Gendered Frames, Beyond the Bullets: Women's Framing of Survival and Agency in the Conflict in Asia: A Case Study of Malakand Division, KP, Pakistan

Jan Muhammad [1*] Sajjad Ali [2] Faizullah Jan [3] Intikhab Alam [4]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: Journalistjan81@gmail.com

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: Sajjadjmc@uom.edu.pk

[3] Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: faiz.jan@gmail.com

[4] Independent Researcher, Dir Lower, Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: Intikhab1786@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: In this study, the researchers used Framing theory is a theoretical framework to explore how women in Swat narrate and frame their experiences of the conflict of 2007-2009. Drawing on in-depth interviews with fourteen female respondents from across the Swat Valley the article details five dominant frames: Victimhood and Trauma, Societal Collapse, Attribution of Responsibility, Survival and Agency, and Media Critique. Women position themselves as victims of Taliban rule and military operations but also as possessing tactical agency through the enforced invisibility of women, clandestine education, and strategic neutrality. One of the most notable findings is the critical media literacy of the respondents, evidenced in their rejection of simplistic binaries and their insistence that media erased civilian suffering. This chapter adds to feminist conflict scholarship by highlighting women's interpretive frameworks and resisting monolithic victim narratives.

KEYWORDS: Swat Conflict, Female Narratives, Framing Theory, Victimhood, Agency, Media Critique

Pages: 278 – 295
Volume: 5
Issue: 9 (September 2026)

Corresponding Author
Sajjad Ali
✉ Sajjadjmc@uom.edu.pk

Cite this Article: Muhammad, J., Ali, S., Jan, F., & Alam, I. (2026). Gendered Frames, Beyond the Bullets: Women's Framing of Survival and Agency in the Conflict in Asia: A Case Study of Malakand Division, KP, Pakistan. *The Regional Tribune, 5*(9), 278-295. https://doi.org/10.55737/trt/v-ix.471

Introduction

This research looks at how women in Swat speak about and make sense of their experiences of the conflict between Pakistani security forces and Taliban militants in 2007–2009. During this period, the Swat Valley, an erstwhile celebrated tourist destination, became the epicentre of armed conflict. Taliban troops under Maulana Fazlullah took over in phases, implementing curbs specifically on women's education and mobility. By early 2009, more than 150 schools had been destroyed, at least 99 of which were girls' schools, and the Taliban had ordered that all girls' schools were to be closed by 15 January 2009 (BBC News, 2009). On 8 May 2009, the Pakistani military launched Operation Rah-e-Rast, which led to one of the largest internal displacement crises in Pakistan, with up to 2.5 million people fleeing the valley (UNHCR, 2009).

Although the Swat conflict has been widely studied from security and political angles, women's voices have been less prominent. Previous scholarship has centred primarily on victimisation, recording Taliban restrictions and military collateral damage, without theorising women's own narrative agency. As one dissertation on the subject notes, "women are invisible and excluded from the narrative of history, their sufferings are unaccounted and their

experiences from victimhood to agency and what lies in between, largely ignored" (Wagha, 2024). This chapter does this by treating female testimony as a site of knowledge production rather than as mere evidentiary data.

Problem Statement

The prevailing narratives of the Swat conflict have been constructed mostly within the state and military frames – Operation Rah-e-Rast as liberation, Taliban as illegitimate usurpers and the displaced as passive victims. In this framing, women's experience is flattened to one dimension: the Taliban's repression of girls' education. This reduction is a double deletion. First, it obscures women's differential experiences of military operations, including displacement and exposure to counter-insurgency violence. Second, it denies women interpretive agency, positioning them as objects of external framing rather than subjects who actively make meaning of suffering and survival. How do women in Swat tell their stories of the 2007 – 2009 conflict? What do these stories reveal about gendered insecurity, survival and the politics of representation?

Research Objectives

- To analyse the dominant narratives by which women tell their stories of the Taliban era and the military operation.
- To examine the attribution of responsibility for violence and suffering to women.
- To record strategies of survival and agency during the Taliban rule and military offensive.
- To assess women's critical perspectives on media coverage of the Swat conflict.
- To make a contribution to framing theory by demonstrating how gendered experience leads to different narrative frames.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do women in Malakand Division construct gendered frames of survival and agency that contest security-centric narratives of conflict?

RQ2: To what extent do women's lived experiences in Malakand Division complicate victimhood-centred representations of women in conflict?

RQ3: How do media frames of the conflict in Malakand Division gender women's survival and agency, and with what implications for their representation beyond bullet-centric conflict narratives?

Literature Review

Gender and the Swat Conflict in Existing Scholarship

The body of scholarly literature on the Swat conflict has grown substantially since 2009, yet relatively few gendered analyses have emerged. Malala Yousafzai's BBC Urdu diary became the most widely distributed testament to Taliban restrictions as early journalistic accounts documented the Taliban's campaign against girls' education. Published under the pen name Gul Makai, the diary provided what one BBC editor called "the world's only window to what was happening in the Swat valley" (BBC News, 2009). These reports constitute the empirical baseline: destruction of schools, restrictions on movement, forced dress codes and public floggings (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

More recent qualitative work has begun to address women's experiences in a more systematic way. Using oral history interviews of women affected by militancy across the dimensions of personal, educational, economic, health,

community and political security, Nawaz and Hashmi (2026) examined the impacts of militancy on women in Swat. They found that women's insecurities were not confined to exposure to armed violence but also encompassed the breakdown of social institutions and livelihoods, and resilience emerged as a survival strategy (Nawaz & Hashmi, 2026). This speaks to a larger body of work on gendered insecurity in conflict zones.

