


Girls' Right to Education in Pakistan: Critical Reflections on Malala's Campaign in her Hometown

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Abstract

During the War on Terrorism, the Taliban destroyed girls' schools and discouraged their education. At this time Malala Yousafzai, a teenage girl, stood up to them and fought for girls' education rights. Though she went through a physical and psychological ordeal after the Taliban shot her in the head she persisted in her initiative. Soon she was much praised in the Western media and also landed a Nobel Prize for her efforts. However, in her hometown, she became somewhat controversial. By engaging the ethnographic method, we bring to light different perspectives on Malala's initiative in the valley of Swat. This article also contributes to the study of the growingly complex social and political figure of Malala Yousafzai.

Key Words: Malala Yousafzai, Girls Education, Swat valley, Pashtun culture, the Taliban.

Introduction: Malala's Campaign for Girls' Right to Education

This article explores Malala's initiative for girls' education in her hometown. She took this initiative in the face of many hurdles, especially at the hands of the religious radicals as well as the overall conservative nature of the Pashtun society. Her struggle started after her ordeal of surviving an attack by the Taliban. She initially began writing about women's education and soon got global popularity for her efforts despite going through major surgery and psychological trauma. In her hometown, however, her efforts for women's education were received with mixed impressions. While some

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people lauded her others became skeptical.¹ It is important to notice that such controversy to her education efforts women in her hometown has already been facing difficulties in education due to patriarchy and the Taliban. In Pashtun conservative society cultural values, traditions, and patriarchy have been the major factors in the way of women's education. This conservative society was further hardened by the Taliban in her hometown, who launched an offensive to bomb girls' schools during the War on Terrorism.

During the War on Terrorism when the Taliban had formed their Pakistani wing by the name of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and were engaged in full-fledged terrorism, it was quite difficult in her hometown to work for girls' education. Later when the Taliban took over the Swat valley in 2009, it became a life-threatening initiative and anyone engaged in it risked their life. The Taliban destroyed many girls' schools and threatened the teachers from providing education services. The Taliban wanted girls to stay at home or else go to religious Madrasas. They abhorred secular scientific education provided by the state or private organizations. During their time in the valley, women stopped going outside their houses. They would stay inside mostly, and if needed to go to the hospital or other necessary places then they had to be accompanied by a male member and would wear a head-to-toe thick covering. Women in health services also began to decline and life for women, in general, became quite tough.

The concept of gender is socially constructed. If we take this idea from modern feminist literature, then we can shed critical light on how the role of women has been determined and fixed in the patriarchal society of Swat. Radical feminism, cultural feminism, and liberal feminism are some of the feminist ideologies that examine the various aspects of gender equality. These theories can provide us with the theoretical underpinning needed to understand the issues that women in Malala's hometown face. Such issues involve the local cultural norms and Taliban narratives both of which opposed women's access to education. For a long time, the local culture remained the major hurdle in the way of girls' education and restricted them to house chores. Malala stood up to fight against cultural patriarchy, as well as extremism. She challenged these all socially constructed traditions and extremism that restricted them from education.

By engaging the ethnographic method, this article focuses on how the local people of Swat valley perceived Malala's campaign for girls' education. Moreover, how do the local people see the growing social persona of Malala in the media? It also comments on how Malala's education campaign creates awareness about and room for (female) gender mainstreaming in the valley. Furthermore, the

article discusses the various hurdles her campaign faced in the valley. Thus the article helps to understand the state of affairs of girls' education and the level of gender mainstreaming, as well as the hurdles to it and the contribution made by Malala's campaign.

Methodology

The article employs the ethnographic method to study the problem in its setting/culture. The researchers went to stay in the Swat valley, mix up with the people, and have informal dialogues, as well as formal interviews and group discussions. For the formal interviews, the respondents were chosen using the purposive sampling method. The main sources of information were Malala's hometown residents, especially teachers, political figures, and social activists. In total 35 formal interviews were carried out in sites of BadaKhair, Qabal, Matta, Guljaba, Hazara, Akhunkalay, and Tootano Bandy. Most of the interviews were carried out in government schools with teachers, administration, and elders. A total of three focus group discussions were also carried out. To explore the several facets of the study, thematic analysis is carefully developed in the context of primary material. As various themes are developed, the socio-cultural and political elements of the society that posed hurdles and had a considerable impact on Malala's campaign were analyzed. In this way, through various themes, we comment on how Malala's education campaign creates awareness about and room for (female) gender mainstreaming in the valley. The primary data is carefully analyzed in the light of available literature and themes are derived from the primary data.

