Mothers' Role in Preventing Violent Extremism in Bangladesh

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Table of Content

List of Figures & Table

List of Appendices

List of Acronyms

PVE - Preventing Violent Extremism
NAP - National Action Plan
WPS - Women, Peace, and Security
BAL - Bangladesh Awami League
BNP - Bangladesh Nationalist Party
JMB - Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
HuJI-B - Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh
HT - Hizb-ut-Tahrir
AAI - Ansar-al-Islam
ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
RAB - Rapid Action Battalion
CTTC - Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime
DMP - Dhaka Metropolitan Police
INGOs - International Non-Governmental Organizations
ATU - Anti-Terrorism Unit
UNSCR - United Nations Security Council Resolution

Acknowledgement

An Ode to all you beautiful and kind souls…

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With the greatest love my little heart can hold in one lifetime,
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Abstract

This study explores the role of mothers in deradicalization and preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh, a country that has experienced waves of radicalization since the 1980s. Through interviews with mothers, C/PVE practitioners, and government officials, the research explores their positioning and strategies within families and communities, gender-specific impacts and dynamics, and best practices for integration in comprehensive P/CVE strategies.

Findings reveal that mothers perceive themselves as having authority and influence over their children, with varying dynamics based on age and gender. They strategically communicate and foster trust to prevent radicalization, although patriarchal and conservative norms pose challenges. Mothers play a crucial role in shaping values and beliefs, particularly through early peace education, reducing the risk of intolerance and radicalization.

Mothers' involvement in PVE is seen as more approachable and receptive, compared to other family members, due to their nurturing approach. However, gender dynamics and societal expectations limit their agency, requiring recognition of their unique experiences and circumstances. Collaborations between the government, civil society organizations, and community leaders are crucial for scaling up interventions involving mothers.

Based on these findings, the study recommends three key actions. First, training programs should enhance mothers' capacity in C/PVE and promote socio-economic resilience through financial empowerment. Second, tailored interventions should consider diverse socio-cultural dynamics, fostering community-led networks to share best practices. Lastly, meaningful engagement of mothers should go beyond tokenism, ensuring their perspectives are considered in collaborative interventions.

These recommendations aim to develop a holistic and inclusive strategical framework for C/PVE in Bangladesh. By empowering and involving mothers, addressing gendered hindrances, and promoting collaboration, a sustainable and impactful approach can be achieved, fostering a community free from radicalization and extremism.

Relevance to Development Studies

As Development Studies aim to promote sustainable development and improve the standard of living regardless of individual backgrounds by addressing different socio-economic challenges, violent extremism hinders any development initiative by creating instability in society and different communities. It severely diminishes social cohesion and peace. Hence, it is important for development practitioners to have an in-depth understanding of the push and pull factors of radicalization and to frame effective interventions.

This study explores the role of mothers in preventing violent extremism, emphasizing the potential of mothers as key actors in deradicalization. It emphasizes the need to maintain a balance and adopt a gender-sensitive approach in preventing violent extremism initiatives, avoiding the instrumentalization of women's role in peacebuilding.

With the limitation of existing research on the specific perspective of mothers in peacebuilding initiatives in Bangladesh, this research aims to contribute baseline data for an integrated, inclusive, and holistic peace and development strategy in Bangladesh and the Global South.

Keywords: Mother, Soft and Hard Power Approach, Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE), Radicalization, Instrumentalization, Agency, PVE Framework, Bangladesh

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 A Juxtaposed Peacebuilder: When My Mother Rescued the Family

When anyone asks me about my profession, I introduce myself as a Peacebuilding practitioner and researcher with a special focus on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). The first time when my realization of the existence of violent extremism solidified dates to September 2012. Just 2 months fresh into college (Upper Secondary Education) in Grade 11, when one fine morning my best friend called and said she could not ride together with me to college anymore. And within a week she left the college and eventually the country. I felt at a loss, trying to think over and over again, what I had done wrong. Later, I came to know from her roommate, who used to live with her in the same student dormitory that, because I wear hijab, her family felt insecure around my 'Muslim' identity, after her family lost all their property and savings to the massive 'Muslim' mob destruction in Buddhist neighborhood in Ramu, Cox's Bazar over a derogatory post on Facebook demeaning Islam by an alleged Buddhist youth from that neighborhood, which was later found to be fabricated (Sarkar, 2020). Growing up in a family were Islamic practice structured our everyday life of peace and comfort, I became very unsettled by losing a friend to a religiously motivated communal violence, and developed determination to work as a peacebuilder. Afterwards as I started working as a facilitator of capacity building workshop for PVE, from the get-go, having almost three thousand participants throughout the first year, mostly youths from college, universities, and madrasah (religious education institutions), I started living in a bubble of satisfaction, that I am doing a fantastic job! But soon, my bubble busted, as my parents got to know that, for a month, my younger teenage brother has been associating with 'learning' groups that encourages violence against the state to establish the rule of religion of Islam. I was dumbfounded waking up to the harsh reality that despite teaching others on how to look for the early signs of radicalization, I

could not see through my dear brother. It was my mother who noticed the changes in him and flagged to my father. Given that we were a military family, living in a cantonment, the main concern arose that how to get him out of the edge of radicalization without alerting the authority. As seen in similar earlier cases, the person at risk had been taken away, 'unofficially' without any legal record, by officials of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the military intelligence service of the Bangladesh Armed Forces. And the families had been kept in total ignorance to what happened to them till date, with the parents of the accused being made to forcibly retire from their military job without any post-retirement benefits. While I was in a juxtaposition in a between professional and personal ethical approach, I surprisingly observed how my mother single handedly saved our entire family. She identified other of my brother's friends (also from military families), having access to the same group, contacted their parents – where the mothers came together to form a support group on the face of the military fathers being in a puzzled position, looked for resources and ways online on deradicalization, and actively trialed and tested all the measures and counselling, and stayed at it for months. Now, four years later, as all the teenagers-at-risk from that time, including my brother, have turned new leaves in their lives by studying at prestigious universities in Bangladesh and abroad, not a day goes by without me reflecting on what could have happened if the mothers had not bravely faced the unknown situation. Therefore, I have been trying to have a deeper comprehension of mothers' role in deradicalization and PVE initiatives, leading to developing a passion for doing this research.

1.2 Research Problem:

In Bangladesh, the first evidential incident that drew mass attention to the existence of religiously motivated radicalization with the possibility of violent extremism, was when in 1993, an extremist

group known as ‘Council of Soldiers of Islam’ held a rally demanding execution of the Author Taslima Nasreen for her book which the group viewed as blasphemous, depicting anti-Islamic sentiment, offering a bounty of $1,250 if anyone can kill her within 15 days (Lintner, 2004; Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, 2003). In January 1999, acclaimed poet Shamsur Rahman survived an attempt on his life by three members linked to the Bangladesh branch of the international extremist group Harkat-ul-Jihad or HuJI (B) (Attempt on Shamsur, 1999). Later in March 1999, the same group carried out bomb attack on a music festival organised by the Udichi Shilpi Goshti group, the cultural wing of the Communist Party of Bangladesh that left 10 dead and 100 injured (BBC News 1999; Bhattacharya, 2021).

From 2001 to 2005, several bomb blasts carried out across the country left 95 people dead. A series bomb blast in 525 places within 30 minutes in 63 districts of Bangladesh on August 17, 2005, by another extremist group ‘Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) (Bhattacharya, 2021) shook the entire administration. And finally, after 156 deaths by violent extremism between 1999 and 2005, the then government of Bangladesh officially admitted the existence of Islamist militancy in the country (Gupta, 2006). The Home ministry of the then government formed a special force called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to counter violent extremism. RAB continued its drive, busting several militant outfits, arresting, and trialing thousands by 2007 (Gupta, 2006).

In 2008, Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) came into power with ‘zero tolerance policy of terrorism’ as one of its main agenda. The new government framed and enacted the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2009 which had been specifically designed to counter and prosecute extremist acts and terrorism financing, with capital punishment integrated in the later amendments for some charges

under the act (Mostofa, 2023). The government's hardliner approach seemingly reduced the magnitude of extremist violence, but the events of terrorism never stopped completely. Between 2013 and 2017, violent extremist attacks had killed 255 individuals with a casualty of 942 over 50 incidents (Parvez, 2019). Amid the government's counter terrorism effort, extremists had murdered more than 40 bloggers, writers, publishers, professors, and individuals from religious minorities within this time (Parvez, 2019; Amnesty International, 2015).

But the extremist attack on the Holey Artisan Café, a place frequented by foreigners, in the usually specially secured diplomatic zone in Dhaka in July 2016, pronounced the intensity of the existing militancy in Bangladesh. A group of armed individuals from a local extremist group took the staff and customers hostage for 12 hours, targeting mainly the foreign and non-Muslim guests. 29, including 17 foreigners and two security officials were brutally killed in the attack. This violent extremist incident drew attention from global media creating international pressure to scale up the effort of security measures in not only countering terrorism, but also preventing radicalization and thus violent extremism, especially the requirement of joint international effort (Parvez, 2019; BBC, 2019; Sharma, 2023; Mostofa, 2023).

Immediately after the Holey Artisan Tragedy, the security forces conducted a massive counter-terrorism drive. With killing of 100 militants and arrest of more than 500, the activities of the militant groups appeared to be reduced over the years (Mostofa, 2023). More than 800 youths were discovered to be missing as reported by their families, many of whom could later be traced reaching Middle East to join ISIS (Prothom Alo, 2016). Though there has been no major incident since the 2016 Holey Artisan attack, the news of police detaining militants every now and then

indicates that militancy of Bangladesh has not diminished, rather in a dormant phase, leaving the country at-risk of restarting the horrible incidents of extremism (The Daily Star, 2021; Hossain, 2022; Dhaka Tribune, 2022; Mostofa 2022).

