

**Terrorism, Tribal Identity, and Women in the Merged Districts of Khyber
Pakhtunkhwa: From Militancy to Marginalization and Resistance**

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the interaction of terrorism, tribal identity, and women in Pakistan's merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly FATA) while tracing historical trajectory from militancy to systemic marginalization and resistance. It employs qualitative methods, an analytical approach and historical methodology and argues that post-9/11 militarization and the militant exploitation of Pashtunwali and its structure, transformed traditional governance, displaced millions and institutionalized gendered-based violence. However, Pakistan's counterterrorism policies and systematic securitization have deepened socio-economic exclusion, and reinforced strict segregation system for women. Due to these dual oppressions, women faced rigid patriarchal-militant narratives and interpretation of both customary and Sharia law while resisting their marginalization. Though the 2018 administrative merger of FATA symbolically integrative but failed to address structural inequities, and systematic cycles of violence. The core of tribal communities' resilience and women's mobilizations, this article challenges reductive victimhood frameworks, contribution to the discussion into post-conflict recovery that prioritizes cultural reclamation, gender-responsive policies, and inclusive governance to dismantle the legacies of militarized marginalization.

Keywords: Terrorism, Tribal Identity, Women, Militancy, Marginalization, and Resistance.

INTRODUCTION

The events of 9/11 led to a surge in national and transnational terrorism, and the groups like Al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) used the merged districts as a base for survival and militancy against the US-led War on Terror. They manipulated these fragile regions to spread militant violence and terror, displacing millions as well as destroyed vast infrastructure and institutional structures. Historically, these regions were governed by the British colonial policies and tribal codes, and militant groups have exploited *Pashtunwali* and its traditions to reinforce patriarchal structures and implement a strict interpretation of Islam. While counterterrorism efforts have reshaped governance frameworks, they have also disrupted traditional tribal identities that once promoted social stability and security. Within this upheaval, women have emerged as key agents of resistance, dual systems of oppression i.e. militant rule and tribal patriarchy to reclaim religious, social and political spaces in the Pashtun society.

Long marginalized under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), the merged districts became a sanctuary for transnational militants following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (Fayaz, 2021, pp. 1-6). Exploiting the region's autonomy and tribal identity, the TTP and Haqqani Network imposed parallel governance, dismantling tribal structures such as the institution of *jirgas* and *Maliks* while enforcing draconian restrictions on women's mobility, political participation and education. In such situation, tribal identity was altered to justify violence, as militants co-opted codes like *badal* (revenge) and *melmasitiya* (hospitality) to recruit youth and target state forces and institutions. Hence, this disintegration fractured communities, leaving over three million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a legacy of trauma disproportionately borne by women.

Therefore, during these transformations, a different narrative is emerged and developed. Firstly, the determined imposition of state policies over deeply entrenched tribal identities and systems has marginalized communities, disintegrated traditional laws and practices and disempowered local voices. Secondly, these interferences have generated a new form of resistance, particularly among women, who have experienced both the enduring legacy of extremist ideologies and patriarchal traditions. Alongside

men, women are evolving as agents of change, resisting not only the impact of militancy but also the religious, socio-cultural norms and values that have long restricted their participation in both segregated and non-segregated spaces in Pashtun society. To examine how militancy has encouraged both marginalization and resistance, it highlights pathways for integrating state demands with customary identities and the role of women in resistance, resilience, survival and rebuilding. It outlines how militancy has shaped tribal identity, disintegration, reclamation.

Terrorism: From Militancy to Systemic Marginalization

Terrorism involves the use of aggressive and confrontational methods, including violence and media, by groups or individuals to achieve political, religious, ideological, economic, or social objectives. From the Cold War to a post-9/11, the focal point of transnational militancy draw attention to reciprocal relationship of external intervention and systemic neglect (Javaid, 2016, pp. 140-142; Shaukat, 2021, pp. 92-97). During the Afghan War (1979-1987), Pakistan aligned with U.S. against the Soviet Union, transformed FATA into a means for arming Afghan *Mujahideen*, development a culture of warlordism and militarization (Anwar, 2021, pp. 116123). This epoch embedded a networks of weapon trafficking and insurgent havens along the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border, laying the groundwork for the Taliban's rise i.e. a movement initially perceived as a stabilizer but later changing into a global security threat (Rashid, 2001, pp. 45-67; Shaukat, 2021, pp. 92-97). In the post-9/11, as frontline state, Pakistan's counterterrorism polices and military operations, especially under General Musharraf worsened regional instability: alliances with NATO and bans on militant groups alienated tribal identity, local communities have deepened anti-state hatred (Ahmed & Shad, 2018, pp. 111-114; Musharraf, 2006, p. 201).