The volume Voices of the Unvoiced (2025) by Anthem Press is a sustained qualitative engagement with the narratives of Swati women, documenting the transition from education under peace, through armed conflict, displacement and what the author terms as "education under burnt ashes" (Khattak, 2025). In particular, the study highlights two behavioural responses of women: complete withdrawal from education and "an act of challenging radical courage—'I must continue my education by any means'" -- even at considerable personal risk (Khattak, 2025). This finding speaks to the co-existence of victimisation and agency, which the framing approach developed here seeks to theorise more fully.

Framing Theory: Origins and Core Concepts

Framing theory originates in Erving Goffman's 1974 book Frame Analysis, where he introduced the notion of "schemata of interpretation," or cognitive structures that enable individuals to situate, perceive, identify and label events (Goffman, 1974). Goffman argued that frames are cultural and work to reduce complexity.

Entman's influential formulation outlines four functions of frames: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) referred to frames as "interpretive packages" that provide meaning to issues. Frames are "organizing principles shared in society that persist over time," Reese stressed, and power lies in their ability to bring a certain way of seeing to dominance (Reese, 2001).

Framing theory has been widely applied to conflict reporting. Conflict frames are one of the most prevalent frames used in political communication, drawing attention by emphasising clashes (Vliegenthart et al., 2011).

Framing Theory and the Present Study

The chapter extends framing theory in two ways. First, it shifts the analytical focus from media frames to experiential frames, or the interpretive structures through which people who experienced conflict make sense of experience. Second, it foregrounds gender as constitutive of framing; The frames of the Swat conflict for women are constructed not only through direct exposure to violence but also through their positioning in patriarchal structures that mediate the experience and telling of violence.

The application to women's narratives is especially apt because the conflict was a contest over frames. The Taliban framed their campaign as a restoration of Islamic moral order, the military framed its operation as a liberation from terrorism, and the media framed the conflict in a binary of "savior versus terrorist." As this chapter demonstrates, women's frames challenge each of these dominant constructions.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this chapter is interpretivist and qualitative. The interpretivist paradigm is suitable because the research is interested in exploring the meaning that women attribute to their experiences of conflict, rather than measuring pre-determined variables. The study does not intend for statistical generalisability but analytical

generalisation, referring to the development of theoretical insights that can be transferred to other contexts of gendered conflict experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

The study is based on in-depth interviews with fourteen women of the Swat Valley. The participants were selected purposively to represent different areas such as Mingora, Barikot, Kabal, Charbagh, Bahrain, Matta and Khwazakhela. They were all adult women living in Swat during 2007-2009 who had direct experience of Taliban rule, the military operation, or both.

The participants were recruited by the snowball sampling method. Given the sensitivity of the issue of Taliban violence and military operations and the difficulty of talking about it in Swat even years later (Wagha, 2024), the study used trust networks to reach the participants and make them comfortable during the interview process.

Data Collection

Each participant was interviewed in a semi-structured format. The interview guide covered four broad areas: experiences of everyday life under Taliban rule, experiences of the military operation and displacement, perceptions of responsibility for suffering, and assessments of media coverage. Interviews were conducted in Pashto or Urdu based on the preference of the participant, and they took 45 to 90 minutes to complete. Each interview was taped with the interviewee's permission, and transcribed and translated into English.

Ethical Considerations

The research was informed by many ethical considerations. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity first, in view of continuing sensitivity. Throughout, pseudonyms were used. Second, the study acknowledged that recalling traumatic experiences could be distressing, and participants were informed that they could pause or stop the process at any time. Third, oral informed consent was obtained.

Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted in two phases. First, interviews were transcribed and inductively coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial codes were generated through close reading, with attention to recurring descriptions, evaluations, and explanations. These were combined into higher-order themes based on co-occurrence patterns. Secondly, themes were interpreted using framing theory, investigating how participants structured accounts—what they highlighted, what they left out, and the moral judgements and causal claims that organised narratives. Each theme was then analysed for its problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation and suggested remedy (Entman, 1993).

Findings: Thematic Analysis of Female Narratives and Framing Regarding the Swat Conflict

This section is the analysis of female interviews about the Swat conflict so as to find the narrative and framing of them.