Within this trend of radicalization and involvement in violent extremism in Bangladesh, there are few notable points. The age of the radicalized individuals who have joined extremist groups and conducted violence has decreased with time. Till 2007, the average age of the militants were 35 years and older since most of these individuals were Afghan war veterans (Mostofa, 2021; Azad, 2021). But research conducted on militants arrested between 2014-15 found the average age to be between 18-30 years (Riaz, 2016). Again, recent news reports and research articles have been indicating evidence towards a growing trend of female radicalization and extremist. In December 2016, a female suicide bomber killed herself during a raid in a militant outfit, drawing attention to female militants while 20 other female radicals were arrested later. Another nine female militants were killed between 2016 and 2018 (Mohsina, 2017; Sharma 2023). Additionally, the drivers to radicalization and causal factors to violent extremism have long been assumed to be poverty, corruption, illiteracy. But after the Holey-Artisan Tragedy, during the massive raids and investigation on the missing youths, that the radicals and extremists have increasingly be joining from socio-financially affluent families (Comerford 2017; Riaz and Parvez, 2018; Sharma 2023).

With militants continuing targeted radicalization of students and young teachers from madrasah (religious educational institutions), private and public universities, young professionals and youths from both privileged and marginalized backgrounds, the government counter-terrorism effort has not been comprehensive (Khan, 2017). Prior to the Holey Artisan Tragedy in July 2016, leveraging

on the Counter-Terrorism Act 2009, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) formed Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) to support hard-power countering violent extremism (CVE) measures through surveillance and sharing intelligence with different security forces. But initiatives for soft power approach to preventing violent extremism (PVE) had not been a part of the initiative (Mostofa, 2022). With the magnitude of violence and brutality seen in the Holey Artisan attack baring the imminent challenges and threats from the deeply rooted Islamist militancy, the government started integrating impromptu preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies based on a five-tier approaches, starting from the stage of preventing radicalization, reaching the final stage of deradicalization, going through countering radicalization and Counter Terrorism.

In the very first tier for preventing violent extremism, the policymakers adopted a community approach aimed at building awareness against radicalization and extremism. While parents had been identified as one of the key stakeholders in the process, but, together with CTTC, different ministries had engaged mostly local religious leaders, security forces members, teachers, media personnel and political leaders in public awareness program through holding different dialogues and seminars. After that, in 2018, the Ministry of Education took a short-term initiative to hold awareness campaigns in educational institutions to orient teachers, students and parents to the identifiers of radicalization and violent extremism. As the age of the identified at-risk missing individuals, arrested or killed militants had reportedly been youngsters, the youths were the mostly targeted beneficiaries. Different local and national non-profit organizations have received grants and logistical support from international governments and organizations in engaging youths in PVE awareness programs, focusing on communal harmony, integration of cultural elements from

different communities, mobilizing counter-narrative campaigns, peace dialogues and festivals with youth at the center. RAB initiated a mass information dissemination campaign, circulating a book titled “Misinterpretation of Verses by Militants and the Right Interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith”. But the volume of these initiatives scaled down by 2019 (Mostofa 2023; Anik and Rabbi, 2018).

The second stage of providing psychosocial counselling by different actors, with credible proximity to the beneficiary group of youth like social workers, religious leaders – is yet to be implemented. With severely backlogged initiative on reintegration of former extremists into the mainstream society, the fourth stage of deradicalization also had not been successful so far. Only the third phase of the DMP’s CVE approach via aggressive counter measures to wipe out homegrown terrorism has been successful. Then again, reports show that the militants who had previously been jailed and received reduced sentences and had been released from the jail, went into hiding or returned to extremist association. (Mostofa 2023; Anik and Rabbi, 2018)

Therefore, despite the visible neutralization of extremist activities for the time being, government’s P/CVE initiative has gone back to square one, with several of the activities being discontinued due to disjoint effort (Khan 2017; Mostofa 2023; Anik and Rabbi, 2018). With a super focus on Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, the government is yet to come up with a National Action Plan or framework to check and balance the feasibility and impact of the existing CVE program (Bashar 2017; Khan 2017). To Counter and prevent radicalization, along with the policy makers and defense forces, all other stakeholders need to be integrated into a PVE package of motivational, cognitive, political, economic, and sociocultural aspects. So far, several nonprofit initiatives,

specially run by youths under the supervision of experienced INGO-UN bodies have been able to engage multilayered stakeholders (Khan, 2017). But amid all these initiatives in creating awareness against radicalization and establish a discourse of negatively connotated narrative against violent extremism, voice of women contributing to CVE measures continues to be tokenized (Henty & Eggleston, 2018).

Bangladesh adopted the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2019. The NAP favorably positioned women within the society with the ability to influence on developing counter-narratives along with detecting the early symptoms of radicalization. Though, the NAP 'vested' the responsibility of involving women and creating informed community against radicalization, violent extremism, and gender-based violence - On the governmental bodies and security forces - But it did not indicate how the 'favorably positioned women' would get involved or be positioned in the CVE initiatives (UN Women and Government of Bangladesh, 2019).

In Bangladesh, the gender division of labor, dictated by the age-old patriarchal socio-cultural setup, unfortunately assigns the responsibility of monitoring and tracking children's actions, whereabouts, and welfare only to mothers. The strategic authority and trust that mothers hold, especially with their children, adolescents, and young adults, have gained international recognition as an integral part of deradicalization strategies (Henty & Eggleston, 2018). UN Women acknowledges women's role as mothers, among other roles, as critical in shaping family and community values that directly influence the radicalization process. Detecting signs of detachment, a core indicator of radicalization, mothers' increased awareness within families and communities is considered vital for the prevention of violent extremism (True et al., 2018).

INGOs like Women without Borders, through initiatives such as the 'MotherSchool: Parenting for Peace,' have been actively informing mothers about the early signs of radicalization, the concept of violent extremism, and developing resilience in their children in Bangladesh (Women without Borders, 2019). However, the scope and success of these efforts have been limited to designated project areas, leaving a void in understanding the role of mothers in preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh. Returning to my personal experience of how my mother acted as a mediator in bringing my brother back from the state of radicalization, I cannot help but draw a parallel between her role and the broader positioning of women, specifically mothers, within society. This parallel inspires me to explore the void through the research questions mentioned in the next sub-chapter.

1.3 Research Question

With the main research question, 1) What is the role of mothers in deradicalization and preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh? This research aims to find answers by investigating the following three sub-questions.

1.1) How do mothers position themselves and strategize within their families and communities in Bangladesh to contribute to preventing violent extremism and deradicalization?

1.2) What are the gender-specific impacts, dynamics, and potential risks of instrumentalizing mothers' involvement in preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh?

1.3) How can the experiences and best practices of mothers in preventing violent extremism be leveraged to effectively integrate their involvement in the development of comprehensive and sustainable P/CVE strategies in Bangladesh?

Chapter 2: Context

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Historical Context of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Bangladesh

Even prior to the independence from Pakistan in 1971, the then West Pakistan, that is, Bangladesh has been heralded as a pluralistic society, where diverse groups from different ethnic and religious communities have coexisted peacefully. Intolerance of the ruling class of East Pakistan towards the value of such Bengali nationalism acted as one of the catalysts of the war of Liberation of Bangladesh (Habib, 2011). With a uniquely intertwined moderate practice of Sufi-inclined religion and secularism, the socio-cultural infrastructure of Bangladesh has been framed on the foundation of Islamic values (Comerford, 2017; Khan, 2017).

But over the years, the weed of Islamist militancy started growing in the country owing to the politicization of Islam by condescending Islamist-ideology based groups by the influential political parties and leaders (Comerford, 2017). As Lintner, 2004; Habib, 2011; Comerford, 2017; Khan 2017 and Mostafa 2022 find, after the assassination of the founding father and first president of Bangladesh under the political party BAL, Bangabandhu Shiekh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the government formed by the military created a narrative that BAL's secular stance embedded in Bengali nationalism is a deviation from Islam. Thus, the label of Bangladesh being an Islamic country, instead of a subtly practiced liberal Muslim-majority country was imposed on the discourse around national identity. In 1979, the then President Major General Ziaur Rahman (former military personnel) amended and omitted secularism as one of the state principles, permanently establishing the interpretation of the term secularism in a negative connotation. In doing so, the gate to rightist approach to religion and politics opened wide, as President Zia led

the way by forming Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which eventually became the second largest political party in Bangladesh. Thus, the popular appeal of Islamic ideological persuasion amalgamated with military and military-backed government. It not only solidified its stand as a strong opposition to BAL, but also created fertile ground for the growth of rightist political groups, weaponizing religious essence for public favoritism. With the assassination of President Zia in 1981, the then Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad took over the government after a coup and formed his own political party, Jatiya Party with the support of military and financed by the state. He only expediate the legacy of politico-religious nationalism by constitutionally institutionalizing Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh in 1988. To diffuse the influence of BAL, leveraging on previously created anti-secular narrative, president Ershad revived the right-wing political party Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), known as the anti-liberation outfit for siding with the Pakistani military, consolidating Islam as a critical institutional factor in shaping the country's political trajectory.

