

Female suicide bombings in Pakistan - what's in it for women?

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Pathways of Women's Empowerment Religion Gender Politics

Islamic militancy in Pakistan appears to be mobilising women suicide bombers as part of its religious trope. This trend unsettles the conservative divide between the public and private roles of women in traditional societies, and also attracts an anthropological defense of Islamist women's agency. The question remains: what's in it for women?

Despite the upsurge of Islamic militancy in Pakistan in the 1980s, suicide-bombings, as a terrorist weapon, were virtually non-existent and did not serve as the preferred strategy of militant groups. In 2002, only 2 reported suicide-bomb attacks took place in Pakistan [1]. After a decade of (controversially) serving as the front line ally for the US-led War on Terror, Pakistan suffers regular reprisal bomb-attacks by Islamic militants who target military installations but also market places, mosques, hotels and shrines. The motivations for these suicide-bombings are commonly cited by militant outfits, such as the Tehreeq e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as vengeance for the Pakistani state's collaboration with the US' *munafiqeen* (infidels') project in Afghanistan. In 2008, Pakistan topped the list of countries with the highest number of casualties due to suicide-bombings [2], ahead of Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the end of 2010, a total of 49 suicide attacks took place just that year, primarily in the province of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP) that borders Eastern Afghanistan. The 49th one was perpetrated by a veiled woman who infiltrated a queue of refugees waiting for food distributed by the World Food Programme (WFP) in the tribal agency of Bajaur [3].

There are conflicting opinions about the 'firsts' or origins of female suicide-bombings in the country. Pakistan does not feature in most international research studies, academic papers or in the tabulated records of suicide bombings (male or female) up until 2004. A memorandum published in 2006, does record 2 female suicide-bombings in Pakistan in its historical listings of female suicide-bombers between 1985 and 2006 [4].

The Pakistani media though, commonly references a veiled female suicide-bomber who blew herself up in Peshawar city in 2007, as the 'first' of such incidents [5]. Others dispute this, on account of the technical 'failure' of the attack whereby the woman bomber was the only casualty. For them, this qualifies as a suicide-bombing attempt, with homicidal intent but nonetheless, technically, not a suicide-bombing. The idea of the woman's fruitless attempt was mirrored in different reports, with some commentators also suggesting that although this female bomber was transporting explosives on her body, the detonation was triggered by a remote control device, presumably by male Taliban commanders. On this technicality, therefore, they discount this as an autonomous act of wilful suicide-bombing.

Similar ambiguities, around the gender of a suicide-bomber in October 2009, and suspicions about a women-suicide-cell harboured by the Taliban, have cropped up occasionally in the media [6]. The

media reports on the 2010 Bajaur attack confirmed that the suicide-bombing was successfully committed by a woman who had breached security with the aid of her veil. She killed herself and 45 recipients in the WFP queue, as well as security personnel. It was at this point, that all previous doubts over the possibility of women acting as suicide-bombers were dispelled.

Subsequently, the recent suicide-bombing by a 17 year old veiled woman in Peshawar, KP, on 11th August 2011, has further confirmed the fear that the TTP intends to use 'Burqa Bombers' as their weapon of choice [7].

Traditionally, the spectacle of violence against women has served as a useful propaganda tool for militants to demonstrate their opposition to western values, especially those associated with, sexual or spatial, freedom for women. With the initiation of female suicide-bombers in Pakistan, who use violence as part of Islamic militant strategy, the seeming aberration of female suicide-bombers has become a serious talking point around the discourses of women and violence, agency and Islamic militancy.

The common charge against Islamic militants, that they simply deny women's agency, has been challenged in the wake of these recent incidents. Contemporary militant strategy seems to be deviating, as it turns from its lay restrictions over women, and seems to be recognising women's agency to act as potential militants. This strategy offers women temporal roles and immortality as martyrs. The Bajaur attack of 2010 was claimed by the Taliban with the warning that the organisation had, "a large number of women suicide bombers who would carry out more attacks... in the near future." [8]

This female suicide attack has prompted anxiety amongst otherwise conservative male politicians and media commentators, over the potential of the veil as a tool for future breaches in security. A newspaper columnist suggested that the all-engulfing veil makes for "perfect... concealment of explosive devices and even suicide jackets." [9] The columnist goes on to predict; "There should be no doubt that militants would use females to launch suicide attacks, particularly in places difficult to penetrate."