In such dynamics, the TTP used its strategy to exploit governance vacuum, tribal grievances and cross-border shelters to embed insurgency and training. However, Pakistan prioritized short-term security over long-term structural reform, prolonging cycles of violence, displacement, women oppression, gender inequality, and political disenfranchisement. Although the 25th constitutional Amendment in 2018 merged FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Muhammad, 2022, pp. 26-28; Mir, 2019, pp. 186-189), it failed to dismantle decades of FCR, leaving the region emblematic of how geo-strategic, geo-political rivalries, alongside militarized policies, transform localized militancy into entrenched systemic marginalization. The merged districts became a focal point of transnational terrorism, following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the region became a shelter for the TTP, Al-Qaeda and other groups (Shoab, 2016, pp. 12-17 & 73; Javaid, 2016, pp. 137-147).

Likewise, by 2007, the TTP, under Baitullah Mehsud, unified 40 militant factions (now has up to 130 groups), organized blatant attacks such as the 2007 siege of Swat Valley and the 2014 Army Public School massacre in Peshawar, which killed 149 children (Hamza, 2017, pp. 105-113; Chughtai, 2013, pp. 18-28). Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act (1997) legally defined terrorism as "coercive violence to instill fear," (National Counter Terrorism Authority, 1997), however, the state's reliance on militarily and intelligence operations such as Operation Zarbe-Azb (2014), prioritized short-term security over systemic reform to counter them. While the operation displaced 3 million people and reduced terror attacks by 52.3% by 2018, it failed to address root causes their ideological appeal (Mir, 2019, pp. 195-196). The evolution of TTP manifests the interchange of local grievances and global jihadist networks. Founded in 2007, the group expanded from 40 to 130 factions by 2023, maintaining ties with Al-Qaeda and ISIS-Khorasan (Fakhr-ul-Islam & Jan: 2022, pp. 1059-1067). Its campaigns targeted state infrastructure i.e. over 400 girls' schools were destroyed by 2009 and enforced a strict interpretation of Sharia law, opposed female education and public mobility. In 2021, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan strengthened the activities and attacks of TTP about 50% by 2023 (Rahman, 2023, pp. 24-29). For instance, in South Waziristan, militants destroyed a girls' school in Karikot village in 2024, emblematic of their sustained war on education. These acts institutionalized gendered violence: female literacy in ex-FATA stood at 7.8%, compared to Pakistan's national average of 49%, while honor killings and forced marriages risen under militant rule (Khan U., 2024; Shinwari, 2024; Afridi M., 2023, p. 36).

In such dynamics, Pakistan's responses further aggravated systemic marginalization. Despite the 2018 merger with KP, 80% of post-conflict funds were allocated to border fencing and military infrastructure, overlooking social services. Literacy rate remained at 22% (compared to KP's 53%), and 85% of women relied on subsistence farming due to a lack of economic alternatives. During 2001-2021, systematic inequalities deepened disparities and injustice, with approximately 60,000 casualties and over 100 billion U.S. dollar in economic losses (Jafar, 2019, pp. 187-191). Though military operations like Zarb-e-Azb were considered tactically functional and successful, they displaced millions into IDP camps in the settled districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where, along with men, both children and women experienced psychological trauma and gender-based violence. Additionally, 68% of displaced children exhibited traumatic disorders, with girls disproportionately affected by disrupted education and early marriages (Javaid, 2016, pp. 137-147).

Similarly, Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, attributed to purely a security lens, highlighted militarization over governance. For example, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), the National Action Plan (NAP) and National Internal Security Policy (NISP reflected a bureaucratic nature in both structure and practice, and remained inadequate and dysfunctional. They lacked levels for deradicalization or local community engagement, enabling groups like ISIS-Khorasan to exploit cultural and institutional gaps. (Nawaz S., 2016, pp. 2-5; NACTA, 2020; Aliya Durrani, 2017, pp. 130-134). The US-Pakistan alliance further complicated local power dynamics, increasing anti-state sentiment, especially as CIA drone strikes killed 2,300 civilians between 2004 and 2018. Since the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the allies like Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), leveraged their ideological alignment with militants to reinforce electoral support, establishing patronage networks (Hamza, 2017, pp. 105-113; Chughtai, 2013, pp. 18-28).

