

# **STANDING WITH OUR SISTERS: The Life and Work of Rehana Hashmi of Pakistan**

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**2013 Women PeaceMakers Program**



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**JOAN B. KROC  
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*Institute for Peace and Justice*

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## **A NOTE TO THE READER**

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

## **ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.<sup>1</sup>

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER —**  
**Rehana Hashmi**



Rehana Hashmi, a development professional and human rights defender, knows well the stark differences between the remote expanses of Pakistan and its bustling cities. Born in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North-West Frontier Province) and raised in the sparsely populated province of Balochistan, she now alternates her work between Pakistan’s capital of Islamabad and the remote regions of her childhood.

At a young age Hashmi saw her father jailed for political activism and soon followed in his footsteps, leading student protests as Pakistan went through political upheaval. When the police came to her door threatening her arrest, the teenage Hashmi was given two choices: stop the protests or leave town. But she would not be silenced.

In the 25 years since, Hashmi’s activism has centered on the defense of human rights, especially for women. She became a development specialist in the district of Chitral; the work involved organizing women of diverse sects to come together to improve their livelihoods. It was a challenging task, as women in this region had never before been allowed to form organizations or make decisions side by side with men.

Hashmi has also created two national networks to support women taking control of their rights. As the national manager of the Women Political School Project under the Ministry of Women Development, she trained over 25,000 elected women leaders to support their political engagement. Hashmi also formed the largest health worker’s network in the private sector to provide services in reproductive health, linking over 3,000 paramedics to reach 2 million women.

Through her leadership of Sisters Trust Pakistan, Hashmi has worked tirelessly to help victims of domestic violence and women and girls breaking free of religious fundamentalism and forced marriages. However, her defense of human rights has come at a price: A regular target of threats, Hashmi must frequently move locations, occasionally going into hiding. But this does not deter her. Despite many opportunities to settle abroad, Hashmi prefers to stay with the women and those marginalized in Pakistan society, helping them fight for their rights and create a country that will defend them.

## CONFLICT HISTORY – Pakistan

Since Pakistan became a nation in 1947, its struggles for peace and democracy have been marked by periods of military dictatorship and political, social and economic instability.<sup>2</sup> All of these have had an impact on human rights and the rights of women in the country.

The movement to become a nation began in 1940, when Mohammed Ali Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League, endorsed the concept of partition of British India into separate Muslim and Hindu nations. India for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims. The new state of Pakistan was composed of East Pakistan and West Pakistan, with Indian territory between them. The areas of Sindh, Balochistan and the North-West Frontier came to Pakistan intact. The Punjab and Bengal were divided between Pakistan and India. Kashmir remained a disputed territory.

In putting forth the two-nation concept, Jinnah argued that India's Hindus and Muslims could not live together. Each group needed its own country. Two interpretations followed: One, that Pakistan was intended to be an Islamic nation, and two, that Pakistan should be a place for Muslims to practice their religion in safety, in a society of tolerance and moderation.

There is no doubt where Jinnah stood in that debate. In a speech soon after independence he said to the people of Pakistan, "If you change your past and work together in a spirit that everyone, no matter what community he belongs, no matter his color, caste, or creed, is first, second, and last a citizen of the State, with equal rights, privileges and obligations, there will be no end to the progress you can make."

His progressive vision for Pakistan, a vision that included equal rights for women, was evident even before Pakistan became a nation, when Jinnah declared in 1944, "It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable conditions in which our women have to live. You should have taken your women with you as comrades in every sphere of life."

His vision for Pakistan has yet to be realized. Conflict between Muslim moderates and Islamic fundamentalists and extremists continues today over the role of religion in society and the place of women in it.

Jinnah died unexpectedly in 1948. His successor, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, proposed and passed the Objectives Resolution declaring both that Muslims would be able to order their lives in accordance with the teachings of Islam *and* that minorities would be allowed to freely practice their religions and develop their cultures. But subsequent resolutions and constitutions would primarily promote the former and neglect the latter.

In 1951, Khan was assassinated. Including Khan, Pakistan went through seven prime ministers from 1947 to 1958. It was an era characterized by instability and lack of direction.

The year 1958 brought the first military coup when General Ayub Khan took over as Pakistan's first military leader and declared martial law. Many Pakistanis were convinced that democracy was a failure and were relieved that martial law would put an end to the chaos and confusion of the previous years.

Ayub Khan was a secularist who objected to traditions like polygamy and the wearing of the burqa. Among the many changes he introduced was the Family Law Ordinance of 1961, which gave a variety of legal rights to women. For instance, the law changed polygamy by requiring the consent of the first wife if a man wished to take a second. It also did away with the practice of instant divorce in which a man could divorce a woman simply by saying, "I divorce you," three times. In his pursuit of rapid economic modernization, Ayub Khan emphasized education for women, as well as family planning. These policies earned him a reputation at the time as a defender of women's rights.

That reputation underwent a change, however, in 1964. That year a majority of political parties formed an alliance in favor of direct elections and a parliamentary system of government. They called themselves the Combined Opposition Parties and chose Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Pakistan's founder, as their candidate to oppose Ayub Khan in an election.

People all over Pakistan debated whether a woman could be the head of a Muslim state. Ayub Khan exploited this controversy, enlisting Muslim scholars to rule that Fatima Jinnah's candidacy was not in keeping with Islamic law. Ayub Khan remained in power until 1969, when he was forced out by General Yayya Khan.

Yayya Khan's rule marked the end of One Unit, the province created by merging all the provinces in West Pakistan in 1954. This administrative arrangement was a response to the government's difficulty in creating parity in the number of voters in both East and West Pakistan. One Unit was created to preempt permanent dominance of East Pakistani (Bengali) politicians over other provinces. East Pakistan remained a single province. The One Unit program had a unifying effect on the West and was also intended to counterbalance the political domination of East Pakistan, which had a larger population.

The modernist leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became president in 1971 (and later prime minister from 1973 to 1977). His was the second period of democratic civilian rule. His Pakistan People's Party (PPP) promised socialism infused with Islamic values. "*Roti, kapra aur makan*" (bread, cloth and house) was his slogan, and he attempted to deliver with a series of nationalizations, including schools, banks and major industries. Minorities lost their educational and health institutions, but the redistribution of feudal land wealth was a boost to the mostly lower class minorities. Bhutto established compulsory education for all children under 15, set up a quota for employment of women and minorities, and replaced the separate electorate system (which only allowed Muslims to vote for Muslims, Christians for Christians, etc.) with a joint electorate.

During his administration women's rights continued to be a part of the government's modernizing agenda. The PPP organized a women's wing and in its constitution stipulated that there should be no discrimination on the basis of sex. Women were promised equal opportunities for

employment in the government. Several were appointed to high-level positions in the administration.

At the same time, in order to gain support of religious parties, Bhutto constitutionally adopted “Islamic Republic of Pakistan” as the country’s official name, made Islam the state religion, changed the official workweek holiday from Sunday to Friday, and officially declared Ahmadis to be non-Muslim. He also attempted to impose a ban on alcohol, gambling, and nightclubs. His opponents often found themselves jailed.

Bhutto’s time in office was marked by other key events, including the secession of East Pakistan, which escalated into a bloody civil war and resulted in the formation of Bangladesh, continuing disputes over Kashmir, and a shaky peace agreement with India. Bhutto also pushed for Pakistan’s development of a nuclear weapon.

A military coup installed General Zia ul Haq in power in 1977. Later, in 1979, Bhutto was tried and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court for authorizing the murder of a political opponent.

The coup that had deposed him was a turning point in the women’s movement in Pakistan. General Zia asserted that “the introduction of an Islamic system is an essential pre-requisite for this country.” He set about limiting women’s participation in the public sphere. Censorship increased. All women employees were told to cover their heads with *chadors*.

But the changes that had the biggest impact on women’s lives were three areas of the law: Hudood Ordinances of 1979, the 1984 Law of Evidence, and *Qisas* and *Diyat*. “Hudood” refers to penalties prescribed by the Quran for theft, adultery, fornication and consumption of alcohol.

The part of this ordinance that affects women most seriously is *zina*, which regulates illicit sex, such as adultery, rape and premarital sex. Transgressions of *zina* are technically punishable by stoning, but most result in long imprisonment with expensive bail. Though both men and women are susceptible to *zina*, women are its most common victims. In cases of rape, for example, if the rape cannot be proven (which requires four male, Muslim witnesses), the woman is then charged with *zina* herself — for partaking in illicit, extramarital sex. False *zina* charges are commonly used as a tool to control women. A woman who attempts to choose her own marriage partner is often seen as endangering her family’s honor, and the threat of a *zina* accusation can rein her in. Husbands often use *zina* to trap so-called “errant wives” attempting to leave an abusive marriage or even remarry after a verbal divorce.

In many cases, the potential for dishonor is avoided altogether. Inconvenient or strong-willed women often disappear under the guise of honor killings — the murder of female family members to avoid cultural shame — or are intimidated into submission with tactics such as acid attacks. It is also socially acceptable that a raped woman will end her and her family’s “dishonor” by taking her own life. Rape victims generally commit suicide rather than attempt seeking justice.

The Law of Evidence Act further diminished women by prescribing that in all legal cases not covered by the Hudood Ordinance, two male witnesses (and in the absence of two male witnesses, one male and two female witnesses) would be required for proving a crime. In other words, the word of two women equaled that of one man.

This sort of equation continued in the law of Qisas and Diyat. Qisas refers to the principle of equal retaliation, “an eye for an eye.” Diyat refers to financial retribution. Financial compensation for a female who was a victim of an unintentional murder would be half that of a male. On the other hand, a woman guilty of murder or causing bodily injury would incur the same punishment as a man.

Pakistan has three parallel judiciary systems: 1) the government’s system and penal code based on British law; 2) Sharia law; and 3) a feudal system in which local elders, men only, resolve disputes in *jirga* or *punchiat* courts.

Women face significant challenges in the justice system. Powerful landowners tend to settle conflicts between families in rural areas, administering solutions like exchange marriages, polygamy, or *wan’ni*, the trading of a female family member in marriage for compensation for a wrong done by a male family member.

The most significant challenge to the “Islamization” policies of Zia ul Haq’s regime came from a group of professional women who organized to form the Women Action Forum (WAF). The group was not large in size and was limited to the urban areas of Pakistan, yet it was successful in initiating a national debate on the inequities of the policies.

The group took up the cause of Safia Bibi, an 18-year-old servant girl from a poor background who became pregnant after being raped by both the father and the son in the house where she worked. Her father pressed charges against the older man. But since there had not been the four witnesses required by Hudood, the accused man was acquitted. Safia’s pregnancy was cited as evidence of adultery and the girl was sentenced to a public flogging, a fine and three years in prison.

The WAF made effective use of the press to publicize the case, embarrassing the Zia government in the court of public opinion, forcing a public debate on the unfairness of the law, and bringing about a clarification by the Federal Shariat Court that made the law less discriminatory for women.

Most members of the WAF were Muslim, but they viewed religion as a private matter and did not believe it should shape public policies. For Muslim fundamentalist men, these “Westernized” women symbolized the cultural dissonance between Islam and Western imperialism.

Zia’s Islamization also made life harder for religious minorities. He reinstated separate electorates — further marginalizing minorities from political participation — and wrote blasphemy laws into Pakistan’s legal code. Under those laws, anything construed as insulting to the Prophet Muhammad or desecrating the Quran is punishable by death, and an individual can be imprisoned



simply on the basis of accusation — without investigation. False accusations are easily wielded as revenge against one's enemy or in neighborhood disputes.

Zia also revamped and censored government textbooks to purge them of any un-Islamic content, exacerbating religious intolerance and stigmatizing minorities. Though Sharia courts were established, Zia made sure they could not challenge military law; the power of the military trumped Islamic law. Later, in 1985, Zia further ensured his strength by amending the constitution to give the president the power to dissolve governments.

The Zakat tax was introduced in 1980, which demanded 2.5 percent of one's total savings to be collected on the first day of Ramadan. The measure inflamed tensions between Shiites and Sunnis, as Shiites believe the tax is voluntary and the government has no right to force collection. The Shiite-Sunni conflict is rooted in a dispute over the rightful successor of the Prophet Muhammad, but this tax stirred up differences between the two sects and acted as a catalyst for the growth of sectarian violence.

Sectarianism and its religious intolerance has made Pakistan a breeding ground for instability, violence and discrimination. Though extremists and fundamentalists occupy the headlines, these radical Islamic parties do not represent the typical Pakistani. Muslims make up about 95 percent of Pakistan's religious landscape — 20 percent Shiite and 75 percent Sunni. The remaining 5 percent of the population is comprised of Christian, Hindus and Ahmadis. Punjab, the most populous and prosperous of Pakistan's four provinces, is home to 90 percent of Pakistan's Christian population, making it an epicenter of minority discrimination and blasphemy accusations.

Zia's regime ended when he died in an airplane crash in 1988, and a third period of democracy asserted itself until 1999. For those eleven years the government alternated between two political leaders: Benazir Bhutto, the eldest daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Nawaz Sharif. Because of her father's execution, Bhutto was naturally wary of the army; Sharif was more familiar and comfortable with the military, as he had been a chief minister for General Zia. Bhutto's governments were more secular, while Sharif tended to play more to the religious groups. He incorporated Sharia law into the legal code in 1991, and in 1992 tried unsuccessfully to add a religious column to the national identity card.

When Benazir Bhutto won the 1988 election, she became the first female prime minister not only of Pakistan, but of any modern Islamic state. During her first term, Bhutto vowed to repeal the Hudood Ordinance and set up women's police stations, courts and development banks, but was unable to accomplish those goals. Her administration was dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan for the first time in 1990 under charges of corruption. Nawaz Sharif took over for two years but then resigned under military pressure in 1993. Bhutto was re-elected and held power for three years before again being dismissed for alleged corruption and placed under house arrest. During her second term she worked to modernize Pakistan and bring electricity and schools to rural areas. Her countrywide priorities included improving health care, nutrition and housing.

Sharif returned as prime minister, and in 1999 Bhutto and her husband were convicted of taking kickbacks while in office. She denied the charges and remained out of the country in self-exile.

In 1999, Sharif, who had lost much of his public support, was removed by General Pervez Musharraf in a military coup. The following year, Musharraf attempted a slight reform to the blasphemy law, not addressing the punishment but proposing the requirement of investigation before arrest (rather than just an accusation). He backed down quickly, however, when religious scholars, or *ulemas*, opposed it. But in January 2002, Musharraf supported the rights of religious minorities when he banned the separate electorate system established by Zia.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, General Musharraf allied Pakistan with the United States' "war on terror," which required that he turn against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Ending sectarian violence was one of Musharraf's missions even before partnering with the United States, but the partnership stirred up intense anti-American sentiment. Much of the anger increased discrimination against Christian minorities, as they are often associated with and assumed to be sympathetic to U.S. policy. Violence against religious minorities continues to worsen as extremist groups grow larger and more brazen in their attacks.

Extremism also continues to be fueled by poverty. Pakistan's suffering economy makes it difficult to combat militants on the government level, but on the civilian level it makes something as simple as paying for school fees a challenge. Madrassas – Islamic schools, many of which cultivate young militants – offer free education, and usually room and board, as well as the promise of financial compensation and support for a martyr's family, making madrasa education a viable option.

Girls' education suffers especially in rural areas, where girls' schools are attacked by militants. Poverty and illiteracy only increase women's victimization under Islamic law.

In spring of 2007, Musharraf removed from the Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, whose rulings had begun to challenge the Musharraf government, including raising questions about "forced disappearances," in which Pakistanis had been held by government and intelligence agencies without access to due process.

During his troubles with the Musharraf government, Chaudhry became the embodiment of the Pakistani people's desire for change and for a fairer society. A popular outpouring, led by Pakistan's lawyers, culminated in Chaudhry being restored to his seat on the Supreme Court.

