RESEARCH BRIEF: YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN PROMOTING PEACE AND SOCIAL COHESION IN NORTHERN BANGLADESH

JUNE 2020

Young women and men are powerful peacebuilders, actively seeking creative and innovative ways to resolve conflict, prevent violence and promote peace. In Bangladesh, young people are driving social cohesion by advocating for gender equality, the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, non-discrimination, and public policy based on non-partisan interests. With almost half of the population under the age of 25, young people are critical partners in peace, and their participation in processes relating to social cohesion and preventing violent extremism can result in important peace dividends for all of Bangladesh.

Attitudes on the prevalence and drivers of radicalization and violent extremism

Recent research examining the views of students from two universities in northern Bangladesh reveals that most young women and men consider radicalization and violent extremism as emerging issues that are not particularly widespread, neither at the local nor the national level. Nevertheless, young people recognize the threat that radicalization and violent extremism poses for their communities and to social cohesion overall.

When young people were asked to identify the drivers of radicalization as they related to four factors, economic, political, religious and socio-cultural, women identified all four factors as drivers, with a slight emphasis on political and religious factors. Likewise, men afforded greater attention to political and religious drivers, yet their overall responses were low, indicating that men are either less aware of the drivers of radicalization, or that there are other elements beyond the four identified factors.

Although women-led violent extremist attacks in Bangladesh are less common than in some other Asian countries, women can and do play different roles in relation to radicalization and violent extremism. In recruiting women, violent extremist groups in Bangladesh prey on women's marginalisation on multiple layers, ranging from family and community life, to social hierarchy, experiences at education institutions, employment opportunities, pressures around and conditions of marriage, religious discourse about women and freedoms, societal view on women's bodies and their security in the public space.

Gender equality and protection of minorities as key elements of social cohesion

Young women and men in northern Bangladesh identify gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men as the single most critical element for social cohesion in Bangladesh(see table 1). Conversely, violence against women and children, including sexual and gender-based violence against women and children; discrimination against women in arbitration processes; forced detention or confinement of women and girls to the home; and, child, early, and forced marriage, are considered the main obstacles to social cohesion.

The protection of religious and ethnic minorities emerged as the second most important element of social cohesion. Concerns relating to the oppression of ethnic and religious minorities, their lack of access to economic opportunities and social protections, as well as discrimination in local arbitration processes, were cited as contributing to the ongoing marginalisation of religious and ethnic minorities and negatively impacting social cohesion. In this regard, the principle of non-discrimination, both at the national and the local level, ethnic and religious pluralism, and non-partisan public policy, were considered important. In addition, young women and men considered freedom of choice in personal and social life, as well as freedom of expression and the press, as an important feature of social cohesion.

Table 1.

Perceived significant elements for social cohesion by Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University (JKKNIU) and Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur (BRUR) students, disaggregated by sex

Elements	BRUR		JKKNIU	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Equal opportunity for men and woman	90.9	92.9	97.2	96.8
The interest of religious and ethnic minority needs to be protected and respected	76.5	78.7	87.7	78.5
Principle of non-discrimination should be practised at a national and local level	67.8	80.6	83.7	73.4
Provision of positive discrimination for backward/under developed community/region	67.4	81.3	80.2	73.4
Public policy decision should not be based on partisan interest	65.9	79.4	77.8	75.3
Freedom/diversity of choices in personal and social life	63.3	70.3	76.2	68.4
Ensure coexistence of multi-ethnic and religious communities	53.8	63.9	77	68.4
Freedom of expression/the press	56.1	67.7	73.4	71.5
Create and promote space for pluralistic views and thoughts	50.8	65.8	72.2	60.8
Tolerance and respectful towards other people's choice/preference	56.8	72.3	70.2	74.1

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Women at the forefront of social cohesion

Given the importance assigned to gender equality as the most critical indicator of social cohesion, insights into young women's lived experiences in northern Bangladesh must be understood to further ascertain their roles in promoting a peaceful and cohesive society and preventing violent extremism.

When asked further about gender equality, the majority of women highlight the gender-based discrimination and harassment they are subject to on a daily basis. The most prominent issue they highlighted was women's freedom of movement. While an overwhelming majority of students agree that women can move freely in their community without obstacle, half of the students are of the view that women should be accompanied by their male counterpart or other family members while travelling, for reasons relating to personal safety and security, religious rules, and family restrictions. In addition, women report feeling watched and talked about for their mobility, which drives them to dress in ways to be less conspicuous in public. In this regard, an overwhelming majority of students consider that modest religious attire ensures safety and security. Women's freedom of movement has become imperative as women increasingly adopt roles outside the home and greater participation in public life. As such, women's freedom of movement is highlighted as an issue where tensions between women's traditional role in society, social norms, religious rules, and gender equality rest.

