# Pakistan: Early Warning by Women for Conflict Prevention in the Erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Merged Districts)

Noreen NASEER, Muhammad Irfan MAHSUD, Marium FATIMA

**Noreen NASEER**
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,
University of Peshawar, KPK, Pakistan
Email: noreennaseer22@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-9900-8608

**Muhammad Irfan MAHSUD**
Assistant Professor, Department of Peace and Conflict Studies,
National Defence University, NDU, Pakistan
Email: irfanmahsud@ndu.edu.pk
ORCID: 0000-0003-4685-8013

**Marium FATIMA**
Assistant Professor, National Institute of Intelligence and Security Studies,
Quaid-e-Azam University, QAU, Pakistan
Email: maryam_khan9@yahoo.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-1808-7477

Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 54, January 2026, pp. 68–85

DOI: 10.24193/csq.54.4
Published First Online: January 05, 2026

**Abstract:** This study examines the role of tribal women who issued warnings to elders and community members prior to the outbreak of conflicts in Kurram, Orakzai, and North and South Waziristan, located in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now Merged Districts) of Pakistan. These early warnings demonstrate the efforts of tribal women to prevent emerging conflicts; however, their concerns were largely disregarded by tribal authorities. The article analyzes the status of women within patriarchal tribal structures that marginalized their perspectives and constrained their ability to report latent conflict drivers and early warning signs to stakeholders capable of taking preventive action. Understanding the position of women in tribal societies and their relationship to conflict informs a hypothesis grounded in feminist security theory: conflict and violence in the tribal districts could be mitigated if women were included in both informal and formal mechanisms of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, this research evaluates the contributions of tribal women in the pre-conflict stages and highlights their potential role in strengthening early warning and prevention systems.

**Keywords:** Tribal Women, Early Warnings, Violence and Peace Building, Merged Districts.

## Introduction

During the Cold War, an early warning system (EWS) was introduced in specialised, sensitive military installations to prevent surprise attacks and military accidents. Later, computerised satellite warnings were issued to provide timely notice of the launch of nuclear missiles by rival superpowers (Rupesinghe, 2008). Though the EWS originated against the backdrop of military conceptualisation, it was also introduced to prevent natural disasters and food shortages (Sättele et al., 2016). With increased conflict emergence around the world, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development used the EWS to predict the drivers and triggers of armed conflicts and communal violence (Nyheim, 2009). Currently, "early warning efforts do not intend to suppress conflicts but to respond to the trajectory of a conflict." The purpose of the EWS is to prevent conflict emergence from the latent phase, which constitutes conflict prevention.

Later, practitioners and policymakers developed scholarship on gender-sensitive EWS initiated by women before and amid conflict in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines (Arnado, 2012). This research reveals that tribal women warned against unseen conflict drivers and triggers. If tribal elders and the administration had paid heed to the gender-sensitive EWS approach proposed by tribal women, then it might have prevented the eruption of violent conflicts. This study provides a foundation for further research on tribal women to ensure women's inclusion and participation in peacebuilding. Women can assist in identifying changing dynamics at familial, grassroots, and community levels to alleviate tensions in tribal areas. It is observed that women were included in peace processes during the conflict transformation period in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines.

In rural and tribal areas, women keenly observe men's behaviour at home and outside, as well as changes in the community. Tribal women easily identified the conversion of local male socialisation spaces for clandestine activities. For example, studies in Kosovo (Besnik, 2004) and Sierra Leone (Gizelis, 2011) discovered that women provided valuable information on weapon depots, combatant hideouts, and the planning of attacks, but they couldn't report this information to the concerned authorities to stop violence. In these conflict areas, women suffered both as combatants and non-combatants. This research on the role of women in EWS is premised on the need to include women in different formal and informal structures for conflict prevention. Thus, the debate regarding conflict prevention in the United Nations and the lack of information about the potential role of women is now being seriously considered in light of the theme of women, peace, and security. This resulted in the passage of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in October 2000 (UN Resolution 1325).

Since 1979, the Afghan Jihad (holy war) project created militants in the form of mujahideen (holy warriors), and after the Soviet exit, different militant groups started fighting against each other for power in Afghanistan. The erstwhile FATA, comprising seven tribal districts (northwest of Pakistan), shares the longest porous border with Afghanistan. The region

is apparently peaceful, but internally, its social cohesion suffered a breakdown due to the shifting dynamics of the tribal hierarchical equilibrium with the emergence of a new rich class dealing in guns and drugs. During the Taliban rule (1994–2001) in Afghanistan, though the tribal areas did not experience any active conflict, local people (new rich traders and the clergy class) developed connections with militants for trade and ideological reasons. The interesting outcome in the global terrorism discourse is that the erstwhile FATA is debatably projected as the epicentre of militancy.

In 2001, with the start of the US-led Global War on Terror in Afghanistan, several militant groups fled into the tribal districts of Pakistan for refuge due to existing relationships (Mahsud, 2024). The existence of different militant groups such as Al-Qaida, Taliban (and its splinter factions) (Mahsud & Aman, 2018), and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Khorasan (ISIS-K) in the tribal districts transformed the armed conflict in the erstwhile FATA into a complex phenomenon. These groups promoted different agendas and used different tactics to implement ideology in each tribal agency (Mahsud, 2019). Subsequently, the nature of early warning (EW) varies in each tribal district according to the conflict.