Musharraf's actions in all this resulted in the United States insisting he attempt to share power with the then-exiled Benazir Bhutto. In November, afraid that the courts – and especially the reinstated Chaudhry – were about to remove him from his military post, Musharraf declared emergency martial law. He dismantled the judiciary system, deposing 60 judges (including Chaudhry for the second time) and arresting hundreds of lawyers. But by the end of the month he resigned from his military power so he could run in the upcoming parliamentary elections against both Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

On the positive side, Musharraf's administration put in place some progressive laws, including the 2006 Protection of Women Act, which protects victims of rape from the possibility of being convicted of adultery. Also, as part of his Devolution of Power Plan, a provision was instituted for a 33 percent quota for women in local legislative bodies: district, municipality and union councils. This opened the door for women to have a say in setting and implementing the agenda of local governments.

Several laws on the books in Pakistan prohibit explicit types of gender discrimination. But the state has consistently failed to proactively enforce those measures. For example, in 1996, Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations in 1979, but it has yet to implement its provisions within society.

In October of 2007, after nine years of self-exile, Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan after Musharraf agreed to grant her amnesty and withdraw all corruption charges. On December 27, she was assassinated at an election rally. In the aftermath, her political party, the PPP, won the 2008 parliamentary elections. Threatened with impeachment, Musharraf resigned the presidency and was succeeded by Asif Ali Zardari, widower of Benazir Bhutto. Party member Yousaf Raza Gillani was sworn in as prime minister.

In February 2009, President Zardari attempted to broker a ceasefire with the Taliban by reinstating Sharia law throughout the region. But militants continued to attack government forces and overstep the bounds of the agreement, so in May the military launched a campaign to force the Taliban out of Pakistan. The conflict created the largest mass movement of people since the migration during partition — 1.3 million Pakistanis became refugees or internally displaced persons.

In 2010, both houses of Parliament passed the Constitution Act (18th Amendment) to strengthen the powers of the legislative branch of the government and the role of the premier, while limiting presidential authority. The amendment's intent was to stabilize the country by dialing back the sweeping powers of the presidency that had come to characterize the administrations of Generals Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf. In 2012, Gillani was disqualified as prime minister by the Supreme Court. In the general election of 2013, Nawaz Sharif was elected prime minister.

In the fractious political environment since Musharraf left office, an ongoing battle for supremacy has ensued among the main institutions of the state — the government, the opposition, the judiciary and the military. In recent years the Taliban and other militant Islamists have resurfaced and spread their control throughout the country.

Changes to Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which allow a death sentence for anyone found guilty of desecrating the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad, mosques or Islamic beliefs, have been strongly resisted by the religion's more militant factions. In January 2011, Salman Taseer, governor of Punjab, was assassinated for his opposition to the blasphemy laws.

The threat of Talibanization persists in Pakistan. The U.S. has made extensive use of drone aircraft to kill suspected militants in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. These strikes have prompted much anti-American sentiment, as well as

debate in the international community about the use of such tactics in areas not officially identified as war zones.

Terrorist bombings and violence continue to disrupt and destabilize the lives of innocent civilians. The 2012 attack on Malala Yousafzai, a schoolgirl from Swat who was shot by a member of the Taliban for her belief in the rights of girls to be educated, brought worldwide attention to the radicalism that currently plagues Pakistan.

The challenges the Islamic Republic of Pakistan faces today are many – and are heightened by the conflict within the country between Islam’s moderates and its fundamentalists. Gaining greater educational and employment opportunities for women are important goals for the moderates. But the fundamentalists view these as evidence of the influence of western imperialism. Their goal is an Islamic society that has sexual segregation as one of its core principles, with limited access for women to educational and economic opportunities.

Some might say that reconciling the viewpoints of these factions is impossible. But no nation can move forward economically, politically, or socially by excluding 50 percent of its population from participating in the process. Pakistan’s founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, looked forward to a time in Pakistan when men and women would be “comrades in every sphere of life.” Today the country’s human rights defenders, like Rehana Hashmi, continue the struggle to fulfill Jinnah’s dream of progress for the nation and all its people through equality.

MAP



## INTEGRATED TIMELINE

### **Political Developments in Pakistan and *Personal History of Rehana Hashmi***

- 1906** The Muslim League is founded in India to advocate for Indian Muslim separatism.
- 1940** The Muslim League supports the formation of a separate nation for India's Muslims.
- 1947** India's partition creates an independent East and West Pakistan; millions of people become homeless and hundreds of thousands die in the migration. The first war over the controversial state of Kashmir begins.
- 1948** Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, dies.
- 1951** Liaquat Ali Khan, Jinnah's successor, is assassinated.
- 1956** Pakistan's first constitution is created, declaring Pakistan an Islamic republic.
- 1958** Gen. Ayub Khan takes over in Pakistan's first military coup.
- 1960** **Rehana Hashmi is born in her parents' hometown of Dera Ismail Khan.**
- 1969** Gen. Ayub Khan resigns and Gen. Yayja Khan takes power.
- Rehana's father is jailed for his political activism. Nine-year-old Rehana is called on to work in his place at his store selling firewood.**
- 1970** The first national elections in East and West Pakistan take place.
- 1971** East Pakistan becomes independent Bangladesh after a two-week civil war with West Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto becomes president of Pakistan.
- 1972** Bhutto and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sign the Simla accord, a peace agreement that releases over 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of the East Pakistan war and establishes a new, temporary cease-fire line in the Kashmir conflict. Bhutto enlists scientists to begin building a nuclear bomb.
- Hashmi family moves back to Dera Ismail Khan.**
- 1973** Bhutto becomes prime minister and oversees the passage of a new constitution.
- 1974** India's first nuclear test takes place.
- 1977** Gen. Zia ul Haq takes over in a military coup during the protested re-election of Bhutto.

- 1978** Zia becomes president.
- 1979** Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is executed by hanging after being charged with murder. Afghanistan is invaded by the Soviets. Zia begins a process of Islamization, including the creation of the Hudood Ordinances, a set of laws particularly focused against women and minorities.

**Rehana leads students from her college in a demonstration in protest of Bhutto's death sentence. As a result, she is arrested and sent into exile from Dera Ismail Khan.**

- 1980** The United States gives military assistance to Pakistan, offering itself as an ally during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Zia attempts to increase the Zakat tax, sparking renewed tensions and violence between Shiite and Sunni Muslims; extremist groups start to organize. Sunni-Shia riots begin in Dera Ismail Khan.

- 1981** The Women's Action Forum is formed as an advocacy group for women's rights after Islamic law is introduced into the penal code.

**Rehana resumes her college education in Peshawar.**

- 1985** With the Eighth Amendment, or constitutional clause 52b, Zia amends the constitution to increase presidential power, adding the ability to dissolve governments.

**Rehana's exile from Dera Ismail Khan ends. She comes to the defense of a woman falsely accused under the Hudood Ordinances.**

- 1987** **Rehana joins the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Chitral and initiates a program specifically for women.**

- 1988** Zia dies in an airplane crash. The Pakistan People's Party, led by the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir, is elected to government.

- 1990** Benazir Bhutto's government is halted after the military intervenes with charges of corruption and incompetence. Nawaz Sharif takes power for the first time. Sharif incorporates Sharia law into the legal code.

- 1992** **Rehana becomes regional director at Strengthening Participatory Organization in the North-West Frontier Province.**

**Rehana Hashmi and Fayyez Baqir marry.**

- 1993** Prime Minister Sharif and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan both resign under military pressure.

**Rehana gives birth to a son, Sonu, on July 26.**



1994 Benazir Bhutto's second government begins.

**Rehana gives birth to a daughter, Ayesha, on November 16.**

1995 **Rehana attends the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China.**

1996 Benazir Bhutto's second government is dismissed by the president, Farooq Leghari. The Taliban take power in Afghanistan.

**Rehana and her colleagues help an Austrian woman, a survivor of domestic violence, flee Pakistan and her Pakistani husband.**

Pakistan signs the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

**Syed Gul, a young girl from Kalash, becomes part of the Hashmi family when Rehana and her husband take her in so she can attend school in Islamabad.**

1997 Nawaz Sharif's second government begins.

1998 India and Pakistan conduct nuclear testing. Protests follow.

**Rehana joins Futures Group UK as its social development advisor, and develops and trains a network of 3,000 paramedics focused on improving women's health. The program reaches more than 2 million women in all areas of Pakistan.**

1999 Known as the Kargil conflict, Pakistan's army attempts to cross the Kashmir border, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths on both sides. Gen. Pervez Musharraf's coup ousts Sharif.

**Shamim Akhtar, Rehana's mother, dies.**

2001 August — Musharraf bans the militant groups Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Sipah-e-Muhammed Pakistan. Musharraf begins disassociating with the Taliban when Pakistan signs on as an ally of the U.S.'s post-9/11 "war on terror."

2002 January — Musharraf bans two of the most prominent militant organizations: Jaish e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Toiba (the latter notorious for acid attacks on Kashmiri women). He also bans the two largest remaining sectarian groups, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP, who in 1985 demanded Shiites be deemed non-Muslims) and Tehrike-Jafria Pakistan. Musharraf "wins" a referendum that awards him five more years in power.

2004 **Rehana becomes national project manager of the Women Political School, under the Ministry of Women Development and the U.N. Development Programme.**



**2007** July — A new wave of militancy begins after an eruption of violence between Islamic militants and the Pakistani government at the Red Mosque in Islamabad.  
December — Benazir Bhutto is assassinated in a street rally in Rawalpindi just prior to elections.

**2008** August — Musharraf resigns after impeachment charges.

September — Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, is elected president.

**Rehana is named national project director for the Gender Reform Action Plan, with the Ministry of Women Development.**

**2009** February — Zardari reinstates Sharia law in the Swat Valley to appease the Taliban and attempt to negotiate a cease-fire.

**Rehana leads a protest in Islamabad against Sharia law.**

April — The Swat agreement fails and the military launches a campaign in May to force the Taliban out of Pakistan, creating the largest mass movement of people since partition – 1.3 million refugees.

August — Baitullah Mehsud, leader of the Pakistani Taliban, and Ali Sher Hyderi, head of the largest Sunni extremist group, SSP, are both killed, separately.

**2010** August — The worst floods in 80 years kill at least 1,600 and affect more than 20 million people. The government response is widely criticized.

**Rehana registers Sisters Trust as a nongovernmental organization.**

**Rehana receives the Benazir Bhutto Human Rights Award from the government for her work in the flood-affected areas. Syed Gul also receives the award, in recognition of her work to preserve the endangered culture of Kalash.**

**2011** January — A campaign to reform Pakistan's blasphemy law leads to the killing of two prominent supporters, Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer in January, and Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti in March.

**Rehana speaks out against blasphemy laws at a memorial for Governor Taseer and soon receives numerous threats from the Taliban. She is forced into hiding, sometimes for months at a time.**

April — The founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, is killed by American special forces in Abbottabad.

**July — Abdullah, Rehana’s nephew, is killed by the Taliban on July 27. Sonu, Rehana’s son, is sent to school in Canada.**

**Rehana and her sisters provide shelter for Zaibi, a victim of a forced marriage.**

**2012** October — Taliban gunmen seriously injure 14-year-old campaigner for girls’ rights Malala Yousafzai, whom they accused of “promoting secularism.” The shooting sparks a brief upsurge of anger in Pakistan against the militants.

**Rehana marches in support of Malala and her advocacy on behalf of girls’ education.**

**2013** April — A court orders the arrest of Gen Pervez Musharraf over his attempt to impose house arrest on judges during his military rule in March 2007. Gen Musharraf returned from British exile in March to contest parliamentary elections.

June — Parliament approves Nawaz Sharif as prime minister after his Muslim League-N wins parliamentary elections in May. Taliban conduct systematic campaign of attacks and intimidation, but fail to deter largest turnout of voters since 1970.

July — Mamnoon Hussain elected president by parliament.

**August — Rehana is chosen by the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice as one of four Women PeaceMakers for 2013.**

September — More than 80 people are killed in a double suicide bombing at a church in Peshawar. It is the deadliest attack so far against Christians in Pakistan. Taliban-linked Islamists claim responsibility.

**Rehana and Fayyaz send their daughter to England to study, far from the Taliban’s threats.**

**October — Rehana returns to Pakistan to continue her work for gender justice.**

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**DEDICATION**

*This story is dedicated to  
my family  
and  
to the memory of  
my nephew, Abdullah, and  
my mother, Shamim Akhtar  
— Rehana Hashmi*

**NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF  
REHANA HASHMI**

**Pushing the Boundaries**

“Rehana, how many times have I told you to stay away from those gypsies? *How many times?* If you like them so much, maybe we should just give you to them!” Hashmi-Sab glowered at his 8-year-old daughter.

The girl lifted her chin and stared up at him, her mouth set in a tight line. She’d heard this scolding before. She was smart enough not to answer back. Smart enough to lower her eyes as her father’s voice grew louder. But gazing down at her muddied frock, she held back a knowing smile, certain she would hear him say those words again the next time she got caught.



This second daughter of Hashmi-Sab and his wife was a challenge for them both. She was different from Baji, their firstborn. Five years older than Rehana, Baji was demure. Obedient. A fair-skinned beauty happy to help her mother care for their younger sisters and do chores around the house.

Rehana was something else.

Summer afternoons like this one often found her in the backyard, skipping along the top of the wall that surrounded the spacious house the growing Hashmi family called home. A compound, really, at the end of the road, with an expanse of farm fields behind it.

Hashmi-Sab had moved his family from Dera Ismail Khan to Mastung when Rehana was a baby. He’d been offered a position there as the general manager of the town’s bank. Theirs was a home befitting a man of his stature in the community and among their fellow Muslims. Everyone in Mastung — Hindus, Sunnis, Shias, Christians, Pakhtoon, Baloch — knew Hashmi-Sab was a Syed, a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

From her vantage point on the wall, Rehana scanned the fields that stretched to the horizon. A cool breeze lifted the hem of her frock. In summertime Mastung’s cooler climate lured visitors to the town from Pakistan’s hottest regions.

The gypsies had come to Mastung at this time last year. Rehana was hoping to see them again.

Catching sight of lorries in the distance, Rehana clapped her hands.

“Yes!” she cheered. “They’re back!”



Each year when the lorries rolled into the wheat fields and the gypsies set up their tents, adults in Mastung warned their children to stay away from them.

“They’re dirty.”

“They’re lawless.”

“They’re not like us.”

Stories were told of gypsies snatching rings right off of small fingers and gold earrings out of tender lobes. Worst were the tales of children who disappeared suddenly and forever.

Rehana had heard all those stories, but her curiosity had been stronger than the fear they were meant to instill.



That night in the bedroom she shared with her four sisters, Rehana took out the stick-doll a gypsy had made for her the year before. She kept it in a secret place. But every now and then, when her sisters were sleeping, she brought it out.

Rubbing the stick between her thumb and forefinger, she made the patchwork dress twirl as if the doll were dancing, and she remembered: the flickering light of the gypsies’ campfires, the women’s colorful skirts with their carry-all pockets, the songs that floated on the night air into her walled-in courtyard and her open heart.

She heard again the music of their laughter and their makeshift instruments. She closed her eyes and tasted once more the flat bread they’d baked and shared with her. Rehana marveled at how the gypsy men played games with their children and helped with their care. And how the women spoke up with ease at gatherings around the fire.

To her, the gypsies weren’t wayfarers living in abject poverty. They were freedom personified. People without boundaries who gave her a glimpse of a larger life.

She knew it would be risky for her to visit them this year. She’d have to brave again her father’s wrath and her mother’s exasperation. She’d have to ignore her sisters asking, “Why, Rehana, why do you keep doing this, when it makes *Ammi* and *Abba* so mad?”

Tucking the doll under her mattress, Rehana whispered the four words that in the years ahead would come to define her attitude toward life’s obstacles and challenges.

“I will do it,” she vowed. “I will do it.”

### The Pied Piper of Mastung

In the dim light of the shed, Rehana's playmates from the neighborhood looked at her accusingly. They'd been herded into a windowless room by a red-faced guard who'd caught them in the act of plucking fruit off the trees in this orchard, miles from their homes — and it was all Rehana's fault.

“Who gave you kids permission to do this?” he roared. “Who?”

Before anyone had the courage to point to Rehana, he slammed the shed's rough-hewn door. A lock clicked. The tiny room grew quiet. “You said it was OK, Rehana! You told us we could have all the apricots and plums we could carry,” one of the boys hissed.

From a dark corner the youngest among them started whimpering.

“You said you knew the guy who owned the orchard!”

“My *father* knows him, not *me*,” Rehana said.

