



Keeping Adrift:

Documenting Best Practices for Addressing Gender Based Violence from the Platform of Women Friendly Spaces



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of Women Friendly Spaces



شیرکت گاہ

Shirkat Gah

WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

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Foreword

Devastating floods swept through the length of Pakistan in 2010; an estimated 20 million people were displaced and among them almost half were women. The dislocation, loss of family members and animals and destruction of homes and crops left people bereft and reeling. Women's additional miseries were due to their gender based vulnerabilities. Large numbers were pregnant, others especially the young and widows under threat of sexual abuse, harassment, forced early marriages, and even kidnapping.

Shirkat Gah responded to the emergency collaborating with community based partners in flood hit areas to mobilize and deliver relief especially to those unable to reach official camps. In view of the observed discrimination against women and the widespread incidence of GBV and its threat, Shirkat Gah ventured to establish Women Friendly Spaces (WFSs) as part of the recovery effort in the same areas. Building on its earlier experience of helping set up WFSs in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake (in Azad Jammu and Kashmir with SUNGI and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation), it proposed establishing 6 WFSs with a special focus on GBV and women's sexual and reproductive health.

The WFSs have been up and running since April this year in Bhakkar, Muzaffargarh, Usta Mohammad, Swat and Shahdadkot. Conceived as a mechanism to facilitate women's access to services to counter GBV, these provide women information about police, legal and protection services, psychosocial support, awareness of rights and laws, and mobilization skills. Run in coordination with Shirkat Gah's CBO partners these are managed by local staff. These also serve as drop-in centres and hubs of collective activity for local women of all ages.

It has been a source of immense satisfaction and pride that the initiative has been welcomed by community members including the male population and that the response from various duty bearers, service providers, local NGOs and international organisations has been readily forthcoming. This publication seeks to highlight the efforts of those who have made the WFSs living enterprises and at the same time to document the plight and struggle of survivors of violence who continue to inspire us with their courage and hopefully also the readers of this volume.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the support of UNFPA and Global Fund for Women in making the WFS a reality - without their financial support these would have remained a dream.

Khawar Mumtaz

December 2011

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we must acknowledge the courage of the survivors of Gender Based Violence (GBV) who accessed the Women Friendly Spaces (WFSs) and shared their stories with us for the purposes of research and documentation. Their generosity of spirit helped us to learn from their experiences and provided the inspiration behind this work.

We would also like to thank Shirkat Gah's team members including the GBV focal points (Seham Sadaat, Sabiha Ashraf, Sanam Mallah), the Research and Documentation focal point (Uzma Farooq) as well as the WFS Coordinators (Amna Bibi, Tahira Bashir, Ume-e-Farwa, Jannat Khatoon, Sidra Khan) and their teams who worked tirelessly to reach out to the women and help prevent GBV in the flood affected areas of Pakistan.

We would like to thank our outreach partners (Shahdadkot: NGOs Development Society; Jaffarabad: NISA; Muzaffargarh: Social Youth Council of Patriots (SYCOP); Bhakkar: District Social Welfare Council (DSWC); Swat: Khushboo).

Those referral partners of the WFS who have assisted in providing services to the referred survivors must also be thanked for their kindness and cooperation and for the respect they have shown to this cause and their candidness during the interviews for this study.

Particular thanks is due to Ms. Khawar Mumtaz for her constant guidance and mentoring, Dr. Tabinda Sarosh for steering this project and guiding and training all the team members and Ms. Humaira Mumtaz, the Flood Response Coordinator for sharing her efforts and experiences in managing the WFS in Tindo Dag. In addition, continuous support from Ms Naureen Tawakkal, Ms Saira Bano and Ms Fauzia Viqar and prompt cooperation from Shirkat Gah's publications department (Arifa Nazle and Shahina Hanif) is also gratefully acknowledged.

Last but not least, we would like to thank our donors, United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA) and Global Fund for Women for funding the WFSs, and UNFPA in particular for making this document possible.

It is hoped that all those who have been involved in this endeavour of addressing GBV from the platform of WFS will continue to work together in rehabilitating people affected by disasters with particular focus on the sufferings of women and striving to attain the optimum level of gender equality in society as a whole.

List of Abbreviations

ARC	American Refugee Committee
BHU	Basic Health Unit
CBO	Community Based Organization
CNIC	Computerized National Identity Cards
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DANESH	Drugs and Narcotics Educational Services for Humanity
DHQ	District Headquarters
DSWC	District Social Welfare Council
EDO	Executive District Officer
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FIR	First Information Report
GBV	Gender Based Violence
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IP	Implementing Partner
LHV	Lady Health Visitor
LHW	Lady Health Worker
LSC	Local Support Committee
MOWD	Ministry of Women Development
MSS	Marie Stopes Society
NCHD	National Commission on Human Development
NDS	NGO's Development Society
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NISA	NISA Development Foundation and Women's Resource Centre
OAKDF	Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation
RH	Reproductive Health
RHC	Rural Health Centre
RNA	Rapid Needs Assessment
SUNGI	Sungi Development Foundation
SYCOP	Social Youth Council of Patriots
TBA	Traditional Birth Attendant
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VAW	Violence against Women
VTI	Vocational Training Institute
WFS	Women Friendly Space

Chapter 1

Watching Lifetimes Get Washed Away



Watching Lifetimes Get Washed Away

In the last decade Pakistan an underdeveloped nation already crippled by various socio-economic and geopolitical problems was wracked by two major natural disasters. The first natural disaster struck the country on 8th October 2005, when an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale hit Pakistan's picturesque mountainous region and left 86,000 people dead, orphaned some 10,000 children and rendered an estimated 3.5 million people homeless. Five years later calamity struck again when monsoon rains mercilessly pounded and submerged villages and towns across all four provinces of Pakistan during the summer of 2010.

According to the National Disaster Management Authority¹, the magnitude of destruction left by this disaster was twice that of the Pakistan Earthquake 2005, Cyclone Katrina 2005, Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004, Cyclone Nargis 2008 and Haiti Earthquake 2010 all put together. The Singapore Red Cross estimated that approximately one-fifth of Pakistan's land, about 796,095 square kilometers (307,374 sq mi), was underwater. Immediate data released by the Government of Pakistan indicated that an overwhelming 20 million lives were directly affected by the floods mainly through the destruction of property, livelihood and infrastructure.²

While natural calamities leave a trail of death and destruction in their wake, it is the surviving population that suffers the most, struggling as they are to subsist in an environment where their basic needs and security are heavily compromised. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and governments around the world now agree that women and children are generally more vulnerable than adult men in most societies around the world. During humanitarian crises (whether arising out of conflicts or natural disasters), these groups become even more vulnerable and likely targets for exploitation and abuse. Any relief effort that follows these crises seldom

¹ Annual Report 2010, National Disaster Management Authority of Pakistan.

² Singapore Red Cross (September 15, 2010). "Pakistan Floods: The Deluge of Disaster - Facts & Figures as of 15 September 2010.

lays adequate emphasis on gender- or child-specific issues. As noted in Shirkat Gah's special bulletin on the 2005 earthquake, rights-based efforts are often relegated to an "extra" status in any emergency response.³ Elaborating on the insignificance of women's issues, E. Enarson reported after the Gujrat Earthquake in India in 2001, that the "tyranny of the urgent" often shortchanges women and girls in the disaster zone, even when the responding organizations are well aware of gender issues. This is even more likely over the long term as media attention declines and the politics of recovery become more complex.⁴

Violence against women is directly correlated with the status of women in Pakistan. The life-long social and economic disadvantages, early marriages and births lead to limited career opportunities forcing them into the informal sector (70%), subjected to domestic violence, bartered to settle disputes, and killed in the name of honour. Violence has only recently received national level recognition with the passage of the Domestic Violence Bill, 2009, by the National Assembly which however lapsed in the Senate. In 2010 alone Aurat Foundation recorded 8000 cases of reported violence. It is estimated that this is just the tip of the iceberg. Violence, especially domestic violence, is seldom reported and according to Shirkat Gah's own findings it has been internalized by most women as an unchangeable part of their traditions and norms.

In a country where Gender-based violence (GBV) has been a consistent problem of high magnitude, the floods of 2010 predictably exacerbated the situation, also noted by Shirkat Gah during its multiple relief activities.

The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in its guidelines for GBV interventions⁵ states that during a crisis, institutions and systems for physical and social protection may be weakened or destroyed. During the early stages in emergencies there is a rise in sexual violence, and even in later, more stable phases other forms of GBV become more frequent.

The learning from past relief efforts has been that in the scramble to provide food, shelter and sanitation, women's specific needs are relegated to a secondary status. As a result, women are deprived of even the most basic of needs. For instance, latrines in the camps do not have roofs and the locks are affixed on the outside, leaving women vulnerable to attack. Food is another problem, as the system of food distribution requires presenting a document to verify one's identity. The system does not take into account the fact that

³ Rising from the Rubble. Shirkat Gah (2006).

⁴ Promoting Social Justice In Disaster Reconstruction: Guidelines For Gender-Sensitive And Community-Based Planning. Elaine Enarson (2001).

⁵ Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings. IASC (2005).

many women living in a conservative and impoverished society do not possess identity documents. Another common issue that women in the camps face is the difficulty in nursing children due to a lack of privacy.

Shirkat Gah is a rights-based organization with a special focus on women. Its vision includes the empowerment of women, promoting gender equality, ensuring human dignity, security and opportunities for all. It also works to ensure that peace prevails and resources are shared on an equitable and sustainable basis. One of Shirkat Gah's core areas of focus is building capacity in women as rights claimants who are able to make informed decisions and create alternative life choices.

The idea for the project *Addressing Women's Needs and Vulnerabilities through Women-friendly Spaces and Hammams* grew out of a rapid assessment of women's situation in nine camps around Abbottabad, Mansehra and Muzaffarabad conducted in 2005 during the relief efforts being carried out by Shirkat Gah. The assessment led to the development of the idea of Women-friendly spaces (WFS) and *hammams* (bathing areas), both of which are relatively new concepts in Pakistan. Each WFS was conceived as a venue to serve women from the villages near and around it. The WFS conducted various structured activities such as disseminating information on health and reproductive health needs, imparting skills training, conducting lectures and talks amongst other activities. The WFS also became an oasis for unstructured activities, such as reading, playing games, coming together for relief, support and other collective undertakings. The spaces were jointly managed by partner organizations who are working with the participation of local women at the grassroots level in NWFP and AJK respectively i.e. Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation (OAKDF) and SUNGI Development Foundation (SUNGI).

Following the 2010 floods, WFSs were set up in five districts with the primary objective of addressing GBV in the affected areas. The WFS served two purposes. One was to serve as a place where women could access a safe environment, seek psychosocial support and be facilitated when seeking medical, legal and security services through a system of referrals. The second, more important purpose was to address GBV. This also entailed disseminating knowledge regarding women's rights vis a vis their sexual and reproductive health as well as clarifying the concept and forms of GBV and the legal rights available to them with regard to it. The most important addition to the original concept of the WFS was the introduction of a system of case management. Under this system, survivors of GBV could approach the WFS in confidence, report the abuse, gain information about the choices available to them and make informed decisions and get relevant referrals to

committed and qualified referral partners.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which has GBV and Reproductive Health as two of its core areas, lent extensive support to both the endeavors. It is worth mentioning here that in response to the 2010 flood, the UNFPA established a Gender-based Violence Sub Cluster (under the Protection cluster) to facilitate the coordination of GBV response services, build capacity of local GBV response actors and to advocate a multi-sectoral survivor centred response. Through participation of the local organizations comprising the sub cluster, UNFPA has initiated GBV case management, introduced standardized GBV incident reporting forms, and conducted several orientation sessions on Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Guidelines on Prevention and Response to GBV.⁶

For implementation of the project *Gender-based Violence in the Flood Affected Areas*, Shirkat Gah has used the support of five Community Based Organizations (CBOs), each located in the same district as the WFS. This has helped increase community mobilization, and strengthened smaller organizations with greater community outreach and the ability to integrate with locals from the affected areas. The purpose of engaging local actors was to increase the level of awareness regarding GBV and Violence Against Women (VAW) and to ensure that the benefits of the WFS can be conveyed in the long-term, even if the project itself does not extend beyond the short run.

This Best Practices Document will examine the efforts and achievements of Shirkat Gah through the WFSs set up in disaster situations. It will also outline the needs of the women which necessitated the establishment of WFSs, and give voice to the views of locals and referral partners regarding them. Finally the report will elaborate on the lessons learnt and explain why the project should continue.

⁶ TERMS OF REFERENCE. GBV Multi-sectoral response in KP and FATA agencies. UNFPA (2011).

Chapter 2

The South Asian Earthquake of 2005



The South Asian Earthquake of 2005

A Camp Experience

On 8th October 2005, the Pakistani government, CSOs and ordinary citizens were shaken by the worst natural disaster most of them had seen during their lifetime. With entire cities and villages razed to the ground within the space of a few minutes and constant coverage in the media television of rescue work, dead bodies and the injured an atmosphere of despair engulfed the nation. The outpouring of sympathy was overwhelming, as were the donations and relief efforts by people from all walks of life. Following the disaster over US\$ 5.4 billion was received in foreign aid and assistance.⁷

It was observed that the destruction compounded preexisting gender-specific vulnerabilities which are the result of traditional practices such as *purdah*, gender segregation and female seclusion. As Shirkat Gah began to intervene, it not only examined the reasons and ways in which women's specific needs and vulnerabilities are overlooked during relief processes, but also the particular needs of women that required intervention.

1. Needs Assessment and Findings

In December 2005, Shirkat Gah conducted a Rapid Needs Assessment of Women Survivors in collaboration with five organizations* in the earthquake-hit areas of Muzaffarabad (Azad Kashmir) and Mansehra (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). Interviews were conducted with 350 respondents of which 90% were women, including married women, adolescent girls, as well as old and/or disabled women. Some male

⁷ The Pakistan Earthquake of 2005: A Reminder of Human-Science Interaction in Natural Disasters Risk Management - Illinois International Review (2009)

* Centre for Health and Population Studies, SUNGI Development Foundation, Omar Asghar Khan Development Foundation, Khwendo Kor and PAVHNA. The training and analysis was by Kausar S. Khan and Shama Dossa of the Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University.

camp administrators were also interviewed. The interviews were conducted mostly through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Sixty-four in-depth interviews were also conducted.

1.1 Food Distribution

Shirkat Gah's Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) found that in such a volatile environment women became even more dependent on men for their survival. Those who could not be accompanied by a male relative during food distribution found it difficult to push through to the front of the queue and often had their packages snatched from them on the way back home. One woman also reported that some men offered assistance in obtaining food in exchange for sexual favours.

1.2 Compensation

Access to compensation and relief goods became a problem for those women who had lost their CNIC documents and were relocated to areas other than where their male family members were registered.

1.3 Unsafe Latrines

Most of the camps had inadequate latrines that were unsuitable for use by women. Many latrines were situated at the very end of the camp, behind men's latrines and most women felt embarrassed crossing the camp to use them. Furthermore, due to insufficient lighting around latrines women were reluctant to use them in the night for fear of being attacked or being approached inappropriately by a man. Many latrines did not have doors or lights and so were completely unsafe and inadequate for women. Almost none of the camps had adequate space for women to bathe. There were reports of girls being harassed on the way to latrines as well as being spied on by peeping toms.

1.4 Lack of Privacy in Tents

Most women interviewed in the camps felt that they were living on busy streets, with men constantly walking around outside. Due to traditional *purdah* restrictions the women felt that they became restricted to their tents and almost caged. Women also reported

that men would peep unnecessarily into their tents. The problem was further aggravated by security guards (in the few camps that had them) who checked on the tents at nights with flashlights. While this was done for their security, it offended most women who saw it as an invasion of their privacy.

1.5 Insecurities and Anxieties

Some of the main concerns among women appeared to be the loss of children's education, the loss of livelihood, marriage of their daughters and having to live amongst unfamiliar people and surroundings.

It was also reported that some families, which had many female members, especially teenaged girls of marriageable age, refused to shift to the camps because of the privacy and *purdah* issues.

Spousal tension increased as a result of men being out of work, having lost their property and lack of privacy for intimate relations. Women also feared increased violence at the hands of their male relatives.

Personal fears of abandonment also came up during the interviews. A disabled woman expressed fears that her husband might abandon her and not return. Similarly, some women feared not being able to find a spouse. Others were concerned about completing their education. There were also insecurities regarding the tenure of the camp facilities and some women feared being asked to leave.

1.6 Reproductive Health and Hygiene Requirements

Pregnant women's health suffered due to a poor nutritional diet. Due to a shortage of female personnel in camp administration and unavailability of *dais* (traditional birth attendants) women faced difficulty in expressing their reproductive health needs. This was especially felt when trying to obtain sanitary napkins, contraceptives and hair removing creams. Women also suffered menstrual complications and did not have sufficient knowledge about such issues to deal with them.

