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Swarna Rajagopalan

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Swarna Rajagopalan
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Swarna Rajagopalan is a political scientist, peace educator and independent researcher and writer on gender, security and politics.

Copy-editor: Bhavini Pant

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EXTREMISM AND GENDER VIOLENCE: SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

The project originated in a quest to understand state capacity to address violence against women and children in the context of religious extremism, within the broader framework of upholding rights of minorities in South Asia. Early project consultations resulted in an adaptation of this framework which led to the creation of a detailed picture of how rising levels of religious extremism are affecting women and children in the region. An underlying assumption was that the rise of extremism results in an escalation of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). South Asian authors of the project rejected a narrow identification of extremism with one religion alone—specifically Islam. Authors expanded the scope of their study to include other types of extremisms, where sometimes the violence is not merely physical but also manifested through speech or public policy, where it is perpetrated by state and non-state actors as well as private individuals.

Accordingly, we started with the following research questions:

- What does a snapshot of rising religious extremism look like in each country?
- What are some tangible, direct effects on levels, types and intensity of SGBV?
- What have been some indirect consequences on the same?
- Has there—and to what extent—been a change in impunity levels?
- What—more broadly—can we conclude about the impact of RE on gender equality and women's rights?

Contributors to the project have written about six South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The resulting papers reflect the diversity of the region and people's experiences.

A SUMMARY OF THE STUDIES

Afghanistan

Written in the shadow of the Taliban takeover, Metra Mehran's paper outlines the cultural and ideological moorings of the Taliban. It describes the evolving status of women in Afghanistan from the mid-1990s to 2021, showing the growing influence—direct and indirect—of extreme religious orthodoxy. Finally, it surveys the prevalence of different types of gender-based violence in Afghanistan.

Bangladesh

Amena Mohsin and Nahian Reza Sabriet examine how secular and religion-centric forces both use technology to bolster hypermasculinity and how this impacts gender-based violence. They compile statistics as well as quotations from online discourse to illustrate the prevalence and nature of online misogyny. The popularity of these platforms is framed on the one hand by the resurgence of religion in politics and on the other by adoption of laws for prevention and punishment of gender-based violence.

India

Swarna Rajagopalan and Natasha Singh Raghuvanshi offer case studies of four kinds of extremism in the country. For each, they compile data from 2000-2020 on domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment in public spaces and child marriage to set the context for the rise of extremist politics. In each instance, the rise of extremism, the state response to it and accounts of gender-based violence on either side are brought together to answer the original research questions.

Maldives

Azra Naseem draws a link between the widespread adoption of ultra-conservative religious beliefs and the rise in violent extremism. She shows how present misogyny is in the country's normal political and religious discourses, and how sexism is expected and accepted in society. This acceptance is underlined and strengthened by ultra-conservative religious discourses which sometimes dress gender-based violence as a religious tradition or duty. She asserts that while the Maldives has a wide range of legal and institutional tools at its disposal to successfully confront gender-based violence, it cannot do so due to the country’s widespread acceptance and pre-dominance of ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam.

Pakistan

Nazish Brohi begins by narrating the experience of women in Swat as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan briefly controlled the region before the state regained control. She describes the significant impact of religio-political parties and the 1980s military regime of President-General Zia-ul-Haq on politics. She demonstrates that it is not just by dint of their physical and rhetorical attacks but also by forcing a shift to the right, that extremists shape gendered discourses.

Sri Lanka

Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits writes a historical review of women’s status in post-independence Sri Lanka, drawing out a connection between violence against women and religious extremism. The paper then considers Sri Lankan women from three ethnic groups and explores how religious extremists have made their identities

part of their plan of attack, especially in the post-war period. By taking a historical view and zooming into the immediate post-war context, the paper highlights how the link between religious extremism and violence against women gets heightened under both strong (authoritarian) and weak state scenarios.

