

## **Role of Women in Countering Extremism – Pakistan’s Case**

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### **Abstract**

This study is an analytical account of the critical and complex role of women against the malaise of violent extremism in Pakistan. In this vein, ‘grounded approach’ as a theoretical prism is proposed for an inclusive countering violent extremism (CVE) policy. This lens of enquiry assesses women drive as agents of peace in the highly conflictual domain of violent extremism. Highlighting the dynamic role of women in national security, counter-terrorism, and community resilience, this framework explores how Pakistan’s National Action Plan (NAP 2014) integrates WPS, the strategic input women make, and the impediments they face. Similarly, Pakistan’s country-level policy frameworks on countering violent extremism and counter-terrorism: National Internal Security Policy 2014 and 2018 (NISP), and National Counter Extremism Policy Guidelines (Jan 2018) issued by National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) include guidelines for government agencies to develop community and youth engagement strategies to counter violent extremism (CVE). This study underscores the need for an indigenous and inclusive national CVE initiative registering women role in the decision-making domain. The research highlights women as an equal partner for the peace, development, security and stability. Women led community driven CVE measures are essential components for nurturing peace and social cohesion across the board.

**Key Words:** Women, Peace, Extremism, Pakistan, Grounded Approach.

### **1. Introduction**

Women’s participation in peacebuilding, de-radicalization and reconstruction of a conflict prone zone is a much-inspired notion stipulated in the WPS framework (Oct 2000) globally adopted with UNSCR 1325 (United Nations, 2024). In 2015, two important resolutions - Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security and Resolution 2242 on Women, Peace and Security – emphasized the need to address the factors and conditions pushing youth and women towards violent extremism (lack of social inclusion, marginalization, political alienation, etc.), especially by enhancing youth and women’s empowerment. In this vein, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2015 called upon UN member states to substantially involve young people and women in strategies aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism (PVE).

In this regard, women apart from passive victims or supporters of violent extremist groups, can also (and do) play a role as active preventers.

Parallel to this, United Nations adopted SDG Goals Number-16 recognizes the vital roles of women in both countering violent ideologies and working as peacebuilders, which was reflected in Security Council Resolution 2242 in 2015 following the high-level review of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which was adopted in 2000.

- Potential linkage between the SDGs and CVE objectives has been welcomed by many governments and practitioners as complementary approaches that seek to deny extremist groups the oxygen they need by addressing many of the grievances on which they prey. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly Goal 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels".
- This has direct bearing for promoting an integrated society thus minimizing the threat of Violent extremism and terrorism on long-term basis.

In Pakistan case, women's contribution towards countering and preventing violent extremism (CVE and PVE) is seen through two contesting narratives. First one situates them as 'Mothers' that are well placed to identify early warning signs of (violent) radicalization of their Keith and kin. In this capacity women impart the values of peace and tolerance within the family circles as preventers of violent extremism and radicalization. The second stream argues that, perceiving women's role in countering violent extremism within private sphere (as mothers, wives and sisters), carries a risk of underestimating women's capability to prevent and counter violent extremism far beyond their family roles. Thus, the role of women should also be registered vis-à-vis the need to address female radicalization. (Chowdhury Fink et al., 2016). One can deduct and relate these two perspectives to the Pakistan's women role acting as individually and collectively - engaged in the CVE and PVE efforts in the diverse roles: as actors of security enforcement agencies (e.g., police officers collaborating with local communities), as teachers, as policy shapers, as community members and as female preachers, to mention only a few examples.

