



## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. Oct-Dec 2025. Page# 1-9

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

## The Role of Pakhtun Women in Militant Organizations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan) and Nangarhar (Afghanistan)

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### ABSTRACT

*The involvement of women in militancy is a growing reality across the world, yet their roles often remain hidden or underestimated. In societies like the Pakhtun belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan and Nangarhar (Afghanistan), women are usually seen as confined to domestic spaces. However, evidence shows that they too participate in militancy, both directly and indirectly. This study explores the ways in which Pakhtun women contribute to militant organizations, the factors that draw them into such activities, and the differences and similarities across the two regions. The research is based on qualitative methods, using unstructured interviews with women who have been directly or indirectly linked to militancy, along with secondary sources such as literature, reports, and documentaries. Findings reveal that women in these regions are not merely passive supporters but play active roles in militancy. Their contributions range from providing money and shelter, spreading militant ideology, and assisting with logistics, to spying and even carrying out suicide bombings. Patriarchal control, unquestioned religious devotion, and experiences of personal or communal loss emerge as the most powerful motivations. A comparison of KP and Nangarhar shows many parallels, though the forms of women's involvement vary with local conditions and the structures of militant groups. The study argues that addressing women's involvement in militancy requires more than just security measures. It calls for policies that empower women, challenge patriarchal structures, and offer alternative roles in peace-building and community resilience.*

**Keywords:** Militancy, Terrorism, Pakhtun Women, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Nangarhar, Gender and Conflict.

### Introduction

Militancy has become one of the most pressing challenges of the modern world, reshaping states and societies in ways that continue to affect global security. While the study of militancy has received considerable attention, the focus has largely remained on men as the primary actors. Women, in most accounts, are portrayed as passive victims of violence or as individuals confined to the margins of conflict. The reality, however, is more complex. Across diverse regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and Europe, women have actively participated in militant activities, whether through combat, support, or ideological promotion. Their presence not only complicates the traditional gendered assumptions about war and militancy but also highlights the need to examine their roles within specific cultural and social contexts (Doost, 2016).

The involvement of women in militancy is particularly significant in Pakhtun society, which spans both KP in Pakistan and Nangarhar in Afghanistan. This society is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions that emphasize honor, modesty, and submission for women. At first glance, the idea of women participating in militant organizations appears to stand in contradiction with these norms (Leede, 2014). A closer examination, however, reveals that patriarchy itself may provide the channels through which women are mobilized. They may be encouraged to embody sacrifice, persuaded by religious narratives, pressured by male relatives, or recruited through promises of honor and revenge. At the same time, some women may actively seek participation as a way to recover lost dignity, avenge the death of loved ones, or find purpose within an environment that restricts their choices (Shalinsky, 1993).

This study seeks to explore the role of Pakhtun women in militant organizations in both KP and Nangarhar, focusing on the cultural, religious, and social factors that shape their involvement. It investigates the nature of their participation, whether as active combatants, suicide bombers, financiers, or ideological supporters and compares the similarities and differences across the two regions. In doing so, the study brings attention to an under-explored dimension of militancy and contributes to the growing scholarship that emphasizes the agency of women in conflict situations.

In sum, this study argues that women in Pakhtun society are not merely passive actors but have taken up meaningful roles in militancy. Their participation, whether voluntary, coerced, or shaped by cultural and religious pressures, challenges conventional understandings of gender and conflict. By documenting and analyzing these roles, the research opens new space for discussion on militancy, gender, and the broader dynamics of conflict in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

### **Methodology**

The research employs a qualitative approach. Given the sensitive and dangerous nature of the subject, direct access to women militants was not possible; instead, insights were gathered from informal, unstructured interviews with individuals who were directly or indirectly connected to militancy, including relatives of women involved and local informants. These primary accounts were complemented by an extensive review of secondary material such as books, journal articles, newspaper reports, and documentaries. Together, these sources provide a sufficiently detailed picture of women's involvement despite the secrecy surrounding militant organizations. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the process: consent was obtained from participants, anonymity was maintained, and sensitive details were treated with care.