A growing interest in the Pakistani tribal woman has led to a concern to study, document, educate, liberate and celebrate her. She serves as the point of reference for tribal resistance against cultural intrusion and military aggression, but also presents a quandary for non-militant fundamentalists and liberal men, alike. The predicament is over her potential for reverse 'penetration' where the woman is not a victim of male violation but is herself a security threat. Both, fundamentalist and liberal men concur on the need to rescue her from the extremists' narrative of violence and 'unIslamic' tribal traditions. However, there is fresh fear and therefore, tacit agreement on the need to regulate the veiled tribal woman's agency, as it now potentially poses a security threat. However, they do not want to be complicit in unveiling her to this end either. A new challenge inverts the resistance motif, whereby veiled women are not symbols of traditional cultural resistance but are serving as active participants of militant strategy.

While the above responses reflect an ambiguity over the agency of female suicide-bombers, there are others who remain blinkered about the implications of such agency. Instead, they suggest that such acts on the part of militants simply reflect a sign of 'weakness' in the Taliban strategy [10]. Presumably, feminising suicide-bombings is a symbol of emasculation and weakness on the part of male militants. Such commentary betrays a misplaced optimism, stemming from the argument that it is the lack of education, prevalence of poverty, a tribalised religious ethos and 'false consciousness' that converts Muslim men (and pietist women) into militants. The analysis fails to recognise the appropriation of women's bodies which continue to act as repositories of religious and nationalist identity in the context of Pakistan. It also disregards the agentive aspirations of Islamist women.

A more nuanced reading of Islamist agency and its use by militant outfits is found in Farhat Haq's research on the mothers of martyrs recruited by the Lashkar e Tayabba (LT, Army of the Righteous) in Pakistan [11]. Haq observes that women members of LT "serve more as props or a supporting chorus for the... mission rather than as active participants." Haq's research findings from a lower-middle-class neighbourhood in Lahore city suggest that, "the majority of the mothers of martyrs are victims of a negligent Pakistani state, not Spartan mothers ready to sacrifice their sons for the mission of the ummah."

With reference to their agency, the study is more sceptical when it surmises that there is "no adequate means to adjudicate the question of agency for [the] mothers." Rather, the agency of the mothers is tapped by the "LT leadership [which] becomes the agent that mines the mothers' private grief to enact a public jihadi community."

Analysis within Pakistan has remained circumspect about the motivations or agentive potential of Islamist women. However, recent diasporic anthropological attempts, which aim to rescue the subaltern Islamist woman, have tended to over-emphasise the agency of Islamist women. Some of these ethnographic studies, such as Saba Mahmood's research into the politics of piety in Egypt [12], argue that autonomous will and self-realisation can be directed to non-liberal ends and human agency can aspire towards goals that are at variance with western liberal notions of feminism, thus casting the 'docile agency' of Islamist or pietist Muslim women, as an alternative to it. Such submissiveness to the demands of piety can be interpreted as agentive, public and even as a form of resistance, particularly if viewed within the framework of the cultural and religious conditions and contexts.

Although Saba Mahmood's argument does not address the phenomenon of female suicide-bombings, her thesis obviously lends itself to new interpretations. Rivka Yadlin, writing about female suicide-bombers [13], relies on Mahmood's proposition, arguing that it "does (not) restrict its conclusions to the researched group of the Egyptian Piety movement and may be applied to the issue at hand", that is, Muslim female suicide-bombers and particularly, Palestinian martyrs. Yadlin's point is, that the "prevalent norms in their society (Palestinian women martyrs') situates them in a consensual position, rather than in one motivated by aberrancy".