This influence of political Islamization coupled with influence of religious understanding as practiced in the Gulf region facilitated the first wave of radicalization. emergence of the first generation of Islamist militants in the late 80s. Between 1979 to 1992, more than 3000 individuals who actively fought in the War in Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh. Veterans from these group formed a militant organization called Harkatul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) with the objective of sending fighters wherever there is any war or movement for the cause of any Muslim group which the then was supporting the Rohingya community seeking independence and justice against persecution in Arakan of Myanmar (Lintner, 2004; Habib, 2011; Comerford, 2017; Khan 2017; Mostofa and Doyle 2019; Azad 2021; Mostafa 2022). Riaz (2016) identifies this militant

outfit as the emergence of the first generation of Islamist militants. The first wave of radicalization continued till 2005 with two more generations of militant groups adding to the existing militants (Comerford 2017; Mostofa and Doyle 2019; Rahman, 2016). Riaz (2016) categorizes Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) formed in 1998 as the second generation of militants comprising of former HuJI-B militants, former student leaders of Bangladesh Islami Chaatrashibir, the student wing of Jammat-i-Islami and individuals from religious educational institutions (madrasah) who earlier came together as smaller groups with radicalized ideologies. Formation of the Bangladesh chapter of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) marks the third generation of militants. Interestingly, the militants of this generation came from comparatively advanced higher educational background with sound technological skills under the leadership of a university professor who served as a Commonwealth Scholar in the United Kingdom. Throughout the different ruling authorities from 1991- 2005 including BNP government under the Khaleda Zia, the widow of deceased president Zia and BAL government led by Shiekh Hasina (also the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh), HuJI-B, JMB, HT Bangladesh chapter continued their extremist violence through attacks on life and properties of religious minorities, opposition and leftist political parties, Bengali cultural celebrations, progressive writers, poets, foreign government delegates and so on. Specially, HT manged to develop a mass radicalization network through trained insider in administration, educational institutions including universities and madrasahs, mosques and even in security forces (Comerford, 2017; Khan, 2017; Mostofa and Doyle 2019; Mostofa, 2022). While the BNP government tried to contain the volume of extremist attack by hard counter-measure via arrests, raids and quick trials with the support of RAB, after the BAL government came to power with a strict no tolerance policy against terrorism in 2009, the hardliner approach accelerated, apprehending all the then top militant

leaders by the end of 2009, signifying the end of first wave of radicalization (Mostofa and Doyle 2019; Mostofa 2022).

Between 2005 and 2016, the government of Bangladesh legally prohibited five extremist outfit including HT, JMB and HuJI-B. But the root of radicalization and threat of violent extremism could not be uprooted. Identified as the fourth generation of militants, a new locally grown militant outfit, Jamaat-ul-Muslemin was reported to emerge which later changed its name to Ansarullah Bangla Team in 2007 (Riaz, 2016). The phase between 2007 and 2013 is marked as a silent phase with very few instances of militant activities which has been found to be a recharging period for the militants after the hard blow on leadership and finances between 2007 and 2009 (Mostofa, 2020). Several formal militants from different banned groups of HT, JMB, HuJI-B regrouped in preparation of violence on a larger scale. In 2013, extremists under the banner of Ansarullah Bangla, brutally murdered secular blogger Rajib Haider (BBC, 2015), which is said to be the initiation of the second phase of radicalization and extremism in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2016; Mostofa, 2022). Soon, emergence of other extremist groups Ansar-Al-Islam (AAI) and Islamic State (ISIS) or Neo-JMB were reported. Compared to the previous four generations of militants, this fifth generation (Riaz, 2016) appeared to be completely different in their interfaces. The militants were younger in age, students from different renowned educational institutions, highly skilled young professionals, often trained in foreign countries and very proficient in utilizing online platforms to radicalize and recruit young men (Mostofa, 2022). This violent phase again continued till 2016, with over hundred murders of secular bloggers, writers and their publishers, non-Muslims, foreigners, non-conformist scholars and university teachers who have been perceived to be a challenger to orthodox Islamist view believed by the extremist militants (Khan,

2017). After the 2016 Holey Artisan attack, as the government and the security forces have been able to visibly reduce the activities of radicalization and extremism through coercive hard counter approach to terrorism, the dormant phase from 2017 onwards does not give an occasion for celebrating success in neutralizing violent extremism in the country. Specially, with 82% of arrested extremists between 2016 and 2020 being radicalized online through various social media platforms (Hasan, 2020), the prolonged lock down during COVID pandemic in the year 2020 and 2021 would have definitely created a fertile space for the aggravated radicalization and recruitment of militants (Mostofa 2020; Sharma 2023). RAB recently uncovered the existence of a new militant organization as its members who are mostly former militants from JMB, HuJI-B and Ansar-al-Islam have been actively building network and fundraising since 2019 (Dhaka Tribune, 2022; Mostofa, 2022).

2.1.2 Factors Driving to Radicalization and Violent Extremism

Now with the uncertainty of what is waiting to be unfolded by extremists in the near future, information revealed by a young detainee on how he was radicalized definitely requires attention for thinking on preventive measures to radicalization. The militant was first approached from within his family, as one of his cousins sent him videos of Muslims being attacked in different countries and news of derogatory comments against the Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) and Holy Quran (Mostofa 2022; Channel 24, 2022). This finding of the militants leveraging on the discourse of ‘Muslims being victims of persecution by non-Muslims globally’ confirms an earlier argument by Parvez (2019) that the militants pursue their targets with the narrative of an imminent global crises and how only violence action is the justified solution to that crisis.

With Bangladesh's history of highly unstable and intense political rivalries between two major political parties weaponizing Islamic essence in maintaining their respective vote banks, all while ignoring the collapse of electoral democracy amid deteriorating social and legal institutions – had left the check and balance of socio-legal realities and dissatisfaction in shambles (Khan, 2017). The high rate of systematic corruption, nepotism, disproportionate distribution of social capital and broken justice system have been affecting the access of youths to social and financial well-being with little scope of civic involvement to address these crises. These factors have been pushing the youths towards a disconnected stance to life, devoid of family and community in the absence of a purpose. The militants have been using this rhetoric to grow consensus of a leadership as an alternative to democracy. Coupling this local disfranchisement of the vulnerable youths together with the sentiment of Muslims suffering in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir etc., the militants interplay between real and perceived grievances, and use the Islamic ideology of equality to present with the solution of realizing the rule of Islam to run the country. And armed extremism is indoctrinated as an entitled tool of solution, making the youth feel empowered to thwart any threat to their identities and purpose in life. (Comerford, 2017; Khan, 2017; Parvez, 2019).

2.1.3 Interventions in Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE)

In terms of preventive intervention, in the early 2000s, the then governments primarily focused on hard-handed countermeasures as an immediate response to the attacks. In 2004, the BNP government established a state paramilitary security force named Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to counter terrorism. In 2009, the BAL government introduced the Counter-Terrorism Act and established the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes Unit (CTTCU) under Dhaka Metropolitan Police. They also formed the National Committee on Military Resistance &

Prevention and the National Committee for Intelligence Coordination to facilitate coordinated efforts among ministries and security agencies in countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism. These efforts involved gathering and sharing intelligence, supporting each other's counter operations, and *studying, monitoring, and thwarting* violent extremism (Hasan and McDonald, 2022). After the Holey Artisan attack in 2016, the government accelerated the hard power C/PVE efforts by increasing security finances, imparting international trainings to security personnels, increasing surveillance, and corresponding with INTERPOL on tracking identified extremists and suspects. But these initiatives had drawn controversy due to politicization of the CVE activities by the security forces to oppress and persecute political oppositions.

On the other hand, the government also adopted a soft power approach to PVE with the support of foreign governments, donors, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and United Nations bodies. Going beyond the conventional security and state ministries, PVE initiative involved ministries concerning religious affairs, culture, education, youth and sport to create public awareness programs by disseminating counter-narrative to extremism in the light of Islam. Religious leaders and clerics had been specially trained to reach these messages of peace to a wider audience. The government also collaborated with different educational institutions to revise and integrate elements of peace education into the existing curriculum along with equipping teachers in detecting vulnerable pupils. Vocational training and cultural events were carried out across educational institutions and communities. Grants were sanctioned to national thinktanks to conduct research on the causal factors leading to radicalization of and violent extremism. Though all these activities aligned with the generally practiced PVE interventions globally, their feasibility and impact had raised doubt in the long run due to discontinuation of coordination across all

stakeholders. Also, the intrusions have been observed to be integrated on an ad-hoc basis instead of evidence-based designing via assessment and evaluation of the resilience, resources, gaps and needs (Mostofa, 2020; Hasan and McDonald, 2022).

For example, in the five tier CVE approach plan introduced by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police

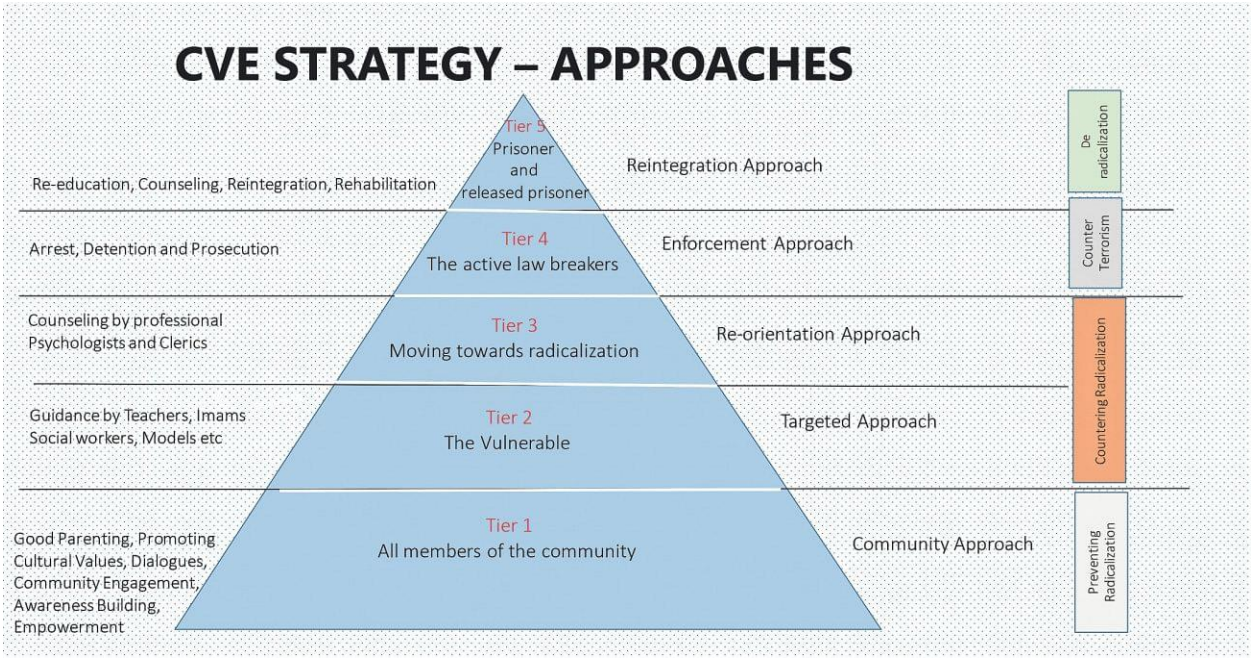

Figure 1: DMP Manual to CVE Strategy & Approaches (Mostofa, 2023)

