision-making within the home. As mothers and teachers, they also play a predominant role in raising and instilling values in younger generations. Because of their role both within the family and civil society, they are strategically placed to serve as a voice of reason and temper radical beliefs before they take root, as well as to bridge the social divides that contribute to violence in the country. They are also more often attuned to the needs of their communities and have a large stake in promoting peace for their personal and family's wellbeing in areas prone to violent extremism. Similarly, because they have been frequently targets of radical ideologies and violence, women are all too aware of the damage that extremism has been causing to their country and people, and are best positioned to do something about it. Examples from other communities show that women tend to be the first to propose creative, non-violent solutions to prevent and resolve conflict – and to act in the face of disaster or rebuild after it strikes (McCarthy 2011).

We believe that women serve as peace educators beginning in the home and at the family level. Mothers shape the morals and values of their children and instill a sense of responsibility for creating positive human relationships in both family and community. Women develop strong networks, they facilitate the building of connections and information sharing. Women's work and active engagement in their homes – again, meaning family, immediate community, and religious community – result in the development of meaningful relationships of trust and hope which strengthen and maximize opportunities for peace and reconciliation at both the micro and macro levels (Dysert 2012).

In the context of our target areas of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KPK) and FATA, youth is inhumanly recruited and used for terrorism. In fact, "recruitment" is hardly the right word because in many cases these children have little if any say in their induction; younger children lack the capability to refuse the terrorists, fearing their own safety or reprisals to their families<sup>(3)</sup>. While working with mothers, Saleha Jan explained to me that she had turned to the Taliban when she could no longer cope with her son's drug abuse as local marijuana grows wild throughout Swat (Qadeem 2010). Targeting children at risk like this provided the Taliban with a perfect opportunity to reach out to parents with an offer to help "save" their children. The militants promise a future involving discipline, belonging, purpose, and meaningful work. The youth is being taken into the folds because of multiple reasons and one most important reasons is the lack of awareness regarding the true meaning and knowledge of Quran and Islamic traditions. This gives another good opportunity to extremists to convince parents in the name of religion and take their children into their folds. Today there has been a rise in the use of children as suicidal bombers. They have been told that the mission is as simple as touching two wires together and the resulting blast would obliterate the infidels or those siding with infidels – but God would spare them from the flame and shrapnel<sup>(4)</sup> and would remain unharmed. "The worst part is that these children don't think that they are killing themselves. They are often given an amulet containing Quranic verses. Mullahs tell them, 'When this explodes you will survive and God will help you survive the fire and only the infidels and their supporters will be killed, you will be saved and your parents will go to paradise' (Farmer 2012).

It does not end here: the same suicidal approach is used in the sectarian and ethnic violence that Pakistan is grappling with today. The underlying causes of all violent acts of extremism is lack of awareness of Islamic teachings in addition to poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to opportunities, poor governance and foreign interference etc.

The analysis of the situation led us to work on the most challenging and unthinkable solution to address this menace by engaging mothers. Globally the primary focus always rests on military operations, intelligence and law enforcement and the potential of mothers has thus far been neglected in counter terrorism strategy. Their position in the family and the community to play a meaningful role in countering violent extremism undermined and has never been given due consideration. Their role in educating their children regarding tolerance, accommodation as well as use of Quranic text within a context is crucial for countering violent extremism.

### ***From Unthinkable to Thinkable***

The ethnic and sectarian violence has affected hundreds of families in the conflict prone areas of Pakistan. Initially we started building the capacity of youth in conflict transformation and community peacebuilding in the target areas affected by violent ethnic and sectarian extremism. They were also assigned to form Youth Groups called TOLANA - means together in Pashtu - in their respective areas and would create awareness regarding the importance of tolerance, accommodation and social cohesion. TOLANA's activities are closely monitored and they are guided at every step. This intervention paved the way for PAIAMN to build trust among the members of the community and hence we started approaching the mothers. The members of TOLANA were tasked to identify mothers of three categories of youth; extremist (in the hideout with Taliban), vulnerable youth and militant sympathizers, having the potential to become extremists.

