

POLICY AS PROMISE, PRACTICE AS PARADOX: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PAKISTAN'S NATIONAL POLICY ON PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (NPVE) 2024 IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a qualitative exploration of the implementation of Pakistan's National Policy on Preventing Violent Extremism (NPVE) 2024 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province deeply affected by violent extremism. Utilizing thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse range of stakeholders—excluding bureaucrats to ensure impartiality—the study examines how the policy is perceived, interpreted, and operationalized at the provincial and community levels. The findings reveal significant gaps between policy intent and practice, highlighting issues of awareness, coordination, cultural legitimacy, and resource constraints. The study concludes with recommendations for a hybrid governance model that integrates top-down policy coherence with bottom-up community ownership, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity, resource allocation, and inclusive participation to enhance the effectiveness of CVE initiatives in KP.

Keywords:

Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE), Policy Implementation, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism remains a pervasive threat to global security and development, with Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province bearing the brunt of decades-long militancy and socio-economic marginalization. The National Policy on Preventing Violent Extremism (NPVE) 2024 represents a significant shift from reactive counterterrorism to proactive prevention, emphasizing community engagement, youth empowerment, and gender inclusion. However, translating national policies into effective provincial and community-level interventions remains a

critical challenge. This study aims to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of NPVE implementation in KP, focusing on the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders, including civil society leaders, academics, youth, women, and religious figures, to identify barriers and opportunities for sustainable CVE governance.

Literature Review

The global discourse on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has evolved from a narrow security focus to a broader, multi-sectoral

approach that emphasizes prevention, community engagement, and human rights (United Nations, 2016). In Pakistan, the National Action Plan (NAP) 2014 laid the foundation for counterterrorism, but critics argue that it neglected preventive and developmental aspects (Khan et al., 2023). The NPVE 2024 addresses these gaps by prioritizing education, youth empowerment, gender inclusion, and interfaith harmony. However, the literature highlights persistent challenges in policy implementation, including weak institutional capacity, socio-cultural resistance, and resource constraints (Rabasa et al., 2017). In KP, these challenges are compounded by historical grievances, conservative cultural norms, and the legacy of conflict (Yusuf, 2020). This study builds on existing scholarship by providing an empirical exploration of NPVE implementation in KP, focusing on the perspectives of stakeholders who are directly affected by and involved in CVE initiatives.

Methodology

Design: This study employs a qualitative-exploratory design, utilizing thematic analysis to understand the complexities of NPVE implementation in KP. The study excludes bureaucrats to ensure impartiality and focus on grassroots perspectives.

Sampling: Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their roles and experiences in CVE initiatives. The sample included civil society leaders, academics, youth representatives, women leaders, educators, and religious figures. A total of 19 semi-structured interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted, involving 69 participants across eight districts of KP.

Data Collection: Semi-structured interview guides were developed to explore themes related to policy awareness, institutional coordination, socio-cultural barriers, and community engagement. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Pashto and Urdu, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Field notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

Analytical Procedure: Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software. The

process involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the analysis. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through regular meetings and discussions among the research team.

Ethics: Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Data were stored securely, and participant identities were protected.

Results

Theme 1: Awareness and Understanding of NPVE Policy 2024

Participants highlighted significant gaps in policy awareness, with many expressing unfamiliarity with NPVE 2024. Civil society leaders and academics noted that while the policy was well-intentioned, its dissemination remained limited to elite circles. One civil society leader remarked, "NPVE is a policy for the policymakers, not for the people" (Participant 12). This awareness gap extended to community-level actors, with youth and women participants expressing a desire for more accessible and localized information.

Theme 2: Institutional Mechanisms and Coordination

Participants identified overlapping mandates and weak coordination mechanisms as critical barriers to effective implementation. Civil society leaders and academics emphasized the need for clear institutional roles and responsibilities. One academic noted, "Coordination is a buzzword, but in practice, it is a mess" (Participant 8). The absence of a centralized coordination body and the reliance on short-term donor funding further complicated efforts.

