GIVING VOICE TO SILENCE

Edited by **Saba Gul Khattak** | **Noreen Naseer**

GIVING VOICE TO SILENCE

Pakistan 2026

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To those whose stories
are often told by others,
but rarely heard.
This is for your agency,
your determination,
and your truth.

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Foreword | Adeela Suleman

"I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, then why do we read it? ...We need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief."

– Franz Kafka, *Letter to Oskar Pollak* (1904)

We live in a world that often demands we avert our gaze. We are taught, implicitly and explicitly, to look away from the uncomfortable, the illicit and the desperate. We construct boundaries both physical lines on maps and moral lines in our minds to separate the 'dignified' from the 'damned'. But there are moments when a body of work arrives that refuses to let us look away. This book is one such work. It acts, as Kafka prescribed, as an axe for the frozen sea of indifference that separates us from the realities of the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands.

This volume is not merely a collection of research findings; it is a cartography of survival. It maps the unseen terrains of the human spirit operating under the crushing weight of conflict, displacement and rigid patriarchy. It explores the lives of people who have been rendered invisible twice over: once by the militarised geography they inhabit, and then again by the moralistic gaze of a society that refuses to acknowledge their means of existence.

The Paradox of the Borderland

To understand the gravity of the research presented in this book, one must first understand the landscape in which it is rooted. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is not just a demarcation of

Adeela Suleman
Wilted Flowers
Digital Image
2026

state sovereignty; it is a liminal zone of contested identity, perpetual war and ancient codes. It is a place where the echo of the Cold War has never truly faded, and where the War on Terror turned homes into battlefields.

In this geography, the Pashtun tribal code of Pakhtunwali reigns supreme. It is a code built on honour, but often, that honour is constructed upon the silence of women. The poignant Pashto verse that opens this narrative serves as a haunting overture to the lives documented within these pages:

Sister or Wife,
Your house is home because of me,
I am the prop you lean on,
I am the power that runs you,
Yet, you think I am a slur against your honour.

This verse encapsulates the devastating paradox of womanhood in the tribal belt. The woman is acknowledged as the foundation, the very prop upon which the domestic world leans yet, she is simultaneously viewed as a vulnerability, a potential stain. In the triad of *zar* (gold), *zan* (women) and *zameen* (land), women are commodified, treated as possessions to be guarded, traded or avenged.

The essays in this book meticulously deconstruct how this commodification is institutionalised. Through customs like *swara* (bartering women to settle disputes), *valver* (bride price), and *ghag* (forced marriage), the tribal structure denies women autonomy. But the violence of this system is not static; it has been compounded by decades of militarisation. The imposition of the Durand Line and the subsequent treatment of the tribal districts as 'buffer zones' stripped the region of development and rights, leaving its inhabitants to navigate a landscape where violence is normalised and justice is the prerogative of the powerful.

However, this book courageously expands the lens of vulnerability beyond the traditional narratives of the oppressed women. It sheds necessary light on the young men of the borderlands, orphaned by war, manipulated by militants, and forced into a crisis of masculinity where the only path to survival often lies in the shadows of exploitation. It speaks, too, of the transgender community, who stand at the harshest intersection of this social order. Denied the protection of their families and the dignity of social recognition, they are pushed to the absolute margins, migrating to urban centres like Peshawar, only to find new forms of exclusion.

Transactional Sex: The Architecture of Survival

The central inquiry of this book, transactional sex is perhaps the most silenced subject in the region. In a society where sexual morality is the yardstick of honour, the exchange of sex for money, goods or protection is viewed with revulsion. It is legally criminalised and socially abhorrent. Yet, the research undertaken by the ListenH Project reveals a different truth: transactional sex in these conflict-ridden zones is rarely a matter of 'immorality' or simple 'choice'. It is a calculated, desperate and often an ingenious strategy for survival.

As the essays illuminate, when the traditional pillars of livelihood collapse under the weight of displacement and war, the body becomes the last remaining asset. For the widow with no male heir, for the boy orphaned by a drone strike, for the transgender person exiled from their village, transactional sex is the difference between starvation and sustenance.

The ListenH Project, led by Karin Astrid Siegmann and her team, challenges the humanitarian sector's blindness to this reality. Too often, international actors view transactional sex solely through the lens of victimhood and trafficking, or, conversely, ignore it entirely due to cultural sensitivities. This book argues that such reductionism fails the people it aims to help. By reframing transactional sex as a livelihood strategy albeit a precarious and dangerous one, the researchers restore agency to the subjects. These are not passive victims; they are individuals navigating an impossible labyrinth of choices.

The Methodology of Trust and the Dilemma of Visibility

What makes this volume particularly significant is not just what it tells us, but how the knowledge was generated. Researching a criminalised

and stigmatised practice in a militarised zone is a task fraught with peril. The standard extractive research model where an outsider collects data and leaves was impossible here. It would have yielded silence or worse endangered the participants.

Instead, the project adopted a radical participatory approach. The researchers were not distant observers; they were community members, including those with lived experience of transactional sex. This dissolved the hierarchy between the 'knower' and the 'known'. However, as Siegmann's essay poignantly details, this inclusivity brought its own heart-wrenching dilemmas.

We read of the Pakistani team members who, despite their deep involvement, feared being 'outed' to their own colleagues. We witness the internalised stigma that makes open conversation difficult even among allies. The research process mirrored the very societal fractures it sought to study.

Perhaps the most devastating illustration of the 'frozen sea' of structural violence is the account of the Afghan refugee researcher. Despite being a core member of the team, her expertise and voice were suffocated by the politics of borders. Her struggle mirrors the plight of the many Afghan refugees who come here to Pakistan, having lost everything and facing a future with no livelihood options.

They are victims of government decisions that declare them illegal, policies enacted without ever considering how they will affect human beings. The refusal of the international community to process resettlement cases, the looming threat of deportation, and the inability to travel to Poland for a conference to present her own work serve as a scathing indictment of the global humanitarian apparatus. It highlights a painful irony: we are willing to consume the stories of refugees, but we block the movement of the storytellers. The 'white knower' taking the stage in Warsaw because the Afghan expert is trapped in legal limbo is a powerful metaphor for the inequities of knowledge production in the Global North.

The Visual Voice: Unmasking the Shadow

Words, for all their power, have limits. In the face of trauma that is deep and systemic, language can sometimes falter. It is here that the book makes its most profound contribution through the inclusion of PhotoVoice, as Clea Kahn details.

Transitioning from text to image is not merely an aesthetic choice; it is an epistemological one. How do you document the life of a person who must remain invisible to survive? How do you capture the reality of transactional sex without exposing the subject to violence?

The PhotoVoice methodology enabled participants to take control of their own narratives. It moved the camera from the voyeur's hands to the subjects. The resulting images are not graphic documentation of sexual acts; they are metaphorical landscapes of emotion. They capture the 'black mask' not just as a disguise but as a symbol of the dual lives young men lead. They show the 'dusty sewing machine' as a symbol of skills possessed but opportunities denied. They depict the exchange of a flower as a poetic abstraction of a transaction that society deems ugly.

These images manage to be simultaneously shielding and revealing. They protect the photographers' identities while laying bare their emotional realities. As Kahn notes, there is a sense of 'exile' in these photos, a feeling of being locked out of society, or locked inside a prison of circumstances. Yet, amidst the shadows, there is resilience. There is the companionship of the two *khwaja sira* (transgender women) in their modest room, creating a home in a hostile world. There is the undeniable assertion of existence: "I am here. I survive. I matter."

The Axe for the Frozen Sea

This book is a challenging read. It asks the reader to suspend judgment. It asks them to look at the 'slur against honour' and see the human beings beneath. It demands that we recognise the complicity of our own silence and the failures of our own systems, be they the patriarchal codes of the tribe, the militarised policies of the state, or the exclusionary borders of the international community.

The text and images contained herein are a lament, yes. They are a record of pain. But they are also a testament to the indomitable will to live. The women, men and transgender people of the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands and beyond are not merely statistics of war or objects of pity. They are architects of their own survival in a world that has offered them nothing but rubble.

By bringing these stories out of the shadows, this book performs a sacred duty. It breaks the silence. It forces us to confront the uncomfortable. It reminds us that dignity is not a privilege granted by the powerful, but an inherent right that these individuals claim for themselves, every single day, against all odds.

May this book be the axe that breaks the frozen sea within us. May it shatter our indifference and allow us to finally, truly, see.

The Historical Context of Prostitution in South Asia

Saba Gul Khattak

Prostitution was legal, institutionalised and regulated for over 2,000 years in India over the course of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim rule. Decidedly, it was classified into different categories and classes with moral overtones reserved for street prostitutes, yet it was integral to the social order and an important source of state revenue. Prostitution turned into a crime: under British colonial rule accompanied by religious, moral, medical and legal policing that continued and intensified in Pakistan, unlike in India and Bangladesh, where prostitution became legal.

In some of the earliest writings on governance and statecraft, Kautilya, advisor to Chandragupta Maurya (320-298 BCE) and the author of the third century BCE *Arthashastra*, has described the management of prostitution as part of governance. Chandragupta Maurya and his descendants (Mauryan Dynasty 320-185 BC) institutionalised prostitution through taxation and regulation: a superintendent of prostitutes and his assistant city officers were responsible for keeping the peace among brothels, maintaining registers of brothel keepers, prostitutes and pimps for tax collection (a significant source of revenue for the kingdom), implementing a system of fines and punishments for various crimes, including violence by clients and refusal of services by prostitutes. The Mauryan Dynasty also distributed pensions to older prostitutes and pimps who were unable to work anymore.[1] Importantly, prostitutes and brothels

were important sources of espionage, so the ruler would receive regular information on who might be fomenting rebellion.[2]

Such administrative systems spanned centuries and existed in different forms and contexts across India, whether in temples, courts, or common bazaars. Under the Delhi Sultanate, especially the Khiljis and Lodhis (1206-1526), prostitution was treated as a pragmatic necessity for managing male sexual desire for social peace, and equally importantly, it was an important fiscal resource for the state.

Rulers such as Alauddin Khilji regularly fixed the rates for prostitutes in accordance with their and their customers' class, whether they were hereditary prostitutes or individual ones, or whether they were exclusive or available to anyone. In some forms of entertainment, such as troupes of touring dancers, they operated along a spectrum whereby they could also use sex work as a means of attracting people to their performances. Hereditary prostitutes, held in high regard, could testify in courts; their houses were under court oversight, and the rich ones contributed to public charitable works. Their daughters could inherit from them. Furthermore, women dancers and musicians were considered distinctly different from prostitutes and their abodes were marked as exclusive neighbourhoods of cultural refinement within the city.[3]

Under the Mughals (1526-1857), the tradition of separating prostitution from dance and music, which were seen as entertainment, continued with the Mughals employing thousands of women and male musicians and dancers. *Tawaif* (courtesan) culture, predominantly associated with Awadh, including its capital Lucknow, is a prime example.

Tawaifs were highly cultured, acting as teachers of literature, rhetoric, music and dance. They were adept political mediators, as their homes were training grounds for future rulers. Under the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1607), morality around prostitution changed when he ordered dancing girls to 'marry or leave the realm'. However, by the eighteenth century, connections, including marriages between the ruling class and courtesans, became common and legitimate again.[4]

After the War of Independence (1857), when British colonialism became firmly established in India, much changed over the ensuing 90 years. The regulation of female sexuality became a problem of law, medicine and morality, a radical shift from the past when male sexual desire was perceived as a threat to the social order.

Following 1857, the British changed *tawaifs'* status overnight into that of prostitutes, who had to entertain British soldiers as a punishment for their role in supporting the Mughal king. The different categories of entertainers and prostitutes were deliberately collapsed in surveys carried out by the British. Where there had been ambivalence towards prostitutes in India, the British turned to systematic moral, religious and medical policing within a few years.

They introduced the system of Lock Hospitals, where women underwent forced medical examinations and hospitalisations in British and Indian port cities; the purpose was to protect the bodies of the soldiers from contamination to ensure the imperial project of colonisation continued unhindered. The Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1868 and 1897), alongside Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860) and the series of Criminal Tribes Acts (1871 onwards) that categorised certain people as hereditary criminals, introduced the medical surveillance of women prostitutes, transgender persons and over a hundred marginalised castes and tribes.

These were followed by the Cantonments Acts (1864 onwards) for the designation of military bases and their governance, including *chaklas* (brothels) for British regiments within the cantonments.[5] The duality in legality and practice continued into the laws and practices inherited by Pakistan.

The nationalist movement, alongside the Hindu and Muslim revivalist movements in India, upheld British Christian Victorian morality, blaming degenerate practices chiefly responsible for the downfall of the Mughal empire. By the late nineteenth century, both sides silenced the *tawaifs* and placed them firmly on the margins of patriarchy.[6] Although

prostitution was an important source of revenue for Muslim rulers in India, nationalist discourse during and after British rule in Pakistan pushed for Islam as the main identity of the new country.

In continuation of British laws and policies, any form of sexual 'transgression' was declared sinful and criminal. This approach became more pronounced under the Ziaul Haq regime (1977-1988) when the introduction and implementation of Islamic laws and the Islamisation of the country took centre stage.

Interestingly, in 1987 (towards the end of the Zia regime), the first case of HIV-AIDS was identified in Pakistan, following which the alarm over its spread led to home-to-home surveys and the identification of vulnerable groups in tandem with the decriminalisation and de-stigmatisation of all forms of sex work and extramarital relationships, including same sex relationships.[7]

The medicalisation of prostitution has helped the concept of prostitution transition to sex work and transactional sex, and through this route, the concept has become destigmatised and decriminalised. However, without any corresponding change in the laws governing prostitution, powerful religious and cultural discourses reproduce and perpetuate oppositional and contradictory state policies. These are reinforced by specific international and regional conflicts where good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomies still dominate Pakistanis' worldview.

While the history of the Indian Subcontinent demonstrates that Muslim dynasties maintained and regulated prostitution, this is hard to imagine in present-day Pakistan. Even though several Muslim countries, including Bangladesh and Turkey, have legalised prostitution, in Pakistan, it is one of the most contested terrains, intertwined with respectability, morality, culture, religion and politics, leaving little space for those on the margins to speak.

Endnotes

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ListenH: An Introduction

Saba Gul Khattak

For nearly five decades, we have witnessed a conflict of international and regional significance unfold before our eyes. We are acutely aware of shifting loyalties and mounting death tolls, but consistently miss seeing what happens to people's lives when protracted crises become second nature.

