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A Kofi Annan Foundation Initiative

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# URBAN YOUTH BUILDING PEACE IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA:

Key drivers of violent extremism and ways to prevent it

Research Summary  
May 2021



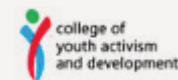




**V**iolent extremism (VE) among youth from urban areas in South and Southeast Asia has been on the rise in recent years. The emergence of ISIS in the Bangladeshi context, for example, has shifted recruitment strategies of violent extremist organisations from their previous focus on rural and religious educational institutions to urban and secular educational institutions. As recent attacks between 2015 and 2020 in Bangladesh and Pakistan have shown, universities have become fruitful locations for recruitment and students in the main cities have engaged in violent acts.

The Extremely Together initiative of the Kofi Annan Foundation, the Kristiyano-Islam Peace Library (KRIS) in the Philippines, the College of Youth Activism and Development (CYAAD) in Pakistan and the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) in Bangladesh have conducted extensive research among young people in urban areas across South and Southeast Asia.

**The research aims to uncover how and why urban youth may be vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist organisations, and to identify and explore potential entry points to engage young people on the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). For full methodology see page 14.**



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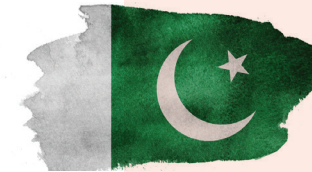


This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union in the context of the 'Leading the way to Peace - Youth Together for Social Cohesion' action. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of the Kofi Annan Foundation and its partners and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

Front cover image courtesy of Extremely Together Pakistan.

## Why South and Southeast Asia?

The Global Terrorism Index 2020 showed that South Asia had the highest average impact from terrorism in 2019. Additionally, in the same year, Pakistan and the Philippines were in the top 10 of countries most impacted by terrorism. Meanwhile, Bangladesh saw an increase in terrorist activity in 2019, with six attacks claimed by ISIS.



**In Pakistan,** the historic State narrative of 'building a Muslim majority country' to consolidate state power after the independence from India, as well as the Islamization project carried out by the military dictatorship in the 1980s have induced the inclusion of religion in every aspect of private and public life. This has resulted in the spread of Islamic vigilantism across the country and a divisive narrative.

Furthermore, 64% of the population is below 30 years of age, making Pakistan one of the youngest countries in South Asia. Urban youth have adopted a worldview that is restricted to 'us' versus 'them', reinforced by social pop culture that glorifies violence and toxic masculinity. This worldview held by many urban youths creates an opening for violent extremist (VE) organisations to recruit them.



**In the Philippines,** the challenges regarding VE differ between regions. Some regions such as Lanao del Sur have seen protracted conflict, combined with discontent about government failure to rehabilitate, making it fertile ground for recruitment into VE groups. Other regions such as Zamboanga and Sulu have been the site of armed attacks and crimes against civilians and law enforcement, with some communities and families suffering from underdevelopment and displacement due to VE acts which exacerbate vulnerability. Davao has long been the target of communist insurgents and recent deadly attacks by other VE groups.

The National Capital Region has seen a struggle for housing for informal settlers for decades. The discrimination against these informal communities has increased during the recent government's war on drugs, of which they have been a target. The insecurities due to the various prolonged and unresolved conflicts allow VE narratives and groups to take hold more easily since they seem to offer a sense of belonging, and financial and personal security and stability. Additionally, the prevalence of violence in society desensitizes children to violence from a young age.



**In Bangladesh,** violent extremism can be traced back to the country's independence in 1971. In the first decade after independence, the country witnessed left-wing extremism by various groups. In the 1990s, veterans of the anti-Soviet fight in Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh, which induced a complex coordinated attack by two left-wing extremist groups.

1 Global Terrorism Index 2020 p. 8

2 US Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Bangladesh

From 2007, a rise in Islamist anger led to the creation of Jamatul Muslemin, which later transformed into Ansarulah Bangla Team (ABT) and Ansar-al-Islam (AI). These groups started targeting middle-class and upper-middle-class urban youth for recruitment. AI began referring to itself as the Bangladeshi wing of Al Qaeda (AQIS) from 2015. Alongside this, ISIS formally declared its presence in Bangladesh in 2015. These groups have conducted various violent attacks, of which the Holey Artisan Attack in 2016 claimed the most lives when five young attackers killed 29 people.

As the difference in historical context indicates, the factors influencing recruitment of young people into VE organisations and corresponding avenues of youth engagement on PVE require a contextual understanding of the history and community as a critical step before devising appropriate engagement strategies.