It is pertinent to mention that some men and women made the following suggestions:

- Employ female service providers
- Appoint women for the management of camps

- Have women distribute personal hygiene items
- Mobilize older women with knowledge about birth and delivery

1.7 Psychological Trauma

Many women who had lost their children and had been relocated were reported to spend most of their time alone in their tents crying in despair. Young girls said they missed their friends and being able to play in courtyards. Parents felt dejected seeing their children queue up for meals. Marital relationships and child-parent relationships became strained due to loss of work and property.

2. GBV and Violence Against Women

Post-disaster relief efforts and policymaking sidelined GBV, which is almost always a woman-centric issue. It was observed that there was a tendency to avoid the troubling issues of rape, kidnapping, trafficking and domestic violence at all levels. Shirkat Gah also found that women who had lost their husbands or other male heads of the family were most vulnerable. They relied on other male relatives, which made them and their children more susceptible targets for exploitation and abuse. Shirkat Gah also examined the reasons these issues remained largely unaddressed. It was discovered that many of the organizations working in the affected areas had established relationships with the Pakistani military and the government which they did not wish to disturb by bringing up issues regarding violence against women. Some felt that given the gargantuan task that already lay before them, it would be unwise to divert attention by raising controversial issues. It was also observed that the military and organizations linked with the government were trying to withhold instances of violence. Organizations that had brought cases of rape or harassment of women to the notice of authorities were persuaded or coerced to maintain their silence. Those that persisted in raising the matter were eventually denied access to the relief areas.

Several cases of rape were reported during this period, however NGOs and international organizations were prevented from following up on the incidents. Some women who complained were coerced into maintaining their silence. It is feared that several more cases of rape and sexual harassment have gone unreported or have been covered up

by the police and other agencies. One incident did receive considerable publicity, where a doctor had allegedly raped an earthquake victim at a hospital in Lahore. Although eventually the survivor retracted her statement, the doctor's own admissions in court regarding his relationship with his patient can be described as inappropriate at best.

3. Women-friendly Spaces in Muzaffarabad and Mansehra

Following the needs assessment, Shirkat Gah set up WFSs in Muzaffarabad, and Mansehra.

WFSs and *Hammams* were originally conceived as spaces where women could access services and raise concerns that were generally difficult to express in a male dominated environment. The need for this was assessed from the RNA. WFSs would employ trained staff that could help women identify key resources and help them make choices.

In assessing the impact of the WFSs, Shirkat Gah interviewed WFS employees, community members, women accessing the WFS and representatives of donor organizations.

Recalling their experiences in working at the centres the WFS staff said that their knowledge had increased while working there and this had made them more confident and strengthened their capacity to help others. One male community member from Charakpur said that the WFS "...has brought 100% awareness to the women of the area and in doing so had impacted the next generation."

It is important to note that the WFSs were not imposed upon the community. This is evident from the fact that the land for the establishment of WFSs was offered by the villagers.

3.1 Starting Out

Staff reported that establishing WFSs was a path wrought with challenges. The most common obstacle was people's generally negative view of NGOs. Many made vague assumptions about women's activities at the centre. Also as one WFS coordinator pointed out, "Women's opinions do not matter if a male relative does not approve of something." Another recalled that initially men assumed that the WFS was simply a place where women learned to sew, however, when they realized that the space was also used to raise awareness they felt insecure and voiced doubts about the exact nature of women's activities there.

3.2 Settling In

Despite the initial opposition from male community members a WFS staff member noted that "...it took time to change their views, but eventually men were not so opposed to the idea."

A coordinator related that once a WFS was fully functional it worked with women from 10 villages and conducted awareness sessions with them regarding gender and health. The regular activities for most at the WFS involved: adult literacy classes, craft and embroidery and library classes (women could either read books at the centre or borrow them to take home). This exposure to literacy was helpful in bringing women into the realm of formal education. One staff member believed that one of the biggest achievements of the WFS was that it had encouraged many women to continue their education and had managed to get some of them registered for matriculation exams.

3.3 Community Impact

Irum Shahzadi, a coordinator at a WFS, said, "The Management Committee of the WFS mobilizes women in their villages and those who learn skills in the WFS go back and teach other women, which in turn increases mobilization."

As mentioned earlier, during the RNA it was found that the lack of female personnel and the unavailability of traditional birth attendants (TBAs) had hindered women from meeting their reproductive health requirements. Through the WFS, local women were trained as TBAs so that they could look after and provide support to pregnant women in their community. These TBAs would also take women to the hospital, when required and follow up on their cases. Furthermore, six health sessions were held every month, both at the WFS and the community to provide awareness on maintaining health and hygiene, family planning and other related reproductive health issues.

3.4 Livelihood Needs

Rukhsana Bibi, a WFS staff member also indicated that when village committee meetings were held the community would express the need for loans to buy livestock and start agricultural activity. The request for loans was forwarded to SUNGI through

the field coordinator as a resolution. In case agricultural training was needed, the WFS staff contacted SUNGI which provides training and seeds, as well as also follow ups. Staff members of the WFS pointed out that these training sessions were extremely successful as farmers who could earlier only cultivate for domestic use, were now were able to sell their produce in the market.

One benefit of the livelihood support for women through the WFS was that it not only helped them meet their needs, but also gave them a leadership role in the community and garnered support for the WFS from the community men. Iram Shahzadi claimed that many men wanted a similar centre for men, as women had become very active through trainings and through SUNGI's village committee for women.

Among SUNGI'S village committee's initiatives was the reconstruction of the Link Road, which compelled community men to think about playing a more active role in community development.

A male resident of Hattian Dupatta said that it was the women who were leading the Link Road construction project and the men were there to help them. He also said that this could have only been possible with the hard work of women, who gave more time to the project than men.

3.5 Women Empowerment

Recognizing that the WFSs were serving several purposes, an elderly male resident said, "These centres are serving women's needs from education to training and recreational activities, such as ludo and badminton just as men do in hotels and parks. Now women have a space, which is very important."

Samina Khan of SUNGI says that "...if a girl from a remote village says that she wants more books in the library, it should be considered a success." Similarly Khawar Mumtaz, CEO of Shirkat Gah, said "...we felt that this would also be an empowering process which would create not only opportunities for women, but also give them a say in what they want."

A female community member, who had also enrolled in university following persuasion from the WFS feels that women should be empowered and that she, too now felt empowered. A WFS staff

member felt that women had been empowered through awareness sessions which had brought them together and given them considerable knowledge regarding their rights.

3.6 Funding

Dr. Shamas of UNFPA believes that any such project needs at least three to four years of initial funding after which it may be able to generate funds on its own. The initial seed money can be obtained from UNFPA or other donors. She also suggested, "The community could form a CBO and generate funds and ask donors for a matching grant."

Samina Khan of SUNGI was of the opinion that, "If the WFS in each village can gradually start generating money, then they might be able to collect funds." She also feels that "...it is important for the Pakistan government and the people to support such initiatives."

Khawar Mumtaz, CEO Shirkat Gah, concluded that this has been one of the most inspiring projects that Shirkat Gah has undertaken. While Shirkat Gah has considerable experience in the field, this was the first time they created centres where women had control over their activities and took decisions. She further stated that "...the role of Shirkat Gah and SUNGI has been that of facilitators, creating linkages and providing training."

The impact of these centres has been extremely positive as it is not only women who are benefitting but the entire community. The leadership potential of women has been realized and accepted by this conservative community and there is actual evidence of women's empowerment. Lastly, Khawar Mumtaz expressed a desire to broaden the impact of the WFSs. She said, "My appeal to all organizations would be to try and replicate this model. This model needs replication, it needs support. The model becomes self sustaining after initial seed money and the capacity building of people who are going to run it. I would like to call upon other NGOs to take up the cause so that we have many such centres all over the country."

3.7 Lessons Learnt

An endeavor such as the one outlined above cannot reap benefits in a day. The selection of appropriate community members for key

position and training is required. Opposition from male community members needs to be overcome. However, through such spaces for women every person's potential is realized as part of a process of empowerment, development and building a stronger community. The results that interventions such as the WFSs do produce, though, can be long-term and far reaching. After initial years of funding, training and capacity building such projects can become self-sustaining, however, they do require a great deal of input before reaching that stage as many of these communities are striving for survival.

Chapter 3

Women-Friendly Spaces as a Platform to
Counter GBV



Women-Friendly Spaces as a Platform to Counter GBV

Floods 2010, Experiences after Resettlement

Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. And it is perhaps the most pervasive. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace.” – Kofi Annan

After the floods hit Pakistan in 2010 Shirkat Gah reached the affected areas in all the four provinces to provide relief to the survivors. In keeping with its mission statement Shirkat Gah teams focused especially on the needs of the female population and the specific problems women have to deal with in such catastrophes.

Shirkat Gah mobilized and raised funds to provide flood relief in 12 districts across the 4 provinces of Pakistan to more than 65,000 beneficiaries, and medical assistance via 26 medical camps to 12,000 beneficiaries. Setting up relief camps (food, goods and medical) was preceded by needs assessment activities including individual interviews regarding the Reproductive Health issues of the affected population. During these efforts Gender-Based Violence regularly came up as a major human rights, social and public health problem in various IDP camps as well as areas where resettlement had begun. An urgent need was felt for interventions that could help prevent violence and strengthen women to cope with such challenges even after they ceased to be IDPs.

In light of its findings, the Shirkat Gah team submitted a proposal to UNFPA to establish Women-friendly Spaces (WFS) as a platform to address



Participants and the facilitator of a GBV training

prevailing Gender-based Violence in the flood affected areas. Having already implemented a successful model of WFSs after the earthquake 2005, Shirkat Gah decided to redesign the model with new applications to address GBV in a focused and organized manner. This was an innovative initiative that would use the WFS forum to reach out to the community to explore the incidence of GBV and engage community elders, religious leaders and

survivors themselves to unite as a force against GBV. The WFS would also serve as a referral centre and a “point of initial contact” with the survivor with provisions for initial psychosocial counseling.

Project Location and Teams

Five flood affected districts where Shirkat Gah had already been carrying out relief activities were selected for the project:

- Shahdadt, Sindh
- Jaffarabad, Balochistan
- Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- Bhakkar, Punjab
- Muzaffargarh, Punjab

Besides the senior cadre of Shirkat Gah that contributed towards steering and guiding the project, the team consisted of a national level coordinator, three GBV focal points for the provinces and 5 WFS coordinators, their assistants and support staff. The WFS coordinators and their assistants were chosen from among the candidates from the affected community itself to ensure maximum insight into problems of the women, their expectations and possible recourses.

Needs Assessment and Mapping

Following the induction of the team a RNAs was conducted; a week long exercise that consisted of FGDs and in-depth interviews with the women of the community. Findings of the RNA revealed a multitude of problems which were identical in some areas and differed in others. Domestic violence was by far one of the commonest concerns of the women and was more or less internalized by most as a routine part of their lives. They seemed resigned to domestic violence as their predestined fate as well as an accepted tradition. Women were unaware of their legal and reproductive rights and the services available in their areas related to RH and GBV. Early age marriages, socioeconomic deprivation and harmful traditional practices (*watta satta* etc.) were also seen. On the other end of the spectrum were findings related to more serious and heinous forms of GBV such as honour killing and rape. Specific findings for each district are given in chapters that follow.

Mapping exercise consisted of identifying services essential for a multi-sectoral response to GBV and assessing their quality and accessibility. Services related to medical and health care, legal recourse, psychosocial support and safety and security institutions were explored. Shirkat Gah's focal points personally visited these service providers and assessed their capacity as potential referral partners. Overall, there was a dearth of services in the psychosocial sector and hence establishing referrals points in this area proved to be a challenge. Health and Medical service providers consisted of Lady Health Visitors (LHVs), Lady Health Workers (LHWs), private practitioners and government doctors serving at BHUs and primary care facilities.

1. The Project

The WFS was to serve as a hub for community awareness as well as a referral point for survivors of GBV. The multi-sectoral approach for referrals was adopted and referrals partners were inducted based on the quality of services and commitment from them to provide the services agreed upon. The WFS coordinators and the provincial



An exercise on the need for multi-sectoral coordination



A group activity during the training

focal points personally liaised with local lawyers, health care providers, nearest shelter homes, police stations and other influential members of the community to have a working network in place that would persist beyond the duration of the project. All the referral partners are regularly contacted in

order to sustain their commitment and keep them abreast of the activities of the WFS.

Two types of outreach awareness activities are planned in the WFS:

- Those directed at the general well being of the women, reproductive health, their capacity building and livelihood
- Those directed specifically towards the prevention of GBV, creation of linkages and dissemination of information regarding channels and referral pathways and finding the best possible recourse for the survivors

The WFS staff comprises of a coordinator, assistant coordinator, and a male and female attendant. The primary responsibilities of the coordinator, concerning case management are taking case history of survivors, assisting them in accordance with standard guidelines, making referrals and following up. In addition to this the coordinator must organize the activities in the centre, arrange meetings for the GBV project and manage the administration of the centre. The coordinators are in turn supervised by the provincial focal points who visit every fortnight to conduct outreach sessions, meet with the referral partners and monitor the progress of the cases. Cases of GBV are recorded on Incident Recording Forms and a copy is sent to the GBV sub-cluster in the province.

A Local Support Committee (LSC) was formed in each district which consisted of survivors, referral partners, male allies, religious leaders, teachers and key role players from within the community. The LSC serves as a support system for the WFS, helping in mobilizing

community and designing activities for the WFS to attract and engage female members. Other functions of the LSC are informal evaluation by providing direct feedback on the functioning of the WFS and guiding the project according to the needs of the community.

Women and Youth groups were also formed to ensure maximum involvement of the community and to explore their issues and encourage them to suggest the solutions themselves and then design activities accordingly. This encouraged the adolescents to participate actively and also express their needs. For instance, when girls voiced their concerns about reproductive health problems, sessions for RH and hygiene were conducted and hygiene kits were distributed to the participants accessing the WFSs.

WFSs serve as extended social spaces for women where they can meet, vent and also learn skills. Sewing machines were provided by Shirkat Gah from its separate flood fund so that women could come to the WFSs and spend their time productively. This also helped minimize opposition from male family members. Relief goods were also distributed among the community.

Various methodologies were adopted in different districts which will be discussed in the following chapters.

1.1 Capacity Building of the Team

UNFPA nominated the team leader to be trained as a GBV Capacity Development Promoter, one of the 9 in Pakistan. In a 14-day long exhaustive exercise the participants learnt everything from the basic concepts of GBV to advance program management for GBV in humanitarian settings, coordination in the field and ethical guidelines for collecting data.

The team leader in turn trained the entire Shirkat Gah GBV team in the basics of GBV in

Jannat, the WFS coordinator from Shahdadt

I am a success story myself. I had never left my home town before this training. Being employed as the coordinator has given me the confidence to assert myself in front of my family and ask for permission to be allowed to come to Karachi for the training. This is a liberating experience for me and I am enjoying being here with all my colleagues and getting to learn so much.

humanitarian conditions, introduction to the IASC guidelines for preventing GBV, psychosocial aspects of GBV, and legal provisions for women and laws related to GBV including legal procedures such as the filing of FIRs. This training itself was a remarkable achievement because the WFS coordinators who had been selected from the community traveled all the way to Karachi, met under the same roof, exchanged experiences and learned the skills needed to steer the WFS.

The focal points and the WFS coordinators were further trained in extensive and advanced modules of Psychosocial Aspects of GBV by ROZAN, another partner organization of UNFPA.

The result was a strong, capable and motivated team that was able to grasp the real essence of the project and employ various tactics to engage the community without inciting undue criticism and form allies where and when possible to bolster the project at the local level.

Chapter 4

WFS Qubo Saeed Khan, Shahdadtot



WFS Qubo Saeed Khan, Shahdadkot

Qubo Saeed Khan is one of the oldest towns of district Qambar Shahdadkot. During the 2010 floods, around 20,000 people were forced to leave their homes as the town became increasingly inundated. Although Qubo Saeed Khan suffered relatively less damage compared to other villages (some of which were either almost or completely wiped out), the level of hardship that was faced by the inhabitants of this small, underdeveloped village has exacerbated, and gender-based violence (GBV) has increased as result of rising frustrations.

Initially, a WFS was opened in the village Shah Baig Murree in April 2011. However, hiring suitable staff from the village proved challenging and it was decided that the project should instead move to Qubo Saeed Khan which was also a severely flood affected area of Shadadkot. The WFS became functional in April 2011 and was formally convened in June 2011. The opening ceremony was attended by both men and women of the community as well as several key service providers and duty bearers many of whom went on to become either members of the LSC or referral points for the WFS.

The WFS centre in Qubo Saeed Khan, Shahdadkot, has been providing its female visitors with vocational skills in sewing, enabling them to earn a livelihood. Although a teacher has been hired the women share their knowledge and ideas and have developed a support system by engaging together in group activities, sharing their problems and mentoring each other. It is pertinent to mention here that at the initial stage many GBV survivors do not ask for a specific service or assistance as they are just relieved to be able to come to a place and share their problems.