For this reason, we seized the opportunity to understand how people survive when conflict becomes an everyday reality, repeated displacements become a given, economic challenges become routine, and systems of governance fail. For us, this meant speaking about the unspeakable, particularly sex work as a livelihood strategy among people affected by the conflict in Afghanistan and its fallout in Pakistan.

It also meant understanding how vulnerable people, especially women, navigate their circumstances to subsist. These realities are important to narrate to lift the metaphorical curtain of respectability that protects and simultaneously hides the inconvenient facts about the human costs of conflict and war.

Prostitution, sex work, survival sex and transactional sex, these are all terms that include the exchange of money or goods in return for sexual services. Prostitution and sex work primarily involve the exchange of money and are primarily commercial, while transactional and survival sex may also include non-monetary exchanges, gifts, employment or access to services.

Survival sex is restricted to basic needs (such as food, shelter and safety) due to intense poverty. In contrast, transactional sex is broader in scope and may not carry the same sense of urgency and immediacy and includes jobs or other opportunities for livelihood, and people involved in transactional and survival sex do not self-identify as sex workers.

We wanted to explore the reality of transactional sex in protracted humanitarian crises contexts where people lose almost everything, financial and material assets, livelihoods and loved ones.

In such situations, transactional sex often becomes an important yet unacknowledged livelihood strategy. While transactional sex takes diverse forms worldwide, it is rarely treated as a conceptual category in South Asia, and the topic remains taboo in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Against this backdrop, ListenH initiated the first systematic research on transactional sex in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the term 'transactional sex' has no equivalent in any of the languages used during ListenH interviews, which were primarily Urdu, Pashto, Siraiki, and Persian/Dari/Hazaragi.

Pakistanis used a variety of terms to allude to transactional sex: *dosti* (Urdu/Persian/Pushto: friendship), 'boyfriend', 'intercourse' and *da kaar* (Pashto: this work/deed). Afghans relied on Dari words like *ee rabita* (this relation), which could refer to either a romantic or a sexual relationship, *fahashgee* (an Arabic-derived word used in Dari and Urdu, which means obscenity or immoral acts), *waisha* (prostitute), and *kar-e-hayae badd* or *kar-e-budd* (bad or immodest deed).

Interestingly, a few men used the term *khush guzaarni* (passing time with pleasure). These linguistic differences reflect not only gendered perspectives but also the social and moral dimensions attached to transactional sex encounters.

About ListenH

Employing a large research network, ListenH is a five-year research project conducted between 2021 and 2026. It was hosted by the International Institute for Social Studies and funded by the Dutch Research Council

(NWO). It is grounded in country-based studies in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Colombia as the network seeks to understand the reality of transactional sex as a survival strategy in humanitarian contexts through participatory research.

In Pakistan, we focused on hearing the voices of Pakistanis and Afghans in Pakistan, emphasising that people involved in transactional sex speak for themselves to avoid misrepresentation. We also relied on persons involved in transactional sex to conduct the interviews to minimise the distance between 'the researcher' and 'the researched'.

In addition, trained researchers and humanitarian practitioners were engaged as researchers and advisors at various stages of the project. The Pakistan research comprised a total of ninety-two interviews, with seventy-one conducted with people who are involved in transactional sex and twenty-one with humanitarian actors. Of the seventy-one interviews, fifty-one were with women, eight were with men, and twelve were with transgender persons.

Our Pakistan research participants were mainly from areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Dera Ismail Khan and Peshawar. The interviews with Afghans, who had fled the current Taliban regime, were held in Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

We found different aspects of inequality, such as gender, age, social class, education, ethnicity and migration/citizenship status, to be important determinants of the decision to rely on transactional sex. Single women, including widows and divorcees, constituted sixty-five percent of our respondents. A majority of those involved in transactional sex were aged between nineteen and thirty-nine, and most had attended primary school.

Compared to Pakistanis from border areas, Afghans were highly educated, with most holding university degrees, indicating that citizenship and legal status critically affect livelihood opportunities. Similarly, transgender individuals face discrimination and marginalisation not only from local communities but from governments as well, often resulting in reliance on transactional sex.

At ListenH, we prioritised knowledge about people's motivations for and impacts of transactional sex. Our interviews indicated that livelihoods for survival were a central issue. Roughly one-third of our interviewees relied solely on transactional sex to earn money for food and rent, while the remaining two-thirds turned to transactional sex to supplement the meagre earnings they obtained by begging, child labour or financial support from family members abroad.

Most of our transgender respondents engaged in transactional sex as well as dancing and entertainment. About half of the research participants lacked a male earner. As a research participant from Kurram District explained, "Our financial position was stable, but then sectarian clashes started. I lost my parents and family elders. For some time, a community organisation supported my siblings and I, but later they stopped helping us; even begging did not sustain us, and I was left with no choice but to resort to transactional sex."

Another research participant explained, "...Due to raids, curfews and surveillance, our male family members lost their jobs, and we were pushed towards absolute poverty; I had to resort to transactional sex to feed my family."

What were the consequences of transactional sex? For many, it is an important source of basic necessities, especially rent, food and health-related expenses of a disabled husband or sick child. In the words of sixteen-year-old Zahra, "...Engaging in these activities ensures that I do not go hungry and that I am able to meet my basic needs such as clothing and shelter."

Simultaneously, some participants said that transactional sex does not significantly improve overall wellbeing in the long term because their earnings are inadequate and they cannot save what they earn; sometimes their children go hungry, as there are days when they are able to feed them only *roti* (bread) with water once a day.

An Afghan woman said, "If you insist on knowing, the consequences can be serious illnesses and even depression and death. Anyone who engages in such activities does so out of coercion. I sought help from my family, but they refused, saying they couldn't. This led me to this line of work out of necessity."

The most critical issue regarding the impacts of transactional sex on people pertains to their emotional and physical wellbeing. A young Afghan woman, Zainab, said, "I see this as a form of suicide. We are destroying everything and bringing disgrace to our relatives, losing our pride, and stripping away our self-respect. All our efforts feel futile because we are left with neither a life nor any hope for the future." (ListenH, June 2023)

Pre-existing community support and local justice systems have ceased to be effective in militancy and conflict-affected areas. Depressed local economies exacerbate people's vulnerabilities due to a lack of employment and livelihood opportunities, even though they have the necessary skills, education and knowledge. Some local organisations covertly include transactional sex in their contracts and hiring practices.

Desperate for a chance to earn a living, many women agree to transactional sex, and some view it as a prerequisite for employment; they are willing to risk sexual and domestic violence alongside social ostracism. Only if transactional sex is labelled 'trafficking' or 'harassment' can they access the legal system. A research participant said she is now viewed as 'older', so she was asked to provide a young girl in return for a job; another research participant said she was told to leave because she was "not taking an interest" in the HR officer interviewing her.

In such scenarios, how can people who are desperate to earn money have any faith in government and/or humanitarian organisations? Through ListenH, we have sought to highlight the intricacies of different research participants' lives and experiences to better understand how conflicts and wars impact individuals. The ListenH team collectively decided that the best way they could tell the stories of those they interviewed was through photographs that capture their surroundings, their present, and their dreams for the future.

Everyone collaborated to produce these stories within the parameters of confidentiality, ethical considerations and brevity. Our Afghan colleagues overcame the challenges of extremely limited mobility and fears of arrest to provide snapshots of the Afghan people's lives in Pakistan. Everyone wanted their stories to reach a wider audience.

We invite you to engage with the photo stories in this book as the stories of fellow human beings. Look at them, one at a time, without judgment. These stories emerge from people's desire to share their experiences with the world without apology, without shame, while trying to assert control over their circumstances and their lives. We ask you to listen to them with your heart.

Dilemmas of (in) Visibility: Researching Transactional Sex in Pakistan's Humanitarian Contexts

Karin Astrid Siegmann

Invisibilities and widespread misconceptions around transactional sex formed the starting point of our research project, 'Understanding Transactional Sex in Situations of Humanitarian Crises and Reforming Institutional Responses' (ListenH).

During an early brainstorming session on related research in 2017 with my colleagues Thea Hilhorst, an expert in humanitarian studies, and Silke Heumann, whose research focuses on gender and sexuality, Thea noted that transactional sex is widely framed by humanitarians as sexual exploitation. However, she observed that, in practice, it can also be understood as "an alternative to back-breaking agricultural work."

Silke commented that heteronormative ideas about post-conflict situations often exclude the experiences of certain women and men. Persons involved in transactional sex were probably a case in point.

I added that this translates into a narrow understanding, among international donors and UN agencies, of how livelihoods can be effectively supported. We agreed that understanding transactional sex as part of broader livelihood strategies offered a useful starting point for the research.

A focus on Pakistan made sense. Despite being severely affected by disaster and conflict, the country has often remained out of the sight of humanitarian actors. While the Afghan refugee crisis stems from decades of conflict in neighbouring Afghanistan, internal displacement within Pakistan surged sharply in 2014 following the military's Operation Zarb-e-Azb ('Single Strike') in North Waziristan.

Additionally, millions of lives and livelihoods have been devastated by disasters, from the massive 2005 earthquake and recurrent floods that have submerged large parts of the country, not to mention the severe droughts of 2018 and 2019. Yet, people who resort to transactional sex in response to these crises figure neither in media headlines nor in policy documents and academic literature.

Invisibility does not mean absence. When I approached Saba Gul Khattak, a Pakistani feminist researcher working on gender and conflict with the idea of researching transactional sex in Pakistan's humanitarian contexts, she immediately cited the diverse instances she had encountered. These included sex work becoming the only source of income for many conflict-affected women who did not have a male breadwinner. She also described landlords demanding sexual favours in exchange for land or accommodation to conflict-displaced families. At the same time, Saba noted how those involved repeatedly refused to engage in conversations on the subject, especially given the Pakistani government's refusal to recognise such transactions as legal which forces them remain under the radar.

While arguing that finding interlocutors would be difficult, though not impossible, Saba later became the coordinator of the ListenH study in Pakistan. To address these blind spots, exploratory discussions with Pakistani stakeholders on the feasibility of the research led to the suggestion of recruiting community members as researchers.

Nayyab Ali, a prominent Pakistani transgender activist, participated in a brainstorming session about the feasibility of our research. She emphasised that familiarity with the community was crucial for research

on such a sensitive topic. This aligned with the participatory approach we envisioned, which we believed could facilitate the investigation of sensitive issues such as transactional sex in conflict-affected areas.

Green Light and Red Flags for Research on Transactional Sex

Once our study received approval from the funder in 2020, the Dutch Research Council (NWO), Saba, Noreen Naseer and I were eager to explore how to translate our commitment to a participatory approach into practice. Noreen, a political scientist from the University of Peshawar and co-founder of Qabailee Khor (Tribal Sisters Network), had joined the team as associate coordinator.

Openness to diverse experiences, ranging from structural and direct violence to agency and even pleasure, served as our starting point. Yet, we faced a key question: how could we enable people involved in transactional sex to speak for themselves, and potentially co-shape our research, without putting their lives or reputations at risk? Noreen raised a red flag, warning that: "In these conflict-ridden areas, honour killing is rampant, and no woman or even man will come forward and agree to be a part of the research or work as a researcher."

Against the backdrop of the criminalisation and severe stigmatisation of sexual relations outside heterosexual marriages which underpinned Noreen's doubts beginning our research with trusted key informants, such as Pakistan's community health workers, known as 'Lady Health Workers,' seemed a prudent approach.

We planned to reach out to members of these informants' networks based on their recommendations, and this approach proved to be effective. Several team members, Pakistanis from areas bordering Afghanistan as well as Afghan refugees, originated from conflict-affected communities, including four researchers who had engaged in transactional sex, whom we referred to as 'peer researchers'.

Recruited initially to conduct interviews, most of these colleagues became involved in additional stages of the research, including designing the interview questions, debating the consent form, and discussing the results and strategies for taking them forward.

Dilemmas Surrounding Visibilisation of Transactional Sex

Thus, after trust was established, people with lived experience of transactional sex stepped forward and joined our research team. Yet, even with this trust, many hesitated to openly disclose their experiences to fellow team members.

To me, a small group discussion I attended during a team workshop in late 2023 exemplified this dynamic. In addition to me, the group included two Pakistani team members familiar with conflict-affected communities who, like me, had no personal experience of transactional sex as well as an Afghan refugee who had joined as a peer researcher.

The two Pakistani team members shared the challenges they faced in broaching the sensitive topic of transactional sex. They were particularly concerned that their interlocutors might associate them with the practice and pass moral judgments.

One of the colleagues expressed: "I was also worried that they could think that I am also involved in transactional sex. I am not comfortable with it."

In contrast, the Afghan team member soberly described her approach to interviewing without revealing her personal feelings. To me, it was clear that, at that time, the two Pakistani colleagues were unaware that she had joined the team precisely because of her own experience with transactional sex.

And, it seemed to me that she did not feel safe enough to disclose this experience with the team. Since then, I have asked myself and my colleagues whether and how 'letting people speak for themselves' is

truly possible when the social structures that shape transactional sex also influence our team interactions.

Among these structures, sexual hierarchies where casual and remunerated practices like transactional sex are relegated to the stigmatised 'outer limits' appear to hold a prohibitively dominant position.

But factors such as citizenship, immigration status and racialisation also shaped the insecurities of conflict-affected communities in Pakistan and caused the invisibility of our team members. One of them, another undocumented Afghan refugee, joined the small team preparing the presentation of early research findings for an international conference in Poland.

She registered as a presenter with me for the conference. We felt that her experience of forced displacement would not only enhance the validity of our presentation but also underscore the urgency of our message — about transactional sex in conflict-affected areas of Pakistan and the hypocrisy of northern countries' lip service to refugee rights.

Moreover, we hoped that participating in the conference might provide her with a springboard to apply for asylum in Poland, at a time when she and her family had been waiting for over a year without any response from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) regarding resettlement. After realising the serious complications involved in travelling to Poland, our Afghan colleague decided not to apply for a visa. Nevertheless, we kept the possibility of her co-presenting our paper in a hybrid setting open.

Our wish to make a political statement by visibilising refugees' lived experiences was braided with fear: what if her visibility at the conference or even her name on the programme attracted unwanted attention from officials, for instance, those from the Pakistani government? This could endanger not only her, but the entire team investigating a practice that is both criminalised and severely stigmatised in Pakistan.

As a first step, we therefore decided to remove all authors' names except mine from the presentation slides for safety reasons. In addition, we asked the conference organisers to remove our Afghan colleague's name from the conference website.