The analysis is grounded in Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory, which argues that individuals under pressure may resort to deviant or violent behavior. For Pakhtun women, strains arise from multiple sources: the loss of family members in conflict, patriarchal oppression and lack of autonomy, religious and cultural expectations of sacrifice, and economic marginalization. These pressures can drive them to adopt militancy either by choice or compulsion. Using this framework allows for an interpretation of women's militancy that situates their decisions within broader social and psychological processes rather than reducing them to isolated acts of extremism.

### **Literature Review**

The involvement of women in militancy has been documented in different parts of the world, though the extent and form of their participation vary across regions and time periods. The existing scholarship shows that women have not only supported militant groups but also taken part in direct combat and suicide missions, often surprising both states and societies that tend

to view militancy as a male-dominated activity. Understanding this global backdrop helps place the experiences of Pakhtun women in a broader comparative perspective.

Globally, the presence of female suicide bombers has been steadily rising since the 1960s. Between 1985 and 2006, women carried out approximately fifteen percent of all recorded suicide attacks (Davis, 2013). Some groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, have relied heavily on women, with reports showing that women constituted the majority of its suicide bombers in recent years (Matfess, 2017). Similarly, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka made strategic use of female cadres, who were not only combatants but also suicide attackers. Historical accounts show that women have been active in militant groups in Europe as well. In the 1970s, one-fourth of Russian terrorists were women, a proportion higher than that in the United States or Germany at the time. In Italy, the Communist organized for the Liberation of the Proletariat (COLP) had about one-third of its membership composed of women, while the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse) reported around 31 percent female participation (Townshend, 2011). These examples suggest that women's militancy is neither new nor limited to any single cultural context.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of high-profile female militants in South Asia and the Middle East. Groups such as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Chechen militants, Palestinian factions, and Al-Qaeda networks employed women in diverse capacities (Speckhard, 2008). One of the most infamous cases was the 1991 assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a female suicide bomber, Dhanu, who was linked to the LTTE. The attack highlighted the operational effectiveness of women militants in bypassing security barriers and carrying out deadly missions (Staff, 2020).

In Afghanistan, Deborah Ellis (2000) documented how women contributed to the jihad against the Soviets. Rural women cooked food for mujaheddin fighters, sometimes at night to avoid air raids, and even fired weapons at Soviet troops during village searches. Urban women participated in more organized activities such as spying, investigating suspected collaborators, and training in the use of weapons. Some even hid arms under their burqas to assist fighters. These examples underline that Afghan women, though often invisible in public life, were significant actors in conflict (Ellis, 2000).

Similar patterns have appeared in Pakistan's tribal regions. Reports and videos have surfaced showing women receiving weapons training in militant camps in Waziristan, an area long considered a stronghold of groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Afghan Taliban, and Al-Qaeda (Nicola Smith, 2013). In 2017, the TTP even launched a women's magazine, *Sunnat-i-Khula*, explicitly calling on women to support jihad and offering them a vision of honor and purpose through militancy (Bezhan, 2017; Landsbaum, 2017).

Researchers such as Amira Jadoon and Sara Mehmood (2017) have highlighted the ideological dimensions of this mobilization. They report cases where militant leaders' wives and associates stressed the need for women to play active roles in supporting jihad, not only by aiding fighters but also by raising children committed to the militant cause. Militants have also targeted young girls in religious seminaries, expecting them to carry extremist ideas into their families and communities.

Women have often been seen as strategically valuable militants because of gender stereotypes. Their ability to move through security checkpoints with less suspicion, and the cultural reluctance to subject women to physical searches, makes them useful to militant organizations (Reed & Wood, 2017). In some contexts, disguises such as pregnancy have further enabled women to avoid detection.

Interviews conducted by Seran de Leede (2014) in Afghanistan revealed that although women were actively engaged in supportive roles for the Taliban, there were no women in leadership positions. Nonetheless, many of these women believed that Afghanistan would only be secure if the Taliban regained power, reflecting both ideological commitment and the internalization of patriarchal structures.

Motivations for women's participation differ from those of men. Mia Bloom (2007) argues that while men often join militant groups for ideological or nationalist reasons, women are more likely to be driven by personal motives such as revenge, loss of family members, or the need to restore honor. The "Black Widows" of Chechnya and female Palestinian bombers illustrate this point, as many were widows, divorcees, or women marginalized by their communities. Similarly, research shows that female members of the ETA in Spain or the LTTE in Sri Lanka often came from socially stigmatized backgrounds, including women who had been raped, were infertile, or belonged to lower castes (Tranel, 2011).

