EXPLORING WOMEN'S
VOICES

WOMEN IN CONFLICT ZONES: THE PAKISTAN STUDY

*Community Conversations
in Balochistan and Swat*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN · PAKISTAN · INDIA

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Women experience conflict and militarised situations differently. Physical safety is uppermost in their mind, including safety from sexual and gender-based violence as well as violence in the home. Protracted conflict lowers trust in state institutions and isolates women in their communities. This is exacerbated by the combined impact of patriarchies at home and outside. Corruption is regarded as so pervasive it is unremarkable. What concerns women more is access to justice; there are many barriers to this, some of which were mitigated by the work of local human rights organisations. Change is successfully strategised through dialogue that engages government, the security sector and civil society, taking on board women's views and giving equal importance to national and human security.

One respondent said that she and her husband had to leave Swat physically: "We received numerous threats from the Taliban who announced our names on FM Radio, posters accusing us of obscenity appeared out of nowhere, our Centers for skills training were attacked and the machines stolen. One day the Taliban announced on radio that 'they think they are in Islamabad but our men will get them.' We received threatening phone calls asking us to give a newspaper statement announcing our repentance. Our relatives also implored us, saying their lives are also in danger. During those days, the Taliban used to chop off people's heads so we published a statement/apology."

PROCESS OF DOCUMENTING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

WRN Pakistan chose to focus on Swat and Balochistan because conflict is ongoing in both locations, allowing a rare contemporaneous glimpse of the impact of conflict on women's lives. Dr. Saba Gul Khattak and Dr. Nazish Brohi undertook the project on WRN's behalf. Conflicts in both sites have historic underpinnings and both have been affected by the "War on Terror." In Swat, the conflict is relatively contained both in terms of its location as well as the number of conflict parties (Tehrik-e-Taliban and the army). In Balochistan, multiple conflicts play out simultaneously—ethnic,

sectarian and resource battles, to name a few while the role of the army is less well defined. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with women and focus group discussions to gather data. In Balochistan, the group discussions engaged 22 professional women across ethnicities and based in Quetta; 20 young women between 18 and 30 years, from urban and semi-urban working class backgrounds, from five towns; 18 ethnically Baloch peasant women from three troubled areas; and conflict-displaced Baloch women. In-depth interviews were done with ten of these women. In Swat, ten detailed interviews and one focus group discussion with 18 participants of diverse backgrounds were undertaken.

KEY FINDINGS
ON SECURITY

Participants in the Pakistan Community Conversations process defined security primarily in terms of physical safety. Sexual and gender-based violence is integral to their definition of physical insecurity. Apart from the oppression of protection and control, rumours about rape and sexual violence as well as moral policing contribute to the insecure climate in women's lives. Men are more vulnerable than women in conflict, while women are vulnerable to gender-specific threats. Assuming women are the most vulnerable might foreclose opportunities for women.

Balochistan: While participants said they had last felt safe as children, they agreed that children today grow up amidst too much violence for that to be the case now. Men's lives were at greater risk in conflict than women's because they were more often outside the home for work, thus more likely to be forcibly disappeared by state and non-state actors. Working in the development or human rights sector is risky compared to a government job. For Hazara women, ethnicity rather than gender puts them at risk. Women are punished at home for facing harassment outside. As acquaintances become informers, trust breaks down within the community. While security impairs women and girls' access to education and work, their creativity and determined resistance generates solutions through efficient mobile telephone use, traveling in groups, conservative dressing and pooling resources.

"In order to remove suspicion, I not only wear the burqa, but also gloves and socks in the Quetta summers. I don't even wear sandals, I wear boots so not a single centimeter of skin shows. That way I can prove to the community that I want to study for its own intrinsic value, not because I want to look good or make friends or something. When they see the trial I put myself through every single day, they say okay, maybe she really does want to learn because its 120 degrees hot."