She had first seen the orchard from her father's bank at the top of the hill overlooking the town. She'd overheard him saying that it belonged to one of the bank's clients, a friend of his. The symmetry of its rows spoke of an estate wealthy enough for a full-time gardener. To Rehana, its size suggested that the gardener there might need extra help. And besides, what household could possibly eat that much fruit?

Her plan to organize a small group of the town's children to address that issue seemed like a good idea at the time.

In the afternoons, many of Mastung's grown-ups and all of its children stopped whatever they were doing and rested. It was the time of day when a hush fell over Rehana's hectic home. Life slowed for a bit, but Rehana seldom did. For her, naptime was the perfect time to go where she wanted to go and do what she wanted to do.

“Tell your parents you'll be at my house,” she'd instructed six friends and two of her visiting uncles, Fana and Inam, both of them just a few years older than Rehana.

They all did as they were told. Even at age 9, Rehana had about her an air of authority. Her schoolmates knew her as The Girl with the Right Answers. Her teachers appreciated her quick mind, and that she always did her homework.

That afternoon, in the shade of the courtyard's mulberry tree, Rehana met with the young co-conspirators she'd lured there with the promise of adventure and all the apricots they could eat.

Her favorite lamb trotted over to see what was going on. She patted its head.

“Ready?” she asked the group.

Her friends nodded.

“OK, then. Let’s go!”

With Rehana in the lead, they marched to the corner and turned up the main street, past the soccer field, the jail, the mosque, the school. They marched on, to the edge of town, and to the open space beyond — where the wildflowers bloomed and the porcupines roamed.

“We’re almost there!” Rehana called out over her shoulder.

At last they found the entrance to the orchard. Laughing and hooting, they scampered from tree to tree, picking the ripe and the almost-ripe apricots, plums and pears. With one hand Rehana lifted the bottom edge of her frock to create a cloth basket to put the fruit she was gathering. The others followed suit. They called to each other between the rows and giggled at how carrying their harvest this way made them walk funny.

It felt a lot like Eden — until the guard came and drove them into the toolshed.

Now they could hear his footsteps outside, crunching dry leaves that had fallen from the trees.

“Let us out! Let us out!” they shouted, pounding on the walls and the door.

Nothing.

They kept it up.

Still no answer. No change. No open door.

“Let us out!”

Peering through a small crack between the wall’s wooden boards, Rehana could see that the guard still paced within shouting distance.

She silenced the others with a finger to her lips, took a deep breath, and called out these words: “This is Hashmi-Sab’s daughter. Let us out.”

Within seconds, the door opened.

“Why didn’t you tell me that before!?” the flustered guard said.

“You didn’t ask,” Rehana replied.



“OK. Get out of here now. Go home. All of you,” he barked.

The children pushed past Rehana into the open air, only too happy to leave their reason for coming — the fruit — rolling on the ground.

As the children started running, her young uncle noticed Rehana staying back.

“Come on, Rehana,” Fana pleaded. “Hurry!”

But Rehana hadn’t lost sight of the goal she had set when they started out that afternoon: summer fruit. Lots of it. For all of them. They’d traveled too far and been through too much together to return empty-handed. And she knew that the road home, like the one there, would be long and dry.

“I’d like to take some of this fruit we picked. May I?” she asked, apparently undeterred by her recent captivity.

And though he couldn’t quite believe his ears or the girl’s audacity, the guard also couldn’t help smiling. “OK, OK,” he said, shaking his head as Rehana, her upturned frock filled with fresh and juicy fruit, scurried as best she could to catch up to her friends, waiting for her down the road.

### Daughters, Daughters, Daughters

Sitting in the branches of the courtyard tree she loved to climb, Rehana watched the traditional birth attendant rush down the covered outdoor hallway toward her parents' bedroom.

As the attendant opened the door to go in, Rehana heard her mother scream again. Louder, this time, and higher. The screams were coming at regular intervals now, just as they had in years before.

Rehana closed her eyes and braced herself for the next one. She knew what those screams meant. If the past were any indication, she'd have a new sister before the next day. And her mother would have another mouth to feed, another child to sew clothes for, another daughter to someday marry off.

Into a culture that prized and celebrated boys, Hashmi-Sab's wife, Shamim, bore girl after girl after girl.



Rehana could see that all these pregnancies were taking a toll on her mother. With a baby at her breast — always, it seemed — or one growing in her belly, there was never room on her lap for Rehana. And with little ones tugging at her *kameez* while she cooked or folded laundry, Shamim often lost her patience and yelled at Rehana, sometimes for no reason.

Even though she had some household help, the responsibilities of an ever-growing family weighed heavily on the frail and pretty Shamim. She was so pre-occupied with her babies, toddlers, the house, the help and her husband, Rehana sometimes wondered if her mother even liked her.

When thoughts like that troubled Rehana, she replayed the day she came home from school with two trophies and told her mom the happy news that she — a girl! — had scored the highest grades in her class that year. Rehana loved thinking about how her mother got up from her chair at the sewing machine that day, opened her arms, and welcomed her in.

"I'm proud of you, Rehana," Shamim whispered. Looking up, the girl was treated to one of her mother's rare smiles.



After the birth of the child before this one that was on the way, Rehana had innocently asked her mother, "Why do you keep having all these babies?" Not knowing the facts of life, the girl thought it was somehow exclusively her mother's doing. Rehana, though a whiz in her fourth-grade math class, hadn't yet put two-and-two together.

Shamim met her daughter's eyes. "God gives," she sighed. "God gives."



Now another scream pierced the courtyard, followed by a deep and hollow moan. Something was different this time, and it scared Rehana more than ever. She thought back to the stories around school about the classmate whose mother had died in childbirth. Pregnancies could end like that, the girl knew.

“Please, Allah, don’t take our *Ammi*,” Rehana prayed.

From her perch in the tree, she waited and listened. Finally, from behind the closed door, she heard the familiar wail of a newborn.

The traditional birth attendant came out to bring the news to Rehana’s father.

“So sorry, Hashmi-Sab. Again, a girl.”

Rehana heard the pity in her voice. Hashmi-Sab heard it, too. His back stiffened.

“Another daughter is not something for you to be concerned about,” he bristled. If he was disappointed with the news he’d just heard, Hashmi-Sab refused to show it.

Rehana waited a while before she climbed down to peek into the room where her mother lay. Before she got there, the attendant burst out the door and brushed past her, carrying a metal pan and heading straight for a certain corner of the garden, where everything grew bigger. Something shiny in the pan quivered, as if it were alive. “Placenta” was not a word Rehana knew. And for an awful moment, she feared the attendant was going to bury her new and squirming little sister. That, too, was something that she’d heard happened in Mastung.

Tentatively, she looked into the room where her mother had just given birth. Bloodied rags littered the floor. Pale and spent, Shamim moaned softly, as the baby at her side began to howl. Rehana thought back to how her mother had said, “God gives.” At morning prayers the next day, the girl begged Allah not to be so generous.

### Speaking Out

With the exception of air raids during the 17-day war with India in 1965, Mastung had been a peaceful place for the early years of Rehana's life. The Garden City, as it was called, was home to people of many faiths and ethnic backgrounds. Hindu shopkeepers displayed Quranic verses on the walls of their stores. It was not uncommon for Muslim families — like Rehana's — to bring gifts and good wishes to the elaborate, week-long weddings of their Hindu friends. Sunni kids played with Shia kids, most of them unaware of the distinctions between the sects. Many people from other provinces — Punjab, especially — had settled in Mastung to teach school or practice medicine.

After General Yahya Khan came to power in Pakistan in 1969, appointed by the outgoing president, Ayub Khan, things began to change. Like his predecessor, Yahya Khan imposed martial law with impunity. He also instituted a series of constitutional, military and territorial reforms. Among them was the dissolution of the One Unit program that had merged the four provinces of West Pakistan — Punjab, Sindh, North-West Frontier and Balochistan — into one province back in 1954.

In Balochistan, where Mastung was located, those who supported these reforms began a push for provincial autonomy. And with that push came discrimination against anyone not considered a native of that area.

As the local/non-local divide deepened, natives of Mastung held the opinion that jobs — in the public sector especially — should be filled by Balochis, not “outsiders.” And they began to call everyone from anywhere else a “Punjabi.” The word became a pejorative, more likely to be spat than spoken.

Rehana's father had been born and raised in the North-West Frontier province before moving his family to Mastung in 1960. As general manager of the bank, Hashmi-Sab, a public employee, had earned the respect of the people he served.

In recent weeks, late into the night, Shamim heard loud voices coming from the room in their home where only men gathered to talk — business, in the past; politics, now. Often, the loudest voice was that of her husband, railing against the dictator.

If Hashmi-Sab had kept quiet about his disagreements with the recent reforms, if he hadn't become politically active, his good name in the community might have allowed him to avoid the troubles that were headed his way and his family's.



“The police! They're taking father!” Riffat and Fauzia, Rehana's younger sisters cried, running to the kitchen where Rehana was watching her mother at the kerosene stove stir a big pot of *gur*, sugar-cane juice — a key ingredient in a favorite candy the girls routinely pestered their mother to make.

Rehana looked up, surprised. The news startled her more than it did her mother. Shamim had feared this moment would come. A few months earlier, her outspoken husband had been fired from his job at the bank. To make ends meet, he opened a small store that sold firewood, not far from the Hindu shopkeepers whose loans he once approved. For now, it would have to do.

Throughout the country, a number of anti-government groups had taken up the cause against the Yahya Khan administration. They ranged from the Pakistan People's Party, a liberal group led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, to fundamentalist factions, like the Jamaat-e-Islami Party, the group Hashmi-Sab chose to align himself with, in spite of the fact that he wasn't a strict Muslim.

His reasons for joining were more pragmatic than religious. To his way of thinking, the well-organized Jamatis gave the fledgling movement to defy the dictator a greater chance of success. Rehana always knew when that group would be meeting again at their home.

"Make sure your heads are covered," she and her sisters were told in advance. The girls in the family weren't used to that rule. And Rehana always waited till the last possible minute before she put on the *chador*.

Those meetings at their home with the Jamati activists were becoming more frequent. So were visits from police the day after. Usually, they just asked a lot of questions. Questions intended to convey the message, "We're watching you, Hashmi-Sab."

This time, however, they brought handcuffs.

"They're taking father!" Riffat repeated.

Shamim and the girls dashed out of the kitchen. They got to the main door just in time to see the police jerk Hashmi-Sab's arms behind his back and slap a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. To see the man they knew as "father" and "husband" treated like a common criminal, was more than any of them could bear.

Hearing his wife's and his daughters' sobs, Hashmi-Sab tried to turn around, but the police shoved him out the door and yelled at him to keep moving.

From the kitchen, the smell of burnt sugar wafted through the air, bitter as the family's new reality.

### The New Normal

Rehana gazed up at the heavy outside gate of the Mastung jail. She had often passed it on her walk to school. Back then it was just another landmark. A big walled-in building where the town's lawbreakers — its crooks and cold-blooded killers — were kept. Like all the kids in the town, she knew the building's purpose, but the world it represented had been as distant from her young life as the dark side of the moon.

She squeezed through a small opening that led to the building's inner courtyard. The metal container she carried in her thin arms was getting heavier by the minute.

"Can I help you, little girl?" a man in a police uniform asked.

"Well, I, um, I've brought something for one of the prisoners," Rehana murmured.

"You what?"

The next words didn't come easy: "I'm here to see my father, Hashmi-Sab."



The morning after Hashmi-Sab had been taken away, the family woke up to the enormity of the change that had just happened. It had been a fitful night for Shamim and her five daughters — a night filled with countless questions and even more tears. How would they get by without The Man of the House? Shamim's life had been hard even before all this unrest started. What would it be like now that her husband was in jail?

Her extended family didn't live close enough to be of any help in circumstances like these. Neither did Hashmi-Sab's. Though surrounded by children, Shamim was, in fact, very much alone. Faced with these new troubles, she turned to her second-oldest daughter, 9-year-old Rehana — the girl unafraid of gypsies and scoldings, the daughter who snuck out at naptime in search of adventures.

"I need you to take this to your father at the jail," Shamim said, putting the lid on the container she had filled with some of her husband's favorite foods: *chapatis*, chutney and a steaming mix of meat and potatoes, seasoned just the way he liked it.

The thought of seeing her father behind bars gave Rehana pause. "Why me, *Ammi*? Can't Baji go?"

"Baji helps me here at home," Shamim explained, leaving out that she didn't want her lovely and blossoming 14-year-old to have to deal, unchaperoned, with the leering looks of the local men.

"You can do it, Rehana," Shamim said, in a voice as encouraging as it was commanding. "I know you can."



The policeman led Rehana through two sets of locked doors to the section of the jail recently set aside for political prisoners. Walking toward her father's cell, Rehana held in her mind a vision of him from the days when life had been good. She pictured her father, tall and slim, in the tailored Western-style business suits he always wore to work or in the crisp white shorts he played tennis in. She remembered how his gray eyes would light up with laughter at a colleague's joke. And how he beamed from behind the wheel of the Jeep the bank had given him for his exclusive use.

"Here he is," the policeman said, opening the door of the room where her father sat. She saw her *Abba* look up slowly. Dark circles framed his eyes. Rumpled and unshaven, he reached out his hand.

"Rehana."

She tried to respond. She couldn't.

"It's OK, Billi," he said, calling her by her nickname. "I'm fine. Really. I'm fine."

*How can he be?* she thought.

"Say, what have you got there?" he added, pointing to the thing she carried.

Biting her bottom lip, she handed him the container, watching as he set it down on a small table and lifted the lid. He folded a *chapati*, like she'd seen him do a thousand times, and scooped up the savory stew. In that moment and for just that moment, Hashmi-Sab, political prisoner, was free — home again, where he belonged, and where Rehana hoped with all her being he would soon be allowed to return.



As her husband's imprisonment dragged on, Shamim scrambled for ways to keep their bills paid and their children fed.

Once again, Rehana heard her mother call her name. This time it was as she was getting ready for school.

"I don't want you going today," her mother told her.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't go to school."

This made no sense. Her mother and father had always and often stressed to Rehana and all her sisters the importance of doing well in their studies. And Rehana, in particular, had excelled.

“Why?” she asked.

Her mother hesitated.

“I need you to work at *Abba’s* store,” she said, looking away.

“But *Ammi!*”

“You heard me. One of the men your father hired — the guy who worked the counter — has been stealing. I need someone I can trust to take his place. My father and brothers aren’t here. You know I have no sons. If you don’t do it, Rehana, who will?”

Shamim went on to tell her that she wouldn’t be all alone. The man who waited for the trucks in the big lot in back, the same fellow who weighed the wood when people bought it, would be there. But Shamim needed Rehana to man the cashbox out front.

The girl heard a rising panic in her mother’s voice and saw the pain of it in her hollow eyes. How could she refuse to do what her mother, who worked so tirelessly for her and all her sisters, was asking? Rehana couldn’t refuse.

“All right, *Ammi*. I will do it.”



From the front of the store, Rehana could hear the parade of kids — friends and former playmates of hers — getting closer. She heard it nearly every day now. Their giggles and their chatter on the way to and from school reached her ears before she could see them. That was one thing Rehana was glad about, because it gave her a chance to duck under the counter — hiding herself and her family’s shame.



Shamim knew enough math to know that, as business at the store continued to drop off, the income it generated wasn’t enough to maintain a family as large as hers. Something more would have to be done.

She was good — very good — with a needle and thread. And from the compliments her daughters received on the pretty patterns she embroidered on their frocks, Shamim’s confidence in her sense of color and design had begun to grow.

She had an idea to design and sell embroidered purses and pillows. To produce these in the quantities that would be needed, she would organize other women in the area. They would meet in the late afternoon in a nearby orchard. She would find a way to supply the raw materials: colorful cloth, thread and the shiny bits of mica that characterize the “mirror work” embroidery popular in the provinces. She would show the women the patterns and color combinations she believed buyers



would want. She'd pay the women for their work. She'd enlist Rehana's and Baji's help in packaging the creations and attaching price tags. And she'd employ a middleman to take the work to market.

As Shamim did all these things, Rehana took note of a gradual transformation in her mother. No longer was she simply "Hashmi-Sab's wife." To the women she worked with, the men she employed, and the people who bought her products, she was "Bibi Shamim," a businesswoman, Mastung's first.