Hence, the legacy of militarization particularly, operation of Zarb-e-Azb dismantled TTP strongholds in the region and about 3,000 security personnel died, and 70% of post-merger reforms remain unimplemented (Fiaz, 2012, pp. 50-53). Numerous schools and clinic are considered ghost facilities, dominating the landscape, with only 12% of maternal healthcare facilities functioning. Besides, civil society organizations (CSOs), though active, face financial difficulties and militant threats (Baloch, 2016, pp. 48-50; Bajauri, 2016, pp. 39-48). For example, the role Khwendo Kor in rebuilding schools and providing legal aid to women is hindered by persistent insecurity (Khwendo Kor, 2022-2023).

To conclude, securitization and militarization have transformed tactical gains into systemic exclusion of tribal identity and Pashtun social order. Systematic violence and terrorist attacks in the merged districts, where the new phase of militant revival and state neglect prolong marginalization, have further exacerbated the situation, particularly since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. On the other hand, Pakistan has also failed to eradicate the root causes of terrorism and done little to strengthen local government, promote tribal participation, ensure socio-economic stability and growth, or amplify women's voices against oppression. Thus, sustainable peace remains difficult to achieve. This necessitates genderresponsive policies, equitable socio-economic development, and inclusive governance to dismantle the structural foundations of terrorism and counter its evolving tactics in the post U.S. withdrawal period.

Tribal Identity: Disintegration, Resistance and Reclamation

Among the Pashtuns, tribal identity holds a profound and multifaceted significance within the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ifejika, 2023, pp. 45-47; Jan, 2015, pp. 15-16). This identity is not a monolithic but is instead constructed from historical, cultural, social, and geographical elements, deeply influencing the Pashtun perceptions, behaviour, and social organization of its members (Shah M. Z., 2017, pp. 72-73; Nawaz, 2009, p. 15). Therefore, understanding tribal identity necessitates an examination of the dynamics of militancy, marginalization, and resistance that have characterized this volatile region for decades (Shah M. Z., 2017, p. 72; Naseer, 2015, p. 129).

At its core, Pashtun tribal identity is strongly anchored in patrilineal descent, a shared language (Pashto), a territorial connection, and adherence to a cultural code known as *Pashtunwali* (Barth, 1981, p. 95). As an unwritten code, *Pashtunwali* serves as the way of life for the Pashtuns. It is considered customary law, and

among its various elements, the most prominent are hospitality, honour, revenge (*badal*), and asylum (*nanawatai*) (Azim, 2022, p. 443; Naseer, 2015, p. 132). All these elements function as powerful socio-cultural regulators and practices, shaping tribal relations and facilitating conflict resolution via traditional institutions such as the *jirga* (Jan, 2015, p. 24; Latif, 2012, pp. 202-203). The sense of belonging to a specific tribe, often further divided into sub-tribes and clans i.e. a primary loyalty that can at times supersede national or even religious affiliations (Nawaz, 2009, pp. 13-14). As Fredrik Barth aptly said that “the Pathans’ self-image as a characteristic and distinctive ethnic unit with unambiguous social and distributional boundaries” based on shared cultural traits (Barth, 1981, p. 95).

In historical parlance, the merged districts have played an important role in resistance and the preservation of tribal identity. The Durand Line of 1893 arbitrarily divided Pashtun tribes between British colonial India and Afghanistan. This demarcation was viewed with

“Great contempt and resentment by Pashtuns” and remain problematic in terms of recognition between Pakistan and Afghanistan to this day (Ifejika, 2023, p. 46). It also strengthened a sense of shared identity, transcending national borders and reinforcing the significance of tribal and ethnic bonds among the Pashtuns. Moreover, the British administration maintained a system of indirect rule via Political Agents and the enforcement of the FCR, which operated against traditional democratic structures and the tribal system. Paradoxically, it was also contributed to the preservation of distinct tribal identities in the face of external encroachment and governance (Afridi, 2016, p. 11). The FCR’s top-down system served British colonial interests but was “not suitable for a modern society” (Nawaz, 2009, p. 8).