The primary data is collected through in-depth interviews. The primary data was collected from cultural experts, journalists, and education activities to collect information about women's education and Malala's efforts for their education in her hometown. After the transcription of the primary data, the following themes are derived to cover every aspect of Malala's campaign for girls' education.

Thematic Analysis of Malala's Campaign for Girls' Education

Malala's campaign for girls' education has invited mixed responses. While in the West she is lauded for her bravery, steadfastness, and activism, in Pakistan she is both lauded by some quarters and criticized by others. There are different perspectives on her public figure as well as her campaign ranging from eulogies to conspiracy theories.

1. Malala's Education Campaign and the Western Media

In the Western media, she has mostly been projected as a global icon for peace and women's education rights. She has also presented herself to the international community as a symbol of resistance,

women empowerment, and moderate enlightenment of women in Islamic society. Her struggle is often romanticized as a struggle of a little girl fighting the dangerous terrorists in the world on behalf of her fellow girls. She is seen at the forums of the UN and in parliaments of western democracies describing her daunting challenge of fighting for girls' education in Islamic societies. In general, she has been commended and well-received in the global media for her work. There is no doubt that western countries look at her struggle from different perspectives as compared to local narratives available in Pakistan.² The local people of Malala's hometown, for instance, believe that it's the West and NGOs who are projecting her as the ambassador for women's education. One respondent in our field interview for instance stated:

As an Afghan diaspora, I feel proud that I am from the hometown of Malala. The international community gives respects us when we say that I am from the hometown of Malala. However, in our society, we fail to recognize her efforts for women's education and peace at the local level.³

In the West, Malala's efforts are symbolic of liberating women and making them educated in different parts of the developing world. According to one observer, educated women around the world can readily understand the global project for peace, education, gender, development, and democracy⁴ and they don't see many conspiracy theories in it. Education can facilitate women to participation in the peace-building process and gender mainstreaming.⁵ Therefore, the western media acknowledges her efforts for girls' education and presents her as an ambassador of peace. In the recognition of her efforts, the West gave her the Nobel peace prize. She has also established the Malala Fund, a non-profit organization, to support women's education in developing counties. International non-governmental organizations and western countries financially support The Malala Fund organization to further women's education across the developing world, especially in conflict zones like Pakistan and Afghanistan. The international community views her struggle through the lens of gender mainstreaming, equality, and empowerment framework. And her struggle for girls' education easily fits into the UN's global project of gender uplift and also suits the democratic interest of the West.

a) Malala's Narrative for Girls' Education in the Borderland

Malala is known for her work for peace and education not only in the West but also in the East, especially in Pakistan, her home country. She has established the Malala Fund to promote female education in the northwestern borderland of Pakistan, which is one of the neglected areas concerning female literacy. Malala Fund organization has been working for female education also in other parts of the

developing world where women are facing sociocultural and political obstacles to getting an education. However, it is mainly the Pashtun borderland that is the main focus and beneficiary of her efforts. The people of neighboring countries who believe in democracy, liberty, and women's education, especially in Afghanistan and India also support her stance.

The Taliban government has been against women's education in Afghanistan. However, women inspired by the struggle of Malala now resist the Taliban narrative. They are protesting for their right and especially the right to education. They endorse the struggle of Malala for women's education and challenge the conservative stance of the Taliban about women's education. The whole of South Asia and especially the people of the neighboring countries are inspired by the work and ideology of Malala Yousafzai. Patriarchy is one of the dominant cultural norms in the Pashtun society and women are half of the population. And her struggle for women's education inspired women across the borderland and in Afghanistan. One respondent stated that;