Still, we kept the possibility of her co-presenting with me open. My Afghan colleague stated, "I have nothing to lose. "We therefore explored safer ways of doing so. Hoping that anonymised participation would be possible, I contacted the conference organisers to check whether the online participation link would display her name. Ultimately, a few days before the conference, she withdrew, stating, "I would prefer [to] just participate."

I felt that the politics of forced displacement from Afghanistan, which had shaped the context of our research, had also undermined our commitment to "letting people speak for themselves." The Pakistani government had halted UNHCR's processing of Afghans' resettlement cases, a process that would have made new arrivals eligible for asylum and refugee status.

Against her will, this turned my colleague into an irregular migrant in Pakistan, a status that prevented her from participating in the conference in Poland. As a result, I the team member most distant from the communities in question presented our research.

Surely, what I was able to share in Warsaw as a more distant analyst was less political, less urgent. Beyond undermining our efforts to achieve more just representations, it also, unintentionally, reproduced the racist trope of the "white knower" entitled to analyse the rest of the world.

From Disillusionment to Deep Impression Picturing Transactional Sex Through PhotoVoice

The dilemmas and disillusionment outlined above stand in contrast to the profound impact that the team members' PhotoVoices, presented in this book, have had on me.

There was significant uncertainty about our colleague Clea Kahn's plan to train the ListenH Pakistan team in participatory photography, or

PhotoVoice. An ugly new wave of deportations of Afghan nationals from Islamabad and Rawalpindi threatened collaboration with the Afghan team members.

Team members from Pakistan's north-western borderlands could not travel, as the region was once again tense. Against this backdrop, the participation of a diverse group of six team members in Clea's photovoice workshop felt like a significant achievement in itself.

Witnessing the power of PhotoVoice to visibilise hidden experiences left a deep impression on me. A few weeks after Clea's training, I attended a workshop where a series of the team members' new photographs were displayed and discussed.

One of our colleagues shared poignant photographs of two *khwaja sira* (trans women), who share a modest two-room flat. The space serves both as their home and as a place to receive clients seeking sexual services. He titled his series *A Story of Care and Companionship*.

To me, this photo story offered a counterpoint to dominant frames of violence and victimisation. Another member of our research team, depicting both the poverty of her participants and what they were able to provide for their children through involvement in transactional sex, argued that the PhotoVoices "can show their basic needs, also the physical needs, including the sexual ones." It was inspiring to see how these stories sparked an engaged conversation among the entire team.

The team's excitement about sharing their images online, through a printed publication, or in an exhibition to visibilise untold stories and raise awareness was palpable, shared and deeply encouraging.

It is with great joy that I contribute these reflections to this pictorial volume, in which these dreams have been realised.

Surviving in the Conflict-Ridden Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderland

Noreen Naseer

چرته ښځه چرته لور یم
آبادی زه ستا د کور یم
هُم دی مټی هُم دی زور یم
هُم زه تا لره پیغور یم

Sister or Wife
Your house is a home because of me,
I am the prop you lean on,
I am the power that runs you,
Yet, you think I am a slur against your honour.

This poignant Pashto verse encapsulates the paradox of womanhood along Pakistan's tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. It is a lament, a protest and a declaration of identity from a woman whose existence is simultaneously important and marginalised. The verse reflects the deep entrenchment of patriarchal norms in tribal society, in which a woman is revered as the foundation of the household yet reviled as a potential stain on male honour.

Pakhtunwali, Gender and the Tribal Order

The tribal code of Pakhtunwali, the unwritten constitution of Pashtun life, revolves around three pillars: *zar* (gold), *zan* (women) and *zameen* (land). They are not merely symbolic; all three are treated as property possessions to be guarded, traded or avenged. Within this framework, tribal customs codify the status of women as property, denying them autonomy and rights.

A woman's identity is relational; she exists as someone's daughter, sister, wife or mother. Without a male guardian, she is invisible in society. The *riwaj* (custom), reinforces this invisibility by denying women legal standing in matters of inheritance, justice and representation.

Six tribal customs institutionalise this dispossession: exclusion from shared property (*shamilaat*), denial of inheritance and declaring her issueless without a male heir (*miratah*), selling her through bride money (*rasnama/valver/khawara*), legalising her murder under honour codes (*ghairat/nang*), bartering her to settle disputes (*badala/swara*), and forced marriage through public gunfire (*ghag*). While these practices primarily target women, the rigid gender order they uphold also shapes the lives of men and transpeople, producing overlapping yet distinct forms of vulnerability.

How Militarisation Impacts Women, Men and Transpeople

The geography of the Pak-Afghan borderland has shaped its politics and people. The Durand Line, a colonial legacy, divides ethnic Pashtuns across two states, creating a liminal zone of contested sovereignty and perpetual militarisation.

The tribal districts formerly part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have long been treated as buffer zones rather than communities deserving of, and entitled to, development and rights. This militarisation has had a disproportionate impact on people living in the borderland, they are the first casualties of war, not because they fight, but because they are silenced, displaced and violated.

Before the Cold War ended, the tribal belt became a staging ground for proxy battles, and later, the War on Terror transformed it into a theatre of counterinsurgency. In both cases, tribal people were rendered invisible in national and international narratives.

Women's Marginalisation Under Militarisation

In tribal societies, violence against women is not just common, it is normalised. Domestic violence, forced marriages and economic deprivation are treated as private matters. The *jirga*, an all-male tribal council, adjudicates disputes without any female representation. Its rulings reinforce patriarchal norms, legitimising violence and denying women justice.

As a result, the voices of tribal women remain unheard, their stories untold. Even international women's forums have largely ignored their plight, focusing instead on more visible urban or global struggles. Hence, ironically, while women elsewhere were gaining rights in the 1970s and 1980s through feminist movements, tribal women were losing theirs.

The state's security concerns overrode any commitment to gender justice. Religion was instrumentalised to portray the tribal belt as a bastion of tradition, where women's empowerment was seen as a threat to social order. This narrative was internalised by both the state and international actors, resulting in a double marginalisation by culture and by the state.

Men's Vulnerability in a Militarised Economy

Alongside women, young men in Pakistan's militarised borderlands have struggled since 1979 to navigate lives marked by militancy, insecurity and displacement. Many orphaned and poor boys grow up in environments where mobility, income and safety depend on cultivating sexual relationships with militants or powerful older men.

Violence, coercion, manipulation and emotional dependency become normalised survival strategies. Checkpoints, informers, border controls and the dominance of armed groups further erode their autonomy, pushing many into poverty, exploitative networks, drug use or militant groups. Beneath this structural violence lies a quiet emotional struggle of young men longing for dignity, stability and a future beyond conflict.

Transpeople at the Harshest Intersection of Patriarchy and Militarisation

Like women and men, transpeople in the borderland experience the violence of militarisation, but they face a uniquely harsh intersection of tribal patriarchy and social exclusion. Gender nonconformity is met with ridicule, ostracisation and threats to family honour.

Militant groups intensify this hostility by enforcing hyper-masculine norms, including demands to adopt male appearances and behaviour. Field research reveals that transgender people have no social space in the tribal districts, forcing many to migrate to Peshawar.

Yet, in urban and developed parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, they face new vulnerabilities, including exclusion by established transgender networks, economic desperation and dependence on transactional relationships for survival. Their stories reveal how conflict and patriarchy combine to produce lives marked by displacement, violence, health risks and severed family ties. Despite these hardships, many continue to support their families and demand employment, mobility and state recognition, reflecting a profound desire for dignity and inclusion.

Transactional Sex as a Livelihood and Survival Strategy

Despite the layers of cultural control, militarisation and economic deprivation that shape life in the borderlands, people do not remain passive. Women, men and transgender individuals all navigate these constraints in ways that reveal both vulnerability and agency. Transactional sex is often discussed only in relation to women; yet, it emerges across genders as a complex survival strategy shaped by poverty, displacement and the collapse of traditional livelihoods.

Women: Negotiating Survival Within Patriarchal Boundaries and Amid Conflict

که ياري کم مخ مي توريږي
که ياري نه کم ماشومان د لوږي مرينه

If I continue, I will lose my honour,
If I discontinue, my children will starve.

For many tribal women, transactional sex becomes a dangerous but critical means of supporting their families in contexts where they are denied inheritance, mobility and formal employment. Their choices are shaped not by desire but by necessity. Even within these constraints, women living in the borderland exercise agency sometimes subtly, sometimes defiantly. Their poetry, whispered stories and oral traditions transform their pain into protest, challenging the patriarchal narratives that seek to silence them.

Men Facing Exploitation, Dependency and the Collapse of Masculine Roles

Militarisation, unemployment and displacement have eroded traditional masculine roles as protectors and providers. Many orphaned or impoverished boys become entangled in exploitative relationships with militants, security personnel or older, more powerful men. These relationships often blur the lines between coercion, emotional dependency and survival.

For some young men, transactional sex becomes a means to food, shelter or protection in an environment where legitimate opportunities are scarce. The stigma surrounding male vulnerability forces these experiences underground, making them even harder to document. Field accounts reveal how structural violence reshapes gendered expectations and pushes men into forms of exploitation that are rarely acknowledged in policy or public discourse.

Transgender People Surviving at the Harshest Intersection of Patriarchy and Exclusion

Transgender people face the most acute vulnerabilities. Excluded from family structures, denied social legitimacy, and targeted by both tribal norms and militant groups, they often lack access to formal employment or community support. Many are forced to migrate to urban centres like Peshawar, where they encounter new layers of marginalisation, including exclusion from established transgender networks and dependence on transactional relationships for basic survival.

For transgender people, transactional sex is not merely an economic strategy; it is often the only available pathway to housing, mobility and safety. Yet, even despite these precarious arrangements, many continue to support their families financially and demand employment, recognition and dignity. Their resilience challenges the assumption that transactional sex reflects moral failure. Instead, it exposes the structural failures of state and society.

A Shared Strategy of Survival But With Unequal Burdens

Across women, men and transgender people, transactional sex emerges as a shared but unevenly experienced survival strategy. What differs is the degree of stigma, coercion and risk. Women face honour-based violence and lifelong social erasure. On the other hand, men face silence, shame and the collapse of a traditional masculine identity while transpeople face total exclusion, violence and the absence of any alternative livelihood. Yet, all these people living in conflict-ridden areas share common challenges, such as the lack of rights, protection, and economic opportunities. Their strategy of transactional sex, however, is uncomfortable to discuss, but it has emerged as a form of resistance against a system that denies them dignity, rights and recognition.

An Endless Conflict: Afghan Refugees and Their Quest for Survival and Dignity

Saba Gul Khattak

"Our situation is very difficult. There are days when we can only afford to eat a plain piece of bread, and there are days when we have nothing to eat at all. I am struggling to find work to support myself and my children and to pay rent on our house. To provide for my family, I am using the wrong paths… [transactional sex]."
— Zahra, an anonymous Afghan woman living near Raja Bazar, Rawalpindi. Interview for ListenH, August 2023.

This chapter discusses the international, regional and Pak-Afghan bilateral relations as the backdrop of Afghanistan's endless conflict and to contextualise Afghan refugees' struggles for survival and dignity in Pakistan. It highlights the connections between refugees' legal status, poverty, decreasing humanitarian aid and their reliance on transactional and survival sex as livelihood strategies. When livelihood options shrink, men, women and children have to make difficult choices to support their families.

Two wars — the Cold War and the War on Terror — have left lasting scars on the world especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan, over the last forty-five years. Following the onset of the Cold War, Pakistan chose to align itself

with the US by signing two major defence treaties in the 1950s, which aimed to contain the USSR.

Although US-Pakistan relations have fluctuated over the decades, Pakistan quickly became a 'frontline state' for the US when Soviet forces entered Kabul in December 1979 at the request of the Afghan government to keep the pro-USSR People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government in power. Following the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan and its subsequent disintegration in December 1991, the US lost interest in Afghanistan as the Cold War was ostensibly over.

Ten years later, in September 2001, the US initiated a new war, the War on Terror, after becoming the target of Al-Qaeda's attacks. The Taliban's refusal to hand over Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden prompted the large-scale carpet bombing of Afghanistan in tandem with a change in regime. The US-led allied forces, seeking to dismantle Al-Qaeda and the Taliban networks, spent between $2.26 and 4.5 trillion on military operations, reconstruction and humanitarian aid. After twenty years of conflict, war fatigue led the US to negotiate a phased withdrawal from Afghanistan by 2021 under the Doha Agreement of 2020, which was signed with the same Taliban who had been ousted in 2001.

The US has actively shaped political developments inside Afghanistan over two prolonged periods: from 1979 to 1992, when it fought a proxy war against the USSR in Afghanistan, and between 2001 and 2021, when it intervened directly and supported successive Afghan governments. Each time, the US used its dominance to ensure that the balance of power favoured its interests, which profoundly affected the lives of Afghans.

Over five decades, regime changes in Afghanistan have caused different sets of Afghans from diverse rural and urban centres, and spanning different religious, ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic groups to seek refuge in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. This has resulted in a complex refugee population, with thousands experiencing repeated displacement and a sizable proportion living in conditions of intergenerational refugeehood.

The Historical Context of Refugees in Pakistan (1979-2025)

"We protected ourselves from the rain but are sitting under the train."
Surraya Mosavi, quoting a Persian proverb used by Afghans in Pakistan

Pakistan has hosted around 3.5 million refugees, but it has neither signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol on Refugees. Instead, it has maintained a legal vacuum and adopted an ad hoc policy towards Afghan refugees, which is determined by bilateral relations in addition to regional and international developments.

Following the USSR's military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, both Iran and Pakistan welcomed Afghan refugees, ostensibly in the name of religion. In the aftermath of its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran positioned itself as a custodian of Islam and welcomed Afghans as co-religionists. It also viewed Afghans as a source of cheap labour and disposable fighters during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the Syrian conflict (2011-2024).

Pakistan also welcomed Afghans as co-religionists, granting them refugee status *en masse*. Terming them *mujahideen* fighters waging *jihad* (holy war) and *mohajireen* (refugees, a reference to Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina for refuge), the Pakistan government generated widespread support for Afghans by highlighting their readiness to sacrifice their lives and homes for Islam.

The Afghan Mujahideen soon formed political parties, supported by Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the US and its European allies to oust the USSR. Waging instant *jihad* was tricky as it required maximum human resources, as well as expertise in military strategy, logistics and training in the use of Western arms and equipment.

Hundreds of refugee camps, established in Pakistan's neighbouring provinces with Afghanistan, became strategic sites where humanitarian and military aid became intertwined. Eligibility for entry and aid in refugee camps required allegiance to a *mujahideen* commander who, in

turn, received funding and military equipment based on the number of declared followers.