Since 2005, tribal women in the Pak-Afghan borderland have suffered manifoldly from militancy, but this remains limitedly reported in scholarship (Naseer, 2015). Although women are adversely affected by the violence and displacement, they were never included in peace-building processes and agreements. Pertinently, women tried to alarm community elders by situational predictions and EW, but they were ignored by tribal elders and the state government in the erstwhile FATA and in the new constitutional status of the Newly Merged Tribal Districts. During the last two decades, women were neither active nor passive participants in the different conflicts in the erstwhile FATA, although some studies were conducted to examine their involvement in conflict. In isolated cases, women were targeted for hosting militants' abductees for ransom, but there is no evidence available to substantiate the argument of tribal women's participation in conflicts.

In Swat and Afghanistan, studies found that some women supported militants and therefore indirectly became part of a conflict (Naseer et al., 2020). This work attempts to discuss the role of non-combatant tribal women in conflict prevention by warning communities and the responses of local tribal men.

## Literature Review

Historically, scholars focused on the impacts of war on women as disproportionate targets during and after the conflict. Several research works discussed the decisive role that women can play in peacemaking and reconstruction. However, scholarship on early warning (EW) by women emerged before the conflict. The early warning and response systems come from reports published by different charity organizations involved in conflict resolution, while scholarly literature focuses on overviews and theoretical approaches to conflict early warning and response systems.


**Figure 1.** Map of Erstwhile FATA

*Source*: RS. News (2017)

It is pertinent to mention that no scholarship has been undertaken on tribal women's role in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, or theoretical approaches to early conflict warnings. This research builds on case studies of conflict areas to understand the role of women in early warning in relation to conflict prevention and to generate a debate on tribal women warning tribes in the erstwhile FATA. Alice Ackermann's work (2020), *Early warning and conflict prevention: Responsibilities of the international community* discusses EWS in conflict prevention. Although her work is not about the role of individuals in conflict prevention, it rather provides quantitative methods to create database predictive models for assessing the risks of complex humanitarian crises. She discusses three kinds of risk assessment: first, the use of structural indicators, which helped this research to see what structures helped or hindered tribal women in communicating early warnings; second, sequential models distinguishing between background, reaction, and trigger variables, which provided an in-depth understanding of EW; and third, inductive methods that classify different variables to understand the ground realities of conflict building. However, the author also identifies several challenges posed by the warning-response gap in early warning and conflict prevention, as well as the issue of "missed opportunities" to prevent the escalation of wars (Ackermann, 2020).

Susanne Schmeidl and Eugenia Piza-Lopez (2002) discussed the critical issue of the Taliban's refusal to allow women in peace processes—a situation very similar to that of

tribal women in the erstwhile FATA. Schmeidl and Piza-Lopez established that involving women in EW processes in traditional and regressive societies would challenge conventional analytical patterns and open new possibilities for response (Schmeidl & Piza-Lopez, 2002).

Naseer (2025) argued that women provide warnings before conflicts emerge to prevent violence in FATA. The study discussed the dynamics that have prevented tribal women from participating in the peace process. The research suggested that women living on the Pak-Afghan borderland could be brought out of marginalization if they are included in the peacebuilding structure (both formal and informal in society). The study, conducted among internally displaced tribal women, found that although tribal women suffer from conflict, they are excluded from the peace process as stakeholders, indicative of a patriarchal society (Mahsud, 2024).

Hill (2003) reports in *Women's contribution to conflict prevention, early warning, and disarmament* to UNIFEM, discussing the experiences of women from Kosovo and Sierra Leone. She stressed that it is important to listen to these women in conflict situations to address gender blind spots in early warning information, compilation, and investigation, which can also contribute to conflict prevention. She shares the account of a woman from Kosovo who realized that armed conflict was building when she saw arms caches being smuggled into their area. She added that certain young men, including her nephew, went up into the hills to receive training. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, women continuously warned against the Revolutionary United Front attacking peacekeeping forces; however, they had no one to inform or communicate with (Hill, 2003). All experiences of women recorded in the report are relatable to the case of tribal women living in the erstwhile FATA.

Brigitte Rohwerder (2015) identified that accurate predictions and the persuasion of authorities, political leaders, and the public are a challenge. Therefore, civil society organizations play the dual role of warning and response, although they cannot record effectively. Unfortunately, no civil society exists in the erstwhile FATA, and charity organizations are not allowed to work in the tribal areas without permission from Pakistan's Interior Ministry and military. Rohwerder criticized early warning mechanisms for being largely gender-blind to women. In the Asia-Pacific region (Philippines, Nepal, and Australia), hardly three National Action Plans have been devised that allow the participation of women in peace and security processes. There is no mention of women's involvement in EWS at the community level or within formal government structures (Ahmed, 2013). After the merger of the erstwhile FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), under the new name of Merged Tribal Districts, tribal women were given reserved seats in the provincial assembly of KP, but these women are not included in any rehabilitation, peacebuilding processes, or prevention systems. This work aims to study warnings shared by tribal women before conflicts through interviews recorded via field notes.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

This study employed qualitative and analytical methods to examine both primary and secondary data. Given the absence of reliable statistics and the sensitivity of the research setting, an exploratory design was adopted to uncover women's lived experiences of conflict, displacement, and informal early warning systems in tribal districts.

