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Women Agency and Resilience in Conflict Affected Swat: Experiences of Displacement and Recovery

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Keywords

Women
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Abstract

Armed conflict involving militant groups and Pakistani security forces in Swat Valley during 2007–2009 resulted in large-scale internal displacement, profoundly affecting women and their communities. Although existing studies have primarily examined the political and security dimensions of the conflict, limited attention has been given to women's lived experiences of displacement, trauma, and recovery. Drawing on oral histories and qualitative interviews, this study examines the gendered consequences of conflict-induced displacement and post-conflict rehabilitation. Grounded in migration theory and feminist security perspectives, the research explores transformations in women's social roles, psychological well-being, family structures, education, and livelihoods. Using purposive sampling, the study analyses narratives collected from internally displaced women originating from Swat, Buner, Upper Dir, and Malakand districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The findings reveal multidimensional vulnerabilities extending beyond physical insecurity, including psychological distress, economic hardship, restricted mobility, and changing family responsibilities. The study also highlights women's agency and resilience through family solidarity, community support, and institutional assistance. These findings contribute to feminist security scholarship and provide insights for policymakers and humanitarian organizations seeking to promote gender-responsive rehabilitation, social reintegration, and sustainable post-conflict recovery.

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Introduction

Armed conflict is one of the push factors for forced displacement worldwide. Like other social phenomena, it affects women disproportionately. Contemporary conflicts extend beyond the military, producing profound humanitarian crises, characterized by social fragmentation, psychological trauma, economic insecurity, dismantling community

structures. According to UNHCR (UNHCR, 2024), more than 120 million people have been forcibly displaced including women and children across the world, as a result of armed conflict comprising the overwhelming majority of displaced persons. Armed conflict rupture entire social fabric but its effects are felt disproportionately. Existing gender inequalities intensify during periods of violence, displacement and post-conflict reconstruction. (True, 2012)

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Women's experience of armed conflict is different from men due to socially constructed gender roles as well as biological essentialism. Socially constructed gender roles limit women access to resources, security, mobility, education, healthcare and participation in decision making. Conflict reinforces patriarchal structures, exposing women to multiple vulnerabilities including gender-based violence, psychological trauma, economic deprivation, restricting further their limited access to education and health services. (Cohn, 2013) At the same time women's responsibilities expand further as caregivers, breadwinners, and community leaders demanding considerable resilience and forbearance from women. (Ní Aoláin, 2018) Understanding women's lived experience during conflict in one of the central themes of gender studies and feminist security studies as well as research on forced migration.

Pakistan became a case study of such themes due to the country's role in War on Terror, resultant militancy in areas adjacent to Afghanistan. Since the beginning of 21st century the country experienced prolonged insecurities due to militancy, counterterrorism operations, and regional insecurity as an aftermath of 9/11. The emergence of militant groups in northwestern regions particularly in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA). Among the worst affected regions was the Swat Valley, where militant groups established parallel governments challenging the authority of state, imposed strict regulations in the name of religion, and targeted educational institutions especially Girls schools. (Yousafzai, 2009; 2013)

Swat Valley is a region renowned for its cultural heritage, natural beauty and tourism. It dramatically transformed between 2007-09 as militancy destroyed everyday life. The militants destroyed public infrastructure, educational institutions, markets and civilian property, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee for their survival and safety. Life became even more difficult for women because due to prevailing cultural norms of the region they had limited mobility and knowledge of the world outside their homes and community. Displacement was not only loss of home for Swati womenfolk but a profound disruption of identity, social bonds and tradition that made their "normal". A 'new normal' was waiting for them outside, of which they knew nothing.

The gendered consequences not only impacted physical insecurity, it led to long term psychological distresses including uncertainty about future (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Displacement was also a concern of human security due to disruption in education, healthcare, reproductive services, employment loss, community support, reinforcing existing social inequalities and exposing to multitude of fear. Hence displacement was a complex social process rather than a mere relocation to another place.

Though much has already been written in the context of terrorism, counter terrorism and militancy in the context of Pakistan, existing literature employs political, strategic and

security-oriented paradigms. Fewer studies record the voices and lived experiences of women who endured the trauma of living under militancy and displacement and exile that was not their choice in the first place. Further the literature on displacement treats all the exiled population as a homogenous group overlooking gender specific ways in which conflict reshape everyday life, physical and emotional well being and personal agency. Hence there is a need for empirically grounded qualitative research that accounts for women narratives.

The study addresses the gap by examining the lived experience of women living and surviving during conflict adopting the technique of oral history. The emphasis of the paper is not the political development or military strategy but it is exploratory study recording rupture and transformation of women social roles with change in their ecology and habitat accompanied with displacement. It also accounts that encounters with other forms of existential reality changed their perception about life. The research adopts a qualitative research design based on purposive sampling and in-depth interviews of women belonging to Swat, Buner, Upper Dir, and Malakand region of Pakistan. The use of oral history enables researchers to locate and situate participants' experience with broader political events and processes at national and global level (Figure 1).

