ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

RELIGION IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES IN PAKISTAN

S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana

INTRODUCTION

Militant groups, in the name of Islam, continue to threaten peace and security in the Western and Muslim worlds. Pakistan is one of the countries that suffers most from the attacks of these groups. For instance, in December 2014, gunmen stormed the Army Public School in Peshawar, setting off explosives and firing automatic weapons, killing more than 148, mostly children. The Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for the attack. Within this context, Mossarat Qadeem, a Muslim woman in Pakistan, founded the PAIMAN Alumni Trust (PAIMAN), a national organization working at the grassroots level, to address radicalization and extremist violence, and also to build peace in the conflict-ridden regions of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Based on the principle of “local ownership”, PAIMAN draws its conflict resolution from Islamic and Pakistani traditions and values. This case study will explore how PAIMAN, empowered by Islam, works to address extremist violence in Pakistan. It considers: (1) religion as a community, which explores how Muslim identity provides women with credibility

and legitimacy to resolve conflicts and build peace; (2) religion as practice, which examines how PAIMAN assists women and youth impacted by violence and conflict in Pakistan by engaging and supported them, and (3) religion as a set of teachings, which describes how Islamic values inform their work.

RELIGION, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND PEACEBUILDING

Since 9/11 the role of religion in conflict has become a main area of interest. In order to respond to religiously motivated conflicts, scholars and practitioners have pointed out that our policies must be based on a deeper understanding of the dynamics of religion, violence, and conflict resolution, and must address the unique needs and opportunities of the communities within their religio-cultural contexts. Consequently, the potential of religious traditions as sources of peace and the crucial role religious actors can play are increasingly being recognized by governmental agencies as well as non-governmental organizations working in the field of security, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. This recognition has led institutions such as USAID (2019), the World Bank (2015), and the United Nations (UNIATF 2018) to identify engagement with religion and faith-based actors as an important component of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Religious peacebuilding includes a range of activities performed by religious actors or religiously motivated individuals and groups for the purpose of resolving and transforming conflict and building sustainable peace. Engaging in religious peacebuilding can provide a spiritual basis for transformation and supplement the mechanistic and instrumental conflict resolution models. Religion can bring social, moral, and spiritual resources to the peacebuilding process. They can also inspire a sense of engagement and commitment to resolving conflict and to transforming conflictual relationships into peaceful ones, especially because religion incorporate ideals of peace. Furthermore, they provide vocabulary, images, and myths, exemplars to serve as symbols and models of peace, as well as a range of values and principles to guide conflict resolution. Religious involvement in peacemaking initiatives can prepare and equip conflict resolution practitioners and diplomats for proactive roles

in transforming the conflict. As Abu-Nimer (2001: 686) notes, “Framing the interventions within a religious context and deriving tools from a religious narrative have made it possible for interveners to gain access and increase their potential impact on the parties”. Gopin (2000: 15) supports this by stating that

a close study of the sacred texts, traditions, symbols and myths that emerge in conflict situations may contribute to theoretical approaches to conflict analysis by providing a useful frame of reference for conflict resolution workshops, and interfaith dialogue groups, and by creating a bridge to the unique cultural expression of a particular conflict.

Religious peacebuilding, then, could become a major tool for training, empowering, and motivating religiously oriented people towards peace.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN IN FAITH-BASED ACTORS?

Engaging religious actors and developing intervention strategies have been incorporated to address Islamic militancy in Pakistan. Noticing that religious actors have more credibility and legitimacy than secular actors, governmental organizations such as USAID, OECD, and the Interior Ministries of Iraq and Pakistan have started to work with religious leaders and develop counter-narrative strategies that aim to deconstruct, discredit, or demystify groups like Taliban and al-Qaeda and to de-radicalize or disengage their followers (Briggs and Feve 2013). However, these approaches focused on traditional religious leaders, which are often men, and have rarely recognized the important role women have been playing in responding to violence and building peace in their communities. Gendered approaches to peace and security are mainly articulated by the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) community which emphasizes addressing women's needs and empowering them at times of conflict, mostly through secular approaches. Much of the research and discussions still presume religious women are voiceless victims of religion and religious institutions and therefore are in need of being saved. Hence, the important work Muslim women activists are doing in their communities to respond to violent extremism and their intervention strategies rooted in Islamic theology go unnoticed.