### *Primary data collection*

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): A total of 24 KIIs were conducted between 2018 and 2022 across four tribal districts: Kurram, Orakzai, North Waziristan, and South Waziristan.

Narrative inquiry: Primary data was collected through narrative inquiry, focusing on life stories, interviews, observations, and social interactions. Six women from each district were interviewed, deliberately selected between the ages of 40 and 60 due to their direct experiences of conflict, military operations, and displacement.

Age considerations: Age reporting was often imprecise due to the absence of accurate birth records in tribal areas. Researchers noted respondents' difficulty in recalling exact ages, relying on both self-reported estimates and observational judgment.

Social roles: Most respondents were homemakers but socially active through *gham-khadi* (participation in funerals and weddings), which provided them with community-level insights into conflict dynamics and informal warning signals.

### *Early warning systems and women's role*

A distinctive aspect of this research was the documentation of women's roles in informal early warning systems within tribal districts. Women reported observing subtle signs of impending conflict, such as the unusual movement of armed groups, sudden restrictions on mobility, or changes in community gatherings, and relayed these warnings to male family members. These informal alerts often preceded formal announcements or visible escalations. Women's participation in social networks (funerals, weddings, health visits) enabled them to act as conduits of information, making them critical yet under-recognized actors in community-level resilience and preparedness.

### *Informal conversations*

In addition to KIIs, informal conversations with both men and women were recorded to triangulate data. These discussions provided nuanced insights into how women's observations and warnings were perceived by their communities.

### *Secondary data collection*

Secondary sources included books, peer-reviewed articles, reports from national and international agencies, and internet-based resources. These materials contextualised primary findings within broader discourses on conflict, gender, and tribal governance.

*Ethical Considerations*

All principles of feminist research and conflict sensitivity were upheld. Educated participants provided written consent, while uneducated participants gave verbal consent. Research goals were explained before interviews, and pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Ethical safeguards were prioritised to prevent psychological or physical harm.

*Research setting and limitations*

The study was conducted in troubled borderland tribal districts, where researchers faced challenges of security and restricted accessibility. Fieldwork was carried out in three phases between 2018 and 2022, requiring prolonged engagement to build trust and gather reliable narratives.

Limitations included the absence of formal records, reliance on oral histories, and the difficulty of accessing certain conflict-affected areas.

**Table 1.** Table of Interview Respondents

| District | Tribe (sect) | Respondents with Code Names and Age (from researchers' field notes) |
|---|---|---|
| Kurram | Turi (Shia) | 3 (Gulnaz-43)<br>(Sakina-51)<br>(Zainab-55) |
| | Bangash (Sunni) | 3 (Ayesha-48)<br>(Hafsa-52)<br>(Ayat-46) |
| Orakzai | Mohammad Khel (Shia) | 3 (Shehwar-44)<br>(Sana-50)<br>(Hira-35) |
| | Massuzai (Sunni) | 3 (Shehla-40)<br>(Palwasha-43)<br>(Gul-28) |
| North Waziristan | Dawar (Sunni) | 3 (Sinzela-44)<br>(Ujala-40)<br>(Hina-39) |
| | Wazir (Sunni) | 3 (Dil Khushad-55)<br>(Anwar Begum-60)<br>(Parwari Begum-64) |
| South Waziristan | Mehsud (Sunni) | 3 (Zarghona-59)<br>(Musarat-43)<br>(Farah-46) |
| | Wazir (Sunni) | 3 (Jannat Bibi-51)<br>(Fauzia-47)<br>(Ruqaya-65) |

**Discussions during informal personal meetings**

Table 2. Table of Respondent

| Code Name and Age | Profession | Area of Residence |
|---|---|---|
| Rafiqa-44 | Gynecologist | Kurram |
| Shahnaz-59 | Home maker | Orakzai |
| Asma-39 | Lady Health Visitor | Kurram |
| Shereen-42 | Home maker | North Waziristan |
| Asifa-40 | Primary Teacher | North Waziristan |
| Shehla-44 | Home maker | Kurram |
| Firouza-50 | Home maker | Orakzai |
| Nargis-66 | Widow | South Waziristan |
| Zubaida-Around 60 | Widow | South Waziristan |
| Gul-38 or 40 | Home maker | South Waziristan |
| Hameeda-56 | Home maker | North Waziristan |
| Suraya-60 | Widow | North Waziristan |
| Tahira-55 | Home maker | Kurram |
| Hashmat-above 60 | Widow | South Waziristan |
| Sultana-above 55 | Home maker | South Waziristan |
| Bilqees-above 60 | Home maker | South Waziristan |

**Bridging Conceptual Framework to Methodology**

In this research, the conceptual framework is grounded in UNSCR 1325, Galtung's Violence Triangle, and feminist human security, which directly informed the methodological choices of the study. Since the research question focuses on how tribal women identified early signs of conflict and issued forewarnings, the framework emphasized women's lived experiences as critical sources of knowledge. This necessitated a qualitative approach, privileging narratives, oral histories, and field interviews with women in Kurram, Orakzai, and North and South Waziristan.

