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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“SAVING SONS” BY FARAHNAZ ZAHIDI

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



Her name is Yasmeen Khan. She is a daughter of this soil. As the loudspeaker of the mosque near her office summons the faithful to Friday prayers, she respectfully covers her head. In her office, a prayer mat and the Holy Quran sit handy. It is this deep connection with Islamic teachings of peace and the value of human life that has given her the strength to pursue such a perilous quest. In her soft, measured voice, she begins her story.

Nearly every home here has lost one or more male family members to the scourge of violence—victims, or perpetrators, or sometimes simply suspects who vanished: either into the abyss of a grave or into nothingness. For those of us who know this part of the world through news snippets, these men are mere statistics. The tragedy of conflict in Pakistan is seldom given a human face by the international media. And the women who mourn these lost men are even more veiled to the world.



Women of KPK at a hospital in Peshawar that treats most blast victims of the province.

Yasmeen has taken on one of the most difficult challenges a peace-builder can ever confront: **to convince young radicals in the making to come back home and to embrace life.** Her bridge to each of these boys is usually a woman – his mother or his wife or his sister; women reach out to Yasmeen because they trust she can help them.

She never envisaged this life. Born of an educated but non-political family from the KPK region, Yasmeen majored in Conflict-transformation and Peace-building. **She studied and graduated in the United Kingdom, but realized during her student days that "we were studying conflict-transformation as practiced by other nations, but not tailored to our own cultures."** With her degree, Yasmeen should have become an academic in the safe bubble of a university back home. Instead, she was practically thrust into the danger zone. "When conflict began in my own area," she says, "I realized it was time."



She has never been to school. But this woman of KPK wants her children to get an education.

The silence here is a lull. Fear lurks behind the striking green eyes of the almost European-looking children, even as they run to school or play cricket in the streets. They seem much too aware for their young years—aware of words like terrorism, drones, and death. They overhear their mothers talking over cups of sticky sweet tea cooked over wood fires, their conversations fueled by loss and despair.

While working with Internally Displaced Persons in refugee camps, Yasmin heard of a woman no one wanted to meet because her son was a terrorist. **"Everybody said I shouldn't, but I felt I had to meet her. A colleague agreed to lead me to her house. But he showed me the house from a distance and promptly disappeared."** She entered and found only women. "About ten of them," she recalls.

Initially, it was Yasmeen who was interrogated. But, in the end, the mother of the boy, overwhelmed by pent-up fear and emotion, shared her story: "My son has been taken. People say that he is responsible for killing people with the help of a remote-controlled bomb. But my son is not like that. I know him! He is just 17. Please help me. Save my son." Once this woman had opened up, the others did too. "My husband's been taken." "My father." "My brother." The stories were many, each unique, yet all similar.

"If your son is how you say he is, and is not inherently violent, I promise to help you," Yasmeen told the first woman. "At that moment I did not know what I was getting into. I asked to meet her son when he came to visit," she says.



Albeit veiled, the brave women of KPK are not faceless.

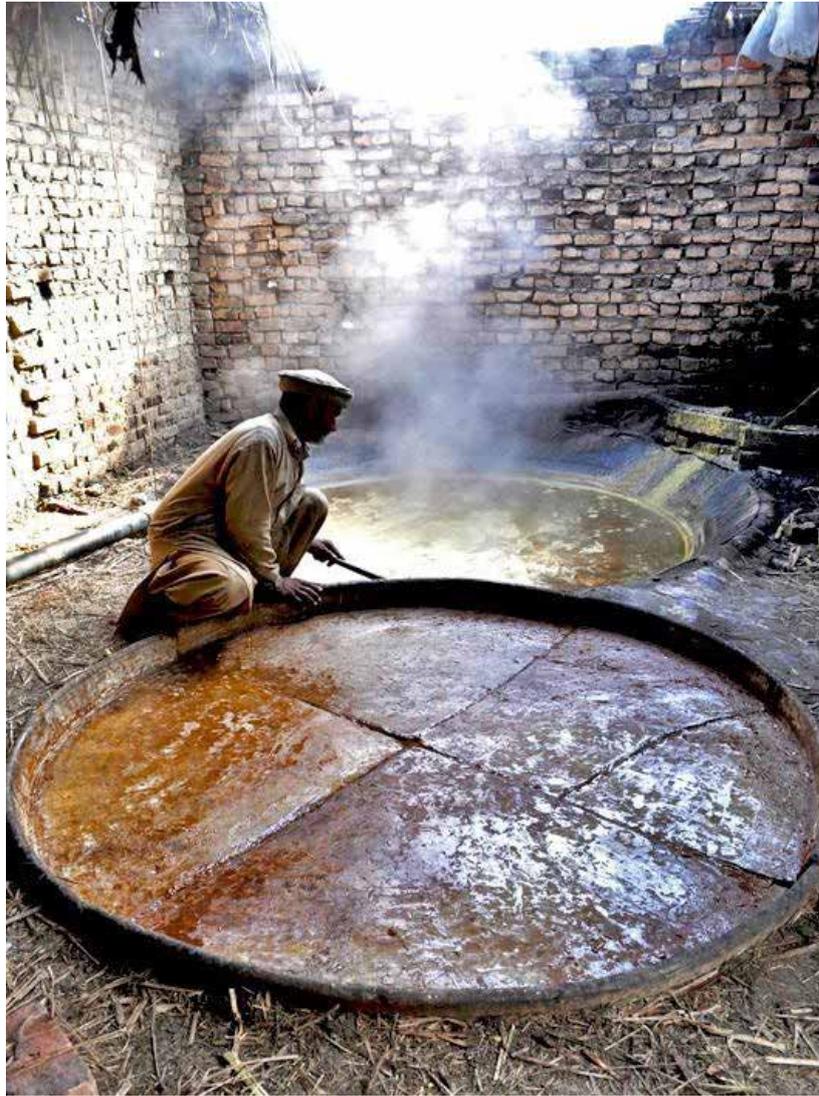
Months later, on a cold November night at around 11:30 pm, the desperate mother called Yasmeen. The son had come. Yasmeen wrapped herself tightly in a shawl and set out, traveling through the night, reaching her destination just in time to sit on the floor of that village home and have breakfast with the family.