Malala has set up an education fund for women's education and the fund supports women in the neighboring countries of Pakistan as well. Poverty, patriarchy, and extremism are the basic obstacles that do not allow women to get an education in South Asia. Women, who are living in the borderland of Pakistan, are also facing obstacles to getting their education.⁶

Malala has been supporting women's education across the globe but her efforts are more focused on the women who are facing obstacles in Pakistan, where they are not allowed to get primary education.⁷ Currently, women in Afghanistan are protesting against the narrative of the Taliban about women's education.

b) How Far the West Buys her Narrative

Western countries support the struggle Malala for girls' education and present her as a women's rights activist to the world. They own the narrative of Malala and they believe we cannot free women from the shackles of patriarchy and radical ideology without education.⁸ The people, however, saw Malala's fight for women's rights through the prism of their cultural traditions. Elites in Pakistan have various perspectives on her. Education is essential in challenging the state's hegemonic power structure and the conventional state narratives.⁹ Malala's contribution to women's education was questioned by the local media and the general public with the tacit support of the government. The locals occasionally felt that her fight threatened their way of life and they believe that the western countries are imposing their liberal agenda through Malala and presented her as an icon of liberalism. However, despite the above-mentioned obstacles she through education activism successfully challenges the

patriarchal structure and somehow convinced the local people to allow female education.¹⁰ She challenged the Pashtun cultural values which restrict women from education in public or private schools.

Moreover, the Pakistani state perceived her as a threat to its national identity. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, even educated people are against the campaign Malala for women's education. They are skeptical and oppose her stance. However, the local people due to cultural values are opposing her stance on women's education. A big number of people also demonize her struggle through conspiracy theories relating to religion, secularism, and/or nationalism.¹¹ One of the respondents for instance stated that;

The local people oppose her struggle in the name of religion or for political gains. They are against gender equality. Political parties are doing politics and projecting their efforts against the national interest. Pakistan as a state also does not welcome her narrative about the democratic rights of women.¹²

However, western countries are strong advocates of democracy and they own the struggle of Malala for women's education. Educated women can easily challenge the cultural and ideological oppression they are facing in different parts of the world. The western countries both financially and ideologically support her struggle to protect the rights of oppressed and vulnerable communities in different parts of the world.

However, in the West people believe that women's emancipation will promote more liberal and democratic trends in countries. On the other hand, Islamist political parties use religion as a political tool for this purpose. The conservative people in Pakistan perceive her as a threat to national identity. The liberals believe they present her as a soft image of Pakistan to the outside world. In general, her role is highly appreciated among the democratic people and human rights activists throughout the West.

2. Malala's Campaign in the East

Cultural and ideological differences between the eastern and western countries have a significant influence on the projection of Malala's struggle for women's education. She is a symbol of peace and inspired millions of people with her struggle for women's education both in the East and the West. One of the respondents to our field interview for instance stated:

She has globally challenged extremist narratives which oppose women's education. She has also presented the problems of women at the global level, especially the women who are subjected to structural discrimination. The educated people recognized her efforts for women's education.¹³

Despite opposition, people have different perceptions of Malala and a significant number of people perceive her as a symbol of courage,

bravery, education, and strength in Pakistan as well as at the global level. Malala raised her voice for a noble cause when extremism and terrorism were at their peak in her hometown and as well as in the eastern part of the world.

Although Malala's native region became famous for terrorism and militancy, she successfully represented the soft image of Pashtun girls at the global level. Still, she is presenting the soft image of Pashtun across the world.¹⁴ However, in eastern countries including Pakistan, people in opposition to Malala believe that western media made her popular across the world to achieve their political interest in the eastern part of the world.

a. Malala's Ground Struggle in the Borderland, especially Swat

Malala has challenged the Taliban narrative through women's education. The Taliban and their followers inspired by their ideology have been against Malala's campaign for women's education. The Taliban have directly perceived women's education as a threat to their narrative. Political parties tilted towards popular opinion in politics and supported the Taliban narrative to gain the popular sentiments of the local people in the borderland. Hundreds and thousands of children suffered during the War on Terrorism concerning their education rights. It was only Malala who stood up and became a global icon of resistance to the Taliban narrative on women's education. The local media and the Pakistani state also doubted her struggle and most of them thought that her narrative was not fit in the Pashtun society. One respondent stated for example:

She's been supporting women's education at the global level and her voice makes difference. Now she needs to promote women's education in her home town and still women face sociocultural and financial problems. The local people expect more from her regarding women's education.¹⁵

In Pakistan, different conspiracy theories emerged regarding the aim, objectives, and financial support of Malala and her agenda. Recently, Imran Khan as the prime minister of Pakistan on an international forum uttered that Pashtuns are culturally against women's education and he uttered that Pashtuns have a natural inclination toward Talibanization. However, Pakistan as a state promoted Talibanization to counter Pashtun nationalist narratives and strategic interests in Afghanistan. Pashtuns suffered and their home are destroyed and displaced from their hometown in the so-called War on Terrorism. However, we fail as a state to transform the tribal values which contradict the democratic rights of women. One of the respondents stated:

The powerful elite also launched propaganda against Malala. She challenged their narrative and believed the political and religious elites exploit the common people in Pakistan.

The state has failed to counter the patriarchal cultural values and protect the rights of women.¹⁶ Despite difficulties, Malala has challenged the state narrative as well as the Pashtun cultural traditions which are against women's education. It is believed that Malala has become a victim of publicity and jealousy because she comes from a very modest lower middle-class background and she is neither the daughter of a feudal lord nor she has a good political background. In Pakistan, the local people do not endorse Malala's role as a leader because she belongs to a lower-middle-class family.¹⁷ One respondent stated;

The local people have high hopes for Malala. She is doing efforts for women's education but people now are expecting more. The local people are desirous that they are now absolutely despaired as she did nothing for her hometown. Normally the people of Swat don't talk about her.¹⁸

The local people were convinced by the political elite and different ideologies to deny every fact related to Malala's assassination attempt. They believed that Malala's popularity was a global conspiracy and they could not convince otherwise. Women's liberty in Pashtun society could not be tolerated and the right-wing religious workers disseminated that Malala was promoting foreign agenda, and she was spreading vulgarity in our society to defame our people. These clerics also wanted to protect their power, and they perceived that the philosophy of Malala would challenge the power of the local Mullah (religious clerics).¹⁹ In this regard, one respondent stated that;

Some people believe that the western media made her popular and now she is doing nothing for the common masses of her native town.

This perception was strengthened by Pakistani media which projected her as a foreign agent.²⁰

People also argued that the Taliban have shot two other girls but are also not supporting her, Shazia Ramazan and Kainat Riaz to Wales UWC Atlantic College, and they were offered scholarships in the Atlantic college at an international school in Wales. However, without logical arguments, some local people would oppose Malala and their opponents seem to be based on the popular misperceptions of culture, religion, and nationalism.²¹ One of the respondents for instance stated:

The local people and religious clerics perceived Malala's role as a threat to the culture, which she has been advocating for women's education and liberty from cultural oppression. They believe that women's liberty will challenge the traditional power structure of Pashtuns as well as Pakistani society".²²

Despite various challenges, she is committed to her struggle and she got global popularity for the struggle for women's education. The Malala struggle and slogan have the potential to change people's perceptions and challenge the traditional customs and patriarchy in Pakistan. The religious forces that are against Malala were also against her campaign for women's rights.

The religious and cultural factors undermine Malala's presentation at the local level. Local people believed that her role for woman's rights was only confined to speeches and she failed because of various socio-cultural barriers. However, it was also observed in the field that the local community in Pakistan and particularly in Swat recognized her role as an ambassador to present the soft image of Pakistan and Pashtun. The people also raised the question of why she did not come back to Pakistan. One respondent stated:

Malala has challenged the extremist narrative and she has been working for women's rights. The people who work for women's rights are often resisted in the patriarchal society of Pashtun. It is very common in patriarchal societies to see the people who advocate for the rights of women being countered.²³

However, Malala Fund has financed a secondary school in Shangla Swat and contributed 60 million rupees to purchasing the school land. In 2014-15, Malala Fund also donated 13,000 dollars to Khwendo Kor (Sisters' Home) for IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in FR Bannu under the project of education in emergency, and in Upper Swat, the Malala Fund is funding three schools worth of 183,000 dollars. Along with the financial support, she advocates globally for female education rights and her character inspired millions of people to work for the rights of women across the world.