It is often the case that, in many religious traditions, women's role in the public sphere is limited as a result of patriarchal interpretation of religious text, and many male religious actors ignore or obstruct women's leadership in peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts (Hayward and Marshall 2015: 13). Muslim women, in particular, have often been perceived as victims of not only violence committed by militant organizations but by Islam in general. Hence, emancipation and empowerment of Muslim women have been an integral part of foreign policy objectives and democratization, and development efforts by many Western governments and organizations. While it is true that Muslim women are often victims of patriarchal structures and discriminatory practices, this depiction of Muslim women as victims does not tell the whole story. Many Muslim women are inspired by their faith and believe Islam calls for justice and peacebuilding. They are increasingly playing critical peacebuilding roles either by organizing to stop violence and end the conflict or developing initiatives.

PAIMAN AND ISLAMIC SOURCES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

One such example of a Muslim woman working on building peace in her community is Mossarat Qadeem, who co-founded PAIMAN, a non-profit organization in 2004 (www.paimantrust.org). Within an Islamic framework, PAIMAN works directly with youth as well as mothers of radicalized youth, female community leaders, teachers, and elected representatives to respond to violent extremism and build resiliency in her community in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan (Peace Direct 2019). Based on the belief that there is an urgent need for developing the understanding of people on various aspects of conflict transformation and peacebuilding and its application at a community level, PAIMAN aims to neutralize extremist tendencies through community mobilization, active citizenship, and community empowerment for building social cohesion (ICAN 2017). To accomplish this, PAIMAN established the Center for Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding in Islamabad to act as a resource center and training institute in South Asia. Initiatives of PAIMAN engage various local actors such as elected officials, youth, women,

madrasa teachers, religious leaders, and journalists, amongst others, from conflict-affected areas. PAIMAN also trains women, particularly mothers, and youth in a number of different areas to increase local capacity for addressing violent extremism. Recognizing “[A] woman’s role is not just a mother, but also an activist, a teacher, a religious scholar, a political leader, a decision maker, and a peace negotiator” (ICAN 2017). Qadeem’s organization has trained 14,000 males and females, who then became members of Peace groups called TOLANA to promote peace and counter violent extremism within the community (ICAN 2017). Amongst other tasks, they use social media, and hold community sessions at schools, madrasas, and public places to create awareness and to discuss how to address extremism. The PAIMAN Alumni Trust also developed an inclusive peace curriculum and trained 220 teachers of private schools and 98 teachers of madrasas who then use the curriculum in their respective schools and madrasas.

MUSLIM IDENTITY AS A SOURCE OF CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY: RELIGION AS COMMUNITY

Muslim women who are working in their communities to respond to violence and build peace, like Qadeem, frame their efforts within their Muslim identity and the religio-cultural traditions of Islam. Despite all the challenges faced by Muslim women peacebuilders, they are often inspired and empowered by Islam to work towards peace. Given that Islam is the primary source of legitimacy in Muslim communities, the women’s religious identity and their efforts to use Islamic texts, images, concepts, and vocabulary provides them with legitimacy and credibility that is vital to the success of peacebuilding actors. More particularly, when the conflict and violence is framed within a religious framework, as is the case with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, it becomes even more important to frame the responses to it within the same religious framework. Therefore, to be considered legitimate and authentic, the women derive their conflict resolution and peacebuilding approaches from the Quran, hadith, and sunna.

