



# Asian Conflicts Reports

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# Terror, tribes, and the war on women in Pakistan

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Sakina Bibi and Gul Begum had never been to the market before in their lives. Forty-year old Sakina and her daughter in law finally made it out of the tent that had been supplied to them in the camp outside Karachi when their seven children ran out of food. They had a hundred rupees between them and fifty were taken by the rickshaw driver who took them to the market. They had to rely on the shopkeeper for correct change because neither of them could read or write and had not dealt with currency before. The two women are among the hundreds of thousands of displaced who fled their villages in the north and made their way to camps in the South. In their case, the men had sent them ahead while choosing to stay to guard the family property, which they thought would be taken over if they were not there to occupy it.

These women, part of the hundreds of thousands of displaced that have been seeking shelter in camps and relatives houses since the onset of fighting between security forces and Taliban militants in 2004, represent the most ignored constituency in the War on Terror. Not only is it nearly impossible to find statistical data on the number of women affected by the conflict that began in Afghanistan and has now bled over to the tribal areas of Pakistan, but few efforts have been made to provide systematic or targeted aid to them. According to piecemeal reports compiled by International Aid Agencies like UNIFEM and the UN Office for the Co-ordination for Humanitarian Affairs, nearly 60% of the approximate 2.5 million people displaced by the conflict are women. Like the women whose predicament is presented above, few have ever left their home villages or even their homes unaccompanied by men. Nearly 80% are illiterate and as a group they have the highest maternal mortality rate in all of South Asia. Because they have led such sequestered lives, very few are able to provide for their families in camps and the death of the men in the family has left many without recourse. Many widows who left the tribal areas at the beginning of the conflict have been forced to take shelter and face abuse at the hands of relatives in big cities like Karachi and Lahore. Many have been forced into marriages and many also into beggary and prostitution.

The internally displaced women ironically represent the most visible toll that the ongoing conflict has taken on Pakistani women. Since direct causal relations can be established between the women in the camps fleeing villages with burnt schools and off-limit bazaars these women, swathed in their *Burqas* are the image of the female cost of the conflict. Even lesser attention is being paid to the more complex conglomeration of existing tribal customs, strategic choices made by Pakistani and NATO forced to defeat the Taliban and the failure of the Pakistani state to take seriously the ever deteriorating impact of a culture of violence on the most vulnerable of their population.

While violence against women has historically been and continues to be a debilitating problem in Pakistan but unlike previous years, the escalation of the conflict and the consequent pressure on existing structures of social and tribal organization have left women, the most unprotected group in Pakistani society after religious minorities, even more vulnerable than before. According to reports compiled by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in the last eighteen months alone 808 gang rapes were reported in the country. The majority of victims were raped by groups of three or more men and then killed by immediate relatives. This astounding number becomes even more chilling when one considers the fact that the numbers compiled by the HRCP are based on newspaper clippings of reported cases; which statistically make up only a third of actual cases. The reason why the number of gang rapes is significant is because it shows a communal component to the brutalization of women that is proximately of not directly related to the ongoing civil war on the country. While there is no data available on whether these gang rapes are directly related to groups participating in the conflict, their known use as weapons of revenge and retaliation unrelated to the women themselves demonstrate how a conflict ridden society is increasingly using women's bodies as sites of warfare. This pattern is recognizably similar to the rapes of women in conflict zones in Africa and Eastern Europe. Its prevalence and increase in the years since 2004 suggests that civil conflict and violence against women are interrelated in complex and disturbing ways.

1 Women are an ignored constituency in the War on Terror

2 Pressure on existing social structures has left women even more vulnerable than before

3 US aid to Pakistan has failed to make any specific provision for women affected by the conflict

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Changing regimes whether democratic or military have neither paid attention to the ignored plight of women caught in a conflict ridden society but have instead promoted what are termed as “pragmatic” or strategic objectives as a justification for their deliberate ignorance. During his tenure, President Pervez Musharraf was the first to sign a peace deal with militant leader Azad Khan in an effort to put an end to the fighting in the region. More recently, the democratically elected Government headed by President Asif Ali Zardari made similar concessions in their peace deal with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan enacted in April of this year.

Peace deals with the Taliban have not been the only problems. Both military and civilian governments have failed to repeal overtly discriminatory laws that continue to hold women hostage under the threat of being accused of fornication or adultery by disgruntled spouses or relatives. The much touted Women’s Protection Bill passed in 2006 gave only lip service and failed to repeal the Zina and Hudood Ordinances. Furthermore, in changing evidentiary requirements it put the onus on the woman saying that she would have to produce four witnesses to the act in bringing a charge of rape against a person. Tribal customs like *Vani* (a form of honor killing) continued to remain in place even after the Bill’s passage. Indeed according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan nearly 1100 women were killed in 2008. Of these 183 were axed to death, 30 were brutally tortured. Nearly a quarter of the women belonged to minority groups and was particularly targeted for this reason and about 80 of them were minors. Despite these figures, which would undoubtedly be higher if data on unreported cases was also collected, honor killing is not prosecuted by the Pakistani state and perpetrators of the crime are permitted to go free. In one lurid display of the widespread institutional and social acceptance of such treatment of women, the brother of a provincial minister who was accused of burying three of his female relatives alive was never prosecuted. In House and Senate hearings on the issue, some Senators actually defended the practice as being part of Pakistani culture.

In addition to the impact of the ongoing conflict, the weight of patriarchal tradition and the lack of political will at the hands of both civilian and military governments, Pakistan’s women have also been ignored in the strategizing of United States and NATO forces in the region. One example of this has been the prominence given to the use of tribal Lashkars or militias in the effort to fighting the Taliban. The organization of these Lashkars has followed a model similar to that used in Iraq which empowers local tribes and even arms them against the Taliban. While the success of this venture has been difficult to evaluate, it remains nevertheless a core tactic in both NATO and Pakistani arsenal against the Taliban. Long term strategy in the region also focuses on the strengthening of the capacity of local tribes to resist and fight the Taliban in a model similar to the one used to fight the Sunni insurgency in many Iraqi provinces.

Finally, U.S aid disbursements to Pakistan, increasingly such an integral part of Pakistan’s economy have failed to make any particular provision to assist Pakistani women caught in the conflict and left without recourse. The “Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act 2009” which set disbursement amounts of 750 million dollars a year for various economic and development projects in Pakistan made no mention of women’s issues in the Act itself. Despite the escalating rate of sexual violence faced by Pakistani women caught in a conflict torn region, the Act allowed for no construction of shelters, women’s health centers and created no basis requiring the Pakistani Government to take any development, legal or public education efforts to curb the onslaught against Pakistani women.

In failing to do so even the United States seems to have taken the position that the welfare of Pakistani women suffering silently under the cumulative weight of suicide bombings, honor killings and concerted efforts to render them invisible is simply not an issue worthy of attention. Caught in a conflict that seems to have no end, their voices remain unheard and unnoticed both by the masters at home and abroad.

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