

Report on Student Seminar

**Extremism in Pakistan
Gender, Culture and Violence**



Society for Arts, Gender & Education

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Produced with support from:



76-B Nisar Road, Lahore Cantt-54800
www.boell.de/worldwide/asia/asia.html

Background

A seminar for students was organized on the topic of **Gender, Culture and Violence in the Context of Extremism in Pakistan** as a part of a project on **Combating Radicalization Tendencies in the Punjab**. The project is being undertaken by the Center for the Study of Gender and Culture (Society for Arts, Gender & Education) in partnership with Heinrich Böll Stiftung Pakistan/Afghanistan and Auswärtiges Amt (AA) German Foreign Office. The **overall goal** to which the short project contributes is to “contest extreme radicalization in Pakistan by engaging students, intellectuals and policy makers on the role of gender and culture for peace and democracy.” The **objectives** of the project are to:

1. open an academic space to contest growing radicalization and polarization in Pakistani society; and
2. employ that space by reaching and engaging academics, students and policy makers on issues of culture and gender that underpin violent fundamentalism.

During the short project, the Center for the Study of Gender & Culture produced two research-based policy briefs, gathered views of a range of experts on “Ideas, Culture and Terror, and conducted a seminar with students in Lahore, Pakistan. This report presents the main features of the moderated discussion in the seminar held on January 20, 2010. Further information on the Center (including programs, projects and publications), as well as the project and its outputs are available on the Center's website: www.csgc.pk.org.

Introduction

The primary **aim of the seminar** was to provide a broad cross-section of undergraduate and postgraduate students in Lahore with a conceptual background to radicalization in Pakistan, connecting some socio-cultural causes of phenomena to their impacts, especially on gender and culture. A secondary aim of the seminar was to provide a platform to students for voicing their opinions on the topic and thereby gauging interest in such educational activities in the future. The seminar was conducted as a double-session on January 20, 2010. The Center had initially planned for a single seminar, possibly followed by another in case of student interest. However, due to over-subscription to the seminar and overwhelming demand of student participants, the seminar was extended to a single double-session lasting three hours.

The Center had announced for 20 available seats for **participants** in the seminar. However, 27 students were finally selected from the applications. The selection was made to include students who were articulate and keen on academic aspects of the topic. Care was also taken to ensure **gender balance and broad representation of different geographical areas, economic backgrounds, institutions of study and disciplines**, to the extent possible. In the event, 9 male and 18 female students participated, mostly from Punjab but also some with Sindh and Balochistan domiciles. The students represented a range of higher education institutions in Lahore. These included the oldest, premier arts institution in the country: National College of Arts (ten); the oldest public university in the country: Punjab University (seven); the prestigious College of Arts and Design at Punjab University (four); a leading public engineering institution: University of Engineering and Technology (three); one of the oldest and leading private universities in the country: Lahore University of Management Sciences (two); and a leading private school: City School (one).

The seminar was organized in specially rented facilities near the offices of the Center, a neutral venue for all participants, after university hours. All students received a certificate of participation from the Center. Along with discussions in the seminar, the students also received detailed and wide-ranging handouts, especially designed by Center staff, on theoretical aspects of the seminar topic. A list of handouts is attached in this report (Annex I). The discussion in the seminar was chaired and moderated by the Center's Senior Research Fellow, and Project Director, Dr. Durre S. Ahmed, and involved extensive participation by students.



Summary of Seminar Discussion

The discussion in the seminar was free-flowing and wide-ranging. All participants contributed actively to the discussion, both for clarification and extension of concepts being discussed as well as to provide personal experiences and insights on the topics. The discussion was organized around the three key theoretical frames of the topic violence, culture and gender. The Chair **introduced the subject of the seminar** and proceeded to summarize the scholarship on each concept. Participants then discussed and extended the concepts in light of their experiences, before the next concept was introduced. Toward the end of the seminar, contemporary violence in Pakistan was briefly examined in light of the concepts. The nexus between violence, gender and culture led to the core of the discussion.



The Chair began by introducing the **concept of violence** in the context of our daily lives and its connection to gender in the present culture. Emphasis was laid on the personal and individual rather than macro-political perspectives. Various explanations of violence, covering dictionary definitions and summaries of key political philosophers (including Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes) were shared and discussed, with an emphasis on the wide range encompassed by the term and its evolution over the years in academic

thinking. Violence was discussed as being academically established as going beyond physical aggression to also include emotional, psychological and intellectual aspects. Contemporary extremist terrorism was presented as “violence-plus”, since it focused on instilling fear and panic. In the discussion, students agreed that violence can range from overt and physical to hidden and focused on infringing personal identity or freedom to choose.

The Chair also introduced the **concept of culture** from anthropological viewpoints spanning a way of life to a system of representations that can lend meaning to our lives. Language and media were discussed as two aspects of culture. Recent scholarship on communication was summarized to present how individuals are shaped by the **language** they are born to and the worldview that it defines in terms of a spectrum of expression and modes of thinking. Likewise, different theories in **media studies** were presented (including Noam Chomsky' notion of “manufacture of consent”)to highlight how public opinion is molded by popular media. The key question which students discussed was: “*Is the media a window onto our culture or is it a reflection in the glass?, does it create culture in the process of showing us what is culture?*” Students were exposed to, and actively discussed, the connections between terrorist violence and the media. During the discussion, students generally agreed that the media has decisively penetrated the world and monopolizes our thoughts, and that “*we increasingly experience a mediated world rather than reality itself.*” The discussion on media and terrorism included comments from students regarding the numbing caused by repeated images of violence.