The four pillars of UNSCR 1325 shaped the interview guides, ensuring that questions addressed protection, prevention, participation, and peacebuilding. Galtung's typology of violence provided analytical categories for coding data, enabling the identification of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence in women's accounts. Finally, the feminist lens required that women be treated not as passive victims but as active agents of early conflict warning, guiding the decision to foreground their voices in both data collection and analysis.

Thus, the methodology operationalized the conceptual framework by placing women's perspectives at the center of the research design, ensuring that their forewarnings were systematically documented and interpreted.

## Conceptual Framework

**This study is guided by the central research question:**
What were the early signs of conflict noticed by tribal women, and how did they forewarn about triggering incidents that escalated conflicts in the tribal districts of Kurram, Orakzai, North and South Waziristan?

**It is also important to highlight that:**

a. In the tribal districts, protection and prevention mechanisms are largely absent, leaving women exposed to violence.
b. Women's participation is denied, as patriarchal structures exclude them from jirgas and decision-making forums.

Therefore, to advocate for the inclusion of women in peacemaking and peacebuilding processes, the conceptual framework for this article is developed around United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the feminist approach to peacebuilding, and John Galtung's "Violence Triangle". Before advancing this debate, it is essential to recognize that early conflict warning is an integral element of peacebuilding.

John Galtung first introduced the term peacebuilding in 1969, defining it as a process of conflict prevention and management during the latent phase of a conflict by addressing its root causes. Identifying early warning signs in this latent phase and issuing alerts to prevent these causes from evolving into open conflict constitutes a core component of the peacebuilding process. This process involves all formal and informal structures within society.

Findings from our field research indicate that even when women have limited roles within formal settings, they can nonetheless play a vital and unique role in peacebuilding through informal early conflict warning mechanisms. Their observations and warnings contribute significantly to conflict prevention, underscoring the importance of their inclusion in broader peace processes.

During fieldwork, we assessed the precarious situation of women in the erstwhile FATA using the four pillars of UNSCR 1325—Protection, Prevention, Participation, and Peacebuilding and Recovery. However, mechanisms for the protection and prevention of violence against women are largely absent in these merged districts. As a result, the third pillar, *Participation*, is also fundamentally compromised. Women are consequently excluded from participating in peace processes and from contributing to conflict prevention through early warning systems. The fourth pillar, *Peacebuilding and Recovery*, emphasizes restoring societal stability after conflict. This pillar offers significant, yet largely untapped, opportunities for women in the erstwhile FATA, who constitute one of the most directly affected and vulnerable groups.

Examining the phenomenon through John Galtung's violence triangle, it is important to note that Galtung distinguishes between two forms of peace: *positive peace* and *negative*

*peace*. He argues that peace is not merely the absence of war—defined as negative peace—which is maintained by containing or suppressing conflict. Positive peace, by contrast, is a long-term condition sustained through economic and political stability, respect for human rights, freedom of speech and religion, and gender equality.

Tribal women in the merged districts remain highly vulnerable to violent cultural practices (*riwaj/dastoor*), including honor killings, being exchanged as compensation for the murder of a male relative, or being sold as brides. Furthermore, the state has historically ignored and marginalized them, denying them access to basic constitutional rights (Naseer, 2019).

The concept of peace cannot be understood independently from violence, which Galtung defines as comprising three interconnected forms: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence refers to explicit physical or verbal harm inflicted by a perpetrator on a victim. Women in the erstwhile FATA are frequently subjected to domestic abuse, beatings, and honor killings. Structural violence arises from institutionalized injustice, socioeconomic inequality, and oppressive social practices. In the former FATA, the male-dominated *jirga*—a council of tribal elders responsible for dispute resolution—systematically denied women access to justice. Cultural violence is embedded in societal norms, beliefs, and traditions, and often remains invisible because it is legitimized through cultural or religious frameworks (Galtung, 1969).

Tribal men are repressive due to extreme patriarchy and often view women as personal property. Cultural norms and social structures have denied tribal women any role in conflict prevention, resulting in their early warnings being ignored by men, even as women directly suffered during conflicts (Ullah et al., 2021). The feminist human security perspective defines security in a multidimensional manner, allowing for the analysis of unconventional methods to observe facts, examine subjects, explore narratives, and write histories with a gendered lens on conflict and war. Feminist scholars emphasize not merely "adding women and creating a stir" but ensuring their meaningful participation in consequential processes (Khan, 2024). In the erstwhile FATA, women face tribal violence, militant religious oppression, and state neglect in education, healthcare, and other essential services, rendering them largely invisible in national and international peacebuilding and rehabilitation efforts. Even after the merger of the tribal areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, tribal women remain absent from local peace *jirgas*, committees, and agreements, despite these decisions profoundly affecting their lives (Naseer, 2025).

