

**The Linkages Between Scholarship and
Advocacy: From a feminist analysis of
research on the Karachi conflict**

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The Linkages Between Scholarship and Advocacy: From a feminist analysis of research on the Karachi conflict

Ayesha Khan

Abstract

The feminist movement in Pakistan has a strong core of political and social activism. Feminist research, in turn, must confront the tension between advocacy and scholarship goals during the research process. This discussion explores this tension and related issues raised during a feminist research project based on the study of women affected by violent political conflict in Karachi. The research methodology was designed as specifically feminist: to keep women at the centre of the entire process by giving primacy to the voices of the women interviewed and including the perspectives of the researchers themselves in the process of analyzing the data. Fieldwork presented unanticipated challenges unique to working in an unresolved conflict situation. Managing the physical and psychological insecurity of the respondents, building trust in the interview process, working across class and linguistic boundaries, and realizing the depth of injustice experienced by the respondents, all contributed to an enhanced sense of participation by all researchers involved. The result was a set of interviews that were both life histories of women but also testimonies to crimes committed and the absence of justice, thus creating a sense of historical and political urgency to the research work. The findings from this critique of the research methodology presents a challenge to the feminist researcher. The author argues that the way in which we choose to present our scholarly work, and to incorporate – or dismiss -- the calls for advocacy that it has produced, are not just personal choices that we make as researchers. They will also determine the course of feminist research endeavors in the future. The study of conflict, in particular, demands a deeper understanding of what we as feminists mean by peace and security in the course of our effort to create a new and relevant discourse on peace and security in South Asia.

Feminist research is an evolving field in the context of Pakistan. While a great deal of work on women's issues and women's development has been done, particularly in the social sectors, this research does not necessarily call itself feminist.¹ Research that is self-consciously feminist sometimes embraces and occasionally rejects other work on women that does not explicitly explore patriarchal structures.² Yet when it comes to advocacy on women's issues that may arise parallel to or based on this research, the women's movement stands more united and less questioning of the self-consciously feminist credentials of participants.³

1 For example, pioneering work on women's fertility and its linkages with social indicators, such as the studies by demographer Zeba Sattar and economist Shahnaz Kazi. One such example is Zeba A. Sattar and Shahnaz Kazi, 1997, *Women's Autonomy, Livelihood and Fertility: A Study of Rural Punjab*. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad.

2 A non-government organization, Applied Socio-Economic Research (ASR) is the first feminist publishing house in Pakistan, and through its publications seeks to evolve a feminist approach to research and scholarship in Pakistan that is distinct from other women's development research.

3 The Women's Action Forum, for example, spearheaded the women's rights movement in Pakistan during the 1980s. Its membership included feminists, as well as women who felt that working towards women's legal equality or improved legal status was sufficient. Women throughout Pakistan have demonstrated and voiced opposition to discriminatory legislation in the name of Islam, including women who are feminists, who support a secular state, and women who are deeply committed to their Muslim identity and achievement of their rights within an Islamic framework.

While the women's movement has sometimes glossed over ideological differences among its participants, in the small but emerging areas of feminist research another aspect of the problem needs to be addressed. Researchers of many disciplines express concern and even anxiety about the utility of their work to effect social, political or economic change for the better in their societies, but for some the matter is fairly easily resolved. For example, in the development sector in Pakistan non-government organizations fund research with a specific view to influencing the policy-making process and the programmes or projects which result.⁴ But among feminists in Pakistan, for whom feminism involves critiquing patriarchy and its manifestations in our context, the question of how their work may contribute to redressing the oppression of women is a haunting and important one.

In Pakistan the modern women's movement was initiated through activism and protest against discriminatory legislation in the 1980s, and led in large part by women who called themselves feminists. Until today, feminists remain activists and rally women around a wide range of women's, human rights, and governance issues. Women who have joined in awareness-raising and protests do not all call themselves feminists. But for feminists, particularly those who formed the Women's Action Forum, activism remains a large part of their lives even as they continue to conduct research and struggle with questions of theory and methodology.

This paper will focus on one feminist research project, the study of violent political conflict and its effect on women in the city of Karachi. It is an example of how the tension between feminist scholarship and advocacy emerged in the research process. The study's methodology and findings are a useful vehicle for discussion among feminist scholars in the region, who may learn from the ambitions, disappointments and rewards of this project. I will assert here that one of the most valuable findings of this study was its insight into the tension between the roles of scholar and advocate that were brought into light through the project's methodology.

This paper will first describe the study, its methodology and purpose. It will then situate this in the context of the Karachi conflict, as a way to highlight why and how obstacles appeared in implementing this methodology. The discussion will then turn to the demands of advocacy, and how they emerged as the study progressed. Finally, I will link our attempts to incorporate these demands into the study with the original feminist goals of the research.

Researching Women in Conflict: Methodology

The roots of the feminist research project "Women, Conflict and Security" undertaken by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Islamabad, Pakistan during 1999-2001⁵ lay in the wider geo-political issues of the region. In the wake of the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan respectively in 1998, citizens in major cities in Pakistan set up peace committees to advocate demilitarization and the building of a lasting peace between our two adversarial countries. Although

4 For example, the Population Council, a US-based non-government research organization, has the mandate to provide technical and research support to Pakistan's population programme. In so doing, it also conducts some of the most innovative and interesting research on women and reproductive health issues in the country.

