

Bridging Pakistan's gender divide

By Samina Ahmed

International Crisis Group (07.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2heaFWY> – “Our people won't let a girl study beyond the third grade (eight or nine years old). But this girl here cries and says: 'I want to learn'. And I love her so much that I have no choice but to send her away from our village, because no education is available here beyond primary school level. She will go to the big city and she will learn and be the first one in the family”.

I hear these words from a Pakistani father about his daughter back in the early 2000s, on my second research assignment for the International Crisis Group. I am travelling in Balochistan, an area affected by a decade-old insurgency. I am seeking to unpack the causes of militancy and conflict through meetings with former militants, political workers, rights activists and religious leaders.

The eagerness of a little girl to defy the odds against her studying still resonates for me, as does her father's sympathetic support, despite all the obstacles of tradition. They epitomise countless testimonies I hear throughout my travels. Not only do they influence how I work, but they guide my understanding of Pakistan and of how people – especially but not only women and children – experience its violence and multiple conflicts.

Unheard Voices, Invisible Forces

On this pivotal day for me in Balochistan, a region tucked up against Iran and Afghanistan, I am planning to meet liberal, secular political activists, opponents of the Islamist Taliban. The meeting at this house, sitting cross-legged on the floor are only men, with one exception: a little girl. Responding to my questions, her father explains her determination to go to school and praises her character and tenacity to fulfil her dream.

He then proposes that I speak to other women from their community to hear their perspectives and experiences of the situation in the province. Such an opportunity in a part of the country where men and women live segregated lives is rare for any outsider. I jump at the chance and am escorted to the part of the house where women of the family live, off-limits to all men barring close relatives.

A large group of women greet me, well-dressed for the occasion. They gather round, excited at the chance to meet an outsider. They start by asking questions. How can a woman do the job I do? How can I work alone? How do I travel long distances freely? Except for family visits once a year, they say, they never venture beyond the walls of their home. They begin sharing their experiences and life stories. Some tell me that they would like to be educated and to have a job. There is anger and frustration in their voices. They know what they want, but believe it beyond their reach.

This meeting has a profound effect on me. I am a longstanding

women's rights activist, and was a member of the Women's Action Forum in the 1980s during military rule. Having studied in universities in Pakistan and abroad, and worked in several countries, I am comfortable standing up for myself in a man's world. But experiencing real, well-articulated frustration on both male and female sides of a traditional Pashtun household makes me start to think anew about the gender divide.

I begin to understand the importance of integrating gender power dynamics into my conflict analysis by listening to women and girls in conflict-affected areas, even if they are publicly invisible. I come to realise that being a female researcher is a definite plus, as it gives me access to women as well as men. That day I make a conscious choice: I will redouble efforts to interview women as well as men, understand how they experience violence and their perspective on ending it and harness their potential to help build a more peaceful society.

The Remotest Reaches of Pakistan

In my years at Crisis Group I travel throughout Pakistan, from the slums of its largest city, Karachi, on the Indian Ocean to the hamlets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa along the border with Afghanistan. I talk to people of all walks of life, especially the unheard and invisible parts of society. These include not just the voices of girls and women, but also those of political party workers, fishermen and farmers struggling for survival in often harsh and inhospitable terrain.

As a female researcher, I face no resistance while at work. The challenges are those faced by every woman travelling in Pakistan. The absence of public toilets for women, for

example, poses not just a health but also a security hazard. Overall, though, during my trips, including times when I am the only woman staying in hole-in-the-wall hotels, I find that people are especially anxious to ensure that I am comfortable and safe.

Being a professional, at times people forget that I am a woman. They rarely treat me as an outsider, or a woman not conforming to local norms. The exception is in urban centres where I visit more conservative madrasas or mosques, though even there, people do not stop or openly rebuke me. Only very occasionally does someone ask me to cover my hair, as normally expected of a Muslim woman in Pakistan. Through their demeanour, however, people can convey that they are at least uncomfortable if not hostile to independent women like myself.

Of course I am conscious that not all Pakistani women think like me. This strikes me most forcefully one day on a visit to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I attend a session of the local parliament, where the ruling Islamist Party has a large number of female parliamentarians. Yet it is the men who talk, while the women simply sit there in silence.

“Aren’t you going to take part in the debate?”, I ask one of the women from the Islamist Party.

“No, my male leaders will talk on my behalf”, she retorts.

Providing a public platform to women is sometimes not enough to ensure that they themselves express their views and needs. In some cases, women in public life may also serve as proxies for other interests.

And yet I also see women and girls, like that little girl in the remote household in Balochistan, who want to speak out, who want to learn, who want an education, and whose menfolk are sometimes willing to listen to them.

The Madrasa Paradox

Women are not the whole story, since men are also changing, sometimes almost without being aware of it. I become conscious of this during my research on madrasas, or religious schools, a truly male preserve that I initially do not even connect to women.