Table 1

Female Narratives and Framing regarding the Conflict in Swat (2007-2009)

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Victimhood & Trauma	Pervasive Fear & Terror	Descriptions of a constant state of fear, anxiety, and psychological trauma.	12	"It was an atmosphere of fear. We thought that life was over, nothing was left." (Mingora Female 1)
	Systemic Oppression of Women	Specific focus on Taliban-imposed restrictions on female movement, education, and public life.	10	"We couldn't leave our homes without a male guardian, and girls' schools were burned down. It felt as if our voices, our rights, even our very existence were being erased." (Barikot Female 2)
	Violence & Destruction	Direct experiences with bombings, gunfire, destruction of property, and physical harm.	9	"Suddenly, a mortar shell landed... injuring everyone. After that... our house was also destroyed." (Kabal Female 2)
Offenders & Causes	Taliban as Illegitimate & Deceptive	Framing the Taliban as un-Islamic, cruel, and deceiving the population in the name of religion.	8	"They flogged people, spread terror... none of which was justified legally or Islamically." (Charbagh Female 1)
	Societal Manipulation	The theme of the public, particularly youth, being manipulated through religious zealotry and coercion.	4	"Weapons were given to the public instead of pens, and people were fooled." (Kabal Female 1)
Coping agent, Organization & Repercussion	The Army as a Necessary but Defective Force	Acknowledging the army's role in eliminating the Taliban but also highlighting the collateral damage.	7	"The military operation eliminated the Taliban, but the homes and properties of innocent people were also destroyed." (Charbagh Female 1)
	Silent Endurance & Hope	A strategy of internal resilience, quiet support for peace, and maintaining hope amidst fear.	6	"Fear kept us from speaking to them, but we held onto hope. Our strategy was to silently support peace..." (Barikot Female 2)
	Irreparable Loss & Suffering	Framing the experience as one of profound, permanent loss that "cannot be put into words."	5	"The wounds inflicted on the people of Swat by this operation will never heal." (Charbagh Female 1)

This table organizes the emergent themes and codes, showing how often each concept appeared across the 14 interviews. Table 1 is about Female Narratives and framing regarding the Conflict in Swat (2007-2009).

Three themes with their codes were identified, including "Victimhood & Trauma" with the codes "Pervasive Fear & Terror, Systemic Oppression of Women and Violence & Destruction". It is analyzed that females were in constant fear, as respondent No. 1 from Mingora says, *"It was an atmosphere of fear. We thought that life was over, nothing was left."* Similarly, strict restrictions were imposed by the Taliban on women, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Barikot; *"We couldn't leave our homes without a male guardian, and girls' schools were burned down. It felt as if our voices, our rights, even our very existence were being erased."*

There was violence and destruction, as respondent No. 2 from Kabal says: *"Suddenly, a mortar shell landed... injuring everyone. After that... our house was also destroyed."*

Regarding the second theme "Offenders & Causes" with codes "Taliban as Illegitimate & Deceptive and Societal Manipulation", the analysis shows that the Taliban were deceivers and were misusing the name of Islam for their illegitimate activities, as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Charbagh, "*They flogged people, spread terror... none of which was justified legally or Islamically*."

In addition, they also manipulated society using religion, as respondent No. 1 from Kabal articulated. W*eapons were given to the public instead of pens, and people were fooled."*

The third theme was "Coping agent, Organization & Repercussion" with the codes including "The Army as a Necessary but Defective Force, Silent Endurance & Hope and Irreparable Loss & Suffering."

According to the responses, the army's role is acknowledged in crushing the Taliban but also causes damage to common people, as expressed by respondent No. 1 from Charbagh. "*The military operation eliminated the Taliban, but the homes and properties of innocent people were also destroyed*."

Moreover, the females kept silent and were hoping for peace, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Barikot: "*Fear kept us from speaking to them, but we held onto hope. Our strategy was to silently support peace*..." The analysis also shows that the people, particularly females, are severely traumatized and will never forget what happened to them, as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Charbagh. "*The wounds inflicted on the people of Swat by this operation will never heal*."

Table 2

Female Narratives about the Societal Collapse in Swat

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Targeted Eradication	Education as the Primary Target	Framing the education sector, especially girls' schools, as the intentional and symbolic target of the Taliban. This is framed as an attack on the future.	12	"The Taliban's first restriction was on girls' education. Schools were forcibly closed, and most were destroyed with bombs." (Bahrain Female 1)
Systemic Collapse	Economic & Livelihood Devastation	Describing the complete halt of commerce, tourism, and agriculture, leading to poverty and starvation.	11	"Swat is a tourist area... Where there is no peace, people do not visit... it was impossible to transport fruit to other cities, which had a major impact on the economy." (Charbagh Female 1)

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
	Infrastructure Destruction	Describing the physical destruction of roads, bridges, and buildings, framing it as a breakdown of connectivity and basic civilization.	9	"Infrastructure was also severely damaged because constant bombings destroyed something or the other every day." (Kabal Female 2)
	Healthcare System Failure	Framing the collapse of medical services as a critical failure, with doctors fleeing and hospitals closing.	7	"The local doctors had left the areas and shifted to Peshawar." (Barikot Female 1)
Responsibility & Collective Suffering	Dual Responsibility for Destruction	A nuanced frame attributing damage to both the Taliban *and* the military, highlighting the civilian's impossible position.	4	"First, our house was destroyed by the army. Then, right before my eyes, the girls' school was targeted and destroyed by the Taliban..." (Kabal Female 1)
	Total Societal Breakdown	A macro-frame summarizing the impact as all-encompassing, leaving no aspect of life untouched.	6	"Every walk of life including economy, education, health, and infrastructure, Communication etc was badly affected." (Barikot Female 2)