Rehana noted, too, the pleasure the local women took in the work they did together and the pay they received. "Empowerment" was a word the girl would learn later. But at age 9, Rehana saw firsthand its effects.



During these months, Hashmi-Sab would be released from jail, imprisoned again, and released once more. His political activism continued, and so did the family's financial and legal problems. Rehana was allowed to return to her elementary school, to its world of small desks, books of folktales, and recess games. But in truth, Rehana's childhood had ended that night the police took her father away.

## Displaced

“Pack up your clothes and books,” Hashmi-Sab told his daughters. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

The growing divisions between locals and non-locals, Baluchis and Punjabis, continued to complicate life for the family in Mastung even more. But there was another reason for the move. Societal pressure had been mounting on Hashmi-Sab to arrange marriages for his two eldest daughters: Baji, 17, and Rehana, 12. Tradition dictated his girls’ future husbands must be chosen from a Syed family.

Suitable matches, Hashmi-Sab concluded, could never be found among Mastung’s Baluchis. So the family would return to Dera Ismail Khan, his and his wife’s hometown. They’d start a new life among their own kind, their own tribe: Syed, descendants of the Prophet.

Rehana’s sisters hurried off to start packing. Rehana didn’t budge.

“Why do we have to go, *Abba*? All my friends are here. Tomorrow’s the annual awards day at school! I don’t want to!”

“If you don’t like it in Dera, Billi, we can always come back,” Shamim piped up, knowing full well that would never happen.

The family left without saying goodbye to neighbors, friends and former colleagues. Shamim and the girls settled in with her parents in a rambling house on Bammu Shah Street. Hashmi-Sab took a job in the finance department of a paper company in the town of Charsadda, several hours away. He moved into company housing near the plant, seeing his wife and girls only occasionally. The family did what they had to do, adapting as the changing times demanded.



Life for everyone in the family was different in Dera Ismail Khan — stricter and more circumscribed, especially when *Abba* was home. The girls were forced to stay indoors more and had to wear a burqa when they did go out. Under the watchful eye of his religion’s fundamentalists, Hashmi-Sab would often remind Rehana and her sisters of something he scarcely mentioned in Mastung: “We are Syed. Don’t ever forget that.”

Yet some things remained unchanged. Shamim enjoyed continuing success with her embroidery business, and with that came the desire to help those less fortunate. With Hashmi-Sab away most of the time and Shamim in charge, the house on Bammu Shah Street gained a reputation as a place of welcome for those stranded in the city because of martial law — like the traveling salespeople who came to Dera trying to eke out a living selling baskets, rugs and trinkets door-to-door. In the shade of Shamim’s veranda, those whose homes were someplace else could always count on a glass of *lassi* or a serving of fresh yogurt, along with the company of others who understood what it felt like to be displaced.

Rehana, whose friends in Mastung still wondered where she'd gone, was one of them.

### **Bloodied but Unbowed**

Coming home from Dera's Women's Degree College, Rehana, student-body secretary, burst through the door, dropped her books on a table and headed straight for the dining room. She was hungry after a full day of classes and the mile walk home. And she knew she'd find the usual after-school meal there — a bowl of curry and a plate of fresh *chapati*, warm and wrapped in tea towels, waiting for her and her sisters.

The music coming from the big wooden radio in an alcove in the hallway suddenly stopped. Rehana did too. A voice on the BBC, speaking in Urdu, broke in with the news that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, founder of the Pakistan People's Party and the country's former president and its deposed prime minister, had been sentenced to death by five judges on the Supreme Court.

“No!” Rehana thought. *“It can't be!”*

To her and many others, Bhutto had stood for hope, fairness and the will of the people. She hated General Zia-ul-Haq, the army chief who ousted him and who now ruled Pakistan, imposing martial law and repressing any and all opposition to his regime. Public whippings and hangings in the town square had become all too common. School closures, routine.

Martial law had been in effect in Dera Ismail Khan for some time. Rehana knew that people gathering in groups of four or more could be jailed. Now individuals on their daily errands scuttled through the town's markets and main streets, eyes down, seldom daring even to acknowledge a familiar face or a neighbor's hello.

*Pakistan deserves better than this*, Rehana believed.

As the voice on the radio crackled on, she leaned against the wall, her shock giving way to anger, her anger turning into determination.



Rehana stood near the massive mango tree in the center of the campus courtyard where her fellow coeds milled about between classes. She heard the young women talking to each other in low tones — their usual conversations about too much homework and too little social life replaced by nervous talk about yesterday's news of Bhutto's impending execution.

*We need to do something*, Rehana thought. *I need to do something. Now.*

Moments later, she found herself standing in the “Y” of the tree's trunk, commanding the attention of her classmates.

“My friends, are we going to stand idly by in the face of this verdict against Bhutto?” she shouted.

They stopped and turned, their eyes wide at the sight of their student-government representative standing in a tree, yelling. Young women weren't supposed to do either.

Rehana was almost as surprised as they were. She hadn't planned any of this.

"If we don't raise our voices, they're going to hang him! Are you willing to just let that happen? Are you?"

She heard one "No!" Then another. And another.

She continued to challenge the young women, urging them to let their voices be heard.

"Are you with me?" she finally asked.

"Yes!" the crowd, as one, roared.

"Then let's march together — out of here and into the streets! Come on! Let's go!"

An administrator who'd heard the courtyard commotion frantically signaled the gatekeeper to shut the entrance to the college — a massive black gate topped with a row of spear-like iron bars. Rehana was already climbing to the top of it. She balanced precariously on a small ledge, clinging to one of the bars. The group surged forward. The gatekeeper strained. As the heavy door was jerked wide open, the sharp point of one of its bars ripped into Rehana's chin.

She straightened up, her left hand cupping the wound.

"*Zia-ul-Haq murdabad!* Down with the dictator!" she chanted, blood from her chin seeping through her fingers, dripping onto the sleeve of her white *kameez*.

Rehana jumped down to take her place at the forefront of the group. "*Zia-ul-Haq murdabad!*" she shouted, her reddened sleeve rising briefly above her head. The women found their voices again.

"*Zia-ul-Haq murdabad!*" they answered, bolder now than they ever thought possible.

Through the streets they marched. As they passed young men from a nearby college who were watching from the sidelines, the women taunted them: "You call yourselves men? If you're afraid to join us, you're sissies! Here, wear these," they said, sliding their colorful bangles off their wrists and tossing them to those "girls."

People peeked out the windows of their homes. Shopkeepers shook their heads. The co-eds marched on, almost giddy with their newfound freedom. Rehana led them straight to the school her younger sisters attended. She grabbed a rock from the road and banged it against the outside bell.

Students and teachers came out of their classrooms to find the throng of young women gathered around the schoolyard's ping-pong table. Rehana stood on top of it, holding her black *chador* tight against her chin.

“We’re marching to protest what the government is going to do to Bhutto. They’re going to kill him. Let’s march and send a message. Come with us!” She jumped down. “Follow me!”

And many of them did, including Rehana’s sisters Asma, Humaira, Fauzia, Nidi and Honey.

The group, some 70 strong, continued to the center of town. Their chant of “*Zia-ul-Haq murdabad!*” became a kind of song, sung with a growing hope. So caught up were they in the moment, they hadn’t realized the police had arrived on the scene.

“Leave now!” a deep voice growled through a megaphone. “You’re breaking the law, girls. Go home — or else!”

The young women stopped in mid-chant. They looked at one another as if someone had just shaken them awake. Some of them started crying. All of them scattered. All except Rehana and her sisters. They were escorted by the police to the corner of the street where they lived.

“Go home now, you hear me? And if you know what’s good for you, that’s where you’ll stay,” one of the policemen said.

The girls slunk into their house. Rehana went in search of a bandage for the gaping wound on the lower part of her face. She changed her clothes, exchanging her blood-soaked *chador* for a clean one.

Her plan was to wear it around her head and face so her mother wouldn’t ask what happened.



That evening shortly before supper, the doorbell rang, several times in rapid succession.

*Who could that be, calling at this hour?* Shamim wondered as she sent the household helper to answer door.

The boy came back, shouting, “Madame! It’s the police!”

Shamim had heard those words before. They had changed the life she and her family had known in Mastung. Arriving at the front door, she loudly demanded, “Why are you here? What do you want?”

Huddled nearby in the courtyard, Rehana and her sisters held their breath as they waited to hear the answer.

“Madame, we have a warrant for your daughter’s arrest.”

“What? My daughter? Which one?”

“It says here,” the policeman said, reading from the paper he held in his hand, “Rehana Hashmi.”



Rehana sat next to her mother in the back seat of the family’s rickshaw on the way to the authorities. Shamim had refused to let her daughter be carted away in a police car.

“I will bring her,” she insisted.

She was instructed to proceed to the commissioner’s office. During the ride, both women arranged their *chadors* to cover their faces, almost completely. For any neighbors watching, a pair of glasses — and the frightened brown eyes behind them — were all that would have identified one of the passengers as Rehana.

The girl didn’t want to think about the look her mother had given her as they had waited for the rickshaw. In her *Ammi’s* eyes, Rehana had seen pain, disappointment — and something very close to a murderous rage.

The day had been triple-digit hot and the evening wasn’t much cooler. Yet on the ride through town, Rehana could feel Shamim shivering.



The commissioner knew the Hashmi family. That might have been the reason Shamim was told to bring her daughter there instead of the police station. As soon as they entered his office, Rehana’s mother began to plead, “Commissioner-Sab, I am so sorry, so very sorry, for what this girl has done. Please, forgive her. Please.”

Her husband’s imprisonment had taught Shamim all too well what happened to people who spoke out against dictators.

“I have seven daughters,” she continued. “This one has brought us shame. She will not break the law again. I promise you that.”

“Bibi Shamim, my hands are tied,” the commissioner shrugged. “Surely, you understand my position.”

Then he turned to Rehana.

“Tell me,” he said, “why did you lead that protest?”

“Because what is going on in the country right now is wrong!”

“You could go to jail for years for this crime. And there is no bail. Do you understand the penalties these days for going against the president?”

“But look at what he has done!”

The commissioner turned to Shamim. “It’s obvious that the girl hasn’t learned her lesson. She shows no remorse. I have no choice but to send her to the detention center.”

“Please, no! Please!” Shamim began to cry, and once she started she couldn’t stop.

Rehana wished there was something she could do to make her mother’s anguish end. She was sorry she had caused *Ammi* so much grief. But the commissioner was right. Rehana was not sorry for what she had done.

His expression softening, he excused himself and left the room. Between her mother’s sobs, Rehana overheard bits and pieces of hurried conversations and hasty phone calls in the next room.

The commissioner returned. “OK,” he said, “here’s what I can do. If you send your daughter away — out of my district, tonight — I won’t send her to jail.”



During the long ride in Uncle Zulfikar’s telephone-company truck to Hashmi-Sab’s apartment in Charsadda, Rehana wondered how her father would react to what she had done. Typically, Hashmi-Sab treated his daughters with detachment. Yes, he had made sure the swing-set from their courtyard in Mastung had followed the family to Dera, but he never pushed his children as they sat on its wooden seats. And they never squealed, “Watch me, *Abba!*” as they pumped their way into the sky. It seemed to Rehana that her father saved his smiles for his colleagues and his scowls for his kids. She knew he was a man of principle; she admired him for that. But she also knew how rigid he had become and how strongly he felt now about the family name.

Rehana stood next to Uncle Zulfikar as he rang the doorbell of her father’s place. The door opened. Hashmi-Sab welcomed his family friend with a hearty hug, but he pointedly ignored Rehana, except to say, “Go wait in the room down the hall.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she heard her father and uncle talking over tea. Heard the rumble of Uncle Zulfikar’s truck as it left. And then, a knock on her door.

She opened it slowly.

“Come here, Billi,” Hashmi-Sab said softly, opening his arms to embrace his rebellious daughter. Like him, she had stood up for what she believed. And in the doorway that night, for a moment she would long remember, the two of them stood together.



### False Charges

Imagine this: You are poor, unmarried and a woman. You live on the outskirts of town, in a one-room shack with your older brother, on a plot of land barely big enough for a couple of chickens. The two of you eke out a living selling things — or trying to — door-to-door. Your simple “wares” are balls of popcorn sweetened with *gur*.

You have been raped. You tell no one, because the law says a woman who has sex outside of marriage is an adulteress. The penalty for adultery is death by stoning. The Hudood Ordinances also say that if you seek to avoid punishment by claiming you were raped, you must produce four male witnesses to even have a chance of being believed.

You become pregnant by the man who forced himself on you. When people start to notice the change in your figure, you tell them you have a tumor. You have no access to medical services. Even if you did, you have no money to pay for them. You despair of a child of yours having any kind of a decent life. And where you live, there are no such things as adoption agencies or social services. Your only close relative is your brother.

When your labor starts you go by yourself to the riverside. Long hours later, squatting in the marshy reeds, you give birth.



“Where is Masi Zaru?” Rehana asked the women vendors in the courtyard of her home. It was the time of day when they took a break from carrying baskets of their handiwork door-to-door in hopes of making a sale. Rehana’s mother always made sure to have food and *lassi* on hand for them when they sought the shade at the house on Bammu Shah Street.

It had taken several years for Rehana’s exile from Dera to come to an end. Now, after a day at the university in her parents’ hometown, where she was working on her master’s degree, Rehana enjoyed coming home to chat with the women, hear their stories and learn of their lives. Rehana liked Masi Zaru almost as much as she looked forward to munching the popcorn balls she sold.

“Masi Zaru is in jail.”

“What? Why?”

The women glanced furtively at one another.

Rehana learned that Masi Zaru had been charged with adultery, and her brother with incest. It all came to light, the women said, when her cousin carried into town two dead babies, twin boys, he said he found floating in the shallows of the river. He was the one who implicated Masi Zaru.

Rehana couldn’t accept what she had just heard. The story just didn’t add up. She had met Masi Zaru’s brother several times when he dropped by the courtyard to see how his sister’s day was

going. They didn't act like a couple; they acted like siblings. And when her brother wasn't around, Masi Zaru spoke of him, openly, and with a sisterly regard. There are some people whose faces cannot lie. And in the faces of Masi Zaru and her brother, Rehana saw only good.

The next day, instead of coming straight home from her classes, Rehana detoured to the jail.

In the years since Mastung, the family had re-established itself in Dera. Being Syed — a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad — had become central to her father's identity and, by extension, his family's.

Given their past experiences with jails, even the mere mention of the word was enough now to push Shamim over the edge. Rehana didn't want to make trouble at home, but she did want to know the truth about Masi Zaru.



The policeman at the front desk of the jail eyed Rehana warily.

“You're Hashmi-Sab's daughter, right? Why have you come here?”

Rehana had a story all prepared.

“I'm working on a research paper for college, and I want to do a survey of the women here.”

The man bought it. Reaching for a set of keys behind the desk, he joked, “Just don't write anything bad about us, OK?”

“Sir, I can assure you,” Rehana said with a smile, “you don't need to worry about that.”



Masi Zaru's eyes grew wide.

“Rehana! I can't believe you're here! A Syed girl! In a jail! Why have you come?”

“I heard what happened. I want to know your side of the story.”

Masi Zaru told her it all started when her cousin declared he wanted to marry her. His reason, she knew, was so that he could claim her land as his own. When she refused, he took to raping her whenever he pleased. Not a witness in sight.

The babies at the river were his. By telling the police that they were the product of an illicit union between her and her brother, he counted on the fact that the two siblings would be locked up for a very long time, and the land would be his.

There was no way at that time to conclusively prove that the babies were hers, even though the milk in her breasts revealed that she had recently given birth.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” Rehana said. Though she had no idea how.

On her way out, she stopped at the front desk.

“You only talked to one woman,” the policemen said. “What kind of survey is that?”

“I recognized her as someone who used to come by my home selling things. She was always so nice. I even called her ‘Auntie.’ You know, I really believe she is an innocent victim here.”

They talked some more; Rehana, very convincingly. Before she left, the policeman told her the name of a prominent attorney who might take the case.

As she headed out the door, Rehana made one last request, “Don’t tell my dad about this, OK?”