5 The research was designed by Saba Gul Khattak of SDPI and myself, an independent consultant. It was funded by the Ford Foundation in New York, USA and also received a MacArthur Foundation Research and Writing Competition grant.

the efforts of these committees were to be internationally recognized⁶, the nascent peace movement failed to address serious feminist concerns.

In particular, these concerns included the dialectical relationship between militarism and patriarchy, one of the most important findings of feminist researchers on women and war (Lorentzen and Turpin, eds, 1998: 15). The issue was ignored in internal discussions and advocacy work. Patterns of female subordination and male privilege, on which militarism depends so strongly, were in fact not critiqued in the workings of the new committees, but rather they were reproduced. Suddenly it appeared to myself and researcher Saba Khattak as if women's voices – particularly those of a challenging feminist kind -- were not only unheard in the raging national security debate of the time, but also in the inner sanctums of the progressive peace movement as well.

Further, the need to expand and include the range of women's views on security and peace had already been established in my mind as an important cross-border project. Along with an Indian journalist, I had researched women's involvement in peace movements in other countries as part of a research fellowship to build up the same capacity among Indian and Pakistani women.⁷ I was confident that women across the region involved in the women's movement would be ready to work together in peace-building if the right networks could be set up and research findings shared. It was therefore out of a combination of feminist consciousness and experience with advocacy issues that this methodology evolved.

Its purpose was deceptively simple: we wished to study the effects of violent conflict on women in four sites (Karachi and Afghan refugee camps being the only two that were approved for funding). We wanted such a study programme of multiple conflict sites, as an agenda of feminist research, to be a first in the region, replicable across other conflict sites. In the project proposal we argued that women's experience during times of conflict must be understood primarily in terms of the patriarchal structures of control and related processes of identity formation. We wanted to build on other qualitative research and analysis by Indian feminist scholars Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia (1998) into the experience of women during the Partition of the sub-continent in 1947, by adding to the knowledge base of women's experiences in conflict in South Asia.

The heart of the research was listening to women's voices through the use of qualitative research tools. The most important of these was in-depth interviews of approximately 50 women in each site. The methodology privileged their perspectives, by making their oral histories our primary data. Further the recorded interviews went through a process of transcribing and translation, to prepare them for sharing among other researchers through an oral history archive. Other research tools included community profiles, interview backgrounds, journals kept by the interview team, and a collection of secondary sources on each conflict site, which were all intended to enrich our interpretation of the primary interview material.

In short, we wanted to keep “women always at the centre” (Menon and Bhasin, 1998: 16) of our research, and this served as a way of anchoring us through the stormy questions that would arise once the research

6 Unesco-Madanjeet Singh Award for Peace was given to the Joint Action Committee in Lahore in November, 1998 in recognition for its work to promote peace and the de0nuclearization of South Asia.

7 Kalpana Sharma, of The Hindu newspaper in India, and myself were Visiting Fellows at the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* from May-June, 1999. This is a journal founded by nuclear scientists in the wake of World War II as a means to avoid nuclear destruction from recurring. Our collaborative effort became all the more significant when interrupted by news that nuclear tests were conducted at home. An important incentive for developing on our own work was the fact that we shared an equal commitment to peace and the women's movement that remained unaffected by the relations between our countries.

actually got underway. We were giving voice to women through listening to their stories and then representing them for analysis and sharing with other researchers. As Sherna Gluck (1991) noted, the “sheer importance of rendering women visible – casting them as agents as we simultaneously documented their oppression – seduced feminist historians into believing that our scholarly work was inherently political and of undeniable value for women.” (p.205) I certainly held this conviction as this research began, perhaps sensing implicitly that without it I would not be able to proceed confidently with the oral history collection, particularly in areas where women had experienced trauma and spoke to us even as the danger to their lives continued. While the confidence of this conviction has waned, it has been altered, not undermined, by later revelations.

We built into the research model other outputs that would contribute to what we termed a research “programme” rather than a discrete “project” with limited outreach. First, we invited four other researchers, all of who had a feminist perspective, to write scholarly papers on the data when it was ready. These researchers also participated in the preparation of themes to explore in the in-depth interviews, pertaining to aspects of conflict that they were interested in. These included widowhood, martyrdom, identity issues, and women’s status. In this way, our effort to create something of a regional network of feminists researching conflict was started up. Thus the research would result in at least twelve scholarly papers, representing the work of at least six feminist researchers⁸. One of the researchers was from Sri Lanka, and added a vital comparative dimension through her work.

Second, we set up an oral archive at SDPI of the oral histories we collected (taped, transcribed, translated and coded) for use by interested researchers. It was intended to further the historical purposes of our work, while also creating the opportunity for the systematic analysis of women’s narratives by committed researchers in the years to come. While to our knowledge the desire to share our data may have been unprecedented in Pakistan, nonetheless we were blithely unaware of the possible negative consequences of inviting misuse of the material. This will be addressed later in this paper.