Table 2 is about Female narratives about the Societal Collapse in Swat. Three themes with their codes were identified. The first theme is “Targeted Eradication” with the code “Education as the Primary Target”. The girls’ schools were deliberately destroyed by the Taliban. The respondent No. 1 from Bahrain says. **"***The Taliban's first restriction was on girls' education. Schools were forcibly closed, and most were destroyed with bombs***."**

The second theme was “Systemic Collapse” with codes “Economic & Livelihood Devastation, Infrastructure Destruction and Healthcare System Failure.” The analysis shows that the economy was completely shattered, pushing people into miserable conditions as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Charbagh, *"Swat is a tourist area... Where there is no peace, people do not visit... it was impossible to transport fruit to other cities, which had a major impact on the economy***."**

The basic infrastructure like roads, bridges, buildings, etc. was also destroyed, as articulated by respondent No. 2 from Kabal. **"**I*nfrastructure was also severely damaged because constant bombings destroyed something or the other every day."* Similarly, the healthcare system has also collapsed, resulting in severe critical emergencies as people have no access to basic medical needs. The respondent No. 1 from Barikot unveils the situation as **"***The local doctors had left the area and shifted to Peshawar***."**

The third theme identified was “Responsibility & Collective Suffering” with codes “Dual Responsibility for Destruction and Total Societal Breakdown.” The analysis explores that both the military and Taliban were responsible for destruction, as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Kabal: **"***First, our house was destroyed by the army. Then, right before my eyes, the girls' school was targeted and destroyed by the Taliban***..."**

In addition to this, wholesome destruction occurred to society, collapsing the entire structure as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Barikot: "*Every walk of life including economy, education, health, and infrastructure, Communication etc. was badly affected*."

Table 3

Female Narratives Regarding Responsibility for the Suffering in Swat

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Responsibility & Collective Harm	Both Are Equally Damaging	Framing the Taliban and military as two powerful, brutal forces that collectively destroyed society, creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust.	7	"Both were powerful and both caused irreversible damage to society." (Barikot Female 2) "They both created a atmosphere of fear and vulnerability where no one was ready to trust each other." (Barikot Female 1)
Root Cause & Primary Culprit	Taliban as the Instigator	Framing the Taliban as the root cause of the conflict, whose actions necessitated the military response. The military's damage is seen as a consequence.	6	"If the Taliban had not been there, the military would have had no reason to intervene. The root of the chaos was the Taliban..." (Charbagh Female 1) "The Taliban cause more damage... if the Taliban hadn't been there, the military would not have been there either." (Matta Female 2)
	Taliban as Deceptive Ideologues	A specific framing of the Taliban's harm as stemming from their manipulation of religion and deception of the local population.	3	"The Taliban were the primary culprits because they used the people of Swat in the name of Islam against the state." (Kabal Female 2)
Frame of Direct & Collateral Damage	Military's Harsh Methods	Acknowledging the military's role in liberation but framing their methods as harsh, fear-inducing, and causing significant collateral damage.	5	"The military, on the other hand, instilled fear among the people... They carried out bombings everywhere and caused great harm to the public." (Kabal Female 2) "Just as the Taliban spread fear... the military also dishonored our Pashtun women and disrupted our traditional Jirga system." (Khwazakhela Female 1)
Ambiguity & Powerlessness	Uncertainty and Silencing	Framing the situation as one of such overwhelming powerlessness and fear that assigning clear blame was impossible at the time.	2	"No one knew what was happening or who was behind it, and surprisingly, no one was even able to speak about it at the time." (Mingora Female 2)

Table 3 is about Female narratives regarding responsibility for the Suffering in Swat. Four themes with their codes were identified. The first theme "Responsibility & Collective Harm" with the code "Both Are Equally

Damaging" says that Taliban and military both were powerful and brutal that collectively destroyed the society and terrorized the people as respondent No. 2 from Barikot says: *"Both were powerful and both caused irreversible damage to society*." and respondent No. 1 from Barikot says; "*They both created an atmosphere of fear and vulnerability where no one was ready to trust each other*."

The second theme was "Root Cause & Primary Culprit" with codes including "Taliban as the Instigator and Taliban as Deceptive Ideologues." It was analyzed that the Taliban were the root cause of the conflict and devastation of swat as respondent No. 1 from Charbagh articulated as *"If the Taliban had not been there, the military would have had no reason to intervene. The root of the chaos was the Taliban..."* And respondent No. 2 from Matta says, "*The Taliban cause more damage... if the Taliban hadn't been there, the military would not have been there either*."

Moreover, the Taliban were deceivers who manipulated religion for their filthy agenda, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Kabal, *"The Taliban were the primary culprits because they used the people of Swat in the name of Islam against the state*."

The third theme was "Frame of Direct & Collateral Damage" with code "Military's Harsh Methods." The military rescued swat from the Taliban, but their method of operation was instilling fear in people because they were harsh and were conducting collateral damage, as respondent No. 2 from Kabal says; "*The military, on the other hand, instilled fear among the people... They carried out bombings everywhere and caused great harm to the public*." And respondent No. 1 from Khwazakhela expresses, "*Just as the Taliban spread fear... the military also dishonored our Pashtun women and disrupted our traditional Jirga system*."

