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**Human Rights**

# Defying the Taliban, Girls in Pakistan Go to School

By Haris Anwar October 17, 2013



Photograph by Asim Hafeez of Malala Yousafzai

In 2009, the Taliban in Pakistan barred girls from attending school, an edict it enforced with indiscriminate brutality. When teenager Malala Yousafzai won international attention for speaking out against the ban, the Islamic fundamentalists tried to make an example of her. In October 2012 a gunman shot her in the face as she rode the bus to school. The bullet struck above her left eye, grazing her brain. Now 16, she's published a memoir, met President Obama in the Oval Office, and become a world-traveling activist on behalf of girls' rights.

In a country where only 40 percent of adult women can read and write, outrage at Yousafzai's shooting has brought pressure on government officials to raise education standards and encourage families to send their daughters to school. In recent months there's been a spike in the number of girls enrolling in school in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which lies at the center of a Taliban insurgency. The provincial government increased education spending by about 30 percent and began an enrollment drive that's added 200,000 pupils, including 75,000 girls. Yousafzai's story "is certainly helping us to promote education in the tribal belt," says Muhammad Atif Khan, the province's education minister. "Education is a matter of death and life. We can't solve terrorism issues without educating people."

Four years ago, Taliban guerrillas took control of the rural district of Swat, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, a forested, mile-high valley 155 miles north of the capital, Islamabad, and imposed their strict interpretation of Islamic law. They beheaded local leaders and burned schools in a two-year fight that uprooted 2 million people from their homes. A government military offensive ended their rule, but Taliban strikes in the area are still common. The government says insurgents have killed more than 1,200 civilians, soldiers, and police this year.

Despite the danger, school enrollment among girls is surging at both private and government-funded schools, according to Ahmad Shah, the chairman of the Private Schools Management Association, an organization that represents 500 schools in the area. His school has seen a 10 percent rise in admissions this year, the most since the Taliban's ouster. "In our schools, girls are saying, 'I want to be like Malala,'" Shah says. Women have held prominent positions in Pakistan, including Fahmida Mirza, a former Parliament speaker, and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was killed in an alleged Taliban attack in 2007. Yet nationwide only 22 percent of women age 15 and older hold jobs, compared with 78 percent of men, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Some Pakistanis remain suspicious of Yousafzai, believing she's part of a U.S. plan to undermine their way of life. "We don't want our daughters to go out and speak against our traditions," says Wali Khan, a restaurant owner in Mingora. "U.S. drones are killing innocent kids and women in our area. Do they really care about us? All they want is to malign us through this girl, who is playing into their hands." The *Dawn* newspaper reported that the Pakistani Taliban has threatened to kill Yousafzai—who now lives in the U.K.—and target shops in Pakistan that sell her memoir, *I Am Malala*.

That hasn't deterred girls from seeking out the book. Sadiqa Ameen, a 15-year-old in Swat, says she'll see herself in the memoir. "This is probably the first-ever book written by a Swati girl," Ameen says. "I am sure her story will be something we all know and have gone through during the Taliban rule." High school student Shehzad Qamar credits Yousafzai with prompting the government to build more local institutions of higher learning. "She has done what we couldn't have achieved in 100 years," Qamar says. "She gave this town an identity."

***The bottom line:*** *Despite threats and brutality from the Taliban, a rural education program in Pakistan has enrolled 75,000 girls in school.*

Anwar is a reporter for Bloomberg News.

This week's directions:

1. Thoroughly annotate the text.
2. Do not highlight; do not pick out part of an argument.
3. Complete an abstract.
4. Complete APA citation.
5. Wax philosophical about what is happening in Pakistan regarding education. Make connections. Don't be one-dimensional, lest I glower at you. Several paragraphs are appropriate. Please write them by hand directly on these pages.