Third, we planned to develop a network of women – academics, development professionals and activists - working on security and peace issues throughout the region. Since this was conceived as a South Asian research programme, it was vital to share our findings across the region and stimulate debate and discussion. Only when women across borders and disciplines were engaged with the issues would they possibly coalesce into an effective force for involving women in the difficult process of building peace. The first tangible outcome of our networking efforts was a research conference to present the twelve scholarly papers, to which feminists and researchers from Pakistan were invited, as well as two Sri Lankan scholars. However, logistical and political difficulties made the participation of Indian colleagues impossible.

These outputs did address some of the concerns of advocacy, in that they indicated our intent to create a wider and more credible possibility of women’s engagement in the processes of security dialogues and the building of peace. However, they still did not anticipate the depth and urgency of the same question that would arise for me at the end of the project. The realities of field work and the difficulties of actually setting up the outputs mentioned above have forced a re-thinking of the relationship between my scholarship and advocacy goals.

8 Papers were authored by: Saba Khattak, Ayesha Khan, Nilofer de Mel (University of Colombo), Nafisa Shah (PhD Candidate, University of Oxford), Lubna Chaudhry (SDPI) and Rubina Saigol (SAHE).

Working in Karachi (1): Background to the Conflict

“City of Death”, reads a caption on an insert provided by the *Herald*, one of the nation’s leading English-language political journals in its coverage of the Karachi conflict in 1995. It quotes a figure of 1,113 killed in the violence in 1994 to a figure of 2,095 the following year.⁹ The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan stated in its Annual General Meeting:

One aspect of [the Karachi situation] is the almost daily occurrence of incidents of lawlessness and terrorism on the streets and inside houses and mosques of the city. The other is the excesses committed by the law-enforcement agencies against citizens, often including indiscriminate detention of people, especially family members of persons ‘wanted’ by the authorities, persons being blindfolded and kept and tortured in unauthorised places, and individuals being threatened or maltreated simply to extort money from them.¹⁰

The HRCP went on to condemn the two-year army operation to impose law and order in Karachi as a failure, particularly as a the resolution of the crisis, according to the leading human rights organization in the country, lay in political dialogue and not the use of force. This position was shared by not only human rights organizations around the country, but women’s groups representing activists and non-governmental organizations as well. (Haroon, 2001: 190-197)

The origins of this dire cycle of violence that became everyday existence for millions of Karachi’s residents in the early 1990s lay in a combination of political and economic imbalances and state neglect. These grew in proportion as the city’s population swelled from 450,000 on the eve of independence in 1947 to 2.04 million in 1961 (Hasan, 1997:189) to an estimated 15 million at present. Pakistan’s largest metropolis is also its most cosmopolitan city, with Urdu-speaking migrants from India comprising less than half of its population and substantial numbers of residents from all four provinces of the country completing the total. Some analysts blame the state for failing to provide adequate municipal funds and facilities, such as drinking water, housing, and roads, that could have kept a lid on tensions in the vast slums of the city. The state also failed to control the arms and drugs mafias that flourished during the Afghan war against Soviet occupation, resulting in the first ethnic riots in the 1980s.¹¹

The profile of the conflict in Karachi changed with the emerging dominance of the Muhajir political party (now known as the Mutahid Qaumi Movement¹², or MQM) which represents the Urdu-speaking migrant community that led the educated ranks of the city, its culture and job market, after 1947. In the changing economic circumstances of the emerging metropolis since the 1960s, Muhajir dominance has been challenged, if not replaced, by the predominantly Punjabi culture of the state institutions and the strong Punjabi and Pathan influx of migrants that redefined access to employment and opportunity. (Zaidi, 1991: 1296) In response, a Muhajir nationalism emerged under the MQM and its leader Altaf Hussain, that

9 *The Herald Annual*, January, 1996. Insert “City of Death”.

10 HRCP Annual General Meeting, April 29, 1995.

11 For an analysis of the first phase of the conflict, in which ethnic rioting, particularly among Sindhis, for whom Karachi was their native city, Pathans and Muhajirs, characterized the violence, see Akmal Hussain, “The Karachi Riots of December 1986” in Das, ed. (1990).

12 The party was originally called the Muhajir Qaumi Movement, capturing its identity as an ethnic-based nationalist party. Altaf Hussain subsequently changed “Muhajir” to “Mutahida” (meaning, “united”) on 26 July 1997 in an effort to give his party legitimacy as a player on the national level and disassociate it from the level of ethnic politics. This was, “In order to further the programme of national development and a nation-wide campaign against feudal domination.” (MQM, 2000: www.mqm.org)

became less embroiled in inter-ethnic issues with Pathan, Punjabi, or Sindhi residents of Karachi and more directly in confrontation with forces symbolizing the federation of Pakistan.

The MQM was formed in 1984, on the premise that Muhajir, ie the Urdu-speaking migrants who had come to the city after 1947, should be considered one of the five nationalities living in Pakistan. As a result, MQM stated they should have proportional representation in the federal and provincial institutions of power, and that biases against Muhajirs in jobs and achievement of civil rights should be removed, particularly in Karachi. (Ali, nd:186) A major achievement of the party was to raise key economic issues faced by the people of Karachi and take political ground away from the religious-based political parties, such as the Jamaat-I-Islami, that had failed to develop its rhetoric. (Farrukh, 1994: 208) The new party challenged the state and its authority through imposition of strikes, varying participation and non-participation in city and national political institutions, and direct combat with law-enforcement agencies that sought to break the control of the MQM over large tracts of the city.