The fourth theme was "Ambiguity & Powerlessness" with code "Uncertainty and Silencing," analysis that people were clueless about the situation and there was a lot of ambiguity and helplessness among the people, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Mingora: "*No one knew what was happening or who was behind it, and surprisingly, no one was even able to speak about it at the time."*

Table 4

Survival and Agency in Swat

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Enforced Invisibility	Confinement & Restricted Movement	Framing the home as a refuge and public space as dangerously off-limits, necessitating self-imposed isolation.	10	"Our strategy... was to stay confined to our homes and remain silent." (Bahrain Female 1) "We stopped going outside." (Barikot Female 2)
	Self-Censorship & Silence	Framing silence as a vital survival tactic, avoiding any speech that could be construed as criticism or information.	7	"We remained silent and even advised our children not to speak about anyone." (Mingora Female 1) "We stayed quiet, even inside our own homes, afraid the Taliban might hear us." (Barikot Female 2)
	Behavioral & Appearance Conformity	Adopting specific dress and behaviors (burqas, beards) to avoid drawing attention or suspicion from armed actors.	4	"We wore full burqas... Some men grew beards and wore simple clothing to avoid suspicion." (Barikot Female 1)

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Covert Resistance	Secret Education & Preservation	Framing the secret safeguarding of knowledge and education as an act of defiance and hope for the future.	3	"Many of us hid books and school supplies to protect our daughters, and some taught girls secretly in their homes." (Barikot Female 2)
Pragmatic Adaptation	Logistical Preparedness	Framing practical actions like stockpiling supplies and monitoring news as essential for daily survival.	3	"Our strategy was to... stockpile essential supplies like water, flour, and lentils... We used FM radio to stay informed." (Matta Female 1)
	Navigating Checkpoints & Rules	Framing compliance with military procedures (IDs, passes) as a necessary, though humiliating, ritual for safe passage.	2	"We always carried our ID cards and passes with us; If someone didn't have them, they would be searched and harassed a lot." (Kabal Female 2)
Altered Social structure	Dependence & Displacement	Framing the collapse of normal family and economic structures, leading to dependence on relatives and internal displacement (IDPs).	3	"We were IDPs before that... During that time, all our expenses were covered by my uncle." (Charbagh Female 1, Kabal Female 1)
	Contradictory Security	A minority frame acknowledging the military's role in providing a paradoxical sense of order amidst the fear.	1	"There was a sense of security. There was some fear initially, but conditions gradually improved." (Khawazakhela Female 2)

Table 4 is about Survival and Agency in Swat. Four themes with their codes were identified. The first theme was "Enforced Invisibility" with codes "Confinement & Restricted Movement, Self-Censorship & Silence and Behavioral & Appearance Conformity."

The female confined themselves to homes, as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Bahrain: *"Our strategy... was to stay confined to our homes and remain silent*." While the respondent No. 2 from Barikot says; "*We stopped going outside*."

Similarly, females adopted the policy of self-censorship as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Mingora: "*We remained silent and even advised our children not to speak about anyone*."

And respondent No. 2 from Barikot: *"We stayed quiet, even inside our own homes, afraid the Taliban might hear us.*"

Moreover, people also show conformity to certain behavior and get up as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Barikot: "*We wore full burqas... Some men grew beards and wore simple clothing to avoid suspicion*."

Another theme was "Covert Resistance" with code "Secret Education & Preservation," says that people show secret resilience, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Barikot: "*Many of us hid books and school supplies to protect our daughters, and some taught girls secretly in their homes."*

The third theme was “Pragmatic Adaptation” with codes “Logistical Preparedness and Navigating Checkpoints & Rules.” The analysis says that people store edibles and stay connected to media, as respondent No. 1 from Matta says: "*Our strategy was to... stockpile essential supplies like water, flour, and lentils... We used FM radio to stay informed.*"

And during travel, they would keep identity documents to avoid any discomfort at checkpoints as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Kabal: "*We always carried our ID cards and passes with us. If someone didn't have them, they would be searched and harassed a lot."*

Another theme was “Altered Social structure” with codes “Dependence & Displacement and Contradictory Security.”

People were displaced and became dependent on others for food, shelter and other necessities as respondent No. 1 from Kabal and respondent No. 1 from Charbagh say: "*We were IDPs before that... During that time, all our expenses were covered by my uncle."*

They felt secure amidst fear in the presence of the military as respondent No. 2 from Khwazakhela says; "*There was a sense of security. There was some fear initially, but conditions gradually improved."*

Table 5

Framing Survival Under Taliban Rule in Swat

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Authoritarian Control	Extreme Confinement & Movement Bans	Framing the home as a prison, with women facing complete or near-complete bans on leaving the house.	9	"Women were completely banned from going outside. Everyone stayed home to protect their dignity, especially women." (Charbagh Female 1) "Our strategy was to remain indoors." (Matta Female 1)
	Enforced Religious/Behavioral Codes	Framing the imposition of burqas, beards, and bans on music/TV as a forced performance of piety and erasure of personal identity.	7	"If we left our homes, we had to wear burqas. Some men grew beards and wore simple clothing to avoid suspicion." (Barikot Female 1) "People burned their TVs and pictures." (Kabal Female 2)
	Psychological Terror & Fear	Framing the Taliban's use of fear, including public executions and threats, as their primary tool of control.	5	"At the time of Taliban everyone was afraid with fear of being slaughtered." (Khawazakhela Female 2)
	Destruction of Social & Cultural Life	Framing the loss of education, communal	4	"The mundane nature of life stopped... communal meetings were made