I cannot enter madrasas, so a male Crisis Group colleague must talk to male students there. But I can meet the leaders of the religious parties that run much of the madrasa sector. I approach one Islamist party leader, who runs what is possibly the largest and most extreme group of madrasas, where almost nothing except the strictest interpretation of the Quran is taught. Surprisingly, he invites me to his home. Clearly, he doesn't consider me as a threat as a woman. His young son is even present.

"Well sister", the party leader says, "please tell my son he should study hard".

"*Maulana*, what does the young boy study?" I ask.

"English, mathematics and computer sciences".

“But *Maulana*”, I shoot back. “Why isn’t he in your madrasa?”.

And he replies: “Sister, times have changed”.

Giving Women a Chanc

In 2005, I travel to Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to get a sense of what is happening in the countryside. A guide, who is an ex-fighter wounded on battlefronts in both Afghanistan and in Kashmir, invites me home to meet his family. His house lies in a small, beautiful mountain village where he lives with his young daughters. His biggest problem: the obstacles he faces in giving these girls a formal education.

“You know”, he says, “for me the most precious thing now is their lives. And their futures. But what do I have to offer them? There is no school here. Without that, they can’t be ever like you, educated. And that’s what I want”.

Then the girls cluster round and I speak with them about what they believe the village most urgently needs. Their answer is simple: water, because they have to travel long distances just to get enough water for the house. And education. Through the years, I often hear this refrain.

Schooling comes up again when I try to explain Crisis Group’s conflict prevention work to one fifteen-year-old girl in Balochistan’s Gwadar city, a major naval base and now the hub of the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor. She responds with

frustration and anger.

“You know, we are sick of the UN and you NGOs. You come here, you talk, you preach, you write, over and over again, but you don’t do anything for us”.

“What you think needs to be done?”, I ask.

“Look, I don’t want to be a teacher. I want to be a scientist. But in my school, there is not even a science teacher!”, she says. “I will never be a scientist unless we have what you had, the privilege of a good education”.

I learn my lesson right there. I want to do something about the lack of opportunities offered to her. Pakistani society may seem conservative about women’s education, but under the surface, currents for change are building momentum.

My research across Pakistan illustrates the impact that insecurity has on girls’ ability to seek an education. Every person interviewed – not just young girls, but also their fathers and brothers – said that if their daughters or sisters could travel without risk to a nearby school, they would send them there. In much of the countryside, however, people often live far from schools; in rough urban districts, the daily trip to school may pose a physical threat. “We can’t risk them going long distances. It’s too unsafe”, is a complaint I hear often. It challenges my previous notion that cultural and social restrictions alone prevent girls from accessing education in Pakistan’s conflict zones.

These insights lead me to write two reports on girls' education in Pakistan. The first one, *Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector*, published in October 2004, warns that Pakistan's deteriorating education system and a curriculum that promotes religious intolerance fails to equip young people with the skills necessary for a modern economy, and, in some cases, creates foot soldiers for jihadist groups.

I return to the subject ten years later, publishing *Education Reform in Pakistan* to show that millions are still out of school, the curriculum remains unreformed, and the education system remains alarmingly impoverished. That report also raises the problem of safe access to schools for girls, as well as the need to change the curriculum to protect against religious extremism and sectarianism.

A Mutual Interdependence

I am humbled again and again by human rights activists, humanitarian aid workers, and women's rights leaders across Pakistan who risk their lives to promote positive changes in the country. By interviewing them and writing about their views, I take their voices to senior decision-makers in Pakistan. A leading champion of women's rights, Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, lauding the recommendations of our reports, told her party leaders that they should be essential reading. Unlike me, though, many of the people I interview are physically threatened and attacked. Yet every time I meet them, they thank me. I always feel it should be the other way around.

The interdependence of my work and theirs is driven home to me one day in Punjab. I meet a lawyer who says he distributes

photocopied versions of our reports among the members of his bar council to build consciousness of the legal changes Pakistan needs, especially to open new opportunities for women. I voice my surprise when he adds that he buys the reports ready-bound in a bookshop, even though they are available for free on our website. He sums up the relationship between Crisis Group, with our research and policy advocacy, and dedicated activists. His group is ready to distribute our work this way because, he says: "We have learned as much from these reports as you have learned from us".

In 2016, writing about different layers of criminal, jihadist and ethno-religious violence in Karachi, I take my insights on what is holding schoolgirls back and test how they may apply to society more broadly. I look into gender-based violence where women are regularly subjected to sexual harassment on the streets as they go to work. Like girls trying to gain a formal education, I find that women from poor and marginalised communities in this mega-city, Pakistan's economic hub, have few options to travel safely to their place of work. What women fear most is violence as they travel from their homes to earn a living and support their families.

By incorporating the perspectives of women and girls into my research, amplifying their voices and analysing how they experience the violence endemic to parts of Pakistan, Crisis Group's work aims to provide a richer understanding of violence and conflict in my home country and encourage the government to take meaningful steps to address the simple problem of safety. Every woman who can leave her house each day to school or work represents a step forward.

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