Its initial popularity was enormous and unprecedented in Karachi's political scene, for example one early rally in 1986 drew a crowd of 80,000 to hear Altaf Hussain speak.(Ali, nd:185) Its membership was and remains drawn from among the lower and middle class Muhajir residents of Karachi and the neighbouring city of Hyderabad. As Zaidi (1991: 1296) writes, while giving the Muhajirs a sense of unprecedented identity, the party has also given rise to an ethnic chauvinism in its politics. It is a populist organization and its centralized decision-making hierarchy has caused it to be labeled fascist by some observers.¹³

The MQM, initially was supported by the Pakistan army intelligence under the military rule of General Zia ul-Haq as a popular organization that could counterbalance the support for Benazir Bhutto in the province of Sindh. Today it is a grave, if somewhat bruised and deflated, challenge to the writ of the state. It has also entered into violent combat with its breakaway faction, MQM (Haqiqi) that received army support during the army operations in the city 1992-94. The civilian government led by Benazir Bhutto attempted to break the MQM by giving law-enforcement agencies extraordinary powers to tackle the party in July 1995, which resulted in unprecedented numbers of deaths and extra-judicial killings. (Idrees Bakhtiar, *The Herald*, February 1996: 74-75) Violence reared up again in 1998 with a series of politically motivated killings, kidnappings and increase in crime. (Zaffar Abbas, *The Herald*, October 1998: 25) Although it has in the past dominated the Sindh provincial assembly and held a small number of seats in the National Assembly, under the current military government it refused to participate in non-party based elections to local councils held in 2001.

The party formed a Women's Wing, drawing on the swell of popular support, that recruited thousands of young Urdu-speaking women to its ranks in the early years. Their numbers are difficult to confirm through independent sources. What is clear is that the Women's Wing played a pivotal role in getting votes in the 1987 elections to local councils. (Shaheed, Zia and Warraich, 1994:10) The following year the MQM women conducted a rally of thousands of their supporters to demonstrate their capacity, and allegedly in February 1989, 7,500 women workers were enlisted in one day. It was possibly the largest ever political mobilization of women in Pakistan in one city. (Farrukh, 1994: 209)

But the Women's Wing remained in a subsidiary role to the central party, and its members were excluded from key decision-making roles. Their party work consisted largely of fund-raising and administrative support. Women were also not encouraged to run for seats when the MQM participated in elections.

13 The liberal intelligentsia and writers in the English-language press in Pakistan use the term "fascist" to describe the MQM most often. However, women interviewed in our study, particularly some who had left the ranks of the party, also accused it of being fascist and violent in its methods of imposing party discipline.

(Haroon, 2001: 183) The MQM mobilized women to act to defend themselves from the threat of rape by Sindhis, and used them on occasion to confront the army holding copies of the Holy Quran. (Farrukh, 1994: 208-209) The Women's Wing has subsequently shrunk in size and has little public profile today. Reasons uncovered through our research also suggest that its lack of access to the party power structures caused differences and led to lowered motivation among MQM women activists.

For every round of violence -- inter-ethnic, MQM vs. state/law enforcement agencies, or MQM vs Haqiqi -- there have been families to cope with the aftermath of fear and death. In some cases the families have had strong political affiliations, and in others they have found themselves engaged in the conflict without identifying with its complex political stances. In a situation of relative calm in the conflict, with the MQM and state forces no longer engaged in an all-out confrontation, we wished to explore the aftermath of violence on families most affected. We identified the most affected geographical parts of the city -- Korangi/Landhi in the south-east, Nazimabad, Azizabad and other areas in District Central, and New Karachi. Through interviews with women in these areas, selected randomly through personal contacts and their willingness to speak, we explored their perspectives on the conflict. We spoke mainly with Urdu-speaking women, and as such achieved a depth of perspective on the group most directly in confrontation with the state in this conflict, but we also collected oral histories of women from other ethnic groups. Women's narratives told us, among much else, how they viewed the causes of conflict and chances for peace, the myriad ways in which violence had changed their lives and those of family members, their sense of ethnic and political identity, and their views on the state.

Working in Karachi (2): Challenges in the Field

There were lessons waiting for us in the field about the linkages between scholarship and advocacy, and some were unexpected. The fact that the conflict was still live for women interviewed in Karachi had many interesting ramifications for the way we undertook our research and how the agendas of interviewer and interviewee were shaped. The field methodology adjusted itself, and sometimes compromised on standards set during training.

To date there has been no political solution to the Karachi conflict, but a series of crack-downs by army and/or law-enforcement agencies have achieved periodic lulls in the violence. At the time of research in 1999-2000 MQM activists were mostly underground, shaken by the 1998 violence and keeping a low profile. During April-May 2000 there was some army activity to seek out activists, and field work had to be suspended for a month since potential interviewees had either gone underground themselves or were too frightened to give interviews. In a major finding of the research, we discovered that many women who had lost husbands or sons in the mid 1990's to state crack-downs were internally displaced within the city. They were still on the move underground, in an effort to avoid unending police harassment years after the initial violent encounter.