COMPARATIVE ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

A deliberate choice was made to not over-determine the style and structure of the country papers so that the authors could take the approach and focus that they felt most appropriate. The papers are thus diverse and enrich our understanding of the research questions with insights arising from a wide range of experiences.

Redefining extremism

Much of the literature on extremism comes out of western think-tanks and universities. Originating from the quest to combat terrorism, it is increasingly focused on Islamic groups and countering violent extremism. Drawing on different parts and adapting the definitions to their purpose, the authors in this project suggest a broader look at this phenomenon.

Jayasundara-Smits defines extremism as "the behaviour or beliefs of people who try to bring about political change by using violent or extreme methods that are not in accordance with norms of the state, society and existing social order or are fully intolerant toward others." Religious extremism is a subcategory, she writes, "that justifies structural violence against relevant out-groups." Regarding extremism as a totalitarian ideology, Mohsin and Sabriet caution that there are extremisms which "emanate from secular, progressive and rational forces" as well, and are commonly overlooked.

Rajagopalan and Raghuvanshi too adopt a broad definition, stating that political activism may be considered extreme in any of the following ways: "in its choice of radically different values from the constitutional and institutional mainstream, in its fundamentally different political objectives than those permitted within the status quo, or in its use of intimidation and violence to achieve desired outcomes that would not otherwise be permissible or possible."

Mehran and Naseem underline the relationship between misogyny and extremism. Mehran writes, "Extremists' beliefs often intersect with misogyny, male supremacy, patriarchy and toxic masculinity in powerful and mutually reinforcing ways, fuelling violence against women."

In short, extremism must be understood as more than a code word for a particular set of organisations or networks. It is a relative term, showing a departure from what is the norm or mainstream, accepted political or social order that itself may change over time. Extremism is manifested in values, objectives, the use of

intimidation or violence towards methods otherwise considered unacceptable. It is totalising, and misogyny—or what Mehran actually terms 'gynophobia' or the fear of women—shapes extremist political strategy.

The challenges of establishing a causal connection

There is a broad correlation between extremism and gender-based violence but it is not a simple relationship. First of all, in most contexts and especially in times of conflict, data are hard to come by. Even if we were to note, as we might have in Indian cases—that at a moment when the conflict was most acute, prevalence of this or that form of violence were high—we would still not be able to establish a direct connection between the two unless we knew about each case in the dataset.

Across the six papers, we are able to infer that the rise of extremism—with the concomitant sanction it grants misogynistic speech and action—creates conditions conducive to sexual and gender-based violence.

In Afghanistan, this began with restrictions placed on women's dress, mobility and access to education or employment. Mehran tells us that since August 2021, the Taliban has re-imposed the ban on women leaving home alone or unveiled and has "authorized men to 'control' their wives." She writes also of women who have been disappeared for their activism in 2021-22.

In Bangladesh, Mohsin and Sabriet write that the manipulation of religion for political purposes enables Hypermasculinism, "an extremist ideology highly intolerant of feminine/feminist ideals and spaces." What they document is not physical violence but the advocacy of misogynistic values by the public that would have been considered unacceptable in another time. As they gain ground, these values make physical violence justifiable.

In India, in Kashmir and Karnataka, extremists have laid down rules of conduct for women. In Kashmir, veiling was sought to be imposed on Kashmiri women. In Karnataka, it took the form of moral policing where good, young Hindu women should not be seen celebrating Valentine's Day. The 'love jihad' discourse also relates to this.

In the Maldives, the growing hold of ultra-conservative schools of Islam—propagated by tech-savvy preachers—promotes a push-back on women's rights. Naseem says that they encourage polygamy, early marriage and women's absolute obedience to the men in her family. Violence is an acceptable enforcement tool for these norms.