We would hold compound sessions with the identified and selected mothers on regular basis. After analyzing their situation we came up with an innovative training model. We developed the whole training manual around a story telling approach as women were shy to share anything. It helped in an open and frank discussion with the mothers. We divided the mothers' sessions into phases:

**In the first phase** we focused on concepts of self-confidence, competence and empowerment. Mothers need to first establish a position of authority within their families; a child only respects the mother when her position is not challenged by her husband or friends or society as a whole. We gave them marketable livelihood skills as per their aptitude in this phase. This helped in contributing to their family's income within a short time and infused a new confidence in them.

**In the second phase** we equipped them with the necessary knowledge and self-confidence to become active players in their family and community. We built their capacity in critical thinking, dialogue and community peacebuilding and also made them aware of their potential in influencing and guiding their children's lives, and in preventing them from engaging in extremist activities. In almost all cases the extremists use the text of the Quran to attract youth and communities towards the concept of jihad or convince them to act in an extremist fashion. We used the Quranic verses in their contexts to help transform the mindset of these mothers. The basis of our transformative methodology is Quran and Sunnah as Prophet Muhammad insists that mothers' role is vital in the upbringing of their sons in accordance with the values of true Islamic teaching that does not preach hatred or violence. Their transformation was slow but steady and firm. The newly gained knowledge and economic empowerment gave them the confidence to have open communication with their sons and help foster deeper mother-son relationships. The metamorphosis of mothers from celebrating their sons' martyrdom in suicidal attacks to becoming the agents of positive change in the community was a tedious and uphill process. For mothers it was extremely difficult in a patriarchal and conservative society to convince other women and men around the negative impact of violent extremism or the exploitation by certain groups in the name of religion. They formed Mothers Peace Groups Called Mothers TOLANA and started reaching out to other mothers. PAIMAN has trained 545 mothers who have formed 30 TOALANA in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, FATA, Quetta and Karachi. Today Mother TOLANA holds community sessions with other mothers in their respective communities and teaches and preaches non-violent ways of addressing the menace of extremism. Since most of the mothers PAIMAN works with are illiterate or semi-illiterate we use pictorial booklets and storytelling for sensitization of these mothers.

The Mother TOLANA becomes very active along with Youth TOALANA during the holy month of Muharram<sup>(5)</sup> to avert incidents of violence through the sons of the community. Both TOLANA are inclusive and include members from all faiths and sects in the area. In 2012 both Mother and Youth TOLANA held inter-sectarian community sessions with communities in Dera Ismail Khan, district of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and a hot bed of sectarian clashes. This helped in developing a joint Sunni-Shia plan of action to avert any violence. The year 2012 saw a decrease in Sunni-Shia riots in the district during the month of Muharram. Both TOLANAS organized food and drinks on the way of the Muharram Processions to show solidarity with the Shia sect. Zareena Masood, our Mother TOLANA member said, I knew my son always became a party to any extremist act that targeted Shia. After I became the member of TOLANA and got knowledge and skill, I would take sessions with my son over breakfast, dinner and whenever I would find time to talk to him on the issue. When the month of Muharram was approaching I started observing my son Zareef's timings. I also would call his friends and would try to know about his whereabouts. He would get very angry after finding out from his friends that his mother

called or when I would question him. One day I heard Zareef talking to someone on his mobile about the blocking of Muharram procession harming the people in the procession. I shared this with other members of Mother TOLANA and we made a plan. We reached on the spot of procession and started leading it with uncovered faces. I called my son and told him that we are leading the Shia procession; come and attack us. They were already in the vicinity but when he received my call he tried to avert the attack. His friends didn't listen to him. They all came but when they saw all Sunni women clad in white leading the procession they did not attack us. It helped because all the boys involved in the plan came to me and asked for forgiveness and Youth TOLANA started taking sessions with them. I believe that my thought-provoking sessions and skillful handling of Zareef started showing signs of change in his attitude and activities. One day he came to me and said he would like to join my TOLANA. Today he is one of the most active members of youth TOLANA along with his other friends and leads the campaign of interfaith/inter-sectarian harmony, tolerance and social cohesion in his home town of Dera Ismail Khan.