Under these circumstances, the choice of Karachi field interviewers turned out to be invaluable. One was a journalist, with close ties to the Urdu-speaking community and a history of covering Karachi violence. Another, although a man, was an activist with a leading human rights organization and as such had a reputation of concern and advocacy for the cause of those Karachi citizens who had suffered due to state violence. The third field researcher was affiliated with community health research, and although not an activist had personally some credibility in the areas where she conducted interviews. These field researchers were initially selected on the basis of their inter-personal skills and ability to navigate the sensitive terrain of Karachi's most affected locales through personal and professional contacts. However

their credibility as advocates of the voiceless in this on-going conflict helped them to access women, build rapport, and win the vital trust required to have meaningful interviews on sensitive issues. The one man on the team also had the strongest links with affected communities because of his human rights work, and to his surprise he found women willing to share their stories with him with relative ease.

The access to respondents and a strong level of trust also meant that the field researchers were not politically neutral in their role as interviewers, although they took pains to demonstrate they had no party loyalties. Yet the “agenda” of the interviewer, as Gluck describes, was in our case revealed to be in support of peace and human rights, and against party or state-sponsored violence. This was in contrast to the standard set during field training, when I, as the Karachi site coordinator and trainer, emphasized that the interviewer must reveal little bias during the course of the interview.

In the field, however, this apparent bias helped to build a bridge between the interviewee and interviewer. The result was an interview that ended on a tone such as this:

Q: I thank you very much, because I took a lot of your time and asked some delicate and sensitive questions.

A: Everyone should know what has happened.

Q: We also want to unveil the facts.

A: Yes I do agree. The truth must be told to the people.

Q: In our society, people do not come out with the truth due to fear.

A: I am also thankful to you.

[Interview with SZ. 23/06/2000]

During the interview process, the field researchers emphasized the political and historical significance to recording the “facts” as revealed by the woman being interviewed, and the woman telling her story displayed a sense of gratitude for being heard. This was not usually recorded on tape, as it happened to be above, but emerged in the record of background notes kept by the field researchers.

This point leads to the related agenda of the interviewee herself. As a researcher and in my earlier experience as a journalist, I had often marveled at the eagerness with which women told me their stories. Even in difficult circumstances, where I was a patent outsider conducting interviews that would bring them no tangible benefit, women living in Afghan refugees camps in Pakistan, or those constrained due to lack of opportunity, or those holding extreme and radical views, all seemed surprisingly willing to talk on tape. This was despite social norms prevalent throughout Pakistan that limit the access of outsiders to women, often assumed to result in restrictions on women speaking their mind. Most of all, when conducting reproductive health research, I found that women told me their life stories complete with intimate details and then later thanked me because no one had ever taken the time to listen to them so intently before.¹⁴ The same eagerness to tell her story to an empathic listener came through again in the Karachi conflict research, and perhaps it was this element that helped interviewees overcome their security concerns and agree to talk for hours to field researchers.

While Gluck found in her interviews with Palestinian women that personal questions seemed ridiculous, if not risky as women were speaking under conditions of military occupation and urgently wanted to

14 This is in reference to the research I did on women’s reproductive health decision-making for the book *Private Decisions, Public Debate: Women, Reproduction and Population*. London: Panos, 1994. Although the research process was not documented, it is from this time that I mark my insights into qualitative research methodology in the Pakistani context. The enormous potential for research and discovery through the act of listening has produced significant findings, such as the breakthrough research study “A Qualitative Investigation into the Use of Withdrawal.” Population Council, Research Report No. 7, Islamabad: 1998.

speaking about their current plight. (208-209), we found that women did respond to personal questions positively, albeit very briefly. Women often provided scant details of the political affiliations of their family members or how they defined their ethnic, political, or national identity. However, when the microphones were turned off after the recorded interview, they usually revealed something of these details, and it emerged that many interviewees were sympathetic to the MQM.

A second element in the dynamic also came into play. Each interviewee in Karachi was usually a woman who had seen conflict violence that had changed her life, but had not necessarily seen justice done in the years that followed. The largest portion of each interview was the story of her experience with conflict violence itself, not her past life, or her political views or visions of peace-building or the future. On record, many women told us minute details of the traumatic event of losing a husband or son, encountering law-enforcement officials or political opponents who had committed the act of violence, and coping with its aftermath. It seemed as if the urgency for women being interviewed, despite the apparent risks inherent in the live conflict situation, was to tell this part of their story while they had the opportunity.

Each woman was bearing witness to a breach of law or justice as she saw it, and through the sympathetic encouragement of the field researcher, each woman's interview also thereby took on the form of a testimony. In the case of the Karachi conflict there have been few trials and convictions of MQM activists, and so there have been few opportunities for those caught in the conflict violence to relate their version of what took place in a court of law or to another neutral body. Other efforts to collect testimonial evidence of what has happened to women in this conflict include the work of the Women's Action Forum in Karachi and the Human Rights Commission in Pakistan.¹⁵ The research conducted by feminists in these organizations was for primarily advocacy purposes.

The original intent of the project was to collect oral histories, as per a vague definition of "life history" that included in it the political conflict and its effect on the interviewee's life. As Butalia wrote, this approach would "offer us a way of turning the historical lens at a somewhat different angle . . . they can offer a different and extremely important perspective on history." (p.13) By offering a perspective on the Karachi conflict through the eyes of women we thought we were turning this lens on events for a unique view of them. What emerged was a set of narratives that were a combination of oral histories and testimonies.