Yadlin warns Western liberal views to read Mahmood's claim as "a demonstration of the firm tendency in Muslim discourse to reject Western views on women's liberation." Yadlin also calls attention to the fact that this rejection is "intensifying and becoming more self-confident, no longer challenging from the periphery of Muslim orthodoxy using Islamic parochial rationale, but rather in the heart of Western public sphere, using what the West considers to be universal terms."

The analysis, that the female suicide-bomber's culture may be a formative part of her autonomy, does not account for the broader gender-discriminatory culture or community, which itself is a locus of abuse and exploitation for many women. Given the overall patriarchal discourse of tribal communities in Pakistan, which are also the site for consensus-building for violence against and marginalisation of women [14], it is difficult to read the trend of women suicide-bombers as a sign of self-realisation and autonomy. Even if this proposal is accepted, the question still remains whether the notion of freedom, even when aligned with custom, religion and tradition, is it at any point, going to progress beyond ephemeral gratuity.

Are rewards such as martyrdom, pride, nationalism, spiritual duty, iconography, paradise and piety ever going to translate into any material terms of engagement and deliver any individual or collective rights for women at all? Is the Islamist woman's agency only to be employed for sacrificial purposes and to facilitate holy war, or can she hope for some transformative possibilities for the future of women in her community? Is she destined to merely channel her agency in order to

maintain a male-dominant status quo, which circumscribes her submissive agency to sacrificial terms and for hypothetical martyrdom only, or will agency at any stage translate into an active struggle for tangible freedoms for herself or future generations of women?

These questions require a deeper investigation of the political, rather than faith-based, motivations of women's roles in militancy. It would also be instructive to analyse the possible accommodation of contradictory male views regarding the private/public roles of women within jihadi discourse. Further, it would be far more useful to examine the process of negotiation that precedes induction of martyrs rather than to attribute these post facto, to concepts such as pietistic agency. Despite Yadlin's argument in support of the normativity of Muslim women's militant acts as continuous of a broader cultural consensus, the issue of religious or pietist agency may very well be irrelevant in the context of insurgent militancy against occupying forces, or indeed, Pakistan's own military forces.

Less than a month later, and in contrast to the anonymous female suicide-bomber of Bajaur, a police-woman (Shamshad Begum) in Hangu district of KP was murdered in her home along with three of her children [15]. The murders were an act of reprisal for her active role in identifying militants while she served in the Kurram Levies. Both women belonged to what may be broadly described as "Pushtun culture". However, the comparative agentive expressions of both were clearly split - one was a response to a religious political calling and the other served to uphold the lay of the land. The case for women's autonomous will in Muslim majority societies needs closer examination before belting the fate of women's agency to the notch of some immutable 'religious culture'.

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P.S.

* From Open Democracy, 4 October 2011:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/afiya-shehrbano-zia/female-suicide-bombings-in-pakistan-whats-in-it-for-women>

* This article has also been posted on Viewpoint Online with author's permission.

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/Fidayeenattack.htm>

[2] <http://archives.dawn.com/?s=demographics+of+suicide+terrorism>

[3] <http://www.dawn.com/2010/12/25/explosion-in-bajaur-agencies-khar-head-quarter-several-injured.html>

[4] <http://www.gees.org/documentos/Documen-01398.pdf>

[5] <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=22658&Cat=9&dt=12/29/2010>

- [6] <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/3791/the-paradox-of-the-female-suicide-bomber/>
- [7] <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=63541&Cat=6>
- [8] <http://www.dawn.com/2010/12/25/explosion-in-bajaur-agencies-khar-head-quarter-several-injured.html>
- [9] <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=22658&Cat=9&dt=12/29/2010>
- [10] <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/0811/Another-female-suicide-bomber-strikes-in-Pakistan.-Taliban-desperation>
- [11] <http://www.airra.org/documents/Mother%20of%20Lashkar-e-Tayyeba.pdf>
- [12] <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/7888.html>
- [13] <http://www.gees.org/documentos/Documen-01398.pdf>
- [14] See on ESSF (article 23218), [Pakistan: the Taliban's successful marriage of dogma and custom.](#)
- [15] <http://tribune.com.pk/story/103703/six-killed-in-attack-on-hangu-woman-constable-police/>