1. Rapid Needs Assessment

Although both government and private health facilities are available in Shahdadkot city, there were few options in Qubo Saeed Khan other than a handful of LHWs, LHVs, TBAs and a Rural Health Centre (RHC),



Rapid Needs Assessment being conducted

where a doctor was rarely available. Due to the expense of travel most women do not make the trip to Shahdadkot for checkups, antenatal care, and childbirth etc. unless they feel it is absolutely necessary. Furthermore, the post flood devastation has resulted in destruction of roads and facilities creating issues of accessibility and availability. To make matters worse, the flood nearly destroyed the road joining Qubo Saeed with Shahdadkot city. In one

village, it was also reported that following the flood, the LHW in the area had run out of medicines.

Education is also in a sorry state, with only one primary school (coeducation). For secondary education children have to go to Shahdadkot city and so few, if any, girls from Qubo Saeed have ever received any formal education as parents deem the travel expense and security issues not worth the trouble. Many of the young girls are also not interested in education.

Discussions on violence during the FGDs elicited various responses. Some women claimed that they did not know what ‘violence’ meant. Others believed it meant a husband beating his wife; still others felt it could mean exchange marriages. Most participants did share though that they were familiar with being harassed on the streets if they were on their way to the marketplace or elsewhere. Most women reported that if they became the victim of any incident of violence they would probably not go to the police because their families would not want them to share their problems with strangers.

Benazir (Age 12) Sewing Apprentice

Benazir has been attending the WFS for sewing instruction for a month and a half. She hopes that the lessons will continue and improve her future prospects. Her mother, Zameera, a survivor of GBV also visits and receives support at the WFS. (Her case study has been recorded and given later in the chapter).



Benazir with her mother, Zamiran



An introductory meeting

When asked if incidences of GBV had increased after the floods the women responded that GBV was so common in the area that they could not say how much it had increased. However, on probing they shared that after the floods many girls were forced to marry against their wishes and many early age marriages were also arranged by family elders in the face of severe socioeconomic crises. They also reported cases of kidnappings of young girls in neighboring districts.

2. Referral Partners' and LSC Members' Views on GBV and WFS

Irshad Bibi is a housewife and a member of the WFS LSC. Like most women in this area she does not know her age and so does not know how old she was when she got married, but she knows that she was very young. She has nine children. The awareness imparted to women during sessions at the WFS was what compelled her to become a part of the LSC. She feels that the information on reproductive health that is given here is especially important.

“Earlier,” Irshad recalls, “we would always try to deal with health issues on our own. Now we understand that when it is necessary we should take our daughters or ourselves to a doctor or a hospital.” With regard to violence, she says that so far she

had assumed that this meant that a husband was beating his wife, but now she understands that there are different forms of violence. **“Now I know that even where a woman is being deprived of expenses for herself, it is violence.”** Irshad Bibi believes that the WFS can definitely succeed in lowering the levels of GBV.

Kainat (Age 12) Sewing Apprentice

Kainat is one of the few girls who has attended school till 7th grade and wants to continue as she wants to be a doctor when she grows up. Although she is very young, she enjoys coming to the WFS to learn sewing which she finds more enjoyable than school because she has the company of other girls and women and feels she learns a great deal from them.



Naseeba, a Lady Health Worker

Naseeba, although only 18 years old, is a Lady Health Worker in Qubo Saeed Khan and sees women being victimized on a daily basis. Elaborating on women's victimization Naseeba says, "Women here are extremely overworked, even when they are pregnant. They are already very weak and to worsen the situation they are treated badly by their

husbands who physically and verbally abuse them." On a personal note, she feels that she has also learnt a lot at the WFS thanks to the regular awareness sessions on RH as well as GBV.

Subhan Khatoon, a sewing instructor at the WFS also says that apart from the help that she received at the WFS after the floods for her health problems, the awareness sessions have helped her understand a lot more about GBV. She now strongly believes that any practice that threatens the life of a woman in the name of honour should be stopped. She also understands that stopping a woman from exercising her free will and restricting her mobility is also a form of violence. She believes that the WFS can bring about changes in attitudes and perceptions, as it is also working with the men in the area and helping them understand women's rights.

Imtiaz Abbasi, District Project Officer at Marie Stopes Society (MSS), Shahdadkot city finds that almost 70% of the women who visit their centre, especially those from the villages are survivors of some form of violence, whether it is actual physical abuse or having children against their will. She also reports that self-induced and other unsafe abortions at the hands of untrained TBAs and 'fake' doctors are a serious problem. Abbasi believes that this issue has not been given adequate attention and hopes that the WFS can help by stressing on the need for family planning and other reproductive health issues at the sessions it conducts.

Waheed Bhatti, an advocate of the district and sessions courts in the Qambar Shahdadkot region has dealt with many cases in which women have been victimized. Bhatti often works pro bono. He is also the General Secretary of Citizens Alliance, a network of 36 organizations working for different causes. Mr. Bhatti is of the view that the work done by different organizations in the area over the last ten years has managed to lessen the frequency of violence against women, but that it is still an issue that requires considerable single-minded attention. Mr. Bhatti stresses on the need for communication as a key method through

which to raise awareness, and he credits the WFS and Shirkat Gah for starting this process through their awareness sessions. He also finds that violence against women has an economic basis. Because women are economically dependent on males, this makes them likely targets for violence. He believes that the WFS can counter violence by economically empowering women through its sewing classes.



Awareness session

Subhan Khatoon (Age 50) Sewing Instructor WFS and LSC Member

Subhan Khatoon is an elderly woman of the village and considered a surrogate parent by many of the young girls. She knows the girls well and knows their families personally.

Subhan accessed the WFS to seek help for her health problems as she was unable to afford medical treatment and had little hope of assistance from the male members of her family. The WFS coordinator referred her to Civil Hospital, Shahdadt for specialist advice. She was operated on in Shahdadt and has recovered. As she is feeling much better she has begun teaching sewing at the WFS and encourages young girls to keep coming there.

Subhan says that during the 2010 floods she lost many of her belongings. Many of her animals died and most of the food that they had stored was washed away. She had to flee with her family and wait for relief. She eventually made it to Larkana and returned to Qubo Saeed Khan after eight months. She says that the 2010 floods changed their lives drastically and feels that the WFS can be instrumental in rehabilitating the village women.



Subhan Khatoon, sewing instructor and LSC member, with two children at the WFS

Sherbano

Sherbano is a Baloch woman living in Qubo Saeed Khan. Her case was first brought to the WFS by her sister, Shahzadi, who was concerned about Sherbano's mental and emotional wellbeing, given the abuse she was suffering at the hands of her in-laws. Shahzadi claimed that Sherbano and her husband had married for love, and that for the first few years of her marriage she had been happy as her husband had treated her well, even though her in-laws had inflicted emotional trauma on her through taunts and faultfinding. After a few years, however Sherbano and her husband began to have problems and eventually his attitude towards her began to reflect that of his family. This, Shahzadi said, caused Sherbano a great deal of grief.

When Sherbano finally visited the WFS, she informed the coordinator and the assistant project coordinator that her husband had given her a single divorce and asked her to leave his home. At first she left with her three children, all aged under 12, but he had later taken the children away and would not let her see them.

At the WFS Sherbano was advised on her legal rights and was apprised of the fact that since she was pregnant her husband's oral pronouncement of divorce was ineffective. At first Sherbano decided to pursue her legal rights and ask for her children's custody and maintenance from her husband, however, she later began to fear for her own safety as her husband threatened her with violence. Her mother also advised her against taking any action. She was advised to stay at a shelter which she did not avail. Instead she opted to go away from the village with her mother for a few months so she could think about her options. Sherbano's problems were worsened by her health issues. A swelling in her neck indicates that she might have an issue with her thyroid gland that would require surgery, but is hindered at present due to her pregnancy. Sherbano herself feels that she is not in control of her mental faculties and says that she frequently feels angry, has difficulty sleeping, is overeating and has lost interest in life. She does not want to see a psychiatrist. At present she visits the WFS to talk to other women and hopes the staff can provide her the support that she needs.

The coordinator feels limited by the fact that Sherbano is confused and cannot take decisions about whether to avail legal, medical and

psychosocial services. However, the coordinator constantly follows-up with her, providing her with support and reassurance. Sherbano had been informed of the venues open to her and the WFS staff is currently waiting for her to take the final decision.

Nihalaa

Bahadur Magsi and Nihalaa Sayal hail from Faiz Muhammad Magsi village near Qubo Saeed Khan, Shahdadt. They fell in love when Bahadur was 25 and Nihalaa was 22. Bahadur approached Nihalaa's parents with a marriage proposal which her parents refused saying they did not marry outside their community. After three years Bahadur and Nihalaa felt that they had no other option but to elope. On 24th February 2000 the two ran away to a city and got married. They lived there for eight years and had three children, a son Aslam, and two daughters, Sonita and Aisha.

At the time that Nihalaa had married her brother was very young, but he still swore revenge by murdering his sister and her husband when he grew up. Bahadur and Nihalaa eventually returned to Faiz Muhammad Magsi Goth after eight years.

On the night of 31st May 2011 some people broke into Nihalaa and Bahadur's house and the couple was shot to death. After 10 hours their bodies were taken to the Civil Hospital for postmortem. At the time of this incident Bahadur was 36 and Nihalaa was 33.

The WFS coordinator reached the Civil Hospital and discovered that no doctor was available to conduct the postmortem. It was 10:26 PM by the time the coordinator contacted a doctor who arrived and took the dead bodies to the postmortem room.

Even though Nihalaa had never visited the WFS the coordinator felt a great sense of responsibility as she lived in the area. Jannat followed up the case and found that the bodies had been handed over to their respective '*waris*' (guardians) and that the children were with their paternal grandfather.

Bahadur's father, Allah Rakhio, told the police that those who murdered the couple were from an area of Balochistan called Tando Alhar and so

were able to escape easily. Allah Rakhio lodged an FIR against 10 suspects.

Upon follow up, Allah Rakhio said that arrests had been made and that he would not require any legal assistance from the WFS. He does, however need assistance in raising the three children Nihalaa and Bahadur have left behind.

This was a tragic case of honour killing in the area of WFS in Qubo Saeed Khan and unfortunately the perpetrators fled before they were caught. The WFS regularly follows up with Allah Rakhio on the case and offers legal assistance.

During GBV awareness sessions special emphasis is laid on honour killings and its social and cultural dimensions, the legal recourses available and other harmful traditional practices. While all participants unanimously denounce such ill practices they were unable to understand why the deplorable tradition still persists.

Zameeran

Zameeran can state with certainty that her life has become increasingly difficult since the 2010 floods. When Qubo Saeed Khan was flooded Zameeran and her family had to leave the area and all their belongings for some time. When they returned most of their assets and their animals had been washed away and they no longer had a livelihood. Many were planning to leave the city or the country in search of work. Zameeran says that some people managed to convince her husband to leave. He remained in contact with her for sometime, but eventually disappeared and she has had no communication with him since. She does not however, believe that he has deserted her or their three children. She says that his family was always his first priority and he would never do such a thing. They are the very reason that compelled him to leave in search of work. For six months Zameeran has been living with the hope that he will return soon.

With three children (the eldest being 12 years old and the youngest a toddler) and her mother and father-in-law to support, Zameeran wondered how she would manage. Zameeran learned of an income support program (name withheld) where women could learn to sew and

earn Rs. 2500 per month. At the end of the program she would also receive a sewing machine. The program would last four months and Zameeran believed that in that time her family would be able to live off the Rs. 2500 that she would earn. She didn't face any difficulties enrolling in the program, but she received her stipend quite late and that too only Rs. 1500. The same happened the following month. To make matters worse the teacher told her that if she protested she would be removed from the program. At this juncture, Zameeran said that with nothing to lose she simply refused to be intimidated by anyone. She approached an officer of the program who at first did not take her complaints seriously. She then began speaking to other women in the program who may have also been prey to such unfairness, and found that there were others who had been facing the same situation. Zameeran encouraged the women to stand up and fight for their rights.

Around this time, Zameeran also began to visit the WFS in Shahdadkot and asked the coordinator to help her with her problem. The coordinator then met both the teacher and officer in question who denied that Zameeran or any other woman enrolled in the program was being deceived. Zameeran was assured that all her dues would be cleared by Eid-ul-Fitr (around which time the course was to end). Although Zameeran was given full support by the WFS and GBV staff if she wanted to take legal action against the support program, she decided to wait and allow the organization the opportunity to do as they promised rather than taking the matter to court. By Eid-ul-Fitr her dues were cleared, but she still didn't receive the sewing machine. Zameeran believed that her teacher deliberately didn't give her the machine as everyone else enrolled in the program had been given one. She then approached the teacher who admitted that she had taken the decision and told Zameeran that she would be able to get the sewing machine if she paid her Rs. 2000. Zameeran approached the WFS again and asked the coordinator to speak to her. The coordinator met the teacher, but the latter denied Zameeran's accusations. The coordinator and Zameeran then spoke to the officer of the program. Although Zameeran did not want to take legal action, Shirkat Gah's legal staff contacted the officer who took notice of Zameeran's complaint and she received the sewing machine in the next two days.

Zameeran was also told by the organization that she should provide a

written complaint against the teacher in question and the support program officers would deal with the matter in an appropriate manner. To this end, Zameeran was satisfied as she believed that at last her complaints were taken seriously and that she had managed get what she had been promised. She thanked the WFS staff because she felt that their counseling and support had given her the courage to pursue the matter. While this is not a typical case of GBV it is indicative of the vulnerability of women trying to support a family singlehandedly.

3. A Success Story

Naimatullah Brohi is 53 years old and hails from Muhammad Amin Brohi village of which he is also the Pesh Imam (prayer leader). He began attending the awareness sessions in June 2011 and his wife Mahar Bano became a part of the women's group formed by the WFS. She would attend the meetings and sessions conducted by Shirkat Gah. Although discussions on GBV and reproductive health were frequent Mahar Bano never shared that she too was a survivor.



Naimatullah with his wife

It was during a session on GBV that some male attendees, including a teacher said to the facilitators, "If Naimatullah, a religious man and Pesh Imam of the mosque can beat his wife why is it wrong if we do it to our women? Surely, if this was objectionable in Islam he would not do it and would have told us not to as well."

This was an awkward situation for the focal points facilitating the session, but was also an opportunity for a breakthrough. They probed Naimatullah about his treatment of his wife and he responded, rather confusedly saying "I don't know. I just get angry sometimes."

The focal points tried to persuade him that this practice is wrong and that it is a misinterpretation of Quranic injunctions to preach that if you are angry with your wife it is acceptable to strike her. At the end

of the session he seemed convinced that he was wrong and assured them that he would never do such a thing again. He made a rather unusual request to the focal points asking if he could be a part of the LSC in return for never hitting his wife again. The focal point told him that if by their next awareness sessions the following month, another male community member could verify that he had not been physically abusive to his wife they would consider his request. To the surprise of both focal points, during the next session a month later, other male members informed them that he had indeed changed his ways.

Naimatullah and his wife, Mahar Bano, were both interviewed in November 2011 by Shirkat Gah, to learn whether things were better between them. For the interview, a Shirkat Gah team member, the WFS coordinator and assistant coordinator visited his home. During the visit both husband and wife appeared to be very humble and warmhearted. Naimatullah explained that before he began attending the awareness sessions he had never thought that women (nor, for that matter men) had any rights. He now believed being violent with women or with anyone was wrong, and he didn't want to engage in such evil again. He shared that he had wanted to become a part of the LSC so that he could contribute to the WFS' cause. When asked about his contribution as an LSC member he replied that he talks to other men to convince them that violence against women is wrong. He believes and hopes that they listen to him.

Mahar Bano was quite shy during the interview, but said she did not mind sharing her experience. She stated that before the WFS opened and she became part of its women's group she had not known that women had 'rights'. Moreover, when her husband used to lose his temper and hit her she always thought it was her fault and never considered that it was violence or that she was being treated unfairly. She was, however, thankful to the facilitators who conducted sessions with them saying that their actions had made a big difference in her life.

4. Challenges and Achievements

Organizations working in interior Sindh have often faced problems due to prevailing feudal systems that instill fear in people working in the development sector making them believe that they are at the mercy of the feudal lords and cannot afford to upset them. Similarly,



A visit by UNFPA

those seeking help dread repercussions that may ensue if a feudal lord is irked over his authority being threatened. Although the WFS and Shirkat Gah staff members have not come into direct conflict with any of the feudal lords that govern this part of district Shahdadkot, they have often felt frustrated after presenting all options to a survivor who in the end prefers to have a matter settled before a “*vadera*” (local landlord), whom

she finds has more authority and, hence, more ability than anyone else to control a situation. However, it is notable that the present assistant coordinator of the WFS is the daughter of a *vadera* and her presence and dedication to the WFS cause gives hope that if sensitization towards women’s issues can be brought into the families of the most influential people of this area, then the plight of women can be improved.