**This summary report will highlight both the differences and similarities between the various countries and the influence this research will have on our approach to PVE in the region.**

## COVID-19

The pandemic has been capitalised on by the various VE groups in all countries, framing the pandemic as the 'wrath from God' because of, for instance, supporting western narratives, or women dressing immodestly.

Other conspiracy theories about the US spreading the virus to weaken foreign economies have also been disseminated through online platforms.

Additionally, the restrictions put in place by all countries to curb the spread of infections have resulted in job and income losses. This has added to insecurities surrounding employment for urban youth in most places. These insecurities foster an environment where VE narratives can take hold.

The threat of social media and its usage to affect young peoples' decision making and recruitment to VE groups has also increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has rapidly increased digitalisation and can leave young people feeling isolated and frustrated. Such feelings combined with a rapid increase in activities on the internet by especially young people makes them more vulnerable to VE narratives and recruitment.

Lastly, the security forces in charge of enforcing the various measures against COVID-19 have caused uproar by using significant force, which has sometimes been lethal. The combination of curbing rights and excessive use of force can fuel discontent with the government, which can be capitalised on by VE groups.



## Push & Pull Factors

Push factors in violent extremism (VE) are structural conditions determined by socio-economic, political, and cultural characteristics. In contrast, pull factors are those factors that attract individuals towards extremist ideologies.

The drivers of violent extremism are a complex combination of push and pull factors, which differ from one individual to the next. The research indicates the prevalence of the following push-and-pull factors in the region that may attract urban youth to VE:

### Divisive Narratives

Narratives propagated by the State that frame struggles as 'us' versus 'them' normalise otherization. It is this 'otherization' that is also often used by VE groups. Especially young people growing up around such narratives can more easily identify with the narratives used by VE groups.

The research found that in Pakistan, the narrative has been a Muslim nation struggling with an existential threat from the West. In Bangladesh, the political discourse has framed different national identities as a struggle between Bengali and Islamic nationalism. In Pakistan, particularly, the State has glorified notions of martyrdom and selflessness to maintain a masculine image, for example, among soldiers, their families and the wider public. These kinds of narratives encourage young men and women to imagine themselves as the nation's saviours by glorifying the use of violence to defeat enemies of Islam and Pakistan.

**Such a dichotomy of 'us versus them' or 'good versus evil' has fuelled populist narratives.**

In the Philippines, such narratives have been used by charismatic leaders, including certain religious leaders who have spread religious teachings that promote exclusivity for their members.

Such a dichotomy of 'us versus them' or 'good versus evil' has fuelled populist narratives. It provides entry points for extremist groups to influence youth consciousness, especially through popular media such as Facebook.

## Pop Culture & Social Media

The availability of content related to violent extremism can lead to vulnerabilities for recruitment. Many VE groups have an active presence on social media platforms. This, combined with a social media-induced increase in hate speech, fake news, and incitation to violence, makes social media a powerful tool in the hands of recruiters for VE groups.

For instance, in Bangladesh, most of the recruitment for VE groups has taken place online, with over 100 secret Facebook accounts used for recruitment, and 82% of arrested violent extremists recruited online. In Pakistan, the research found that women convey a stronger influence on social media than men. Also, their accounts have more followers, and more people engage with their posts.

Recent research conducted by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) suggests that women are more likely to be radicalised online, while men are mostly radicalised offline. This combined with the finding in Pakistan could have a snowball effect on the recruitment of women.

**82% of arrested violent extremists in Bangladesh recruited online.**

VE-related content is not limited to social media. The research in the Philippines and Pakistan found that news reporting lacks accuracy and transparency, thus leaving it open to manipulation. Additionally, all research found that VE-related content can also be found in TV shows, where violence in the name of ideologies is glorified. In Pakistan, participants pointed to a very popular Turkish TV show aired on the state television network, which glorifies a Turkish military general for bringing back Islamic glory while he is shown invading and killing.

## Governance Failures & Lack of Socio-economic Opportunities

The research found that in all three countries, the lack of opportunities for young people to gain meaningful employment, corruption within State institutions, and a lack of the rule of law and adherence to human rights fuels insecurities and discontent within urban youth.

In the Philippines, the lack of acceptable resolutions to historical injustices, such as the struggle for self-determination in Jolo, erodes young peoples' trust in the government. In Pakistan and the Philippines, crackdowns by the security forces and the suppression of dissent were also found as particular factors that can drive young people to be more susceptible to joining violent extremist groups.

More specifically, frustration manifests among educated youth who, after tertiary education, are unable to guarantee employment. This lack of job opportunities is exacerbated by the fact that employment status is tied to being an adult, and without a job, these young people, for example, cannot get married.