Despite the prevalence of women in militant movements worldwide, the Taliban in Afghanistan have generally refrained from employing women as suicide bombers, despite their historical involvement during the anti-Soviet jihad. As Dearing (2010) notes, this reflects the group's ideological rigidity and gender norms, which restrict women's roles despite their potential utility.

Recent reports confirm that women continue to participate in militancy in various forms. In 2017 alone, 181 women carried out suicide attacks worldwide, accounting for 11 percent of all terrorist incidents that year. In Boko Haram, more than 450 female bombers were documented between 2014 and 2018, causing over 1,200 deaths. Other groups, such as Al-Shabaab in East Africa, actively recruit women by offering economic incentives, jobs, or a sense of identity (Cronin, 2019).

In Pakistan and Afghanistan, incidents involving female militants continue to surface. In 2019, an Afghan woman was arrested in Peshawar while transporting explosives to Lahore (Mehsud, 2019). Earlier cases include the arrest of Amtari Bibi in 2010 while carrying 130 kilograms of explosives, and the shooting of a woman attempting to detonate explosives near a check post in Peshawar in 2009 (Tribune, 2010). These events show that the involvement of women in militancy in the region is not only a theoretical concern but a concrete reality with security implications.

The reviewed literature consistently points to patriarchy as a central factor shaping women's participation in militancy (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007; Yesevi, 2014). While some women are coerced, others join voluntarily, driven by grief, revenge, or ideological commitment. Their participation takes multiple forms, ranging from active combat and suicide missions to support roles such as cooking, financing, and spreading propaganda. What remains less explored, however, is how these dynamics specifically manifest among Pakhtun women in KP and Nangarhar, two regions with strong patriarchal traditions, long histories of conflict, and complex relations with militancy.

This gap in scholarship makes the present study timely and necessary. By focusing on these regions, it seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the intersection between gender, culture, and militancy, and to highlight the ways in which Pakhtun women both conform to and challenge the structures of their society.

#### **Pakhtun Women's Participation in Militancy in KP and Nangarhar**

The participation of Pakhtun women in militancy is a complex and often concealed phenomenon. While their involvement is not as visible as that of men, evidence suggests that women in both KP and Nangarhar have been active in different capacities. Their participation

ranges from supportive roles such as providing food, shelter, and finances to more direct roles, including spying and suicide bombing. Examining their involvement sheds light on the interaction of culture, religion, and politics in shaping women's choices and constraints.

### **Supportive Roles**

In both regions, the most common form of women's involvement in militancy is supportive rather than combative. Women provide shelter for militants, deliver messages, and prepare food for fighters. They also contribute financially, often by donating jewelry or savings to militant groups (Zareena, 2019). Such support is facilitated by cultural norms that give women a degree of mobility within domestic spaces, allowing them to hide militants or transport materials without raising suspicion. In rural areas of Nangarhar, for instance, women were reported to work in fields at night and secretly deliver food to Taliban fighters during the day. In KP, women have also been used to transport explosives under the guise of traditional clothing such as the *burqa*, which makes security checks difficult (M, 2019).

### **Spying and Ideological Work**

Another critical dimension of women's participation is their role as informants and propagators of ideology. Women are often recruited to monitor communities, track individuals, and report them to militants (Akbar, 2016). This work draws on their ability to access social spaces that men cannot easily enter, such as women's gatherings or households. In addition, women have been instrumental in spreading extremist ideology within families (Haq F. , 2007). Mothers and wives are encouraged by militant organizations to raise children with militant values, ensuring the transmission of ideology across generations. The publication of the TTP's women's magazine *Sunnat-i-Khula* in 2017 reflects this strategic emphasis on women as ideological agents tasked with sustaining the movement (Landsbaum, 2017) (Bezhan, 2017).

### **Suicide Bombing**

Cases of female suicide bombers, though fewer in number compared to men, have been documented in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. These women are often motivated by personal loss, such as the death of husbands, fathers, or sons in conflict. In societies where honor is tied to family reputation, women may also be pressured to restore dignity through acts of sacrifice. A number of failed and successful attempts have been reported in Peshawar and other parts of KP, where women attempted to carry explosives past security checkpoints (Ali M. , 2011). While such incidents remain relatively rare, they demonstrate the willingness of militant groups to deploy women in roles traditionally denied to them by cultural norms (Akbar, 2016).