One of the main purposes of the WFS is to provide women access to services, especially where they have been victim to some form of GBV. In Qubo Saeed Khan, the difficulty in providing these women such access is due to the fact that for most services, whether legal, medical or psychological, one must travel to the city of Shahdadkot, and due to the damage to the roads following the 2010 floods, this has become particularly problematic. In the medical sector the situation has recently become better due to a few organizations, such as Muslim Aid, now providing free medical services at the RHC located within Qubo Saeed Khan. This organization too, however, provides mostly mother and child-care related services, therefore, for complicated health issues it is still necessary to travel to Shahdadkot city. The WFS staff members try and assist women in need of such services by travelling with them to Shahdadkot and providing the cost of transport.

Probably the most evident achievement for this particular WFS is the number of women it has been able to attract. Over the months of September and October, it was observed at the awareness sessions and a special event commemorated at the WFS, “International Rural Women’s Day,” that the number of women turning out had nearly tripled. Most women whose feedback was sought replied that they felt attending events, meetings and sessions at the WFS greatly enhanced their knowledge and that they encourage other women to attend the same.

Chapter 5

WFS Usta Muhammad, Jaffarabad



WFS Usta Muhammad, Jaffarabad

Usta Muhammad is one of the larger tehsils of Jaffarabad, comprising about 20 union councils. It is 40 kilometres away from Jaffarabad city. The WFS is located near a village called Aliabad and has a target area of ten villages and 4 union councils.

All of Usta Muhammad was severely affected by the 2010 floods. In July 2011, Shirkat Gah's CBO partner, NISA Development Organization & Women's Resource Centre prepared a report on the effects of the 2010 floods to assess the damage to livelihood, infrastructure, the number of people directly affected and the efforts being made for the protection of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. It found that 520,000 people were directly affected, and that there was a 90% impact on livelihood and 98% on infrastructure. The report found that four organizations were working for safety and protection but most organizations involved in the relief efforts were, by and large not giving priority to women or child-specific needs. Furthermore, it found that more than 1000 women-headed households had not been issued Watan Cards (for the disbursement of cash grants) and that about 20,000 women did not possess CNICs (Computerized National Identity Cards).

There is a lot of community interdependence in this area, and even though there is a legal infrastructure, such as police stations and courts these are underutilized. Most matters are resolved through community elders and incidents of violence are rarely reported. Female leadership is hard to come by, not just in the political arena but even at the community level. Although there is no real religious extremism here, the local community is very conservative and there is great focus on traditions such as women's honour, appropriate clothing for women etc.

1. Rapid Needs Assessment

The RNA was conducted through interviews and FGDs in three villages, namely, Karim Bux Band, Ali Laro and Chakar Khan Buledi.



Rapid Needs Assessment and Focus Group Discussion

As in other areas, a severe lack of health services came into sharp focus. There were only two TBAs in the area and women had to travel to Usta Muhammad or Jaffarabad city if they needed to visit a hospital. There was only one girls school in Karim Bux Band and only 2 to 5 girls per village were attending school as most families preferred that they stay home.

Women participating in the FGDs revealed that they knew of cases of honour killings, exchange marriage, swara (child marriages contracted to resolve feuds between clans), kidnapping and harassment. The FGDs revealed that domestic violence was very common. The participants of the FGDs explained that most of the domestic violence involved husbands beating wives usually due to petty issues such as not receiving food on time, feeling agitated when children asked for things they did not have money for or when they felt that their authority had been challenged by a wife who demanded money or answered back. Women also reported that they faced harassment when going out to marketplaces, and that they never shared these problems with male family members as they feared repercussions from them.

2. Referral Partners' Views on GBV

Shirkat Gah's referral partners in Usta Muhammad comprised other NGOs working on GBV or related issues, service providers, duty bearers, community leaders and media personnel. From the interviews of referral partners ten months into the project it is apparent that GBV is a major issue and that it has risen since the 2010 floods.

Naz Bibi, Project Coordinator and Psychosocial Counselor at the American Refugee Committee

The American Refugee Committee (ARC) has been running several projects in Jaffarabad and Naseerabad districts; however, it is presently focusing on GBV in Usta Muhammad. Naz Bibi, the project coordinator and psychosocial counselor at ARC, said, **"Although many people still try to deny it, GBV is rampant in this area. Domestic violence is common, as are honour killings."** The major reason for the latter, she believes, is property disputes or

other financial issues. “From the cases we receive, only about 30% appear to actually have happened because the husband was jealous and suspected his wife of infidelity, or simply because a woman was talking to a man and a family member found it objectionable.”

According to Naz Bibi, the 2010 floods have led to an increase in GBV in Usta Muhammad, due to the extreme conditions which many families, especially those migrating from other affected areas, have had to face. She says, “People have been living in broken homes, their safety is compromised and, hence, they begin fighting and squabbling, which usually ends up with women becoming the victims. Also, in this type of setting, women become more vulnerable to rape and sexual violence.”

Arbela, Social Officer at DANESH

Arbela, social officer at DANESH (Drugs and Narcotics Educational Services for Humanity), an organization focusing on child sexual abuse, reports that **“Violence in Usta Muhammad is reaching extremes and this is largely due to the serious lack of education, widespread ignorance and the excessive importance given to ‘honour’ and losing face in front of others, in this community.”**

Arbela believes that the 2010 floods caused a rise in GBV and explains, “One reason is that many families have relocated to this area and as their basic needs are not being met they have become more violent.” DANESH is a referral partner for the WFS for psychosocial support for victims.

Mohammad Qasim, Advocate District and Sessions Court

Mohammad Qasim is an advocate practicing in various district and sessions courts in both Jaffarabad and Naseerabad. Genuinely motivated to help others, Qasim often takes on cases where he feels a woman is being subjected to violence or where a person’s rights are being violated. The WFS has sought his legal advice on several matters regarding the women who approach it. He has also successfully handled the case of a victim and helped resolve it in a very short time. Although he does not believe the 2010 floods have directly led to an increase in GBV, he speculates that since life has generally become more difficult, it could be that victims are being subjected to more violence.

3. Referral Partners' Views on the WFS

Farida, Social Officer, DANESH

Farida sees the WFS as a ray of hope for the local women, “I believe the WFS is definitely bringing about change, especially through its awareness sessions, which I hope will one day end the violence in this area. The WFS is constantly making women more aware, helping them access facilities and dealing with their cases. Moreover, it is empowering women by helping them overcome their fears, and letting them know they have support.”

Zakir Hussain, Reporter, National News Agency

An optimistic Zakir Hussain says, “The WFS may even succeed in ending violence against women. There was a case in which my colleague and I were approached by the WFS for help. A girl’s father was not supporting her in her endeavor to seek justice. If there was no WFS in this area, who knows, maybe the girl would not have had anyone to assist her and nothing would have happened.”

Mohammad Qasim, Advocate District and Sessions Court

“The WFS is helping some very poor and needy women. In one case which the WFS referred to me, the poor girl had been patiently enduring her situation for so long, she would probably have never thought that someone would help her get out of that mess. But the staff here is so dedicated, they have even shown up for court hearings for the sake of the victims!”



Awareness session



Awareness session with males

Tania (Age 13)

Tania recalls the harrowing events that changed her life, “I was sitting alone at home one day when I heard my uncle (father’s brother) call me outside. He asked me to go into the baithak (sitting room) where I found my cousin (paternal aunt’s son) sitting. When I entered, to my surprise my uncle locked the door from outside. I did not understand at first and yelled for him to let me out as I felt scared. He didn’t respond. I could tell my cousin was going to do something with me that I would not like. I pulled the Quran off from the top of a shelf and handed it to my cousin. I said to him, “Surely you would not disrespect me in front of the Quran.” But it did not make a difference. He pushed the Quran aside and raped me. When he was done, he asked my uncle to unlock the door and ran off. When I stepped out of the room, my uncle said to me ‘Don’t worry, nothing bad happened. It’s alright.’ and then he also left.”

“When I was inside the room, my brother had been somewhere close by and had heard my screams. He ran to fetch my mother. By the time she reached home, she knew something bad had happened. After I explained to her what had happened, she assured me that we would go to the police and do something about this. My brother also told us that he had seen my cousin giving my uncle Rs. 1000 before all this happened.”

“We went to the police station at about 8:00 PM. My mother explained the whole incident to the SHO, but he refused to make a report. He told us that he was only going to mention that someone had broken into the house, and that the rest was a family matter to be resolved by the family.”

“My mother used to visit the WFS sometimes. So she approached their staff the next day and informed them that she would need their help. The WFS staff really looked after us. The coordinator went with us to the police station the same day. The SHO said to her, ‘This girl came here telling us something else yesterday and now she wants us to change the report.’ The coordinator reasoned with them all she could, but then asked if I would be okay with a news reporter visiting the police station and telling the police that if they did not change the report and grant me an application for a medical exam, they would make the matter public. I agreed, as all I wanted was justice. When the reporters showed up with their cameras, the attitude of the police completely changed.”

“The next day, the coordinator and baji (referring to the CBO focal point as big sister) took me to Civil Hospital. Even the doctors made it difficult for us. By that time, I suppose the police were so scared, that they actually helped us. But the problems with the police did not end there. Although they initially arrested my uncle, they soon informed us that they were going to release him. At this point, I myself told the WFS coordinator that she could call the reporters and tell them to report the matter anywhere they liked. A press conference took place and my story was printed in the local newspapers the next day. I’m glad I took this step, as after that the police did not release my uncle. But even then, I don’t believe the police are on my side. They have still not caught the cousin who raped me. They say he has escaped, but I don’t even know if they ever tried to find him. I also know that the SHO is his uncle as well.”

“Sadly, we did not have my father’s support in all this. He denied that I had even been raped. My mother, my siblings and I had to leave for my maternal grandparents’ house. My father’s family has been sending us threats and my father supports them. He did, however send clothes for us on Eid, so sometimes I really don’t know where his loyalties lie.”

“The WFS is still giving me moral support. All I want is justice. My uncle and the cousin who raped me should be punished with death for what they did to me.”

The WFS also referred her to ARC where she received Post Exposure Prophylaxis and later to DANESH for psychosocial counseling. The WFS team is following up this case and since this a very recent case reports were still being awaited as this document was being written.

Sakina (Age 25)

“I knew that the WFS was working for GBV, but I only used to come here to learn to sew. One day, the coordinator saw me looking very worried. I confided in her that my husband had left me for another woman ten years ago. He would not divorce me, but he would not come back to me either. He never sent me money, neither for me nor for our only child, a daughter who is now 9 years old. The situation was very distressful for me.”



Sakina

“The coordinator told me that if I did not want to wait for him any longer, I had the option to seek khula (the right of the wife to seek release from the marriage bond). After much contemplation I decided to pursue this option. The coordinator arranged a meeting with a lawyer. I explained that I would not be able to bear the expenses, but I was told not to worry. I really liked this lawyer as he too was very supportive and reassuring. If the WFS had not been around, I don’t think I would ever have woken up and realized my rights; maybe I would have waited another ten years for my husband to come back.”

“I was also happy with the way the lawyer handled my case. He managed to obtain a decree of divorce for me within two months. I had not realized that it would be this quick, but I am glad I took the decision to do this. Earlier, neither I nor my family was happy. My father used to keep telling my husband to take me back, but what was the use?”

“Now I feel as though a burden has been lifted off my shoulders. I **continue to have the support of the WFS staff and the CBO partner, and they always try to help me with my needs. I am also very happy that the WFS is still here. I had only come here to learn to sew, but I got so much more than that.**”

Note: Although the WFSs are not meant to provide financial support to the survivors they do have a small kitty amount allocated in their routine expenses for special cases. In Sakina’s case financial assistance was provided to the lawyer for the court expenses incurred. The lawyer, Mohammad Qasim provided his services as a legal referral partner free of cost.

Aman Khatoon (Age 50) Sewing Instructor WFS

Aman Khatoon has spent much of her life in an abusive marriage. Her daughter too, was married for three months but her husband left her at Aman Khatoon's home. When Shirkat Gah began to conduct its awareness sessions at the WFS she realized what they were there for. She shared her story with the WFS staff, but told them that she really did not need any help. However, one night her husband beat her and her daughter very badly and she approached the WFS informing the



Sewing lessons begin

coordinator that she wanted to take legal action and see her husband punished. She went to the police station with the coordinator, who managed to convince the police to lodge an FIR. Two police officers went to find the husband, but other community members got involved and helped him to dodge them. The other community members, however came to Aman Khatoon and swore to her that they would help her resolve her issues with her husband amicably, but that she should not go to the police. Aman Khatoon then agreed to a meeting at which her brothers were also present and made her husband swear that he would not strike her again.

Now Aman Khatoon says that her husband has begun to change his ways. When asked about what she wants to do now, she responded that once her daughter is settled, she will decide what she wants to do for herself. However, she believes that the WFS is an asset for the women who access it as it has helped her by giving her options. She also feels that by giving her the opportunity to teach other women how to sew, the WFS is helping women earn a livelihood for themselves.

4. Challenges and Achievements

Shirkat Gah and its CBO partner NISA had quite a task before them when looking for a suitable site for the WFS. In each village they encountered problems such as family rivalries which often resulted in women from one community not wanting to attend the WFS in another. Finally, a two room structure was identified in Jan Colony, UC 4, where most women said that they could come to with fewer reservations. Even after the WFS was set up, many women faced problems because the male members of their families did not want them associating with women from other communities. Therefore, the WFS coordinator, along with focal points from NISA and Shirkat Gah, conducted the regular door-to-door visits with the additional task of speaking to male members of the family and reassuring them that no problems would occur because of mixed community gatherings and that the women were being invited to learn to sew and gain knowledge through awareness sessions.

The first month of the new WFS saw very few women coming to the centre. As time passed, and following the door-to-door visits, word began to spread and more women accessed the centre. However, many seemed to perceive it as merely a skills centre and it took many painstaking endeavors by the WFS team to show them the other side of this facility in their neighborhood.

In one instance the coordinator and Shirkat Gah's facilitator were forced to change the venue of the community session after disruption by a local feudal lord who prohibited them to continue the session and threatened them with violent repercussions if they did not immediately cancel the activity and leave. Later, the WFS team and CBO partners had a meeting with a tribal elder who ensured them of his co-operation and also reprimanded the aforementioned feudal lord who later apologized to the team for his rude behavior.

The awareness sessions slowly began to change this. Some of the staff, too, at times grappled with how they were to run this project and what they were to do to help counter violence against women. Also, in the first few cases that were received the women did not want the case to be referred to anyone nor did they want the WFS to take any action. The coordinator took a hands-on approach and started visiting areas if she heard that there had been a case of violence. She spoke to the victim and offered help.

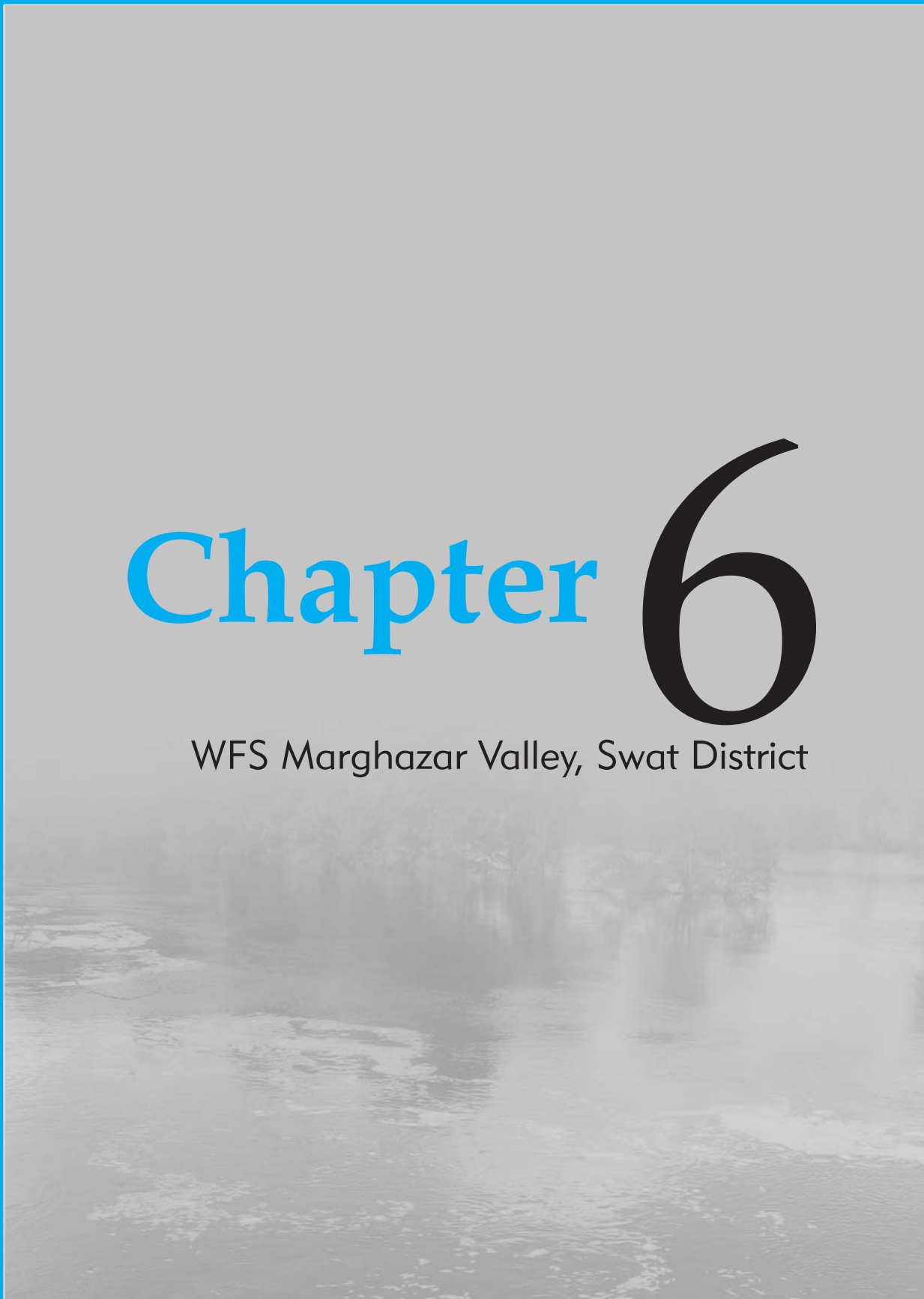
The present situation is quite different. The WFS has managed to form

10 women's groups in the villages (one in each village) and 3 youth groups. The aim of these groups is to impart knowledge and awareness regarding various issues ranging from health, hygiene, reproductive health, GBV and laws regarding the same, to women. The groups have also conducted trainings regarding CNIC registration and Watan Cards. A few women have also sought legal help through the centre. One such victim won a case which encouraged other women to stand up for their rights.