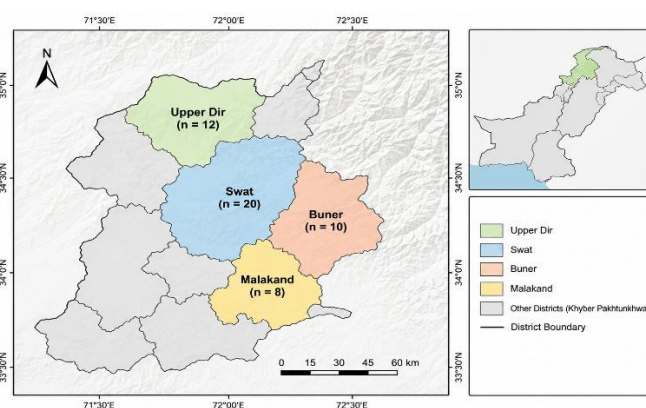


Figure 1. Map of the Study Area: Swat Valley and Adjacent Districts, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

The study takes Lee (Lee, 1966) Push-Pull theory to conceptualize displacement as the outcome of Push factors such as conflict, multitude of insecurities including threat to survival and corresponding Pull factors including security and access to basic amenities of life. The theory is complemented by feminist approach to security that emphasizes the need to look beyond the territorial aspect of security adding human dimensions like dignity, psychological well-being and everyday exposure to violence. (H. Hudson, A. Gouws & E. Porter, 2020) Appended with human security this is the analytical framework of study addressing how conflict-induced displacement intersects with gender to shape women's lived experiences.

Based on women's narrative of conflict, trauma, displacement and resilience, the study contributes to three important scholarly debates.

1. It advances gender-sensitive understanding of forced migration in conflict affected societies.
2. Foregrounding women's voices enriches the literature on internal displacement in Pakistan from people's perspective rather than institutional and political perspective. The study is contributing to the field of historical sociology.
3. It contributes to Feminist security studies moving beyond physical violence to long term psychological, social, cultural and economic implications.

Finally, the study argues that sustainable post-conflict recovery requires gender-responsive rehabilitation policies prioritizing aspects of human security and meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction in the post-conflict phase.

Literature Review

The literature can thus be grouped into five related themes: (1) the gendered aspects of armed conflict and insecurity; (2) forced displacement as a socially and gender-differentiated experience; (3) psychosocial, educational and economic impacts of displacement; (4) women's agency, coping and resilience; and (5) the importance of qualitative and oral history methodologies for capturing lived experiences. These strands lay a solid conceptual ground, but they are not sufficiently represented in empirical studies of women suffering displacement due to the Swat conflict. This is brought together in the present study by the interplay of Lee's (1966) migration approach with Feminist Security Theory and analysis of women's narratives of conflict, displacement, trauma, changing gender roles, and recovery as interwoven facets of women's lived experiences.

Literature indicates that methods must be able to include memory, interpretation, emotion, and context in the lived experience of women, methodologically. Portelli (1991) argues for the importance of oral history to understand how people remember and make sense of history and Patton (2015) highlights the need for qualitative research to gain insight into complex social phenomena that cannot be captured in numerical variables. In conflict studies, these methods can retrieve experiences that are missing from official military, policy, or institutional narratives. This is especially true in Swat, where women's lives might be woven into family narratives, migration stories, trauma recollections, and reintegration and recovery experiences.

While the literature in Pakistan offers important insights in a context-specific manner, it is relatively focused on conflict, militancy, counterterrorism, and displacement at institutional or macro levels. Abbas' (2014) work discusses the rise of militancy and violence on the Pakistan-Afghan frontier; and Yusuf (2014) deals with Pakistan's counterterrorism dilemma. Khan and Javaid (2015) discuss conflict and IDPs in Pakistan, highlighting IDP and humanitarian aspects. Moreover, Khan

et al. (2023) drawing on Pushtun's women oral narratives established that how women's agency can itself invoke life threats and masculine backlash enhancing everyday risks. Rehana Wagha examined how gender ideology and norms of Swat shaped women's agency and resilience during and after militancy. These studies are useful in researching the political and security environment of mass migration. They, however, offer less nuanced analysis of the impacts of displacement on women's everyday life, such as women's social identity, mobility, livelihoods, education, psychological health, and the role of women in the family. Literature therefore provides an opportunity for a gender-based, experiential understanding of the Swat conflict.

There is also an increasing literature that contradicts the image of the displaced women as victims. This focus on women's roles in family survival, community recovery, and post-conflict processes is reflected in the writings of Ní Aoláin et al. (2018), and in highlighting women's participation and voices in peace and security agendas in the writings of Hudson et al. (2020). Similarly, True (2012) highlights the structures that surround women's agency. These investigations suggest that vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive, for women can be living in harsh structural constraints but at the same time developing coping mechanisms, undertaking greater roles (and responsibilities), supporting family members and contributing to the process of community recovery. This outlook is particularly helpful when considering IDPs from Swat, as shifting domestic roles and dynamics within the community may unmask aspects of women's agency that may not be apparent when women are only viewed as humanitarian recipients.