As women remain peripheral to power structures globally, feminists prioritize women's security, focusing on them as individuals or community members rather than on the state or international system. Security is inherently complex and contested, involving struggle and disagreement; it is a process rather than an ideal, in which women must act as agents in securing their own well-being. In feminist scholarship, human security has been challenged by critical questions such as: Whose security? Where are women? These inquiries open debates on gender inclusion in international relations and security studies (Krulišová & O'Sullivan, 2022).

In 1999, the UN identified several facets of human security and linked them to gender issues relevant to tribal women. These included women's human rights, such as recognizing violence against women and girls—perpetrated by cultural, state, and non-state actors—inequalities in access to resources, power, and decision-making, and the acknowledgment of women (and men) as actors, not merely victims, in conflicts. In tribal conflicts, women experienced multiple forms of violence at both domestic and tribal levels (Afridi, 2023). Rafiqa, a doctor in Kurram, noted that "tribal women suffered cultural violence, coped with militant religious oppression, and endured blatant state aggression" (10 January 2021). It is important to view tribal women as active participants in conflict and to apply feminist insights emphasizing the significance of women's participation on an equal footing with men in pre- and post-conflict processes. Noreen Naseer (2022) argues that tribal women's everyday experiences in conflicts can provide essential insights for conflict prevention if society and the government take their perspectives seriously. Before the paper advances, it is pertinent to understand the life cycle of conflict to contextualise early warning in the latent and perceived phase for conflict emergence, as evident from the image below.

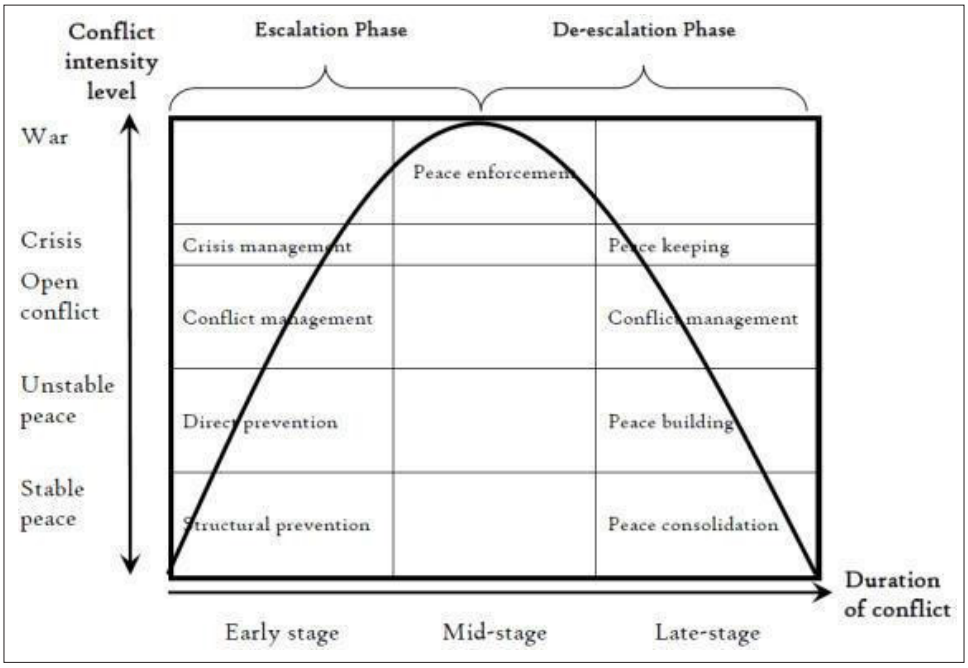


**Figure 2.**

*Source*: Swanstrom and Weissmann, 2005

## Early Warnings by the Tribal Women

To conduct this study, Kurram and Orakzai districts were selected for fieldwork to examine sectarian conflict, while North and South Waziristan tribal districts were studied to analyze conflict dynamics arising from militancy.

## Kurram and Orakzai Sectarian Conflict – Women's Warnings

Sakina, a religious speaker, and Zainab, a primary school teacher, noted that two pivotal events in 1979 triggered sectarian tensions in Kurram and Orakzai: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In the post-2001 era, militant groups promoting anti-Shia agendas—such as Al-Qaida, the Islamic State Khurasan Province (headquartered in Jalalabad, Afghanistan), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and the Taliban—vowed to purge Shia tribes from Kurram and Orakzai. This escalated into severe violence, including mass displacement, beheadings, and sexual assaults (August 18, 2018).

Local women in both districts attempted to warn tribal elders through their male relatives, but these warnings were largely ignored. Gulnaz, a Shia woman from the Turi tribe (Alizai), recounted that a seemingly minor incident at a local school in 2013 sparked a sectarian conflict. A Sunni Bangash boy initiated a fight with a Shia Turi boy, hurling sectarian slurs. The following day, all Sunni students boycotted the school. Gulnaz reported the matter to her husband, a tribal elder, suggesting resolution through a jirga (council of elders), but he dismissed it as a routine quarrel among children. Within days, two Shia Turi boys were killed in Bagzai Village, Lower Kurram, igniting a full-scale sectarian conflict (August 18, 2018).