This is a contribution to future historical record not only because of the interview content and also because interviews were professionally recorded and can be used for other media purposes if required. They have political value in the context of the current conflict as well, which we discuss further in this paper. For the woman being interviewed, it appears that the testimonial part of her interview was its most valuable part, and in conjunction with the avowed activist considerations of the interviewer, she cooperated most fully in placing this testimonial on record.

We implicitly understood the reason for the strong testimonial component of the life histories during fieldwork, but only articulated it later. It was the temporal proximity of the woman to the conflict violence that shaped the kind of interview she gave – her recollection of a violent death or encounter that

15 Anis Haroon, a leading women's rights activist and member of Women's Action Forum recently published a book in Urdu on the experience of women in the Karachi conflict. See A. Haroon, 2000, *Dard key Rishtay*, Fazlisons, Karachi. Women's Action Forum, *Witness to Violence*, (video) Karachi, November 1996, is a recording of a WAF-organized public meeting for women affected by the on-going violence; also see Nafisa Shah, 1998, "Women in the Crossfire" by Lahore: Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

was at most just a few years old and whose consequences she was still struggling to face. She wanted to place on record what she knew, and how difficult it still was for her to cope with increasing isolation in her community as the threat of continuing violence still loomed over her head, and to make ends meet with ever-shrinking resources. And we sensed she wanted us, through the re-telling of her story, to help in her bearing witness to events lest they be forgotten.

But once her story was told it was as if she had exhausted her energy for the interview process and her fears overcame her once again. As a result, follow-ups were extremely difficult. Field researchers sensed that women feared their neighbours or watching political/law-enforcement individuals would become suspicious if they spoke to outsiders more than once, and women sometimes made comments to this effect. For the security of both the women and the field researchers, follow-ups were abandoned as a requirement in the field, in favour of keeping our promise to interviewees that we would do nothing to jeopardize their safety through our research.

There were other, sometimes complicating, discoveries in the field observed by the field researchers. For example, field researchers noted in their journals when they sensed that women respondents, particularly while describing their encounters with political organizations or state agencies, were not telling the full truth. Some women may have tailored their narratives to appeal to the researcher's sympathy and possibly elicit offers of tangible assistance. Another element that affected the narrative, and indeed the agenda of the woman giving an interview, was that other family members were sometimes present during the interview session itself. While some did not interfere with the interview, in other cases field researchers noted that women deferred to input from male relatives. In one amusing incident, one woman refused to give a follow-up because she said she had fought with her sister-in-law after the first session, in which she voiced complaints about their domestic relationship.

But these observations did not undermine the quality of the life history, or even the testimonial part of the narratives we were collecting. As long as they were carefully noted in the background information to each interview, they form an invaluable part of the research data and also enrich our interpretation of the interviews. We understood that oral history "is a matter of memory, reconstruction, and imagination."¹⁶ It was clear to us that there was historical and political importance to the woman making her voice and her story heard as a matter of record, even if that record need not represent an objectively verifiable account of events.

After urging women to speak, we were not able to move on easily. Field researcher Shabana Shafique commented on this dilemma in her journal after interviewing AK, a widow whose one son was killed by the police on suspicion of being with the MQM, a second son had become a police informant for security, and a third had joined the Haqiqi.

During the interview I felt that she didn't hide any aspect of her life from me. Compared to other women she never showed any fear. Maybe the reason for this was the extremely bad circumstances she had faced. And the circumstances could not have been worse than they had been. After meeting AK I felt sadness in my heart for many days. I kept on thinking why did this woman have such a fate for so many years. What habit did she have that displeased Allah so much, for which Allah gave her one problem after another. I am often afraid of thinking what situation she must be facing these days. ...I really want to lessen her sorrow, solve her problems, but this is beyond me, it is not in my power and I

16 James Young, quoted in Menon and Bhasin, 1998, p.29.

don't want to give her false assurances. This is the reason why I hesitate to talk to her on the phone -- because she might expect some kind of help from me.

A growing sense of responsibility emerged among the field researchers that women's stories, and their testimonies to crime witnessed, lead to some tangible benefit for them.

One reason for this was the field researcher's position of power; bringing social and economic privilege to the interview also brought with it the promise of possible monetary benefit or at least successful advocacy on behalf of the woman giving her interview. Because the field work methodology allowed for researchers to record their concerns and observations as part of the data, and there were sufficient opportunities for us to discuss these issues amongst ourselves, we put any resolution of these dilemmas on hold until field work was complete almost a year later.

Back At Our Desks: Re-Thinking Advocacy And Scholarship

With a set of fifty in-depth recorded interviews in hand, the next stages of processing and analyzing the material, as well as preparing the texts and findings for wider sharing among researchers, posed repeated challenges again for the issues of advocacy raised above. I will discuss them below in terms of the framework laid out by our original project methodology, that sought to build in a role for advocacy in the structure of the project. These included building of a regional and local network of feminist researchers on conflict and peace, the establishment of an oral archive of the data, and a research "programme" rather than limited project based on the data.