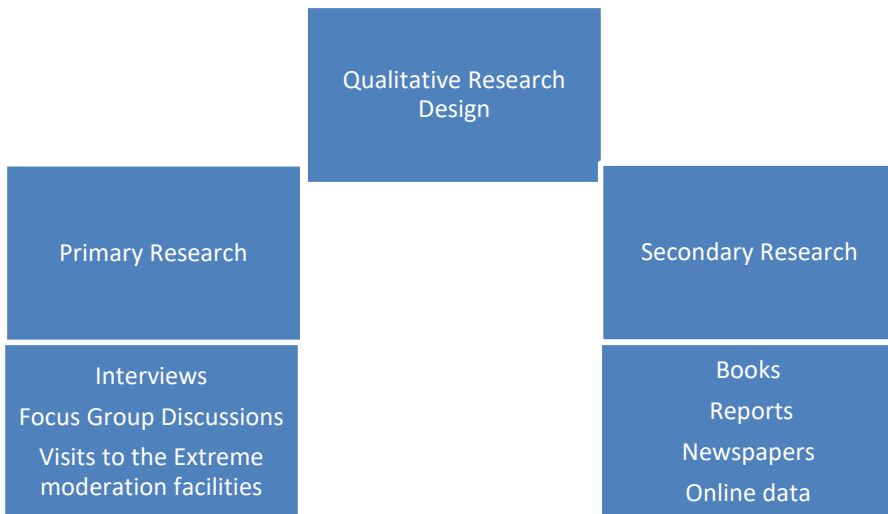
## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically, a 'Grounded Framework' is proposed to underscore the critical role of the female agency versus the menace of violent extremism in the country. That is, women's effectiveness as an equal partner for development and peace building requires a holistic approach and should be conceived as a long-term project. There is no quick fix available, and an informed understanding of the contextual parameters is critically needed. An enhanced women's representation in leadership and policymaking positions can pave the way for development-based solutions and the region's peacefulness. This lens of analysis aims to assess the role of women's empowerment and solve the gender gap in the violent extremism stricken sanctuaries of Pakistan. The research highlights that women agency, peaceful co-existence, proactive Eco chamber are complementary factors and cannot be achieved in isolation.

To understand impact of terrorism and extremism upon women, the study notes that to undo violence, terrorism and radicalization in any society or state (here, Pakistan) drivers of the such occurrence must be registered. That is, marginalization or discrimination (real or perceived), unfulfilled expectations (poverty, lack of opportunities) or inequality (especially aligned with ethnic or religious divisions) are baseline denominators of violent radicalization and terrorism across the board. And holistic framework to synergize CT (Counterterrorism) and CVE (Counter Violent Extremism) with the ground realities – national, regional and global level – remains a work in progress.

The research model operationalized in this study urges empowering women facing structural gender inequality the by exploring indigenous conflict resolution and social cohesion practices that can serve as tools of sustainable development and peace. Strategies implemented by forums/organizations working on indigenous women empowerment models, like PAIMAN, AURAT FOUNDATION, PEADS, are testimonials to be considered in the Pakistan’s context. The goalpost of female-led CVE initiatives is, broad-based conception of Peace anchored in the realization of societal social-economic-legal justice along with the absence of violent extremism, polarization and hostilities. This research registers, Pakistani women play an indispensable role both the family and community level, critical for the ‘State – Society’ partnership to curtail violent extremism trend in the country. Women’s participation in peacebuilding, deradicalization and reconstruction of a conflict prone zone is a much inspired notion according to The WPS framework (Oct 2000) which was globally adopted with UNSCR 1325 (United Nations, 2024). Hence, it necessitates women’s presence in Pakistan’s security apparatus as well. Academic discernments from gender peacebuilding and feminist security studies underscore women’s empowerment in CVE policy making, and community resilience-building of a critical value. The following table explains the Research methodology for the present research study:

**Figure 1: Research Methodological Framework**



Through the qualitative research lens, central query of this study – how women’s empowered role against the violent radicalization can divisively nurture sustainable peace and stability in Pakistan. The research utilizing primary and secondly methods notes, role of women to counter extremism is underestimated and exhibits resilience to craft sustainable peace.

### **3. Women as Architects of Sustainable Peace in Pakistan**

The WPS global framework is based on four pillars: Prevention, participation, protection and relief, and recovery. In Pakistan, women are progressively involved in countering violent extremism (CVE) through community engagement and deradicalization initiatives (GIWPS, 2024). However, full realization of WPS framework in the case of Pakistan calls for uncapping the real potential of the women populace as proactive partner. There is an understanding amongst the relevant strategic stakeholders that women comprise half of the country’s population are not to be situated as mere spectators, silent sufferers but are major stakeholder in the national security domain. (interview, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2024). Including women in the decision-making specifically related to the CVE domain requires an ‘inclusive and multi-layered security’ outlook encompassing their long-due role in the intelligence-based operations, conflict resolution dialogues and deradicalization programs. It is noted that ‘grounded theoretical prism unfolded qualitatively’ provides unique insights often missing in the traditional security approaches outlying women role in the national security policy (S Fayyaz, 2023).