Many young women feel they must negotiate community expectations and social customs in order to access new opportunities, including education, employment, and relationships. Women are at the forefront of societal changes in Bangladesh in relation to gender equality and, by understanding their lived experiences and supporting their participation in public life, society can address persistent obstacles to gender equality and promote social cohesion.

Early warning signs of radicalization and violent extremism

In northern Bangladesh, students highlighted a number of early warning signs and indicators that radicalization may be on the rise, including:

- lack of safety and security of people from ethnic and religious minorities;

- promotion and dissemination of extremist religious ideologies and theories;

- justifying violence in order to protect religious views; and

- the obstruction of religious and cultural activities that are not related to Islam.

Building on the finding that gender equality and equal opportunity for women was identified as the key element for social cohesion, sexual harassment was identified as a significant early warning sign or a proxy indicator of radicalization. In this regard, 67% of students at BRUR identified sexual harassment as an early warning sign of radicalization, and 86% of students at JKKNIU identified the same.

Previous research[1] has found that sexism and support for violence against women are the factors most strongly associated with support for violent extremism. In Bangladesh, people who support violence against women are three times more likely to support violent extremism. This can be exploited by violent extremist groups in Bangladesh through adherence to traditional gender roles, gender-based oppression, and sexual and gender-based violence to heighten the marginalization of women and girls, and a toxic masculinity that positions men as violent defenders and protectors of extremist ideologies.

Supporting young people in understanding sexism and violence against women as important early warning signs of radicalization and violent extremism can have a multiplier effect for the crucial work that young women and men are already doing in promoting social cohesion through gender equality. In addition, it can empower young people to address unequal power relations between women and men that manifests in sexism and violence against women, thereby short circuiting the continuum of violence that often starts with sexism and/or violence against women in the private sphere and escalates to ideological masculinity rooted in violence and support for violent extremism.

1 Johnston, M, and True, J. Misogyny and Violent Extremism: Implications for Preventing Violent Extremism, Monash University and UN Women (2019).

Conclusion and recommendations:

Young women and men in northern Bangladesh are highly attuned to the elements that create social cohesion, and, in this regard have placed emphasis on gender equality and equal opportunities for women, and the protection of people from ethnic and religious minorities. Harnessing this awareness and providing pathways for young people's engagement in public life, and in particular strengthening the participation of young women in society, can contribute to increasing social cohesion, reducing conflict, and building sustainable peace.

Recognizing the agency of young women and men as partners in peace and actors in building social cohesion can increase resilience to violent extremism, bridge gaps between communities, and accelerate gender equality. The following mechanisms provide avenues to increase and empower young women and men in this regard:

1. **Platforms for discussing difficult issues**

   To prevent radicalization and to bring forward alternative ideas and approaches, there must be safe spaces for dialogue and discussion of difficult issues. Creating spaces for young people should be supported through guidance on the exploration of extremist messages and violent radicalization, as well as on creating narratives to counter violent extremist ideology. It is essential that the dialogue is egalitarian, with women and men both able to participate and explore issues in ways that are meaningful to them.

2. **Creating women champions and leaders**

   Women's critical roles in promoting social cohesion, resolving conflict, and preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh is recognized by women and men alike. Women's expertise in this regard must be acknowledged and their meaningful participation in formal and informal decision-making processes supported. Creating networks of women champions and leaders will enable young women to build coalitions and give women a leading voice in setting priorities in secular and religious matters as they navigate various kinds of structural and ideological obstacles.

3. **Engaging men**

   Violent extremism remains highly gendered and there continues to be a strong correlation between gender inequality and violent extremism.

   To transform unequal gender power relations, men and boys must be engaged in gender equality. This involves challenging notions of masculinity and traditional perceptions of manhood. It requires men to question power dynamics in their actions or their words at the personal, interpersonal and societal level, and to take responsibility for change. Men need to be engaged as gender advocates, to speak out as active agents who can transform social norms, behaviours and gender stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

4. **Strengthening and supplementing education**

   Human rights-based and gender-sensitive education and guidance can contribute to promoting social cohesion, including through greater awareness of gender equality, as well as address the drivers of radicalization, and mitigate the risk of violent extremism. Educators, policy makers, and community leaders play an important role in shaping the views of young people and can contribute to national strategies to prevent radicalization and violent extremism through education-related formal and informal initiatives. By strengthening and supplementing education with human rights-based and gender-sensitive education and guidance, educators and community leaders are empowered to have informed dialogue with young people about radicalized ideology and traditional gender roles, as well as recognize and address drivers of violent extremism.

5. **Supporting community programmes**

   Communities play a central role in preventing radicalization and violent extremism by creating societies that are cohesive, including by exhibiting attitudes and behaviours that are conducive to social cohesion, such as gender equality. Together, strong communities can challenge those who seek to radicalize community members, increase communities' resilience to radicalization and violent extremism, and provide support to community members affected by violent extremism. In addition, women-led community groups can engage with community members that have traditionally been marginalised from mainstream community programmes, and therefore at greater risk of being radicalized.

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