She knew neither of her parents would approve of her involvement with sordid matters like these. So she waited for the right moment, when no one was around, to look up the telephone number of Shah Munwar, the lawyer, and pick up the phone in the hall.

Her side of the conversation with him was hurried and hushed. But he heard enough to make him want to hear more.

“Can we meet somewhere?” the lawyer asked.

Still whispering, she suggested the library on campus. In order for him to recognize her, she described what she would be wearing.

“OK, see you tomorrow, Rehana.”

Click.



“I can pay you,” Rehana said, after telling Shah Munwar everything she knew about Masi Zaru’s situation.

She put rupees from her savings on the library table where they were sitting.

Shah Munwar shook his head, placed his hand over the money and slid it back to her.

“My hourly rate, Sister Hashmi, is a lot more than this,” he said. “But these Hudood cases need to be challenged. I give you a lot of credit for wanting to help Masi Zaru. I’ll take the case. Pro bono.”



Rehana returned home later that day to find Shah Munwar’s wife and mother sitting in the living room with her *Ammi*. The air was rife with tension. Rage and horror blazed across her mother’s face.

Shah Munwar’s wife had just finished telling her about the secret phone conversation between her husband and Rehana she’d overheard on the extension. She had picked up the phone just as they were planning their rendezvous. Not wanting to believe what she had heard, she went to the university library, hid behind the stacks, and saw for herself it was true.

“Did you talk with him on the phone?” Shamim screamed at Rehana.

“Yes.”

“Did you meet with him?”

“Yes. But, I can explain!”

After she heard the accusations of Shah Munwar’s wife confirmed, Shamim refused to hear more.

“Go. Get out of my sight!” she said, slapping Rehana as hard as she could.



The next few days, gossip raced through the town and the university. Everyone was talking. Everyone but Rehana and her mother.

Even if her mother could be convinced that she wasn’t having an affair with Shah Munwar, Shamim would still be angry at Rehana for going to the jail and meddling in what looked to everyone to be an open-and-shut case of incest.

“I can’t live like this,” Rehana confessed to Asma, her younger sister. Asma was so concerned with Rehana’s state-of-mind at that time, she made sure their father’s hunting gun wasn’t anywhere her sister could find it.



“Masi Zaru?”

From her room, Rehana heard her mother's voice tentatively greet the woman at the center of the family's turmoil.

Throwing herself at Bibi Shamim's feet, Masi Zaru said she had come to beg forgiveness for all the trouble she had caused. Between sobs, she told Rehana's mother the whole story. Everything, including how Rehana had gotten a lawyer — a very good one, Shah Munwar — to take her case. She was free now because of him, she said, and so was her brother.

Shamim pulled her up and put her arms around her.



In her willingness to believe that her daughter had betrayed her trust, Shamim had betrayed her daughter. She knew that now. And wise as she was, she instinctively understood that some rifts run so deep, repairing them is a process that takes time and care. Forgiveness can't be forced.

Emerging from the kitchen with a salad of bananas and oranges, Shamim placed her daughter's favorite treat before her.

"For you, Billi," she said, with a catch in her voice that said so much more.

### Making a Difference in Chitral

The small plane banked to the right after taking off from the airstrip in Chitral. Blinking back tears, Rehana gazed out the window at the land below. She was leaving her home for the past five years. A place she had grown to love in spite of, or maybe because of, all the challenges she'd faced there.

Rehana arrived in Chitral as an idealistic 25-year-old, hired by the Aga Khan Foundation as part of its Rural Support Program (AKRSP). Prior to that, with a master's degree in science, she'd been teaching physics, chemistry, and biology at a university in Gilgit, a busy city in the northernmost territory of Pakistan. But a life of giving lectures on mitosis and magnetic fields, correcting quizzes and sitting through faculty meetings, just wasn't enough for Rehana. She wanted a larger life, and she found it in the tiny and remote villages around Chitral, a town located at the foot of Tirich Mir, the highest peak in the magnificent range that stretches between central Afghanistan and northern Pakistan.

She could see Tirich Mir out the plane's window. Even after all her time in the region, its chiseled peaks still had the power to take her breath away. And her memories of the people living in that mountain's shadows and snow still warmed her.

She closed her eyes and thought about the past five years — the work she had done, the people she had met, the progress they had made together.



"I'll be honest with you, Rehana. This job is difficult. Setting up programs for the local women is an uphill battle. The Sunni fundamentalists don't want to see change. The men in the community are suspicious of women like you. Seventeen women have come here before you, and seventeen of them turned around and left," one of the men in the program told her, her first week in Chitral.

"I am going to stay," Rehana said, more confidently than she felt.

The first few days had been hard. She had to find a place to live. Go through an orientation. Clean and set up her office. Struggle to understand Khowar, the local language. And, per her boss' orders, begin to develop a coherent strategy for the work she would be doing, work she had never done before.

And what made all of it even more difficult was the fact that she was alone, far from home, without a roommate or a relative to share things with at the end of the day.

"So, Hashmi, you think you'll be different, huh?"

Rehana nodded.

“Well, we’ll see,” her colleague said smugly. “We’ll see.”



On the sixth day a team from AKRSP invited her to go with them into the field. They would be meeting with men from a community above the river. This could be an opportunity for her to explain to the local husbands and fathers her vision for the women’s program.

What they *didn’t* tell her was that the trip, by Jeep, was more than seven hours long. The road was rutted and rocky, and the Jeep’s shock absorbers, non-existent. In some places, the route was so narrow and the mountain so steep, travelers familiar with the road made sure to bring along their prayer beads.

“How you doin’ back there, Rehana?” one of the men turned around from the front seat to ask, a couple of hours into the journey. “Enjoying the scenery?”

The men in the front seat and the back exchanged smirks. Minutes into the trip, Rehana had figured out that this was a test. And she had made up her mind she would pass it.

“Fine! Yesssssss!” she said brightly.

When the Jeep finally came to a stop, the test got even harder.

In flimsy shoes more suitable for the office than the great outdoors, Rehana stood outside the vehicle, at one end of a narrow and rickety wooden bridge that stretched across the Kunar River, roiling far below. At this time of year, late summer, water from the mountain’s melting glaciers surged into the Kunar, turning it into a white ribbon of fast-moving foam.

Rehana watched as the first man from the team made his way to the other side. He’d bragged earlier that he’d crossed the bridge before, yet now she saw him hesitate, lurch, and stop more than a few times. Wooden slats were missing in a number of sections. The “hand rail” was nothing more than a sagging rope lower than her knees.

“Your turn, Rehana!” he yelled over to her.

She swallowed hard and took the first step. Above the thumping of her heart, she heard the wind kick up and whistle through the cedars. The bridge swayed. But she continued, one step at a time.

*If the fall doesn’t kill me, the river surely will,* she thought. Yet she didn’t stop. She didn’t retreat. She squared her shoulders and kept on going.



The meeting with the local men took place in an open field. Because of the positive impact the program was having on the lives of the people there, the men looked forward to the visits from the AKRSP team. New channels for irrigation were being developed. New crops introduced. Livestock was healthier thanks to a vaccination program.

Women did not attend these gatherings, much less speak at them.

When the business part of this one was finished, Rehana's colleague announced to the group, "Ms. Hashmi, the newest member of our team, would like to tell you about a program for women — your wives and your daughters — she wants to start."

The local men treated it as a joke. "A program for women!" they hooted. "Don't make us laugh!"

But laugh they did, some of them so hard they almost fell off the boulders they were sitting on.

The men's reaction made Rehana feel small. *What have I gotten myself into?* she thought. She wanted to run away, but instead, she stood up and spoke. As the interpreter translated her Urdu into the local language, the men began to listen. She spoke of ways that the women could add to the family income and the betterment of the community. It sounded reasonable and her sincerity was obvious.

"OK. You can come back next month," they told her. "You can talk to our women."



The next time Rehana came to that village, she wasn't the only woman on the team. She had two assistants: her sister Humaira and Rabia.

Newly graduated with a bachelor's degree, Humaira initially came to Chitral just for a visit. She was drawn there by her older sister's letters home. In those, Rehana had focused on the rugged beauty of the landscape, the gentleness of the people, the green patchwork of the small farming plots along the river, and the way the moonlight made the mountainsides glow. She didn't mention things like the area's extreme poverty, the long hours, the bumpy rides, her aching bones or the over-sized scorpions.

Nevertheless, after she arrived, Humaira happily decided to stay, thanks to some backroom arm-twisting by an AKRSP administrator who saw in her a can-do spirit, a keen intelligence and a soulmate for Rehana to share her work with.

"We will learn by doing," the two sisters agreed.

Rabia came to the team by happenstance. A Chitrali with training as a lady health visitor (LHV), she was at the hospital to apply for a job when she bumped into an acquaintance, a doctor,



who was chatting with Rehana. He introduced her to Rabia as “the person heading up the new Women’s Program at AKRSP.”

“Say, you wouldn’t by any chance need an LHV, would you?” she asked Rehana, offhandedly.

It didn’t take long for Rehana to realize the pluses of that idea. Since the day she arrived in Chitral, she had worked to overcome the language barrier between her and the local people. She’d quickly learned basic words and phrases in Khowar, but knew that real communication went beyond, “Good morning” and “What’s your name?” Rabia was fluent in both Khowar and Urdu.

Then there was the matter of health care. The women in the villages had scant access to it. Many died in childbirth. Scores were malnourished. On those rare occasions when a male doctor was available, most women would refuse to be seen by him for reasons rooted in the culture.

“Yes, Rabia, yes! When can you start?”

The three women formed a team that would work together to improve the lives and the health of the village women in the valleys of Chitral. When their efforts began, none of them could have imagined the number of girls there who would one day bear their names.



On the Jeep ride to the village, Rehana peppered Rabia with more questions about the community they were headed to. Humaira, notebook in hand, leaned in to hear the answers. It would be their first attempt to organize women.

Rehana and Humaria, “outsiders,” wanted to learn everything they could about the women they’d be meeting — their customs, their culture, the pattern of their days, the things they liked to talk about. Rabia was happy to share what she knew.

“The best time for us to get there is between 10:00 and noon,” Rabia said. “The men are in the fields then and the women are finishing up their morning chores.”

One of the program’s “social organizers” in the region had given the community advance notice that the women’s team from AKRSP would be arriving.

The Jeep sputtered to a stop. A woman feeding chickens near the road looked up.

“*Keecha sus,*” Rehana greeted her in Khowar.

With Rabia translating, they engaged the woman in an easy-going, get-to-know-you conversation.

“Is this your little girl?” Rehana asked, smiling at the youngster hiding behind her mother’s kameez. “What a sweetheart! How old is she?” And so it went. Before long, 10 of the woman’s neighbors, curious about the newcomers, had gathered. Rehana noticed that several were pregnant.

“If you have any questions about your health or your children’s, our lady health visitor,” Rehana pointed to Rabia, “is here for you.” She was hoping that that would start a dialogue, and it did.

The women settled in, sitting on rocks outside the woman’s mud house.

“Have you ever thought about having regular meetings like the men and working on a project collectively?” Rehana asked.

“Oh, no,” the women giggled. “We can’t do that! The only time all of us get together is at prayers or when someone dies or gets married.”

“Why not meet? You have the right. You work as hard as the men, don’t you?”

“Harder!” one of the women said. The group laughed and nodded, the way women do when they’re free to speak their minds.

“OK then. Let’s form a group,” Rehana said.

She and Humaira outlined possible money-making projects: selling eggs, making wool, growing vegetables, breeding chickens. They chose a president — a woman they called *Nan* (“Mother”), the eldest among them — and a secretary, the one girl who could write.

Rehana explained that the profits they made would be theirs. They could use the money to do things like send their children to school or buy a new stove or be assured of a safety net in hard times. She would help each of them open her own bank account.

“I’ll bring the papers for you to sign. And if you don’t know how to write, no problem, your thumbprint will work just fine.”

“Yes! We will do it!” the women said to one another.

Before leaving, Rehana asked the women to tell Humaira their names so she could record them in her notebook as the group’s founding members.

“Zahoors Shah’s wife,” one said.

“Sardar Ayub’s daughter.”

“Miraj Khan’s mother.”

Rehana, Humaira and Rabia exchanged looks.

“Let’s try this again,” Rehana gently suggested. “This time tell us your first name, the one given to you when you were born.”

Shyly, the women spoke.

“Khunza.”

“Hasheeda.”

“Zaitoon.”

And on it went, until the last had said her name.

“Beautiful!” Rehana said. “At our meetings, that is who you will be.”

That night back at the house Rehana and Humaira shared, the three women celebrated all that had happened that day.

“I feel like we could conquer the world, don’t you?” Rehana said to her team. In small but significant ways, they had already started.



The plane was beginning its descent into Islamabad. When it touched down, a new chapter in Rehana’s life would start. She wasn’t quite ready for it. With her seat belt fastened and a view of the Kurang River below, she was still back in Chitral — working with women’s groups; advocating for equal opportunities for the mothers, daughters, and sisters she championed; training new leaders; and espousing interfaith harmony.

She replayed some of the triumphs:

The helicopters she wrangled from his High Holiness the Aga Khan the day he visited Chitral. He agreed when she respectfully pointed out how the use of them would allow her and her team to continue their work in the most remote areas even in winter.

The support from donors who recognized the inroads the Women’s Program was making.

The three-day conference she organized for women from villages all over the valley. More than 100 made the journey to Chitral, and for many it was the first time they’d been anywhere other than their own small communities.

The interfaith communication she nurtured among Sunni, Shia and Ismaili women in hopes that it would influence the way the men there dealt with their “enemies.”

The 160 women's groups that now were a vital part of life in the valleys.

The pilot program she instigated of satellite offices in the field, staffed by local women, who — Rehana insisted — should be paid for the work they were doing.

The women on whose behalf she intervened in instances of domestic violence, acid attacks, forced marriages or incestuous relationships.

The deep joy she felt when the manner in which the locals referred to her changed from *Kai* (“Sister”) to *Nan* (“Mother”).

The “second line of leadership” she worked to establish among the locals, knowing that the work must go on, even when she could no longer lead it.

That day had come.

By empowering women, Rehana's work had challenged the system and threatened the status quo.

“It's time for you to go,” she was told, not by any of the local communities she worked with or the women she served, but by a new administrator, a local with a feudal mindset, who was all-too-ready to cave in to fundamentalist pressures.

Leaving the most demanding work she had ever known was the hardest thing Rehana had ever done.

But the causes she had come to care about so deeply — women's rights, education, reproductive health and peace among people of all faiths — she still carried in her heart. And like that day on the bridge, back when her work in Chitral first began, Rehana glanced down now at the river below and vowed to keep on going.

### Daughter of Kalash

“She is your daughter,” the man said to Rehana, holding the hand of one of the youngest girls from Kalash. The troupe had been invited to Islamabad to participate in an outdoor event aimed at showcasing a one-of-a-kind culture from the valleys of Chitral that was in danger of dying out.

The 6-year-old, in her pretty native dress, smiled up at Rehana.

“My daughter?”

“Yes. She was born the day the women of our village had that celebration. Remember?”



Rehana had been especially looking forward to that day’s visit to Kalash. Together with Rabia and Humaira, she’d be celebrating the achievement by the women’s group of a significant “first” that had been several months in the making.

As they jumped down from the Jeep, the three of them thanked their favorite driver, Mohammad Ullah. With him at the wheel, the ride through the mountains always felt a little less harrowing.

In the distance, Rehana spotted Khunza, the local woman she had come to think of as a second mother, hurrying toward them through the scattered bones of the ancient above-ground graveyard there at the village’s edge. The colorful beadwork on her traditional black robe glinted in the sun. Her little round hat slid forward at a jaunty angle.

“Welcome!” Khunza said, greeting them with garlands of walnuts and almonds — a lovely way, the three agreed, to put the teeth-rattling, two-and-a-half hour drive from Chitral behind them.

With a culture and a language all its own, Kalash was unique among the villages of the valleys. Its people, believers in many gods, grew grapes, made wine and knew how to enjoy it. The women of Kalash danced to distinctive rhythms tapped out on goat-skin drums on special occasions.

That day was a new kind of special occasion. The first payment had been made for a plot of land that would be owned collectively by the women’s group. Up until then, only men could own property there. This land would be the women’s to cultivate as they saw fit. They’d already developed a vision for what was still just a couple of empty acres: an orchard with row after row of fruit-bearing trees — plums, peaches, apricots, cherries.