In historical discourses, the relationship between *Pashtunwali* and Islam among Pashtun differs in practice (Jan, 2015, p. 15; Azim, 2022, p. 442). Pashtuns are predominantly Muslims; however, the practice of *Pakhtunwali* contrasts with the interpretation of Islam in both convergence and divergence. There are prospective conflicts between customary laws and religious interpretations, particularly in the context of rising religious militancy and its ideologies (Jan, 2015, pp. 19-25). The emergence of the Taliban and their acts of terror challenged traditional tribal leadership and the established interpretations of both *Pashtunwali* and Islam within the region (Naseer, 2015, pp. 133-134).

In the post-9/11 era, the rise of militancy and extremism transformed tribal identity and its structure in the merged districts (Shah M. Z., 2017, p. 72). Various militant activities occurred in the region, turning it into a safe haven for militants and a focal point for state securitization (Khan M. A., 2015, pp. 15-26). During this period, tribal structures and values were exploited, particularly the principles of asylum (*nanawatai*) granted to those perceived to be fighting against external forces. However, the brutal tactics of militants also created fissures within tribal societies, challenging traditional authority and leading to internal conflicts and forceful displacement (Naseer, 2015, p. 133; Nawaz, 2009, pp. 13-14). In such a situation, the “warrior and militant,” narrative of the Pashtun, often constructed during periods of conflict, has had lasting impacts on the perception of tribal identity (Naseer, 2015, pp. 129-130).

Therefore, traditional tribal structures and institutions such as the system of *maliks* have historically played a crucial role in conflict resolution, governance and the maintenance of order these regions (Azim, 2022, pp. 442-443; Ahmed A. S., 1980, pp. 417-418). However, these systems were undermined by both internal power struggles among the Pashtuns and the imposition of external institutional, administrative and judicial systems by the state of Pakistan. Though the FCR was removed, the authority and effectiveness of traditional tribal councils have not stabilized the region, nor have they eradicated terrorism and its roots (Ahmed A. S., 1980, pp. 417-418; Afridi, 2016, p. 11). The socio-economic marginalization of the region has further complicated matters, with insurgents sometimes exploiting the deprivations of the common people and promoting their own agendas (Ifejika, 2023, pp. 42-43).

In this context, to mobilize Pashtun tribal identity, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) represents a significant form of resistance against terrorism and military operations in Pashtun areas. Established in 2018, but with origins traceable to 2014, the movement draws upon the cultural code of *Pashtunwali*, particularly the concepts of honour (*nang* and *ghairat*), to critique both the violence of militant groups and the perceived excesses of state military actions. It “commitment to non-violence to liberate oppressed

Pashtuns in Pakistan.” (Dawar, 2024, p. 10) Being an indigenous peace and civil rights movement involving both men and women, it has played a key role in resistance and the preservation of Pashtun identity, reinforcing the importance of peace for the tribal Pashtuns (Yousaf, 2019; Ramachandran, 2018, pp. 1-11). However, the PTM faces challenges from both the state and Pashtuns while simultaneously engaging with the state to demand their rights and security, particularly in regions where traditional tribal structures have been significantly weakened by prolonged conflict and terrorism.

In short, terrorism has influenced tribal structures, as well as their reclamation and resistance in the contemporary context of the merged districts. Tribal identity continues to evolve under the pressures of integration into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ongoing security concerns, and socio-economic development initiatives. Various reforms agenda have been introduced to bring the region into the mainstream of Pakistan’s socio-economic and political development, offering citizens basic civil rights (Ifejika, 2023, pp. 57-59). However, these reforms have failed and contain flaws in implementation, which have had a significant impact on deeply entrenched tribal identities and structures, making them complex and contested (Zaman, 2016, pp. 56-57). The relationships between traditional tribal affiliations, emerging forms of political participation, and the overarching national identity of Pakistan will continue to shape the future trajectory of tribal identity in this strategically significant region (Azim, 2022, p. 442).