Islam and their Muslim identity were an important source of legitimacy for PAIMAN and Qadeem in reaching out to youth, women, and religious leaders in their community. One of the strategies of PAIMAN was to build women’s capacity for critical thinking,

allowing them to recognize indicators of violent extremism in an individual and in their communities, and to find ways to address these early warning signs by promoting dialogue and community peacebuilding. This required them to find ways to make women aware of their potential in influencing and guiding their children's lives, and in preventing them from engaging in extremist activities. Because, in almost all cases, the extremists used the text of the Quran to attract youth and communities towards the concept of violent jihad, the women needed to develop a strategy that was rooted in the Islamic discourse. This was important particularly for them to gain legitimacy to offer narratives countering the extremist interpretations. Therefore, PAIMAN based their initiatives within an Islamic framework, used the Quranic verses and the *Sunna* to reach out to radicalized and vulnerable youth, and to help transform the mindset of these mothers. For, instance, regarding their work with mothers, Qadeem notes, their "transformative methodology is based on the Quran and Sunnah, as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) insists that a mother's role is vital in the upbringing of her children in accordance with the values of true Islamic teaching, which does not preach hatred or violence" (Qadeem 2018: 8). Consequently, PAIMAN was able to offer an alternative understanding of jihad and justice.

SERVICE FOR WOMEN IMPACTED BY CONFLICT: RELIGION AS PRACTICE

Often inspired by their faith, many religious actors provide a number of different services in their communities, ranging from providing food, clean water, or education, amongst other amenities. During conflicts, the religious actors may also provide services to help resolve conflict and build relationships between the parties. Conflicts and violence impact men and women in various ways, and they have different needs and opportunities. In conservative communities, where interactions between men and women are restricted, women can work with female victims and perpetrators of violence more easily, and have resources that may not be available to male religious leaders, as it is the case with PAIMAN in Pakistan. Associated with the honor of the family and the community, their contact with outsiders, especially men, is often constrained. Stigma

associated with secular women's organizations also limits their access to more conservative women in these communities. Since advancing women's status and rights is an important dimension of peacebuilding, development, and countering violent extremism, it is particularly critical for women who have a good understanding of other women's needs and concerns, and who have legitimacy to work with them, to reach out to women who have been impacted by violence.

Many Muslim women work on a number of issues engaging different actors in their communities. One of the areas Muslim women are uniquely positioned to work is addressing the impact of conflict on women and children. Conflict in Pakistan put additional burdens on women there. Imposing a strict gender code based on their interpretation of Islam, extremist groups limited women's and girls' mobility and participation in social and cultural life, such as going outside of the home without a male escort and participation in social and political activities. Women were excluded from working in public and private sectors. Qadeem states that those women and girls who failed to comply with this interpretation of Islam were often subjected to harsh punitive measures for defying the social practices (Qadeem 2018: 4–5). In addition to being physically attacked by these groups, more than 400 girls' schools in the Swat region were destroyed and burned and many girls were prevented from attending the schools that remained (Qadeem 2018: 4). Fear of punishment even prevented many of the female health workers and doctors from providing basic health care to women. As Qadeem puts it, extremists were engaged in “gender apartheid, but nobody dared to raise a voice against them” (Qadeem 2018: 5) because anybody who would talk about women's rights was ostracized for being anti-Islamic and pro-west.

In addition to being victims of violence, some women in Pakistan had become supporters of militant organizations and their jihadi ideology. Qadeem (2018: 8) states that women were easily influenced by the jihadi sermons of extremist leaders whose notion of jihad transcended gender, and who used a convergence of propaganda, media attention, and intellectual and theological ignorance to construct a hybrid role for women in their idea of an Islamic society. Some of the mothers also wanted to provide support for their sons who were involved in extremist groups. PAIMAN also found that as

a result of socially accepted gender roles women often followed the instructions and advice of their male relatives. Within this context, working with women was particularly important.