If all went as planned, the women of Kalash would not only have a new source of income, they’d also have new sources of nutrition. Healthy food at their fingertips.

Rehana had worked with the women and the powers-that-be there to make this happen, including securing funds from the Aga Khan Foundation for the creation of water channels, just like the men's farm projects received.

"Yes, it's a great day for us," Khunza said, nodding in the direction of the field where the women were starting to gather. "A great day for the women, but, sorry to say, not for all of them."

She pointed toward the log hut on the other side of the road — the *bashaleni*, a windowless room where babies were born and where menstruating girls were banished until that month's period ended and they were no longer "unclean."

"Wazir Kalash's wife has been in labor there for three long days," Khunza continued, shaking her head. "It doesn't look good."

Just then a mournful scream pierced the air. Rehana stiffened. She knew that sound. Growing up, she'd often heard it following the traditional birth attendant's footsteps into her mother's bedroom.

As much as she had been looking forward to celebrating with the women's group, Rehana knew she and Rabia were now needed elsewhere.

"You and Khunza go ahead, Humaira. Congratulate the group for me, OK? Rabia and I will find you later," Rehana said, already on her way to the *bashaleni*.

Wazir's wife screamed again. The girls sitting outside the structure looked up from the knitting and beadwork that helped them pass their time there each month. They didn't speak but their eyes, meeting Rehana's as she hurried toward the doorway, said, "*Do something. Please. Make it stop.*"

When Rehana and Rabia stepped inside the dark room, they saw the attendant rise from the "bedside" of the woman in labor, writhing on one of the sullied mattresses that lined the dirt floor.

"She's lost so much blood. Look how pale she is! And the baby's not coming," the attendant said.

From the far corner, the woman moaned. It wasn't the moan of a mother-to-be getting ready to push; it was the guttural sound of someone giving up.

"There's nothing I can do," the attendant added. "Markami is not going to make it."

Coming to kneel beside the young woman, Rehana reached for her hand.

"Hold on, Markami. You'll get through this."

The laboring woman opened her eyes and locked on to Rehana's. As another pain gripped her, her fingernails dug into the top of Rehana's hand.

"It's going to be OK," Rehana told her. "Hold on."

From the base of the mattress, Rabia, with her training as a lady health visitor, assessed the progress of the labor and the condition of the woman and the unborn child.

"If we don't get her to a hospital *now*, the attendant will be right," she said.

"OK. It'd be best if you went with her, Rabia. I'll stay here."



With the help of the girls at the *bashaleni*, they carried Markami to the Jeep, the blood-stained mattress serving as a kind of stretcher. They eased it onto the flat back of the vehicle. Rabia climbed up to take care of her on the rough ride back to Chitral.

"When you get to the hospital, ask for Dr. Salima. Tell her I sent you," Rehana said.

"But how will you and Humaira get back to Chitral?"

"Don't worry. We'll hitch a ride or something," Rehana said. "Now, go!!"

She watched the Jeep disappear in a haze of dust. And with a heavy heart she went to find Humaira among the happy village women.



That evening Rehana tiptoed into the hospital room where Markami lay — an IV in her arm, a sleeping newborn at her side. The color had returned to her face; her breathing was even and steady.

She opened her eyes as Rehana drew near and blinked a "hello."

And for a moment that held within it mystery and miracle, neither woman spoke.

"Thank you," the new mother finally whispered, as the bundle beside her stirred.



"We named her Syed Gul, Flower of Syed, after you," the little girl's father told Rehana.

More memories of her time in that remote region came back to her. And while she and Wazir stood there trading stories of the village and the orchard and the people they both knew, Syed Gul slipped her hand into Rehana's.

Wazir also talked about how this trip was his daughter's first time outside of Kalash. How excited she was to come to Islamabad. How happy she'd been since they arrived.

The girl nodded.

"And so I have something important to ask of you," he said to Rehana.

Could his daughter live with her and her family and go to school in Islamabad, he wanted to know.

"There are so many more opportunities for her here," he said. "I want her to get a good education."

For Rehana, home was the place where you welcomed people in. Her *Ammi* had taught her that, many times over. If people needed your help, you opened your door. It wasn't just a belief; for Rehana and her family, it was a way of life.

Giving Syed Gul's hand a motherly squeeze, Rehana smiled. "Yes."



Rehana could not have foreseen that the precocious little girl entrusted to her care that afternoon would one day be the first woman from Kalash to earn an advanced degree, a master's in archaeology, and become the curator of a museum in Chitral aimed at preserving the extraordinary culture of her village in the valley.



### Into the Hornet's Nest

“I’ll go. I want to,” Rehana told her boss at the Small Projects Office (SPO) of the Canadian International Development Agency program in Pakistan.

Her job as the organization’s regional director of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province had her sitting behind a desk more and more. And while she understood the need for things like meetings and memos and inter-office briefings, she never wanted to lose sight of the real reasons behind it all — the families the organization served.

Guided by the principle “People First,” Rehana welcomed every opportunity to go out into the field, even when the field was the volatile region of Swat.

She’d been wanting to see the bridge that her department had had a role in building. The local men simply viewed it as a new way into town. But behind the scenes, Rehana had lobbied to make sure it was positioned so that the women working in the fields wouldn’t have so far to walk, and their children would have an easier way to get to school.

The man on Rehana’s team who was scheduled to make this Swat trip had called in sick. Rehana wondered if he really was. The conflict in the area between the army of Pakistan and the rebel group led by Sufi Muhammad had been getting worse. In 1993, families that had lived there for generations were starting to leave. The only way most people at that time wanted to see Swat was in their rearview mirrors.

In the 1980s Sufi Muhammad aligned himself with the Jamaat-e-Islami party. In the early 1990s he took fundamentalism even further and founded Tehreek-e-Nafaz-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, a militant organization hell-bent on implementing Sharia law. In a strict interpretation of that law, women have few rights and their lives are at the mercy of their husbands, brothers and fathers.

For instance, in Sharia law there is no age limit for marriage of girls. A marriage contract can take place any time after birth — or even before — and can be consummated as early as age 8. Rebelliousness, a word open to all sorts of interpretation, on the part of a wife nullifies her husband’s obligation to support her and gives him permission to beat her and prevent her from leaving the home. Divorce is only in the hands of the husband and is as easy as saying: “I divorce you” three times.

Her boss did his best to talk Rehana out of making the trip. “It’s too dangerous right now — especially for a woman,” he said.

“Well, *this* woman is going,” Rehana answered. As if to add an exclamation point to that statement, the baby growing within her kicked.



Like all women with both a career and children, Rehana often felt pulled in two directions. When she was at home, thoughts of tomorrow's to-do list at the office tugged at her. When she was at the office or in the field, she missed her little boy, Muhammad — “Sonu,” she and her husband called him — and wondered what new discoveries he was making that day, what new words he was learning. She trusted his nanny, a young Christian woman named Monica, and knew he was well cared for. But still.

In three months, Sonu would have a new brother or sister. Rehana's loose-fitting *kameez* concealed her pregnancy. No one at the office knew or guessed. Least of all her boss.

When she was expecting Sonu, she'd fought to institute a policy of maternity leave at SPO. And with the understanding and support of her former boss, Ralph McKim, and his wife, Jean, she had succeeded. Knowing what a strong proponent Rehana was of gender equality, the couple had teased her after Sonu's birth that — to be fair — her next child *must* be a girl.

But maternity leave wasn't on the organization's books for child number two. Or three. Or more.

As things stood now, Rehana would be unable to continue at SPO when this new baby arrived. She was already planning how to work to change that policy.



While some of the Swat locals whisked her boss away to see the new bridge, Rehana found herself unexpectedly facing an audience of some 150 men at the headquarters in Matta, followers of Sufi Muhammed. Their dark eyes glowered at her. Their mouths above their long, woolly beards remained immobile. Most sat rigidly, arms folded tight across their chests. The group's body language needed no translation. As clear as anything, it said, “Woman, why aren't you at home?”

“Where is Haroom? That's who we were expecting,” the leader of the group said gruffly.

Rehana summoned her courage and answered, in near-perfect Pashtu, “He works for me but he's sick today, so I came instead.”

“What? You mean you're his boss?” the men protested.

Rehana nodded

“Where is your burqa?” the leader demanded.

“Yes, where is it?” others echoed.

“If you ever come here again, you must wear the burqa. Do you understand?” the leader repeated.

Off to a terrible start, Rehana knew she'd have to do something quickly to diffuse the situation.

“Why, yes, of course,” Rehana said with a sweet smile. “What color burqa would you like me to wear? White? Black? Which? Tell me, please.”

She intentionally named the two colors of the group's flag, which she noticed on her way into Matta had replaced the army's on several key buildings.

Caught off guard, the men at first were speechless. Then a wave of laughter rippled through the room. They weren't laughing at Rehana; they were laughing with her.

“I tell you honestly,” Rehana said, “when I chose my *shalwar kameez* for today, I was mindful, as always, of the Prophet's words: ‘And tell the believing women to subdue their eyes, and maintain their chastity.’ But if I need to wear a burqa in order to work with you and the community here, I will gladly do it,” Rehana said.

The men, still chuckling at the way she had disarmed them, gave themselves permission to listen to what she had come to say.

“How many of you have children enrolled in school?”

Almost all hands went up.

“Excellent!” she clapped. “And how many of you send your daughters there?”

All hands went down.

“We allow our girls to study the Quran at the mosque. That is enough schooling for them.”

“But doesn't our holy book begin with the word ‘read?’” Rehana asked. “Read in the name of thy Lord who created the human being.”

Rehana continued the give-and-take, asking the men how many had lost wives in childbirth? Children in infancy? Did they know how to get to the nearest hospital? Did they have access to routine care?

She followed up the question-and-answer session with specific information about SPO programs in the area aimed at helping them with those issues.

“And now I'd like to talk with your women. May I?” she asked. To her surprise, the men agreed.

It was a pattern of communication she had learned by doing at meetings all over Pakistan, most of them with the women's groups she initiated, like the one she began that day in Swat.

Whenever she could, she sought to break the ice with a comment that would make people smile, to talk in terms of the issues that affected their lives, to arrive at practical solutions and new possibilities. And through it all, to realize that the ways human beings are alike often outweigh a world of differences.

Some of those differences were playing out that very moment in Swat in violent clashes between the army and followers of Sufi Muhammad. Rehana and her boss fled home to Peshawar the next day, tipped-off by the rebels that the airport was soon to fall.



*“Ammi!”* Sonu shouted when he heard the front door open. The boy raced toward his mother, his tiny feet slapping on the tile floor. Arms open wide, Rehana knelt down to greet him at eye-level, bracing herself for impact, laughing when he almost knocked her over.

“I missed you so much, Sonu!” she said, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

It felt good to be home. Yes, the world outside was a dangerous and uncertain place where injustice and cruelty were all too common. But one thing Rehana knew for sure: It was worth every risk to work to make it a better place, not only for the little boy in her arms and the baby on the way, but for generations yet to come.

### Gaining Control

Voices of the neighborhood children — yelling, playing, laughing, crying — drifted through the open windows, past the tattered curtains and into the tiny room where Rehana sat with the mothers of those kids. The women shared space with her on the floor, on a plastic rug in the middle of the room, a special-occasion mat rolled out for company.

It wasn't every day that their lady home visitor brought along someone from the outside, someone willing to sidestep the goats and the trash and the sewage in the street to sit and talk with them. Someone who genuinely wanted to know more about them and their families.

“How many children do you have?” Rehana asked one of the young woman.

“Nine.”

“And how long have you been married, dear?”

“Thirteen years.”

“And what about you?” Rehana said, turning to the woman next to her. “How many kids?”

“Seven.”

“Married, how long?”

“Eleven years.”

Rehana looked around the circle. More the half of the women there were pregnant.

“Are you happy producing all these children?” she asked the group.

She had expected, maybe, a meek, “Not really.” What she got was a resounding, “No! We're fed up!”



After her seven years on the job at SPO, Rehana had been asked to join the Futures Group. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the global health consulting firm worked in developing countries all over the world, to, as their mission statement put it, “promote and protect people's health and well-being so they can transform their own lives and their futures.”

Rehana was hired to launch their women's program in Pakistan. She would take the position, she said, on the condition that she could do fact-finding in the field first, going where the need was greatest, to discover the best ways to approach family planning.

Too many kids and too few resources led to problems not only for families and mothers stretched to the limit, but also within the society and the culture. Young people without opportunities for education or employment were more likely, studies had shown, to turn to drugs or terrorism. Limiting family size wasn't the only solution, but it was a place to start.

"I'm sure you'll want to work with local doctors on this," a supervisor said to Rehana, early in her employment with the Futures Group.

"Actually, no. I was thinking paramedics — LHVs, lady home workers (LHWs), nurses. They're the ones who are able to reach women where they live."

"Paramedics? You're kidding? They can't compare to doctors!"

If the program were to hinge mainly on doctors' participation, Rehana argued, only those women who could travel to hospitals or doctors' offices would benefit. Most would be shut out.



The discussion of birth control with the women on the rug was eye-opening for Rehana. She learned that, yes, some of them had had access to the pill and had tried using it.

"But it doesn't work!" they told her.

One of the pregnant women went on to explain. "I took the pill before I went to bed with my husband. And look!"

"Did you take it every day?" Rehana asked.

"No, only those times when my husband wants to," the woman paused demurely, "you know."

The women shared more stories, and the need for the various methods of birth control to be well-explained became obvious to Rehana.

After that first foray into the field, she continued meeting with other groups of women and their paramedics in some of Pakistan's poorest and most densely-populated areas.

*What can we do to make sure that women get the accurate family-planning information they need?* Rehana asked herself. Brochures or flyers are not an option when women can't read.

Then it came to her.

"Here's what I propose," she said to her bosses at Futures Group. "Let's make an audio cassette that answers women's questions about birth control." She suggested that the script be

written in the form of a conversation between a woman and her doctor. Performed by professional actors. Produced by a first-rate ad agency.

“Are you forgetting that not many women in those areas own cassette players?”

“That’s where the paramedics come in. We’ll give them the players and the cassettes. They’ll be the ones who will take this program into the neighborhoods.”

In her mind, Rehana was already training an army of LHVs, LHWs and nurses in the nuances of dialoguing with groups of women on this sensitive topic and others related to their reproductive health.

That meeting marked the beginning of “Neighborhood Friendship,” a program that became the largest health worker’s network in Pakistan’s private sector, linking over 3,000 paramedics to 2 million women.

Paramedics, who had previously been treated as second-class citizens in the health world, gained new stature through the program. And women all over Pakistan gained new control over their bodies, their health and the size of their families.

### Safe House(s)

In the street out front a car door slammed, the gate at the side of the house banged open, and Rehana looked up from the book she was reading in her backyard garden, startled to see a strange woman rushing towards her.

“Rehana!” a raspy voice said. Rehana didn’t recognize that either.

Squinting into the late-autumn sun, she put her book down and got up from her chair.

“Yes? What do you want?”

“Rehana. It’s me! Zaibi! The Women’s Degree College in Dera? Class of ‘79?”

“Zaibi?”

Rehana tried to reconcile her memories of a carefree coed with the frightened middle-aged woman who had just hugged her much too hard. The Zaibi she remembered always had the prettiest *chadors*, bangles of real gold and a chauffeur-driven ride to campus in a new Land Rover that was the envy of everyone, professors included.

“I came here in a taxi,” Zaibi said, looking over her shoulder. “I need a place to stay. People told me I should see you.”

Zaibi had come to the right place. For the past dozen years or so, Rehana’s home had become known in certain underground circles as a safe house for survivors of incest, domestic abuse, acid burns and forced marriages. Two rooms upstairs were set aside for that purpose, and when those were filled, Rehana’s sisters opened the doors to their homes, as well.

It was a group effort, funded by the family’s paychecks and sometimes by the sisters’ savings. Husbands were on board with it, too.

Banding together on behalf of women who needed help, the daughters of Bibi Shamim did their best to follow in her humble footsteps.



“What happened, Zaibi? What brought you here? Tell me,” Rehana said, placing a cup of ginger tea in front of her former classmate.

“It’s a long story,” Zaibi sighed.