Disruption of education and livelihoods as well as access to essential services is another major focus of the literature. Cohn (2013) demonstrates the potential of conflict to exacerbate gender inequalities by changing women's social and economic access. Krause (2021) points to the fact that in displacement settings women may be denied access to resources and become reliant on others, while True (2012) links gender-based violence to the wider economic and structural inequalities. Such views are in harmony with the notion that conflict-induced displacement may create compounding disadvantages, such as the potential for future loss of employment due to interrupted education, loss of livelihoods due to dependency, and limited mobility due to lack of access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities. Therefore, the impacts of displacement are not just humanitarian and may also impact on women's longer-term social and economic futures.

The issue of the impact of the displacement of women's mental health is another theme that was touched on. Mental health in

conflict and post-conflict contexts cannot be explained solely on the basis of exposure to traumatic events, as everyday stressors (insecurity, economic hardship, displacement and disruption of social life) can also contribute greatly to psychological distress (Miller and Rasmussen 2010). This is especially relevant for IDP women, whose vulnerabilities may be exacerbated by their caregiving roles, lack of information on family members and lack of social networks, as well as the lack of access to services, due to conflict exposure. Krause (2021) also refers to the connections between displacement conditions, gendered vulnerability, violence, and coping. As a whole, this literature suggests that trauma is not just the result of exposure to armed violence, but a long-term social and psychosocial process.

A second analytical line is provided by the forced-migration literature, which attempts to explain the mechanisms driving people out of their homes. Lee's (1966) Push–Pull Theory says there are forces in push and pull at the places of origin and final destination that are important influences on migration decisions. Violence, insecurity, threat to life, destruction of property, and loss of livelihoods in conflict environments may act as strong push factors while physical safety, humanitarian assistance, access to services and supportive host environment may trigger pull factors. But the literature on migration is not enough to account for the different experience of displacement faced by women and men. For example, Krause (2021) has shown the intersection between gender and violence in displacement settings, as well as between gender and access to resources and coping conditions. So, the joint migration-feminist perspective is that the choice or necessity to migrate and the experience of being displaced should be analyzed separately and in conjunction with one another. Brück, Hanmer, Klugman, and Arango (2024) establish that gender continue to shape displacement outcomes unevenly besides the other factors like livelihood, poverty, and exposure to violence, hence there is a need to move research beyond aggregate and gender-blind accounts presenting displacement as a homogenous experience.

A second corpus of literature focuses on security as a personal and life dimension and not only as a state dimension. Tickner (1992) challenges the traditional security strategies that ignore gendered experiences and Hudson et al. (2020) argue that women's perspectives in peace and security processes are important. This literature is especially relevant to displaced women as the security may continue to be a concern after the initial military violence has stopped. Conventional military indicators do not reflect insecurity and the factors of fear, limited mobility, loss of livelihood, disruption of family relations, and exclusion from decision making can all be considered forms of insecurity. The literature hence suggests a conceptual framework to understand displacement as a

multidimensional human-security experience, not just a change from an unsafe to a safe place. Drawing on, Zuccarelli, Riggiozzi, Owen, and Cintra (2025) emphasize that humanitarian protection regimes mostly remain gender insensitive, producing overlapping vulnerabilities loop across different stages of displacement; hence attention must be paid to reconceive displaced women's agency, autonomy and resilience contextualizing the experiences within broader setting. The study believes that experiences of vulnerabilities are different in different women subjects.

There has been a growing body of literature that addresses the subject of women, armed conflict, and forced displacement, and that has sought to go beyond the traditional male-centric view on war that emphasizes military operations, territory, and state security. One key critique in feminist scholarship on conflict is that it is a manifestation of everyday social relations and structures of gender inequalities. True (2012) shows that violence against women is deeply rooted in broader political and economic systems, and Cohn (2013) argues that war has an impact not only on women directly through physical violence, but also indirectly through its effects on gender relations, roles and access to resources. Ní Aoláin et al. (2018) also identify that the role of caregiving, maintaining the household, rebuilding the community and engaging in politics are also key components of women's lives in the post-conflict phase. These studies indicate that a gendered analysis needs to consider women's vulnerability and their agency in conflict-affected spaces.

Research Gap

Much has been written on War on Terror, conflict, terrorism, counter-terrorism and displacement since the beginning of war on terror, yet significant gap remains in understanding of gendered consequences of armed conflict focusing and emphasizing everyday experiences of women affected by conflict and resultant displacement.

Research focusing on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) paid attention to aspects of displacement like humanitarian assistance, camp management, security and post-conflict rehabilitation. (Umbreen Javaid and Ahmad Khan, 2015). Women are presented as a vulnerable sub group within displaced population rather than active beings having agency. Hence, women's narratives concerning trauma of displacement, loss of identity, cultural shocks of being exposed to new life patterns remained inattentive by the scholars of the field. Women resilience remain insufficiently documented. Hence there is a need to reflect on the experience of displacement from the feminist lens. (Ní Aoláin, 2018) (True, 2012)

Another important gap relates to methodology. Existing literature mostly rely on quantitative surveys, policy reports and secondary data. The complexity of women lived experiences cannot be quantified. Technique of oral history adopted for the study enable the participants to reconstruct the lived experience. (Portelli, 1991) Hence the study contextualizes the personal experience with broader political and historical processes going on at national and international level; making personal political and inversely political personal.