(DMP), though the first two tiers had been determined to be community-based targeted approach (Mostofa, 2023) to build awareness around cultural values through dialogues and engagement of community members, teachers, Imams and so on, Women Without Borders (2022) observed that the activities mentioned above have been very formal in a tokenistic manner, which has not been complementary with, but an extension the coercive countermeasures with the narrative used being set by the security forces instead of practitioners. The community-led efforts had not been able to properly address the societal root causes of radicalization along with tapping into the potential of the community to prevent radicalization. With decline in the number of extremist attacks in

increasing ratio of reported uncovering of militant outfits and detaining of radicalized youth, in the seemingly dormant phase of militancy, the community based PVE approach has to start addressing on the roots of drivers of radicalization instead of just being informed about the indicators (Mostofa, 2020). Specifically, the CVE interventions had missed on the influence of familial dimension in creating vulnerability or resistance in individual to work on the pre-stage of radicalization and thus prevent passing the phase into extremism where coercive hardliner intervention remains as the only option for counter measure (Women Without Borders, 2022).

2.1.4 Family Dynamic in C/PVE Interventions

In terms of evidential research on the importance of understanding the familial dynamics, Women Without Borders (2022) reports, the C/PVE practitioners have observed the accelerated risk to radicalization in youths in case of a lacking family dynamics which adds to the existing socio-political grievances. And during profiling of seventy-two arrested militants by the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) of Bangladesh Police, ATU identified disfranchisement in family crescendos to be the common denominator among the subjects, reinforcing the validity of the above observation. The local C/PVE practitioners have observed that *prevention potential of parents* had not been tapped into while framing C/PVE initiatives in the higher level. Specially, in the societal family set-up of Bangladesh, mothers are the most emotionally invested and affected when it comes to children. But this specific group has been left out of the C/PVE strategies and interventions usually framed at higher policy level (Women Without Borders, 2022).

2.2 Existing Literature in Mother's Role in PVE

This work found that the volume of studies and research, especially on the role of family and specifically on mothers' role in preventing violent extremism, is yet developing. While there are several papers on the overall women's participation in the peacebuilding and C/PVE processes, few studied have touched upon the subject of the risk of instrumentalizing women's involvement in peace negotiations if specific roles like that of a mother or wife are underpinned on women. Few project reports from different peacebuilding organizations have specifically studied the impact of socio-financial empowerment of women in influencing the acknowledgement of women's capacity in the peace table. Some case studies have addressed how women's role as mothers are labelled to be de-radicalizer, which have been found to be stifling their full potential as a peacebuilder in some countries whereas, it has actually borne a positive outcome in deradicalization in few countries. So the following review of existing literature can be largely categorized as general research findings on women's inclusion in overall C/PVE and peacebuilding strategies; the studies highlighting the instrumentalizing of women's role by reinforcing the existing patriarchal gender norms in framing of C/PVE programs and adding to the women's already existing burdens of expected social responsibilities by 'glorifying' the agency of mothers in PVE initiatives; recommendations from case studies on engaging women and positioning them as mothers in C/PVE initiatives in different VE effected countries in Africa, South-East Asia and South Asia including Bangladesh; And findings from the report of the only project on involving mothers in preventing violent extremism in smaller project areas in Bangladesh by an INGO.

Giscard d'Estaing (2017) states that women have been in the frontline of violent extremism, both in a positive and negative role. But the current interventions of countering and prevention of

radicalization and violence have limitations in interpreting the role of women in the process. Often, these initiatives are designed not to be sensitive or aware of the diversity of women's experiences in a VE setting, ending up instrumentalizing their voices and agency in different capacities. Despite women being an important actor playing an active role in sustainable peacebuilding through mobilizing alternative narratives in countering extremism by challenging the fault lines in actions taken by the state in conflict-affected countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali, Nigeria and Pakistan – yet their civil space for operating the interventions keeps getting targeted and repressed by both state actors and the extremist outfits. As it affects the feasibility and impact of their peacebuilding activities, the authorities take the loophole of imposing marginalization on women peacebuilders by interacting with them as subjects, not acknowledging their grass-roots experience or expertise, limiting their participation in the peace table. Here, the author analyzes the C/PVE strategies in the aforementioned countries and finds that while designing the initiatives, the policymakers could not see beyond the patriarchal gender stereotypes of women's role in the society by an imposed framing of being an influential 'de-radicalizer' as mothers and wives within the family. But this has led to instrumentalization of their potential as peacebuilder. Thus, they have been excluded from peace negotiations not being 'allowed' outside of their societally assigned roles that came with threats of being blamed, if those women's children or husbands have joined extremist outfits. That is, the state simply cleaned its hands off the responsibility of providing citizens with socio-financial and political stability for diminishing their vulnerabilities to being pushed or pulled towards radicalization. The study stressed on gender-sensitive approach to framing C/PVE programs, keeping a check and balance on securitization of women's roles and rights, both within and outside of the familial spheres that ultimately undermines their inclusive and qualitative engagement in peacebuilding. Hence, the author urges the governments and the international

agencies to work on their limitation in PVE programs in terms of women's engagement, roles, and gender sensitivity to acknowledge their contributions as agents of change at all decision-making tables. No P/CVE measures can surely be full proof. But, through all in participation of women in designing, implementing, and deciding, the programs can have the maximum positive outcome.

True (2013) explores C/PVE frameworks in different post-conflict and peacebuilding settings and finds that there is a gap in operationalizing gender perspective in prevention measures, making the strategic advancement of women's rights to equity tokenistic. It ultimately affects the sustainability of peace negotiations. The author finds that, after a conflict, when a community is in a vulnerable state in terms of ensuring the rights of the citizens, there is a considerable security gap between the political and economic components of peacebuilding. Therefore, even if the intended objective of peace processes highlights the intention of gender mainstreaming, the structural inequities reinforced by conflict sets back the reconciliation agenda in the long run. Ignorance of this aspect of infrastructural gender inequality had been disrupting society's journey to peace. The author builds on the UN Secretary-General's *seven-point plan on women's participation in peacebuilding* and recommends an integrated framework. The action includes addressing the underrepresentation of women in planning and decision-making on C/PVE and peacebuilding policy interventions in post-conflict governance. Local community groups and organizations of women should be entrusted with monitoring of human rights violations like sexual and gender-based violence. The state actors must diversify resources in building technical and legal knowledge and capacity for protection and support of women. Specially, empowering women financially by ensuring access to economic resources and rights would address the exacerbation of gender inequalities in post-conflict setting. The C/PVE interventions must have a gender-responsive budgeting approach

allocating resources for increased participation of women in the CVE stages of disarmament-demobilization and in PVE intervention for reintegration of the radicalized individuals.

Patel (2017) explores the different roles women are increasingly reported to be playing within the overall context of countering and preventing violent extremism. Starting from contributing as a peacebuilder with state actors to mobilizing radicalization process by promoting extremist narrative and recruiting militants. The author argues that while different United nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1325, 2178 and 2242 emphasizes and recognizes the significant roles and impact in C/PVE, the narratives are still structured in a victim-centered approach overlooking their possible participation as a perpetrator. In doing so, the C/PVE discourse takes away the agency from women of deciding and acting on their different capacities, posing challenges in effective integration of women in security strategies. For example, the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group initiative by the government of UK had faced allegations of reinforcing gender and religious stereotypes while favoring certain participants and leaders in taking the driving seat of the project, ignoring the diversities of different backgrounds and communities despite being based on same religious ideologies. The Australian government have been implementing activities targeted for increasing social cohesion, promoting positive behaviors and building resilience, but the government implemented the initiatives without localized assessments of community needs and controlling access to information on the projects. Though the women peacebuilders were appointed as facilitators of the activities, focus on different stories of negative encounters with extremists and militants, coming from only 'victims' and professionals have hindered the holistic outcome of the projects. The final take away from those interventions was that both practitioners and non-practicing individuals must be empowered as mentors and

intervention officers. In relation to this research on mothers' role in PVE, one particular finding by Patel (2017) has been the crucial role found to be played by the families and the needs to intervene in building the capacity of parents with knowledge and tools of different components of preventing radicalization and violent extremism, maintaining balance between hard and soft security practices.