Despite socio-political-legal constraints, Pakistani women serve as police officers, paramedics, and leaders in grassroots organizations, contributing meaningfully to peace and security efforts. Pakistan’s National Action Plan (NAP) has theoretically aligned with WPS principles but lacks full implementation. Police and Paramedics have taken visible roles in crisis response, yet structural challenges limit women’s roles in policy-making and combat roles. For example, women contribute significantly to intelligence in local at negotiating tables where security policies are shaped (UNWomen, 2024). Likewise, Pakistan had a significant number of female paramedics who operated in places where male paramedic access was not allowed because of strict cultural norms, especially during natural disasters. Pakistan’s principal emergency medical response system Edhi Foundation has more than 30% women employees. Their sense of empathy and compassion contribute to effective paramedic services (Pakistan Islamic Medical Association, 2024). Women presence in Police force supports the female victims to be more willing to report crimes and attempt for attain justice. According to 2023 report on the State of Policing in Pakistan, there’s less than 2% of women representation in Pakistan’s Police force but recently there has been a surge in recruitment of females by 15% in specialized departments which (Accountability Lab Pakistan, 2024).

#### **3.1. Women role in the Counter-Terrorism Intelligence and Civilian Engagement - Pakistan**

Operational Efficiency and Surveillance Report of 2023 by PSCA, women have positively contributed by playing a critical part in detection and response of threats by monitoring, analyzing and integrating data (Punjab Safe Cities Authority, 2024). Counter terrorism department of Pakistan is looking forward to increase more than

10% employees in the next five years. Including more women in CT Intelligence could help address the security gaps that were earlier or can be exploited in future because of gender biases. According to 2023 annual report by CTD, more than 500 suspects were profiled on the basis of analysis made by female officers which has helped in successful anti-terror operations in critical regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan (Farhan Zahid, 2024).

### **3.2. Women's Role in CVE, Narrative-Building, and De-Radicalization**

Women in Pakistan continues to stand tall against the very complex and ever-mutating form of extremism to be confronted on day-to-day basis. Introspectively, often sidelined narration of the female victimisation in the name of Islam by the TTP (Tehreek-i-Taliban) an outlawed violent non-state actor is full of coercion and disgrace. The physiological scars, physical dislocation, educational embargo on the girls continue to haunt them (off-record interviews, 2023 and 2023). Former FATA areas became radicalized as Al-Qaeda, and subsequently the TTP, established a foothold there. TTP's influence came through coercive tactics in the name of the 'Islamic system' employing religious propaganda and violence plus eliminating tribal elders who questioned them. They destroyed educational institutions particularly GIRLS and barred NGOs for the female vocational trainings further sliding and isolating FATA's citizens from the rest of the country. The governance system and structures of that times became almost non-existent. Malala Yousafzai – Nobel Award holder is testament of being victimized by a target shooting in Swat – Pakistan, in 2012. It's a telling account of how female agency are quite often repressed in the name of religion, cultural and social norms reflection by the violence prone extremist outfits The regressive attitude of TTP towards Western-style education for girls continues to date. In December 2023, unidentified torched a government-run girls' higher secondary school, inscribed a note on the school gate, warning against reopening the educational institute in Bannu, a district bordering the volatile North Waziristan tribal region. Incidents like these, have raised concerns about the safe mobility of females to seek education and otherwise (Focus Group Discussion, Jan 2024).

Despite extremist's 'repressive tactics' women of the area have come out more 'Resilient' and have developed 'ways to secure education', etc. One of the women in conversation with the author said, "the entire face of our society became a victim of the circumstances of not our making and everything was drastically affected" (Interview, 2024). In such an indigenized tense context, Pakistani female peace icons and initiatives have germinated from a club of few like-minded individuals to very vibrant civil society organizations engaged in advocacy, counter-messaging, mentoring, researching, education, training – all directed against violence, hate-speech, religious discrimination and marginalization (Steven R Corman, 2011). There exist collaborative and competitive interaction patterns between the state and female- led counter-extremism networks from time to time. Apart from certain differences on devising gender balanced CVE strategy, 'unity in diversity' is a pronounced goalpost that serves as a common ground reference extremism.

