



## The Pakistan Earthquake: An Agent of Social and Political Change

Shamineh S. Byramji

Disasters, natural or man-made, are horrific events that destroy lives, disrupt the social, economic, and political fabric of communities, and can erase decades of development gains, sometimes in a matter of minutes.<sup>1</sup> The daunting aspect of disasters is their potential magnitude and their indiscrimination to affect everything and everyone in its path. But it is essentially this indiscriminating attribute that provides a small silver lining or a short window of opportunity. A disaster has the ability to effect surviving communities to their very core, leaving an opportunity for self-examination and re-evaluation of their make-up and structure.

The recent earthquake in Pakistan upset the country's traditional balance in both gender and politics. However, a country's vulnerability after a disaster does not always result in positive transformation. The changes accompanying the relief operation in Pakistan, and the influx of all forms of aid, have presented a window of opportunity for both negative and positive cultural transformation. This paper describes some of the more apparent changes that have taken place during the relief effort: the expanding role of Islamic militant groups juxtaposed against the improvements of the gender gap. The final section is a culmination of recommendations that emerged from examining the current post-disaster

situation, with a particular focus on strategies for empowering women through the reconstruction process.

### A Positive Window of Opportunity — Bridging the Gender Gap

On October 8, 2005 an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter Scale hit the Pakistan-administered section of Kashmir, killing 75,000 people. The fault line of October's quake encompasses some of the most conservative areas of the country, where the rigid observance of *Purdah*, a segregation of the sexes, has deprived many women of education, healthcare, and their own means of livelihood.<sup>2</sup> However, due to the medical emergency that the earthquake caused, the disaster has surprisingly provided some women the opportunity to seek medical assistance for the first time in their lives.

Due to the general lack of modernization in the affected areas, most of these villages, even if they had a medical facility, have never been exposed to progressive medicine. For some this changed within hours of the quake, as doctors from Karachi and Lahore came in to set up medical camps in the worst hit areas.<sup>3</sup> For those

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*Shamineh Byramji is a recent graduate of The Fletcher School. Upon finishing a fellowship with The Asia Foundation in San Francisco, she embarked on a tour of earthquake-affected areas of Pakistan.*

within camps, it is a standard camp procedure to establish some sort of medical facility within the camp that provides round-the-clock medical assistance. Additionally, to meet the short-term health needs of local communities outside the camps, the World Health Organization (WHO) constructed 35 prefabricated basic health units (BHU) in earthquake-affected areas. The WHO also operates 64 field hospitals with a staff of 87 medical teams. Several other relief agencies have also planned to set up prefabricated health facilities. The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), for example, proposed the establishment of about 50 prefab BHUs, while another 22 are to be constructed by the UN family and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).<sup>4</sup> In terms of gender, it is not clear that these medical facilities provide for the needs of women. However, it can be presumed that, where possible, these international agencies include female medics on their teams.

[T]he hospital I visited in Bona is run by Save the Children and the only female doctor there is an American volunteer. And she had been there for two weeks and the hospital had seen 3,200 female patients which I was told was unprecedented in that area because there had never really been female doctors in that area before and the women were reluctant to go to the hospital because it is against their religious sensibilities to be treated by a male doctor unless its really an extreme case.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, it is plausible that the relief effort has provided at least some women with the opportunity to seek medical assistance for the first time in their lives.

In a similar light, another opportunity that has emerged from the rubble of this catastrophe has been access to education within camps, particularly for girls. Across the quake-affected region, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) partner agencies, such as UNICEF and Save the Children, have established improvised schools in relief camps providing

young children, and some not so young, with access to education.

The most encouraging example of this experience has been within the Mehra relief camp, the largest in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) housing over 20,000 people mostly from the Allai Valley. Approximately 2,700 children attend either morning or afternoon classes, and teachers estimate that up to three-quarters of their female students had never previously attended school. Most of the new pupils are under 10, but several of the girls are as old as 17.<sup>6</sup> The Pakistan Newswire reported that, "Hundreds of girls are attending school for the first time, learning math and science, Urdu and English in tents at the Mehra Camp."<sup>7</sup> School was never an option for most of these girls as they were expected to help their mothers with domestic chores or parents needed them to work due to economic constraints. Where village schools did exist, enrollment was often just for boys, as there was a lack of female teachers and parents would not allow girls to be educated by male teachers in classrooms where boys were present.

Reports indicate that it is not only camps administered by international aid agencies that established schools. According to the Federal Relief Commission, among the 55 tented-villages in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJZ) some 20 tent-schools have also functioned in the camps, employing nearly 90 teachers and enrolling over 1,100 students. Likewise, among the 23 tent villages in NWFP around 20 schools are now being run in the province, enrolling more than 3,000 students and employing almost 100 teachers.<sup>8</sup> However, no reports state if these schools are catering to both girls and boys, or if they are only offering education to male pupils.