The study attempts to address the gaps by recording women lived experiences. Rather than assuming displacement occurred as a result of Swat conflict solely as humanitarian crisis, the study conceptualizes it as a gendered social process shaped and felt by gendered beings. The study adds a new dimension to conflict induced displacement literature on Pakistan.

Research Questions:

The Study answers following research questions

Q 1: How the Swat conflict and resultant displacement having social, psychological and economic implications influenced the lived experiences of Internally Displaced women?

Q. 2: How were the displacement reshaped women's role and responsibilities and what coping strategies of resilience adopted during conflict, displacement and rehabilitation phases?

Q. 3: What constitutes a gender responsive rehabilitation and post-conflict recovery policy?

Research Objectives

The prime objective of the study is to account gendered experiences of women displaced during conflict.

The related objectives are

- To examine impact of armed conflict on everyday lives of people specially women living in Swat valley.
- To explore the socio-psychological, educational and economic impacts of conflict and displacement on IDP women.
- To analyze how conflict and displacement transformed women's family responsibilities, existing gender relations and role in community.
- To investigate the resilience strategies adopted by the displaced women to cope with change and challenges.
- To propose gender-responsive policy recommendations for improving humanitarian

response, rehabilitation and post-conflict reconstruction in Pakistan.

Propositions

The study is qualitative nature but clearly stated analytical preposition guide the study to explore, refine and contextualize qualitative data in systematic manner. These statements are derived from existing literature and theory hence not used for statistical tests.

P 1: Armed conflict significantly increases multidimensional vulnerabilities among internally displaced women.

P 2: Displacement adversely affected women psychological wellbeing, educational and economic security,

P 3: Conflict induced displacement transformed traditional gender roles by increasing women's responsibilities at household, in community and somewhere as breadwinner besides being caregivers.

P 4: Social support networks, family cohesion and community solidarity positively influence women's resilience during and after displacement.

P 5: Gender responsive rehabilitation programs contribute to long term recovery and social reintegration.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical frame combining Lee's Push and Pull Theory of Migration (Lee, 1966) with Feminist Security to explain the gendered experience of conflict-induced displacement.

Lee (1966) establishes that migration is the outcome of interacting forces operating at places of origin and destination. In conflict settings, armed violence, insecurity, destruction of livelihood, fear of persecution, and threats to personal security acts as powerful push factors compelling individuals and families to leave their homes and livelihoods. Conversely, safer environments, humanitarian assistance, educational opportunities and access to healthcare operate as pull factor for the displaced population. Within the case of Swat conflict, militancy, military operations, destruction of public infrastructure including schools, and threats to civilian life constituted the Push factors inducing massive internal displacement. Temporary camps and host communities in secure districts presented important pull factors for the terrorism affected families.

While migration theory explains the why displacement questions, it provides a partial understanding of how displacement affects were experienced differently across gender groups. Feminist security theory addresses this limitation by challenging traditional conception of security

prioritizing state sovereignty and military power over human well-being. (Tickner, 2001) (Steans, 2013) Feminist scholars believe in the notion “personal is political”, and security is a paradox that must be understood through everyday lived experiences of individuals particularly women. Women insecurities are rooted in structural inequalities, discriminatory practices, economic marginalization and social exclusion rather than direct military threats. (H. Hudson, A. Gouws & E. Porter, 2020)

From this standpoint the displacement is not merely a movement but a multidimensional rupture affecting women’s identities, social relations, emotional well-being, economic opportunity, and access to essential services. Hence displacement experience can be placed at cross section of gender norms, family responsibilities, cultural expectations, restricted mobility and unequal access to resources. Hence the research on women issue of displacement must move beyond traditional security analysis tilting more towards human centered approaches to security prioritizing dignity, agency and social justice (Figure 2).

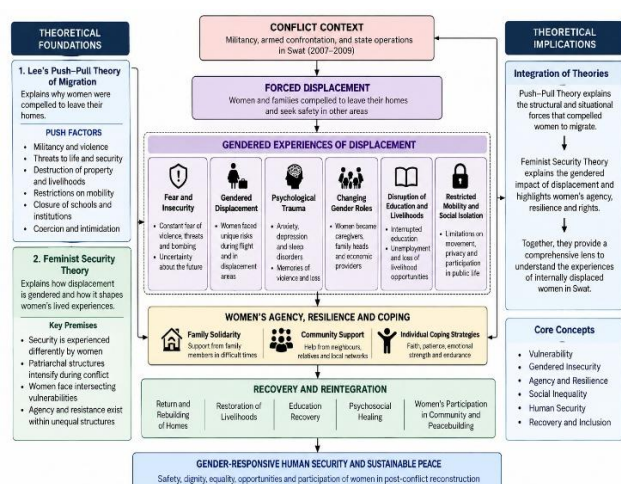


Figure 2. Integrated Theoretical Framework: Linking Lee's Push–Pull Theory of Migration and Feminist Security Theory to Women's Displacement Experiences in the Swat Conflict.

The integration of migration theory with feminist security paradigm provides a comprehensive analytical framework to examine not only the structural causes of displacement but also its gender specific consequences. Migration theory explains why women were compelled to leave their homes whereas feminist security theory gives understanding about women altered lived experience before, during and after conflict, providing a holistic view of women vulnerabilities, as well as resilience within conflict affected societies.