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
		gatherings, and business as a systematic destruction of society itself.		unavailable. At the same time, business activities were closed." (Barikot Female 2)
Strategic Neutrality & Moral Withdrawal	Absolute Neutrality as a Shield	Framing a deliberate, public stance of supporting/criticizing no one as the only viable survival strategy.	3	"The best strategy was to stay neutral---praise no one, criticize no one... neutrality was the safest approach." (Charbagh Female 2)
	Internal Rejection & Social Withdrawal	Framing a private, internal disengagement from the Taliban and a withdrawal from social contact.	2	"We completely rejected the Taliban. We kept to ourselves, avoiding conversations or interactions with outsiders." (Khwazakhela Female 1)
Taliban as Moral Restorers	Imposed Order & Piety	A minority frame that portrays the Taliban as having enforced a harsh but effective moral order and religious piety.	2	"During the Taliban's time, people prayed, and there was a sense of modesty among everyone. No one dared to do wrong..." (Kabal Female 1)

Table 5 is about Framing Survival Under Taliban Rule in Swat**.** Four themes with their codes were identified. The first theme was "Authoritarian Control" with codes "Extreme Confinement & Movement Bans, Enforced Religious/Behavioral Codes, Psychological Terror & Fear and Destruction of Social & Cultural Life."

People, especially women, were compelled to stay indoors, as narrated by respondent No. 1 from Charbagh: *"Women were completely banned from going outside. Everyone stayed home to protect their dignity, especially women***."**

Adding the respondent No. 1 from Matta, that "*Our strategy was to remain indoors.*" People were forced to conform to religious/behavioral codes, as respondent No. 1 from Barikot says: "*If we left our homes, we had to wear burqas. Some men grew beards and wore simple clothing to avoid suspicion."*

And respondent No. 2 from Kabal says: "*People burned their TVs and pictures***."**

Moreover, the Taliban spread fear and psychologically traumatized the people using violence as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Khwazakhela: "*At the time of Taliban everyone was afraid with fear of being slaughtered."*

Similarly, the societal life was severely disturbed as respondent No. 2 from Barikot puts: *"The mundane nature of life stopped... communal meetings were made unavailable. At the same time, business activities were closed."*

Another theme identified was "Strategic Neutrality & Moral Withdrawal" with codes "Absolute Neutrality as a Shield and Internal Rejection & Social Withdrawal." The people adopted the policy of staying neutral and criticizing no one for surviving during that time, as respondent No. 2 from Charbagh observes: "*The best strategy was to stay neutral---praise no one, criticize no one... neutrality was the safest approach***."**

The people imposed self-restriction and disengagement from the Taliban and tried to avoid any sort of connection to them, as respondent No. 1 from Khwazakhela says: "*We completely rejected the Taliban. We kept to ourselves, avoiding conversations or interactions with outsiders*."

Another theme was "Taliban as Moral Restorers" with code "Imposed Order & Piety." A minority of people think that the Taliban restored moral values and law & order up to some extent, as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Kabal; "*During the Taliban's time, people prayed, and there was a sense of modesty among everyone. No one dared to do wrong..."*

Table 6

Framing the Media's Portrayal of the Swat Conflict

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Media Bias & Simplification	Sensationalism & Exaggeration	Framing the media as focusing on dramatic, violent events while ignoring the nuanced, everyday suffering and trauma.	6	"The media exaggerated the military operation... Media coverage often focused on violence and dramatic events, overlooking the everyday suffering of the locals." (Bahrain Female 1, Barikot Female 1)
	Savior vs. Terrorist	Framing the media's portrayal as a simplistic binary: the military as liberators and the Taliban as pure evil.	4	"The media portrayed the Taliban... as agents of terror... while the military was depicted as a force restoring peace." (Matta Female 1)
	Negative or Unbalanced Role	A general critique that the media's overall impact was harmful or failed to provide a true picture.	3	"The role of the media was extremely negative." (Charbagh Female 2)
Elimination & Invisibility	Erasing Civilian Experience & Voice	Framing the media as having completely ignored the internal, emotional world and specific suffering of women and civilians.	5	"Our pain, our silence, went unseen. No one told the stories of cooking in fear, hiding our daughters, or crying secretly every night." (Barikot Female 2)
	Dehumanizing & Misrepresenting Locals	Framing the media's portrayal of local people as either helpless victims or Taliban supporters, denying them agency and complexity.	3	"Sometimes, local people were portrayed either as helpless or as Taliban supporters, which was inaccurate." (Barikot Female 1)
Media Operations & Constraints	Media Under Pressure	Framing the media's reporting as being produced under extreme pressure and threats from both the	3	"Reporting was extremely dangerous---journalists faced threats from both the Taliban and the military." (Charbagh Female 1)

Themes	Codes	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
		Taliban and the military.		
	Information Scarcity & Rumors	Framing the media environment as one of blackouts and unreliable information, where truth was scarce.	3	"The public was unaware because there was no access to media... most of the information could be either false or true---no one was sure." (Bahrain Female 1, Mingora Female 2)
Media as Informant	Balanced or Informative Portrayal	A minority frame acknowledging the media's role in providing information, however shocking, or portraying the conflict in a balanced way.	3	"The media portrayed the presence... in a very balanced manner." (Matta Female 2) "The media kept us informed..." (Mingora Female 1)

Table 6 is about Framing the Media's Portrayal of the Swat Conflict. Four themes with their codes were identified. The first theme was "Media Bias & Simplification" with codes "Sensationalism & Exaggeration, Savior vs. Terrorist and Negative or Unbalanced Role."