Women in Resistance: Resilience, Survival, and Post-Conflict Rebuilding Pashtun women’s experience with terrorism is vast and has had a significant impact on their survival and identity. As agents of change and voices of resistance, they have been suppressed by extremist ideologies, state-centred polices, and Pashtun patriarchal norms and values. The issue of women’s agency in the merged districts is multifaceted, shaped by the region’s history of militancy, prevailing tribal identities, and experiences of marginalization (Mansab, 2024, pp. 1-2; Ifejika, 2023, pp. 42-43). The journey of women in this region, where the rise of violent extremism significantly curtailed their rights and autonomy, is marked by societal constraints rooted in Pashtun traditions, yet it has also spurred instances of resilience, resistance, and the struggle for survival (Khan N. A., 2012, p. 1). Thus, to analyze women’s resistance, it is important to contextualize both the internal and external forces that have shaped their lives and their capacity to make independent decisions, particularly in the context of terrorism. Their experiences with war and peace, persistent patriarchal structures and their roles as both active and passive victims highlights their efforts to survive, their marginalization, and their resistance against constraints imposed by terrorism, tribal customs, and at times, state interventions. This analysis helps to examines severely limited spaces available to them, narratives of victimhood and the resilience and determination of women in a complex and volatile environment.

Militancy in the merged districts had a significant impact on Pashtun women and their social mobility, as well as their basic rights of education, healthcare, and political participation and representations in both public and private life (Naseer, 2015, p. 129; Baloch, 2016, pp. 3839). The extremist ideologies of militant groups, along with their strict interpretations of religious and social norms, led to the enforcement of restrictive practices, such as limitations on women freedom of movement, banning girls’ schools, and the targeting of women perceived to be defying these edicts (Naqvi, 2012, pp. 22-23). As Noreen Naseer notes, in the “global terrorism discourses the Pashtun tribal areas of northwest of Pakistan straddling the Afghanistan border are projected as the “natural” epicenter of militancy and extremism” (Naseer, 2015, p. 129). Such fear and violence became the issue of survival, which not only restricted the space for women’s solidarity and agency, but also made them vulnerable to the dictates of extremist ideologies of militant groups and Pakistan military operations (Baloch, 2016, pp. 37-38). The problem within counter-terrorism polices is that they are security-centric rather than the addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women, further marginalizing them within the conflict and securitization.

Similarly, both terrorism and patriarchy reinforced a terrible web of constraints that significantly shapes and re-shaped Pashtun women’s oppression and voicelessness. The rise of militant groups and their rigid interpretations of religious doctrine further strengthen traditional norms and values, leading to severe restrictions on women’s mobility, empowerment, representations (Mansab, 2024, p. 1; Naseer, 2015, pp. 129-132). As Maria Mansab argues that “the increasing infringement of women’s rights in the tribal belt

has allowed terrorists to exploit the deep-seated hostility, thereby becoming a significant threat to the regional government's authority" (Mansab, 2024, p. 1). Such violently enforced restrictions curtailed women's ability to make independent decisions and act freely in well-established patriarchal nature of Pashtun society. This system, embodied in the code of Pashtunwali, has historically limited women's roles primarily to the private sphere (Noor Sanauddin, 2015, pp. 145-146; Azim, 2021, pp. 9697). The Pashto proverb, "Khazaya da kor da, ya da gor da", meaning "a woman's place is either a home or a grave", is an obvious example of the limited space available for women's involvement in the public domain (Noor Sanauddin, 2015, p. 146). The confluence of these forces – the violent dictates of militants and the restrictive norms of patriarchy marginalized a strong bond of sisterhood as an agency to oppose these dynamics. Paradoxically, this sisterhood becomes a crucial tool for survival and subtle resistance.

Besides, tribal identity within the structure of *Pashtunwali*, which developed historically, has determined specific gender roles and responsibility, thereby limiting women's agency in the region. *Pashtunwali* and its patriarchal norms not only subordinate women but also confine them to segregation (Jan, 2015, pp. 15-16; Naseer, 2015, p. 130). As aptly said by Noor Sanauddin et al., that the "patriarchal Pashtun society and culture present numerous hurdles in the way of women to actively participate in the peacebuilding process and that their role in peacebuilding efforts is not recognized and appreciated" (Noor Sanauddin, 2015, p. 141). This traditional framework, while not monolithic and subject to regional variations and changes over time (Nawaz, 2009, pp. 13-14), has always been interconnected with and influenced by the rise of militancy. Such an amalgamation has created a context where women's agency is significantly constrained by both violent actors and prevailing cultural norms (Khan N. A., 2012, pp. 1-2).