Research Design

As research is concerned on documenting women's experiences, before, during and after internal migration; qualitative research design is employed to record women narratives and standpoints using the techniques of oral history,

as these experiences cannot be quantified. (Patton, 2015) Technique of oral history was used to enable participants to reconstruct their personal experiences while situating the experiences within broader historical and political development going on national and international level connecting different levels of analysis. This approach also enables us to recover the voices that are oft excluded from official narratives.

Study Area

The research was conducted in Swat valley located in Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Swat experienced militancy between 2007-09 followed by large scale military operation to establish the writ of state. Thousands of inhabitants have to leave their homes. Majority were temporary settled in make shift camps administered by the Government of Pakistan and International Organizations like UNHCR to ensure the right to live of citizens. While others settled in relatively peaceful districts of KPK like Dera Ismail Khan, Peshawar and Kohat etc. While a smaller number migrated to Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan permanently establishing their homes there.

Interviews included women originating from Swat as well as neighboring conflict affected areas including Buner, Upper Dir and Malakand. It is worth noting that participants were not a homogenous group as they were on varying stages of displacement and rehabilitation. Moreover, different locations provided diverse perspectives regarding conflict exposure, displacement and recovery.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

The study adopted purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly employed in qualitative research to identify participants possessing direct knowledge and experience of phenomenon under study. (L. A. Palinkas, S. M. Horwitz, S.M. Green et.al, 2015) The method ensure that all participants had personally experienced displacement during Swat Conflict and were therefore able to provide relevant information,

Further technique also enabled researchers to differentiate between displaced population and permanent migrant to other regions. Study only focused on the group that came back to their homes after the conflict was over. It is also noteworthy that study also took account of difference in experience due to participants belonging to different age groups, educational background, marital status and socio-economic conditions. Hence the research is mere statistical representation but in-depth insight (Guest et al., 2020)

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducting using an oral history approach ensuring flexibility to explore further the predetermined themes while allowing participants to introduce issues they think important. (S. Kvale & S. Brinkman, 2015) The questions focused on five broad themes

- Experiences before the conflict
- Experiences during militancy and armed violence
- Displacement and migration journeys
- Life during Displacement
- Rehabilitation, return and Long-Term Recovery

The interviews encouraged participants to narrate events chronologically while reflecting upon the emotional, psychological, social and economic consequences of displacement. Participants were also encouraged to discuss the coping strategies, family support, institutional assistance, and perceptions regarding future peace and security.

Interviews were conducted in Urdu and where needed in Pushto with the assistance of translators from the same household that can understand Urdu. Translators were chosen for practical reasons to ensure the trust, comfort, access and family literacy dynamics; as most women were unable to express even in Urdu. Further due to tradition and cultural patterns of the area expressing in front of strangers was not a choice. Hence there were not a single translator from Pushto to Urdu but multiple people helped the process to transcribe responses in Urdu. As research is inspired from Feminist theory a further care was taken to involve women in translator role yet in few cases the male belonging to same household acted as translator. With participant consent interviews were recorded transcribed and translated in English for analysis.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis following the six phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (V. Braun & V. Clarke, 2006) the method is recognized as an effective method for identifying recurring patterns within qualitative data while preserving participants voices. The process involved

1. repeated reading of interview transcripts;
2. Familiarities with participants narratives;
3. Generation of initial codes;
4. Organizing codes into broader themes;
5. Review and refinement of emerging themes; and
6. Interpretation of findings within the theoretical framework of migration theory and feminist security studies.

The overarching themes identified during analysis included

- insecurity and fear;

- educational disruption;
- psychological trauma; loss of livelihood;
- changing family responsibilities;
- social resilience; and
- post-conflict reconstruction

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to internationally accepted ethical principles governing research involving human participants. (BERA, 2018)

Methodological Contribution

The methodological complexity of this study is due to the interdisciplinary approach that combines oral history, qualitative methodology and feminist security analysis. The research foregrounds agency, resilience, and lived experiences of IDPs women, and not their passivity as victims. The oral narratives allow the study to go beyond descriptions of displacement, and can help present a picture of how women experienced conflict, negotiated daily life in the face of such changes, and reconstructed their lives after their forced displacement.

By highlighting the importance of women's voices in documenting the social, psychological and cultural impacts of war-induced displacement, this methodological approach adds to the burgeoning qualitative work on gender and conflict.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis identified six interconnected themes reflecting women's experiences of conflict-induced displacement, including insecurity and fear, gendered displacement, psychological trauma, changing family responsibilities, disruption of education and livelihoods, and resilience during post-conflict recovery. Figure 3 presents an integrated model of these findings, illustrating the relationships between conflict-related vulnerabilities, women's coping strategies, and pathways towards recovery and social reintegration.