One of the greatest achievements of the WFS according to the Shirkat Gah focal point is that it has managed to get women from different communities to come out of their homes, get together for activities and take legal action, or speak out against injustice.

Chapter 6

WFS Marghazar Valley, Swat District



WFS Marghazar Valley, Swat District

“The oppressive and murderous rule of the Taliban, who had almost total control of the north Pakistan valley by the end of 2008, followed by the army’s retaliatory operation last year, which seemed to consider civilians entirely incidental to the matter of military strategy, forced 64% of the inhabitants of the Upper Swat region to join the numbers of internally displaced persons. By March this year, nearly 90% of those had returned to Upper Swat, badly in need of assistance to restart their lives, but at least with some hope that the worst was behind them. And then the rains came.” Kamila Shamsie - The Guardian, 5th August 2010

The strikingly beautiful valley of Marghazar is 15 kilometres away from the city of Mingora in Swat. Apart from its serenity and natural beauty Marghazar is also rich in mineral resources and has mountains that contain large reserves of marbles.

In the past few years, the Swat Valley has become the unfortunate scene of both man-made and natural disasters. The valley was first ravaged by Talibanisation, then by the consequent army operations and finally the floods of 2010.

Today, job opportunities in Swat are few and far between and are more or less restricted to construction and lumbering. Female education is rare and there is only one primary school in the vicinity. The cumulative effect of a general lack of opportunities, regressive Talibanisation and the widespread devastation by flooding has led to a rise in the number of GBV episodes. Nargis Bibi, an active member of the community and general secretary LSC, confirms that since the 2010 floods, GBV has increased as the floods washed away people’s homes as well as their livelihood.

She explains this rise thus, **“Often when men are without work and unable to earn, the only way to deal with their frustration is by venting their**

Nargis Bibi

Nargis Bibi was married at the age of 20 and her husband works as a watchman at a school. She is a homemaker and has four children; three sons and one daughter. She became a part of the LSC because of a strong belief that the WFS is a significant step in the right direction. She encourages people to visit the WFS by telling them it is a place where they can acquire knowledge and by assuring sceptics that the activities are consistent with Islamic teachings.

In the last two months (July-August 2011), Nargis Bibi has participated in informing the residents about hygiene kits and has helped the WFS in their distribution. "The only drawback," she says, "is that I cannot visit the WFS everyday!"

anger on their wives." Outlining the forms of GBV that regularly arise in this deeply conservative and religious society, Nargis Bibi elaborates, "There are different kinds of situations that can be classified as GBV. GBV can be inflicted by in-laws upon their daughters-in-laws, by husbands upon their wives, and sometimes even by parents upon their daughters. Parents frequently inflict GBV by discriminating and giving preference to their sons over their daughters."

Following the 2010 disaster, several organizations have been working in Swat district on a number of wide-ranging issues; from development, health and education to gender and child protection. Shirkat Gah was able to pinpoint Marghazar as an area that was relatively untouched by development work especially interventions for women. Furthermore women from this area were almost completely unaware of their rights. Therefore setting up a WFS in Marghazar seemed a natural step.

1. Rapid Needs Assessment

The RNA sessions that were conducted while setting up the WFS have garnered positive support from the local community as is evident from the case of Nargis Bibi. The RNAs piqued her interest, compelled her to find out more about it and how she could contribute to it. According to her as Marghazar is a mountainous area, its residents do not know much about the world beyond the mountains. However, the launch of the WFS has opened a new vista of knowledge for the residents through its awareness sessions and meetings.

Setting up the WFS in this area was extremely challenging as it was met by strong opposition from this conservative society. The WFS was viewed with suspicion and continues to be regarded by many in the community as an establishment where women are encouraged to defy Islamic edicts.

Several strategies such as door-to-door visits, awareness sessions and the activities organised at the centre, (especially vocational training such as sewing) helped attract women and enabled them to resist the protests from male members of their families.

One of the strategies used to provide support to women

was through conducting sessions for men to apprise them of women's health issues, their legal rights and GBV. It was also envisaged that the WFS would form a network of male allies so that sustainable, long lasting change could be brought about. This has proved to be particularly difficult.

For effective intervention, it was imperative that Shirkat Gah's facilitator was integrated into the community. The focal point for this area, a Shirkat Gah staff member was the first to conduct a session with males. When the focal point approached the men for a meeting she was informed that community members did not approve of a female talking to males. Thereafter all sessions were conducted via a male member from a partnering Community Based Organization (CBO). This was a break from the usual manner in which such sessions were conducted in the flood affected areas of other provinces.



Inauguration ceremony of the WFS

Parveen (Age 16) Sewing Apprentice

Parveen comes from a large family of eleven. Her father is a construction worker, her mother is a housewife and she has six sisters and two brothers. She came to know of the WFS through the door-to-door visits and LSC member Bakht Amin Bibi's efforts. "I like coming to the WFS because I get to learn something useful and I feel that the experience gives me a degree of freedom," says Parveen.

Family opposition to her accessing the WFS has only strengthened her resolve and the belief that she should acquire skills "...to help me make a better future for myself."

2. Door-to-Door Visits

Shirkat Gah's door-to-door campaign has been the most successful in creating awareness in the Swat area. The campaign has enabled strong liaisons between community members and WFS workers. Most of the

Nasreen (Age 20) Sewing Apprentice

Nasreen has been married six years now. Both her parents were farmers and she has six sisters and two brothers. Nasreen notes that in her home, gender disparity was the norm. The needs of the male members of the family were always given precedence over that of the females. After five years of marriage Nasreen had her first child, a daughter. Her husband worked as a construction worker in Peshawar, but was seeking better employment elsewhere. She learnt of the WFS through door-to-door visits and Bakht Amin Bibi.

Being a devoted homemaker makes it difficult for her to attend the WFS, but she manages to stay involved and is keen to continue to do so. She has not faced any family opposition to attending the WFS, however she says that if such a situation arose in future she could assure any detractors that there are no males on the premises and that it is simply a venue where women come together to learn to sew.

women who have accessed the WFS said that they found out about it through door-to-door visits.

3. Awareness Sessions

GBV project members have been regularly conducting awareness sessions and meetings in this area with the men of the community to help nurture a more positive perception of WFSs. These meetings and sessions have led to yet another important breakthrough in the shape of male liaisons from within the community which is unheard of in this part of the country.

4. Referral Partners' and LSC Members' Views on GBV and WFS

Iftikhar, Teacher and LSC President

With an undergraduate degree and a B. Ed, Iftikhar is a teacher at the only primary school in Marghazar Valley. He is the president of the LSC.

Iftikhar became interested in the WFS through its awareness sessions and meetings and wanted to help as he believed that it would make a difference.

Iftikhar believes that there are many pressing needs of women in

Marghazar that are not given adequate attention. He points out that there is a dearth of health facilities for women and that even LHVs and dispensaries are few and far between. He also feels that education is not given due importance. **“The residents of the area have failed to recognize that children should not be wasting time and that education can improve their future prospects,”** he says elaborating, **“At best children here study till the 8th or 10th grade and then leave. The situation for females is far worse.”**



Rapid Needs Assessment and Focus Group Discussion

As someone who works for the WFS with considerable devotion and as the president of the LSC, Iftikhar ensures that meetings are regularly conducted to discuss the running of the space and its future, but he stresses that its survival ultimately depends on the continued support of its parent organizations.

Bakht Amin Bibi, Sewing Instructor and LSC Member

Where men were generally reluctant to lend support, the WFS found some invaluable allies in women, such as Bakht Amin Bibi. Bakht Amin Bibi, a dedicated community member of the LSC, became a sewing instructor at the WFS and was instrumental in enabling many young girls to join. Essentially a homemaker, Bakht Amin Bibi who is married to an unemployed drug addict is no stranger to GBV.

“My father died when I was very young. My mother was unable to care for all her children so they had to give me away to my father’s family who could raise and educate me. Instead my relatives married me off, without consulting my mother when I was only eight years old. At that time I was very young and did not understand what was happening,” recalls Bakht Amin Bibi.

Describing her married life, Bakht Amin Bibi recalls, “My father-in-law was quite supportive. He used to tell my husband not to treat me with cruelty. But I was also very scared of my father-in-law, probably because he had a very thick moustache.

My husband, on the other hand frequently beat me. There is a gap in my eyebrow where he once struck me. His attitude towards me has improved only recently when my brothers moved to this area and warned him to treat me better. This is the reason why I was more cautious when marrying my daughters off. I have been married 35 years now.”

What distinguishes Bakht Bibi from other women is her drive to make a positive contribution to the general welfare of local women. **“I learned about WFS through the door-to-door visits of its staff, as well as from the young girls who would visit the space. I was motivated by my desire to help others and the WFS gave me this opportunity. I do not take any remuneration for my services, because I simply want to help,”** she says.

“I believe that the WFS is making a positive difference through its awareness sessions and by giving the girls a chance to learn skills that will be useful to them in later life,” says Bakht Amin Bibi.

She believes that if stocks of plain cloth could be provided to the WFS, the women would be able to embroider and sell them to make a living. “What is important to note is that this is the first centre of its kind in this area,” she says, adding, “this is probably why the men also feel threatened at times.”

Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Crisis Centre for Women (MoWD)

The Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Crisis Centre functions as a provisional shelter to assist women in distress and provide them with legal aid and shelter (for up to 48 hours). In case of an ongoing problem the crisis centre refers cases to the Darul Aman, a shelter home for women. The crisis centre mostly files cases on behalf of women in district and sessions courts and those that come within the jurisdiction of the high court or Supreme Court are referred to the crisis centres in Peshawar and Islamabad, respectively.

All cases coming to the crisis centre that require legal assistance are registered, after which their entitlement is assessed. Victims who are able to afford private lawyers are requested to avail the option. The case is then prepared and forwarded to a lawyer on the panel of the crisis centre.

According to Saleemzada, a legal officer, the majority of cases that

arrive at the centre are those of domestic violence. Although the centre is willing to take up all such cases in which women are directly or indirectly affected, most of the cases they have filed on behalf of their beneficiaries pertain to divorce, unlawful/forced marriage, early marriage, dowry and property disputes.

Nusrat, the manager at the Crisis Centre, believes that traditionally women are resigned to “accepting abuse as part of their bad fate.” The kinds of cases that eventually end up at the centre are those where the trauma of years of abuse has accumulated to the point where the victim is no longer able to endure the situation. While the centre helps survivors identify their options, most of the time they choose to return to their situation. This is usually due to the fear of reprisal from the perpetrator of the crime and/or pressure from the community.

Saleemzada believes that the WFS is a very important space because it meets the need for a place where women can come to redress their grievances.

Nusrat met the manager of the WFS in Marghazar Valley and has also attended its orientation sessions. She believes the WFS is beneficial for the community and also sees it in an ancillary role to the crisis centre, as it has greater outreach within the community.

Nusrat thinks the WFS has the ability to gain confidence within the community and recommends that such centres should be easily accessible by Pakistani women in all parts of the country. Nusrat has immense faith in the WFS project as she believes that despite initial misconceptions by the local population the benefits of this initiative are gradually being realized.



Handicrafts made by women at the WFS

Zainab

Zainab approached the WFS in April 2011, soon after it convened. At the time, she was severely distressed, mentally and emotionally. She said that her husband's routine beatings had sapped her emotional strength and she did not know how to endure it any longer. Apart from the brutality inflicted upon her physically, Zainab's husband regularly made her bring money from her brothers. Failure to do so would render her liable to further beatings. Interestingly, during the army operation, Zainab tried to take advantage of the situation. She informed her husband that if he struck her again she would report him to one of the army officers in their area. This, she says, made him treat her slightly better for some time but following the army's withdrawal her husband returned to his old ways with her.

The WFS staff informed Zainab that she had the option of seeking a judicial divorce or taking legal action against her husband for assault. However, Zainab did not think these were suitable options and requested the WFS for a more amicable solution. She requested the focal point from Shirkat Gah, Sabiha Ashraf to arrange a meeting with her husband, Imran to discuss the rights that Islam gives women, as well as to apprise him of Pakistani laws which prohibit the kind of physical abuse she was enduring. At the meeting, Imran conceded that he had not been treating his wife well and assured Sabiha that he would not only cease to be violent towards his wife, but would also try and find employment so that he would not have to ask her to bring money from her family. A follow-up revealed that Zainab's husband had eventually found employment and that his treatment of her, in general had improved.

Humar Bano

Humar Bano is one of countless Pakistani women who are victims of domestic violence. Humar has two children, a boy and a girl. The son is physically handicapped. When Humar accessed the WFS, she described her husband's treatment of her as cruel, not only because of the physical violence but also the emotional abuse that she was made to endure. Soon after the birth of her first child, Humar felt that she was no longer able

to cope with the torture and left for her parents' home. Unfortunately, she was made to return after 18 months at the behest of a *jirga* (assembly of elders). This, she recalls was unbearable as her husband's treatment of her had not improved at all. After the birth of her second child she decided to leave her husband. This was the time when she first approached the WFS.

While the WFS was prepared to provide Humar with any assistance that she may require, she decided to reconsider her decision after receiving assurance from her brother-in-law that he would intervene to help reconcile her with her husband and provide her with the expenses required by her growing family. Given her circumstances Humar felt that this decision was in her best interest and decided against legal recourse in the matter.

5. Challenges and Achievements

As mentioned earlier, community outreach in Marghazar has been problematic due to the conservatism and dynamics of the local populace. The WFSs were not only envisaged as a space where distressed women can seek help for GBV, but also as a platform which can change GBV trends through awareness sessions and by liaising with males.

However, working with males has been especially difficult in an environment which does not allow intermingling of the sexes. Further exacerbating the situation is the rampant use of drugs by the men in the area which makes them more prone to violence towards the most common victim, the wife. The few male allies that the project has cultivated and who support the WFS deny that GBV is common. Male allies support the WFS because it increases awareness on reproductive health, helps women access health-related services and imparts sewing skills.

To add to the plight of the GBV survivors, there is a lack of resources, facilities, services and employment opportunities in the area. These drawbacks add up, leaving many victims who wish to escape their situation inevitably feeling that they will be unable to survive once they leave their abuser. Thus it is extremely rare for a woman to end an abusive marriage. Ironically the first step for a woman seeking a

divorce is also the first obstacle she encounters, as she is required to travel outside the conservative environs of Marghazar to seek legal assistance.

Despite functioning in such a challenging environment, the WFS did manage to achieve its goals. In order to address GBV it is essential that women be empowered to realize their rights and to make informed decisions. For a woman to approach the WFS staff or a member of Shirkat Gah to try and mediate with her husband or in-laws is a bold step that indicates that she recognises the abuse and seeks her rights.

Also, when many victims decide against options set forth by a facilitator and opt for what they believe is in their best interest, the choice is indicative of their empowerment. The example of 16-year old Parveen (see pg. 65) can give a sense of the growing empowerment of women in Marghazar. Parveen whose views have been given earlier in this report, says that although her family often chides her for attending the WFS, she continues to defy them and attend anyway because she feels she is learning something.

WFS Tindo Dag, Swat District

Village Tindo Dag is one of the areas badly affected by the conflict in Swat. Stories of militants who have sexually abused village women abound. Survivors of the violence are depressed and unable to discuss the abuse for fear of stigmatization by the community.

A former Taliban stronghold, the children from Tindo Dag were routinely kidnapped by the militants and trained for armed conflict. Some children fled from the training centres and were rehabilitated by CSOs and are now living a normal life in the village. Men who became victims of conflict are also being rehabilitated in a centre in Tindo Dag. No program has yet been initiated in the area to rescue these women from their pre- and post-conflict traumas.