There are hundreds of Zareefs today who have been transformed because of their mothers to become active citizens with positive attitudes.

## **Prevention and De-radicalization**

After establishing PAIMAN's trust in the target communities we reached out to the extremist youth through the agency of mothers and helped them become de-radicalized in a phased wise manner. Our approach is unique, innovative and indigenous. We identify the three categories of youth through our members of Mother and Youth TOLANAS. The different categories of youth then undergo phased wise trainings that include:

- Self-assessment
- Self-reformation
- Islam and concept of peace
- Youth in Islam
- Community peacebuilding
- Importance of interfaith/inter-sectarian harmony through community engagement
- Active citizenship
- Psycho-social counseling
- Marketable Livelihood skills

Once they are transformed and assessed they are sent back to their communities where TOLANAs have already paved the way for their reintegration in their communities. In cases where the boys are not acceptable to their communities we help them in finding jobs outside their home town and once the situation is more conducive for their return they go back to their families. Both Youth and Mother TOLANAs keep an eye on the boys who have undergone transformation trainings with PAIMAN and hold meetings with them from time to time. The close collaboration with the boys after their de-radicalization or transformation keeps the extremists away from these boys. The vigilance of the whole community discourages these extremist elements to make their inroads into these communities. There are many cases and instances where the extremist or vulnerable boys would attend TOLANA community sessions as informers of extremists but would become part of our mission as is evident from the case study of Zafar.

Just like other boys of his age, Zafar would stroll around the deserted alleys with his peers in the troubled Mohmand Agency, Pakistan's northernmost regions. Being a sensitive boy, he was highly critical of social inequality prevailing around him and disgusted with the attitude of so-called custodians of traditional values.

The violent wave of extremism had swept across the entire FATA and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province and Zafar was no exception. He came into contact with extremists that were reckless of slaughter and covetous of glory in the name of Islam. The extremists had an obnoxious modus operandi to lure in the boys in their fold. Indeed, it was tragic to witness the boy taking interest in all sorts of ghoulish events taking place around him; the sights of the killings, the shootings, the hostage-taking and the lamentations of victims.

Inspired by the wanton designs of evil mongers, Zafar jumped into the fray and started making suicide vests for potential suicide bombers to be used in sectarian killing. He convinced his mother and two sisters who were also influenced through the wife of a local cleric about the new phenomenon and the worn out clichés of extremists in the name of religion and social equality.

Now Zafar's siblings and mother would make suicide vests and he would fix detonators and explosives inside the jacket. Within a short span of time, Zafar won the trust of the people at the higher echelon of terrorists' networks and became their confidant.

Zafar attended one of the community sessions conducted by TOALANA in his area through a peace practitioner in the year 2009 with a view to take inside information of the training session to his mentors in extremists' network. However, he was moved by the message of peace and the rationale behind the message. He started attending such sessions regularly and came into contact with youth who were instrumental in spreading the message of peace.

Zafar was in graduation when he met me. One of the peace practitioners informed me of his horrible past but I was determined to bring in a qualitative change in the life of the boy, come what may.

Zafar stayed at PAIMAN House Islamabad for almost a week where PAIMAN's team would hold exclusive sessions with him. Initially the boy stayed for seven days for his training session but then returned after a few days voluntarily for his week-long transformation process because PAIMAN's team had asked him to think and reflect over his past and not to waste his life. He underwent trauma healing, learnt livelihood skills and PAIMAN facilitated him in getting admission in one of the best universities of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa. He got his Master's degree in Economics in 2012. Zafar is now working with a private firm and is a very active PAIMAN's peace practitioner himself.