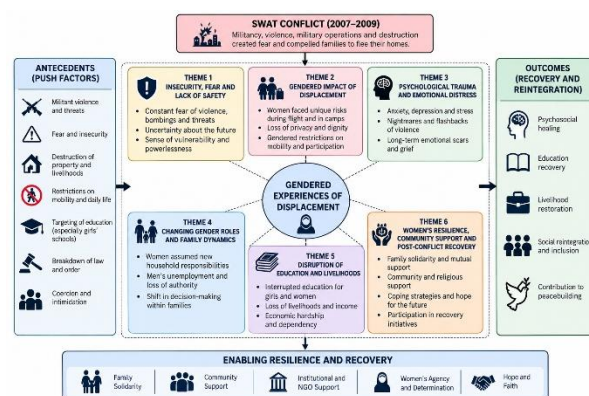


Figure 3. Thematic Findings Model: Gendered Experiences of Internally Displaced Women in the Swat Conflict.

Theme 1: Living Under the Shadow of Conflict: Fear, Insecurity, and the Breakdown of Everyday Life

The one thing which came across from the story of the participants was the fear that engulfed all their lives in the days of Swat conflict. Women spoke of the fear which surrounded them at all times as they lived with threats from violent groups, killings of those who opposed them, curfews, explosions and military operations that interfered with everyday life. They remembered how fear turned into a way of life and had an impact on their ability to move, study, work, access health care and family life. Instead of isolated acts of violence, women reported insecurity as an ongoing phenomenon changing perceptions of “home,” “community,” and “personal safety.”

The results indicate that insecurity was not limited to being exposed to armed violence. Women reported emotional distress due to witnessing the destruction of schools, markets and public infrastructure, hearing about violence every day and daily concerns for the safety of family members. Mothers' perpetual worries included increased anxiety about their children's schoolwork and physical safety. Many of the participants described that the lack of predictability of militant attacks led to an environment where everyday activities like going to school, visiting markets, travelling between villages were life-threatening choices.

The findings are in line with Feminist Security Theory which asserts that security should be seen not merely from the military lens of the State, but from the point of view of people's everyday lives (Tickner, 1992). The narratives of the participants point to the sense of insecurity experienced in the context of a disrupted family life, psychological distress, and, restrictions on everyday freedoms, as opposed to the focus on territorial control and military operations in the traditional security analyses. Findings are similar across studies of conflict-affected women in Afghanistan (True, 2012), Syria, and Iraq, where the homes and other areas of everyday life became spaces of fear, not safety (Hudson et al., 2020).

The results therefore indicate that conflict can't simply be comprehended by military markers. Women's experiences highlight that everyday insecurity is one of the most long-lasting impacts of armed conflict and not something that just ends once the conflict has ceased.

Theme 2: Forced Displacement as a Gendered Experience

There was a consistent theme that displacement was one of the most traumatic experiences of their lives. The displacement came quickly and with fear, uncertainty, and violence, as opposed to economic opportunity-driven voluntary migration.

Homes, livestock, farmland, assets and communities were lost with little warning. Often women pointed out that the process of moving away from the homes where they are from meant that they were not only physically moving away, but they were losing their identity, dignity, and emotional connection to place as well.

An appropriate understanding of these experiences can be gained from Lee's (1966) Push–Pull Theory. The push factors of militant violence, military action, insecurity and threat to survival were effective and pushed families to seek to leave. Temporary camps and safer host communities were pull factors providing protection and humanitarian assistance, in contrast. But the stories of participants show that migration theory can't capture the gendered impacts of migration.

Women faced displacement differently because they had to take care of the children, elderly relatives and household welfare during migration, which left them with primary responsibility. Participants spoke of the emotional toll of trying to shield others from harm, while at the same time dealing with their own concerns and anxiety. Numerous reported instances of overcrowding, lack of sanitation, privacy and reliance on humanitarian aid. As expected in society, these conditions were disproportionate to women, as they were expected to be the caretakers and the head of the household.

International research also shows that women are subject to forced displacement due to multiple social vulnerability processes linked to gender, their caring role and unequal access to resources (Krause, 2021). The present finding corroborates these arguments, demonstrating the need to conceptualize displacement as a significant shift in women's social identities and daily living.

Theme 3: Psychological Trauma and the Invisible Consequences of War

While, on one hand, physical uprooting was an immediate effect of war, war participants repeatedly pointed out that the psychological trauma persisted well beyond the end of the fighting. Women reported the following symptoms of fear, anxiety, insomnia, depression, flashbacks to violence and uncertainty about the future. Many recalled the memories of explosion, confrontation with armed men and displacement many years later after returning home.

The results showed that the cumulative effect of traumatic events exacerbated emotional distress. Participants lost their homes, children's education, their economic security, and lost their families and their prospects of return. Displacement also did not occur as a discrete event but caused long-term psychological stress that lasted during the conflict and in the rehabilitation phase.

The results are in line with the emerging body of literature on conflict-related mental health, which suggests that long-term psychosocial distress can follow from conflict situations where direct exposure to violence is combined with long-term social disruption (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Another feminist argument is that women's emotional labour is often invisible as care taking duties involve putting the family first, and that caring for family means caring for their mental health (Ní Aoláin et al., 2018).

The study hence underscores the need for inculcating psychosocial support in humanitarian and rehabilitation programmes. The rehabilitation process after a displacement is not only about rebuilding people's homes, but also about healing their emotional wounds from the long conflict.

Theme 4: Change in Gender Roles and Family Responsibilities

A key insight is the changes in traditional gender roles in the context of displacement. Participants reported that they took on new roles and responsibilities for child care, household management, earning income, health care, and family decision making after displacement. There was a lot of conflict in many homes that had to break up the lines of authority which meant that the women had to take on various roles of the men in the family.