In terms of the question about the existing social structure and status quo, most of the respondents asserted that she couldn't challenge the existing social structural barrier for women in Pashtun society. There was widespread agreement on it among the respondents that the status of women is the same as it was before Malala's campaign, and therefore no considerable change in the status of women or girls Post-Malala scenario could be seen. People have become conscious of the Malala presentation at the local level.²⁴ One respondent said:

The local people believed that she had challenged the existing power structure. The conservative people are not in favor of women's education and they perceive it as a threat to local cultural values.

The existing traditional power elite fears the campaign Malala for women's education. Education is the tool for women's empowerment and educated women can fight for their rights against the state and well societal oppression.²⁵

b. The level of investment: Material and Immaterial

Malala has established the “Malala fund” to support girls’ education across the world. The Malala Fund has been working both on infrastructure building and advocacy to promote women’s education, especially in those parts of the world where they face hurdles to getting an education. This organization spends approximately millions of Pakistan rupees to provide modern equipment and buildings. The Fund makes it easy for girls to get an education in remote areas of Pakistan. One of the respondents stated:

Malala Fund provides financial assistance to local non-governmental organizations and government organizations to build school infrastructure. The girls of remote areas in her native town have easy access to school.²⁶

The Malala Funds also run a campaign to transform social values in favor of women’s education. Malala has inspired millions of people through her struggle and the people in the local areas are now supporting women’s education.²⁷ However, the local media does project her work and significant numbers of people are against the Malala narrative about women’s education. As discussed in the above pages they believe that she is against our culture and ideology and promoting liberalism which acceptable to the United States and Europe.²⁸

c. How Far the East/Locals Buy her Narrative and Investments

The local people have different opinions both in favor and in opposition to her struggle for women’s education. Some Pakistani media outlets have projected her struggle as a conspiracy and created doubts in the minds of local people. The non-governmental organizations funded by Malala Fund cannot work smoothly in the local areas. Malala Fund faces various cultural and security problems and it is not easy for the local people to support the Malala fund initiative for women’s rights in her hometown.²⁹ One of the respondents stated:

The local conservative cultural values and patriarchy create obstacles to the Malala narrative about women’s education. Moreover, Pakistan as a state also negatively projected her struggle because she challenged the traditional power elites of Pakistan.³⁰

However, a significant number of women and people who believe in democracy and rights they are strongly supporting her struggle. Malala’s popularity at the global level inspired a significant number of people and political leaders at the local level. The people of her native town feel proud that she belongs to her home District Swat.

However, some of the local people in the east considered her narrative as a threat to the local culture and values.³¹ The local people believe that she promoted liberal values which are against our cultural norms and values. However, public opinion is divided on the Malala narrative. The liberal people are in favor of change they

are supporting the narrative of Malala about women's education and change.

Conclusion

This essay concludes that Malala's national and international activist figure invites different socio-cultural and ideological perspectives ranging from optimistic to pessimistic to conspiracy theory-driven. It is argued that Malala's education campaign in Pakistan is a subject of debate and susceptible to conspiracy theories and propaganda. Malala is frequently viewed and characterized as an agent of the West. At the local, national, and international levels, Malala's campaign has invited varying impressions. Malala may have created a counter-narrative to all of these prevalent stories and positioned herself inside a fairly moderate and pluralistic postmodernist framework; however, she is caught up in the ambivalence of patriarchal cultural dominance, masculinity, and man's superiority because of the gender paradigm of the local culture.

The study argues that while she brought significant change in educational infrastructure and also raised the hopes of women in the borderland, she could bring little change to the patriarchal structures of Pashtun society. She continues to work dauntlessly to bring change in Pashtun cultural codes and traditions of seclusion and demarcation of the public and private spheres for women. Malala also appears to be the victim of jealousy and publicity because of her family background and moderate values. In addition, she is also labeled to have violated the religious norms of Pakistani society and religious interpretations concerning women. In Pashtun society, the local people perceived that she violated the cultural norms of Pashtun society, but at the same time, they see the need for time to move forward.

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