Ayesha, a Sunni female health worker from the Bangash tribe appointed at the Basic Health Unit (BHU) in Sadda, recalled feeling uneasy when unfamiliar men sought treatment at the facility. She requested that the BHU in-charge verify their backgrounds and also informed her husband, a government employee, who advised her to remain silent. Within a month, militants raped and killed a Shia health worker, Suriya Bibi, while she was providing medical services in an ambulance. The incident was reported in the local Urdu press. In retaliation, Shia militias burned Sunni villages, causing mass displacement. Sunni female respondents Hafsa and Ayat, both from the Bangash tribe, noted that hate banners against Shias and inflammatory sermons from local mosques created panic among women, though men either ignored the signs or lacked channels to report them (December 19, 2019).

The sectarian conflict in Orakzai followed a different trajectory. Palwasha and Gul, Sunni female respondents, explained that tensions centered on the shrine of Syed Mir Anwar Shah in Kalaya, Lower Orakzai. While Shias revered the shrine, the Taliban equated shrines with idolatry and attempted their destruction, sparking deadly clashes. The shrine is now under the protection of the Pakistan Army, with restricted access. Shehla, a Sunni woman from the Massuzai tribe in Ghiljo village, Upper Orakzai, observed that armed

men frequented the village hujra (guest house), engaging with young Sunni men who later joined sectarian anti-Shia outfits before disappearing (December 18, 2019). Ghiljo, a remote and underdeveloped area with limited economic opportunities, witnessed protests by families of the disappeared youth through the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement.

In Kalaya, the central conflict zone of Orakzai, Hira, a Shia woman, recounted that Sunni neighbors began hosting strangers arriving in large trucks and refused to answer questions about their guests. She explained that in close-knit communities, such inquiries are customary. When she urged her male relatives to raise the matter with tribal elders or the administration, her elder brother dismissed her concerns as paranoia (August 15, 2019). A few months later, skirmishes erupted over the shrine, forcing Shia families to seek refuge in Hangu and Kohat districts. Shehwar and Sana, respondents from Orakzai, further reported that militants smuggled arms caches into Sunni households, which were later deployed against Shias (Zahab, 2011).

**Women's Early Warnings, Normalisation of Strangers, Patterns of Youth Recruitment in North and South Waziristan**

The North and South Waziristan districts have frequently been described in scholarly accounts as "the most dangerous place" due to the spillover of militant groups from Afghanistan after 2001. This influx triggered violent conflicts and counterinsurgency operations, ultimately displacing nearly one million people from both districts (Khan et al., 2023).

In North Waziristan, women respondents vividly narrated their experiences of suffering and marginalization. One respondent explained, "We warned our men, but nobody listened to us." Sinzela, a woman from the Dawar tribe in Tappy village, recalled: "We started noticing strange men in our village in double-cabin vehicles interacting with our young men and boys at *jamma* (congregation prayers) before the militants took control of our village. Our men also noticed strangers around the village, but they felt it was normal. However, for us women, the strangers' presence was not normal". Similarly, Ujala and Hina, also from the Dawar tribe, observed, "Our men started behaving cranky at home and would pick up fights in the neighborhood".

Dil-Khushad, a female respondent from the Wazir tribe in Shawa village, recounted how her son eventually joined the militants: "My son became quiet and would go missing for the whole day." Despite informing her family members and tribal elders, they rationalized his behavior as typical adolescent change, noting that "some become hyper and a few go quiet". Her concerns were echoed by two elderly female neighbors, Anwar and Parwari Begum, who lamented that men witnessed these behavioral shifts but failed to recognize that conflict was gradually building up in North Waziristan (18 December 2019).

Women's warnings in South Waziristan mirrored those from the north. Zarghona, a respondent from Wana, stated, "Our village was infested with strangers, and it became

very difficult for women to freely socialize in the community" (11 December 2021). She explained that before the conflict, elderly and married women interacted freely in public spaces. However, when she informed tribal elders about the strangers, they dismissed her concerns, assuming the men were Afghan refugees seeking work in Wana and the surrounding areas.

Collective testimonies from female Mehsud respondents in Makeen, as well as Mussarat from Ladha, highlighted similar observations of strangers in their villages. Farah recounted, "Our neighbor's young son, working with militants, would go missing for days and come back with money and gifts for his family." When questioned, the boy's mother admitted she did not know about his activities. Farah added, "Later, militants took over our village, and our neighbor's son terrorized local people as a militant".

Further testimonies from Jannat Bibi, Fauzia, and Ruqayya of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe in Wana revealed two distinct patterns among families whose sons disappeared and later returned with money and gifts from unnamed sources. Ruqayya, an elderly woman, explained, "Either the family would show off the gifts to their poverty-stricken neighbors, while wise women from other families would worry about the legitimacy of the son's source of income" (19 October 2022).

**Women's Early Warnings and Social Disconnect**

Across all interviews, a recurring theme emerged: women perceived triggering incidents that men ignored, leading to conflict escalation. Tribal women, despite lacking direct access to public life, repeatedly raised alarms through male relatives, urging them to convey their concerns to tribal elders. These warnings were dismissed, reflecting an entrenched gendered disconnect in social structures. Working women, including teachers and health workers, also reported untoward incidents to competent authorities, yet their concerns were disregarded. This neglect underscores the insignificance attributed to women's opinions in the patriarchal tribal setup (Askari et al., 2023).