The participants often reported difficulties accessing institutional decision-making or employment opportunities, and financial resources. The participants often reported on the difficulties of access to institutional decision making, employment opportunities and financial resources despite the added responsibilities. Women thus found themselves in a situation of increased responsibility and still facing structural inequalities. Their role in providing for households' necessities was frequently overlooked, even though it became essential during the displacement situation.

This research corroborates feminist scholarship which holds that conflict not only reinforces but also changes gender relations (Cohn, 2013). In addition to limitations on opportunities, displacement also gave women increased agency, adaptability and leadership within the family and community.

The results therefore reject the stereotype of passive victimization of displaced women. Rather, participants came into the world as active agents who negotiated the shifting family responsibilities while at the same time maintaining the resilience of the household in extremely challenging circumstances.

Theme 5 Disruption of Education, Livelihoods, and Social Well-being

Education and livelihoods were always seen as among the most impacted by conflict and displacement. The loss of schools and extended periods of displacement were reported by many women who experienced interrupted schooling for themselves and/or their children. Moms were especially worried about the education of girls saying that education barriers were institutionalized due to conflict.

Another theme, which showed up repeatedly, was economic insecurity. Displacement caused disruptions to agriculture, the livelihood sectors and to the employment of the people and their income, thus making them more dependent on humanitarian assistance and expanded family structures. A large number of participants indicated that they faced financial difficulties well beyond the immediate post-return period due to lack of livelihood development.

The results suggest that there was a vicious circle between disruption of education and economic insecurity. The short- and medium-term impacts of displacement on education were long-lasting, with education opportunities reduced due to lower household incomes and education interrupted due to lower future employment prospects.

The results are similar to those of a study that shows how conflict depletes women's human capital by disrupting access to education, preventing women from turning to the workforce, and creating a greater dependency on the economy (Krause, 2021). Therefore, investments in women's economic empowerment, physical rehabilitation and education and vocational training are key to sustainable recovery from a human security perspective.

Theme 6: Women's Resilience, Community Support and Post-Conflict Recovery

In the face of great challenges, participants showed great resilience in displacement and rehab. Drawing on family solidarity, religious faith, community support and helping each other, was a theme that was always mentioned by the women. Limited institutional support was often filled in by informal social networks in times of uncertainty.

Participants also indicated that resilience is a changeable process, not an attribute of a person. Recovery included reconstruction of homes, livelihoods, return and re-establishing children's education, and slowly rebuilding community relations. While there were challenges, many women highlighted the importance of collective experiences of displacement fostering social cohesion and community commitment to rebuilding.

Overwhelming narratives of displaced women as victims are challenged by these findings. Rather, the study shows that women were the main players in the family survival, community recovery, and post-conflict reconstruction. The findings are in line with other international studies that focus on the agency of women in conflict-affected societies (True, 2012; Hudson et al., 2020).

As seen from Feminist Security Theory, resilience is not a sign that women do not need as much institutional assistance. Instead, because the participants' resilience is being acknowledged, the role of policies in recognizing women's agency and supporting the dismantling of structural inequalities that persist in post-conflict reconstruction is emphasized.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the gendered experiences of women who were displaced as a result of the Swat conflict and showed that the impact of armed conflict was multidimensional, that is, it had an impact beyond simply being physically displaced. The research, conducted through qualitative oral history, captured the impact of militant violence, military operations, forced migration, and the effect these had on women's everyday lives, family relationships, psychological health, education, income, and their role in community life. The findings indicate that internally displaced women were living through conflict not merely a humanitarian emergency; that many of its effects were long-term and remained active even after the end of the active conflict.

The analysis has shown that in addition to the exposure to violence, insecurity was also felt when it came to the disruption of everyday social life. Among the most recurring themes for women's experiences in displacement was the fear, uncertainty, limited movement, interrupted education, economic hardship and emotional stress. The results corroborate feminist challenges to traditional security concepts by offering a more comprehensive picture of security that goes beyond military or territorial (Tickner, 1992; Hudson et al., 2020) security.

The study also shows that gender relations in affected families changed due to conflict. While women's roles in caring for children, sustaining living and managing the household became more burdensome, they also faced increased structural inequalities which restricted their access to resources and decision making processes in the community. The findings contradict the portrayal of a passive victim of displacement and speak to the agency, adaptability and resilience of displaced women throughout the displacement and rehabilitation processes.

Lee's (1966) Push–Pull Theory offers an explanation of the structural factors that drove families out of their homes, and Feminist Security Theory offers a more holistic lens through which to view the gendered impacts of displacement. An important contribution of this study is the integration of these theoretical frameworks where they show that forced migration should be seen simultaneously as a spatial, social, psychological and gendered process.

Oral history, as a method, was used to recover women's voices to tell their stories, often missing from traditional security and conflict analysis. This study is based on a feminist perspective, which makes it a contribution to the scholarship on gender, forced migration, human security and post-conflict reconstruction in Pakistan and in South Asia more broadly.