International aid agencies are not the only organizations that have taken extra care to assist women through the relief and reconstruction process. Several local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also attempting to gain a gender perspective. For example, the Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation, an NGO working with rural communities in the Mansehra division of NWFP, has conducted "people's assemblies." The idea was to expand the political space of the marginalized, especially women, so that they would be able to effectively engage with the state. Since the success of their first assembly

in late January 2006, the foundation has held others with similar results. One organizer explained, "We wanted to provide the women a platform to share views, hopes and fears about reconstruction of homes, of rebuilding health and education facilities, and of achieving livelihood security."<sup>9</sup>

Around 600 women traveled from nearby areas to attend the last assembly to express their views about the progress of rehabilitation. Most of the concerns voiced at the assembly were regarding the need for female doctors and gynecologists, and girls' schools in their villages. Many women also complained about the design of the homes being planned. Although there was general unanimity over following building codes for safe reconstruction, several women stated that the pre-fabricated models neither met with their traditions nor respected their privacy.

Many young girls attending the people's assemblies also spoke passionately about their right to education. In this very traditional area, religion and custom demand that women wear a *pardah* (veil) and defer all decisions to men. Thus their vocal demands present a notable step forward. Hopefully, these women's concerns will continue to be taken seriously both in the assemblies and in the larger political sphere.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Gender Support Program has also attempted to empower women after the devastation of the earthquake. The UNDP program is assisting the Pakistani government to consider women's concerns when planning projects and preparing budgets: "How the budget is allocated can produce very different outcomes in terms of gender equality. It is their access to social services."<sup>10</sup> The UNDP program advocates that gender is a crosscutting theme, crucial to promoting gender equality and women's status in society. The program aims to help women find a stronger political voice by establishing 'political schools' where thousands of locally elected female representatives will have the opportunity to develop leadership skills, as well as knowledge about how to navigate their way through the government structure.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, there are some organizations, both internationally and locally, that see "real opportunity [in post-disaster] to change traditional power relations which can bring a lasting change."<sup>12</sup> These organizations are doing the most they can, but further external pressure is needed for the government and other development partners to adopt a gender framework that could make a lasting impact to gender relations in Pakistan.

### A Negative Window of Opportunity - The Role of Islamic Militant Groups

After the quake struck, it took several days for the relevant Pakistani government agencies to begin mobilizing their resources and strategies, a delay which left a void of authority and no organizational mechanism to seize control of the relief operation in an orderly manner.<sup>13</sup> In the days following the earthquake, NGOs and radical Islamic groups filled the void created by the central government. Through the efforts of these organizations much relief reached some of the devastated areas.<sup>14</sup> Militant groups were among the first to arrive with aid in some of the worst affected villages. Islamic militant groups tend to have vast networks and disciplined cadres able to organize and commandeer lifting equipment and tents to the most remote regions.

Currently, over a half dozen banned militant groups carry out relief work in the quake-affected areas of Azad Kashmir, "A cursory glance over the relief and rehabilitation activities being carried out by the guerillas-turned-philanthropists in Azad Kashmir shows that they are well organized and devoted. The volunteers and infrastructure of the banned organizations are working night and day to help the quake survivors."<sup>15</sup> For instance, Dawa, the parent organization of the outlawed Lashkar-I-Taiba (LeT), erected a cluster of tents to provide shelter for displaced persons, along with a mobile hospital where doctors from Pakistan, Indonesia and other nations could perform surgery.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the Jamaat-ud-

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Dawa (JuD) camp by the Neelum River in Muzaffarabad set up tented shelter for an estimated 2,000 people, approximately a dozen clinics for the injured, and provided relief for up to 2,500 other victims in Muzaffarabad alone.<sup>17</sup>

Islamic militant groups are said to consider the disaster to be a golden opportunity to “reactivate themselves” and improve their image among the masses.<sup>18</sup> For the most part, they can claim success. The popularity of Islamic militant groups has risen sharply since the earthquake struck.<sup>19</sup>

These groups have seized the opportunity to raise their profiles by painting their names on the side of refugee tents and flying flags from the roofs of trucks carrying blankets and other supplies.<sup>20</sup> The Islamists are, as the saying goes “doing well by doing good.” Earthquake victims are understandably grateful for their help.<sup>21</sup> An old man, after he had been lifted down a mountain by the Hizbul-Mujahideen group, said “What the *mujahideen* (holy fighters) have done, no one else would do and I will always pray for them.”<sup>22</sup>