“This could not have been possible without one-on-one trust building. She had remained in close contact with the mother for months, supporting her all along. This work is about human connection. **Only through genuine trust can one convince a mother to introduce me to her son who is wanted,**” says Yasmeen, a fierce determination underlying the softness of her voice.

Yasmeen started the process of convincing the boy by having repeated discussions with him about the concept of jihad in Islam. **"The base of the problem is the wrong interpretation of religion. You have to counter that with religious reasoning. If you do not have solid knowledge of religion, you can't do this,"** she says. Yasmin studied Islamic injunctions pertaining to jihad in depth. "Not many people have the courage to have dialogue around this issue. Why are we so afraid to talk about this?"

She then gave the boy time to wholeheartedly understand what she had said. Finally, he called her himself. "I am ready to surrender," he said.

Yasmeen's next hurdle was to reach an understanding with Pakistani security personnel. She told them she would turn the boy over only under certain conditions. **"Do not torture him. Instead, give him time in a rehabilitation facility," she demanded.** He spent months there, being counseled and simultaneously learning skills like masonry and fan repair. "Tell me, the boys I save from the clutches of terrorists, if we do not work on their rehabilitation and sensitization for peace and tolerance, what use is it? Give them opportunities and another chance! The brainwashing has to be countered. We work on prevention and de-radicalization, but their reintegration into society is the toughest part of our work."



In a small in-house jaggery sugar production unit. Violence has impacted sales of all goods, and often these hardworking men struggle to make ends meet.

No militant can be won back to the fold unless he is first acknowledged as a human being. Understanding where the boys are coming from is a critical part of her job. "They are hungry for recognition and respect," she says. **She also stresses that she can only achieve this with young men not yet hardened beyond redemption.**

This empathetic and humane approach comes easily to Yasmeen because she herself is a woman and her way to these men is through the women in their lives. "You have to make the women understand the impact of terrorism on their personal life and the life of their family and community. It's tough to develop critical thinking in these women who have been brought up in a patriarchal environment," she says.

Life is difficult for the women of KPK. A lack of security has made things worse. Schools are often closed due to unrest. Those that are open, the girls' schools in particular, live in perpetual fear of attack. **Countless stories like that of Malala Yousufzai, perhaps the most famous daughter of KPK, wait to be told.** So many homes no longer have male members older than 13 and have thus lost their breadwinners in a culture where women are often unable to go out to earn a living. **Their men have either been lured into a 'holy war', or have been killed. Some have died because they chose to fight, others simply because they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—a market or a wedding or a school, rocked by a bomb blast.**

Poverty, cultural conditioning and social inequity leave young men and boys little choice but to take up arms. And while men are braving it out, women are braving it in, trying to keep radicalization from consuming their most precious possessions: their men.



Young girls of KPK at school. Many are the first females in their families ever to attend school.

"Part of my aim is to develop these women's critical thinking "If they're aware, they will notice the sudden presence of a cell phone when the family cannot afford to spend 500 rupees (\$5) a day on food. She will notice that her husband now has 25 new friends frequenting their home. She'll notice the changes in attitude and conversation and priorities. But if she is in her usual slumber-like state, she won't know. She is not conditioned to."



Zarghoona, who is not yet 20 years old, with her first baby.

In rare cases—like that of a 21-year-old boy who, thanks to Yasmeen's efforts, has completed his Bachelor's degree and is working in a private firm—it is the mother who must be convinced. "This boy attended one of our training sessions with a hidden agenda to relay inside information to his mentors in the extremists' network. However, he was so moved by the message of peace and the rationale behind the message that he came around," says Yasmeen. **But it took months to overcome the resistance of the mother, who initially blamed Yasmeen for converting her son into an "infidel"**. Today, Yasmeen has saved almost 80 boys thus far. She has also trained many mothers who are now working as peace practitioners at the grassroots level.

There are nights she lies awake, traumatized by memories. "Particularly difficult is the part when the boys finally are ready to speak, to share, after a few months in rehabilitation. **They burst out! They cry, they yell, they scream! They are uncontrollable. In many cases, they have withdrawal symptoms because they have been drugged,**" she says.



A 14-year-old victim of a bomb blast that left him severely wounded. His mother sits alongside him in the hospital, weeping.

Few know about the activities of Yasmeen and her organization. "I don't want to romanticize my work by giving interviews and becoming a celebrity. I just need to do this. This mess of 30 years cannot be cleaned up in a day," she says. "Conflict is about humans. It's never about weapons. It has nothing to do with ideology or religion."

In the face of brutal extremism, apathy is not an option. And believe me, the solutions are there in the Yasmins of this world. If we would just care to look deep enough.