"Ironically when Zafar went back to his home town after his transformation sessions, his sister vehemently spoke to me on telephone and criticized me for taking her brother out of a holy task and stressed that he had become an infidel and an atheist just because of me. At this critical juncture I realized that unless we win the support of his mother and sisters and transform them Zafar may return to violent extremism anytime.

I went to Zafar's home and had a day session with the beleaguered family. "If he's killed," I countered, "he won't be able to help you." I found that the simple ladies were inspired with the distorted dogmas of extremists. I shattered the myth of violent extremism and deliberated upon the issues of Jihad, Islam and humanity for more than two hours. This first conversation was followed by series of dialogues with the three women and ultimately I won their trust and helped them in becoming transformed persons with positive thinking. Today all the three women are part of PAIMAN's Mothers Peace Groups called TOALANA.

## **Our uniqueness**

PAIMAN's model of de-radicalization is unique in the sense that it uses the Quranic text in its true context to transform the same boys who were radicalized or made to think on extremist lines by using the Quranic text without context. This is our achievement as no one can challenge the Quran and hence no one can defy PAIMAN's model of transformation. Besides, we do not leave them after reformation. We help them in rehabilitation and reintegration in their communities and societies and help them live a decent and peaceful life. PAIMAN believes it is better to prevent the vulnerable boys from becoming extremists because once they join the other group their transformation becomes difficult, something that we have personally experienced in transforming the radicalized youth.

PAIMAN's task is challenging and threatening and is difficult to project but our work has received recognition and appreciation as Swanee Hunt writes, "Qadeem is one among a nonviolent army of women promoting collaboration over confrontation as she lifts up the moderate voices drowned out by radicals in Pakistan. Her work is art, not science. 'Extremism is a state of mind,' she says. 'You can't define love; you must feel it. And so you must feel extremism' " (Hunt 2012).

We engage mothers of extremist youth and build their capacity in critical thinking, dialogue and community peacebuilding. These transformed mothers then guide us to their radicalized offspring and we hold series of de-radicalization sessions' to purge them of nefarious indoctrination of extremism. We bring in youth from different ethnic and sectarian groups and put them together to think and act collectively to address violent extremism through non-violent ways of engaging and building networks of likeminded youth. The ingenuity of the process saw not only mothers exerting their influence on indoctrinated youth, it also provided a platform for the mothers to work collectively under an organized umbrella and multiply the effects of their efforts. We de-radicalize the youth in a phased wise manner and so far hundreds of youth have been de-radicalized through this innovative method. We have deduced that mothers possess immense potential in offsetting extremism provided we build their capacity around critical thinking, early warning systems and social cohesion.

Our model of transformation is rooted in the cultural milieu, traditional values and Islamic teachings. De-radicalization of youth with the support and active participation of families, in particular the womenfolk, have been central to our overarching strategy of creating non-violent communities. The ownership developed for this approach among these communities has generated a reservoir of activists who are functioning as agents of change. We are successfully carrying out a non-violent movement against violent waves of extremism against all sorts of threats and challenges in the most volatile region of the world.

## Endnotes

- (1) Leader of Red shirt movement in the then North Western Frontier Province of the Sub-continent who led the fierce and warlike Pakhtun tribesmen to take an oath of nonviolence.
- (2) Quote of Ghafar Khan narrated by his grandson Asfandyar Wali to the author.
- (3) In Swat the Talibans would ask either for money or the young son for induction and would punish the family in case they failed to provide either of them

- (4) The extremist infuse in the minds of these to be suicidal that Pakistan army and police support the infidels (the Americans and others) so killing them is jihad and will be rewarded hereafter.
- (5) Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. Shia Muslims mourn over the martyrdom of Hussain Ibn Ali and his family during this month.

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