Some analysts hope that groups like Jamat-ud-Dawa, having seen the benefits of relief work, are replacing militancy with social work. Others state this might be a sign that they are following the lead of Palestinian Hamas, claiming that they want to pursue eventually more mainstream political ambitions.<sup>23</sup> Research shows that Islamist groups have long used charity to boost their support amongst poor Muslims; “Islamist groups like the Jamaat-I-Islami (JI) have always used their extensive welfare networks to give support to people failed by their governments as a fundamental part of their strategy to achieve political power.”<sup>24</sup> Development analysts say this is likely to bolster their legitimacy and advance the separatist cause.<sup>25</sup>

President Musharraf has admitted that Islamic groups, including ones banned by his

government, have exploited the administrative vacuum in the worst hit areas. And he has further admitted that he is reluctant to prevent them from entering quake-affected areas because of the dire need for assistance.<sup>26</sup> Musharraf is also hesitant to deter these Islamist groups from doing relief work because their access to survivors may even surpass that of international agencies. Additionally, some groups are providing far better medical care than their state-run counterparts and have been an indispensable part of the relief effort.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the political implications of these Islamist groups gaining popularity and power in the affected areas, these groups are using their new popularity to smuggle weapons and recruit the young and vulnerable according to some human rights campaigners.<sup>28</sup> Allegedly, children orphaned by the earthquake are ‘adopted’ by these militant Islamist groups and placed into training camps. Although the Pakistani government moved quickly following the quake to ban adoptions and intends to house these children in state-run institutions, aid agencies still claim these militant groups bring orphans and displaced children into their camps.<sup>29</sup>

A further concern that arises from the government allowing militant groups to fill the administrative void in quake-affected areas is the increased penetration of these groups into other government sectors. Education, for example, is a particular concern. Almost all state-run schools in Pakistani-administered Kashmir and five affected (NWFP) districts were destroyed or badly damaged in the quake. Volunteers and non-sectarian NGOs are concerned that *madrasas* (religious schools) will replace these schools, as it is easier to set up a *madrasa* than it is to rebuild a school.<sup>30</sup>

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The Deobandi Wafaqul Madaris Al-Arabiya, Pakistan's largest union of *madrasas*, has established an earthquake relief fund to rebuild 1,500 mosques and 300 *madrasas* in Azad Kashmir and NWFP... In Battagram, the foundation has set up twenty tent schools, operating under the Jamaat-I-Islami's (JI) student and teacher wings. Other religious organizations, such as Al-Huda Foundation and Iqra Foundation, are also focusing on the education sector, hoping to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of government schools. Jihadi groups such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JD) also see in this an opportunity to gain new recruits."<sup>31</sup>

UNICEF is particularly concerned about unmonitored *madrasa* 'tent schools' in some camps but believes that it is the government's responsibility to address this issue.<sup>32</sup> President Musharraf, although admitting he will not stop the militant groups from undertaking relief work, insists he will not allow them to exploit the situation to solicit new recruits. Some are hopeful that Musharraf will keep to his word, others are

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hopeful that as victims start returning to their villages the influence of radical groups will wane. Some analysts also fear that the involvement of militant Islamic groups in relief work will undermine certain development efforts. First, Western relief agencies, including those run by the UN and the U.S. government, are complaining of harassment. These Western relief agencies fear that if this tension should explode into actual violence against them, they might have to leave.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, such strong involvement from militant groups will most likely undermine gender development efforts in the country. Workers

from Jammata-ud-Dawa, for example, have urged some female humanitarian staff workers to wear the veil, not just the usually required headscarf. Pressured by Al-Rasheed Trust, an Islamic charity, one international NGO was even forced to remove female staff from an Islamic-run camp. Overall, complaints arise about increased gender segregation, enforced prayers, and compulsory Islamic education at JD relief camps in Mansehra.<sup>34</sup>

### Recommendations

Due to the vast devastation caused by the earthquake and administrative vacuum left by the government, the relief effort has been inconsistent and varied. The Islamic militant groups have proven most resourceful, mainly due to their strong economic base and knowledge of the terrain. The international relief agencies have been successful in pushing forward a gender framework, and incorporating women and girls in their education and vocational training courses. The government administered relief effort, however, lags behind both of these two groups. It lacks the commitment to involve local authorities and the foresight to incorporate a gender-framework to its reconstruction plans.

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### Political Consistency

Immediately following the earthquake, the Pakistani government permitted militant organizations to participate in the rescue effort because of their abilities in delivering aid to remote areas. Now several months later, the government needs to intercede in this private aid distribution and play a more active role in what is happening within the newly formed camps.