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) reveal that women, regardless of formal schooling, demonstrated acute sensitivity to external threats. Their discomfort with the presence of unfamiliar men—often driving expensive vehicles without women—was a clear indicator of their observational intelligence. Women's warnings about such outsiders in Orakzai and among Turi tribesmen foreshadowed sectarian clashes, suggesting that conflicts in the merged FATA districts were not entirely indigenous but influenced by external actors.

**Commonality of Warnings and Situations**

Women across four tribal districts consistently reported early warning signs:

1. **Youth frustration and aggression**: Women observed young men becoming petulant, disturbed, and increasingly hostile at home. Asma, Shereen, and Asifa linked this to

men's growing interactions with militants, which heightened anxiety and isolation. Shahnaz noted inappropriate language and village fights (23 October 2022).

2. **Unemployment and humiliation**: Respondents highlighted that unemployed youth, insulted by elders, were drawn into militancy for monetary benefits.
3. **Livelihood insecurity**: Women such as Shehla, Nargis, and Zubaida reported missing poultry and livestock, yet these offences were ignored.
4. **Institutional shifts**: Women noticed jirgas (councils of elders) being replaced by militants' shuras. Gul, Hameeda, Tahira, and Suraya observed restrictions on women's mobility after militants' takeover (August 2018; January 2019; December 2021–January 2022).

Women also identified rising violence against children in schools, leading to dropouts and enrolment in newly established seminaries. Mothers warned elders against these seminaries and new mosque clergies, but their concerns were dismissed. Elderly women such as Hashmat, Sultana, and Bilqees noted negative propaganda by new clergies against tribal elders (23 September 2021). These ignored warnings culminated in children being recruited for suicide bombings.

### Neglect of Women's Warnings

The neglect of women's early warnings raises critical questions. Timely attention to women's concerns could have prevented minor issues from escalating into armed conflicts. For instance, addressing student violence in Kurram might have averted a sectarian war, while discouraging the ridicule of young boys in Orakzai and Waziristan could have reduced militant recruitment. This points to the broader debate on tribal women's marginalized social position in the erstwhile FATA and their exclusion from state structures (Khan et al., 2019).

### Religious Militancy and Patriarchal Structures

The patrilineal family structure institutionalized male superiority, reinforced by tribalism and militant ideology (Askari, Javed & Askari, 2023). Religious segregation silenced women, enabling militants to thrive. Sectarian conflicts revealed a destructive mix of tribalism and fanaticism: Sunni tribes aligned with militants to attack Shia communities, destroy property, and commit gendered violence. Women attempted to preserve kinship-based trust, but elders ignored their warnings, allowing militants to manipulate youth.

In Pashtun tribal society, women's position is defined by Pashtunwali's triad—Zar, Zen, Zameen (gold, women, land)—which equates women with property. Practices such as bride price, denial of inheritance, and honor killings reinforce women's status as possessions (Naseer, 2019). The saying "A woman's place is either at home or in a grave" epitomizes this exclusion. Despite these constraints, women's efforts to voice concerns

were commendable acts of resistance. Militants exploited tribal values to gain acceptance while isolating women. Jacobson and Deckard's (2012) tribal index highlights how tribal structures predict religiously inspired aggression, particularly against women. Thus, women's warnings about militants were systematically disregarded.

## Human Security and the Need for Inclusion

Findings reveal that human security for women in the erstwhile FATA is virtually non-existent in both pre- and post-conflict contexts. According to the 2011 census, FATA's population was 5 million, including 2.4 million women. Even today, 60% of the population lives below the poverty line, women's literacy stands at 7.8%, and half of rural healthcare facilities remain dysfunctional due to insecurity and political pressures (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these vulnerabilities.

The prevailing situation in the border districts underscores the urgency of conflict-sensitive approaches that integrate women's voices into peacebuilding. As Galtung (1969) argues, sustainable peace requires positive peace through empowerment, development, and inclusion. Tribal women's early warnings demonstrate their potential as agents of conflict prevention, yet patriarchal and militant structures silenced them. Therefore, recognizing and institutionalizing women's roles in risk assessment and peacebuilding is essential in these conflict-ridden tribal districts.

## Conclusion

The study is based on a qualitative design because the subject—women's role in conflict early warning in FATA—is underexplored and requires contextual depth rather than statistical generalization. The research is situated within feminist conflict analysis, emphasizing marginalized voices (tribal women) and linking them to broader theories of early warning and peacebuilding. In this study, women's interpersonal observations of conflict precursors (e.g., men's behavioral changes, tensions in schools, presence of armed strangers) are documented to advocate for their inclusion in peacebuilding processes in these conflict-affected border districts. These observations are further triangulated with community-level events to validate women's accounts.

The findings indicate that women identified changes in tribal cohesion and community structures as signals of instability. They analyzed the conflict milieu by noting actor reactions (male dominance, disregard of women's concerns) and trigger incidents (school tensions, armed strangers). Women classified these variables (children's fights, presence of strangers) into relational patterns that indicated potential conflict escalation. The study examined how women's warnings were ignored due to patriarchal exclusion, resulting in "missed opportunities" for prevention.