Recognizing that engaging women in general, and mothers in particular, was critical to counter extremist violence in Pakistan, PAIMAN developed an integrated approach to empower women socially, economically, and psychologically. This multilayered approach focused on building women's capacity in critical thinking, dialogue, and community peacebuilding, to help them recognize early signs of extremism in order to prevent them and to make them aware of their potential in influencing and guiding their children's lives. Moreover, PAIMAN sought to provide them with livelihood skills, thereby raising their status and voice in their families and communities and reducing their vulnerability to violent extremism. PAIMAN also worked to build the capacity of female school and madrasa teachers, police women, and female leaders of religious political parties and activists, and to form a coalition known as "Women of faith building social cohesion in Pakistan" (Qadeem 2018: 7). Finally, PAIMAN also provided education to women on Islamic teachings and texts that promote tolerance and gender equality and helped women to understand their role in promoting a culture of tolerance and peace and encouraging resilient communities. PAIMAN's trainings also focused on building self-confidence, competences, and basic skills in understanding attitudinal and behavioral changes in their sons. For example, PAIMAN, to this date, has trained more than 235 female teachers, including those from religious schools in their peace curriculum that emphasizes values of pluralism and harmony, and reached more than 6,400 students (Qadeem 2018: 11).

Following these trainings, participants became members of PAIMAN mothers' peace groups called Mothers Tolana ("together" in Pashto) (Qadeem 2016). Through the 23 Mothers Tolana (with a total of 1,500 members), PAIMAN has reached out to 23,198 women and worked to reintegrate 1,450 extremist and vulnerable youth through a phased process that includes psycho-social counseling (Qadeem 2018: 9). Mothers Tolana hold community meetings with other women and have been instrumental in identifying vulnerable and extremist youth and mothers who support them. Qadeem explains that when the Mothers Tolana found

out that 30 women were supporting extremism by stitching suicide bomber jackets, they met with them to talk to them. When, during their conversation, the woman who supplies the jackets to the extremists was asked whether she knew what they were used for, she explained to them:

Of course I know, we are all engaged in a jihad. I haven't told the other women who sew the jackets, but they must know. What other use can these strange jackets be for? I know whom I am supplying, I know what they are being used for and I am putting my bit in the jihad that is being carried out against the infidels.

(ICAN 2018)

The woman also explained, in addition to contributing to jihad, stitching these jackets brought them respect and security, and provided with an income as they were paid to do so. Through their efforts, the Tolana Mothers and Qadeem provided the women with alternative sources of livelihood by helping them make dresses instead, and explaining “that going to heaven can be done in many other ways, without the need to be part of a group that kills people” (ICAN 2018). They were able to convince 13 of the 30 women involved in the stitching of suicide bombing jackets to stop.

ISLAMIC VALUES OF PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS

Islamic values and principles play an important role in Muslim women's efforts (Kadayifci-Orellana 2015: 196–201) because as “a powerful constituent of cultural norms” they influence individual and social conceptions of peace and conflict, including jihad. For this reason, extremist groups in Pakistan base their ideology within Islamic frameworks and use religious texts selectively and out of context, especially regarding jihad, to recruit followers (ICAN 2018). They exploit the fact that most Pakistanis do not speak Arabic and many Pakistanis depend on the interpretation of religious leaders. However, Islam tradition is replete with teachings and practices of nonviolence and peace (Kadayifci-Orellana, Abu-Nimer, and Saleem 2013). Muslims often point out that Islam itself is derived from the word *slm*, which means peace and safety. There are many references to peace (*salam*, *silmi*, *sulh*, etc.) in the Quran that

indicate that peace, together with justice (*adl*), is a central message of Islam (Q3:83; 4:58; 5:8; 10:25; 16:90; 41:11; 42:15; 57:25). Based on these verses, peace in Islam is associated with a wide range of values and principles of peace such as *Tawhid* (unity of God), *Fitrah* (original constitution of human beings as good), *Khilafah* (humans as vicegerents of God on earth), *Adl* (justice), *Rahmah* and *Rahim* (compassion and mercy), *Afu* (forgiveness), *Sabr* (patience), and *Hubb* (love) (cf. Kadayifci-Orellana et al. 2013: 8), which urge Muslims to resolve their conflicts peacefully. These values and principles can provide a moral framework, inform attitudes, and guide action towards resolving conflicts. Islamic sources lay down fundamental Islamic ethical principles and moral values to provide guidance and coherence to Muslim conflict resolution practices across cultures and historical periods. Many of these continue to inspire Muslim peacemakers in their efforts to establish a just and sustainable peace.