Similarly, the international community's close cooperation with the Pakistani military was understandable in the first few months after the quake, but as the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase progresses, a decentralized military role is

essential. In particular, international agencies and NGOs need to focus on establishing a closer working relationship with civilian institutions, while also building civilian capacity. International NGOs and aid agencies working with the Pakistani government must identify and develop mechanisms that will provide local communities with a role in decision-making. By involving elected officials the capacity for civilian disaster response will be improved. Civil society organizations should also play a role in informing government policy, monitoring public expenditures, and implementing reconstruction and rehabilitation projects. Donors should also encourage the government to create mechanisms that allow local NGOs with a proven track record to participate effectively.

To achieve a decentralized aid distribution infrastructure, the International Crisis Group (ICG) suggests that major donors should work through a single overarching body that is supplemented by country-specific accountability mechanisms at the national level. If a donor country is reluctant to join such an umbrella mechanism, ICG posits the possibility of participation as an observer.<sup>35</sup>

### Equal Aid Distribution

An overarching monitoring system could facilitate better transparency of the aid process. The widespread allegations of corruption, pilferage, and hoarding might subside by implementing an independent system to track the distribution of aid and compensation.<sup>36</sup>

Additional transparency is also needed for the registration process of affected households. Presently, only male household heads are registered. Registration of women separately and independently of male family members will assist in ensuring that women who do not have husbands or fathers (or are in polygamous marriages) are still documented. Separate registration of women will also ease the problem women face in seeking asylum.<sup>37</sup> Hence, registration and documentation of parentless

children, single women, and others who are vulnerable to abuse is urgently required. Placing all registration data on a web-site, for example, might be a successful mechanism to make relief efforts more transparent.<sup>38</sup>

Regarding equal distribution of aid, changes must occur as soon as possible. For example, research demonstrates that in cultures with strong *pardah*, like in Pakistan, most women will not go to aid centers or stand in line to receive assistance. As a consequence, many women are left out of the process.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, aid must be given to women, the injured, and the elderly who are unable to reach distribution centers or make their needs known, for example, through door-to-door relief services.<sup>40</sup>

For equal distribution to occur, the policy regarding distribution of compensation on a per-roof basis needs review. Several families often share one roof, hence, per family distribution of the amount would be more equitable. Compensation payments should not be restricted only to men, nor should tenants or other affected people who do not own property be excluded from compensation. Pending payments need to be made immediately, so people can begin reconstructing their homes. Additionally, longer-term schemes need to be introduced, such as initial interest free loans.<sup>41</sup>

### Female Relief Workers

Women relief workers are very important to female survivors. In a gender-segregated environment such as Pakistan it is not socially acceptable for men to work with women. Moreover, female survivors have an inability to freely discuss their needs with male outreach workers or invite unrelated men into their homes. Thus, extra efforts are needed to recruit additional female staff. Additionally, a means of providing personal security for female staff is necessary for a culture that often opposes both female and outside aid workers.<sup>42</sup>

### Accessing Local Women

As both a necessity in terms of effectively delivering relief and as an opportunity to empower women, it is essential to include local women in pre and post-disaster planning. Planners should identify key groups of women whose local knowledge, community languages, social networks, and insight into community history is an asset in assessing vulnerability.<sup>43</sup> Local groups of women should be consulted in both design and operation of emergency shelter and in housing design during the reconstruction phase. These efforts can both protect and advance the rights of women.<sup>44</sup>

The Pattan NGO in Pakistan best exemplifies this gendered local capacity building after the 1992 floods. The NGO encouraged the formation of local village groups. They organized women and men into separate groups to institutionalize women's participation in decision-making. In housing reconstruction, women's views about design and layout were incorporated. Some of these women were involved physically in the construction of the homes, but the NGO's main goal was to increase women's decision-making role more than their workload.<sup>45</sup> The use of participatory methods for information gathering and program design can illuminate the different needs of men and women and increase women's capacities in the decision-making process.<sup>46</sup>

### Expand Education Options

To further bridge the gender gap in the wake of a natural disaster, relief agencies need to take greater advantage of the opportunities presented within relief camps. Due to cultural restrictions on mobility, many women have not had the opportunity to learn about or access the outside world. Vocational training courses, as already implemented in some of the USAID and Save the Children relief camps, should be further extended into the realms of education and health.

Apart from economic restraints, two of the main constraints to female education are access in

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terms of mobility and lack of female teachers within villages. Now that mobility is not as much of a constraint within camps, the government, in collaboration with relief agencies, needs to expand the number of camps that have schools.