Swat: Women are both physically and psychologically vulnerable, the latter in the sense of worrying about the safety of their family members outside the home. The army presence is seen as a necessary protection, but paradoxically, increasing insecurity. Caught in the crossfire between the Taliban and the army, women face intimidation (especially by acquaintances turned conflict partisans), moral policing, gender-based violence and anxiety which pervades every aspect of life. The deteriorating situation also traumatises children and the elderly. The presence and influence of the Taliban makes

rural areas less secure for women, but trade and livelihoods are affected everywhere by their arbitrary appropriation of property.

ON MILITARISATION

Some aspects of the army presence are seen as problematic, but women do not see militarisation as a system in itself. The more protracted a conflict, the lower the trust in the state, requiring longer-term interventions. Militarisation limits the flow of news and information, especially pertaining to political and geopolitical issues, however, women do hear about killings and disappearances.

> *"The FC is supposed to protect us. But then they are complicit in the disappearances the intelligence agencies tell them to do. Or when attacks on Hazaras happen, that day they are not around. These paramilitary and law enforcing institutions are genetically anti-people. They torture innocent people. A political government will just be a new façade."*

Balochistan: The army's entry into a fragile situation hastens its deterioration, and the civilian administration's lack of control over the security apparatus has made both parties complicit in sustaining the climate of insecurity. Together, they have made a strong case for Baloch nationalism. Baloch women experience intimidation and moral policing by security forces. Rural, non-literate women said poverty leads to conflict; urban, educated women said conflict leads to poverty. Forced disappearances, and related rumours, have become more important to participants than the central issue of relative deprivation and neglect. Both the security forces and the Taliban function with impunity, which is reinforced by the unwillingness and inability of the local authorities to enforce the law. People cope by relocating, by telephoning relatives outside to hear news updates and by marrying daughters earlier.

Swat: Women's views have transitioned from regarding the military as a saviour to believing that real peace will only follow its withdrawal. Here, the army has undertaken development projects and its work is considered superior. The army presents a relief to women whose rights, presence in the public sphere, mobility and access to services are opposed by the Taliban. However, human rights violations such as incarceration and torture are noted. Participants sympathised with the displaced who were afraid to return, fearing what awaited them. Both sides were said to have raped women. Questions were raised about the relationship between the Taliban and the army and whether in fact, there is collusion between them on some matters.

ON CORRUPTION

Corruption is so pervasive that women did not have much to say about it.

Balochistan: Participants were matter-of-fact about corruption being pervasive and everyone being complicit. While they were clear that all aid money was siphoned off, they did not know about specific cases and controversies. Inflation, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and lack of accountability were considered responsible for corruption at the local level. Further up the class ladder, people's powerlessness, the lack of accountability and the

absence of deterrence mechanisms facilitated corruption. Professional women in the study thought problems originated at the federal level and trickled down. The insurgency and subsequent breakdown in law and order have caused a rise in crime.

Swat: Corruption was variously defined as: violation of rights; not doing one's job properly; lack of accountability; and sexual harassment which is seen as occurring in two contexts, moral and financial. There is no accountability for violence against women from violations such as trafficking of women into prostitution, to sexual abuse of displaced women by those giving them shelter and acid attacks. Militancy has created opportunities for siphoning off of funds, interference in the working of institutions and bullying and intimidation. The army is seen as less corrupt than civilian contractors. Women are less corrupt, most respondents said, because they have less exposure to corruption in the public sphere and fewer resources for bribery. Raising children with awareness about corruption is viewed as women's main contribution to ending corruption.

ON ACCESS TO JUSTICE INSTITUTIONS

Women in Balochistan and Swat have quite contrasting perceptions of modern, state-centred justice institutions, with the former finding them alienating and the latter retaining faith in spite of the many barriers they list. To the extent that private and public patriarchies work in synergy, they exacerbate women's disenchantment with state institutions. Local human rights groups forging solidarity and coordinating collective action have made a difference.

> *The educated Baloch women from Quetta were dismissive of state institutions as essentially anti-people. One woman stated the problem as, "They were not formed to protect people from threats, but to protect the State from the threat of the people. That's how they evolved and that is still how they are. It is genetic. They are programmed to protect the power elite from the suspicious masses, not the other way around."*

Balochistan: Participants said they felt a sense of disconnect from state institutions. Only a woman who had no one else to turn to, would turn to the state. The state is not "pro-women" and its mediations regressive and alienating. Moreover, courts are seen as powerless and particularly distant from poor women's lives. Traditional systems have the merit of not isolating women from their social networks and do not require bribes.