In Pakistan's Swat, the Taliban takeover and military offensive were—as Brohi points out—one episode in a series of conflicts in the area. Women initially supported the Taliban hoping that an Islamic order would bring about social justice and well-being, but that order was defined by restrictions on women's dress, education and access to the outside world as well as permitting men to be violent at

home. As she says, in the 'before' and the 'after' of this episode, women's rights were still at risk.

In Sri Lanka, the impact of war and post-war militarisation have been felt by women of all communities, no matter which community's radicalisation drives the process. Jayasundara-Smits writes that Tamil women experienced violence both within the household and outside. In uncertain socio-economic circumstances, they bore the brunt of family stresses as intimate partner violence. They were also targeted by the Sri Lankan military with sexual violence during "post-war" clean-up operations.

As an extremist Buddhist rhetoric targeted Muslim women's reproductive rights, Muslim men began to impose stricter dress codes on them. In defence of the Sinhala Buddhist nation that is now being reinforced, Sinhalese women are also being told to have more children and raise them in traditional ways.

Extremist violence also engenders a state response. In most cases, this takes the form of counter-insurgency operations. As "representatives" of the opposite, women and girls are targeted by both extremists and state forces. In Chhattisgarh, where the extremists are Maoists, most of the accusations of sexual and gender-based violence are directed at state forces and state-supported vigilante groups. Similarly, in Kashmir, accusations of sexual violence have been directed primarily at the military forces stationed in the state. In such times, special legal protections reinforce their impunity.

As mutual hostilities escalate, there is a second tier of circumstances in which women become more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence: bereavement, the breakdown of community, the loss of extended family support and displacement. These circumstances open women and girls to sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced marriage and domestic violence. In all the Indian cases, child marriages seemed to rise in times of greater tension.

Thus, while it is hard to draw a straightforward causal connection between the rise of extremism and the greater prevalence of violence, there is evidence everywhere of an intricate connection between the two.

Misogyny is the common factor

The common factor in all six countries is misogyny. Mehran (Afghanistan) and Naseem (Maldives) write about how central misogynistic thinking is to extremist ideology in their countries. Mehran attributes misogyny to gynophobia, or a fear of women. Naseem says it is integral to extremist ideology. Mohsin and Sabriet (Bangladesh) also speak about the rise of toxic hypermasculinity along with increasing political manipulation of religion. In Pakistan, the discourse on vice and virtue—now common—is sought to be actualised by policing women's lives (Brohi). In Sri Lanka, radicalisation takes the form of misogyny of women of the other community (Jayasundara-Smits). This is also the case in Karnataka, India

(Rajagopalan and Singh Raghuvanshi). In both cases, the corollary is to place restrictions and police the behaviour of women from the extremists' own community.

The Bangladesh study demonstrates how the politicisation of religion has resulted in encouraging misogynistic thinking in both secular and religious individuals. The common denominators are Hypermasculinism and misogyny. The study examines their creation and use of online forums to express these views. It also points to the rise in online harassment of women.

The four cases in the India study allow us to see the difference that misogyny does and does not make. In Assam and Chhattisgarh, extremist ideology is not essentially misogynistic or focused on gender. State forces carry within them the misogynistic, patriarchal values of their society. In Assam, you read about militants targeting women on the opposite side, but in Chhattisgarh the accusations of sexual violence are strictly on the government side—either by active commission or by turning a blind eye. In Kashmir, extremist misogyny takes the form of curbs on women but misogyny on the state side takes the form of hate speech. Triumphalist rhetoric after 2019 has also been sexist. In addition, accusations of sexual violence are levelled at state forces. In Karnataka, misogyny is central to Hindutva extremism.

The relationship between extremism and misogyny would appear to be symbiotic. If a culture is already misogynistic, people are more likely to be radicalised through an appeal to values, culture or religion. As extremist thinking appeals to more people, misogynistic thinking and their violent expressions become normalised, acceptable and lauded. As Brohi's study of Pakistan points out, there comes a point when the extreme becomes the mainstream.