As demonstrated in the Mehra Camp, if given the opportunity to attend school within the camp many girls and their families support the idea.

With government support and funding, education could become a long-term initiative that addresses the shortage of female teachers. The camps should not only look at schooling primary age children but also older girls and women, who, with a little additional training, could return to their villages and teach primary school themselves.

The Community Support Program (CSP) in rural Baluchistan is an example of a program that specifically addressed the shortage of female teachers. Carried out in three stages, the CSP experiment provided communities with a school in the village, ensured the presence of a female teacher, and encouraged the communities' involvement in running the school. Due to the short supply of educated females, the educational qualifications were relaxed relative to the standard requirement for a government teacher. The teachers were given in-service training to make up for an insufficient educational background.<sup>47</sup> A similar scheme can be replicated within current camps; however, it will involve substantial commitment from both the government and relief agencies.

### Expand Health Coverage

Many of the same restrictions that limit female access to education pertain to health coverage, such as restricted mobility, lack of trained female health practitioners, and a lack of empowerment and awareness. Life within the camps is an opportunity for relief agencies to provide health facilities to formally inaccessible groups of women. Within a gender framework,

relief agencies should address the specific needs of women in disaster situations, including providing suitable bathrooms, undergarments, sanitary supplies, prenatal, and maternity care.<sup>48</sup> However, beyond treating some women for the first time in their lives, which could possibly build a demand for future access to healthcare, this is an opportunity to train and educate women in basic preventative health care.

With lower literacy rates and training, women are often overlooked as a potential resource in health-related issues. Training women to care for and educate others in health and sanitation practices increases the likelihood that more women will be accessed and cared for. Additionally, such training will increase women's caretaking capacities, while also boosting their self-confidence, skills, and organization abilities. In particular, older women are often overlooked, despite their experience and knowledge, and the role they traditionally play as midwives and health educators. Such realities indicate the need for relief agencies to reassess priorities, such as qualifications or English language skills, when selecting refugees for health training.<sup>49</sup>

### Information Dissemination

Without initiative to disseminate information more effectively, none of the gender empowering programs will work. Many survivors are unaware of free medical services, schools, or tent camps that are available just a few kilometers away.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, intensive information campaigns covering a wide range of issues are critical.

Information campaigns can take form in a variety of different ways. Relief agencies and/or the government should look into using village loudspeakers to communicate a few well-chosen messages, either informing people of services being offered or as a general health information campaign. Their use should be expanded, as local media campaigns can also build community acceptance or at least reduce social barriers towards women's needs.

The most successful project thus far consisted of mobile health teams that delivered their services to local communities. The project was

successful because preceding the visits by the mobile teams there were extensive information outreach campaigns. This ensured maximum effectiveness of the mobile teams. Communities were informed repeatedly about when and where the team would arrive (typically at a local market where people tended to congregate), how long the teams would stay, and which services the team would provide.<sup>51</sup> In Pakistan, especially in the affected regions, such a model could be very powerful, particularly given the constraints on women's mobility.

Concurrently, women refugees should be made aware of their rights, as well as their available sources of protection. Relief agencies need to find a means to educate women about their legal rights, especially pertaining to compensation and land rights. As was indicated earlier, most women in rural Pakistan are unaware of their rights, and even those that are aware are scared to act on them. Again, by having large numbers of families within secluded camps it provides relief agencies with the opportunity to disseminate information regarding legal rights.

At the local level, agencies should work with entities that are already doing similar work. For example, Pakistan's Society for the Advancement of Community, Health, Education and Training (SACHET) has made critical contributions in this area. They have used media and community outreach efforts to mount campaigns that disseminate information about female rights regarding child marriage, dowry, and divorce. However, SACHET or similar organizations need to be further encouraged and supported to expand their work to laws that protect women. This can be done both within the relief camps and in surrounding affected areas.

### Conclusion

The recommendations in this paper are, to some extent, idealistic, though some, in part or in

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full, have begun to be implemented. However, the real basis of this piece is to highlight that following a disaster there is a real possibility for political and social change. Presently, civil society organizations and international agencies have begun to endorse the idea of considering reconstruction as an opportunity for transformation. However, despite the evidence from experts on gender and disasters who believe that crises situations provide a real opportunity for changing inequality in relationships between men and women, joint civil society organizations in various countries have not included changing gender roles or relations on their work agendas.<sup>52</sup> Aid agencies themselves have an unparalleled opportunity to challenge gender barriers by

generating jobs and income for disaster survivors.<sup>53</sup> It is a chance to “build back better” and apply principles of sustainable development and hazard reduction to communities and regions that are likely to remain at high risk of future disasters.<sup>54</sup>

*The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School..*

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