Their narratives revealed that women consistently observed early signs of conflict, behavioral changes in men, school tensions, and movements of strangers. These observations were later corroborated by actual outbreaks of violence, demonstrating predictive accuracy. Documentation of women's absence from political and social spheres illustrated why their warnings were disregarded. Women's ability to classify triggers and variables provided a systematic form of risk assessment, aligning with Ackermann's theoretical models.

The empirical data show that, despite accurate warnings, patriarchal structures obstructed communication and response, confirming the existence of missed opportunities. The methodology—female-led qualitative fieldwork, ethnographic observation, and adapted risk assessment models—ensured culturally sensitive and contextually valid data collection. The women's narratives, observed variables, and evidence of structural exclusion collectively demonstrate that women are critical connectors and early warning agents in conflict settings. The identified warning-response gap is not speculative; it emerges from documented instances in which women's warnings were ignored, leading to conflict escalation.

## References


1. Ackermann, A. (2020). Early warning and conflict prevention responsibilities of the international community. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of International Studies*. https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-527.
2. Afridi, M. (2023). Exploring women's educational rights in Pakistan through a case study of female education in FATA. *Paradigm Shift*, *2*(2), 31–37.
3. Ahmed, K. (2013). Sectarian violence in Pakistan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *48*(13), 40–42.
4. Arnado, M. A. (2012, October 24). *Women's involvement in conflict early warning systems: Moving from rhetoric to reality in Mindanao*. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.
5. Askari, A., Javed, A., & Askari, S. (2023). Women's education in Pakistan: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Women Empowerment*, *8*(1), 27–32.
6. Besnik, A. K. (2004). *The Kosovo early warning report*. Reinvest Institute and UNDP.
7. Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, *6*, 167–191.
8. Gizelis, T. -I. (2011). A country of their own: Women and peacebuilding. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *28*(5), 522–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894211418412.
9. Hill, T. (2003). *Rethinking the warlord approach to state building*. Political Studies Review. Sage.
10. Jacobson, D., & Deckard, N. (2012). The tribalism index: Unlocking the relationship between tribal patriarchy and Islamist militants. *New Global Studies*, *6*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1515/1940-0004.1149.
11. Khan, S. (2024, December 10). Female education – A catalyst for development in former FATA. *Paradigm Shift*. https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/female-education-fata/.
12. Khan, A., Khan, I. U., & Ahmad, M. (2019). The impact of patriarchy on female quality of life in tribal areas. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)*, *5*(2), 106–119.

13. Khan, G., Faiz, J., Khan, A., & Ahmad, M. (2023). The war on terror and its implications on the social life of the people of South Waziristan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences*, *4*(2), 14–28.
14. Krulišová, K., & O'Sullivan, M. (2022). Feminist security studies in Europe: Beyond Western academics' club. In M. Stern & A. E. Towns (Eds.), *Feminist IR in Europe: Trends in European IR theory* (pp. 33–53). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91999-3_3.
15. Mahsud, M. I. (2019). Religious militancy and tribal transformation in Pakistan: A case study of Mahsud Tribe in South Waziristan Agency. [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. University of Peshawar.
16. Mahsud, M. I. (2024). The emergence of nonviolent nationalist movement among the tribes of Waziristan in Pakistan. *Cogent Social Sciences, 10*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2333084.
17. Mahsud, M. I., & Aman, S. (2018). History of Religious Militancy in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, *10*(4), 97–109.
18. Naseer, N. (2015). Federally administered tribal areas (FATA): Impacts of militarisation and war crimes on tribal women and children. *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, *7*(4), 129.
19. Naseer, N. (2019). Tribal women, property and border: An auto-ethnographic critique of the Riwaj (tradition) on the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland. *Geopolitics*, *24*(2), 426–443. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1543662.
20. Naseer, N. (2025). The role of women in the peace-building process in the erstwhile FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*, *3*(5), 157–162.
21. Naseer, N., Bashir, F., & Zubair, M. (2020). Women and terrorism: An ethnographic study of women's collusion in Swat, Pakistan. *Review of Human Rights*, *6*(1), 79–97.
22. Nyheim, D. (2009). *Preventing violence, war and state collapse: The future of conflict early warning and response*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
23. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Reports and publications*. https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/all-reports-and-publications.
24. Rohwerder, B. (2015). *Conflict early warning and early response*. Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, University of Birmingham.
25. Rupesinghe, K. (2008). *Early warning: Selected works from 1985–1996*. The Foundation for Co-Existence.
26. Schmeidl, S., & Piza-Lopez, E. (2002). *Gender and conflict early warning: A framework for action*. International Alert and Swiss Peace Foundation.
27. Sättele, M., Bründl, M., & Straub, D. (2016). Quantifying the effectiveness of early warning systems for natural hazards. *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences*, *16*, 149–166. https://doi.org/10.5194/nhess-16-149-2016.
28. Ullah, K., Jan, A., Rani, M., Ahmad, M., & Khan, I. U. (2021). Factors affecting female education in the newly merged district Bajaur of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, *18*(4), 3136–3156.
29. Zahab, M. A. (2011). *Unholy nexus: Talibanism and sectarianism in Pakistan's tribal areas*. Sciences.Po.