In addition, women's reproductive health is neglected as women do not have access to family planning and RH services. The number of children in each family varies between 6 and 13. Men do not allow their women to use contraceptives and the women are not aware of their reproductive health rights. The women who do use contraception do so without proper guidance and without the knowledge of their husbands. There are no



A young girl at the WFS

medical facilities in case of health emergencies.

Ground work has been carried out for the implementation of the WFS project. As Tindo Dag was in the eye of the storm during the conflict an army unit was established there and it took Shirkat Gah some time to gain permission to start work there.

It was only by 1st July 2011 that a building that was convenient for women to reach was identified and rented. Mobilization was started earlier in June in partnership with Khushboo Community Development Organization. Staff was hired by July and the introductory meetings and initial dialogues to brief the community about the WFS were conducted for both genders.

1. Rapid Needs Assessment

Demographic and socioeconomic data was collected for stratification of different project interventions and FGDs were conducted.

Some women groups have been formed for different capacity building events.

There is only one middle school in Tindo Dag and most of the women are illiterate. Those seeking further education have to go to high schools or colleges in distant towns which automatically eliminates women from the sphere of education.

The health situation in Tindo Dag is also bleak. There is no doctor, gynecologist, midwife or hospitals in the vicinity and most women go to the neighboring villages for treatment. If they are unable to travel to see a doctor. The residents of Tindo Dag go to the sole compounder's clinic in their village for treatment.

2. Setting Up the WFS

The LSC has been formed with motivated and supportive women who also have leadership qualities. A trainer has also been identified and a 3-day sewing and embroidery course was conducted.

On popular demand, literacy classes have also been arranged by the WFS for the women of Tindo Dag. The coordinator has undertaken the

task of teaching the women to read and write. At the time this report was written, many of the women were just starting to write their names. The coordinator is also conducting Urdu and English language lessons as the women were keen to learn both languages. Even those girls who had dropped out of school at various stages are learning Urdu and basic English at the WFS. This is a relatively new WFS and still in the initial phases of setting up.

3. Challenges and Achievements

The participants were very happy to enhance and learn new skills. One participant voiced the sentiments of many when she said, “We are very happy because in Swat there are 2 or 3 vocational skill centres which are very expensive. We can’t afford to go there, but this is totally free and very beneficial for us.” The women requested more kinds of trainings such as beauty and grooming, gardening and other training that would help them generate an income.

Chapter 7

WFS Mehmoodkot, Muzaffargarh, Punjab



WFS Mehmoodkot, Muzaffargarh, Punjab

“This disaster is not like an earthquake or a tsunami. In the 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan, 80,000 people died more or less at one blow; whereas the immediate death toll from this flood is likely to be in the low thousands. The loss of property, however, is catastrophic. It is as if a neutron bomb exploded overhead, but instead of killing the people and leaving their houses intact, it piled trees upon the houses and swept away the villages and crops and animals, leaving the people alive.” Daniyal Mueenuddin - The New York Times, 18th August 2010

Situated in the Seraiki belt of Punjab, Muzaffargarh district is one of the oldest in the country. Because it is situated between two rivers, Indus and Chenab the district is known as *doaba* in the local language. As reported by Tariq Malik from Oxfam Novib on 16th August 2010, “This geographic advantage for Muzaffargarh turned into a disadvantage when rivers Chenab and Indus surged on both its sides leaving huge numbers of people from 443 small villages in sub-districts Alipur, Jatoi, and Kot Adu homeless.” The district is subject to extremely hot and cold climate conditions, and is affected by floods every year, however, the 2010 floods proved to be the most disastrous.

Mehmoodkot is a small impoverished town that was one of the worst hit areas in the district. The town was first inundated by breaches in the Lalpir Canal and then by flood torrents from the River Chenab. The Express Tribune, on 28th August 2010, reported the experience of 75-year old Ghulam Qadir, “The canal water was not very destructive. We had been aware of it in advance and guarded ourselves against it, but the flood wave from River Chenab took us by surprise. It washed away most of the houses.” Indeed, interviews with residents of the area, including survivors of GBV, reflect similar sentiments about the sense of loss. Domestic violence appeared to be the most common form of GBV in this area.



A visit by UNICEF and UNFPA

1. Rapid Needs Assessment

Shirkat Gah found that it was at an advantage in Muzaffargarh district when it implemented its RNA mainly because several organizations had already begun relief work in this badly hit region. Because of the groundwork already begun Shirkat Gah faced no real resistance to NGOs or to women who work in them. However, the presence of relief organizations did pose another challenge as many women assumed that the WFS was being set up for the purpose of providing relief goods. Thus explaining Shirkat Gah's work to community member was an initial challenge.

FGDs to assess women's access to health, education and the prevalence of violence revealed that there was a dire need for intervention on women's issues. The WFS was set up in a house with two spacious rooms at the centre of Basti Moza Powar situated in Mehmoodkot. This site was central to five *bastis* (localities) and would enable the WFS to access Kumharwala, Munjhota, Shaheedabad, Oulch as well as Moza Powar. The rented space was provided by a school teacher in the area, Mr. Safder who is now a LSC member.

As in other flood-affected areas around the country, there was a dearth of health facilities and services in Mehmoodkot. The women



Members of SG & SYCOP share a light moment with women at the Dar ul Aman

complained of a complete absence of medical institutions such as hospitals, clinics or dispensaries, which compelled them to travel to Muzaffargarh city whenever they needed medical attention. Since this was difficult for most women, their health issues were generally neglected and the expense of travel was only borne when it became absolutely necessary. Such challenges to women's mobility meant that childbirth was frequently performed at home and travel undertaken only when complications arose.

The situation regarding women's education was less grim. A few organizations had set up schools in Mehmoodkot and government schools were also operational in the area, thus young girls had access to primary and secondary education. Since higher education would require travel outside of Mehmoodkot, it was largely not an option for most young women.

The FGDs revealed a complete lack of awareness amongst women about basic human rights regarding physical and psychological harm. Women were completely unaware of their rights and of the protection provided to them under the law. What was alarming was that women didn't recognize the abuse that was being perpetrated upon them. Most women did not consider beatings by their husbands or fulfilling sexual needs against their wishes to be wrong or classified as abusive or

violent. Some women claimed that they were hearing the word “*tashadud*” (violence) for the first time. They had only a vague idea of the meaning of “*zulm*” (torture or injustice).

Soon after the FGDs were conducted and the WFS was set up, the coordinators conducted door-to-door visits. The campaign proved successful in not only drawing women to the awareness sessions and activities, but also in encouraging them to share their experiences of GBV and request assistance.

2. Staff, Referral Partners’ and LSC Members’ Views on GBV and WFS

. Erum Batool, Lady Health Visitor, Shaheedabad Basti, Mehmood Kot- Referral Partner

Erum Batool has been a referral partner for the WFS since its inception in April 2011. She has been a LHV for the last ten years, and has also been associated with Green Star for the last seven years, assisting them in many of their camps.

Erum became interested in the WFS and GBV projects because they were for the welfare of the community.

Erum practices from her home. A portion of her house functions as a ‘clinic’ where she examines patients and assists in childbirth. If a surgical procedure or a C-section is required, she takes the patient to Chowk Qureshi, to a medical facility where surgical staff is available. Erum claims that she often assists the surgeons with the procedures. Several patients, including those referred through the WFS consult Erum on matters pertaining to reproductive health and contraception methods. She has found that most women in the area prefer the Intrauterine Device method.

In Erum’s opinion, the women of Mehmoodkot are not at all empowered. She explains that they are impoverished, overburdened with housework and have no rights. She elaborates that the women have no control over their bodies. The number of children they have and when to stop are decisions which are strictly the husband’s domain, thus it is not uncommon to come across women who go on giving birth to girls in the hopes of having a son. In Erum’s view, this is violence.

Erum believes that the WFS is bound to make a difference in the

lives of the women in the area. She says that the WFS has become a meeting point for educated women who hold awareness sessions and meetings there with the impoverished women of the local community. She is glad that women such as herself can use the WFS to talk to women about issues such as family planning, maintaining health and hygiene, taking control of their bodies, and managing their households. She feels that such activities will make a positive difference. Erum felt that the WFS needed to increase its integration into the community through networking and conducting more door-to-door visits, so that more people understood its mission.

Umme Farwa (Age 35) WFS Coordinator

“I feel like my life has been a constant struggle. I grew up in Karachi and adjusting to life in this area was extremely difficult. I was troubled by the situation of women that I saw. Women’s earnings would be wasted by their husbands and a woman could end up divorced even after a marriage of eighteen years.”

“I have three sons and two daughters. I had another daughter, who unfortunately passed away some years ago. I was in Sinawa when the 2010 floods hit, and we had to leave our home and head for Multan. I was six months pregnant at the time. We returned home after a month but found that we had to rebuild our house. I was working with another organization at the time and came to Mehmoodkot in connection with a matter regarding relief work. My uncle told me about the WFS project. He is a member of the LSC and has extended us commendable support since then.”

“At first the women who used to come to the WFS assumed that we were here to give them cash or some other benefit and it was very difficult to explain our purpose to them. What motivated me to persist however was my personal experience as someone who was married at a very young age. When I was younger, I found it very difficult to speak up for myself and did not have anyone to turn to for help or guidance. Therefore, I wanted a place where women could come and share their problems, in confidence and get support when needed.”

“One of the biggest challenges that we deal with here is the mentality of many of our community members. The men of this area would assert that the WFS would make women troublesome

for them to deal with. Many would also scoff saying ‘You think every woman is going to go to court and stand up to her husband?’ It was very difficult to explain to them that we are not here to send women to court and also that not all problems involve courtrooms. Our aim is to see what the woman herself wants. If a woman wants us to simply talk to her husband or a family member, we do that as well.”



Library corner

“Having said that, things have become better now, especially after we conducted meetings with males, particularly with the youth. Maybe some of the men still badmouth us behind our backs, but at least in our presence most of them offer support and praise, saying we are doing something good for the community.”

“My first real success story was a personal one. It was one where I feel that all my training and work with the WFS came into play. My sister had problems with her husband and in-laws. My family’s reaction was the same as it had always been in my case. They blamed my sister for not trying to adjust and start a family. I had to support and fight for her so that she would have a say in the matter and in the final decision. Fortunately, this time I also had the support of my husband. Eventually, the matter was settled amicably, and I was satisfied with the outcome as my sister’s wishes were also taken into account. I do not believe I would have had the courage to stand up for my sister had it not been for my experiences with women at the WFS.”

Anjum (Age 21) Assistant Coordinator, WFS

Anjum joined the WFS on 1st May 2011, after she found out about it through her father’s friend. Anjum has a Bachelor’s degree as well as a postgraduate in Computer Sciences. Anjum is relatively new to Mehmoodkot; her family moved here three years ago following her father’s retirement. Anjum says that before the floods, people of this area were very close-minded and had very strange perceptions about NGOs. “Not only were they opposed to such organizations but they also assumed that women who work



Art competition

in NGOs don't actually work but use it as a ruse for something else. Things changed after the floods when many organizations became involved in the relief effort and also helped people rebuild their lives. My friends and I used to say 'Look at the women from other cities, how much progress they have made,' and we used to wish

that we also had opportunities for such professional development as well. **At first when I started this job, I was a bit apprehensive. I wondered whether, given people's perceptions of women NGO workers, they would speak badly about me too.** Thankfully, the GBV focal point from Shirkat Gah, Seham Saadat, gave me some sound advice and counseling that changed my mind. She told me that if I do not wish to work at the WFS then I do not have to as someone else can take my place. But, she pointed out, if I really want to do something good for my community, then change had to start somewhere. **If no woman from this community stands up to make a difference and set an example, how can those from other communities help us?** That's when I realized what I had to do and although I faced severe opposition from other family members, I was lucky to have the support of my parents. After working here, and hearing the stories of so many women, I have begun to feel grateful for every second of my life."

Huzoor Buksh, Social Worker and LSC Member

Huzoor Buksh has been involved with the WFS from the start. He has a commendable background in community development work and has even done courses in gender balance and human rights. He is of the view that village life is severely oppressive for women. He points out that even while he was doing his human rights courses, people used to say strange things about how NGOs and other agencies want to make people "wayward."

"The 2010 floods gave people an opportunity to bring about change. This was the first time in my life that I put aside all my other responsibilities and activities to attend the WFS meetings." He feels

that the WFS's work in the community is a true example of the Holy Prophet's *sunnah* (traditions), as instead of giving money to someone in need, it was actually equipping them to be self-sufficient. He believes the WFS is achieving this through its awareness session, meetings and sewing lessons. Huzoor Buksh hopes that the organizations supporting the WFS will continue to do so, as abandoning the project would be akin to nurturing a plant and then giving up just as it was about to bear fruit. He has requested Shirkat Gah to continue supporting the WFS and set up more such spaces.

Abida Perveen, Superintendent, Darul Aman Muzaffargarh, WFS Referral Partner

At the Darul Aman in Muzaffargarh, the daily activities for women are handicrafts and religious instruction. They are also being given some formal education through the National Commission on Human Development (NCHD), through literacy centres which have been set up in the Darul Aman itself. Presently, the Darul Aman is home to 17 women and 3 children who have been here for some time. Most women who come here do not stay for very long: the minimum period is three months and the longest case they have encountered stayed for nine months. The majority of survivors who come to the Darul Aman are victims of domestic violence. The centre has received rape cases as well, but these have been few and far between. They also receive kidnapping and *swara* (child marriages contracted to resolve feuds between clans) cases but domestic violence remains the biggest problem.

The superintendent is of the view that the 2010 floods have created an increase in GBV. She reports that during this time there were several cases of kidnapping women who were on their way to collect rations.

The superintendent praises the WFS for providing women with a platform where they can have their problems addressed and where they can seek shelter, or legal advice. The superintendent states that women come to the Darul Aman in bad shape after they have left home. The WFS, on the other hand, can assist women before things reach that stage. Although women are provided with all the legal, medical and psychosocial support that they need, she admits that as the officers at the shelter are responsible for their safety it becomes difficult to allow these women to go out and if they wish to do so, it must be at their own risk.

Farhat, Sewing Instructor, WFS Mehmoodkot

With great regret Farhat discloses that she only studied till the primary level. However, she learned how to sew when she was very young. Farhat has lived in Mehmoodkot all her life and at the time of the 2010 floods she was training at the nearby Vocational Training Institute (VTI). Before the floods, and for some time after that, Farhat's mobility was seriously restricted by her family. This restriction generally frustrated her.

She joined the VTI for three months and then went on to learn sewing from another woman in the area. After that she decided to stand up for her rights and informed her father that she would no longer stay confined to her house. She told her family she wanted to teach other women to sew at the WFS regardless of whether she was paid for this, so that other women would not feel the despair that she once had. Her primary motivation for teaching at the WFS was that other women in the area would have something to do and would become more self-sufficient. Interestingly, Farhat had approached the WFS herself. She had learnt about it through other girls in the neighborhood who would go there and bring back decoration pieces that they had created there. Some of the girls suggested that since she also had skills that she could share, she should join the WFS.

Farhat says that sometimes people ask her, "What do you get out of going to the WFS?" Her answer is that she receives a lot of love and support from those around her which she believes is more important than anything else. She also feels that it is important for her to impart the knowledge that she has acquired with great difficulty to those around her. She feels that the WFS' greatest achievement is that it gives women a purpose which makes a difference in the lives of survivors of GBV. She feels that GBV survivors can forget their problems and unwind away from the restrictive environments of their homes.

Farhat feels that the staff working there has made herculean efforts to reach out to the women in the community. She feels that ample effort was made to help abused women. WFS staff has intervened by speaking to the perpetrators on behalf of the survivor and by mediating between victims and their families.

Farhat talks about the homely atmosphere of the WFS and says that most men have stopped objecting to their female relatives visiting the space.

Samina (Age 25)

Samina grew up in a loving home where she was the eldest of four siblings and treated well by her parents. She attended school till the 7th grade and found out about the WFS during an FGD. She approached the WFS in the hope of finding a solution for her problems. Samina's distress was caused by her husband who would frequently reproach her, treat her badly and refuse to keep her in his house, all at the behest of his mother. Samina wanted someone to mediate and help forge a reconciliation between them.

The WFS coordinator had separate meetings with Samina's husband and her in-laws. After a few meetings, Samina reported that her husband's attitude slowly began to change. He even assured her that he would find a way to take her back home, without further conflict between her and his mother.

While Samina has not been able to move back to her husband's house yet, she says she is glad that the WFS staff tried to help her. She says that visiting the WFS enables her to interact with other women, which lightens the sorrow of her personal burden.

Farheen (Age 20)

Farheen has been married for five months and is expecting her first child. She found out about the WFS through its door-to-door visits, and now comes here regularly. Farheen feels invigorated during her visits to the WFS and feels that it provides women with purposeful activities and gives them the opportunity to assemble and discuss various topics, including their problems.