As Abu-Nimer (2003: 71) states, “Peacebuilding in Islam is based on a framework of deeply embedded religious beliefs regarding individuals’ responsibility for their actions and their active participation in larger social contexts”. The Quran constantly reminds Muslims about the value of justice, which is a divine command, and not an option, therefore it is the responsibility of all Muslims to work towards the establishment of justice, including social and economic justice, for all (Q4:135; 57:25; 5:8; 2:178; 2:30; 16:90). The Quranic notion of justice is universal and valid for all human beings with the universality of justice being clearly expressed in the following Quranic verses: “O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah even as against yourselves, your parents or your kin, and whether it be (against) the rich and poor” (Q4:135) or “To fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just for it is next to Piety” (Q5:8). Therefore, the Qur’an calls Muslims to mobilize and act against injustice, even if a Muslim originates the injustice (Q4:135). The universality of justice for all, not only for Muslims, is critical for the resolution of conflicts and developing peaceful relations.

Because of the critical role religious teachings play in the justification of jihad, PAIMAN has developed a counter-narrative based on Quranic teachings and Islamic values of peace. As Qadeem (2016) states:

In almost all cases the extremists used the text of the Quran to attract youth and communities towards the concept of violent jihad or convince them to act in an extremist fashion. We used the Quranic verses in their appropriate context to help transform the mindset of these mothers.

In their work with mothers PAIMAN found that women had no weapon to fight against violent extremism because they were unaware of the basic interpretation of the Quran (PAIMAN n.d.: 19). In that respect, Qadeem points out that in their work they employ Islamic values and principles, particularly Quranic texts and hadith. To counter violence and to promote a culture of tolerance and peace PAIMAN uses Islamic teachings and texts. For example, Qadeem states (2018: 8):

To counter this extremist strategy, it was crucial to educate women on Islamic teachings and texts that promote tolerance and gender equality and help them in understanding their role in promoting a culture of tolerance and peace and encouraging resilient communities.

So, the PAIMAN community sessions have always been grounded in the interpretation of “Peace” and “Jihad in the light of the Holy Quran” and provided Quranic education by engaging *Aalima* (women religious leaders) because women believed that “once they were well versed about the concepts of peace and jihad they would be in a better position to educate their children to prevent them from being radicalized” (PAIMAN n.d.: 20). In addition to the Quranic verses, the prophet’s life and dealings with non-Muslims based on tolerance and patience were referred to as examples. As a result, women became more aware of Islamic conceptions of peace and jihad and were able to counter narratives that called for violence (PAIMAN n.d.: 20).

CONCLUSION

Islamic tradition is replete with teachings that promote peace, harmony, and co-existence. The Quran and Prophet’s tradition provide Muslims with values, principles, and examples of resolving conflicts and building peace. Responding to extremist violence

in the name of Islam requires developing strategies and counter narratives rooted within this tradition. Many Muslim women, like Qadeem and her organization PAIMAN, work in their communities to resolve conflicts and build peace. As this case study illustrated, Islam as a community informs their identity and gives them credibility and legitimacy to work to counter religiously based violent extremism. Islam as practiced can inspire and empower women to develop approaches to work effectively with mothers to prevent radicalization of their children, address gender-based violence, collaborate with imams and religious schools to develop peace-oriented curricula, promote peace and social cohesion, as well as prevent numerous youth from joining extremist groups. Islam as a set of teachings provided the theological framework of their peace work and narratives countering extremists' understanding of jihad.

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