These interconnected insecurities related to (un)employment and perceived injustice by the State can drive young people to engage in violent extremism. Furthermore, financial and material incentives may be a pull factor, especially where governance failures mean that young people lack employment opportunities or feel insecure.

## Gender Aspects of Recruitment

The research in Bangladesh and the Philippines found that gender stereotypes are utilised in recruitment by VE organisations. Typical stereotypes such as the masculine identity revolving around being a good father, husband and provider are used to attract young men. For women, the identity of a devoted wife with a sense of duty and loyalty towards her husband is used to lure them into VE organisations.

Some women were documented to have joined VE groups for protection if they were, for instance, being harassed by men in their community. Such gender stereotypes and gender violence were thought to be push factors in all target areas.

**Women are often seen by security forces as victims and not perpetrators and can easily avoid detection.**

Researchers in Bangladesh found that female participants had less awareness about VE than their male counterparts. This lack of knowledge can be exploited by VE groups, making women more vulnerable to recruitment. Additionally, VE groups have emphasised recruiting women and family members. Women are often seen by security forces as victims and not perpetrators and can easily avoid detection. Recruiting within families ensures more secrecy for VE groups since family members will be more invested in non-detection.

Importantly, women are not merely passively drawn into VE organisations. The Philippines' research found that some women join VE groups for the sense of empowerment by assuming roles that are usually undertaken by men, such as carrying arms. In Bangladesh, female empowerment is also used as a narrative for recruitment. Female recruiters convey the ideals of gender equality as a strategy to recruit other women, painting them a picture of empowerment if joining the organisation. In all three countries, the research found that women play an active role in disseminating extremist narratives and recruitment into VE organisations.

<sup>3</sup> <https://f.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2725/files/2017/08/Women-Gender-and-Daesh-Radicalisation.pdf> pp. 66-67



## Discrimination & Minority Persecution

Those with shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion are susceptible to the grand narratives by VE groups, who usually propose a simple solution. All researchers found that discrimination and marginalisation of certain parts of society can push young people to join VE organisations. In Pakistan, different religious minorities face different forms of persecution, such as forced conversions of Hindu girls in Sindh Province and the use of blasphemy laws against the Christian minority.

**Discrimination and marginalisation of certain parts of society can push young people to join VE organisations.**

In Bangladesh, the tertiary education system, which is comprised of four different types of institutions, is discriminatory between students. Students from the various institutions are treated differently in the job market, with the private universities being prioritised. Furthermore, participants pointed out that especially the Madrasah education system is isolated from the mainstream education system, which leaves young people feeling oppressed, alienated, and isolated, a point that researchers in the Philippines also identified. Additionally, students in Bangladesh emphasised that there is a notable gap between all the types of education, which adds to increasing intolerance and sectarianism at university campuses. Within educational institutions, political marginalisation and repression were found to be some of the major structural motivators for young people to turn to extremist ideologies.

## Weak Youth Participation

Researchers in the Philippines, Bangladesh and Pakistan found that the lack of participation by young people in local structures such as communities or the decision-making process in universities serves as a push factor for violent extremism. The inclusion of young people fosters a sense of belonging and ownership of their communities and universities, which falls away without opportunities for meaningful participation. A lack of sense of belonging and purpose was identified as a pull factor for young people to join VE groups.

Additionally, the Philippines and Bangladesh research found that role models play an important role in young peoples' decision-making and behaviour. Role models can use this influence to encourage youth participation and foster a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the family can be an important support system to allow young people to build confidence and learn alternative narratives. Participation in a family unit can encourage and be an example for young people to participate in their wider communities.



Above: Image courtesy of Extremely Together Philippines

# Entry points to engage with young people on Preventing Violent Extremism

Preventing violent extremism requires a holistic approach, combining activities at the individual, community, and state level to provide conditions that can counter the push and pull factors described above. The research has identified some common approaches, as well as context specific methods.

For effective PVE implementation, a wide range of these measures will have to be implemented.

## 1. Fostering Youth Participation

The research in the region agrees that one of the most important approaches to PVE is to engage young people through various means. Firstly, to involve young people in decision-making. This can be decision making at the national or local level, or decision making within their universities. Such participation will help give young people a sense of belonging and ownership over their spaces.

Furthermore, youth-led dialogues and discussion forums can be effective to create awareness and foster tolerance, as well as function as a safe space where young people can share their narratives. Such dialogues could be effective especially at universities where not only many young people are enrolled, but where extremist ideologies have been spread both in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Additionally, all research agreed that the school curriculum must be reformed to include subjects such as: human rights, critical thinking, ethics, culture, and sociology.