While Afghan men were trained and sent to fight in Afghanistan, Afghan women's mobility, visibility and freedoms shrank perceptibly through *fatwas* (Islamic injunctions) issued regularly in the camps. Such arrangements enabled Afghan men to wage *jihad* while being fully assured that their women were not interacting with other men. Thus, the imposition of restrictions on women's mobility and economic independence was not incidental but critical for the success of the *jihad*.

Six Major Waves of Refugees

Following the Soviet military intervention, the first wave of over a million Afghan refugees entered Pakistan in 1980. Predominantly Pashtun, they came from neighbouring rural areas.

The collapse of the USSR (December 26, 1991) and the *mujahideen* takeover of Kabul in 1992 caused the second wave of refugees mostly non-Pashtun, urban, educated Afghans loyal to the PDPA government to enter Pakistan over the subsequent four years. Among these refugees, wealthier Afghans from the ruling classes left for Europe and the US or opted to rent accommodation in Peshawar and Islamabad, while others moved to the existing refugee camps where they faced hostility due to their differing political loyalties.

Persistent infighting among *mujahideen* factions in Afghanistan paved the way for the rise of the Pakistan-backed Taliban, who captured Kabul in 1996, triggering the third wave of Afghan refugees. This wave included ethnic and religious minorities, *mujahideen* supporters and long-term refugees opposed to the Taliban. The fourth wave consisted of climate and economic refugees who came in the late 1990s as Afghanistan faced widespread drought, famine and deepening poverty.

The fifth wave, encompassing Afghans from all social, ethnic and political backgrounds, arrived following the large-scale US-led Allied bombing of Afghanistan in 2001. The sixth wave occurred nearly two decades later, when approximately 800,000 Afghans arrived following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, despite border closure. Pakistan denied them refugee status, maintaining that Afghanistan was now peaceful.

Many sixth wave refugees demanded resettlement in the West, citing the promises made by the multilateral and bilateral aid agencies and militaries they had served. Additionally, many Afghans believed that their ethnic, religious and/or sexual minority status, or their work as journalists, human rights and/or women's rights defenders, would qualify them for relocation. For many, this hope became an endless, ceaseless wait.

In November 2023, Pakistan initiated the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, mandating the phased return of all Afghans to their country and launched the mass deportations of Afghans who had entered Pakistan after 2021. Within eighteen months, all Afghan refugees became economically vulnerable. Without legal status, they were ineligible for any international support, including that from the United Nations (UN), barring a minuscule amount for their return.

To conclude, Pakistan has vacillated between welcoming (1980-1999) and deporting (2000, 2015 and 2023 onwards) Afghan refugees. Pakistan attributes these policy shifts to several factors, including linking several Afghans with criminal activities and terrorist groups, pressures on Pakistan's strained economy and resources, increased poverty, decreasing international financial support for refugees, and the government's belief that many Afghans are victims of drought and poverty rather than conflict.

Declining Aid and Waning Hopes of Resettlement in the West

After the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021, all North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries took partial responsibility for the resettlement of Afghans who had worked for them. In 2021, the European Union (EU) announced it would take in 40,000-50,000 Afghans; however, progress has been excruciatingly slow due to bureaucratic hurdles and policy reversals.

A list of Western countries where Afghans have been resettled over the past twenty-five years indicates that the US has accepted approximately 220,000 Afghans, while Germany hosts around 150,000. The remainder are dotted across fourteen Western European NATO allies besides Canada and Australia (mostly between 1,000 and 10,000). These resettlement patterns reflect NATO countries' proportional responsibility for the Afghan imbroglio.

After US President Donald Trump reversed the US refugee policy towards Afghans in 2025, Germany followed suit, leaving many Afghans in Pakistan stranded. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Pakistan could only prioritise and process 3,500 resettlement applications each year since 2022, while hundreds of thousands of Afghans waited. This led to disappointment and hopelessness as Afghans could neither stay in Pakistan nor return, while almost all Western countries have closed their doors to them.

Receding Funding

Underfunding has become a consistent pattern since the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. In 2025, the UN humanitarian system required $45.37 billion globally to assist 281 million people in need; however, it received only $10.61 billion, less than a quarter of the required funds.[1] Global funding cuts have severely undermined the operations of three of the largest recipients of humanitarian aid: the UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). For example, the UNHCR received only half of its required funding between 2022 and 2024; this shortfall widened to sixty-seven percent in 2025, the worst funding gap in the agency's history.

This funding gap, replicated in Pakistan, had devastating consequences for Afghan refugees: by 2024, an estimated sixty percent were living below the poverty line, compared to forty percent of Pakistan's population.

Humanitarian Crisis, Multiple Vulnerabilities and Transactional Sex

During the 1980s and early 1990s, significant international aid for refugees in Pakistan centred on their health, education and income generation. While refugee school curricula designed at the University of Nebraska have been widely critiqued for promoting *jihad*, income-generation programmes have attracted little attention. These initiatives were premised on the stereotype that men were primary earners and consequently offered few, if any, livelihood opportunities for women.

Donors, the Pakistan government officials, and refugee men in charge of running refugee camps reinforced patriarchal assumptions that restricted women to unpaid domestic labour and rendered them invisible outside their homes, a stance mirrored in the Taliban policies enforced in Afghanistan in 1996[2] and again after August 2021.

Aid for Afghan refugees decreased significantly after the *mujahideen* took over Kabul in 1992, and declined again after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, thereby leaving the most vulnerable refugees and internally displaced persons with few survival options. In this context, single women or widows with children who arrived in Pakistan after 1992 preferred to live outside refugee camps due to the hostility they encountered there. Resultantly, they became ineligible for humanitarian aid as it was restricted to the camps. More recently, Afghans arriving during or after 2021 were largely excluded from already shrinking aid programmes due to the Pakistan government's refusal to grant them refugee status.

Prior to 1992, prostitution was not associated with Afghan refugee women. However, this changed as many women from the second wave of refugees ran out of their savings and could barely eke out a living by accepting domestic work. In the absence of male earners, inadequate earnings, language barriers, educational degrees which were not recognised in Pakistan and minimal access to paltry amounts of aid through private charities, they had to find alternate means of survival. Under these conditions, vulnerable women, men and even children resorted to transactional or survival sex as a means of subsistence.

By the mid-1990s, sex work and begging among Afghan women and children began to be reported in the media. A 1996 report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) stated that Afghan women

constituted thirty percent of the prostitutes in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) due to limited economic opportunities and a lack of legal protection.

This proportion reflected a much higher incidence of prostitution compared to the overall refugee population in the province. Several refugee women that I interviewed in the 1990s spoke about their involvement in sex work candidly, emphasising that they didn't have many other choices in the absence of male breadwinners.[3] The report feared that prostitution could become an intergenerational phenomenon.

Discussing the negative attitudes towards Afghan refugee women, Tasleem Malik and Faizuallah Jan wrote: "Educated women would beg in the streets of Peshawar while others were forced into prostitution and labelled *gelumjum* (women involved in prostitution). Some preferred being *gelumjum* to begging on the roads."[4] The authors assert that by the 2000s, the term had become synonymous with Afghan sex workers who were, at times, also viewed as dangerous spies, and threats to public health, morality and national security.

Stories of sexual exploitation and abuse also began to circulate, and incidents of trafficking were mentioned in hushed tones.[5] In more recent years, Afghan women have started to speak about these experiences more openly. For example, Sajia (a pseudonym), an Afghan singer and mother of five children, became a victim of sex trafficking in Pakistan. She did not know her husband's whereabouts and said that she attended parties where she was given drugs. "As refugees, we feel completely helpless and threatened, unable to speak up or resist... we have no way out. They promise us payment, but we are often dropped off home unconscious and empty-handed..." She added, "People in the community call us 'prostitutes' and speak out against us. Yet, the person running this operation is powerful and pays off the police."[6]

Across my interviews with Afghan refugee women, a recurring breaking point emerged among them due to their inability to feed, clothe and care for their children or ensure a male presence.[7] A 27-year-old Afghan woman stated, "I had to provide sexual favours to my landlord in exchange for lodging in order to protect the welfare of my child." (ListenH interview, 2023).

Afsan Chowdhury states that structural violence that denies basic human dignity "... doesn't just touch the body; it rapes the soul."[7] Given that sex outside marriage is forbidden on religious, moral, cultural and legal grounds, already vulnerable women and men along with their children are pushed into even more precarious situations. Many confessed to experiencing profound distress and suicidal thoughts.

Transactional sex is not restricted to girls and women; it is also practised by men and boys (some as young as thirteen and fourteen) as well as transgender persons. For some boys, it marks a rite of passage, but when it occurs out of necessity rather than choice, its meaning changes entirely. A fifteen-year-old boy said, "These things make me incredibly angry. Witnessing my mother's distressed state deeply troubles me. Unfortunately, we have no choice in Pakistan due to the lack of job opportunities. I have to engage in these activities (transactional sex) to sustain ourselves." Another stated, "We can't save much; it mostly goes towards our daily expenses... [and] to pay our rent. I give the money I earn to my mother, who collects and utilises it for household needs" (ListenH interviews, 2024).

For men, transactional sex serves both as a source of income and as a form of 'fun'. It is unclear, however, whether they framed it as enjoyable to assert their masculinity rather than to acknowledge their actual need and necessity. A 25-year-old man said, "I have some girlfriends who provide financial assistance to me, and they are rich." He said if his relatives discover his activities, "I would be criticised and lose the respect of those around me. They might even label me as *zanaka baz*" [a highly derogatory term for womaniser]. (ListenH interviews, 2024).

In contrast, a 23-year-old Afghan transgender person described her sense of shame for her inability to fit into a conventional woman's role and explained that she fled because she feared abuse from the Taliban. She added, "I am not financially struggling... I engage in sexual favours

because they help me navigate through life when I cannot conform to the societal norms of being a conventional male or female."

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, the Taliban practise gender apartheid as an integral part of their worldview. This places single and widowed women, as well as religious, ethnic and sexual minorities in a particularly precarious situation. A large number of Afghans who came to Pakistan were educated and skilled, but their 'illegal' status prevented them from obtaining decent work with fair remuneration. Furthermore, they faced barriers stemming from the Pakistan government's refusal to grant them asylum or formal refugee status, thus making them ineligible for aid from donors or to receive funds through banking channels.

Due to these conditions, many women, men and children have turned to transactional and/or survival sex as coping and livelihood strategies. They pay a heavy price for it, be it severe mental distress or physical harm, in addition to being termed terrorists, spies or prostitutes.

For many Afghans, the arduous journey to Pakistan has altered little beyond geography; their struggles to survive under profoundly adverse conditions persist. Furthermore, protracted humanitarian crises lead to the dehumanisation of human beings, especially women, as physical and discursive violence occupy a central part in conflicts.

In the words of a ListenH 2023 interview participant, Mohammad Ali, "...I urge you to convey the voices of these unfortunate immigrants... It is crucial that they understand the challenges we face and work towards finding solutions. Regrettably, I was born in a country called Afghanistan, where each day brings pain and suffering. I pray that God provides a resolution for all immigrants."

The photo stories in this book aim to convey the pain and hope of people who have endured violence and trauma, yet have survived through their determination and desire to realise their dreams. Privileging their voices through images and words is our homage to their endurance.

Endnotes

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An Introduction to Photo Stories and ListenH

Clea Kahn

Images are a powerful medium for conveying the complexities of a context or experience. They help transcend language and literacy differences to provide a visceral, emotive insight into another person's experience. While a photograph cannot capture all the complexities and nuances of a situation, it can convey an emotional truth and a sense of place that are difficult to communicate in words. A camera can also be a powerful and empowering tool for people marginalised by structural factors or circumstances and who may feel invisible and voiceless.[1]

This is why the ListenH Project in Pakistan decided to undertake a participatory photography initiative using the PhotoVoice methodology. This approach complements the ListenH methodology, which seeks epistemological justice by integrating lived experiences not only into the data but also into the design of research tools and the collection and analysis of data.

The PhotoVoice methodology was developed as a form of participatory action research in the early 1990s. It empowers people to act as catalysts for change with respect to issues that concern them by giving them the tools to record experiences and reflect upon them. By using an insider's perspective, the approach allows better insight into lived realities by "oscillating between private and public worlds in [an] attempt to publicise and politicise personal struggle via photography, narratives, critical dialogue and social action."[1]

PhotoVoice is explicitly political, encouraging participants to recognise their own expertise on the situations that affect them and drawing on their personal histories to effect change.[2] It is now a well-established and developed tool used throughout the world to enable people to reflect on the situation of their communities, foster knowledge exchange and critical dialogue, and influence policymakers to take the steps needed to address their concerns.[3]

PhotoVoice is an excellent complement to the ListenH peer research methodology, in which the lived experiences of people who have navigated difficult choices during humanitarian crises are integral to the design of the research, the collection and analysis of data, and its dissemination.

This photobook originates from this methodology, and its contributing researcher-photographers provide a powerful and compelling glimpse into the realities faced by two communities in Pakistan: Pakistanis living in insecure border areas and Afghans made profoundly vulnerable due to the denial of official recognition as refugees. Both communities live in highly precarious conditions and face physical and economic insecurity in addition to social liminality.

The Approach

The ubiquity of smartphone cameras has made taking photos virtually second nature, a part of our lives like never before. Several people argue that the growth of this 'citizen photography' has ushered in a democratisation in the way we create and share information.[4, 5]

While most of us are familiar with the basics of taking photographs, we can still benefit from learning techniques that can make our photos more powerful. This is why the months-long process of creating this photobook began with a three-day workshop in Islamabad.

At the beginning of the workshop, each team member was given a simple digital camera, a measure that served two purposes:

1. To create a level playing field among team members, as the quality of all the cameras was the same.

2. To ensure anonymity and data protection, as these cameras were offline.

The first phase of the workshop focused on familiarising team members with the equipment and practising basic principles of photo composition. They were given a simple exercise that allowed them to gain confidence in using the cameras and to begin to explore their own unique forms of expression through images.

On the second day of the workshop, we explored how photographs can be used to tell a story. We drew on the researcher-photographers' experiences during their time working with ListenH to think about how lived experiences of transactional sex in Pakistan could be conveyed powerfully and safely through photographs. The researcher-photographers then designed a simple story made up of five photographs.

On the third and final day of the workshop, each participant presented their story through a powerful set of narratives. Together, we reflected on the lessons learnt and discussed how researcher-photographers would apply these skills and techniques to take the photographs you will see in this photobook.