The original purpose of creating a feminist research network within Pakistan and South Asia was to increase the capacity for debate and analysis on women and peace issues, as discussed earlier in this paper. We felt the need for serious scholarship by feminists would be a way to help define the parameters of a new kind of security debate, by calling into question mainstream assumptions about conflict – its causes, effects, and possible means of resolution. We needed the participation of a range of women scholars, across national boundaries and the politics that divided South Asia, to help to create this new discourse for our region.

But our capacity to broaden our approach to include more regional, and even local, participation was limited by the constraints imposed by the research topic itself. Women were speaking to us, in both the Karachi and the Afghan refugee camp research sites, under assurances of complete confidentiality, and we could not draw attention to this work until it was safely complete. In Karachi, we received documentation, bibliographical material and assistance in locating some respondents from the Women's Action Forum and Shirkat Gah, a women's research organization. Both organizations had a history of leading advocacy for the women of Karachi affected by the conflict and were providing on-going support to a group of women already. Otherwise in Karachi, we avoided any action that would draw the attention of high-ranking party or law-enforcement officials in our research for fear that their involvement would prevent women from feeling comfortable speaking to us, and possibly cause those who had given interviews a negative backlash.

But vibrant networking of another sort was taking place nonetheless. The on-going process of transcribing, translating, typing editing, and then coding the recorded interviews was so complex that it forced us to hire a broader team of individuals skilled in one or many of these tasks, to complete the work on time. For the Karachi data, the final full team was eleven strong including one man only – our field

researcher. Some women had never worked on these issues before, and for one eager participant this was her first job. As the months passed, they became affected by the material they were working on, as one transcriber said, “I think I got physically sick after two weeks of transcribing these terrible stories, and I had nightmares.” I discovered that their work had also been an awareness-raising exercise for them, although we had not planned it as such.

Through what I felt was a feminist commitment to inclusiveness, all were invited to share their views on the research itself and what could be done with it. For them the research became most meaningful if it was linked to direct advocacy on behalf of the women who had shared so much with us. All of them said they could in some capacity play a role in the work of advocacy or peace-building if we chose to organize it. I felt that if our methodology had produced a keen sense among the wider team of the need to link the research with advocacy, it was indeed one of our research findings. To ignore it would be to force a dishonest schism between scholarship and advocacy that did not arise in the view of our team.

The oral archive, which originally appeared to be a straightforward if somewhat tedious task involving accurate filing and presentation of the interview data, is taking very long to emerge in a final and acceptable form. The initial reason for this was that the actual processing of the interview material required extensive editing in order to be shared with the public without placing the confidentiality of the interviewee in jeopardy. Both the Urdu and the English transcripts have to contain no traceable references to names, addresses, places of work or residence, or extended political or familial networks that would let a keen reader trace the woman who gave the interview. This requires extensive editing and cross checking of the interview texts that is still taking place.

Next, the interview cassettes, which are the heart of the oral archive, present a similar problem. Before they can be shared they need to be edited, possibly with the help of equipment we do not possess. Further, project researchers have questioned whether allowing the voice of the women giving interviews to be shared in the cassette form would make them vulnerable to identification by intelligence agencies that possess sophisticated equipment. Since some women interviewed were mothers or husbands of well-known MQM activists that had been assassinated by possibly state forces, this danger is real and not imagined. At present, until a solution to this dilemma emerges, we are not placing the recorded cassettes in the archive.

These issues have complicated our ambitious, and almost naïve feminist goal of “making women’s voices heard”. Certainly we succeeded in making their voices heard, first to us as interviewers and then to the wider team which processed and then wrote scholarly papers on the material. But now the dilemmas of public presentation, so well framed by Gluck (pp. 213-214) have emerged because of our wish to set up an oral archive. While Gluck commented on the various audiences – with their different needs or agendas -- with whom feminists share their research, and the possibly negative use to which it can be put, we find ourselves in this dilemma at an earlier stage. Along with the various forms in which we present our research, we are planning to share the actual interview texts with anyone interested enough to explore an oral archive at SDPI. This could include MQM activists or government intelligence agencies who wish to track down women who dared to give evidence on tape, or adherents of certain political agendas that have nothing in common with the feminism that created this research project. The political considerations involved in sharing the interview material at this stage over-ride our original goals as laid out in the project methodology, and we have decided not open the oral archive until we can protect the women we spoke with to our satisfaction. I would suggest that this is an example of how our sense of responsibility as advocates, as activists on behalf of women, has prevailed over establishing what we thought was an innovative forum to encourage feminist scholarship.

The scholarly research programme, which will produce at least twelve papers and spawn future research on the issues raised, will become evidence of our own feminist politics as well as our ability as feminist researchers opening up new issues for debate in Pakistan. While we analyze the interview material, “the aspects we choose to illuminate are determined [by] not only the present we live in, but the future we wish to work towards.” (Butalia, p.351) As feminists, the researchers on this project share a perspective on patriarchal structures and the oppression of women within them, and share a sense that increased knowledge of women’s experience during conflict is an important starting point for a feminist analysis of conflict. As activists, almost all of the researchers involved in the project have also been activists in the women’s movement in Pakistan, and therefore have at some point advocated on behalf of a vision of the future for women in this country that reveals some clear political objectives. The scholarly work that arises out of this research programme may not contain recommendations for advocacy or policy changes, but it will be valuable to examine at a later date whether the activism of the researchers has been influenced by the research findings.