“I’m listening.”



Over the next couple hours, Zaibi told Rehana everything. How when she was 17, her father forced her into a marriage with a friend of his more than 25 years her senior. Both men were from the same tribe. When it came time for the *nicab* — the vows — at the ceremony, Zaibi refused. Furious at her insubordination and cognizant of the shame her refusal would bring to the family, her father and brother forced her to go with the man anyway. As far as they were concerned, she was his wife, whether she wanted to be or not.

Zaibi didn't see it that way. Her obstinacy continued that night. She was unwilling to spend her life with a grizzled old man who viewed her as his property. And for that, she paid dearly.

He drove her to a cave in the mountains and kept her there in chains, providing just enough food — via visits from his relatives — to keep her alive till she came to her senses.

“She can stay there until she begs to come to my bed,” he told his cohorts.

A sister-in-law periodically took pity on Zaibi, unlocked her chains and allowed her to stretch her legs on the mountain paths. In theory, the girl could have escaped. But two things stopped her: She didn't want the one person who had shown her kindness in her captivity to get in trouble, and the cave was so remote there really wasn't any place to go.

One day she explored another cave nearby, a kind of natural silo, where wheat was stored. She spotted a stash of white powder she thought might be insecticide. If it was, that poison could be her way out.

She would swallow it, she decided, and end her life.

The sister-in-law found her, barely breathing, foaming at the mouth. She drove Zaibi to the house she grew up in, to the home of the father who had given her in marriage to his friend. A doctor was called and an antidote given. Zaibi didn't die, though she still wished she had.

Her “husband” stormed over to the house. He berated the girl for the shame she had brought him — first, for refusing to accept him as her husband; second, for choosing suicide over life with him.

In the eyes of the tribe, they were married. He would not give her a divorce, he shouted. As long as she lived, she would be his. She would have to keep his name. She would never, ever be free of him.

His vindictiveness didn't stop there. She had three young nieces, the daughters of her brother. As a tribal chief, the man had the authority — called *Ghag* — to claim them as his wives, as well. And if Zaibi thought that killing herself would nullify that claim, he yelled, she thought wrong. The only way for his hold on her nieces to be broken was for Zaibi to agree to take her place in his bed.

She didn't. For the next few years, living in Dera, she endured the contempt of her father and brothers and every other man in the family while she focused on getting her college degree. After graduation, she took a position as a teacher in a remote area, and through the years devoted herself to her work and her students. Because of her "marriage" years ago, she could never know the joys of having a family of her own. Yet as a teacher, she did find happiness helping young girls realize their potential and the possibilities that education offers.

Now it was the Taliban's turn to make life difficult. They did it with a decree that banned girls above the age of 8 from getting an education. They bombed several schools to show they were serious. When Zaibi continued to welcome girls into her classes, she started receiving death threats.

"So, that's what brings me here, Rehana," she said, taking another sip of tea. "Can I stay until this blows over?"

In the years after that, Rehana and her family gave Zaibi shelter whenever and wherever she needed it — sometimes at the family's old house in Dera, sometimes at the home of Rehana's youngest sister, oftentimes in one of the two rooms upstairs from where Rehana first heard her former classmate's story. The sisters all did what they could to help Zaibi and many more like her, even when the death threats for those women began arriving at their own front doors.

### “Partners in Crime”

From the hotel where she was running a workshop on gender issues for SPO staff from all over Pakistan, Rehana made an urgent call home.

“We have a problem, Fayyaz,” she said to her husband. “I need your advice.”



Since their wedding day four years before, Rehana and her husband, Fayyaz, had been a team. Theirs hadn’t been an arranged marriage. But they knew each other only casually, as fellow activists and NGO colleagues, before they became husband and wife.

At age 32, Rehana had been feeling the pressure from her mother, sisters, friends, co-workers, women’s groups — everyone, actually — to get married.

One day her friend Najma asked Rehana, “What kind of man do you want to marry?”

Rehana listed three traits that were important to her: even-tempered, altruistic and non-Syed.

“Non-Syed? Really? Why?”

“I want to break free of that tradition, for myself and my younger sisters. I know my father won’t approve, but it’s just too limiting.”

Najma smiled. “Well then, I think I’ve got a match.”

“Who?”

“Fayyaz!”

“But he’s old!”

“Just nine years older, Rehana. Trust me, he’s right for you.”

With her sisters and Najma acting as intermediaries, a date was set for the *nicah*. Breaking the news to Rehana’s parents of this non-Syed match was as complicated and as difficult as Rehana thought it would be. In fact, her father stopped speaking to her.

Rehana Hashmi kept her maiden name and began to fall in love with Fayyaz their first night together, when he said to his suddenly-shy bride, “Let’s get to know each other first,” and poured both of them a cup of coffee.

At sun up, they were talking still.



The call from Rehana and her request for advice took Fayyaz by surprise. He knew his wife to be as confident as she was competent.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and listened as Rehana told him what happened that day at the hotel.

A woman had stumbled into the lobby holding the hand of a little boy. The child looked frightened and confused. The woman’s face was bruised. Her top lip split. One eye, swollen completely shut. Her torn dress was splattered with dried blood.

Rehana didn’t ask her what had happened. She was pretty sure she already knew.

“Come with me, dear. We’ll get you cleaned up,” Rehana said, shepherding the pair to a restroom down the hall.

Dabbing the young mother’s wounds with the corner of a moistened towel, Rehana told her she thought a visit to the emergency room would be a better idea.

“No! My husband has people looking for me. He has connections. They’ll find me there.”

The woman told Rehana that she’d met her husband, a Pakistani, in Austria, the country of her birth. That’s where they were living when their son was born. She’d been unhappy in the marriage almost from the start. In the beginning, they argued a lot. Then she didn’t dare to.

One day, in a rage, her husband took the boy and left for Pakistan.

She decided to go back to her husband to be with her son. She’d endure his brutal nature, all the while waiting for a chance to take the boy with her back to Austria. They’d start a new life, with new names in a different city.

She tried to leave once before and got caught, which only made things worse.

This time all she took with her was her little boy, their passports and enough cash for a seven-hour cab ride. It ended, by chance, at the hotel in Islamabad that was hosting Rehana’s seminar on gender issues.

“I’ve got to get out of the country. If he finds me, this time he’ll kill me.”



Rehana had helped and hid many women before, but none of those cases had the international complications of this one.

For anyone or any organization involved, the risks were considerable. Not just because of the husband's threats, but also because of the legal ramifications involved in helping a foreigner flee the country with a Pakistani's son. Going to the embassy was equally risky. In addition to the potential danger on the street from the husband's henchmen, security at the small offices of the Austrian ambassador was minimal. Protection in those circumstances could not be guaranteed.

Running out of options, Rehana called Fayyaz at home.

"Yes, bring her here," he said, before she even had a chance to ask.



For two weeks, Rehana and Fayyaz sheltered the woman and her son in their home while they tried to figure out what to do next.

They weren't alone in their efforts. They never were. They always knew they could count on the help and support of a trusted network of good and compassionate people who, to the couple's way of thinking, represented the real Pakistan: Ihsan Sadiq, a local policeman who could not be bought and who was unafraid to lock up predators; Monica, the children's nanny; Shamshad, the family's driver and all-around household helper; Nawaz, the cook who always managed to have enough food on hand to feed whoever was home and hungry; and Rehana's sisters and their families.

With all the ways they worked together to circumvent the system in their shared commitment to help women, they sometimes joked that they were "partners in crime." But to those they aided, they were much more than that.

The woman and her son, during their stay, became part of the family. The little boy called Rehana's sisters "Auntie"; the woman sang to Ayesha, Sonu's baby sister, whenever she fussed. The dinner table at the end of the day was always crowded.

But the question remained: How to get the two safely back to Austria?

Granted, custody cases like this one could be brought before the courts. Typically those dragged on for months or even years, and given the temper of the times and the probability of pay-offs, a ruling in the woman's favor was next to impossible.

Gradually, the group pieced together a plot worthy of a James Bond movie. It involved disguises, unmarked vehicles, airline tickets to Turkey and down-to-the-minute timing.

At any point, discovery was a real possibility. And the woman's husband had the wherewithal and the influence to make it happen.

The most dangerous part of the trip, everyone agreed, would be the transfer in Karachi from the national terminal to the international one. Bajji volunteered to see to it that the woman and her

son got through that leg of their journey without attracting attention. After arriving from Islamabad, Baji would carry the boy through the Karachi airport, posing as his mother. The woman, covered head-to-toe in a borrowed burqa, would, until the very last minute, lose herself in the crowd.

Back in Islamabad, everyone at the house waited for word that the woman and the boy had made it out of Pakistan OK. They tried not to think about the other possibility: that both of them, and Baji too, had been detained or captured, or worse.

The phone rang.

“They made it. They’re safe,” Rehana breathed. Everyone who had had a hand in that exhaled with her.

## Storms

Clouds, grey as wolves, roiled up from the horizon, blocking the mid-morning sun. Rehana looked at the darkening sky and frowned.

That evening she and Fayyaz would be hosting a dinner party at their home for a long-time friend and associate who was leaving Islamabad. They'd invited more than 40 people and planned for everyone to dine under the stars. Tables had already been set up in the courtyard off their living room.

"Looks like it might rain," she said to Shamshad. "Let's set up a tent out there, just in case."

Usually Rehana welcomed the summer monsoons for the relief they brought from the scorching, triple-digit heat. She liked the way a rain shower in July made the world smell — the earthy aroma of dampened dust, the backyard scents of jasmine and roses, thicker than usual.

At around 3:00 that afternoon, the storm that had been threatening all day arrived. When it finally came, the rain fell so hard and fast that within half an hour the top of the tent started to sag and leak. Water puddled on the tables and pooled in the flower beds.

"Never seen anything like it," said the few brave souls who came out that evening, shaking the water from their sodden umbrellas.

For days the deluge continued without letup. As the water levels rose in backyards all over Islamabad, the TV news brought images of epic devastation in communities to the east in the Indus River basin.

As the river swelled, a swath of rushing water some 20 miles wide swept away entire neighborhoods, leaving only sand and stone in its wake. Water streamed through the upper branches of trees, carrying along fragments of homes and lives: sandals, plaster, scraps of clothing, bloated goats and later, it would be discovered, landmines from the remote regions where rebels had lately roamed.

The city of Dera Ismail Khan, Rehana's earlier home, was reeling, not just from the rains, but also from the influx of families who had lost everything. And to make matters worse, humanitarian relief was slow in arriving.

In recent years, Dera had become a hotbed of sectarian violence and a haven for the Taliban. Even under the best of circumstances, nobody wanted to go there.

"I can't just sit here and watch this," Rehana said in phone calls to her sisters, "Tomorrow I'm driving to Dera."

The next morning Bibi Shamim's second oldest daughter set out with a trunkful of rice, lentils and powdered milk — and a plan to do whatever she could to help.



“What organization are you with, ma’am?” a guard asked at a checkpoint into the city.

“Organization? I used to live here, on Bammu Shah Street!”

“Sorry. I can’t let you in unless you have a Non Objection Certificate from the authorities.”

Only registered groups were being allowed into Dera Ismail Khan. Rehana hadn’t realized that when she left Islamabad.

“Oh, come on!” she said. “This is my hometown!”

The man at the checkpoint held his ground, but Rehana knew they’d meet again.



For years, Rehana and her sisters had been operating informally as a group in the service of women. They pooled their resources and their talents to support one another in these efforts, whether it was providing a hot meal or a place to stay or funds for schooling or training to start a new life. The sisters kept a low profile in all this. Women who needed to know about them and the work they were doing somehow found out.

But now, in order to help in this crisis — one of the largest in Pakistan’s history — they would have to go public, file paperwork and give their group a name.

“What organization are you with, ma’am?” the guard asked Rehana again, days later.

She pointed to the document on the dashboard with the group’s name on it, proof that the requirements for application for a Non Objection Certificate had been met.

“Oh, I see. Another NGO,” he said, adding ominously as he waved the woman behind the wheel through, “Just keep your unholy ways to yourself.”

And with that, the work of Sisters Trust began.



When she first arrived, Rehana focused her outreach on the simple act of supplying hungry families with something to eat. But there’s only so much one woman with a little cash and a trunk full of dry food can do.

The enormity of the disaster called for a larger response. Even before she arrived on the scene, she had begun formulating a plan of action that would go farther to alleviate the suffering she now saw all around her.



Walking among the temporary homes made of sticks and blankets, inhaling the stench of death and diarrhea, and hearing women keen, in dialects from near and far, “What will become of us?” Rehana re-doubled her efforts to quickly establish facilitation centers for the displaced mothers and children in Dera.

Drawing on her lifetime of work experiences — organizing community groups, mobilizing donor support, building and training teams, navigating bureaucracy — she soon had several Women’s Facilitation Centers, housed in large tents, up and running.

The idea was to provide a place to help women register for the ID cards essential for government assistance. Many had lived all their lives without any kind of documentation. No birth certificates. No driver’s licenses. In the villages the women came from, these things didn’t exist. Proof that they had lived at all usually died with them.

The process of changing this was a daunting one, especially for those who could neither read nor write. Rehana wanted to make it easier.

Soon word spread among the women in the tent city that the people at the Sisters Trust centers would not only work with them to fill out forms and answer questions, they’d also walk with them to turn in that vital paperwork at the government’s relief offices.

Attiq, the husband of Rehana’s sister Honey, joined Rehana in Dera to take on the role of project coordinator. Whenever she could get away for a few days, Honey too came to help.

The centers became much more than places to get help filling in the blanks. In one corner of the biggest tent, Honey, a licensed beautician, began training women in the skills of that trade so that someday, when the sun shone brighter, they could earn a living or add to the family’s income. In another corner, a hired teacher worked with children on learning the letters of their alphabet.

In the center of the room, a traditional birth attendant talked with a pregnant woman who held the hands of two restless toddlers. At a table near the door, kids played with plastic dolls and trucks or picked up scattered crayons, reached for pieces of paper and drew pictures of the homes they remembered before the river rose.

At night, Rehana, exhausted, fell asleep to the sound of water dripping into the room she reclaimed in the house her parents had vacated when they moved to Lahore.



The centers became islands of hope for the women and children the river had brought to Dera. For a while, when things were at their worst after the floods, the Taliban looked the other way, letting the work of the Women’s Facilitation Centers continue.

But after a few months, the extremists decided enough was enough. In scrawled messages addressed to Honey's husband, they wrote, "You are no longer allowed to work here. Close the centers, or else."



Even after they were forced to return to their homes — Rehana to Islamabad; Attiq and Honey to Lahore — threats continued. But so did their work for women. Victims of domestic violence, incest and rape still sought and found shelter in their homes and training in Honey's salon.

The Sisters Trust organization, founded in the flood, began growing into a larger network of people who shared with Bibi Shamim's daughters a commitment to helping women and working for a more just society.

Word of the group's work spread via emails, text messages and the media. With the greater visibility that those things brought, Rehana and her sisters — now in the hundreds — were able to raise the volume of women's voices speaking out not only on gender issues, but also on things like Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws.

Those laws made it a crime, punishable by death, to insult Islam, the Quran or the Prophet Muhammad. The same year as the flood, the governor of Punjab province, Salmaan Taseer, was assassinated by his own bodyguard after criticizing the death sentence given to a Christian woman found guilty of disrespecting the name of the Prophet Muhammad during an argument with her Muslim co-workers.

Reacting to the verdict in a CNN interview, Taseer said, "The blasphemy law is not a God-made law. It's a man-made law that gives an excuse to extremists and reactionaries to target weak people and minorities."

Those words cost him his life. They also led Rehana and other human rights defenders to speak out against religious extremism at a gathering honoring his memory. The event was widely covered in the media. A photo of Rehana, with her name beneath it, lighting a candle near a portrait of the slain governor, appeared in several prominent newspapers. That image brought her even more threats. Some of them so credible, she, her husband and their two teenagers were forced into hiding. Sometimes for a few days, sometimes longer.