Issues of Safety and Ethics

Conducting a photo-based study with a marginalised and criminalised population presents significant challenges. Two participants took significant personal risks just to attend the workshop, knowing that being detected could lead to arrest and forced return to Afghanistan. All the researcher-photographers faced difficult dilemmas related to their safety and ethics.

These challenges included taking photographs in highly securitised settings and the risk of inadvertently exposing individuals to legal or safety risks in a country where sex work is illegal and where the consequences of such a stigmatised and socially unacceptable practice are severe. This brief introduction outlines the process we experienced as well as some of the challenges we had to face and the reflections that arose along the way.

Ethics are always important, and even more so in a project like this. As a team and as individual researcher-photographers, we reflected on the various power dynamics inherent in the process, including those created by the presence of a camera. We considered how to navigate these dynamics to ensure the process remained safe, just and fair, and that the resulting photographs provided a genuine representation of lived experiences without being exploitative.

This required carefully navigating the sensitivities of both the topic and the context and most importantly ensuring the safety of participants and those they photographed.

Informed consent is one of the most important ethical issues in any research study, particularly when photography is involved.[5] We discussed the importance of ensuring that anyone whose image would be used fully understood that it would appear in the context of a discussion of transactional sex, which could be stigmatising or even dangerous.

It was also important to ensure that they understood and agreed to the use of these images inside and outside Pakistan, including the possibility that they could be posted online and potentially viewed by anyone in the world.

In this context, we discussed how the power dynamics between researchers and participants which had already been considered in relation to interviewing can shift and potentially intensify when a camera is introduced.

We discussed ways to reduce the power disparity, considering a range of options from sharing the photograph with its subjects and giving them veto power to co-producing photographs in which the subject works with the photographer to determine what is important and how it could be best captured. The aim was to consider how subjects could be given

an element of control over the process and the resulting photographs and empower them to raise their concerns.

We also considered how confidentiality differs in photography projects. While data from interviews or focus groups is typically anonymised after being collected, in a photography project it is not, because photographs are visible; we also discussed how the presence of landmarks or distinctive personal items could potentially compromise confidentiality even if a person's face was obscured.

Safety was a critical issue and affected every phase of the project from the risks some participants took to attend the workshop in Islamabad, to the risks associated with transactional sex, to the challenges of being in and taking photographs in insecure areas.

Reflections on the Process and the Photography

Every project is unique and, particularly in participatory work, brings its own revelations, learnings and challenges. This brief section shares some of my reflections on this process and the photographs it produced.

Power and power disparities shaped this project from the outset. Some of these were unavoidable consequences of the context and some were a result of the way in which the project was conceptualised.

While efforts were made to acknowledge the former and mitigate the latter, inevitably, some power dynamics remained and affected both the process and the outcome. For example, some of the photography exercises reinforced disparities between participants, as some were free to move around while others were constrained by their precarious legal status.

The photographs in this book show that far from having a negative impact on the quality or power of the final product, participants were inspired to think of new ways to communicate and express themselves despite significant constraints. Nonetheless, there is a feeling of restriction, even claustrophobia, powerfully conveyed in many of the photographs in this book, both implicitly and explicitly.

Several themes appeared particularly striking to me as I looked at the photographs that emerged. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the concept of exile was powerfully present throughout the images, whether linked to forced displacement, rejection or stigma.

These photographs exhibit a sense of being pushed out in the case of transgender people when they were rejected by their families or, conversely, of being locked in, imprisoned by their families and forced to live a life that was filled with constant threats and dangers.

This evocation of an open prison feels oppressive and, due to the constraints on the movement of participants, the negative impact on mental health was as palpable during the workshop as it is in the photographs.

This resonates with the findings of another recent PhotoVoice project centring on adolescent refugee girls which identified an important link between wellbeing and access to public spaces, particularly the ability to simply be oneself, unjudged and unobserved.[6]

The photographs in this project also reveal powerful themes of visibility and invisibility. This is most explicit in images of people obscured by darkness or shadow, but also implicit through the use of secrecy, such as the exchange of flowers to symbolise a sexual transaction. Secrecy is also apparent in the images of the black mask worn by boys involved in transactional sex to conceal their identity, and later as a way of making themselves visible to potential clients. As the photographer says, "This is not just a story about a mask. It is about what the mask hides, what it reveals, and what it says about us".

Finally, although many of these images convey elements of helplessness and hopelessness, they also carry a powerful sense of resilience and hope. They may be about risks and threats, but they are also about fortitude and survival. Even in darkness there is a glimmer of light. Thus, even when photographs and their captions focus on objects such as a dusty, unused sewing machine, they also acknowledge strength: "I have skills, but no work".

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to participate in this project and to work with this remarkable group of people. I learnt a great deal in the process and was moved and humbled by the extraordinary resilience and strength of the people I met.

I would like to say a heartfelt 'thank you' to the PhotoVoice organisation in the UK, and to Tom Elkins in particular, for their wonderful training programme and support with the design of this project and the procurement of equipment.

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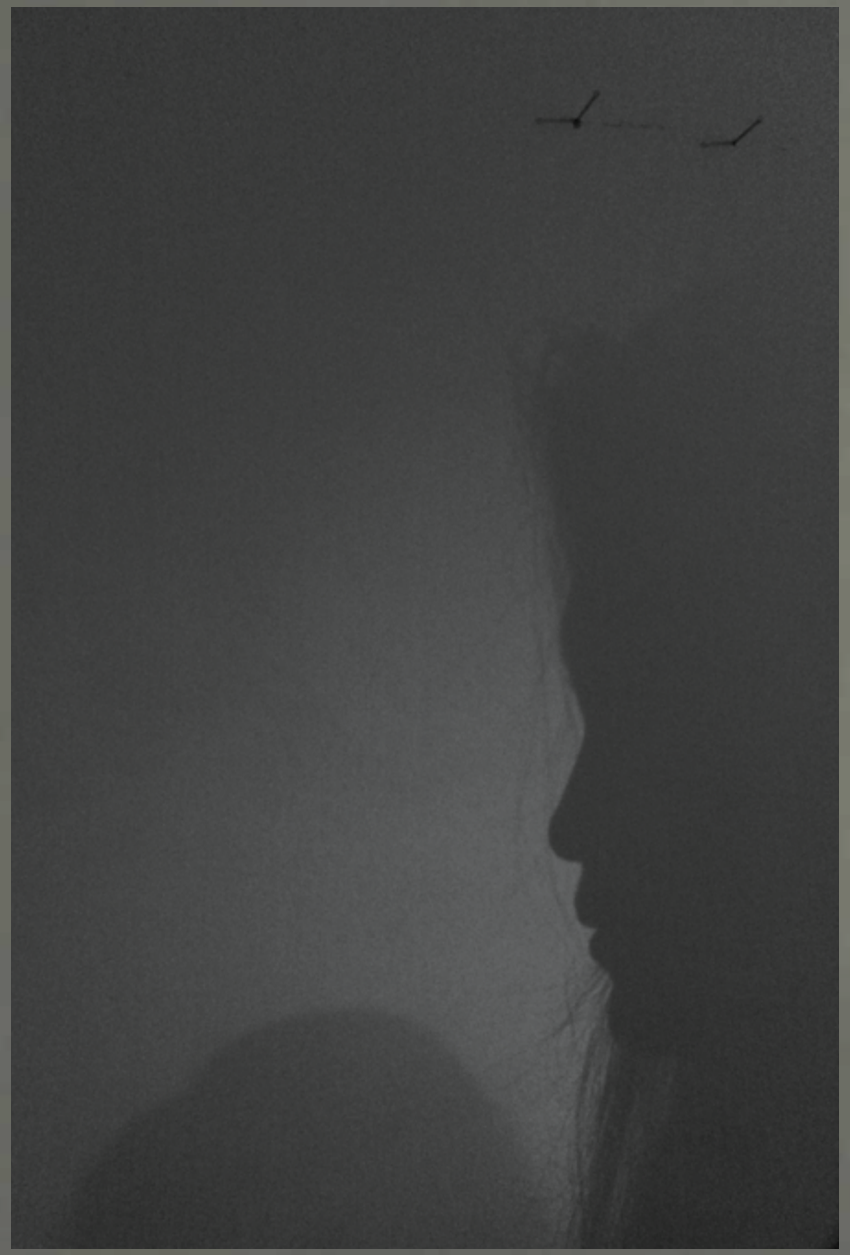
Photo Stories

This photographic series explores the realities of transactional sex in Pakistan through multiple perspectives. Each set of images, which we refer to as an 'Essay' or a 'Photo Story', was either captured by a different photographer or depicts a different and distinct environment. These essays are the products of participatory photography by the ListenH team in Pakistan in 2025.

Migration and Survival

Hasina Khairi



She stands silently among shadows, she doesn’t cry. She just carries the wounds within her, wounds no one asks about

Not every lock is a prison, and
not every key signifies salvation

Journeys of migration,
survival and silent perseverance are
whispered by her tattered shoes

Displaced Lives in the Camps

Taiba Pirzad

The refugee camps in Charsadda and Tajabad have been home to Afghan families for many years. These families fled Afghanistan long ago, and within the camps, they named their areas after the provinces they once belonged to Laghman, Kunduz, Kunar each name reflecting a memory, a piece of where they came from.

In the early days, international aid was generous, but today, these refugees live in extremely difficult conditions. Healthcare is one of their biggest struggles. The camps have only a small clinic that serves children in emergencies, and offers basic services like wound dressings and vaccinations. For anything more serious, families must travel long distances to reach proper hospitals.

Their homes are made of mud. During rains and floods, the yards and surrounding paths turn into thick, impassable mud, making it hard even to walk, especially for children, who often get stuck. Many homes do not have proper walls or doors, yet residents say there have never been any reports of theft, robbery or kidnapping. People know one another. They live as a close-knit community, watching over each other despite the harsh environment.

Living conditions are deeply troubling. Kitchens are set up beside toilets, and there is no drainage system in place. Drinking water comes from a central pump that's a long walk away, though

A generation abandoned: this child, and countless others, wander around, deprived of a childhood, classrooms, care or guidance. Poverty robs them of their futures

a few lucky families have private wells. Education is a luxury most children cannot afford. Schools are either unavailable or unaffordable. Basic stationery is out of reach for many.

There are a few embroidery, tailoring and art classes, but just like elsewhere, access to these depends on connections. Those with influence or visibility often obtain the aid and opportunities, while the poorest remain excluded. A woman explained, "Aid distribution here isn't fair. The well-known receive help, but not the ones who need it most."

Despite all of this, they still call the camp their "home." On the day of our visit, a flood had drenched all their belongings. Mothers had washed the only clothes their children had, leaving them without anything dry to wear. "We know one day a flood might destroy everything we have," the same woman added, "but we still don't want to return to Afghanistan. At least here, we have something."

Many of the children and even some adults have never seen Afghanistan. They were born here, in the camps. This is the only home they've ever known. Despite all these hardships and even

An Afghan woman, her hands deft with embroidery, waits quietly for a customer, her hopes pinned on a single sale to feed her children. Her artistry goes unnoticed and each day, the burden she carries dims her spirit a little more

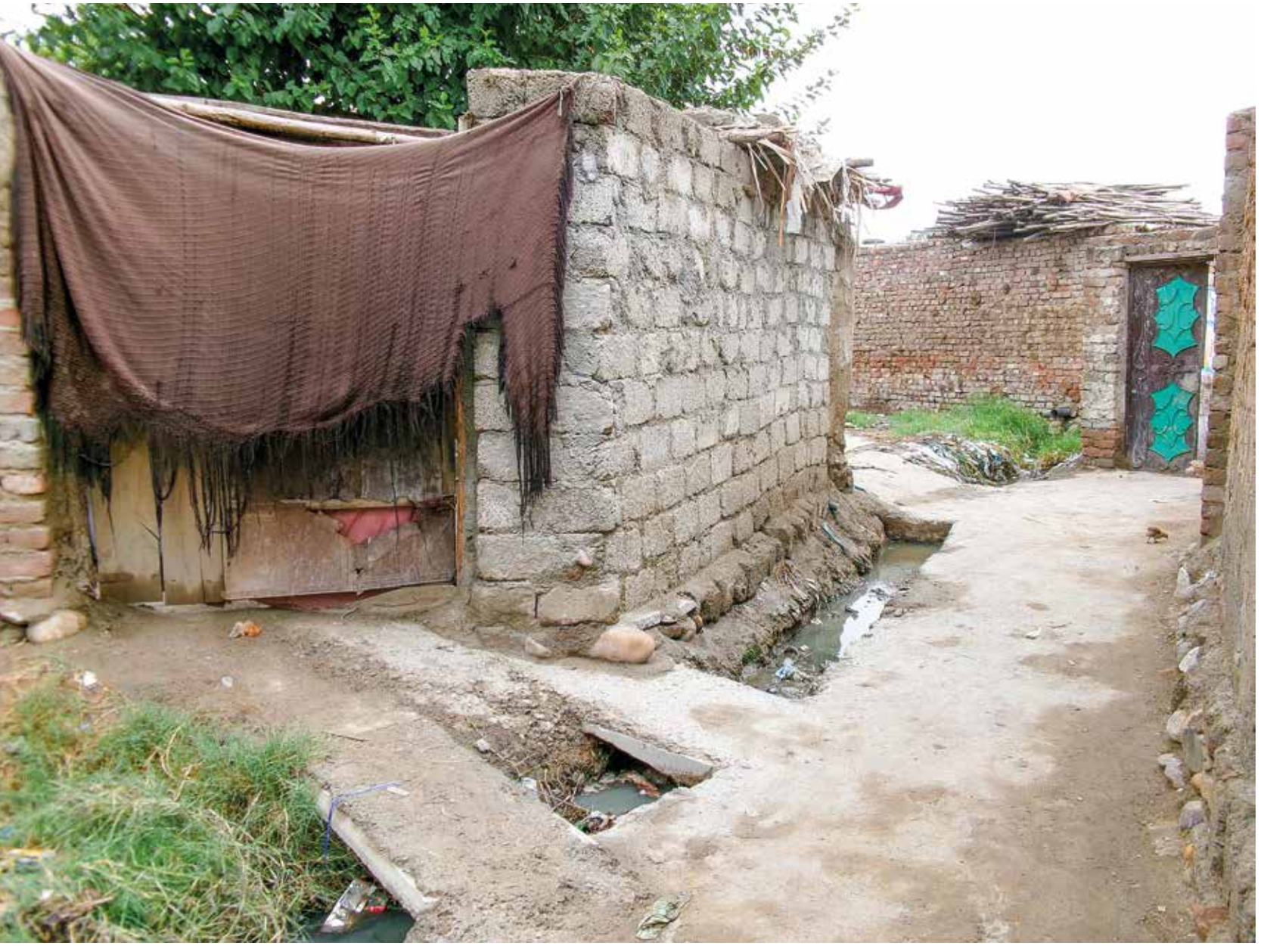
when they don't have a piece of bread to feed their children the women still welcome outsiders with open arms and a warm smile, offering a cup of tea.