Another way of engaging young people would be through engaging them in community development projects. Researchers in the Philippines and Pakistan found that this would give youth the opportunity to build relationships and community cohesion while also contributing to social change. Various other activities would be possible especially at universities such as sport activities, which could function as an effective way of bringing students from different backgrounds together.

**One of the most important approaches to PVE is to engage young people through various means.**

## 2. Ensuring Fundamental Rights

All the regions point to the importance of awareness of and adherence to human and fundamental rights. The Pakistani research highlighted that PVE action needs to highlight the human rights abuses against vulnerable groups and include human rights discourse to raise awareness and educate young people. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, the research found that inclusion of parents and teachers into education about human rights, PVE and critical thinking would be essential. In the Philippines and Bangladesh participants in the research highlighted that the State must be held accountable for respecting, promoting, and fulfilling human rights and other fundamental rights. Particularly the security forces should be guided by human rights laws in their conduct.

**All regions point to the importance of awareness of and adherence to human and fundamental rights.**

## 3. Sustaining Youth Networks

To build sustainable PVE programmes, it is essential to build more localised, context specific programmes. These programmes could draw learnings from the local cultural values that promote co-existence, tolerance, and respect for diversity. Such programmes could include dialogue forums for youth on various topics such as peacebuilding and community development, establishing support networks through youth engagement and collaboration with the wider community, cultural activities which can increase social cohesion. Bangladeshi students and Filipino experts highlighted that mentoring of young people and using role models would help build multi-generational relationships and motivate young people to engage with their community on issues related to PVE.

**To build sustainable PVE programmes, it is essential to build more localised, context specific programmes.**

## 4. Enabling Socio-economic Alternatives

Providing opportunities for employment and education are an important part of PVE action. In Pakistan, participants thought that civil society organisations can play a vital role by entering public-private partnerships, such as the Dream Foundation in Karachi which built a school. This has provided both community engagement as well as employment opportunities. In the Philippines, participants pushed for the availability of a comprehensive programme and resources by the State to meet socio-economic needs of young people.

**Providing opportunities for employment and education are an important part of PVE action.**



## 5. Promoting Gender Equality

Gender-specific issues must be considered in PVE action, as the use of stereotypes in recruitment can make men, and especially women, vulnerable. Gender-responsive programming can raise awareness of the diverse push and pull factors that are used to target men and women. Gender-responsive programming must also take account of the societal context, for instance in Bangladesh, the research showed that 80% of women and 57% of men found that their community was not fair or inclusive. In this context the non-inclusiveness of society can make people vulnerable to recruitment by VE groups. Additionally, aside from women, particular attention must be given to the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and intersex community (LGBTQI) since they are the frequent targets of VE groups' attacks.

**Gender-responsive programming can raise awareness of the diverse push and pull factors that are used to target men and women.**

## 6. Strengthening Government Engagement

Engagement with local government and security forces on youth-based narratives in the context of VE, as well as training local government officials on PVE action can improve the governance and accountability of government. Additionally, Bangladesh research highlighted the need for national coordination of PVE action, since this would allow all stakeholders to assemble and work together which is not the case now.

**Engagement with local government and security forces on youth-based narratives in the context of VE, as well as training local government officials, can improve governance.**

## 7. Increasing Media Engagement

Extremist organisations have organised ways to disseminate their messaging using various tools and platforms. In PVE action, these same tools and platforms must be utilized to spread alternative – not only to counter – messages, raise awareness and combat hate speech. The most effective tools and platforms are interlinked with local context and communities: For instance, in Pakistan the privatisation of news outlets provides an opportunity to engage with media outlets and journalists to disseminate information that can help PVE. Alternatively, in Bangladesh, the focus must lie on social media platforms where much of VE recruitment takes place. While in the Philippines the lack of accurate and transparent reporting, including coverage of conflict, can affect perceptions and should be targeted as part of a PVE strategy as well as using social media to spread peaceful narratives.

**Platforms must be utilized to spread alternative – not only to counter – messages, raise awareness and combat hate speech.**

## 8. Including Faith-based Leaders & Organisations

In all three research areas faith-based leaders are important figures since they have massive following both online and offline. This influence could be leveraged to debunk interpretations of religious texts that seek to legitimise violence and discrimination and promote empathy and interfaith harmony. PVE actions should further include interfaith activities to foster solidarity and understanding.