The media ignored the real problems of laypeople and sensationalized and exaggerated the dramatic event and focused on violence, as respondent No. 1 from Bahrain and respondent No. 1 from Barikot says: *"The media exaggerated the military operation... Media coverage often focused on violence and dramatic events, overlooking the everyday suffering of the locals*."

Moreover, the media portrayed the military as heroic and demonized the Taliban as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Matta: "*The media portrayed the Taliban... as agents of terror... while the military was depicted as a force restoring peace*."

The analysis shows that the overall role of media in covering the conflict was not satisfactory, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Charbagh: *"The role of the media was extremely negative*."

The second theme was "Elimination & Invisibility" with codes "Erasing Civilian Experience & Voice and Dehumanizing & Misrepresenting Locals."

The layman has no voice in the media, and they were eliminated from coverage, as mentioned by respondent No. 2 from Barikot; "*Our pain, our silence, went unseen. No one told the stories of cooking in fear, hiding our daughters, or crying secretly every night."*

Additionally, the media also misrepresented the local people, as respondent No. 1 from Barikot says: "*Sometimes, local people were portrayed either as helpless or as Taliban supporters, which was inaccurate*."

The third theme was "Media Operations & Constraints" with codes "Media Under Pressure and Information Scarcity & Rumors." The media was operating under pressure and was vulnerable to both the Taliban and the military, as verbalized by respondent No. 1 from Charbagh: *"Reporting was extremely dangerous---journalists faced threats from both the Taliban and the military.*"

Moreover, there was a blackout of information and people had no access to the truth as mentioned by respondent No. 1 from Bahrain and respondent No. 2 from Mingora: "*The public was unaware because there was no access to media... most of the information could be either false or true---no one was sure.*"

The fourth theme was "Media as Informant" with code "Balanced or Informative Portrayal." A lesser number of respondents thought that media reporting was balanced and informative, as articulated by respondent No. 2 from Matta; "*The media portrayed the presence... in a very balanced manner.*" a respondent No. 1 from Mingora says that "*The media kept us informed...*"

Discussion

The stories told by women offer insight into a very tragic narrative of life under Taliban control and the counterinsurgency war. Instead of simplifying the situation into a clear-cut good-versus-evil scenario, the detailed testimonies reveal that influential individuals are both suffering and commanding at the same time, and that women will always be subjected to intense scrutiny.

The gender aspect of the conflict is primarily emphasized by the overriding motif of victimhood and trauma. The perception of pervasive fear and Terror and systemic oppression of women, as reported by the participants, is in accordance with the notion of gendered insecurity, which suggests that the body and freedom of women become the main points of ideological domination and fear (Khalid et al., 2022).

The Taliban's dictates restricting women's movement and education were not only tactical but were part of a planned action to erase women from economic participation. This process has been recorded in other cases of extremist control (Held, 2014). The depth of emotional trauma expressed by these women aligns with clinical results of high PTSD and depression levels in the population over time that has experienced a continuous conflict and a sense of constant danger, which is also associated with a deprivation of agency.

Although the Taliban have been declared as illegitimate and a deceptive group of people in the most categorical way, the stories of the women hold the state entities responsible for their woes. The analysis explores the bittersweet dualism through the idea of a necessary but flawed force. It presents a two-sided dilemma where civilians are caught between non-state violence and state-led counter-insurgency harm (Siddique, 2014). Local women recognize that the army helped end the Taliban, yet they also describe the Irreparable Loss caused by military actions, criticizing both the narratives of state sovereignty and the practices of complicity in counterterrorism. They preemptively address the human costs of counterterrorism, a theme that critical security studies explicitly explore (Sanaullah, 2021).

The truth of total war can be demonstrated through quantitative data in the context of Societal Collapse (Table 5.10). The specific annihilation of the educational freedoms of women colludes with the Taliban discourse that amounts to an ideological attack on contemporary female empowerment and society at large (Yousafzai, 2013). The loss of the economy, infrastructure, and healthcare is a classic example of the devastating force of war, a tendency supported by studies of conflict zones and the post-combat degradation of infrastructure and services that persists even after active warfare ends (Rashid et al., 2023). The theme of dual responsibility for destruction stands out as a reiteration of the view that all belligerents share equal responsibility. Therefore, the post-war narratives are not one-sided.

The most glaring results are obtained from female types of survival and agency and strategic neutrality. The three terms of Enforced Invisibility, Self-Censorship, and Behavioral Conformity demonstrate not passive but tactical agency as an initial move of calculated obedience to survive under repression (Giri, 2023). At the same time, there is also such resistance as Covert Resistance (as evidenced by secret education), which is the resistance of everyday

nature and is directed to the retention of hope and identity during authoritarian leadership (Scott, 1985). Under the guise of Absolute Neutrality as a Shield, it was a complex process of survival, with partisanship posing a mortal threat and complicating the popular romanticization of the resistance through redefinitions of survival as resistance (Baines & Paddon, 2012).