Ali (2016) acknowledges that cruciality of engagement of women in C/PVE but finds the existing security strategies to simplifies the roles of women and reduces them to only as mothers and wives, diminishing the weight of their agency in effective policy making and continues to reinforce gender stereotypes. The study criticizes the overemphasizing on empowering the traditional roles and capabilities of mothers by leveraging the conventional patriarchal family system where only women are positioned to identify the signifiers of radicalization in their children and husbands. But often the security practitioners might be ignoring the possibility of the mothers not entrusting the authorities with sensitive information about her families, as it might lead to a backlash on the notion that the mother has betrayed her family and community. The author recommends developing alternative lens on women beyond the binary dimensions of mothers and wives. Any CVE program should also be centered around the evolving narratives of women among the extremist groups. This would empower women and men alike with the skill to identify the radicalization dynamics and prevent further recruitments into militancy. For holistic PVE interventions, it is a must to leave the rhetoric for impactful engagement of women through promoting, empowering and financing women peacebuilders' groups and organizations. Only by developing a nuanced discourse on understanding women's roles, grievances, priorities and

assumed positionalities by extremists and religious institutions from all walks of society would solidify any PVE policies.

Though the aforementioned studies have warned of the imminent risk of instrumentalizing women's agency as mothers in PVE from the findings in different countries across the world and recommends not individualizing on this particular aspect of motherhood in PVE strategies, findings from case studies in few countries like Indonesia, Tajikistan and Bangladesh have indicated a contrasting picture in terms of mothers' importance in deradicalization and PVE.

True, Gordon, Johnson, and O'Brien (2019) investigated the research conducted by UN Women on the relation between financially empowered women and reduction of incidents of radicalization and violent extremism in Bangladesh and Indonesia. The study provided insight on the general interpretations and approach towards violent extremism in different communities in Indonesia and Bangladesh, with a special focus on different gendered layers and the role of women in C/PVE. The research finds that in comparison to men, more women strongly believe that violence is unnecessary to defend one's faith but poverty, socio-cultural inequalities like inaccessible or lack of employment opportunities make young people more vulnerable to radicalization. Research participants in Bangladesh and Indonesia attributed mothers to be the most highly equipped person in preventing radicalization and extremism as they perceived mothers to be in the closest relation with children. The gendered division of labour in these societies have positioned mothers as responsible for children's *activities, whereabouts and wellbeing,* mothers have been perceived to be the most observant in terms of physical and emotional proximity with children and other family members like husbands and brothers and so be the first responders to any red flags of

radicalization. The study finds that to challenge and delegitimizing the militants' narratives, increasing awareness of women, and empowering them financially along with enhancing their leadership would enable the security and peacebuilding practitioners to conceptualize the push and pull factors of radicalization while developing an in-depth insight into the perceived positionality and associated influence of individuals in different roles in C/PVE. In the long run, this would build trust of the public on different state and non-state stakeholders.

Henty and Eggleston (2018) explore the global Women, Peace & Security agenda in the light of case studies from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Tajikistan. It finds that while inclusion and involvement of women in countering and preventing violent extremism has been coming off as a buzzword in the effort to holistically engage different stakeholders, the notion of stereotypical assumption of women being naturally peaceful has been fogging up the gendered lens in PVE. With women emerging both as a confidant of extremists and peacebuilder working towards deradicalization, the sustainability of any CVE intervention would take an intersectional understanding of the different experiences of women in terms of religion, ethnicity, age and socio-financial situations. Amid the different roles of women as practitioners, policymakers, activists etc. interestingly in Bangladesh and Tajikistan, key learnings from different C/PVE programs have recognized mothers as one of the first key actors in identifying early signs of radicalization. With the perceived authority of mothers in the family setting, the outcome has indicated to the ability of mothers in intervening in the radicalization process at the forming stage where it is still possible to disengage the affected individuals from radicalized thoughts and ideas. This approach has been reified through the reported impact on mothers under 'The Mothers Opposing Violent Extremism (MOVE)' initiative in Tajikistan, where the participant mothers have developed a clarified

understanding of VE, created a support network of informed mothers with practical skills in different tools of PVE.

Fink and Barakat (2013) look into the impact of violent extremism on development initiatives in South Asia and the importance of women's multidimensional contribution in mitigating the socio-cultural damages in the process. The study finds that in Bangladesh, family can play both a positive and negative role in one's susceptibility to radicalization. Specially, women are regarded to have the potential in shaping familial and social norms by promoting tolerance within the family and diminish the causal appeal to extremism. Drawing examples from different micro projects where mothers and families have been equipped with technical and knowledge tools to identify the early signifiers of radicalization. It recommends developing in-depth understanding on the local familial perspectives of a country along with mobilizing a safe socio-personal-professional network for collective empowerment of women.

Yamin and Yasmin (2020) draw from their experiences on participating in different stages of PVE initiative including peacebuilding and peacemaking and the influence as a woman leader by the virtue of being academic professionals of a Higher Education Institution. The authors find correlation between women's socio-financial agency and susceptibility to radicalization and discusses it in the context of the existing National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in Bangladesh. The study especially acknowledges the importance of familial dynamics in PVE and how mothers hold an important role in raising children as tolerant and responsible citizens, reducing the risk of radicalization in the long run. Additionally, the research also specifies the associated challenges of societal expectations that might come with the

positioning of mothers. The authors recommend that engagement of women in peacebuilding interventions would be feasible, only if the societal norms are challenged by prioritizing women's needs, meeting which would ensure the assertive agency of women as an influential leader in the society.

Considering the socio-cultural infrastructure of Bangladesh, and how mothers are placed in the heart of the family with traditional proximity to children in comparison to fathers, the Women Without Borders' Impact Report (2022) demonstrates the most evidential positive outcome till date in addressing the radicalization effort at the community level by engaging mothers as peace educators. The report under the project MothersSchools finds increased self-efficacy among the concerned mothers in better 'defending' against extremism both within the realms of family and society. The mothers under the study had broken the taboo of speaking on extremism as a sensitive issue, built prevention networks and increased resilience among the youths and communities, though the success have been limited only within the direct project beneficiaries of 113 mothers and associated indirect beneficiaries of the communities associated to the mothers in three neighborhoods of Dhaka.

The baseline findings of the study are that, amid the different events of violent extremism, especially after the Holey Artisan attack in 2016, the mothers gained some understanding of VE and were concerned about their children being radicalized. But their knowledge was vague or superficial, being received from the online and print media; Discussing violent extremism within the family and community had been a taboo being associated with the affected individuals bringing shame to the family, putting the family members in risk of imposed social marginalization and

safety where, at the end of the day, it was the mothers who would be blamed for their children's activities, making the mothers isolated, holding back from recognizing their strong agency as a peacemaker and help their children even if they could sense the negative changes in their offspring; Despite the closely knitted positioning of mothers, the often authoritarian and patriarchal family set up sees fathers as only the provider to the family, mothers unfortunately has to take over the role of emotional coordinator to the family members having a hard time of developing communicative parenting concepts, creating a gap between the mothers and grown up children; There is a grey area in understanding the hidden drivers of radicalization like domestic violence and violence against women, discussing about which is also highly discouraged as a socially collective norm of men having superior position and ownership of men, normalizing usage of violence against women as a 'disciplinary' approach; Lastly, there is a lack of understanding on how to interact with everyday societal drivers like unemployment, corruption, peer pressure, drug addiction, specially among the young adult sons of the family, who are developing their own superior agency as 'man' in a Bangladeshi society.

The final impact of the project are that, mothers have developed a nuanced understanding of different components of violent extremism like radicalization and recruitment etc.; The group dynamics provided by the MothersSchools prepared the mothers in overcoming the stigma of addressing tabooed topics of violent extremism and familial problems and develop confidence in building an open communicative familial interaction; Mothers have gained a clarified understanding of how the generational cycles of domestic and gender based violence against women plays as a pulling factor to radicalization and extremism and developed confidence in speaking up against abuse within and outside the family; Lastly, the mothers have developed a

support group of informed individuals through which they have been actively pursuing intervention actions based on their understanding of context-specific causal factors to violent extremism.

As the literature reviews indicates to the evidence that going beyond the conventional instrumentalization and over emphasis of the role of women as mothers might be binding women within a predefined typecast role of mothers. It is undeniable necessary to integrate gender-sensitive approach in structuring C/PVE programs in any country while exercising caution on solely imposing the responsibility of core actor in preventing radicalization and extremism on mothers. However, in specific country contexts like Bangladesh, the potential effectiveness of mothers' role in preventing violent extremism cannot be overlooked as found from the studies and reports by policymakers, practitioners, security actors, researchers.

Despite the research and project findings, the direct voices of the mothers themselves remain unheard amid the undeniably valuable insights and observations by practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and security professionals. Therefore, going beyond their figures as subject or beneficiary of any project, this research strives to fill the gap by amplifying the first-hand experience of the mothers for a meaningful insight of how they themselves understand their role in preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Conceptual Unpacking

Throughout the research I have I used four key concepts that are central to my understanding of the research topic: secularism, radicalization, Islamist militants and militancy, violent extremism.

3.1.1 Secularism

Copson (2019) and What Is Secularism? (n.d.) defines secularism as the separation of religious institutions from those of state and public institutions, where the religion would exist but not dominate the affairs of the state, with the state actors reciprocating similar approach. Secularism is meant to ensure that each individual enjoys the right to practice or not practice religion and lead life guided by their religious or non-religious faith in a voluntary manner according to individual's conscience, free from any coercion. This western scholarly understanding of secularism, as Khan (2017) observed, unfortunately, is misinterpreted by the general public in Bangladesh. Secularism translating as *dharma niropekkhota*, that is, *religious neutrality* has been interpreted in a negative nuance of secularism meaning absence or deviation from religion mostly because of different right-wing political parties politicizing the term by establishing the anti-Islamic connotation over the years. Additionally, there is a gap of intellectual discourse on secularism, suited to Bangla speaking audience and readers (Khan, 2017).