Farheen, too, approached the WFS staff for help. After two months of marriage, she was compelled to return to her mother's house as her husband was physically abusive. She recalled that the WFS staff provided her with counseling and also spoke to her husband and her mother-in-law on her behalf. Farheen was able to return to her husband. After the intervention, Farheen feels that her husband and in-laws have begun to treat her better. She hopes that the WFS will continue its work as she feels that many women could be helped in this way.

Asma (Age 19)

Asma lost her mother when she was only a year old. She had only one sister and they were raised by their paternal grandmother, whom they continue to live with. Asma's father remarried soon after her mother's death and had not really been a part of his daughters' lives. Asma's grandmother wanted to educate both the girls and strived hard to provide for them, but Asma was not interested in getting an education and thought only her sister should continue. However, her sister was married to a cousin after she completed 8th grade. Soon after her sister was married, Asma was also wedded to a cousin who lived in the same house as her sister and brother-in-law.

Asma recalls that for some time after the marriage, her husband had seemed fine. It was when he went to Lahore to look for work that things took a downturn. In Lahore, he fell in love with another cousin. He began to taunt Asma persistently, and told her that she was not attractive and that he wished he had been married to the other cousin. He eventually suggested to Asma that she should find him other women, and even suggested her sister as an option. When Asma refused, he turned her out of the house and threatened to divorce her. She was four months pregnant at the time.

One of Asma's maternal uncles knew a lawyer and helped her file a maintenance suit in court. She had already filed the case when she came to the WFS, which she found out about through its door-to-door visits. She says the WFS was extremely helpful. Earlier Asma had worked as a domestic servant in someone's house, however after learning to sew and make decoration pieces at the WFS, she was able to earn a considerable income selling hand fans, her craft goods and clothes. She also felt that visiting the WFS helped alleviate the worries that troubled her mind. Her daughter is a year old now.

3. Challenges and Achievements

The WFS in this area has served as an oasis of hope for many, including its staff. As with WFSs in other areas, the ability for women to gather in one place, learn skills and mentor each other has helped these women form a group for psychosocial support amongst themselves. Although sewing classes are being conducted in all WFSs, in this particular district, the women have taken the initiative to add more activities. Not only do these women sew clothes, they make decoration pieces and have recently made a *tandoor* (traditional oven) in the WFS where they can cook *rotis* (flatbread) together. Farhat, the sewing instructor, noted that many of the girls' parents were thrilled on Eid when the girls came home with the things that they had made. Even though these activities are ancillary to the main purpose of the WFS, they have helped in winning over support of families and in providing women with a form of mutual support.

The WFS has also been fortunate to receive tremendous support from male members in the community, such as Huzoor Buksh and Mr. Safder. Three women referred by this WFS have also had their cases referred to a lawyer and are currently seeking judicial divorce and/or maintenance from their husbands. Several others have been referred to the LHV and two other doctors, namely Dr. Alamdar Gillani in Mehmoodkot, and Dr. Aasima from Rahnuma FPAP in Muzaffargarh.

Chapter 8

WFS Basti Mohanna, Bhakkar



WFS Basti Mohanna, Bhakkar

“It seems the land has ripped out its entrails and thrown them out for all of us to see. These people do not live in picturesque valleys where city folk go on holiday. These areas are of no strategic interest to anyone because they have neither exported terrorism nor do they have the ambition to join a fight against it. The word terrorism does not even exist in Seraiki and Sindhi, the languages of the majority of the people who have been rendered homeless,”
Mohammad Hanif - BBC , 21st August 2010

Basti Mohanna is located in Bhakkar district, and is one of the most impoverished areas of Punjab. Bhakkar district is in the Seraiki belt of Punjab and lies on the left bank of the Indus River. Basti Mohanna has the usual problems of lack of health and educational facilities, but the situation has exacerbated because of the remoteness of this area. There are no proper roads that lead into Bhakkar city and literacy levels are especially low, even amongst men. There are few employment opportunities and most people earn their livelihood through farming. Yet, despite their limited resources, the people are extremely hospitable. Shirkat Gah team members who work here are treated by the locals as their guests, and not only do they occasionally bring food or other items from their homes for visiting team members, but they also expect an occasional courtesy visit to their homes. This experience has been both heartwarming, but also challenging when it comes to meeting community expectations.

1. Rapid Needs Assessment

As mentioned earlier, there are no medical institutions, not even a Basic Health Unit (BHU) in Basti Mohanna. For any medical assistance, a woman would have to travel to either Nawtek or Bhakkar city, which

would be expensive as well as troublesome given the distance and the modes of transport available, namely buses and rickshaws which do not venture out of the area.

The extent of the transport issue can be illustrated by the fact that a coordinator from the WFS was compelled to take a pregnant woman to Bhakkar on a donkey cart. There is, however, an LHV in a nearby village called Basti Bakhtawar, who is now one of the referral partners of the WFS. There is also a male doctor there.

There are no schools in Basti Mohanna. The closest primary school is in Kundranwale, but because of the distance it is only attended by a few boys. Most parents cite security concerns as the reason for not sending

their daughters outside the locality to attend school.



Rapid Needs Assessment and Focus Group Discussion

Most women did not seem familiar with any notions of what constitutes GBV. Although some women shared that they were at times beaten by their husbands, or had in laws unnecessarily interfering in their lives, or at times had to have sexual intercourse with their husbands against their wishes, they did not know if this could be called "*tashadud*" or violence, and

thought it was in their best interests to endure such treatment rather than return to their parents' homes. However, some women did reveal - while discussing reproductive health issues - that at times they were too overworked by their in-laws during pregnancy and this had caused them intermittent bleeding. A few women also shared that *watta satta* was practiced in their communities but had the strange observation that poverty necessitated this practice. Legal rights were almost an alien concept to these women, many of whom did not even know of registration of marriages. Even fewer were those women who were aware of any minimum age of marriage under the law, and many felt that the marriage of a girl as young as 12, 13 or 14 years was not a problem, even if this was with a 40-year old man.

2. Door-to-Door Visits

In both Mehmoodkot and Basti Mohanna, campaigning for the WFS through door-to-door visits was ongoing. Most of the women accessing the WFSs in both these areas found out about it through door-to-door visits. The WFS coordinators conduct their visits twice a week. On the first visit the women are given an introduction to the WFS. Houses that have been visited are marked so that the staff knows where they have to follow-up. Surprisingly, so far, none of these women have objected to the marking outside their homes, and even welcome the coordinators and Shirkat Gah team members to keep visiting.

3. Referral Partners' Views on GBV and WFS

Dr. Sara, Gynecologist, Safder Clinic (Private Clinic) and District Headquarters

Dr. Sara is a graduate of Hamdard University from Karachi and a medico-legal officer at the DHQ. Although she has not yet received any cases from the WFS, she views its establishment as a very positive step. She is no stranger to cases of GBV, "I see cases every day when women are made an example of violence. Only last month I dealt with 12 cases of rape."

Moreover, she adds, anyone who wishes can subject a woman to violence be it her brother-in-law, a neighbor or anyone else. While she feels that it is vital that centres such as the WFS are established all over the province of Punjab, she believes that it is crucial in a district such as Bhakkar, where violence against women is rampant. She thinks that the centre is serving women in a very critical way by giving them psychological support by offering them a place where they are able to discuss their problems and possibly find a solution.

When asked if she thinks the 2010 floods led to an increase in GBV, Dr. Sara says that women of this region have always faced torture and the floods may have led to a 10-20% rise in such cases, however, she speculates that the increase in number may just be reflective of the increase in reporting.

Dr. Sara says, **"Centres such as the WFS have played a critical role in increasing awareness amongst women and helping them**

come out and discuss these issues, but most women that are true victims of GBV remain silent on the matter without any hope of redress.”

Aasma Karim, Superintendent Dar ul Aman, Bhakkar

Aasma states that the women who come to Dar ul Aman are always survivors of some form of violence. Most women who have come here for shelter are usually married, have been subjected to violence (typically by the husband) and have usually been turned away if they returned to their parents’ house. Most cases come to the Darul Aman through court and self admission is extremely rare. Presently the shelter is accommodating 11 women and 3 children. They have the capacity to accommodate 20 people. Moreover, the survivors are provided food and medical services. The shelter also has lawyers who will assess the cases, educate survivors about their basic rights and the procedure of the case and outline the actions that they can take. Volunteers from other NGOs provide these women with counseling and psychosocial support and another NGO provides free medicine.

Aasma believes that the current setup at the WFS is very useful, because at the most basic level it provides women with skills, which is especially important for women who do not have a livelihood or financial support from their families. She is of the view that skills training such as that which is provided by the WFS will make women more self sufficient and empower them to make their own choices.



Awareness session with males watching documentary *Mumtaz Bach Sakti Thi*



Women participating in a discussion at the inauguration ceremony



Awareness session



Awareness session with males

Mr. Khizer Hayat Khan, District Social Officer Welfare, Women's Development and Bait-ul-Maal

Mr. Khizer Hayat has had considerable involvement with community development, not only due to his role as District Social Officer but his own proactive nature which has motivated him to support different CSOs in any way he can. For the WFS in Basti Mohanna, his support has been present since the beginning and he has even participated in its Inauguration Ceremony with much enthusiasm, welcoming Shirkat Gah and praising its endeavors in trying to help the women of the community.

Mr. Khizer Hayat observes that sadly, GBV is the end result of many unfortunate practices and values held by people in our country, in almost every community, irrespective of class or background. He notes that gender discrimination is present from the moment that a girl enters this world; her birth will not be welcomed with the same enthusiasm as that of a male. This discrimination, he finds, continues throughout the girl's life... her own parents will put the needs of their son before hers when it comes to all important decisions regarding her life, be it education, marriage, or even her diet.

In view of the difficulties women face, especially in rural areas, Mr. Khizer Hayat is of the view that the WFS is an extremely effective project and an excellent step as women are desperately in need of the kind of support it provides. He believes that through this WFS women can gain some form of self determination and realize that their worth in life is not simply the work they can do in the kitchen for their husbands and that their value is not to be determined solely by their male family members. He also suggests that the WFS step up its efforts in providing livelihood trainings to

women so that they can become economically independent and free themselves from abusive situations.

Dr. Hasan Nawaz, DHQ Basti Bakhtawar and Private Clinic, Nautak

Dr. Hasan Nawaz is a well respected doctor who has treated cases referred to him by the WFS. He has also conducted sessions on issues such as reproductive health, along with the Shirkat Gah focal point, with the men of Basti Mohanna. He found out about the WFS through its coordinators when they approached him to become a referral partner and accepted the role with enthusiasm. In his view, GBV is a serious problem in Basti Mohanna as well as its surrounding areas and women are suffering tremendously because of it. He says that many incidents of rape are not reported because families believe it will bring them shame if anyone finds out. He believes that the WFS is a great initiative that allows women to assemble, discuss their personal issues and receive moral support.

Hameeda Bibi (Age 25)

Hameeda Bibi was the eldest among eight siblings from a poor household. She says that her parents never differentiated between their children on the basis of gender and always paid equal attention to all of them. She is illiterate due to the lack of education facilities in the area.

Hameeda and her younger sister were married into the same family. As Hameeda was older she was sent to her husband's house, but her sister, being too young at the time of marriage was kept at her parents' home until they felt that she was old enough to live with her husband. Hameeda had not seen her husband before marriage.

Hameeda's story is one of not only violence, but of perversity. It emerged on the very first night that her husband was having an affair with his sister-in-law (deceased brother's wife). On the first night of their marriage her husband came to her, but the sister-in-law got angry and took him away in the middle of the night. This, she says was repeated every other night. Upon questioning her husband about the matter she was told that he did not like her and that if she wished she could return

to her parents' house. Someone from the community then informed her father that Hameeda's husband and the sister-in-law had colluded to murder the brother by poisoning. Unfortunately, by the time Hameeda's father arrived to take away his daughter she was 7 months pregnant. In the meantime, Hameeda's husband and his sister-in-law got married while Hameeda was still married to him.

When Hameeda gave birth to a baby girl her uncle guided her through the process of divorce. She visited the Bhakkar court and filed for divorce. The husband never appeared before the court, but the divorce was eventually granted. Several years later she was married to an uncle's son whose wife had passed away. Hameeda and her second husband have three children from this marriage.

Shirkat Gah's staff members came across Hameeda's case when FGDs were being conducted during the RNA. A few separate meetings were held with Hameeda by the Shirkat Gah focal point to discuss her ordeal. Although she was aware she had been through a torturous experience, it seemed as though her mind had still not registered what had happened and emotionally she was still bruised. During these sessions, Hameeda was reassured that none of what happened had been her fault, and that being married off at the age of 12 was not only unfair, as she was rightfully feeling that it was, but it was also illegal. It was also discussed with her whether she had any health or other complications with which she required assistance and although she did not wish to be referred to any medical or psychosocial service providers, she was advised to attend some of the awareness sessions that were going to take place at the WFS once it was setup. Hameeda attended a few sessions regarding reproductive health and GBV and later informed the Shirkat Gah focal point that she was very glad she had come as she had learnt a lot, and had also realized she was not alone in the troubles she had had to face.

Hameeda also said that Shirkat Gah was the only organization that helped women like her in this area and that the Shirkat Gah GBV focal point was the first person to come and counsel her. She said that she had never heard of any other organizations, either government or private that helped women in this way. Hameeda felt that her own experiences and the knowledge she had gained from the WFS had made her determined to ensure that her daughters would never suffer the kind of injustices that she did.

Rukhsana (Age 24)

Rukhsana says that when she got married she didn't have children for the first five years. She became pregnant in the sixth year of marriage, but had a miscarriage in the third month of her pregnancy. She had two sons after the miscarriage, however, when she became pregnant again an ultrasound discovered that she had stones in her uterus which were removed along with the fetus.

At the time Rukhsana came to the WFS she was pregnant and bleeding heavily. The LHV sent her for an ultrasound to Nawtak. Dr. Hassan gave her the necessary medication which helped stopped the bleeding. She was satisfied with the help she received at the WFS. Since her treatment she has begun to feel much better. Rukhsana states that **"If the WFS were not present then I probably would have had to travel very far for treatment and it would have been very expensive also."** She is now consulting Dr. Akhtar in Nawtak.

Zakia Batool (Age 30)

At the age of 6 months Zakia Batool was married in a *watta satta* (exchange marriage) arrangement. In exchange for her, Zakia's uncle got married to her husband's sister and now has eight grown up children. He has been married for 20 years. However the man Zakia married, later married another woman and has children from that marriage. He didn't divorce Zakia nor did he fulfill his marital obligations towards her. Instead he asked for Rs. 200,000 to divorce her. Zakia wanted a divorce without paying a hefty amount of money. In order to get him to divorce her, the family sought the help of their community but was unable to come up with a fair solution to the matter.

Zakia comes from the area of Chah Dad Shah, which falls in Layyah district. She had been visiting different areas of Bhakkar district on behalf of an NGO named NRSP, conducting door-to-door visits and gathering information regarding mother and child health care needs. It was around this time that she came to know of District Social and Welfare Council (DSWC) and the WFS and she decided to approach the centre too if they could help her get a divorce without paying her husband the sum of money he was asking for. The WFS staff informed her that they could

assist her by providing a lawyer, one of their referral partners, who could help her file for a *khula*, i.e., judicial divorce. Although the WFS staff offered their full support, Zakia decided that she did not want to take this matter to court and wanted a settlement and for someone to advocate on her behalf. Because the distance to Zakia's husband's home was too far off from the WFS, the Coordinators approached a male member of Shirkat Gah's CBO partner, DSWC. The latter visited Zakia's husband and his family repeatedly to convince them that asking for money in return for divorce was unfair to Zakia and that he should let her go and live her life. He informed them that so long as Zakia was his legal wife he was bound to maintain her and if he was not doing so, she had the option of seeking divorce from him and was not liable to pay him anything. He also reasoned with the husband and his family that what was being done with Zakia was wrong on moral as well as religious grounds. Eventually, the husband relented and released Zakia from the marriage. Soon after the matter was resolved, Zakia left for her hometown, and although she is not able to visit the WFS, she has sent messages for the coordinators, through family members in Bhakkar, that she has married again and is happy with her new life.

Khursheed (Age 30)

Khursheed is a 30-year old woman. She says that her husband was good to her in the initial years of their marriage however after the birth of two children his attitude changed. He started to taunt her, call her ugly and even asked her to leave his home. She told the WFS staff that even though she wanted to live in her husband's house, for the past two years she has been living with her children at her mother's residence. She also complained that her husband was quite violent, but that she still wanted to live with him. The coordinators at the WFS informed Khursheed they could assist her in availing legal help or psychosocial support she needed and that she could also come to the WFS to learn skills so she could earn an income for herself, if her livelihood was what she was worried about. Khursheed, on the other hand, stated that she did not want any of those things - she simply wanted to return to her husband and live in peace with him. She asked the WFS staff to try and mediate with her husband so that she could finally return home. With Khursheed's permission the

WFS staff decided to involve some male members of the LSC to have meetings with Khursheed's husband and try and persuade him to reconcile with his wife and bring her and his children back to his home. After a few meetings, Khursheed's husband assured the LSC members that he would indeed reunite his family and would work on his own attitude so that they could all live peacefully under one roof. Khursheed has come to the WFS for a few awareness sessions since then and informs the WFS staff that her husband has improved a great deal in his treatment towards her and that she and her children are happy that they are a family once again.