Women's critical analysis of the media is linked to their high media literacy levels. Their critique of Narrative Should and the Surgery of the Popular on Sensationalism, the Savior versus Terrorist dichotomy, and The Erasure of Civilian Experience aligns with academic criticism of conflict narratives that overshadow the civilian perspective in favor of official stories and spectacle (Schudson, 2019). They view national media as a Propaganda Tool that reaffirms state discourse, consistent with studies on the media's role in securitization, which portray the media as an extension of the state apparatus (Hussain, 2020). Their analysis of domestic, national, and international media framing highlights the heterogeneity of media, influenced by proximity, audience, and political context.

Conclusion

Female narratives of the Swat conflict provide a crucial bottom-up perspective that is central to our understanding of contemporary insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. The study indicates that the women of Swat were not just victims but moral and political actors who were exposed to a layered trauma of both the Taliban and state's military counter-insurgency. Their experience of the conflict was one that was gendered; they were subject to systematic oppression, systematic incarceration, and they had developed a repertoire of ways of surviving, including being forced into invisibility, strategic silence, and the preservation of education and culture in secret.

Their accounts reveal a society that is not just ravaged by violence but also systematically undermined in its social, economic and educational infrastructure. Most importantly, they are not only at the forefront of condemning the Taliban, but they are also giving a stinging critique to the collateral damage of the military and the misrepresentation of their lived reality by the media. They are calling on all powerful actors to take responsibility for their own suffering and to suffer together, or 'dual responsibility'.

The importance of women's voices in post-conflict analysis and Reconciliation processes is highlighted in this chapter. Their stories are proof of the strength of the human spirit and a reminder that war leaves behind the loss of life, the loss of voice and the loss of laughter.

References

Baines, E., & Paddon, E. (2012). 'This is how we survived': Civilian agency and humanitarian protection. *Security Dialogue*, *43*(3), 231-247. https://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7810143.stm

BBC News. (2009, January 15). *Taliban ban girls from school in Pakistan valley*.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/qualitative-inquiry-and-research-design/book246896

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, *43*(4), 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, *95*(1), 1–37. https://doi.org/10.1086/229213

Giri, K. (2023). Strategic silences and epistemic resistance: agency of women ex-combatants in 'post-war'space. In *The Emerald International Handbook of Feminist Perspectives on Women's Acts of Violence* (pp. 249-263). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press. https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780930350918/frame-analysis

Held, C. C. (2014). *The Taliban's war on women: A health and human rights crisis in Afghanistan*. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1287f6v

Human Rights Watch. (2009). *"Lessons in terror": Attacks on education in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/04/15/lessons-swat/conflict-and-taliban-rule-pakistan

Hussain, N. (2020). Role of Media in Securitisation of Terrorism. *Strategic Studies*, *40*(3), 82-98. https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.040.03.0069

Khalid, A., Nawab, B., & Dawar, S. (2022). Gender and development in post-conflict swat, Pakistan: A critical analysis of NGO approaches used in development projects. *Conflict, Security & Development*, *22*(6), 629-649. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2022.2154477

Khattak, S. S. G. (2025). *Voices of the unvoiced: Women's struggle for education in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, Pakistan*. Anthem Press. https://anthempress.com/voices-of-the-unvoiced

Nawaz, R., & Hashmi, M. (2026). Gendering human security: Women's experiences of militancy in Pakistan. *Perennial Journal of History*, 6(1). https://doi.org/10.52700/pjh.v6i1.239

Rashid, M. T. (2023). War on Terror: The cost Pakistan paid. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, *4*(II). https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023(4-ii)67

Reese, S. D. (2001). Prologue—Framing public life: A bridging model for media research. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy, & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life* (pp. 7–31). Lawrence Erlbaum. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781410605689-3/prologue-framing-public-life-stephen-reese

Sanaullah, N. (2021). Counterinsurgency and human rights in Pakistan: A critical appraisal. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 32(3), 456–478. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2021.1881286

Schudson, M. (2019). Approaches to the sociology of news. *Media and society*, *6*, 139-166.

Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press. https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300036411/weapons-of-the-weak/

Siddique, A. (2014). *The Pashtun question: The unresolved key to the future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*. Hurst Publishers

UNHCR. (2009, May 12). *Pakistan displacement crisis worsens as fighting continues*. https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2009/5/4a0a5b8c2/pakistan-displacement-crisis-worsens.html

Vliegenthart, R., Boomgaarden, H. G., & Boumans, J. W. (2011). Changes in political news coverage: Personalization, conflict and negativity in British and Dutch newspapers. In K. Brants & K. Voltmer (Eds.), *Political communication in postmodern democracy* (pp. 92–110). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230299078_6

Wagha, R. (2024). *War, violence and women's agency in Pakistan: The case of Swat*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/War-Violence-and-Womens-Agency-in-Pakistan-The-Case-of-Swat/Wagha/p/book/9781032660929

Yousafzai, M. (2013). *I am Malala: The girl who stood up for education and was shot by the Taliban*. Hachette UK.