Multiple families share a single tented space. One 76-year-old mother was seen selling three-piece suits on the street, just to feed her disabled husband and young daughters.

Many women in the camps possess valuable skills such as tailoring, embroidery, beadwork, *tasbeeh* (rosary) making, and even preparing and selling snacks like *shor nakhod* (a chickpea and potato salad beloved among Afghans). But despite their talents, they struggle to find a market for their work. The camps are far from town, and few people travel that far, making it nearly impossible to find customers. Another challenge they face is that their Proof of Registration (POR) cards have not been renewed, which limits their mobility and access to opportunities even further.

Whenever they or their children see an outsider, they open their arms, seeing it as a sign of hope and a possible source of support. Despite having so little, the children welcomed us with wide smiles and excitedly asked us to take their photos. They proudly pulled in their siblings, friends, even strangers, just to be part of the moment, eager to be seen and remembered.

Childhood slips away in the shadow of work, where lessons and laughter should be. For years, boys and girls have been overlooked, denied the chance to grow, to heal and to dream



The harsh realities of displacement are reflected in the house provided to an Afghan refugee family in a camp in Peshawar. They live in appalling conditions, crumbling walls, improvised roofs, exposed sewage and restricted access to basic resources despite living within city limits. In sharp contrast to their surroundings, they remain resilient


Behind the Black Mask
Mehran Wazir

In the southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, young boys involved in transactional sex often wear black masks. These masks have become such a regular part of their appearance that they are now seen as a symbol of identity, people recognise them by the black mask. Originally, the boys wore the masks to hide their identities and avoid being recognised, but over time, the black mask has evolved into a distinctive mark associated with boys engaged in transactional sex.

These boys, known for wearing black masks, are referred to as "kings" by those who take an interest in them and this is how the boys refer to themselves. Most of them have TikTok and other social media accounts, and they include the word "king" in their usernames.

These photos tell the story of the "black mask." Each image captures a fragment of their daily lives: the anticipation of a client, the ritual of wearing the mask and the moment it is discarded. Through these photographs, the series does not sensationalise, but rather humanises these young boys and invites viewers to reflect on connections between militancy, poverty, identity, survival and silence.

This is not just a story about a mask. It is about what the mask hides, what it reveals and what it says about us.

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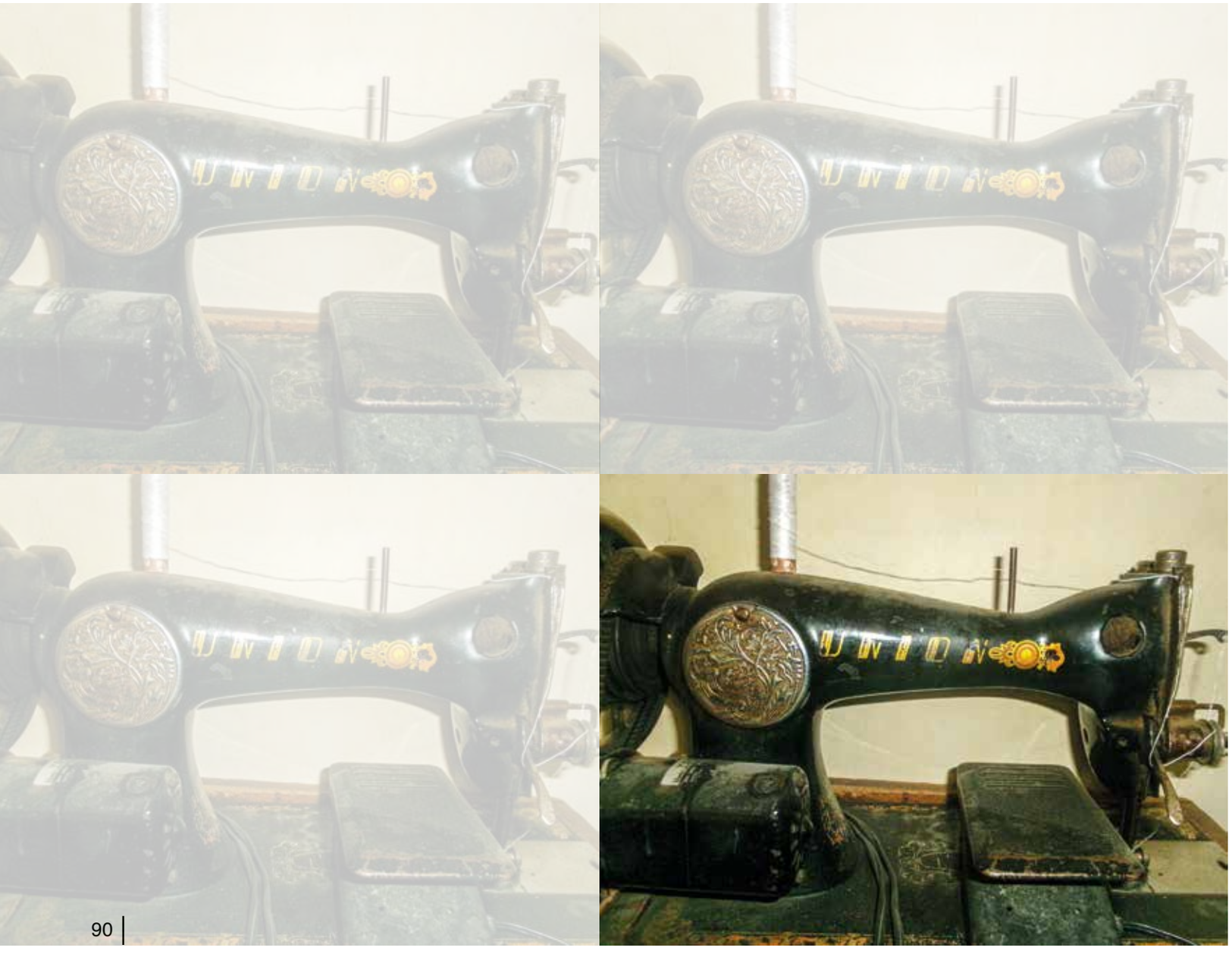
A young boy involved in transactional sex has purchased the black mask

The boy waits for a client, the black mask resting in his hand. He slips it on only when the client appears. Sometimes, especially in public spaces, such boys choose not to wear the mask, hoping to avoid being recognised for what the mask reveals their involvement in transactional sex

The black mask, lying in the trash with other discarded items, suggests it was once worn and is now abandoned. This image stands as a powerful symbol of the fleeting, often overlooked lives and routines of boys involved in transactional sex

Food, Skills, Services and Sex

Nayab Kanwal



A veil of dust cloaks my sewing machine. I have skills but no work, and no earnings. My talent awaits a reason to create

An empty plate, save for a few lonely grains of rice, laments my children's silent hunger and unfulfilled dreams

Fingertips brush as a flower passes between two hands, a silent transaction of sex symbolised by a rose

Noreen Naseer

Under the Tree

Sister or Wife
Your house is home because of me,
I am the prop you lean on,
I am the power that runs you,
Yet, you think I am a slur against your honour



Under the trees where we once played innocent games, we now exchange our souls for two meals a day

We have to pay a price for our
mental and physical health

We have changed – we are
displaced – weakened – chained


A Window to the Outside
Asma Zohal

This image depicts the story of a transgender woman facing the harsh realities of a life marked by rejection and adversity.

She struggles every day amidst emotional darkness and isolation as she lives in a society and is from a family that had rejected her.

Yet, despite the pain and despair, she clings to hope, a beacon in the darkness despite suffering and despair, which symbolises her resilience and the support of those who stand with transgender individuals.

Included in this support are assistance in fulfilling her basic needs, healthcare, education, psychological support and a safe shelter. With this hope, she continues her journey towards a brighter future, believing that she will one day find peace and acceptance.

Even though she is seated in the shadows of destiny, a spark of resilience gleams from the core of her existence

She fled her home, escaping war, threats, and a constant fear that shattered her peace. In search of freedom and safety, she escaped to another country, alone and homeless.

Migration didn't bring a new life, but a continuation of survival. She wandered unknown streets by day and slept in shelters by night, until someone came, offering her a safe house, food and warmth. But in exchange, he wanted something precious: her body.

Knowing that turning him down would result in being homeless, she was forced into transactional sex.

Taken through a barred window, this picture tells her story: She is not free, neither in her homeland nor in this host country.

Through the window, she looks out at the world, yet she is confined by the choices others have made for her.

In the silence, a glimmer of hope remains: Perhaps one day, outside the window, there will be a house where she can live freely and will not have to sell her body to survive.

A window to the outside, a prisoner within

In the heart of the city's chaos, far from the gaze of the crowd, lived a girl who, like a green sprout, had hidden herself among withered leaves. Her days passed in silence; her nights, however, were illuminated not by light, but by eyes that consumed her body and eroded her soul. Each time she looked in a mirror, all she saw were parched leaves exhaustion, humiliation and a fear untouched by any light.

Yet something continued to exist within this darkness. A fragile sprout perhaps a forgotten childhood memory or a lost dream. Something that compelled her to rise, even when everything around her tried to bury her. Every day, she planted herself in soil, soil that was heavy with wounds, pain and judgment. And yet, each time, with hidden strength, she lifted her head. She knew the light was scarce, but it was enough, enough for one fresh leaf to grow, enough for hope to blossom.

Perhaps, one day, the withered leaves will fall away, and others will see that small green sprout, a human being who never wished to remain in darkness.

Towards the sky it rises, a sprout of defiance and courage, amidst the dry autumn leaves

The Evening Begins: A Story About the Lives and Routine of Two Transgender Women

Mehran Wazir

Nestled in a quiet corner of a busy plaza, two transgender women share a small two-room flat where they have created their own world. Hidden from the view of strangers, their presence is unknown to most of the families who live nearby. They drape themselves in shuttlecock burkas to ensure their privacy and protection when they step outside. Only trusted clients, those who have their contact numbers, are allowed to visit.

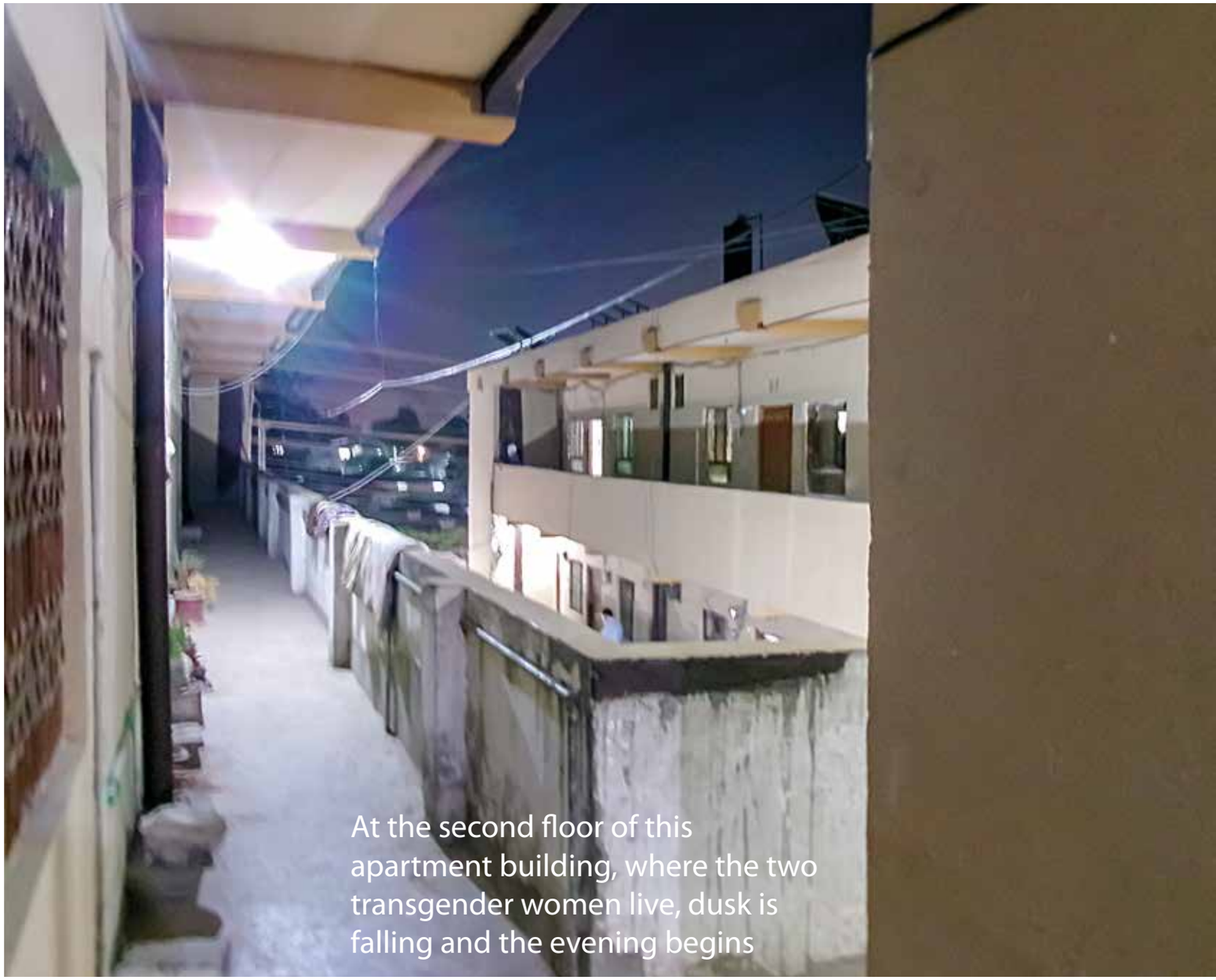
Most of their clients come through referrals from previous clients or mutual friends. They also connect with new clients through TikTok or by sharing small pieces of paper with their contact numbers during their dance performances at parties. While Iqbal Plaza in the area is known as a common meeting place for transgender sex workers, these two women do not go there. Instead, they host clients at their own home.