Anyone might be a perpetrator of sexual and gender-based violence

Implicit in the question of relating extremism to sexual and gender-based violence is the assumption that extremists are the perpetrators of violence. Quelling extremism will quell violence against women. This is not borne out by reality.

Women are instead caught in the rhetorical and physical cross-fire between extremists and their communities or states, treated as symbols of the latter and therefore attacked or cast into fixed moulds. When extremists or extremist ideologies capture the state (as in the case of the Taliban), women's rights are the first casualty. When extremists become influential in its leadership ranks (as in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Karnataka, India), then the protections afforded to women and their rights by law are undermined by state indifference or negligence.

If extremists instrumentalise women's lives and bodies, so do counter-insurgency operations and indeed, the project of countering violent extremism. Were any of these enterprises in fact about the protection of women and the safeguarding of their rights, they would acknowledge their shared misogyny and culpability for the violence that women experience.

Laws are not enough but the state matters

It is worth reiterating, as borne out in all the six country studies, that laws are not enough to prevent gender-based violence within or outside the context of extremism. The passage of laws serves to recognise such acts as unacceptable and punishable, but depending on community awareness, efficacy of police and judicial procedures and state officials—often steeped in patriarchal values—they cannot prevent gender-based violence on their own. Programmes in "countering violent extremism" have focused their attention on how women and others may be mobilised to serve this agenda. However, this does not protect women from increasing levels of policing and violence, as they are caught between all sides of the conflict.

To prevent and end sexual and gender-based violence, social change is imperative but so is the will of the state. There is an aspirational, normative dimension to laws and conventions; they address what must be done to prevent and punish and in so doing, they also signify what must be. The day-to-day task of enforcing these laws and conventions is entrusted to officials of the state. Their own misogyny as well as sympathy towards those who would enact that misogyny as gender-based violence—whether 'extremists' or agents of the state in counter-insurgency actions—make a material difference to the prevalence of violence and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's takeover paved the way for escalating violence against women because misogyny is fundamental to their ideology. If the state laid out strictures limiting the rights of women, those within the home who would abuse women find greater license. In Bangladesh, the state is unable to respond to the abuse of women online and the propagation of hypermasculine values. In the four Indian cases, the state's role in ignoring or dismissing gender-based violence has an impact on its prevalence. In Kashmir, Chhattisgarh and Assam, often it is the state's counter-insurgency forces that are accused of gender-based violence. Special laws reinforce the state's unwillingness to act against these perpetrators. In Karnataka, the state government is run by those who share the ideology of those who target Muslim and Christian women and act as moral police. The state becomes complicit in gender-based violence.

In the Maldives, ultra-conservative religious discourses find an echo in parliamentary debates on laws to address gender inequality and violence. In Pakistan, as religious radicalism has become mainstream politics, women's rights have become the grounds for one-upmanship. In Sri Lanka, as the state's ethno-religious identification intensifies, women of all three major communities bear the brunt through policing of dress, limitations on mobility and sexual violence. Whether it is a centralised state where gender violence is one dimension of control, a state sympathetic to misogynistic values or a state unable to enforce its writ, states and those who work for them do matter.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

If we cannot say that extremism causes a rise in gender-based violence, what can we say?

1. Extremism builds on and intensifies the misogyny that is latent in patriarchal societies. Extremist rhetoric justifies the subjection of women in the name of honour, protection and culture. It gives authority and licence to men—within the family and community—to enforce the extremist group's codes and mores on women. Extremist misogyny finds expression in many modes other than physical and sexual violence. The Bangladesh study illustrates how mounting conservatism finds expression in online platforms, where patriarchal ideas are propagated and women are trolled and threatened. Taking on misogyny itself would seem to be the first step to address both extremism and sexual and gender-based violence. This is not possible without striking at the root—patriarchy, with its deep-rooted systems of inequality and prejudice.