However, physical reconstruction and military victory are not enough to build sustainable peace. The implementation of gender responsive policies, which consider women's experiences and needs, build community resilience, increase women's education and economic opportunities, deliver psychosocial support, and involve women in post-conflict governance activities at the national and local levels, are essential for long-term recovery. To foster inclusive development, social justice and lasting peace in conflict-affected societies, attention needs to be paid to these dimensions.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policy makers, humanitarian actors, development actors and civil society actors in the field of conflict recovery and rehabilitation.

Drawing on the study's findings, Figure 4 presents a gender-responsive recovery framework that integrates humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, educational recovery, economic empowerment, women's participation, institutional coordination, and community reintegration. The framework emphasizes the importance of human rights, gender equality, cultural sensitivity, and coordinated institutional support in promoting inclusive recovery and sustainable peace in conflict-affected communities.

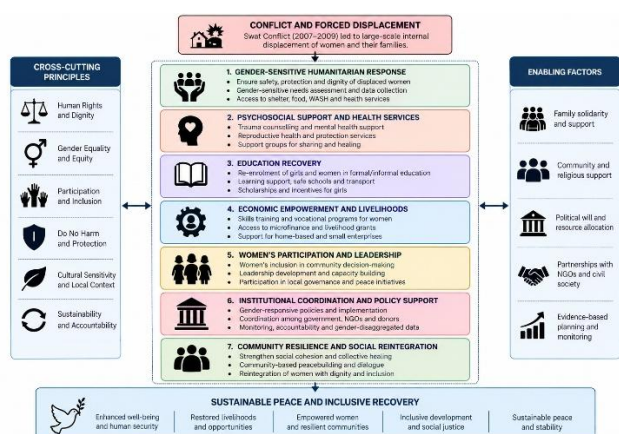


Figure 4. Gender-Responsive Recovery Framework: Pathways from Humanitarian Response to Inclusive and Sustainable Peace.

1. Ensure Gender-Responsive Humanitarian Assistance.

Gender sensitive planning should be part of the process of response programming in the context of displacement. Safe space, sanitation, maternal care, reproductive health services, childcare and protection mechanisms, in particular for girls and women, should be provided at relief camps. Gender responsive humanitarian assistance lessens the vulnerability of displaced people and upholds their dignity (UN Women, 2023).

2. Enhance PSS services.

There is a need for community-based counselling centers that offer psychological assistance in a trauma-sensitive way to women and children affected by conflict, operated by governmental bodies and humanitarian organizations. Mental health programs must be part of the post conflict rehabilitation process and not be a secondary humanitarian effort.

3. Restore Educational Opportunities

Post-conflict reconstruction should make a priority of educational recovery. Rebuilding schools, ensuring that children remain in school and are able to benefit from accelerated learning programs for girls can help lessen the long-term educational inequalities caused by conflict. Women who are affected by displacement should be the focus of scholarship programs and vocational education programs.

4. Support Economic Empowerment of Women.

Displaced women should have access to livelihood recovery programs that include vocational training, microfinance opportunities, entrepreneurship support and access to markets. Economic independence contributes to household resilience and less reliance on humanitarian assistance over time.

5. Facilitate the involvement of Women in Peacebuilding.

Women should be actively involved in local peace committees, community development groups, rehabilitation

planning and conflict-resolution processes. Their lived experiences are a reflection of their community needs that are not always considered in traditional security planning.

6. Improve Institutional Coordination

Integrated coordination mechanisms between the disaster management authorities, humanitarian organisations, health departments, education agencies and local governments should be developed at the federal and provincial levels to enhance the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs for IDPs.

7. Create national policies that address gender needs.

Policies for IDPs should be strengthened at the national level and explicit gender-focused elements should be included in the policies related to women security, access to justice, livelihood, education, health, and social reintegration. These policies should be in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and Women, Peace and Security agenda.

8. Make investments in Community Resilience

Future programs of rehabilitation should go beyond emergency assistance and focus on building community resilience by fostering social cohesion, women's community groups, disaster preparedness and locally-led development programs. Such programs can contribute to lessening the vulnerability during the next humanitarian emergencies and advancing sustainable peace.

Study Limitations

The study has some limitations.

There are a few factors to consider that limit the usefulness of this approach. For the first reason, the study was designed qualitatively, using purposive sampling, thus, the results of this study are analytical rather than statistical generalizations. Second, the study is based on the population of the women who were displaced during the conflict in Swat and might not entirely represent the population displaced in other conflict areas of Pakistan. Third, the recollections of the participants have come from retrospective narratives which might be affected by memory and later life experiences. However, oral history also constitutes a valuable method of understanding the way people experience and interpret and make sense of conflict and displacement over time.

Future Research

Comparative studies of the experiences of women in various conflict areas of Pakistan, including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Balochistan and other conflict and displacement affected regions would be useful for future research. Further understanding of the changing social, psychological and economic status of women after

rehabilitation, would be achieved through a longitudinal study. Furthermore, a combination of qualitative accounts and quantitative assessment of mental health, livelihood recovery, educational achievements and social integration might offer a more holistic picture of post-conflict recovery processes. Comparative studies with the host community, internally displaced women, humanitarian actors and policy makers will also increase evidence building for gender responsive conflict and displacement policies.

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