### **Cultural and Religious Motivations**

Pakhtun culture is deeply patriarchal, and women are often denied agency in political and social life. Ironically, this same structure creates conditions for their involvement in militancy. Many women join not out of ideological conviction but because of pressure from male relatives or because they are left with no alternative after losing their families. At the same time, religious narratives frame women's sacrifice as a source of honor. Militants frequently invoke early Islamic history, presenting examples of women who supported battles and urging contemporary women to follow their path. Such appeals resonate with women who are already marginalized and searching for meaning in environments of war and loss (Europe, 2019).

### **Comparative Perspective: KP and Nangarhar**

While the patterns of involvement are broadly similar in both regions, certain differences stand out. In Nangarhar, the legacy of the Soviet-Afghan war created a longer tradition of women's participation, often linked to nationalist as well as religious motivations. Afghan women played visible roles during the anti-Soviet jihad, and many of those networks continue to shape their involvement today (Kochin, 2019). In contrast, in KP, women's participation has been more

sporadic and often linked to the rise of groups such as the TTP in the post-2001 period. Moreover, while Afghan women militants are largely confined to supportive roles today, women in KP have been more directly implicated in suicide bombing attempts in recent years (Akbar, 2016).

### **Agency and Coercion**

A recurring theme in the findings is the blurred line between agency and coercion. While some women actively choose to join militant groups, others are forced by circumstances or manipulation. The loss of loved ones, economic marginalization, and cultural expectations of loyalty to family often push women into roles they might not otherwise accept (Yesevi, 2014). Yet, even under coercion, many women exercise agency in how they carry out their responsibilities, whether by actively recruiting others, taking pride in their sacrifices, or shaping their children's worldview. This duality complicates simplistic portrayals of women as either helpless victims or dangerous extremists (Leede, 2014).

### **Implications**

The findings suggest that women's participation in militancy in KP and Nangarhar is significant enough to warrant closer attention from policymakers and researchers. Women are not only supporting militant networks but also transmitting ideologies and, in some cases, engaging in direct violence. Ignoring their role risks overlooking a critical dimension of militancy and underestimating the resilience of extremist organizations.

### **Discussion**

The findings on the participation of Pakhtun women in militancy in KP and Nangarhar highlight the multifaceted nature of their involvement. Far from being passive observers, women occupy both supportive and active roles in militant networks, often shaped by intersecting cultural, religious, and political factors. Situating these findings within existing theoretical and empirical scholarship helps illuminate not only why women participate but also how their participation sustains militancy in the region.

### **General Strain Theory and Women's Participation**

Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) (1992) provides a useful lens for understanding women's involvement. According to GST, individuals are likely to engage in deviant or criminal behavior when they experience strains such as the failure to achieve valued goals, loss of positive stimuli or exposure to negative stimuli. Applied to the case of Pakhtun women, three dimensions are particularly relevant (Jurczyk, 2024).

First, many women experience the loss of positive stimuli, most notably in the form of family members killed during military operations or militant violence. The death of a husband, father, or son not only produces emotional trauma but also leaves women economically vulnerable, with few options for survival. Joining militant groups or supporting their activities can become a coping mechanism, providing both material support and a sense of belonging (Jurczyk, 2024).

Second, women often face negative stimuli in the form of patriarchal domination and coercion. In highly patriarchal societies such as KP and Nangarhar, women's roles are largely restricted to the household, and their autonomy is limited. Male relatives or militant recruiters exploit this subordination to pressure women into participation. Yet, even within such constraints, women sometimes internalize and reinterpret their roles, finding pride in sacrifice or ideological work (Skoczylis & Andrews, 2022).

Third, the failure to achieve valued goals such as education, employment, or social recognition, also explains women's participation. Deprived of opportunities in mainstream society, women may view militancy as a pathway to significance. Militant groups often promise them respect,

honor, and a higher religious purpose, offering psychological compensation for their marginalization (Jurczyk, 2024).