Swat: Women from Swat see modern law as holding out a fairer chance at justice even though educated, well-to-do women are not expected to go to courts and others met with harassment in their search for justice. What most women are concerned about is sexual harassment and rape within the family, especially within the marital home. Barriers to seeking justice include: ideas about shame and honour; stigma and the risk of being 'supplied' to influential people from shelters; discouraging police and lawyers; the tendency of men to settle disputes mutually and the lack of time, money, mobility and connections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAKISTAN'S STATE

- **Promote** de-weaponisation of society and de-politicisation of the security sector.

- **Monitor** militarisation of bilateral and multilateral aid to ensure that it does not impact the democratic institutions, processes and cultures negatively.

- **Reconfigure** the national and social security paradigm from women's perspectives especially in crisis situations and include women in local, national, regional and international peace discourse.

- **Observe** activities of religious seminaries and mosques as a measure to end the propaganda of hatred.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- **Locate, probe and understand** the evolution of conflicts from women's perspectives and amplify their voices in the conflict and peace process.

- **Affirm** women as important stakeholders in peace, whose participation is critical to the success of peace and conflict resolution processes at every level.

- **Build** the capacity of women in mediation, conflict resolution and conflict transformation.

- **Promote** disarmament, de-weaponisation and de-nuclearisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

- **Foster** productive relationships among women leaders in South Asia to build an enduring environment of inclusion, where women's concerns and voices are integral to dialogues and agendas for peace and economic development, in conformity with the SAARC Social Charter.

- **Develop** Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa-specific programmes for political and economic development; protection and legal assistance for women and girls; education on reproductive health rights; and rights of the Hazara and other marginalised and threatened communities in Pakistan.

- **Invest** resources in peace, social cohesion, self-defence and personal security programmes that reach out to educational institutions as well as the wider community.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Across the region, the security agenda of states has undermined the rule of law and accountability. Escalating defence expenditures, declining social funding and predatory development models that exploit national resources and marginalise and displace communities have deepened structural inequalities. The growing democratic deficit and rampant corruption are reinforcing extremist, militant and fundamentalist ideologies. As such, the region has become a playground for private and state actors with global geo-strategic interests, and people, especially women, pay the price.

THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

How do you take discussions about security, conflict, militarisation and governance outside elite security policy circles? How do you bring more women's voices into this discussion? How do we integrate their experiences and concerns into the security discourse? Brainstorming around these questions generated the idea of Community Conversations.

The "Community Conversations" process initiated in 2011 was one of the first activities undertaken by the Women's Regional Network. It evolved organically in each of the three WRN countries, adapting to different ground realities. The resulting documents reflect this diversity clearly—the methods are different, the questions are different, the perspectives vary.

At the core, however, a few things remained the same in every country. We sought out women who live and work in remote and insecure areas to understand their experiences, fears and insecurities. Our objective was to document the impact of militarisation, extremisms and corruption on their ability to access rights and justice. The CCs emphasise women as survivors and make visible their agency in everyday life and in resistance movements. The Conversations acknowledge women's contribution to the post-conflict processes of justice, peace and social reintegration.

This process has generated rich and detailed accounts from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan of the gendered social impact of politicised violence, militarisation and corruption in conflict-affected areas. It anchors WRN's work firmly in the real world of women's experiences. While the findings of each Community Conversation process remain context-specific, by identifying the common threads and themes, WRN will create cross-border strategies and seek common solutions.

THE WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK

Founded in 2011, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan working together to strengthen women's rights to ensure peace and security in the region. WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders, to listen to and learn from each other to construct a common agenda towards equitable and sustainable development with full participation of women in building a just peace. At its launch, members of the Network identified interlinked areas of concern—militarisation, extremisms, corruption and lack of security—as a priority for all three countries. WRN networks in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are autonomous but work in close coordination with each other. Network members in each country have invited others to join and establish working relationships with individuals and organisations working for women's rights in their respective countries.

WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
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