In 2022, National Security Policy (NSP) was officially launched stressing, "Geo-economics and Geo-Strategic" as cardinal goalposts of Pakistan's security outlook. Role of women cut across all the major strands of the NSP (Shabana Fayyaz, 2023).

This signifies that mainstreaming women role as the partners in CVE policy is well perceived. However, this is not realized to the maximum level and remains a work in progress.

**Figure – 3:** *National Security Policy (NSP – 2022)*



#### 4. Case studies of Women as Agents of Peaceful Change in Pakistan

- 4.1. ***SHE—The Peace Builder*** is a flagship national project of the Aurat Foundation, also known as “Khuwateen Muamaar-e-Aman” in 2021 (Search for Common Ground, 2022 & Aurat Foundation, 2021) This project envisioned strengthening the capacity of 75 women peace architects (WPAs) to pursue peacebuilding pathway and engage in the conflict resolution processes. This has successfully imparted vital training skills and understanding, enabling them to be a team member in the government and civil society sphere.
- 4.2. ***“Khwendō Jirga” (Sisters’ Council)-*** “Jirga” traditional Pashtun culture conflict resolution mechanism composed of men was reframed as first-ever women’s “Jirga” in SWAT in 2013. This remains a very bold female initiative that aims to educate women of their fundamental rights and be engaged in countering extremism on the long-term basis (Paradigm Shift, 2024).
- 4.3. **PAIMAN Alumni Trust** – more than two decades old female-led organization consistently work for the prevention and combatting of violent extremism in Pakistan. Multipronged strategies are employed: training of women and youth as ‘Peace Captains’ well-versed in the indigenous modes of reclaiming the radicalized elements in conflict-prone areas of KP. Building peace bridges of

women at the national, regional and international level under the UNSCR 1325 framework. Training ‘Mothers for Change’ in the peaceful means to de-radicalize members of the family and community – remains PAIMAN successful campaign to date. Similarly, youth ‘Tolanas’ – groups committed to make chain of peace lobbies led by ‘Peace Captains’ is also one of the most grounded model of narrative building, de-radicalization and counter-extremism engineered by women (PAIMAN Trust, 2024).

**4.4. Peace Education and Development Foundation (PEAD)** – an educative campaign spearheaded by the women since 2002 focuses on proactive counter extremism and peace building in the northern province (KPK) in the country. Dialogue and promotion of non-violent culture based on good governance, religious harmony is being instilled through the community focus projects on the regular basis. PEAD has also forged with international peace networks collaborate for peace education specifically focusing on women as ‘change makers’ for the lasting peace in Pakistan.

The following table tabulates other prominent Female peacebuilding organizations for preventing Extremism of all kinds and forms.

Female led Initiatives	Goals
<b>Aurat Foundation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded by Nigar Ahmed and Shehla Zia</li> <li>• A women-led organization that advocates for gender equality and empowerment, with a strong focus on minority and marginalized women's rights</li> </ul>
<b>Women's Action Forum (WAF)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple prominent female activists including Hina Jilani, Asma Jahangir (co-founder, deceased)</li> <li>• Though not exclusively for minority rights, WAF addresses violence against women, including those from minority communities, and works to build peace and social justice</li> </ul>
<b>Kashaf Foundation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Leader:</b> Roshaneh Zafar</li> <li>• A microfinance institution led by women, providing financial independence to women from marginalized communities, including religious minorities</li> </ul>

**Source:** *Author's illustration.*

**4.5. UN Women and CVE in Pakistan:** Engaging Vulnerable Women and Youth to Build Social Cohesion; Strengthening Local Women Groups and CSOs; Gender-Sensitive Peacekeeping: UN Women engages with Centre for International Peace and Stability (CIPS) to promote women’s leadership and effective role as peacekeepers; Expanding Support to Regional Peace Initiatives; Strengthening women's leadership in disaster management and responses. (UN Women, 2024).