Their evening routine begins around 7:00 pm. By that time, they start preparing for any clients who have scheduled an appointment in advance through one of the mentioned channels.

In this small and modest two-room flat, these two transgender women share not just a space but a mutual respect, trust, support and a solid bond between and for each other. In this home, there is no judgment, only understanding. They stand by each other, regardless of the circumstances.

Only one of them meets clients at a time. A third transgender person, who dresses like a man, helps them with their shopping and daily needs. She doesn't live with them but often visits them to help.

This photo series gently opens the door to their world, offering glimpses of the tender rituals and small acts of care that colour their evenings with warmth and meaning.



At the second floor of this apartment building, where the two transgender women live, dusk is falling and the evening begins

She waits, with patience,
by a mirror for clients
arriving from Nowkhar

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The third friend captures these fleeting moments on video. It's something they do often, it is a tradition now. Through this gentle ritual, they quietly honour their shared life, identity and the care that binds them together

They sometimes use this lock when one of them is with a client and it stands guard to ensure their privacy and helps them avoid overlaps, so other clients remain ignorant of the fact that someone else is already inside

In this almirah lie their clothes representing their coexisting gender identities. This room is adjacent to the decorated room where they welcome their clients

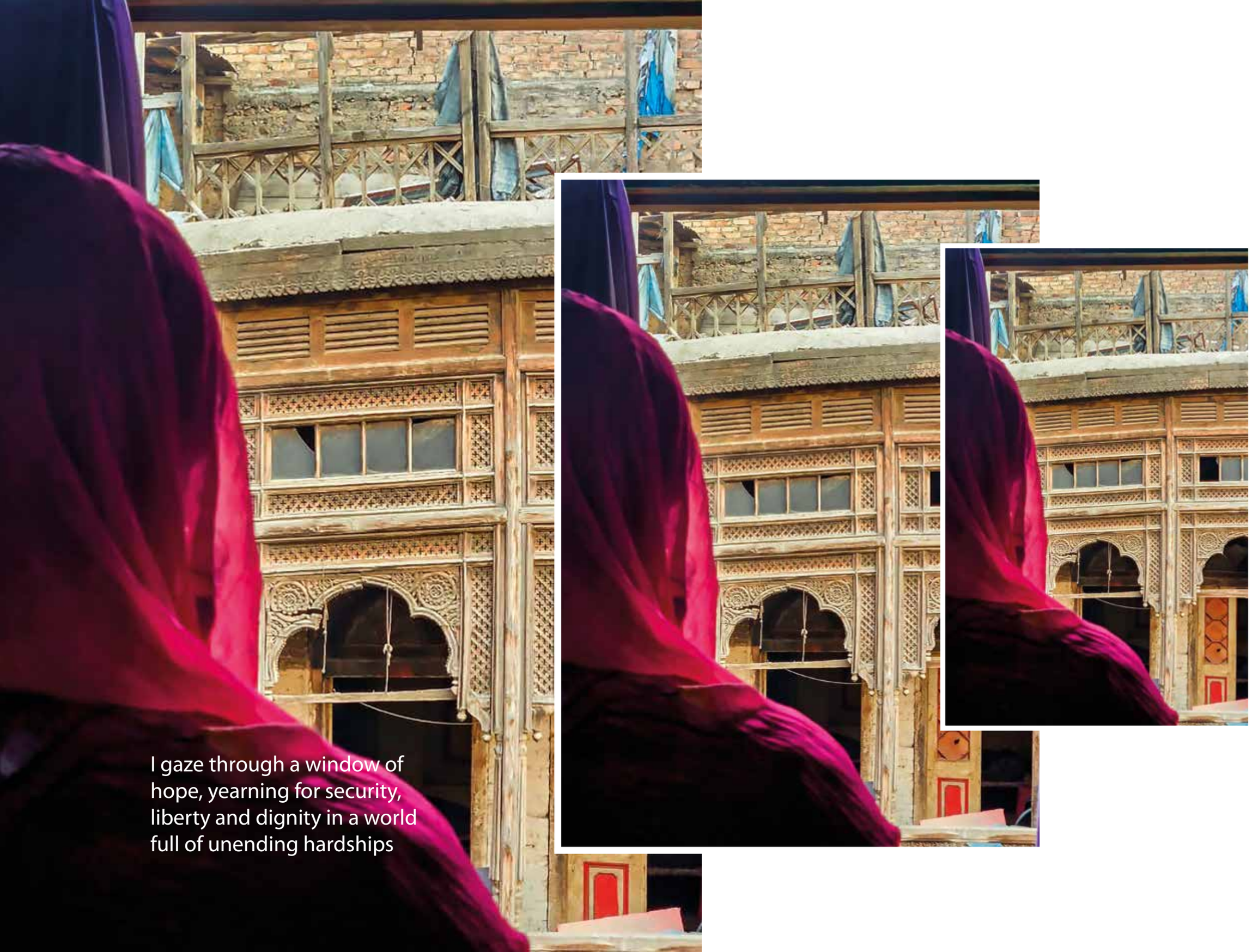
Finally, the door is ready to open, but only for clients with prior appointments. Two pairs of shoes at the entrance silently confirm the clients' presence. The evening begins in earnest now

Transgender as Fluid Identity

Taiba Pirzad

These wounds are a painful reminder of the suffering inflicted by my own family, symbols of oppression and silence imposed by those who are meant to love

My childhood was marked by chains, my brother's attempt to bind my truth, to keep me hidden from a world that was not willing to see the real me

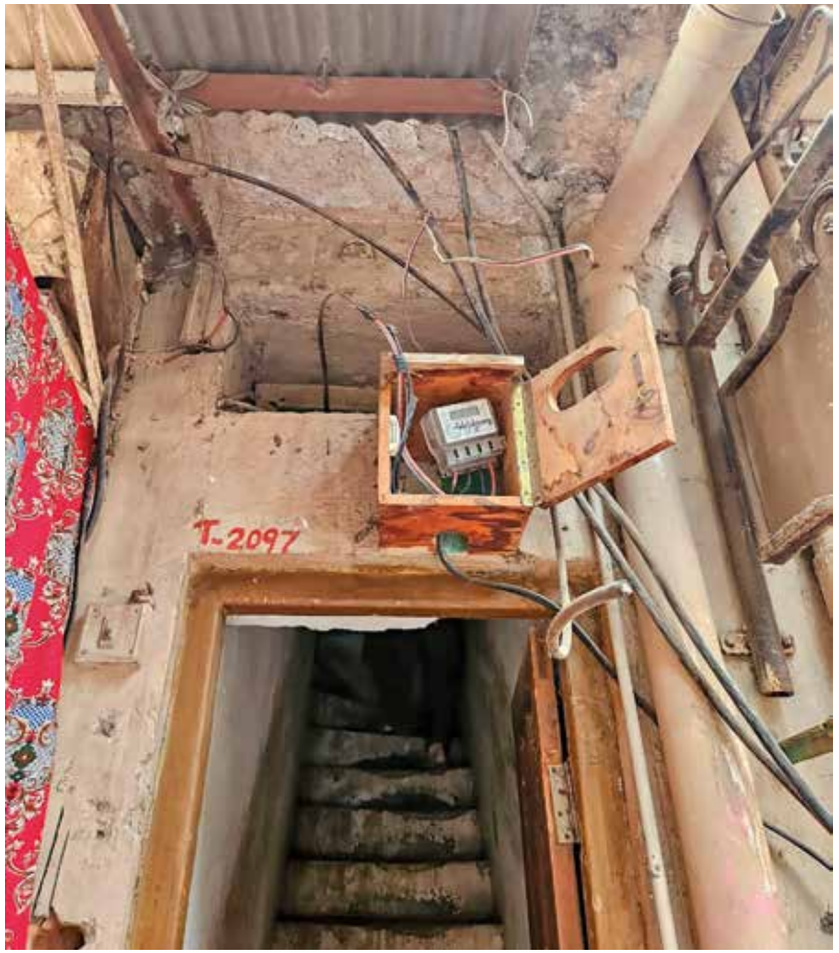


I gaze through a window of hope, yearning for security, liberty and dignity in a world full of unending hardships

The only miserable fates we can see for ourselves are serving tea, cleaning a transgender person's house or begging on the streets, covered in shame and our *burkas*

Like any Afghan girl, I can sew and apply makeup but they see me only as an object of their desire. The anguish of being unseen and unaccepted underscores the resilience required to live authentically in the face of constant rejection

We reach this point when our existence is denied because in their eyes, we were unworthy of acceptance. And as we age or get sick, we are left alone on the streets covered by a shuttlecock *burqa* — unseen, unheard, unwanted



The life of a transgender person often ends in isolation, with blackened stairs that reach nowhere. They beg for survival as they age, and when they die, they are denied a proper grave, a glaring example of rejection

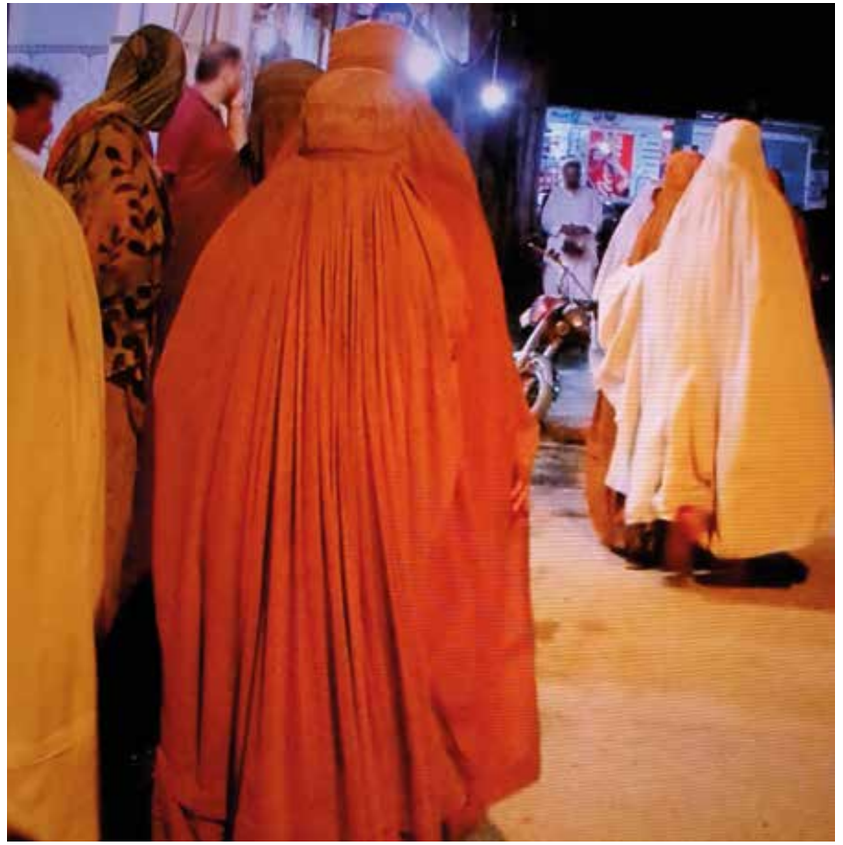
We're not even allowed near the window, living hidden, out of sight, as if we don't exist

Time and affection are only worth Rs 200, which highlights the exploitation and violence that people endure when they are most vulnerable

Whispers and Rumours: Colour Me Dishonourable

Taiba Pirzad

A widowed Afghan grandmother kneels in desperation, begging to feed her five grandchildren. Her son's addiction leaves them in despair. In a world heavy with struggle, her plea is a silent song, echoing through the alleys of hardship



Even covered by a shuttlecock *burqa* with our faces completely hidden, we are not safe. Men still harass us as if our silence, our clothing, our fear doesn't mean anything

Sitting on cold pavements until 10 pm, these women beg to survive not because they want to, but because they have no other choice. Yet, society refuses to see them as mothers or sisters in need. They brand them with shame

When a woman steps out whether to work or to beg, society greets her not with support but with judgment. Dignity remains a privilege for her, not a right. Women in search of food are not only cloaked in silence, shadows and poverty, but by the harsh judgment of society that labels their desperation as dishonour

Surviving the Unseen: Reflections on Transactional Sex

Bahar Najafi

If I were to state my personal opinion and understanding, as a young woman, regarding the interviews and conversations I had with young women and girls, I would say this: they were certainly deeply upsetting for me, as a human being. I recall that during one of the discussions with women involved in transactional sex (TS) they said, "I have no definition for my womanhood because I do not see myself as a real woman. A woman must embody femininity; a woman must be a mother; a woman must be a sister, not someone who submits to sexual relations, in whatever manner, simply to survive the daily grind."

Similarly, another young woman spoke of being forced into a relationship with a stranger, against her will, just to be able to continue her day-to-day life and simply remain alive. There are many comparable stories from other girls and women who, due to the pressure of circumstances including security, family, and economic conditions were compelled to abandon their homeland and loved ones. They were forced into migration, often without any guardian or aid, just to survive. These desperate circumstances forced them to resort to TS and protect themselves just to achieve a bare minimum existence. For me, as a woman and as a fellow human being, sharing time and hearing the difficult realities of these young women who consented to such relationships solely for their own survival and that of their children is profoundly regrettable. Through my

conversations with the women involved in TS, I realised that in many parts of the world, humanity is silenced, sometimes for years. These are individuals who persevere through life with suffering and distress, under the immense pressure of stress and worry, just to get by.

To briefly summarise my findings:
During the time I spent speaking with women and girls involved in TS, I observed that they had varying perspectives on the topic. While the core underlying factor was the same for everyone, the lack of money or a supporter (support could range from learning a new language like Urdu to securing a stable job for basic necessities) I noted different viewpoints.

Some young women involved in TS did not view it negatively, stating, "We are simply living, and this is the reality of my current life!" For them, having relationships with different men was normal and natural. Another contrasting perspective was held by a woman who saw her involvement in TS as a source of pleasure, in addition to being a way to earn an income.

However, my final statement based on my personal view is that TS can lead to known and unknown diseases; it can become a catastrophic path for an entire generation and is a major spiritual disaster for a woman that is not always immediately apparent. Over time, TS can have severe and direct impacts on future generations.

My Experience of Research with People in Transactional Sex

Asma Zohal*

I conducted interviews for ListenH with people involved in transactional sex (TS), and got to know about their painful worlds first-hand. When I met transgender people, I learned that their family often denies their existence, they face social rejection and the denial of basic rights. War and subsequent insecurity and migration make life harder for them, and they are more likely to resort to commercial sex. They feel depressed and alone.