**The influence of faith-based leaders could be leveraged to debunk interpretations of religious texts that seek to legitimise violence and discrimination.**



Above: Image courtesy of Rupantar

## The way forward

This research is shaping the work of Extremely Together in South and Southeast Asia, by giving us insight into both regional similarities, and context specific differences for urban youth recruitment into violent extremist groups and PVE action.

The broad regional similarities across urban centres in Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines show that there is a need for PVE programming which takes a holistic approach, including engaging young people in decision making, youth-led actions such as discussion forums, gender sensitivity, government engagement, training on fundamental rights and tolerance, and media strategies.

However, the contextual differences also highlight the importance of adapting locally to emerging challenges, which can be done impactfully through local youth-led action as a sustainable model for PVE programmes. Additionally, this research allows the various projects to learn from each other's contexts and approaches to PVE.

### About the research

The research was conducted during 2020 by the Kofi Annan Foundation and its partners, KRIS in the Philippines, CYAAD in Pakistan and GCERF in Bangladesh with the support of the European Union in the context of the 'Leading the way to peace ' Youth Together for Social Cohesion' action.

The research consisted of literature review as well as a survey, focused group discussions and in-depth interviews with young people under 30 and experts in the field of PVE.

In the Philippines, the focus was on five urban areas namely: The City of Marawi, the municipality of Jolo in Sulu, Zamboanga City, Davao City, and the National Capital Region (NCR). 193 young people filled out the online questionnaire, all educated to at least high-school level, and 14 in-depth interviews with activists and experts in the field of VE and PVE were conducted.

In Bangladesh, 400 students across 54 higher education institutions in Dhaka filled out a questionnaire, and interviews were conducted with 34 students and 12 teachers and experts in the field of VE and PVE.

In Pakistan, 10 key informant interviews were conducted with youth activists, researchers and PVE practitioners from the urban target areas: Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Islamabad. Furthermore, focus group discussions engaged a total of 69 young people through: three focus group discussions with Hindu and Christian youth from Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore, two focus groups with male and female students from Karachi, Islamabad, and Peshawar, one focus group discussion with PVE practitioners from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – the area most affected by VE and radicalisation in Pakistan – and one focus group discussion with women PVE practitioners and activists from multiple urban areas of Pakistan.

## About the Partners

### KOFI ANNAN FOUNDATION

**The Kofi Annan Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organization** that promotes better global governance and strengthens the capacities of people and countries. We want a world where no one is left behind, democratic principles and the rule of law are upheld, and divides are bridged through dialogue and international cooperation.

Learn more: [www.kofiannanfoundation.org](http://www.kofiannanfoundation.org)

### EXTREMELY TOGETHER

**Extremely Together is a youth-led peacebuilding initiative** by the Kofi Annan Foundation. Extremely Together started with a network of ten young leaders, chosen by Kofi Annan, all with proven track-records in preventing and countering violent extremism in their countries.

The Initiative has then established local chapters in Somalia, Uganda, Pakistan, and the Philippines with more in development. Extremely Together brings young leaders from around the world together to learn from each other, build peace and prevent violent extremism – globally and in their communities – by emphasising positive values and civic action.

Learn more: [www.extremelytogether.org](http://www.extremelytogether.org)

### THE KRISTİYANO-ISLAM PEACE LIBRARY (KRIS) IN THE PHILIPPINES

**KRIS is a non-profit organization based in the Philippines** that aims to promote peace through education by empowering young people to become pillars of peace in their own families, schools, and communities. KRIS commits to developing Filipino youth by building avenues that cultivate a cycle of peace and empowerment. The organization aims to strengthen the networks between the youth and its fellow CSOs through different projects, campaigns, and exhibits to showcase unity in the country despite differences between individual Filipinos.

Learn more: <https://www.krisforpeace.org/>

### THE COLLEGE OF YOUTH ACTIVISM AND DEVELOPMENT (CYAAD) IN PAKISTAN

**The creation of CYAAD is a bold step to empower Pakistani youth** by providing them with opportunities of education, technical training, and broad scale engagement. CYAAD is dedicated to contributing to poverty alleviation, positive local engagement of Pakistani youth in the political system, imparting education and technical training to encourage entrepreneurship and social development, as well as to counter extremism and radicalization (leading to ethnic and religious intolerance).

Learn more: <https://www.cyaad.org.pk/>

### THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE FUND (GCERF) IN BANGLADESH

**GCERF is a global fund that strengthens community resilience** by supporting local initiatives to address the drivers of violent extremism. GCERF has been active in Bangladesh since 2016 to support local, community level initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against violent extremist agendas.

Learn more: <https://www.gcerf.org/bangladesh/>





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