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Identity, Gender, and Conflict Drivers in Pakistan

Summary

- That identity-based divides are key drivers of conflict at the community level is not borne out in a study conducted in Haripur, Pakistan. Children in particular do not demonstrate familiarity with identity-based politics or conflict.
- One form of identity, though, remains salient across all age groups—gender. Distinct markers of identity are based on gender, and girls and women almost consistently demonstrate different views than boys and men on diverse issues.
- Dispute resolution in the community is also primarily a gendered activity.
- Agreement is limited within the community, however, on what the main drivers of local conflict are.
- Future programming needs to take into account how gender affects attitudes toward conflict and participation in community initiatives and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Introduction

In recent years, theoretical and practical literature has moved away from assumptions that poverty drives conflict, particularly extremist violence.¹ Instead, studies assert that identity is a crucial factor in precipitating violence. Identity-based divides have become particularly salient in explaining current forms of violence, extremist or otherwise.² Specifically, perceptions of injustice experienced on the basis of identity have in some instances been an important trigger of violence.³

To address this idea, programming within the peacebuilding sector has sometimes targeted children in the hopes of addressing identity-based divides at a young age. A study conducted in Haripur, a town near Abbottabad in Pakistan's province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, aimed to investigate whether identity played a prominent role in children's attitudes toward conflict. Haripur was chosen for having a particularly representative population—a good mix of urban and rural and a wide range of tribes, castes, and ethnicities as well as communities displaced by natural disasters (such as the 2006 earthquake) or military operations (especially those in FATA)—and a higher literacy rate than the rest of the province (roughly 54 to 35 percent). This Peace Brief uses the example of the study in Haripur to demonstrate that identity-based divides are not the primary

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drivers of conflict at the community level. However, it would be unfair to conceptualize such divides as an undifferentiated whole; some elements of identity are salient at a young age and do shape attitudes toward conflict. In this case, gender emerged as one such marker.

Identity Matters, but Not All Aspects Equally

Many of the markers of identity presumed to trigger conflict—religious connections, tribal affiliations, and ethnic groups, to name a few—did not appear to be relevant to children in Haripur. Children did not demonstrate familiarity with identity politics on a daily basis—in fact, issues of identity rarely influenced their interaction with others. This may have been because groups with different religious, tribal, or ethnic affiliations rarely overlapped in mutual spaces; this included separation on the basis of socioeconomic differences.

One element of identity, however, strongly defined children's attitudes toward conflict: gender. Girls and women almost consistently demonstrated different views than boys and men on diverse issues. Boys identified more with their country, girls with their families; boys were comfortable interacting with people from different backgrounds, girls less so—though this may have been because girls had fewer opportunities for interaction with people outside their immediate family and social circle. Girls' identification with their families manifested in older women in a similar fashion: mothers identified primarily with being a mother. Girls were also more willing than boys were to engage in social issues at the behest of their teachers.

Conceptions of individual identity differed on the basis of gender, which in turn meant that social expectations from boys and girls (and men and women) also differed in parallel. For boys and men, this manifested in different ways. Keeping weapons and arms remained an easily accessible and socially legitimate symbol of power, increasing the likelihood of interpersonal conflict turning violent. Patriarchal norms were also widely recognized, both genders identifying the primary role of fathers in household decision making. Involvement in community initiatives also varied: women were significantly less engaged than men. Two mutually reinforcing reasons for this difference were identified: some women said cultural norms did not allow them to participate in social initiatives; others felt that they had a role to play outside their homes but felt constrained by lack of exposure to and knowledge about the community. Addressing this situation would be a logical next step in future programming. It would require the participation not only of women but also of men in the discussion and dialogue process.

Community Dispute Resolution Remains Gendered

Local attitudes also influenced the community's understanding of who could resolve conflict and in what circumstances. In Haripur, most children said they would turn to their father (or other male family heads) to resolve a dispute they were witnessing. On the surface, it appeared that women did not participate in resolving community conflicts—in keeping with their stated lack of involvement in community initiatives more broadly.

Further investigation demonstrated that though women often did not participate in resolving local conflicts in general, they did mention examples of resolving domestic disputes. In this sense, women were cognizant of their roles as mediators within the community. Mothers' understanding of what peace was also appeared to be linked to the gendered nature of dispute resolution in the community: at least a quarter felt that the absence of domestic violence (the dispute they were involved with the most) was equivalent to peace. This was particularly important for two reasons: first, women's lack of involvement in public initiatives within the community did not carry over to

community-level dispute resolution; and, second, women had a critical role in mediating within and between families when it came to domestic violence and conflict.