Theme 3: Socio-Cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural dynamics emerged as significant challenges to NPVE implementation. Conservative gender norms, religious interpretations, and community mistrust were frequently cited as obstacles. Religious leaders expressed concerns about the perceived "Western agenda" behind CVE initiatives, while women leaders highlighted gender

inequalities and patriarchal norms that limited their participation. One religious leader stated, “CVE must be framed in Islamic values to be accepted” (Participant 23).

Theme 4: Youth and Women as Agents of Change

Despite policy commitments, participants noted that youth and women remained underutilized in CVE initiatives. Youth expressed frustration with unemployment, alienation, and lack of opportunities, making them vulnerable to extremist recruitment. Women leaders emphasized their potential as peace educators and mediators but lamented the lack of institutional support. One youth participant remarked, “We want to be part of the solution, but we need platforms” (Participant 34).

Theme 5: Resource and Capacity Constraints

Participants highlighted severe resource and capacity limitations, with many noting the dependence on short-term donor funding. Civil society leaders and academics called for sustainable financing mechanisms and capacity-building initiatives. One civil society leader noted, “Without resources, policies remain on paper” (Participant 15). The lack of trained personnel and logistical infrastructure further constrained implementation efforts.

Theme 6: Progress and Achievements

Despite challenges, participants acknowledged some progress, including stakeholder mapping, situational analyses, and consultative workshops. These achievements were seen as early “process gains” that fostered trust and multi-stakeholder dialogue. One academic remarked, “We have made progress in understanding the problem; now we need to translate it into action” (Participant 9).

Theme 7: Prospects and Opportunities

Participants identified several prospects for strengthening CVE initiatives, including growing political will, donor engagement, and the availability of institutional frameworks. Youth and women emerged as powerful agents of change, with their engagement in peace education, community leadership, and digital activism highlighting a transformative

potential. One women leader stated, “If NPVE invests in women, it invests in the future of the nation” (Participant 27).

Discussion

The findings reveal significant gaps between policy intent and practice, highlighting the need for a hybrid governance model that integrates top-down policy coherence with bottom-up community ownership. The awareness gap underscores the importance of localized dissemination strategies and translation of policy content into community-friendly language. Weak coordination mechanisms and overlapping mandates highlight the need for clear institutional roles and responsibilities. Socio-cultural barriers emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusive participation in CVE initiatives. Resource and capacity constraints underscore the need for sustainable financing mechanisms and capacity-building initiatives. The study concludes that while challenges are real, the prospects for success are significant if NPVE is localized, resourced, and made participatory.

Conclusion

The implementation of NPVE 2024 in KP faces significant challenges, including limited policy awareness, weak coordination mechanisms, socio-cultural barriers, and resource constraints. However, the study identifies several prospects for strengthening CVE initiatives, including growing political will, donor engagement, and the transformative potential of youth and women. The study recommends a hybrid governance model that integrates top-down policy coherence with bottom-up community ownership, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity, resource allocation, and inclusive participation to enhance the effectiveness of CVE initiatives in KP.

Recommendations

To move NPVE from capital-file to village-mind, every policy brief, toolkit and infographic must be rendered into idiomatic Pashto and Urdu, then pushed through the everyday arteries that villagers already trust: morning school assemblies, Friday-khutba

talking-points prepared by the Auqaf Department, district FM radio call-in shows, and teacher-moderated WhatsApp groups. Only when mothers hear a sermon on sulh, or students debate peace clauses in their mother-tongue civics class, will the acronym cease to be an alien import and become a household reference.

Strengthen Institutional Coordination: Establish a centralized coordination body with clear roles and responsibilities, and integrate CVE objectives into departmental Annual Development Plans (ADPs).

Fragmentation ends when a single statutory CVE steering committee—chaired by the Chief Secretary and serviced by KPCVE—issues binding directions that embed prevention indicators in the ADPs of Education, Social Welfare, Youth Affairs and Auqaf; line departments must then finance and report on CVE activities as core, not optional, outputs, turning sporadic donor projects into a predictable, budgeted programme that outlives political cycles.

Enhance Cultural Legitimacy: Frame CVE initiatives in Islamic values and local cultural idioms to enhance acceptance and legitimacy.