4. Challenges and Achievements

The establishment of the WFS suffered an early set back when a place was rented for its use. After all negotiations regarding rent, tenure etc. were finalized the landlord decided that he did not wish to give his land for use by women for some evil purpose and at first doubled the amount he asked for in rent and, later, flat out refused to rent out the space for the WFS. Although a new space was found, the coordinator notes that the problems did not end there: one of the biggest challenges this WFS faced was in explaining its purpose to the community. It took many months before the people understood that the WFS' role went beyond simply distributing food. During door-to-door visits, some men asked the WFS staff "If you do not give anything to these women at this centre, why are you calling them there?"

Furthermore, the LSC members initially only comprised men as there weren't any women who would take on leadership roles. Also traditionally, the men and women in this area are not very comfortable with the idea of meetings where both sexes are present. The Shirkat Gah focal points and WFS coordinators slowly worked to include more women in the committee.

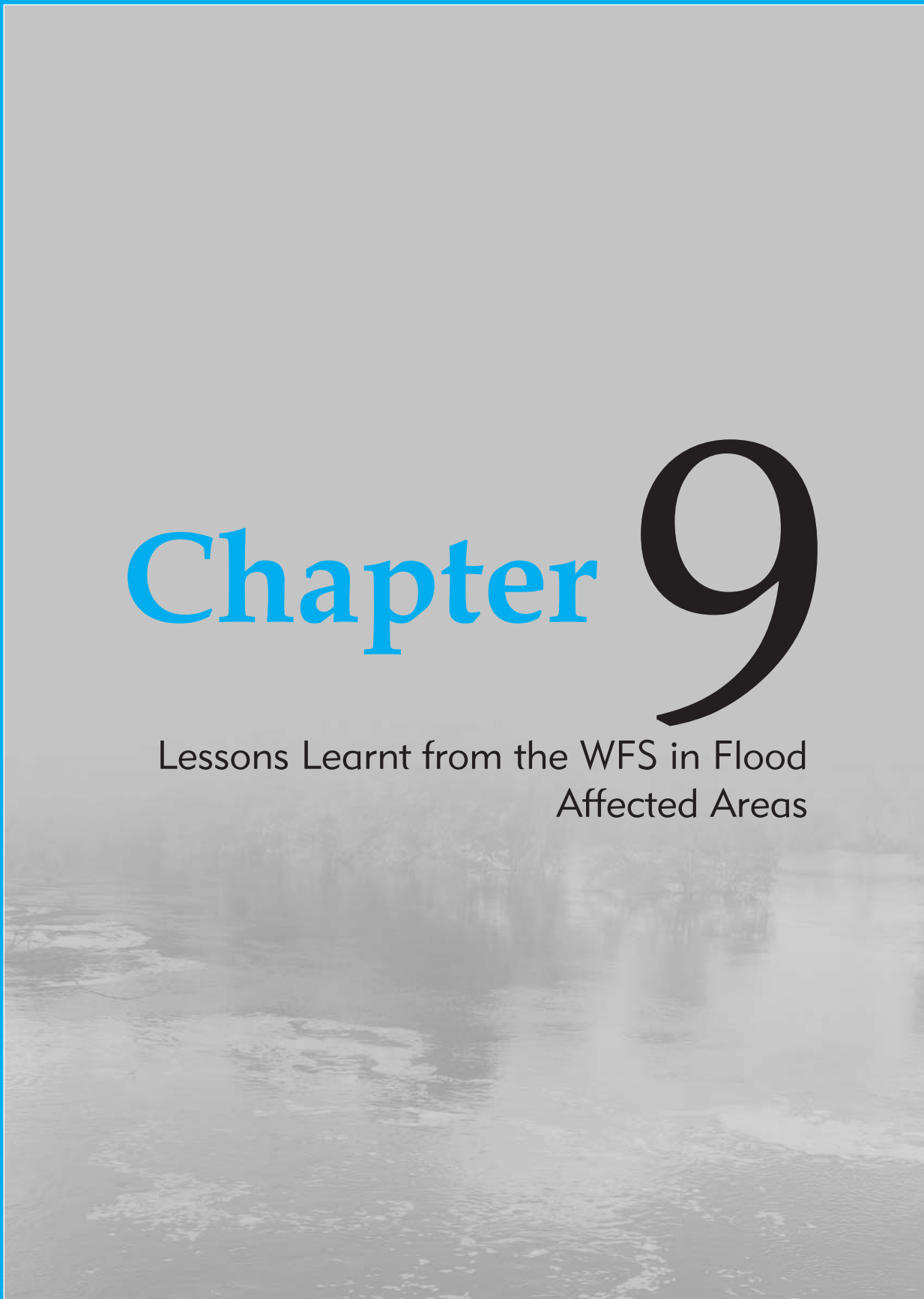
Illiteracy is a major problem in Basti Mohanna, as there are no schools in the area. The WFS has a small library corner, where some of the girls who knew how to read and write, read books and publications (many of which are Shirkat Gah's own publication on women's rights). Also the coordinators believe that despite the lack of formal education, it is commendable that women have grasped concepts such as GBV, and human and legal rights through the awareness sessions.

Poverty is another major problem in this area. At the time hygiene kits were to be distributed, many women saw the sack full of kits at the WFS and assumed that they were rations bags for distribution. Many were disappointed when they saw the contents of the bags. However, even in this regard, a rather unexpected initiative was taken by the women of this WFS. A *tandoor* was set up for the purpose of providing an extra activity to these women, however, there was no firewood available and the same had to be purchased. The women who attend the WFS daily decided that they would each contribute one rupee towards the purchase and the same was collected and given to the Coordinator who then had the wood bought.

There have, however, been some very important initiatives taken by women from other localities who have come to know of the WFS. A group of women from the village of Basti Rawanna, not far from Basti Mohanna, visited the WFS and informed the coordinators that a school building had once been constructed in their village, however, no teachers or faculty members had ever come to that school and it had never become functional. Pursuant to the request of these women, the WFS Coordinators along with the Shirkat Gah focal point visited a referral partner, Mr. Khizer Hayat Khan, who is currently looking into the matter with relevant government departments.

Chapter 9

Lessons Learnt from the WFS in Flood
Affected Areas



Lessons Learnt from the WFS in Flood Affected Areas

At the core of all interventions and projects initiated by Shirkat Gah has always been the belief that to bring about any meaningful long lasting change, strengthening of community members and community mobilization is imperative. The GBV-Women Friendly Spaces project has worked in the form of a network, with supervisory roles accorded to Shirkat Gah staff members whilst the more important roles of facilitators to survivors of GBV have been given after due training to women from the communities in which the WFSs have been set up. Additionally, as Implementing Partners (IPs), Shirkat Gah has engaged in partnerships with CBOs which are able to integrate more easily within the community and to ensure that survivors and others accessing the WFS as well as women groups do not feel that there is outside pressure on them to deviate from their normal customs.

Shirkat Gah successfully employed the WFS platform to promote its agenda of women empowerment and social justice and carry out its various advocacy activities in the WFSs.

The local communities came to regard the WFSs as their own joint public space. They talked openly, shared each other's grief as well as joys, learned skills and sometimes even cooked together in the space. The key to the success of the WFSs was a feeling of ownership by local women, the freedom to decide their activities and building of strategic linkages and networking with other organizations operating in the area which empowered the women to reach out for help when needed. Locally generated activities such as handicrafts and exhibitions, setting up of resource and media libraries, on-demand health trainings, and livelihood sessions also played an important role.

The project was also able to link women with each other and to initiate a

debate at the public, media and community levels to increase awareness regarding GBV and develop strategies to minimize the same. Eventually the discourse filtered down to the daily routine interactions among women of all age groups as well as their families. Now the women have a more positive image and self worth and are ready to protect their rights and feel secure in their environment. They are motivated to become agents of change themselves to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and other forms of GBV.

1. Engagement with the Community: Strategies and Tactics

Of all engagement and penetration tactics, the stitching lessons at the WFS have proved to be the most useful. They brought the survivors and other women to the centre and also allayed the fears of the male members of the community about their women going “wayward.” It has helped the WFS staff come across women in need, it has attracted women and made them attend awareness sessions and it has also given some women a sense of empowerment in knowing they have a skill through which they can earn for themselves. The daily activity of stitching has, moreover, helped the women at the centre to form a support group among themselves. It is important to note, during the mapping in all districts, no form of psychosocial support emerged, whether in the shape of a facility or an activity. It is also worth mentioning that to many women, simply having the stitching instruction is a productive activity...something hard to come by for women in communities where their daily routine consists of little apart from work - whether domestic or in the fields.

Door-to-door campaigns were successful in gaining the trust of the communities in certain districts and bringing them to the doorstep of the WFS. LSCs secured active participation of the communities as well as the influential stakeholders and proved to be a stabilizing and facilitating move that recruited male allies as well as gave the survivors the power and confidence to express the direction the WFS was to take.

By and large the response from each of these sectors has been that the WFS is a welcome initiative because it literally provides these women a “space” for themselves and it is a platform from which awareness is being disseminated. Accolades for the awareness sessions in particular seem to be unanimous. Given the dearth of health facilities in most affected areas, sessions on Reproductive Health have generated the most enthusiasm. What is most notable is the fact that of all the sessions

that have been conducted, there has been one for males and one for females, and that men have continued to turn up for these sessions, although they concern issues faced mostly by women. In some areas, such as Marghazar, although the sessions have to be conducted by a male, the initiative is the first of its kind and it is a rather unprecedented move for males of this area to be gathering for the purpose of discussing the welfare of their women. More importantly, although the purpose of these awareness sessions is to be changing attitudes so that GBV can be lessened, it is often difficult to assess in the short run whether such measures have been successful, however, the example of Naimatullah from Qubo Saaed Khan, Shahdaddkot, who stopped being violent with his wife, is indicative of the fact that important breakthroughs can be achieved through these sessions. It also indicates as one referral partner, Waheed Bhatti (quoted earlier from Shahdaddkot), said: sometimes all it takes is to sit a person down and try and reason with them.

2. Women Empowering Themselves

Some of the care providers involved in this project, including the WFS staff, have at times felt frustrated when seeing survivors who do not wish to fight for their rights, for instance, a woman accustomed to spousal abuse who refuses to leave the situation she is in although all help is being offered by the WFS. However, it has been seen that the process leading to women taking such bold steps is a gradual one. There are usually a number of factors at play: although a survivor could be referred to a shelter home if she wishes to leave her abusive partner but has no other place to go, but this may require her to leave her community behind as well...the fear then is not merely of stigmatization but a very natural one of desolation. Empowerment can be seen in smaller steps which, it is hoped, will encourage other women too to take more bold actions. Even women asking for a mediation that will help resolve issues between her spouse or another abusive family member is also an example of empowerment. Empowerment, after all, is about a person deciding what is best for them.

Furthermore, from some of the most unexpected quarters, such as Usta Muhammad, Jaffarabad, women have taken courageous decisions for instance seeking *khula* from an estranged husband, a move which has encouraged a few others to approach the WFS, even if simply to ask, "What are my legal rights in maintaining custody of my minor child?"

3. Special Activities held at the WFS

- **Art Competition**

In the months of May and June, art competitions were held at the WFSs in Punjab and Marghazar where women displayed handicrafts and stitching. To show appreciation of their efforts, gifts were awarded to prize winners.



Handicrafts made by the women on display

- **Theatre Performance**

A theatre performance based on issues relating to GBV took place at the WFS in Mehmoodkot, Muzaffargarh, in July. The topic of this theatre performance was “*Dhee Da Haq*”, i.e., daughter’s rights. Furthermore, theatre performances were held in each WFS during the *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence* on violence against women, safe age of marriage, family planning and the need for optimum standards of RH care by community based theatre groups.



A theatre performance highlighting GBV

- **International Rural Women’s Day**

On 15th October 2011, the International Rural Women’s Day was commemorated in all five WFSs of Shirkat Gah. The day’s activities entailed a discussion on why this day is commemorated, screening of Shirkat Gah’s documentary “*Kahani Ek Si*” which highlighted the difficult lives of rural women and how they are not given full credit, discussion of the documentary, and plantation of tree saplings, to also commemorate the fact that 2011 is the “Year of the Forest.” At some WFSs, the handicrafts and clothes stitched by the women who come to

the centre were also displayed. Different stakeholders from various sectors, such as the Executive District Officers (EDOs) of education, doctors, LHVs, forestry department officials were also invited along with community women. The purpose was to shed light upon the different injustices faced by women in rural areas, who make up about 60% of its workforce, and yet are not even give the same pay as men. There was a great turn out at all the WFSs. Women were extremely enthusiastic about learning what this day would mean and actively participated in the activities planned for the day.



Plantation of tree saplings, Bhakkar



Plantation of tree saplings, Muzaffargarh

- **Documentary Screening and Awareness Session**

Reproductive Health awareness sessions have been held continually since the beginning. In the month of November, it was felt that maybe something should be added to these sessions, to make them less repetitive and to ensure the continued interest of the community members and Shirkat Gah's documentary, "*Mumtaz Bach Saktee Thi*" was screened in all the WFSs. In Sindh, the Sindhi-dubbed version and in Swat the Pushto-dubbed version was screened.

- **16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence**

Awareness sessions on Violence Against Women with the core theme of "Peace in the Home to Peace in the World" were carried out in the WFSs. The discussion panel consisted of lawyers, women police and medico-legal officers along with Shirkat Gah's expert teams. The objective of the sessions was to help community members understand the relevant laws for VAW cases, procedures involved at various stages, e.g. police, medico-legal examination, hospitals, shelters, women's centres etc., and support available to women faced with

violence. The panelists gave an overview of the procedures, protections and services and with the involvement of the community members outlined the challenges faced while accessing these services. The community also discussed individual and collective strategies for resistance that have helped in their situations and at the end of it all came up with a list of services and support systems in the community for women in distress/survivors of violence.

4. Should this Project Continue?

There are various CSOs presently making commendable efforts in various different sectors, however, the ultimate goal for most has been the same: human development. It is now agreed by most that human development cannot be possible if GBV is allowed to persist at the rate it is presently, as an entire section of a community or population is then being hindered from reaching its full potential, and remains in oppression.

The communities in which the WFSs have been set up already suffer from decades of poor governance and neglect. There is a severe lack of facilities and of opportunities for people of these areas. Reproductive Health issues have emerged to be a major problem, and these issues are often linked to GBV; young girls are not provided an education and marriage is a decision in which they have no part and there is no concept of an appropriate age. Hence, girls as young as 8, 11 or 13 are getting married and because their bodies are not ready to bear a child they end up having up to six miscarriages by the time they are 18. Even among those women married at a later age, many of them suffer from extreme weakness due to being overworked, not receiving a proper diet and not having the consciousness to realize that they are also important and need to look after themselves, too, and not just their husbands and children. The WFS seeks, at the very least, to raise consciousness amongst women regarding having an identity, having rights and the need for them to put themselves first and make themselves a priority. More importantly, the WFS has engaged in counseling women who are survivors of GBV, rehabilitating them by providing them activities and skills through which they can generate income; it has assisted survivors by negotiating on their behalf with abusive spouses and relatives, providing them access to services and providing moral support.

GBV is now well recognized as a violation of basic human rights and

hindrance to human development. Curbing GBV is also essential towards the goal of ensuring that every birth is a safe birth, and one of choice not circumstance. Ten months on, the WFSs has managed to open up some of the most conservative communities to the idea of rights, and has only just begun to start changing attitudes, to start making people understand the unequal power relations that form the roots of violence, and to make people see that to elevate women from an oppressed state could be beneficial for all of society, as women form one half of that society.

Major lessons learnt from this experience can be summarily shared as active engagement of male decision makers of the families, creating ownership of the WFSs by respecting the cultural norms and the power dynamics of each area and designing individualized strategies and activities (e.g., actively engage religious leaders, the main gatekeepers in rural communities, to increase the acceptance of the project). Addressing GBV directly can potentially become a controversial issue and hence the WFS should plan other activities as well to promote local buy-in.

Consistent interaction with women and door-to-door campaigns helps gain their trust and encourages them to seek help.

5. Plans for Scaling Up Best Practices

The purpose of this Best Practices Document has been to gauge the views of survivors who accessed the WFS, community men and women, the staff who have toiled in these WFSs day in and day out since the beginning and those supporting the WFS by becoming either members of its LSC or referral partners.

Future plans of scaling up include refresher trainings of the WFSs teams from all over the country to share the lessons learnt and devise future interventions. Advocacy at the local level for the latest Anti Women Practices Bill as well as pushing for the bill on Domestic Violence would be a strong component of future plans for the WFSs. In addition, linking up women with more organizations that could help empower them socioeconomically and provide them a means of livelihood will be priority agenda for the next phase of the project. GBV awareness will be taken to the next level by involving the community women themselves to co-facilitate the sessions and devise group strategies to combat GBV.



شیرکت گاہ

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