2. While the ending of patriarchy might seem to lie beyond the reach of states, states are charged with the protection of their populations—all sections and genders—and they are bound to enforce the laws that have been adopted by their legislatures. **In their varying ability and willingness to do this, states and their agents reinforce the culture of rape that patriarchy fosters.** There is a low cost to perpetrating gender violence, not just in terms of law enforcement but also socially and professionally. Those who complain pay with stigma and disrupted lives and livelihoods. Those who are accused seem to wait out the outrage to return another day. Indecisive first responses, securitisation and court delays are some of the institutional realities through which the state becomes complicit in gender-based violence.

3. Especially where states see the rise of extremism as a law-and-order issue to be fixed through military action, they reinforce impunity by treating gender violence as an acceptable tool or justifiable side-effect of their actions. The policing of women's dress and access to public spaces is another way in which cultures or communities are sought to be both expressed ("wear this") or delimited ("don't wear this"), as seen in Karnataka, India and in Sri Lanka. Women's right to work, make their own choices and live as they wish is limited in the name of protecting culture and community.

CLOSING REMARKS

International efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism cannot focus on one kind of extremism (viz., Islamic groups). They must view extremist activism of any kind as part of the spectrum of political possibilities offered by a society's own inequalities and divisions—sometimes even as a result of these. Therefore, efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism must be directed at those structural

features—rather than exclusively on measures to prevent, confront and end radicalisation and violence.

A foundational source of inequality in most societies is patriarchy. It sets up relationships of domination and subjugation that—cutting across every other social schism—create intersectional vulnerabilities for violence. Patriarchy creates a culture in which entitlement, misogyny and impunity give sanction to sexual and gender-based violence. Most states have endorsed international conventions against discrimination and violence, and have laws that prohibit and punish sexual and gender-based violence. Nevertheless, prevention and redressal of such violence are considered subservient to the security mandate of the state—interpreted as the security of the state and its ruling regime, rather than that of its citizens, of whom women and gender minorities make up more than half.

This permits extremists and counter-insurgency operations to weaponise sexual and gender-based violence. Women are granted agency in the emerging discourse on this topic only insofar as they can be used to prevent or reverse radicalisation.

What emerges from the six country studies is that misogynistic violence is integral to extremist politics. We acknowledge as extremist violence what happens in the public sphere and we mark the public sphere as spaces dominated by men. What we see in these studies, however, is that extremist activism and violent retribution are first directed at women and girls' rights, their personal choices like dress and leisure, private relationships and access to education and livelihoods in the public sphere. The private sphere is, in other words, the first battle front of extremist violence. Women appear to delimit the borders of a community, so enforcing constraints on them safeguards that community (of language or religion). Perpetrating violence against women of the other community expresses a breach of its defences and marks its subordination. This explains moral policing, child marriages and strictures against going out on one hand, and molestation and sexual assault on the other.

Four recommendations emerge from this project which are addressed to the international community, states and civil society.

1. **Expand the understanding of extremism** by placing it in the context of structural inequalities and societal divisions. Acknowledge that violent expression is only one part of an ideological journey. This allows for early engagement with emerging ideologies which have the potential for extreme expression.
2. **Implement existing laws against discrimination and gender-based violence**, creating at minimum a climate of zero tolerance and at best, a culture of mutual respect and equality. A state's intent and capacity to tackle gender violence suggest how far individuals and groups can push their use of violence. The silence of the state on sexual and gender-based violence makes it complicit in the growth of misogynistic extremism.

3. **Recognise that sexual and gender-based violence is both an early warning indicator and thermostat for levels of conflict.** Increasing restrictions on women's mobility, rising prevalence of child marriage, forced marriages and cyber-bullying suggest anticipation of crisis. Rape, intimate partner violence, domestic violence and trafficking suggest the crisis is underway.
4. **Engage critically through sensitisation and education with structural inequality and discrimination**, to transform the ideational bases of violence. Violence is not an acceptable language in the interface between individuals, groups and states.