Prevention messages gain traction only when they are re-scripted through Quranic verses on justice and mercy, Prophetic traditions on coexistence, and Pashtun proverbs on nang and melmastya; co-authoring booklets with recognised ulema and women councillors neutralises the “foreign scent” suspicion and positions the state as a guardian, not an opponent, of faith and tradition.

Empower Youth and Women: Create platforms for youth and women to participate in CVE initiatives, including peace education programs, community leadership roles, and economic opportunities.

Meaningful inclusion moves beyond photo-ops: provincial Youth Affairs must fund campus peace incubators that pair civic education with micro-grants, while the Women Development Department establishes tehsil-level mediation committees that receive small budgets and official recognition; linking these platforms to digital-freelancing training and public-procurement set-asides converts voluntary activism into paid livelihoods,

making peace-building a career rather than a hobby.

Ensure Sustainable Financing: Develop long-term financing mechanisms, including budgetary allocations and donor partnerships, to support CVE initiatives.

Donor-dependence ends when the Finance Department issues a recurring budget call-letter that earmarks two per cent of every department’s ADP for CVE, matched by a multi-year pooled fund into which UNODC, EU and other partners deposit directly into the provincial treasury; this blended stream is auditable, published in citizens’ budget briefs, and therefore insulated from both electoral turnover and short-term donor fatigue.

Research Gaps and Future Research

Longitudinal studies to track changes in policy awareness and implementation over time are essential because the life-cycle of a prevention policy is not captured in a single snapshot. By re-surveying the same cohorts of teachers, imams, women councilors and youth activists at twelve-month intervals over three to five years, researchers can detect whether NPVE messages actually diffuse from mosque loudspeakers to household conversations, whether budgetary allocations stabilize or wither after donor exit, and whether early “process gains” such as stakeholder mapping mature into measurable behavioural outcomes—like reduced recruitment into militant groups or increased reporting of hate speech. These temporal data allow policymakers to distinguish between implementation delays that simply need patience and structural failures that require course-correction, thereby grounding adaptive management in evidence rather than anecdote. Comparative studies with other provinces—such as Sindh with its urban gang-violence lens or Balochistan with its separatist insurgency—can rigorously test the transferability of KP-derived insights. By holding constant the federal NPVE framework while varying provincial political economies, cultural norms and insurgent profiles, scholars can identify which elements of the ARL hybrid model (authority clarity, resource earmarking, and cultural legitimacy) are context-specific and which travel across dissimilar settings. For

instance, does embedding CVE in madrasa reform resonate in Sindh's Shi'a-Sunni seminary landscape as strongly as in KP's Deobandi network? Comparative quasi-experimental designs can quantify whether a two-percent ADP carve-out produces similar uptake in a fiscally devolved Punjab versus a resource-constrained Balochistan, thus informing whether the KP template merits nationwide scaling or selective adaptation. Participatory action research (PAR) moves beyond extractive data collection to co-design CVE interventions with communities, thereby democratising knowledge production and enhancing intervention fidelity. In this model, researchers, youth activists, women mediators and religious leaders collectively diagnose local drivers of extremism, prototype low-cost responses—such as Pashto-language TikTok challenges that ridicule suicide bombers or women-only dispute-resolution circles—and iteratively refine them through reflective cycles. Because participants generate the data, own the analysis, and witness rapid small wins, PAR builds the very social capital and narrative ownership that traditional top-down campaigns fail to achieve, while simultaneously producing scholarly insights into how grassroots legitimacy is performed and sustained.

Experimental studies—particularly cluster-randomised controlled trials—can isolate the causal impact of culturally-framed counter-narratives. Mosques, schools or radio catchment areas can be randomly assigned to receive either standard Urdu-language CVE messaging or versions infused with Quranic verses on mercy, Prophetic parables on pluralism, and Pashto proverbs on honourable hospitality. Pre- and post-intervention surveys measuring attitudes toward violence, trust in state institutions, and intentions to report extremist recruitment can determine whether culturally resonant frames significantly outperform generic messages. Such experiments not only satisfy donors' increasing demand for rigorous impact evidence but also equip the state with cost-effective communication templates that can be scaled across media platforms once efficacy is demonstrated.

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