Women's acknowledgment of their role in specific disputes did not mean that they disagreed with the primacy or legitimacy of male-dominated dispute resolution mechanisms, such as local *jirgas* (often declared illegal by the state).⁴ In fact, *jirgas* were considered a workable—and sometimes preferable—alternative to state-based methods. A few exceptions to this view were notable, but overall the social legitimacy of these mechanisms was recognized and upheld.

Community Agreement Limited on Triggers Conflict

That girls and women almost always demonstrated separate views from boys and men on issues pointed to another important trend: limited agreement within the community on what the triggers of interpersonal or community-level conflict actually were. Children suggested that it was the inability of individuals to manage anger, underplaying the role of economic pressures or poverty. On the other hand, mothers felt that an increase in daily expenses, coupled with reduced opportunities for employment in the community, was a primary driver of anger, frustration, and associated disputes.

This pointed to little consensus among the community in Haripur on what conflicts were most prevalent, what factors led to conflict, and why. Different categories of respondents privileged different types of conflict on the basis of their experiences.

Recommendations for Future Programming

The programming in Haripur disproved two major assumptions: that identity-based divides are the primary trigger for conflict in communities in northern Pakistan; and that divisions across markers of identity—religion, caste, tribe, gender, and so on—manifest similarly across age categories in a community. Future programming needs to carefully account for which aspects of identity are most salient within different age groups, and in turn be crafted to address the elements that specific programs are hoping to support or change.

Among children, gender was an important marker of identity, influencing both their conception of themselves and their social expectations of others. Because this manifests at a young age across genders, programs aimed at challenging entrenched norms would be well served to target young audiences.

Although social conceptions of gender influenced how likely women were to exercise a role in their community, it was not the only driving factor. Women also said that their lack of exposure to and knowledge about their community kept them out of a decision-making role. Focused awareness campaigns and inclusive public spaces for women would improve their understanding of community issues and help them carve out decision-making spaces for themselves.

Social conceptions of gender influenced not only how likely women were to exercise a role in their community, but also what kind of role they would take on. Women were more likely to be involved in resolving disputes related to domestic violence and appeared more connected to their children's emotional status. Programs aimed at improving conflict resolution skills within communities need to take into account the types of conflicts addressed by different groups; understanding that women's role in addressing domestic conflicts is more salient than men's can be an important access point for domestic violence programs.

Existing local methods of dispute resolution, such as *jirgas* and tribal councils, remained legitimate. Programs aimed at addressing localized conflict need to be aware of existing conflict

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

A collaboration by the Pakistan program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), this brief is based on an evaluation of a program implemented by the Foundation for Integrated Development Action (FIDA), a USIP grantee in Pakistan. Hajera Pasha from FIDA undertook the evaluation and Sairah Yusuf provided important and appreciated editorial support. Jumaina Siddiqui serves as a program officer and learning lead for the Pakistan program and coordinated the production of this Peace Brief.

resolution mechanisms so that they can tap into structures that are already legitimate in the eyes of the community.

The Haripur example disproved the assumption that community members—across age and gender categories—agreed on the primary sources of conflict in their community. This has implications for the way in which conflict analysis is carried out in local settings. Participatory methods of conflict analysis—when the community provides local context on the realities of the conflict—are important in making sure that the entirety of a community's views are captured and represented; only then can programming be effectively tailored to address the prevalence of different types of conflicts in small-scale communities.

Notes

1. Mercy Corps, "Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence" (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2015), www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf. In the Pakistani context, Graeme Blair, C. Christine Fair, Neil Malhotra, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Poverty and Support for Militant Politics: Evidence from Pakistan," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1 (2013), www.sas.upenn.edu/~neilmal/poverty.pdf.
2. Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004).
3. Ross Frenett and Tanya Silverman, "Foreign Fighters: Motivations for Travel to Foreign Conflicts," in *Foreign Fighters Under International Law and Beyond*, ed. Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen (The Hague: TMC Asser Press, 2016).
4. Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860), www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/1860/actXLVof1860.html.



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INSTITUTE OF PEACE

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

www.usip.org

eISBN: 978-1-60127-638-4

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