3.1.2 Radicalization

Leap and Young (2021), Hafez and Mullins (2015) and Prevention of Radicalisation (n.d.) defines radicalization as a gradual transformation that takes place in different phases where an individual or group indoctrinate a radical or extreme beliefs and ideologies, that make the individual or group

supporting the use of violence to realize a specific political or ideological goal. While the complex process of radicalization stems from social, political, cultural or financial grievances and accelerates through a pre-existing network of like-minded people, it may or may not lead to violence always.

3.1.3 Violent Extremism (VE)

While there is no universally agreed definition of Violent Extremism (VE) (Kkienerm, n.d.), Australian Government (n.d.) and Violent Extremism and Radicalisation (n.d.) define VE as the use of intimidation, fear, terror, or violence to act on their extreme ideological value to gain socio-political change. As this research discusses on religiously motivated violent extremism in the context of Bangladesh, my understanding of the phrase includes weaponizing the certain religious values and elements and using violence to impose those on people from that or other religious or non-religious faith to largely change the basis of state affairs which would be guided by strict religious principles instead of constitutional values.

3.1.4 Islamist Militants

As there is no official or internationally agreed upon definition of Islamist Militants, in interacting with this research, I understand Islamist Militants to be individuals who have been radicalized to an extreme interpretation of any religious texts (which is often selective and out of context) from the holy book of the religion of Islam, the Quran or Hadith, and use violence to impose that understanding of Islam on involuntary people who may or may not be believer of Islam or any religion itself, as the individual thinks that establishing the rule of Islam by using violence is the

only way to the Islamic promise of heaven in the life hereafter. In this study, I have interchangeably used extremist, militant and terrorist.

3.2 Theorization

This research would explore the role of mothers in PVE being guided by the following theoretical framework of mothering and motherhood, soft power approach and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development.

3.2.1 Mothering and Motherhood

The concept of motherhood has always been a central debate in interpreting women's positioning in society. While the general notion around motherhood being natural or biological has is mostly taken for granted, but the feminist school of though argues that this idea has rather been socio-culturally constructed (Silva, 1996; Cole and Renegar, 2023). Here, understanding the differences between mothering and motherhood is important to understand the hegemonic discourse around motherhood. Rich and Born (1976) defined motherhood as the relationship among woman, her reproductive power, her children, and the institution of patriarchal power which intends on keeping the above three elements under its control. In this context, mothering is the experiences defined by and centered around female (Jiao, 2019). Jiao (2019), O'Reilly (2010), Green (2004) and O'Reilly (2012) investigate motherhood in the backdrop of ideology, experience, identity, and agency. The lens of ideology structures motherhood through the existing socio-legal policies framed by discourse guided by patriarchy. For example, in Bangladesh, despite having no legal base, a common practice by immigration officials (mostly male) of international airport to inquire and

sometimes even impose restrictions on mothers travelling by themselves with children without the father being present. But again, at home, a common narrative that revolves around mothers shaping their everyday reality is that the responsibility of rearing and providing the children with all living amenities is 'naturally' shouldered by the mothers – this brings in the scope of understanding motherhood through the mothers' experiences. Coming to the third element of how the identity frames the sense of self of a mother, the example of guilt felt by mothers of not being able to meet the societal image of a 'perfect' mother while dealing with conflicts with their children can be explored (Rotkirch and Janhunen, 2010). The fourth aspect of understanding motherhood is agency which sheds light on the concept of power that society ascribes to mothers as an authority over their children. This agency wraps the experience of mothering in a package of a *socially engaged enterprise,* leading to the ideation of motherhood as a quest to bring in socio-cultural change in the greater society through political awareness and social activism.

3.2.2 Soft Power Approach

Wilson (2008) and Nye (2021) centered the ideation of power on the capacity and ability of influencing others with the intention of achieving the outcome as the former party has envisioned in a specific social situation. Understanding power involves specifying who has the power of doing what, correlating chain of events causing change in a given scope and domain. Now, the causal factors initiating changes in any context can be categorized as *coercive, structural, transactional and attractive*. When the behavioral approach involves coercion through structural or transactional manipulation of parties involved, where the target is stripped of choices by negative imposition or altering the possible consequence of positive sanctions, is called hard power. Soft power interaction involves mediated communication by one party with the intent of persuading and attracting the other party to voluntarily choose the outcome, which was targeted by the former

party in the first place. For example, when security forces discover an extremist outfit, they first seek to make them surrender through positive reinforcements like lesser punishment, incentives for family members etc. And when the soft approach does not work, the extremists are faced with hard power armed attacks by security forces to make the militants surrender, with the highly likely consequence of costing the latter's life.

3.2.3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development

In 1979, Russian born American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner formulated the Ecological Systems Theory where he proposed that development of an individual evolves with its interaction with the surrounding environments, described *as a set of nested structures* involving different systems of familial, cultural, social, economic, and political elements, influenced by different policies and programs (Urie Bronfenbrenner - Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, n.d.) Initially it was developed as a four-tier system: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem (Berry, 1995). The microsystem is the central focus for an individual with family, educational institutions, religious affiliations, friends and acquaintances, and the workplace interacting with the person most intimately. The mesosystem establishes the relationship of the individual with all these components in an extended form. The exosystem consists of different societal system and policies involving politics, economics, education, religion and the government which despite not being directly involved with the individual, still have an effect through its multidimensional interplay with other elements in the micro and mesosystem. The macrosystem with its influence through cultural and ethnic ideologies, values, beliefs and attitude overarchingly influences all other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Berry, 1995). Later on in 1986, Bronfenbrenner added another system called the chronosystem which explores the relational

dynamics between the individual and all other elements from all environments (Berry, 1995). The microsystem being the most influential level with environmental settings of closest proximity like family and school to a child, this study would approach to place mother at the center of the micro level, a core point of departure to influence the children and their actions at the macrolevel to bring a change in the society, perceived throughout the timing dimensional in the chronosystem in the backdrop of PVE initiatives in Bangladesh (Vallinkoski et. al., 2022).

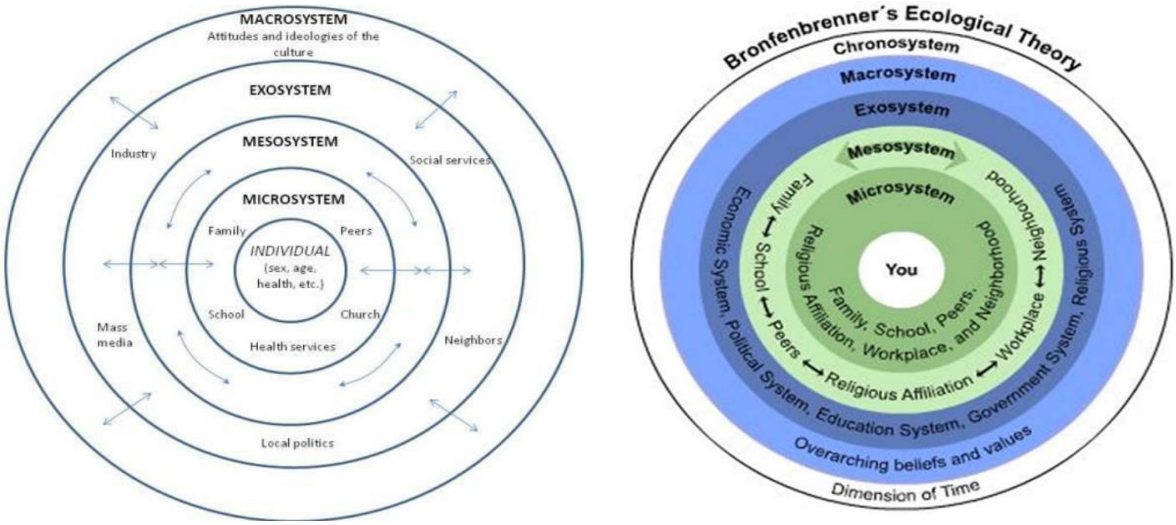

Fig 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986)

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Overview of the Methodology

In my research, I wanted to understand the mothers' thoughts and views on their role in preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh. To this end, I have used a qualitative approach with the methodology of semi-structured interviews. The respondents for this study were selected based on purposive and snowball sampling.

A total of 13 interviews were conducted initially. For this research, instead of geographical proximity, as relevance to the topic of the research was more relevant, centering Bangladesh as the research cite, the interviewees came from different locations across the country. Out of the 13, nine interviewees were mothers with different profiles associated with radicalization, violent extremism and preventing violent extremism. Five mothers had the experience of interacting with their sons and daughters who were found associated with different extremist organizations for some time. Sons of two mothers were returnees from Syria where they spent months in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). One mother was a facilitator of 'Tolerance, Respect & Peace Workshop' aimed at creating awareness among young students and professionals on radicalization, PVE, conflict transformation, peace, and civic education etc. under a local NGO. One mother was a religious leader who regularly conducts group sermon with women from different socio-religious background. Since the research aims to contribute to the knowledge of the practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders in development of an inclusive and gender-sensitive holistic PVE plans, two interviews were conducted with a C/PVE Expert from a renowned NGO and a government official who have previously been part of a CVE program between 2019 – 2022. Interestingly both of them were males. The last two research participants were a schoolteacher

mother, and a stay-at-home mother. None of them had any direct association to C/PVE or peacebuilding. Unfortunately, out of the five mothers of previously radicalized sons and daughters, two mothers to daughters and one mother to a son withdrew their consent for working and publishing their interviews. Therefore, finally, there were 10 interviews that have been used in this research.

The interviews were conducted in-person and via Google Meet and WhatsApp balancing the convenience of the participants. The platforms for social media were chosen as such that no recording is technically possible owing to the sensitivity and privacy of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in two languages of Bangla and English as per the comfort of the interviewees.

