

UNHCR/CERD's efforts for women empowerment are highlighted in The New York Times and International Herald Tribune March 9, 2011.

The Female Factor

Pakistani Women Move Beyond Traditional Roles

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Published: March 8, 2011



JALOZAI, [PAKISTAN](#) — A visit to the Jalozai camp, originally established in 1980 for Afghans fleeing the Soviet invasion, gives an idea of how the fighting between the Pakistani Army and militants has affected families in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

In 2008, all the Afghan refugees left. Their place was taken by about 100,000 Pakistanis known as the “internally displaced” of their country. Children, women and men arrive with what they can carry, then spend weeks, months, even years in tents.

In this part of Pakistan, the women, almost all Pashtun, traditionally have no other role beyond marrying and producing children at a young age, then taking care of those families.

For some women, though, the camp in recent months has offered new opportunity and a change in perspective. A few hundred of them attend one of the five community centers for women established since last June. They learn to read, write, count, sew or knit. The centers, managed by the Center of Excellence for Rural Development, a partner of the [U.N.](#) refugee agency, also serve as venues where they can freely air their problems and hopes.

For Savida, a 30-year-old mother of four from the Bajaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, life had followed the same pattern for 14 years. She woke, prepared breakfast for her husband and children, worked in the field, and then cooked lunch and dinner. The family had to flee the war and ended up in Jalozai. She and her husband got divorced one year ago.

“He was a drug addict and very aggressive,” Savida said, cradling her 1-year-old boy, his feet caked with mud from playing outside. A thatched roof protects the women from the rain; walls prevent outsiders from looking in at the women. “My husband kidnapped the two older ones when they were on their way back to the tent from school,” she said, tears rolling from her eyes.

Savida, who declined to give her family name because she feared violence from her husband, said the support of the community center and other female refugees helped her. She has learned to tailor, and she stitches together clothes that the center sells for her in the local market. She wants to earn money for her children to get an education — something she was denied because fathers, and later, husbands, have to give permission. “I will not make a

difference between my daughters and sons,” Savida said. “I want them all to learn and have a bright future.”

Husbands and fathers indeed have to be persuaded to allow their women to visit the center.

Neila Bibi, a teacher, and her colleague Huma Farman said they went each day from tent to tent to assure the men that only women were allowed in the center and that Islam also permitted the teaching of women. “They fear the gossip of other people,” Ms. Bibi said.

For most of the men, even negotiating with women is a big step. “We are the only chance for these girls and women to get a new perspective in their lives,” said Ms. Farman, who grew up in the nearby city of Mardan.

She recalled how one 29-year-old woman, who had been married at 13, had told her she had never been allowed to see a doctor. “We brought female medics, and this woman and others were for their first time examined,” Ms. Farman said. “For the first time.”

Some of the women report a slow change of perspective among their male kin. Alia Jahwaz, 20, from Khyber Agency, learned to read and write in six months at the center and has lived at the camp for a year and a half. “There were no girls’ schools in my area, that’s why I had not been able to read and write until I came here,” she said, smiling. Last month, Ms. Jahwaz gave a speech to nearly 1,000 people at the camp. Wearing a [burqa](#), traditional in the region, she spoke about women’s rights also guaranteed by Islam and the issue of violence. “I am sure it was the first time for most of the men to hear about this,” she said, giggling, “but my father was very proud of me.”

Anjuman dost Muhammad, 21, has been disabled since birth. Her hands are not fully developed. Yet she learned to write the English alphabet, studying with her older brother. “We are alone here. Our parents are in Bajaur; we are not in touch for a long time,” she said.

Ms. Muhammad said she and other women taught at the center were passing on knowledge to tent neighbors who could not visit the center, either because husbands and fathers still said no, or because they had other commitments. “I teach them the alphabet and also the Koran,” she said.

One of the first things teachers discuss with their new female pupils is violence. “There is psychological, physical and sexual violence,” proclaimed Mulhtiara Lal Wazir, who has visited her center since it opened. She proudly reads a plaque to a visitor. It also says that violence can stem from poverty, unemployment, drug dependence and psychological problems, and that tradition and gender discrimination play a part.

Mrs. Wazir is 42, from Bajaur. Women in her region never used even to talk about these issues, even within families. But she has broken the pattern. “I even discuss violence with my husband and sons,” she said. “I want them to know what is right and what is wrong.”

If ever she returns home, she said, “we already discussed, that we want to start a new center there.” Will her husband agree? “Of course,” she said, laughing. “We know our rights now. We do have a voice.”