Life on the lam wasn't easy for anyone. Whenever a serious threat arrived, day-to-day essentials would be quickly stuffed into suitcases. Rides to the homes of trusted friends took circuitous routes, usually under cover of darkness, and the driver wasn't the only one watching the rearview mirrors. Regular employment became impossible. No one wanted to share an office or a cubicle with a colleague who was on a hit-list. School work suffered. Classmates wondered why and where their friend or lab partner had disappeared. In the houses where the family came to reside, there were long discussions about trying to get visas for the kids so they could live with relatives outside of Pakistan, should it come to that.

“*Ammi*, what kind of life is this?” Ayesha cried. “Can’t you just stop what you’re doing?”

At that stage in her young life, Ayesha seemed to be more interested in reading her friends’ posts on Facebook than in understanding her parents’ political activism. She was tired of not being able to meet her friends for study dates or the movies. Tired of having to catch up with school work when things got back to normal.

And mixed in with her teenage angst was a real concern for her mother’s safety.

“I worry about you, Mom.”

“Oh, Ayesha,” Rehana said. “I am so sorry for putting you and Sonu through this. But this work for women is life to me. Like air. Like oxygen. It might be hard for you to understand, but I’m doing this for you, too. I can’t stop.”

### Nowhere to Hide

Rehana smiled when she saw on her cell phone that it was Honey calling. They often talked, as sisters often do, about anything and everything. Husbands. Work. Kids.

Their teenage sons, Sonu and Abdullah, were more than cousins, they were close friends. The boys grew up kicking soccer balls to each other in the street whenever the grown-ups at family gatherings started talking politics. They shared a love for the same soccer team — Manchester United of England. When they couldn't watch the team's matches together, they'd text each other throughout the game. "Good call!" Or if it wasn't, "Oh, &%\$#!" They were both at the age, 16 and 17, when teasing their moms was another sport they shared. Abdullah posted a photo on Facebook of his mother and his middle-aged aunts dancing at a wedding celebration. In the background, he and Sonu could be seen cracking up.

"Hello, Honey!"

Silence.

"Honey?"

It didn't take long for Rehana to realize this wasn't going to be a chatty call to catch up on each other's lives.

"We got something today," Honey said. "A plain brown envelope. This time there wasn't a note inside, just a small white piece of cotton cloth."

Rehana sat down. *Oh, my God*, she thought.

This was a threat to be reckoned with. In Islamic tradition, a simple white cloth is used to shroud a body before burial or cremation.

"Honey, be careful. And don't send the kids to school."

The stepped-up threats continued, and not long after that, Honey and her family moved to another house and went into hiding.



"Mom, I gotta get out. Just for little while. I'll get some ice cream and come right back," Abdullah said. Honey understood how hard the past few months had been on someone like him — a handsome, fun-loving young man on the cusp of adulthood, spending day after day at home with his mother and two younger siblings.

Honey started to object, but her son was already half-way out the door.



A loud thud at the front gate jerked Honey's eyes from the clock she had been watching. She ran outside. "Abdullah!" she cried, falling to her knees beside the lifeless body of her beloved boy.



Family and friends — Sunni, Shia and Christian alike — gathered together for Abdullah's funeral. An imam, arms lifted to heaven, intoned Islam's traditional prayers for the dead:

"O God, give him a home better than his home and a family better than his family. O God, admit him to Paradise and protect him from the torment of the grave and the torment of Hell-fire; make his grave spacious and fill it with light."

Most answered, "Ameen." Others whispered, "Amen." Everyone who loved him, each in his or her own way, prayed Abdullah home.

### Her Mother's Footsteps

Getting out of her car, Rehana looked up to see Ayesha running toward her in the driveway.

“*Ammi!*”

From the tone of her daughter's voice and the look on her face, Rehana could tell something was wrong. Very wrong.

“What's the matter, Ayesha?”

“They shot Malala! It's all over the TV!”



Malala Yousafzai, a 15-year-old schoolgirl from the Swat district, had become well-known in Pakistan through a blog she wrote for BBC Urdu. In it, she told the world what it's like to live under Taliban rule. She wrote of the edict the Taliban had set forbidding girls to attend school. She chronicled her struggles to continue learning, well aware of the dangers involved in advocating education for girls. “Even if they come to kill me,” she wrote, “I will tell them what they are trying to do is wrong, that education is our basic right.”

Rehana and Ayesha held on to each other as they watched the breaking news. They listened throughout the day as reporters relayed updates about the attack. How a masked Taliban gunman had boarded her school bus and shot Malala in the head. How she'd been rushed to a hospital. How her condition was being described as grave.

“She is so innocent! Look!” Ayesha said, as a still photo of Malala, smiling shyly, replaced the video footage of her being transported to the hospital. In those clips, as the stretcher carrying her rolled toward hospital doors, Malala's body, covered by a white blanket, wobbled ever so slightly. A large rectangular bandage hid her forehead. Her eyes were closed; her young face, eerily serene.

“*Ammi*, how could they do this to her?”

“Oh, Ayesha, Ayesha,” was all Rehana could say.

When words fail, actions can speak instead. And the next few hours saw Rehana texting, emailing and phoning her sisters and colleagues.

“We need to protest,” she told them. “We need to show the Taliban and the world that we stand with Malala. Tell your friends. Tell your sisters.” She shared with all of them the place and time of the next day's demonstration, as well as her determination to continue doing what she could to make a difference.

Ayesha had seen that trait in her mother before, and it had, at times, caused the teenager to roll her eyes in exasperation. But on October 9, 2012, something shifted.

“*Ammi?*”

“Yes, Ayesha.”

“I want to march with you tomorrow.”



The next day Bibi Shamim’s daughter and granddaughter took to the streets with thousands of others all across the country in a show of strength and solidarity for Malala.

Rehana and Ayesha marched for their sister, Malala but, in truth, it was for all their sisters — the ones they grew up with and millions more in places like Mastung, Dera Ismail Kahn, Chitral, Kalash, Karachi, Islamabad, Lahore and the valley of Swat.

They marched for freedom of thought and expression, for freedom of choice and opportunity, and for equality before the law.

Several in the crowd that day carried signs that read, “I am Malala.” Remembering the many women she had encountered in her work through the years, Rehana thought to herself, *We all are*.

For the women and girls of Pakistan, the road to gender justice would, no doubt, continue to be long, difficult and dangerous. But with Ayesha walking beside her that day, Rehana believed they would get there.

## A CONVERSATION WITH REHANA HASHMI

*The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Sue Diaz and an interview during a public event by IPJ Program Officer Jennifer Freeman on September 24, 2013.*

**Q: You dedicated your story to your family. Could you tell us something about them and their connection to your work?**

A: My parents, Shamim Akhtar and Syed Fazal Hashmi, had 11 children — eight daughters in a row: Rukhsana (Baji), me, Riffat, Fauzia, Humaira, Asma, Nidi and Honey, followed by three sons: Armughan, Imran and Suleman.

All my siblings, my seven sisters especially, have been supportive of my work and advocacy on behalf of women and human rights. I think of it now not so much as *my* work, but as *ours*. The name we gave the NGO we started in 2010 — Sisters Trust — says it all.

My brothers and sisters have helped fund scholarships for girls, opened their homes to victims of domestic violence, provided career training for women with few opportunities, and in the case of Asma and Fauzia, taken great personal risks in their work as flight attendants to save young women from forced marriages.

Our father's activism and our mother's outreach to those less fortunate have served as examples for the whole family.

My story would not be complete without mention of the strength I've gained from the love, support, and understanding of my husband, Fayyaz, and my son and daughter, Sonu and Ayesha. Today those two are attending college in Canada and in England. Threats to my life and our family played a large role in my and my husband's decision to send our children out of Pakistan, their home. Ayesha's student visa was finally approved, much to my relief, while I was here in San Diego.

**Q: Why did you want to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program?**

A: Throughout my life, at both the personal and professional level, I have been actively raising my voice in conflicts involving faith, ethnicity, gender, ideology and class. But it has come at a price. Most recently, I started receiving threatening phone calls due to my participation in vigils and statements against the persecution of individuals and groups standing up for the protection of human rights.

The vigils and protest meetings I participated in included support for violence victims from Shia and Christian religious minority groups, Baloch and Hazara ethnic minorities, women falsely accused, and a federal minister and a provincial governor killed for their bold stands against laws discriminating against religious minorities. I have had to go into hiding for months to avert these threats.



Through my experiences, I have learned extremely valuable lessons for protecting human rights, dealing with conflicts and promoting peace. I've come to the IPJ's Women PeaceMakers Program with the hope of documenting, analyzing and sharing those experiences with other human rights activists to better serve my country and the region in the interest of peace, interfaith harmony and human rights.

**Q: You've worked for positive change and gender justice through NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and through the government, as well. How do you view the relationship between the two?**

A: Before I get into that, I want to point out that there are different kinds of NGOs. There are the service-delivery organizations. There are religious organizations. And there are advocacy organizations. The service-delivery and religious organizations are very close to the government, because they do not challenge it. But when it comes to advocacy organizations — like mine — there is a trust deficit, because those organizations challenge the government.

After working in NGOs for a long time, I saw that the government was not changing. And I realized that whenever you want to effect real change, you have to work within the system. If you're out of the system, out of the ring and shouting, it will not influence those who are in the ring. If you don't know how the system works, you can't influence it. We have to engage with the government.

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*“And I realized that whenever you want to effect real change, you have to work within the system. If you're out of the system, out of the ring and shouting, it will not influence those who are in the ring. If you don't know how the system works, you can't influence it.”*

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**Q: What kind of work did you do in the government?**

A: I worked closely with women councilors as the national manager of the Women Political School Project, under the Ministry of Women Development in the government of Pakistan. During my tenure I trained 25,576 women councilors to work effectively under the devolution of power to the local government authorities. The women councilors program was not just a two-day training program. It was a year, year-and-a-half mentoring program.

I also created a pool of resource persons spread over all the districts of Pakistan. This is the largest training network for building the capacity of elected women representatives created after devolution of power. Based on the success of the program, I was asked to extend similar training to male *nazims* (mayors) of district and subdivision governments.

Subsequently, I successfully institutionalized the largest Government of Pakistan project for gender reform, called the Gender Reform Action Plan in the Ministry of Women Development. Through my work as a gender advisor, I was able to help get many pro-women laws passed — laws that deal with harassment in the workplace, acid crimes, inheritance issues. Credit must go to our women legislators. They have played a very important role and have given hope to women in Pakistan.

**Q: Encouraging women’s grassroots participation has been a hallmark of your work. Could you share your thoughts on that?**

A: Women’s participation in the political process is so important. We have such a big country. There are people working on those issues in big cities — Islamabad, Karachi, Quetta, Lahore — but what about women’s issues at the grassroots level? Women are the ones who are suffering on all fronts — social, political, legal and economic. There have been success stories, and you can find them in an anthology compiled by the United Nations of the life stories of 15 women councilors from across Pakistan. It’s called *Powerful Stories of Powerless Women*. These are the stories of women who challenged the system at the grassroots level.

It’s been said that women own half of the sky. Why not 50 percent of the earth and its resources? Why not 50 percent participation at the decision-making level?

**Q: How can such equity be achieved?**

A: Affirmative action is a starting point. We want quotas for women. With quotas in place under Musharraf, a dictator, 33 percent of the legislative seats at the local level were allotted to women. Now, with a democratic government, the quota is less. This is not acceptable. It’s still a long fight.

**Q: When it comes to working at the grassroots level, are there any secrets to your success?**

A: Communication is the key. If you go to a community where you don’t speak the local language, you can’t learn. Well, you can learn, but it is at a very superficial level. If you really want to know — on a deeper level — about the culture and the norms, you have to speak the language. Being able to speak all seven languages of Pakistan has been a plus in my work in the field.

**Q: Pakistan has been rocked in recent years not only by sectarian violence, but also by violence against non-Muslim minorities. What in your opinion is the key to interfaith harmony?**

A: We need to focus more on our similarities, not on our differences. All religions — Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism — talk of peace. No religion promotes war. That is a political use of religion. Every faith talks about peace and humanity. The differences are in how we pray to the Creator. We might have different practices. If someone eats with a fork or hands or chopsticks, what difference does it make? We are eating! The same applies to worship. It is personal — between God and each individual. One Creator. One God. One Allah. The world should not be divided on the basis of faith.

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*“No religion promotes war. That is a political use of religion.”*

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**Q: When you return to Pakistan, how do you plan to use your experience with the Women PeaceMakers Program?**

A: On my return I want to replicate the peacebuilding model of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice in operation in Nepal for the past 10-plus years. I am in a very unique situation to implement this model through engagement of women on a large scale. I have active contact with two national-level women networks that I created during the past 20 years. One network consists of community-level women health professionals — more than 3,000 — throughout Pakistan in the private sector. A second network consists of more than 25,000 women councilors trained under my leadership as the national manager of the Women Political School Project.

I plan to use the IPJs “whole community” approach for peacebuilding through these networks in the conflict-ridden areas of Pakistan.

**Q: How will you do that?**

A: I intend to link civil society, political and government leadership, and defense and security actors, to facilitate and encourage greater collaboration and understanding among these groups, allowing them to identify common interests. While the daily practical roles of these groups may differ, they all share a common stakeholder — the citizens of Pakistan — and their cooperation is essential for the creation of a more sustainable and just peace.

I hope to contribute to peacebuilding through trainings focusing on communication, negotiation and conflict resolutions skills. These trainings would include political leaders, security officials, civil society members, women activists and youth leaders from across the country. My focus will be in those areas in intense conflict zones, including the remote villages of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Gilgt Baltistan provinces, as well as no-go areas of Karachi.

**Q: What is your definition of a leader?**

A: A leader is someone who has liberated himself or herself from fear — fear of anything: threats from the Taliban, threats from the media. Most of the time we feel fear in our hearts. If we can overcome the fear there, then the fears that come from the world are nothing. That I strongly believe. I believe that if someone is willing to die for a cause, then the fear of death will go.

**Q: What have you learned through your life and your work that you would like to share?**

A: Don't fear. Speak up for your rights. If you will not speak, somebody else will decide. You have to speak. Speak out. Speak loud.

If you deny your rights at home, you will deny your rights in your community and at the national and international level. The denial of rights is what creates conflict and leads to war.

You don't have to be in an NGO or other organization to work for peace. You have to be honest with yourself. If you are acknowledging the rights of your daughters, sisters and mothers as human beings, that will spread to all who are weaker. Peace begins at home.

**Q: Where do you find the strength to do the work you do?**

A: The hardships I have known in my life have made me stronger. Now I am not afraid of political challenges or emotional challenges. Fear is gone from me. The challenges I have already faced have given me strength.

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*“The hardships I have known in my life have made me stronger. Now I am not afraid of political challenges or emotional challenges. Fear is gone from me.”*

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**Q: What advice do you have to anyone who is starting out in the field of international development?**

A: Wonderful question. People say the personal contribution will not work. But I think that if one person stands up, they will see after a time that they will create an island of hope. Working in human rights and peacemaking is not easy. It is really a process. Many who are working for human rights often lose their jobs. People categorize them as activists, not as professionals. But I believe professionals can also do human rights work.

I believe in this work. I believe we can effect change.

**Q: What is something you wish people knew about Pakistan?**

A: Pakistani people are peace-loving people. Please don't judge us by the TV news alone. There are very few people in Pakistan who are terrorists. I'm not denying there is a problem, but the people of Pakistan are really very loving people. Come to my country and you will see.

**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER —**  
**Sue Diaz**



Sue Diaz is an author, educator and freelance journalist whose work has appeared in a variety of regional and national publications. The award-winning series she wrote for *The Christian Science Monitor* about the war in Iraq and her personal connection to it was syndicated nationally and internationally. Those pieces were the starting point for her most recent book, *Minefields of the Heart: A Mother's Stories of a Son at War* (Potomac Books), which explores the impact of war on the souls of those who fight and those who love them. It was one of two books selected this year by Silicon Valley Reads, a community-wide reading program in the San Francisco Bay Area. A passionate believer in the power of story to effect change and an advocate of writing as a path to healing, Diaz has also conducted writing workshops for war veterans at the San Diego Vet Center, the Naval Medical Center and Veterans Village of San Diego.

**JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE**  
**at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

**ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

<sup>2</sup> Portions of the Conflict History are taken from the corresponding section in the story of fellow Pakistani Woman PeaceMaker Rubina Feroze Bhatti, *Harmony in the Garden*, written by Kaitlin Barker in 2009.