This research has been conducted with approval from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS). All the interviewees had been oriented with the rationale of the research as an academic research paper for fulfilling the requirement of MA degree. Informed consent about the voluntary participation was endured. And withdrawal of consent by three interviewees was also duly respected. Owing to the sensitivity of personal and professional information shared in the research, this dissertation would be requested to be kept confidential to ensure the safeguarding of the data which would be utilized only for academic knowledge development purposes.

4.2 My Positionality as a Researcher

I am a Bangladeshi Muslim woman, similar to most of my interviewees. Being a peacebuilding practitioner focusing on preventing violent extremism along with having personal experience of a

close family member falling into the trap of radicalization, I could relate to several of the interviewees as they recollected their encounters with radicalization and violent extremism. Additionally, my professional relevance in the field of peacebuilding and PVE facilitated my access to the initial interview participants, whose connections that I fostered and leveraged to connect to other interviewees with similar profiles. Hence, several times, I felt my positioning as an insider.

But that positioning was not always mirrored by my research interviewees. Being a Bangladeshi Muslim woman with a privileged social capital to pursue higher studies in a foreign country, I have felt my research participants to be skeptical about the justification of conducting research on their stories. They have been especially concerned about me not being married and childless despite coming of age according to the gendered norms in Bangladesh. They expressed concern regarding the objectivity of the research findings as they perceived that I would not be able to grasp their lived reality not being a mother or even in a current position of caregiver to any family members. In this backdrop, I could realize myself adjusting my tone of interaction and enquiry as an outsider.

Nonetheless, I tried to embrace my positionalities by utilizing my comprehensive understanding and observation coming from my personal and professional relevance to the interviewees as I exercised caution and maintained a strong objectivity devoid of my familial or personal interpretations in conducting the interviews and the research.

4.3 Limitations and Ethical Choices

This study faced several limitations in terms of data and information management. Because of the sensitivity of the personal information shared during the interviews, such online platforms were used where there is no technical scope of recording. So, taking notes during verbal communications became a bit overwhelming at times. Also, based on the same problem of sensitized data, few research participants withdrew their consent, a few days after the interviews were conducted. As it reduced the already brief sample size, the scope of using the findings for any comprehensive understanding would be limited. Additionally, along with the limited availability of literary works on this specific topic in the specific context of Bangladesh, language constraints also appeared during the interviews. With the research participants being more comfortable to respond in the native tongue Bangla, as I had to translate the question for many of the participants from English to Bangla, I felt that few questions might have lost its essence in the translation process.

In addressing these limitations, I took the ethical approach of Do-No-Harm principle (The Do-No-Harm Approach, Oxfam Novib, n.d) by requesting the Board of Examiners to keep my research paper confidential. Also, I have anonymized the names and locations of the research participants. Also, to get the best data amid the limitations, I was careful in managing socio-political expectations from the participants clearly communicating the research objective and scope of the study. To my knowledge, I have given the best efforts to maintain professionalism in conducting this social science research.

Chapter 5: Positioning and Strategies of Mothers by Mothers within Families and Communities in PVE

This chapter answers to the first sub-question of how the mothers themselves feel and find their positionality within the family and the communities and how they strategically interact in the context of their positioning when it comes to preventing violent extremism.

Delving into the experience and perceptions of the mothers about their positionality is that the mothers are certain of their agency as a mother to her children, and often having the command of authority over the children. As the mothers themselves grew up watching their mothers governing their life up until getting married and starting their own family, they have thought this cycle to be inherent when it comes to their children. But how the mothers pull off their authority to be able to direct the children's everyday chores depends on the age of their children. They have felt that, as a pre-teen, it was easier for them to be on their feet about every little aspect of the children. The kids would listen and rely on their mothers more to navigate or interpret their lives realities through the eyes of the mothers. Though in comparison to their daughters, sons were most of the time a bit hyperactive and bold in terms of or not abiding by each of the words of their mothers, the mothers feel that a gap usually starts to build between the sons and the mothers with their transitioning from pre-teen to teenager. Unless the mother is very proactive, even which does not help many times, the gap in understanding each other increases reciprocally to that of decreasing channels of communication as teenage sons' step into their 'manhood'. The mothers find that this ideation of manhood for their sons is structured by the societal-cultural construct of being tough and masochistic, diminishing the authority of the mothers in their sons' decision making on any issue. Interestingly, the experience of mothering to the daughters appears to be in a bit different dynamic.

While the mothers in general tend to ‘guide’ or know an update about their young adult or adult sons’ lives, when it comes to daughters, it is goes beyond guiding, rather directing their everyday course of actions throughout their preteen and teenage, as the mothers fins themselves continuously with the concern that their daughters might be behaving in such a way, that goes beyond the general norms of the society. So, even if the daughters transition out of teenage into a young adult, the mothers find themselves still holding on to that steer wheel of their daughters’ everyday lives. So, mothers position themselves as an inherently influential avatar with direct ability to structure the values and beliefs of their children, and habituate them to behave in a certain manner, depending on the age and gender of the children. But the nature of the mothers’ relationship changes over time with the age of their children, as they have lesser and lesser control over their sons but quite steady grasp of the life and activities of their daughters.

So in the context of Bangladesh, when it comes to discuss sensitive topics like the risk if radicalization, the mothers unconsciously but cautiously strategize their narratives based on the age and gender of their children. As the mothers feel that fostering a friendly communication would enable them to build trust with their sons and daughters, but, in the backdrop of patriarchal and conservative upbringing style of parents, the delivery of the narrative does not come out in the way the mother has envisioned. Depending on the response of the offspring, that attempt in talking through counter narratives against the risk of radicalization, the consequences of violent extremism may appear to be a bit passive-aggressive.

So, as the mothers believe in their agency that comes associated with the role of being a mother, they recognized the importance of popular narrative of ‘good parenting’ which they find as equivalent as to that of saying only ‘good mothering’ through interacting in an open-door policy

module with children to have their trust on the mothers, amid the harsh socio-economic realities of systematic instability, it might not be often possible for the mothers to stay 'approachable' or supportive in shaping the discourse of the lives of their children.

Being aware of the current developments around softer family dynamic of friendly and cooperative parents, the mothers try to strategize their interaction with their young adult children to be critical and conscious about socializing and navigating the world, both in-person and online, to stay alert of the possible alluring narratives of radicals and recruiters. The mothers want to foster a questioning culture among the parents, where the children can meet their curiosity from the wisdom of the mother by questioning the logic and rational regarding any issue. The mothers though think that it would be difficult to establish that model of communication given the general practice of discouraging children from raising their concern or query on any sensitive topic like radicalization, sexual harassment, or violent extremism in the local community context of Bangladesh. Both the mothers, C/PVE expert and the government official acknowledged to believe that indeed the first lesson of a child's life begins from the heart of the home, being imparted by the mother. So, a child is eventually bound to reflect their parents' values towards tolerance to diversity. Several interviewees actually echoed a similar example, of how they themselves had been indoctrinated in a passive aggressive mentality of non-tolerance and non-compassion towards people from religious minority; In their childhood, the research participants heard from their mothers that they should kill a red ant, because red ant is dangerous. Killing the red ant would not make Allah upset, as red ants are Hindus. On the contrary, as children the participants were discouraged from putting any harm on a black ant, as it is Muslim and hence not dangerous. Also, Allah would punish the children for killing a Muslim ant. Until few of the interviewees as a

mothers repeated the same story to their children, only then they realized how it is putting in the subconscious of the children that a Hindu or someone from another religion is dangerous, and it might be okay to hurt that person. So, after becoming conscious about these micro-narratives that they had been fed in their childhood, many mothers had created an alternative narrative of just going compassionate about ant insect or animal if those do not hurt the latter.

Chapter 6: Gender-specific Impacts, Dynamics, and Instrumentalization Risks in Mothers' Involvement in PVE

This chapter would respond to the second sub-question on the gender-specific impacts, dynamics, and the potential risks of instrumentalizing the role and positioning of the mothers in PVE interventions.

The research participants have observed and felt a unique outcome of their involvement in micro interventions in preventing radicalization in their family and community settings. Because of their 'inherent' command and authority over their children, and the proximity to the emotional and physical wellbeing, at least in an earlier age, they have felt that individuals have been more approachable ad receptive believing in the mothers' ability of doing-no-harm. The mothers felt that because of their nurturing approach, they have found their children or any other person from their circle of acquaintances to interact in an in-depth manner, opening at the most vulnerable condition. The perceived empathetic and supportive nuance of mothers have actually made the research participants realize that indeed mothers would have a completely different influence and acceptance coming from a person in their vulnerable or unstable stage, compared to that of any father figures, as they are perceived to be rigid and strict, going by the book to interact with others,

especially their children. Often, the fathers try to maintain this uptight bigger impression of tough personality to check and balance the ultimate figure of authority within the family, as the fathers themselves have experienced in their childhood.

So when it comes to mothers' involvement in preventing violent extremism, by first thwarting the radicalization attempt on their children, the children would turn to their mothers, fearing emotionally and physically violent backlash from their fathers. Often, the mothers are the first teachers of their children at home. So, being the most centrally positioned in an individual's life, mothers can impart a nuanced interpretation of the religious beliefs and values and thus from an early age provide peace education to the children in their formative years, reducing their risk of being intolerant, one-tracked and conservative in their later life, making them less susceptible to the drivers of radicalization.