#### **4.6. Women as ‘Influencers’ through Social Media for CVE - Pakistan’s Case**

Prominent social media influencers and digital right women activists like Nighat Dad, Kanwal Cheema, Muniba Mazari and numerous other female celebrities in Pakistan have successfully engaged considerable followers and spread awareness regarding Digital media rights and countering cyber harassment. According to an estimate the DRF’s helpline received more than 4,000 calls in 2023 alone. The foundation has empowered hundreds of women by providing them appropriate education on safety and security in the digital arena, rebutting and reframing the narratives (Cyber Harassment Helpline Report ,2023).

#### **5. Challenges in the Effective Use of Women’s Roles in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Counter-Terrorism (CT)**

Pakistani women face cultural, social, institutional backlog despite their growing recognition in the counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism roles. These challenges are deeply embedded in the country’s social fabric and institutional structures, requiring targeted interventions that promote inclusivity and gender equality (Sarah and Shabana, 2012).

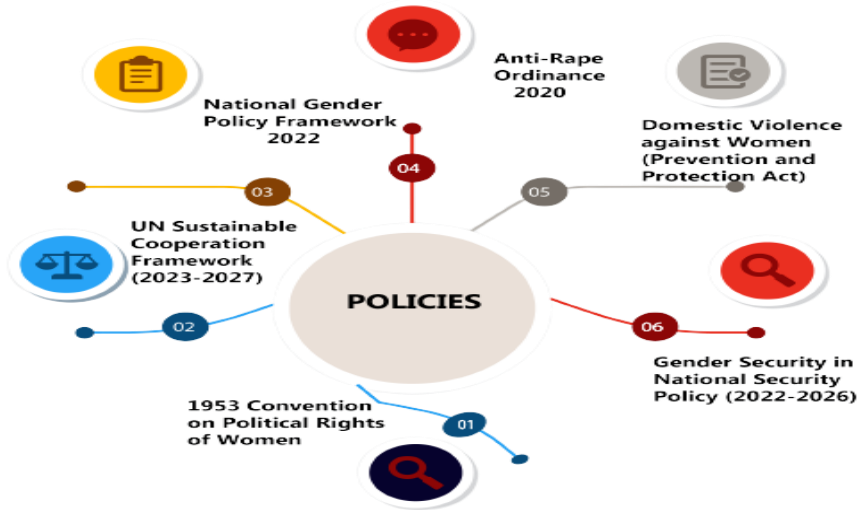
The patriarchal power structure and deep seated social and cultural barrier along with outdated gender insensitive systems have always burdened the status of women participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan as well in South Punjab. Reportedly, women are marginalized and disfavored in critical missions because their competency is questioned on the basis of gender. Hence, women in these regions apprehend societal exclusion in case they join security forces. Women have been generally harassed and threatened which has dispirited their active involvement in counter terrorism efforts (Qadeem, 2019).

Pakistan has a ‘heavily-masculinized’ perception of counterterrorism (Interview, 2024). According to a study by BMC Women’s health, the Pakistani women are at loss because their rights are neglected both at inside home and outside in the workplace. Inclusion of gender perspective in security sector domain is well articulated at the government level. The Government of Pakistan identified “gender security” as an essential principle in its first National Security Policy:

“Ensuring integration of gender equity into national security narratives through full and meaningful participation of women in decision-making, law enforcement, justice sector, and peacekeeping.” (NSD, 2022).



**Figure 2: Snapshot of Gender Legal and Policy Measures in Pakistan (Author's Illustration)**



However, there remains a gap between the perception and practice regarding the effective role of women in the countering extremism sphere. It's a documented fact, limited opportunities for women to advance their careers in security institutions exists. Sitting on the table but not contributing toward the crafting of the gender sensitive CVE approaches remains a long-term goal.