The third key theoretical framework introduced to the seminar was the **concept of gender**. This constituted the main and lengthiest feature of the discussion. Generally being introduced to the concept for the first time academically, participants spent time discussing the notion of gender from biological and sociological perspectives in the Pakistani cultural context. Theoretical work and insights by leading **European thinkers** were introduced



(including feminist Simone de Beauvoir, as well as psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung). The social construction of gender from sexual difference was discussed with de Beauvoir's statement, “*One is not born a woman but one becomes a woman.*” Jung's ideas about gendered attitudes in both males and females were also presented.

Along with a brief historical overview of patriarchy by the Chair, the participants discussed how **gender is intertwined at many levels with languages, culture and religion**. The discussion then centered on issues of the politics of gender inequality in Pakistan, including violence against women. The seminar devoted considerable attention to reasons for women becoming victims of different forms of violence, including frequently reproduced stereotypes women being physically weak and passive by nature, and cultural reinforcement of unequal gender roles. Students also discussed experiences of the precedence given in contemporary Pakistani culture to physical strength over other qualities, which further reinforces violence. In this context, Freud's statement, “*Anatomy is destiny,*” was discussed in terms of construction of rigid gender roles based on surface physical differences. By contrast, students emphasized the need to delve beyond superficial gender constructions. Patriarchal constructions and violence against women were also discussed in the case of banning of the *hijab* (headscarf or veil) in schools in France, which was seen by most participants as a restriction of human freedom and therefore a cause of violent reaction.

Further implications of **patriarchy and the politics of gender inequality** were discussed in the case of girls' education in Pakistan. Participants focused on bombing of girls' schools “with impunity” in some parts of the country as a symbolic indicator of patriarchal mindsets and strong indicators of gender-oriented violence. The seminar also discussed the role of mobilizing ideology (sometimes religious) to justify violence against women. Some students gave examples of fear-evoking pamphlets being freely distributed in Pakistani universities and residential areas about *how women are supposed* to dress and behave. Likewise, “honor” killings were discussed as perpetuation of patriarchal subjugation of women, often having more to do with inheritance and ensuring male financial dominance than with “honor.” In these contexts, examples of the frequent misuse of religion and culture were cited where patriarchy has solidified gender roles without any tolerance for deviation. Participants discussed tribal societies in rural Balochistan as an example, where not only rigid gender roles but also age discrimination have frozen options for individuals to choose their paths. Here, personal examples were cited of tribal leaders imposing strict behavioral codes on men and women, legitimizing them not through religion but through “custom” and “tradition.” Students began to progressively connect the discussion on patriarchy with forced bride money and dowry in NWFP, and violence being culturally justified on claims of “provocation” by women. In all these cases, students particularly emphasized the use of fear as a tool to narrow the space for individual thinking.



When discussing **terrorist violence**, participants focused on the **contribution and implications of patriarchy**, as above. There was general agreement that contemporary terrorist violence in the country is an example of masculine, dominating notions of 'power over' as opposed to feminine, creative notions of 'power with.' However, the participants also noted some structural reasons for terrorist violence. Poverty and inequitable distribution of power were discussed as major causes of violence, summed up by one student saying

“Violence is a fundamental dimension of human poverty.” Participants also agreed that education is important for independent thinking, and is often perceived and blocked by feudal and patriarchal mindsets as being threatening. However, there was also broad agreement that education in itself is less important than a degree of awareness and consciousness regarding the nature of culture, violence, gender etc.

Conclusion

The seminar discussion was summarized and concluded by the Chair. After the seminar, participants were shown a brief documentary on women who were acid-burn victims in Pakistan.

The student seminar proved to be a successful activity. The seminar was over-subscribed, and most students indicated that others among their peers and colleagues would have also like to attend the event. Due to the active discussion and interest, the seminar was conducted as a double-session of three hours rather than the initially planned one and a half hours. There was also clear indication from the participants about interest in future such activities. In particular,



students appreciated both the theoretical/conceptual reviews and extensive handouts, as well as the opportunity to discuss their experiences and views openly. One reason presented for this was that their standard university courses and forums did not allow the space or freedom to engage in such discussions. An indicator of the academic utility of the seminar was the growing confidence, even during the double-session, with which students began to relate theoretical frameworks of culture and gender with their personal experiences of violence.

The success of this seminar built on previous experience by the Center staff in organizing a similar series of eight seminars with students of one institution (National College of Arts, Lahore). Both the earlier series and this latest seminar indicate the need to develop a longer, course-style academic intervention with students across educational institutions in Lahore. Given the gap in provision of such theoretical and conceptual frameworks, there is every indication that students will welcome a relatively informal but academically rich course series which enables active participation.

Annex I List of Handouts in Student Seminar

All student participants received a handout package comprising the following materials compiled especially for the seminar:

1. *Violence*- definitions, early conceptions and evolution in academic thinking
2. *Culture*- some definitions
3. *Media and Culture*- definitions and concepts
4. *The Gendered Society*- extract from article by Michael S. Kimmel
5. *The Violence of the Global*- extract from article by Jean Baudrillard
6. *Masculinity and Gender-based Violence*- UNIFEM Gender Fact Sheet No. 5
7. *The Muslim Hijra* extract from article by Dr. Durre S. Ahmed

The handouts may be downloaded from the Center website: www.csgcpc.org