In Pakistan, the historical socio-economic and political marginalization of the merged districts has also created the issue of survival for Pashtun women (Ifejika, 2023, p. 43; Latif, 2012, p. 202). The colonial law under the FCR and Pakistan's continuation of the same administrative system contributed to a lack of good governance and institutional development, political representation and access to justice. Women in such complex dynamics are disproportionately affecting women in their freedom, voice and recourse within both traditional tribal structures and the formal legal system (Naseer, 2015, p. 130; Ullah, 2015, pp. 1-17). As Solomon I. Ifejika argues, the "major factor underlying the prevailing militancy in FATA is the deep-seated political and socio-economic marginalization of the region" (Ifejika, 2023, p. 43). This marginalization was also witnessed in all development projects within the reform agendas of the merged districts, clearly demonstrated by the limited investment in women's empowerment, socio-economic development, education, and healthcare. This, in turn, restricted their ability to become independent in decision-making process in peacebuilding, and exercise greater control over their lives and resistance (Khan N. A., 2012, pp. 1-2).

Nonetheless, Pashtun women in the merged districts have established resilience, agency, and resistance in diverse forms. This has manifested within the constrained segregated spaces available to them (Mansab, 2024, pp. 1-2; Noor Sanauddin, 2015, p. 141). Though patriarchy and socio-religious ideologies have not led large-scale movements or public activism, they have encouraged women's engagement in informal educations and small-scale domestics business (Khan N. A., 2012, p. 1). For instance, the displacement caused by militancy and counter-terrorism policies, while traumatic, also inadvertently created spaces where women engaged with NGOs and other aid organizations, ahead display to subjective experiences and alternative perspectives, thereby increasing their awareness of their rights and capabilities (Khan M. A., 2015, pp. 15-18). As Mariam A. Khan highlights, in the war women displaced raised concerns about the need for "better facilities and services in camps/off-camp areas, skills training and education for women/girls and sources of income for male family members" (Khan M. A., 2015, p. 34). They expressed their demands in a challenging environment, demonstrating a degree of agency and a strong desire for improved conditions and survival.

Throughout terrorism, and forced migration, Pashtun women have demonstrated remarkable agency in ensuring their survival and that of their families, notwithstanding, a huge burden placed upon women. Traditionally, within the home, they serve as heads of households, their lived experiences signifying their

efforts to provide for their families in displacement camps and unfamiliar environments (Naseer, 2015, pp. 135-136; Khan M. A., 2015, pp. 7-11). They have also built network of support to access essential resources, despite the trauma and insecurity of displacement. Their consistent demands for skill training, better facilities, and income-generating opportunities in restrictive IDPs camps (Khan M. A., 2015, p. 34), reflect a practical assertion of their needs and a desire for a better future. This survival agency represents a form of subversion, challenging imposed restrictions in their daily lives to maintain a degree of autonomy and protect their families at time of conflict. However, unlike the female *jirga* in Swat, grassroots activism did not emerge in merged districts to address women's issues highlighting the persistence of traditional male-dominated structures (Azim,

2018). For instance, the assassination of Farida Afridi, a woman working on women's issues in Khyber Agency (Naseer, 2015, p. 136), underlines the risk faced by women activists. Despite such challenges, women continue to find ways to organized and voice their concerns.

On the other hand, the lack of agency and activism among Pashtun women also reflects their historically limited participation in governance and economic empowerment, primarily due to gender discrimination. They also faced the gender disparity, religious connotations, and structural barriers in formal politics lead to in low representation in directly elected parliamentary seats in Pakistan (Azim, 2021, pp. 94-95). In 2018 general elections, in FATA, male voter turnout was 40.03% whereas female voter turnout was only 23.8%, with some tribal areas reporting less than 10% female participation in electoral politics (Afridi M., 2023, p. 938). However, despite these limitations, women who engage in political activities provide to greater representation (Khan N. A., 2012, pp. 20-21), and seek to influence decision-making processes. Similarly, their participation in economic activities, often limited to their homes due to social norms i.e. security concerns (Naseer, 2015, pp. 135-137; Khan M. A., 2015, pp. 3841), enables them to support their families and gain a degree of financial autonomy. In rehabilitation strategies, the recognition of women's traditional skills, such as like tailoring and midwifery (Khan M. A., 2015, p. 40) highlights the potential for greater economic empowerment within the existing social framework.