However, the research participants also stressed on how in Bangladesh, the gender dynamics based on the social and cultural norms and practices have actually been setting the agenda for women in carrying out their multifaceted roles as women of multiple responsibilities. The gendered burden of meeting the expectations of family welfare and childcare together with keeping the house glued together, greatly affects their time and mobility in any other initiated engagements beyond=d the typecast familial arrangements. Also, with many religious norms being conservatively interpreted to restrict the agency of women, mothers at times can experience their agency being reduced to their womanhood by the male member of the family and community, which often times turn out to be their husbands, brothers, in-laws, the son in question and sometimes the neighbors. This stance definitely puts mothers in a difficult position to actually interact and influence the wellbeing

of her children vulnerable to radicalization. Again, taking the complete absence of father in parenting to be granted, which is a common practice in Bangladesh, instrumentalizes mothers as passive surveillance agent, reinforcing gender typecast of only an observer and informant, rather than decision-taker. This many times leads to added societal expectations out of their existing roles as mothers, failing to meet which makes the mothers vulnerable to sharing and blaming of being a failed mother by the family members and the community. To avoid these pitfalls, the unique experiences resources and circumstances of the mothers need to be recognized in an autonomous gendered and sensitive lens, to frame their involvement to PVE.

Chapter 7: Experiences and Best Practices of Mothers to Integrate in Comprehensive P/CVE Strategies

This chapter delves into finding response to the third sub-question on the experiences of the mothers on the best practices that they have learnt or observed among themselves and other mothers, which needs to be identified and communicated to the concerned policy designers and C/PVE experts for ensuring a sustainable and impactful intervention in Bangladesh.

The research participants shared that their experiences of interacting with their sons and daughters when they previously fell into the trap of radicalization or briefly joint any extremist organizations, they found that they were very brave as they were ready to do anything to protect their children. The mothers found the online resources on developing their understanding of radicalization and deradicalization to be overwhelming. With information overload and at times language barrier, with reading materials mostly written in foreign languages like English, and the scarcity of PVE tools available in Bangla, the mothers would turn to there most trusted circle, usually consisting

of other mothers, and try to decipher the advice found online. Though they were determined to help their children coming back to normal life, the trial-and-error process felt strenuous on them, casing them problem with their mental health, which again, is a very non-existing concept in Bangladesh. The mothers found that the behavioral protocol by the security officials were actually triggering for not only the individual-at-risk, but also for the mothers to trust on the state to actually help their children.

All the research participants have felt and observed that the government has lost its interest on mobilizing PVE interventions. In an attempt to globally showcase the country as a success story in terms of thwarting extremism through rigorous countermeasures in the earlier years, the government is ignoring the dormant risk of another phase of radicalization and extremism in the near future. The interviewees discussed hearing about a school for mothers by an NGO where the mothers first-hand learnt about PVE. The research participants emphasized that the government should forge partnerships and collaborations with civil society organizations, community leaders and all stakeholders to share their logistical and knowledge resources to scale up such interventions for involving the mothers in PVE. This would not only benefit the mothers, but also the government in developing a positive impression on the international community that the government of Bangladesh is proactive in checking and balancing the risk of extremism, making it a good apace for feasible and long-term diplomatic or financial investments.

The mothers restressed the importance of understanding about the structural and gendered hindrances in active involvement of mothers in C/PVE. Addressing discriminatory social practices and norms, the C/PVE interventions should accelerate focus on building capacity of mothers

through different training opportunities, not only in a tokenistic manner, but ensuring that it reaches a wider network of women, going beyond the usual notion of mothers or women being 'beneficiaries' of certain interventions. The mothers want to change the narrative that it is the state and nonstate actors who would reap the benefits of a community free from radicalization and extremism in the near future, with women and mothers being active peacebuilding agents from the hearts of each house of the country. The research participants also pointed out that so far, any interventions on PVE actually either include a homogenous group of participants who are educated with a comfortable social capital. The NGOs, security officials, PVE practitioners and policymakers need to understand and address this disconnect for effective implementation of any countering and preventing violent extremism initiatives in Bangladesh.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Through exploring the strategic positioning of the mothers in their own perception and understanding, addressing the gender-specific impacts and also discussing about the potential risk of instrumentalizing the role of women and mother – learning about the different experiences and backgrounds of the research participants, most of whom are mothers with direct experience of facing the evil of radicalization and extremism for protecting their loved ones - This research has looked in-depth into the role of mothers in preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh.

The research findings answering the central question of 'What is the role of mothers in deradicalization and preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh?' can be comprehended from the following table:

Role of Mothers in Preventing Violent Extremism in Bangladesh		
How do mothers position themselves and strategize within their families and communities in PVE?	What is the gender-specific impacts, dynamics, and potential risks of instrumentalizing mothers' involvement in PVE?	How can the experiences and best practices of mothers in preventing violent extremism be leveraged to effectively integrate their involvement in the development of comprehensive and sustainable P/CVE strategies?
Mothers have a sense of authority and command over their children within families.	Mothers are perceived as more approachable and receptive due to their nurturing approach.	Mothers rely on their own experiences and support from other mothers.
Control over children varies based on their age and gender.	Social and cultural norms and gendered expectations limit mothers' agency.	Accessible resources and government interest are limited.
Mothers feel more in control during the pre-teen years.	Instrumentalization of mothers reinforces gender stereotypes.	Government partnerships with civil society organizations are crucial.
Communication gaps and understanding issues emerge with sons transitioning into their teenage years.	Mothers face challenges in interacting and influencing their children's well-being.	Capacity-building initiatives should go beyond tokenistic approaches.
Daughters are continuously guided and directed by their mothers.	Autonomy and specific circumstances of mothers should be recognized.	Inclusive interventions are necessary to involve women as active peacebuilding agents.
Mothers strategize their narratives on sensitive topics based on age and gender.		Recognition of mothers as key actors in preventing violent extremism is important.

Table 1: Research Findings on Role of Mother in Preventing Violent Extremism in Bangladesh

Based on the research findings from the interview with mothers from diverse socio-political backgrounds, C/PVE practitioners and Government Officials, this research recommends the following for developing a holistic countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) strategical framework:

1. Training programs should be designed for building extended capacity of mothers in nuanced understanding of different components of C/PVE and peacebuilding. Additionally, the scope of financial empowerment should be extended and accelerated to build socio-economic resilience of mothers in no-barred participation in the PVE process.

2. A discourse on understanding the diverse socio-cultural dynamics of the mothers should be developed to tailor context specific PVE interventions in order to accommodate the experiences and needs of the mothers. For example: Establishing community-led networks for sharing the knowledge of best practices.

3. Ensuring meaningful engagement of mothers going beyond the governmental-NGO tokenism should be ensured by acknowledging and considering mothers' perspectives in any collaborative intervention among the government, civil society organizations and community groups is essential.

Appendix i: Consent Form

Assalamualikum! I am Sumaiya Tanim. I am from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Currently I am studying Masters in Development Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam, in the Hague, Netherlands. For the completion of my degree, I am doing a research paper on understanding the role of mothers in preventing violent extremism in Bangladesh, from the mothers themselves.

I express my gratitude and appreciation for taking the time to consent for this interview. The interviews would be around 45 minutes to an hour. Please know that, at any time in the interview, your comfort is my utmost priority. And I understand that the information you would be sharing with me is very personal and sensitive for yourself and for your family members. Please be assured about the safeguarding of all information pertaining to you as your name and location will be anonymized. No recording of the interview would be made. I would take notes manually in my notebook. **If you feel uncomfortable at any point of the interview, you can withdraw your consent for the interview at any time.** All data collected and information retrieved would be utilized only for academic knowledge development purposes.

If you have any more questions regarding the research, usage of research data, or concern of any sort, please do not hesitate to contact me anytime. Thank you so much!

Appendix ii: List of Semi-structured Interview Participants

List of Research Participants						
Number	**Name**	**Relevance to Research Topic**	**Sex**	**Offspring**	**Profile**	**Consent Status**
1	❖	Mother	Female	Son	Child Previously Radicalized	✓
2	❖	Mother	Female	Son		✓
3	❖	Mother	Female	Son		✓
4	❖	Mother	Female	Son		✓
5	❖	Mother	Female	Son		✓
6	❖	Mother	Female	Son		✓
7	❖	Mother	Female	Son	ISIS Returnee	✓
8	❖	Mother	Female	Son		Withdrawn
9	❖	Mother	Female	Daughter	Child Previously Radicalized	✓
10	❖	Mother	Female	Daughter		Withdrawn
11	❖	Mother	Female	Daughter		Withdrawn
12	❖	C/PVE Expert	Male	N/A	Direct C/PVE Interventions	✓
13	❖	Government Official	Male	N/A	Government Assigned Official to C/PVE Programming	✓

Appendix iii: Semi-structured Questionnaire Template

1) Introduction: Ice Breaker

2) As a mother, how do you view your role and interact with your family members in PVE?

3) How do you strategize your engagement with your children, specially your son both within the familial and community setting to prevent radicalization?

4) How do you communicate with your children and community members to establish trust in addressing radicalization risks?

5) How impactful do you think is mothers' involvement in PVE if compared to other actors?

6) What are the social and cultural dynamics that influence you as a mother?

7) What potential risks or challenges arise when mothers' involvement is instrumentalized, and how does it affect their agency and effectiveness in preventing radicalization?

8) Can you share any experience of best practices that you might have exercised in preventing violent extremism in your family or community?

9) Do you think your experiences and practices would resonate with fellow mothers if scaled up and replicated in broader P/CVE strategies?

10) Do you have any recommendations for the practitioners or security officials to integrate mothers' involvement for effective and sustainable P/CVE strategies in Bangladesh?

N.B: In case of the two interviews with a male C/PVE Expert and a government official, the essence of the question remained the same with only the tone and tense of questioning changed from first person to third person rhetoric. For example: For question no. 2, "As a mother, how do you view your role and interact with your family members in PVE?", instead of asking the view as a mother, the question was asked in third person, "How do mothers perceive their role as a mother within families and communities, specially in a PVE setting?"

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