The present research exploration enlists the following inferences that aims to highlight the critical role of the Pakistani women against the scourge of violent extremism:

- Firstly, a grounded WPS framework well versed with the Pakistan's gender aspirations needs to be envisioned and pursued to implement the major thrust of the international WPS resolutions. An understanding of an indigenous challenges and strengths embedded in the complex mosaic of diverse cultural & social norms, religious undertakings, economic disparities, and gaps in policy implementation – needs to be registered.
- Next, a critical necessity exists to endow women training in intelligence, monitoring, negotiation, crisis management and counter terrorism fields. Subsequently, NACTA must maximize women's comprehensive involvement in revising national security policies for gender sensitive perspective.
- Equally significant will be to promote media advocacy by exemplifying female influencers who were involved in the security policy making process. Positive and productive portrayal of 'Women as Peacemakers and Peace Negotiators' instead of stereotype mostly in domestic family scenario. At times, women experience low esteem and are social stigmatized (Zeiger, et.al 2019).
- In addition to this, it is necessary to have comprehensive laws to safeguards women's standing in Pakistan for them to actively participate in national security discourse (Rahim, 2024). Sustained efforts, legislative reforms, awareness

campaigns, and community engagement are necessary to make progress towards a society where gender equality is a fundamental right for all – key to giving women justified role in the nation’s countering extremism and social cohesion landscape.

- It is crucial to empower women in peace and conflict zones to cultivate a safe security environment. Consultation with the indigenous women peace groups in the given context needs to be encouraged. Plus, female representation in the “Jirga System” in dialogue and truce from where women has been excluded - to be stressed by the state functionaries. This relates to the border and tribal areas of the country that has seen maximum terrorist attacks with negative impact on women.
- Pakistan should aim for a participatory CVE policy crafting a larger role of women in the policymaking and implementation process. Gender equality is key to sustainable development and is universally accepted as a critical factor in fostering peace, prosperity and justice across the board. Women being fifty percent of the country’s population are reservoir of emotional intelligence, negotiation, mediation, and empathy to identify and deescalate the conflict and sustain peace in the country. Thus, institutionalizing a gendered balanced CVE policy needs to be a strategic objective of Pakistan’s security policy in the medium-to-long-term. Ultimately, Gender role in the countering extremism must be situated as a sustainable Teamwork.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research study following a ‘grounded analysis’ registered the challenges, vulnerabilities, gaps that women of Pakistan are confronted with reference to the extremism of all kinds. It’s an in-depth account of the complex web of indigenous ground realities (ideational, economic, political, educational, etc.) that define the parameters of female agency role against the malaise of violence, hate and polarization. Women play a courageous and resolute countering violent extremism(CVE) primarily as the proactive agents of peace at the community level. Pakistani women are driving peacebuilding efforts, promoting peace, security, and social cohesion in a country plagued by conflict and patriarchal norms. Initiatives like Aurat Foundation’s “SHE—The Peacebuilder,” Khwendo Jirga, PAIMAN Alumni Trust, and PEAD, along with individuals like Mukhtar Mai, are challenging norms and inspiring change. Through their efforts, they’re countering violent extremism and paving the way for a more sustainable future.

While Islamabad has displayed commitment towards normative framework of safeguarding and advancing rights of women (WPS) and UNSC R 1325 - at the multiple planes, overcoming ideational (religious, social & cultural), structural and constitutional imperatives (opportunities and challenges) to conceive and practice a value driven (that is, women) counter-extremism policy remains an uphill task. The reason being, de-radicalization and counter extremism is not a one-size-fits-all solution nor a solely masculine domain. The task of the national security managers is to tap the potential of women to reclaim a moderate and progressive Pakistan. Invest in female education & economic empowerment to build an equitable and secure eco-system. This implies state cannot work in seclusion while undertaking counterterrorism and counter extremism policies, it must be a regulator of security

in partnership with the society whereby women role cannot be denied. In other words, Women role in the Security Paradigm needs to introspected in line with the Ground Realities.

It is concluded, multipronged and multispectral CVE encompassing gendered balance envisions a ‘win-win’ scenario – inclusive, peaceful and progressive country. This implies implementation of the country’s founder Quaid-i-Azam M Ali Jinnah vision, where in, gender, race, religion, social status does not define “Pakistan”. In nutshell, inclusive and indigenized counter extremism framework (proposed and applied in this study) is also compatible with the very crux of Islam – where women is seen an equal partner in all domains of life – often misinterpreted by stakeholders from time to time.

### **Conflict of Interest**

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