Moreover, there is also ample opportunities for the involvement of women in peacebuilding process, enhancing their agency and contributing to the long-term stability of the whole region. Importantly, their subjective experience in the terrorism, as well as their unique perspectives on conflict, victimization, provide primary evidence and lived experiences that are essential for reconciliation and reconstruction processes. Integrate women standpoints and improving the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives is important for ensuring their meaningful participation and addressing the root causes of their marginalization. Their exclusion of women from peace negotiation not only marginalizes their voices but also risks undermining the inclusivity and effectiveness of peace initiatives, thereby hindering their agency in the long term. (Mansab, 2024, pp. 1-2; Noor Sanauddin, 2015, pp. 141-149). In postconflict peace, organizing gender-responsive approaches in both policy and implementation is also important. These needs challenging patriarchal norms that exclude women from decisionmaking and creating safe spaces for their voices to be heard, and safeguard their meaningful involvement in peacebuilding and tackling the root causes of their marginalization (Mansab, 2024, p. 1).

The post-merger FATA also provides a new form of resilience and resistance. Both formal legal and administrative structures offer women with greater access to justice, political participation and representation, and social services. However, implementation of these reforms, along with the discriminatory practices, resistance from traditional power structures, and the constant influence conservative elements, could hinder progress towards full participation in the newly administrative and political landscape of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Zaman, 2016, pp. 56-57).

From the above discussion, it is evident that Pashtun women in merged districts still faced a key challenge. Firstly, systematic structural violence in terms of discriminatory laws, restriction on female education and issue of basic health services, and economic inequality, creates systemic hurdles to their empowerment (Azim, 2021, p. 94 & 110). Secondly, cultural resistance and patriarchal systems, deeply entrenched in *Pashtunwali* and extremist and conservative religious interpretations, restrict women's autonomy and

public participation (Noor Sanauddin, 2015, p. 146). Thirdly, military interventions further restrict women's mobility and access to resources if gender considerations are not adequately integrated into their design and implementation (Mansab, 2024, pp. 1-2). The relationship of the state and the Taliban's influence, as well as traditional customs forms a challenging landscape for women to practice their activism and rights. Fourthly, restrictions on women's rights and mobility, rooted in patriarchal interpretations of honour and reinforced during periods of militant control, limit women's access to education, employment, healthcare, and participation in public life (Noor Sanauddin, 2015, pp. 146-149; Khan M. A., 2015, p. 39). The issue of purdah is often interpreted as a constraint on women's movement and interaction in the public sphere (Azim, 2018, pp. 43-47).

CONCLUSION

Terrorism, tribal identity, and women's agency in the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa discloses a complex reality of marginalization and resilience and resistance. Militancy has reinforced rigid patriarchal structures, enforced gender segregations, and women identity, expression and sexual orientation. Between 2001-2021, as well as the post-U.S. withdrawal period, securitization and militarization have driven a new phase of militant revival, the transforming tribal identity and intensifying systematic violence and terrorist attacks in the merged districts, where and state neglect prolong marginalization. Pakistan failed to eradicate the root causes of terrorism or to strengthen local government, tribal participation and collective security.

Extremist and militant exploited the codes of *Pashtunwali*, while U.S.-backed counterterrorism campaigns dismantled tribal identity. Their actions undermine collective security traditional governance, displacing communities and entrenching systemic inequalities. The TTP not only killed tribal elders but also exploited the institution of *jirga* which was manipulated both by the state authorities and Taliban through this period. There a paradox: militarized policies, decades of militancy, and military operations have been met with tribal resilience. Pakistan needs to involve Pashtuns in the decision-making process while opposing and negotiating with the Taliban. Without this, the state will fail to address terrorism, as the new wave of terror attacks further destabilize the entire region.

In such complex dynamics, women face both the extremist ideologies; enforced through a strict interpretation of *sharia* law; and oppressive customs, including the patriarchy of *Pashtunwali*. Female financial dependency, systematic structural violence in form of discriminatory laws, patriarchy and misogyny, structurally repressive norms of conduct, high gender disparity, poverty, and the lack of implementation of pro-women laws all influence women in resistance, as well as their role in conflict and peace.

Thus, sustainable peace demands addressing the structural roots of marginalization through equitable development, deradicalization and the inclusion of women in policy frameworks. The future of the merged districts hinges not solely on securitization but on resilience of; transforming from the shadows of militancy to the forefront of reclamation. The article concludes that a gender-sensitive approach to governance, combined with targeted socio-economic interventions, is essential for real progress. Comprehensive reforms must address the legacy of militancy and the structural constraints imposed by tribal dynamics to create a more inclusive and sustainable future in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

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