By applying GST, it becomes clear that women's involvement in militancy is not simply the result of blind obedience or manipulation. Rather, it emerges from a complex interplay of strain, coercion, and agency.

### **Cultural and Religious Dimensions**

The patriarchal structure of Pakhtun society plays a dual role in shaping women's participation. On one hand, it restricts their autonomy and pushes them into militant activities primarily through family obligations or coercion. On the other hand, it provides opportunities for militants to exploit women's roles as mothers, wives, and sisters. By situating women within the framework of honor and sacrifice, militants transform cultural constraints into sources of mobilization (Yesevi, 2014).

Religion amplifies this dynamic. Women are encouraged to see their sacrifices as aligned with Islamic history, particularly through narratives of women who supported early Islamic battles. For example, militant propaganda frequently invokes figures such as Khawla bint al-Azwar, a warrior companion of the Prophet, to legitimize female involvement. This selective use of religious history not only motivates women but also normalizes their participation within conservative communities (Sultana, 2010).

### **Comparative Insights**

In both regions, women's roles are heavily shaped by patriarchal traditions and religious narratives. However, Nangarhar's history of prolonged conflict, created a more entrenched culture of women's involvement, often tied to nationalist struggles. In contrast, in KP, women's participation is a relatively recent phenomenon, shaped by the post-9/11 rise of the TTP.

This difference has implications for the nature of women's roles. While Afghan women in Nangarhar are more often confined to logistical and supportive functions, Pakistani women in KP have been directly involved in suicide bombings and attempts to penetrate high-security zones. The relative novelty of female militancy in Pakistan also means that it is less institutionalized but potentially more disruptive, as it catches security forces off guard.

### **Agency versus Victimhood**

A central theme in debates on women and militancy is whether female participants should be viewed primarily as victims or as agents of violence. The findings from this study suggest that such a binary is overly simplistic. Many Pakhtun women enter militancy under conditions of coercion, economic marginalization, or family pressure, which limits their agency. At the same time, once engaged, they often embrace their roles with a sense of purpose, actively spreading ideology, recruiting others, or taking pride in acts of sacrifice (Warburton, 2016).

This duality complicates policy responses. Treating all female participants as victims risks overlooking their active role in sustaining militancy, while portraying them solely as agents of terror ignores the structural and cultural pressures that shape their decisions. A more careful understanding is required one that recognizes women's constrained agency without denying their active contributions.

### **Broader Implications**

The involvement of Pakhtun women in militancy has broader implications for counter-terrorism and peace-building. First, ignoring women's roles risks underestimating the resilience of militant organizations, which draw strength from the active participation of both genders. Second, the use of women in support and ideological roles ensures the inter-generational transmission of extremist beliefs, making it harder to dismantle militant networks. Finally, the visibility of women in militant activities challenges traditional assumptions about gender roles

in conservative societies, demonstrating that even highly patriarchal cultures can adapt when it serves militant purposes.

### Conclusion

This study examined the role of Pakhtun women in militancy in KP and Nangarhar, showing that their participation extends beyond passive support to include financing, spreading ideology, spying, and, at times, suicide attacks. Informed by Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory, the findings demonstrate that women's involvement is shaped by a mix of structural strains such as poverty, loss of loved ones, and patriarchal domination, alongside religious devotion and cultural expectations. While some are coerced, many women also exercise agency, making it essential to move beyond viewing them solely as victims or perpetrators. The comparison between Pakistan and Afghanistan underscores how historical contexts matter, prolonged conflict in Afghanistan has normalized women's supportive roles, while in Pakistan their participation has been more sporadic but nonetheless disruptive. These insights highlight that militancy is sustained within communities and households, where women play a critical role in transmitting ideology. Addressing this requires policies that look beyond securitized approaches, tackling the social and economic pressures that make women vulnerable to recruitment and creating alternatives through education, livelihoods, and justice. Women must also be engaged as stakeholders in peace-building, supported with platforms to counter extremist narratives, while religious and community leaders should challenge the misuse of faith to legitimize violence. Rehabilitation programs tailored for women who have been part of militancy are equally vital to prevent relapse. Ultimately, acknowledging women's roles, both in sustaining militancy and in advancing peace, is central to building long-term stability in KP, Nangarhar, and the wider region.

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