As one of these researchers, I have already found that both my goals as a scholar as well as my advocacy goals have undergone some development due to the research. My view of “the future we wish to work towards” has been changed through the field experience on this project. While one level of analysis we wished to promote through this project was how women could contribute towards the building of peace in our region, peace itself was not defined. In the context of Karachi, certainly, it has emerged through our fieldwork and discussions with a range of the city’s residents, that peace and security issues are inextricable from the wider complex urban problems of the metropolis. In that sense, I find Birgit Brock-Utne’s attention to the question of defining peace very helpful. She writes that the definition of peace has expanded to include not only the absence of violence (direct and indirect, internal and external), but also the absence of malnutrition, extreme poverty, human rights, and an equitable domestic and international world order. (p.1-3) I suspect and hope to be able to demonstrate in future work, that women interviewed in Karachi share this broader vision of peace, mingling the political, ideological, and economic aspects of their lives when they demand that the security – of life and home – be restored.

In my capacity as an advocate for the women’s movement and peace in our society, I realize that urban issues in all their complexity require more sustained political activism than I previously realized. Beyond what had been the focus of my earlier activist efforts, which included lobbying against discriminatory legislation and the promotion of peace between India and Pakistan, I now understand that peace and security needs at the micro-level require that the women’s movement more seriously politicize and publicize poverty and social development issues.

Conclusion: Formulating the Feminist Research Challenge

In the original research design we did not clearly distinguish between feminist research goals and advocacy goals, but thought that the two could complement one another with ease. We did not compromise on our responsibilities as scholars. We maintained the rigour of qualitative research methodology, painstakingly processing our interview material, and preparing analytical papers. At the same time we thought that the sharing of data and inclusiveness of a research programme would adequately address the wider political imperatives of awareness-raising and advocacy for the women and issues raised in the field.

But the previous discussion has demonstrated how the actual implementation of the research revealed that there were certain advocacy imperatives built into our research study of women and conflict that we did

not sufficiently realize. The activist background of the field researchers helped to build a bridge of trust with the women interviewed, and thus strengthen the sense on both sides that “making women’s voices heard” would involve some kind of advocacy to follow the work in the field. This also helped to create a testimonial core to the interviews, in which women bore witness to crimes in a way that had historical and political urgency. Further, our pledge to protect the safety of women who gave interviews inhibited our networking and the establishment of a complete oral archive, and has subsequently raised unresolved questions of how to avoid the possible misuse of the data for political or other purposes.

I would suggest that this is a direct result of a methodology that sought to make women’s voices heard. Those voices are maintaining a strong insistence on maintaining the linkages between scholarship and advocacy, not one at the expense of the other, but as inextricable from one another. The unease felt by field researchers in how to meet the security needs of women interviewed, combined by the project researchers unease at opening the interview texts for public use, has forced us to re-examine the relationship of feminist scholarship with advocacy in our context.

In fact, the feminist principle of keeping women at the centre of our research was borne out more fully than we could have anticipated. Beyond the collection of women’s oral histories, we also hear women’s voices from the field through their experiences as researchers, and women’s perspectives as shared through our small networking efforts, and later women’s analyses of the material in scholarly papers. I believe that the way our research has mingled advocacy with scholarly pursuits, and also elicited further demand for more advocacy work, has helped to bring our project methodology full circle. By refusing to suppress women’s voices at any level in this project, we maintain our feminist commitment to placing women at the centre of our research and privileging the full range of women’s voices that we have helped to evoke. If we do not take further the advocacy issues raised through our research, we will, in effect, be partially silencing women’s voices.

I share this as I expand my understanding of peace to include the wider context that limits security in troubled Karachi. For example, one area of advocacy suggested by the team was with the police, who have been accused in our interview material of murder, human rights violations and disregard for legal procedure. Police reforms have recently been included in the government’s own national development agenda, because effective and just law-enforcement is lacking not just in Karachi but throughout Pakistan. There is a concurrence of views on this problem among Karachi’s residents, not only those affected by the city’s violence, but women’s and human right’s activists, urban planners, and local government as well. Bringing our research findings to bear on what is seen as a wider issue in governance and development is another way of bringing women’s voices into the security debate, albeit an expanded version of it.

Most feminists in Pakistan who are engaged in research have the advantage of personal experience with advocacy and political activism. But what does emerge as a new challenge is the lessons to be learnt from feminist scholarship itself, if it is indeed to create a new discourse and analytical framework for discussing the well-worn peace and human rights issues that plague us in Pakistan. The feminist research programme on women and conflict, particularly the work in the Karachi site, has revealed that by adhering closely to the principle of listening to women’s voices and placing women at the centre of research, certain advocacy imperatives were strengthened in the course of maintaining methodological rigour.

This leaves us with an exciting vantage point from which to take our efforts further to build up feminist research that is relevant in Pakistan and indeed South Asia. How we choose to frame our scholarly work, incorporate the calls for advocacy that it has produced, and expand our understanding of the concept of

peace, are not just personal choices that we make as researchers, but will determine the kinds of feminist research that arise in the future. Let us hope that in the course of bringing forth a new and relevant discourse on peace and security in South Asia, the voices of all the women that helped to create this new language can always be heard.

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