In societies with low literacy and awareness, their voices remain unheard. Their stories helped me understand that transgender people are not different in a negative sense; they are human beings with feelings, aspirations and the right to a dignified life. We have a duty to change public attitudes towards them by increasing awareness among their families and society as a whole through seminars, educational programmes and the celebration of important days such as Women's Day and Mother's Day. Every person practising TS should be accepted by their family, receive an education and psychological support, and not be deprived of their rights.

To improve the situation of people involved in TS, there is a need to organise health education seminars, provide psychological counselling, support their children's education, make small investments to help them become financially independent, and provide adequate medical services. The interviews I conducted with support organisations revealed that the assistance they provided was often limited to distributing vitamins

or contraceptives, while the needs of transgender people were much broader. During my conversations with them, I tried to convey their voices to others, and since then, I have committed myself to raising public awareness and defending their rights.

Working with ListenH, I learned how to express the life narratives of people associated with TS, especially refugees, through stories, text and images in a way that harmonises their inner selves with their external realities. I also learned to take care of my own and my interviewees' mental health during fieldwork to avoid being overly influenced by their painful narratives while maintaining empathy, and to keep my cool and the interviewees' in trying situations. I also understood the importance of observing ethical principles, such as taking photographs with permission, especially of minors, and the correct way to deal with people in crisis.

This experience was not just a professional collaboration for me, but a humane and spiritual journey, one that led me to a deeper understanding of humanity, empathy and social responsibility.

*Name changed at author's the request

Reflections on Exploring a Parallel World

Mehran Wazir

When we first discussed our work with ListenH in conceptual and technical terms, I became committed to understanding and researching transactional sex. I had previously reflected on various aspects of sex work, but our discussions helped me understand the social, structural, economic and political dimensions of sex work besides issues of sexuality.

The term transactional sex (TS) itself was new to me, even though the phenomenon was familiar. Our discussions on methodology during the tool-design phase further enabled me to frame relevant questions sensitively and engage in meaningful discussions with different categories of people involved in TS.

At first, it was difficult to identify individuals involved in TS, and initially, I assumed that interviewing women involved in TS would be the most challenging part. However, it soon became clear that locating and contacting young boys involved in TS was even more difficult, as the taboos surrounding TS make it challenging to research. Reaching out to and meeting individuals involved in TS could easily be misinterpreted by others as personal involvement on our part, which added another layer of complexity.

I interviewed participants across three demographics: women, young boys and transgender women. It was a new experience for me: discussing someone's sexual life or the issues related to it. What became very clear, however, was that the people we interviewed wanted to be heard. They

wanted to share their stories with someone they could trust. Building that trust was both challenging and crucial. Over time, I learned that they have their own worldviews about life, society and politics, and they want these perspectives acknowledged. Listening to them and valuing their opinions about their individual, social and political experiences became an essential part of the process.

I also learned that many young boys living in conflict-affected areas, especially those who have lost older male family members due to the prolonged conflicts in the border areas, lead extremely difficult lives. They often have simple wishes: to visit another city or travel with friends, but they lack the financial means to do so. This makes them vulnerable to people seeking sexual services from them. Interestingly, some boys began forming sexual relationships with peers of their own choosing, and over time, these relationships expanded into wider networks as others became aware of them.

My experience working on this photobook was fascinating as I learned to tell a story through images without using words. I realised that images can express so much more than words alone. The photos speak of loneliness, difficult lives and, most importantly, survival, care, and friendship

Women in the Borderland: Survival Amidst Conflict and Sectarian Violence

Spogmai Ali*

I learned and unlearned the ingrained way of viewing women from my area as 'bad women' if they were involved in sex outside marriage, a taboo subject in our conservative areas. I conducted interviews well aware of the grave danger I was placing myself in, if anyone had discovered that I was looking into this subject, my name and that of my family would have been dragged through the mud. My interviews would be seen as a transgression of local morality and, more seriously, as disrespect for our religion, which is punishable by death.

I selected a village where people said women from the area are '*kharab*' (bad/ruined). Given that sex is a forbidden topic, I was nervous and literally asked my questions in whispers, such as "Why do you do this?" and "Why are you selling your body?"

I used to think they resorted to this work out of '*shauq*' (desire/pleasure), but they often broke down in tears, saying it was due to '*majboori*' (compulsion). For example, one woman said her husband was killed in the mountains when he went to collect firewood; left with small children, she was turned out of the house by her in-laws, with whom she had differences. "I was desperate and did not know what to do, so I started

begging. Someone told me to get into this work [transactional sex] to earn money to feed my children."

Many other women face similar circumstances due to the sectarian conflicts, militancy, unemployment and/or the drug addiction of their men/husbands in tandem with extreme poverty. Their stories were so sad that we would cry together. Once I understood their reasons, I stopped judging them and, instead, I tried to give them and their children food, clothes or shoes, although this support was sadly inadequate. I also encouraged them to learn skills so they could earn a living when they were older. I did all this discreetly, as my continued contact could have triggered suspicions about what I was up to.

Listening to women involved in transactional sex was emotionally difficult; their stories have shaken my belief in our old tribal system, as the tribal norms of honour and respect have been eroded, and government institutions and humanitarian assistance meant to safeguard them have failed them. Constant conflict, displacement and loss have pushed them further to the margins. Many go to the bazaar and quietly sell their bodies for shockingly low rates, they sometimes charge Rs 500 or Rs 1,000 rates that cannot help them overcome their poverty. This gave me the determination to ensure that their voices, their circumstances and their will to survive and take care of their children are conveyed accurately to the world.

*Name changed at the author's the request

Hunger and Survival: Living on the Edge

Shakila Bibi*

Before embarking on my research, I would often think about the condition of our areas and would notice how some women who came to the hospital (where I work) would meet men they barely knew, and brazenly go off with them... watching their behaviour made me very angry, disgusted and sad as I felt that these women are not only playing with their own dignity and honour but that of all women.

I felt that they could not be good Muslims as they were knowingly committing a sin, and that they had deliberately adopted a wrong way of life. But during my interviews with them, I became aware of their tragic circumstances, their penury and the wretched conditions of their children. After hearing their pleas and seeing their tears and anger, my own anger and revulsion were replaced with sympathy.

I understood their compulsions and powerlessness in the face of hunger and the lack of basic necessities in their lives. They were involved in *jism faroshi* (selling their bodies) just to be able to provide for themselves and their children. I felt extremely sad and prayed for a government that could serve poor people and ensure their problems were resolved and that their children had a future.

Now, I try to help women involved in transactional sex instead of thinking of them as dishonourable and sinful. When I run out of money to give them, I ask well-off people for money or in-kind help that can be distributed among them. I no longer feel it is right to be judgmental of anyone when life is so unfair, and hope that the circumstances prevailing in our areas improve so no one has to resort to *jism faroshi* just to be able to survive.

*Name changed at the author's the request

Desperation and Trust: Life on the Margins in Dera Ismael Khan

Nasreen Kamal*

The city where I live, Dera Ismael Khan (DIK), has changed tremendously over the last twenty years as internally displaced persons (IDPs) from neighbouring militancy-hit areas have settled in DIK. This has not only resulted in increased population and insecurity with bomb blasts, but the culture and ethos of the city have changed because it now displays new conservative characteristics of the former tribal districts. The lack of livelihoods adds to people's insecurity; they feel '*baysahara*' (vulnerable). Many women accept sugar daddy arrangements at the risk of their lives, while the acceptance of transgender individuals by society has become harder, resulting in violence and murders.

I have worked, experienced and observed exploitation at many organisations. For example, the lack of health insurance in short-term project contracts when we need money for doctors' fees, medicines or hospitalisation or even the exposure to harassment, including cyberbullying. We are all desperate for work and people cross boundaries with impunity. One recruiter told me to leave during a job interview for fieldwork, he said I didn't show any interest in him. Another told me to remove my mask so he could see my face and decide whether he should hire me for the project or not. Such people also insist that photos should accompany job applications.

Women's monetary needs to support their families make them accept all kinds of circumstances. My friend, whom I recommend to human resource departments at several NGOs, feels insecure due to being overweight. She believes that if she doesn't do this (transactional sex), she won't be hired. As a result of her activities, she is now afflicted with HIV-AIDS but cannot tell anyone. A Mehsud (the name of a tribe) girl who observes strict *purdah* by wearing *hijab* and *naqab* (she covers her eyes with dark glasses and wears gloves over her hands), fears being discovered by Mehsud men and killed.

Before going with someone, she checks if she knows the man or not. She lives in constant fear. A friend of mine got involved with a married man who promised to marry her, but instead made videos of her and sent them to her colleague. She was very scared. We went to report this to the cybercrime branch, where the officer looked at her and her videos, lecherously rubbing his chin. He thought he could blackmail her into sleeping with him, but he retreated after I threatened to expose him through a press conference. Notably, he did not initiate action against her ex-boyfriend.

My own experience and the interviews I conducted indicate that inexperienced young people are exploited when they innocently trust people. They feel scared and alone for accepting gifts, food or small favours during their employment term. Young women, boys and transgender people urgently need life skills, emotional support, and stable incomes for which they should receive counselling and guidance about sexual harassment laws to protect themselves.

Name changed at the author's request

Unlocked Voices: Listening as an Act of Humanity

Hasina Khairi

When I learned that I would be working on the ListenH project, I felt a mix of excitement and fear due to the fact that the subject of transactional sex (TS) is one that we do not discuss with anyone. Before beginning this project, I had worked on another one supported by the German government for Afghans at risk. It was during that time that I met transgender individuals for the first time in my life and realised that being different should not come between human beings. I was able to understand situations that society rejects rather than accepts.

My first responsibility in the ListenH project was to interview two people working at humanitarian organisations supporting Afghan refugees in Pakistan. At the beginning, I felt anxious and afraid of being judged by those I was interviewing, as the questions included their observations about TS. However, once I introduced myself and explained the project, my fear disappeared. Both interviews went extremely well. When I later reread and translated the conversations, I felt a new and unexpected sense of fulfilment like finding a new facet I did not know existed. Later, I had the opportunity to work with and learn from incredible professionals. I learned that photographs can also speak. Through my photography, I have tried to capture pain, struggle, loneliness and the unheard voices of people the world has often ignored.

One photograph, in particular, remains vivid in my memory: an image of several locks, from the smallest to the largest, placed side by side, some of them unlocked. Each time I looked at it, I found a new meaning. Sometimes the locks represented freedom and release; at others, they symbolised personal spaces that should remain private. At other moments, they reminded me that not every lock is a prison. Often, I saw the struggles of a woman attempting to unlock the chains of her life, having opened some, while the largest one remained closed.

By working on the ListenH project, I learned invaluable lessons about patience, pain, humanity, the power of expression, and the potential of storytelling. Today, I can say with confidence that I am proud of myself. To speak, to share and to tell stories can save lives. Expression has the ability to connect people across borders and bring humanity closer to a shared purpose: compassion, dignity and humanity itself.

Listening Beyond Silence: The Lives of Khawaja Siras

Saad Ali Khan

Working on the ListenH project from the context of Pakistan has been both an intellectual and deeply personal journey. Being part of a diverse/transnational research team engaging with a participatory research frame, my role extended beyond observation/documenting into building trust through sustained, participatory engagement with *khawaja sira* (transgender individuals) involved in transactional sex in conflict-affected regions of Pakistan.

This approach transformed the research process into a shared space of dialogue, where participants were not merely subjects but active contributors to knowledge-making, and hence, they were the central actors of this research project.

These interactions revealed not only the layered realities of marginalisation, oppression, and structural inequalities but also stories of survival, adaptation, resistance and resilience.

What struck me most was how humanitarian crises intensify pre-existing (structural and material) inequalities among individuals. For *khwaja sira* communities, already pushed to the margins, conflict compounds risks while constricting access to protection, healthcare and dignified livelihoods. Within such limitations, transactional sex cannot be imagined and reduced to a singular/reductive narrative of exploitation; rather, it reflects a complex and nuanced interplay of agency, coercion and necessity.

The ListenH project became both a methodological and ethical commitment. The peer-led approach enabled more open and nuanced conversations/interactions, where participants led discussions, challenged assumptions and shared moments of compassion, humour and aspiration—reminding me that their identities extend far beyond the conditions they navigate, the identities they embody and the contexts they are embedded in.

This project has reshaped my understanding of research as an ethical and relational practice. It is not only about documenting lived experiences, but about responsibility, how stories are represented/narrated and whose voices are amplified. This photobook brings together visual and narrative fragments that aim to honour the dignity, complexity and humanity of those *khawaja siras* who trusted us with their stories.

Afghan Women and a World That Looked Away: A Personal Narrative

Surraya Mosavi

During my time in Pakistan, I met many Afghan women who had fled their homeland with nothing but hope. Many were young, many were single mothers, and almost all of them had travelled without male companions. They had arrived in Pakistan believing that the international community would protect and provide opportunities to rebuild their lives. But the reality they encountered was often cruel.

These women were the most vulnerable among the refugee population. Without male protection, they became easy targets for local men, long-term refugee peers, and even for some individuals connected to international organisations. Many did not know the area, had limited language skills, and relied on others for support. Slowly, this dependence sometimes forced them to accept offers they would never have agreed to under safer circumstances; offers made in taxis, shops or offices.

Some of the disturbing stories I heard were about women who were coerced into transactional sex (TS) in return for a phone SIM card required to register their cases with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Others hoped that cultivating 'friendships' with other office staff would expedite their resettlement applications. Other women resorted to TS to survive, to feed themselves and their children.

No woman deserves to be forced into such situations simply to keep her family alive. All Afghan refugees in Pakistan face the constant threat of deportation, but for single women/mothers, deportation to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is worse than death. The ground realities are painful. What I observed was sometimes too difficult to fully narrate, and many women shared their stories with me in quiet confidence, revealing extreme desperation and vulnerability that is hard to comprehend.

Witnessing these experiences made me realise how deeply international policy failures have affected Afghan women. Those without male protection remain among the most at-risk groups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. They fled seeking safety and opportunity, yet they often found themselves trapped in precarious and unsafe conditions, abandoned as global attention shifted elsewhere.

These experiences have left an indelible mark on me. They underscore the urgent need for sustained international attention, gender-sensitive refugee policies, and accessible resources to protect Afghan women. Every woman deserves safety, dignity, and the opportunity to live free from exploitation — not fear, coercion or despair.

Contributors' Biographies

Adeela Suleman has a BFA from the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS), Karachi and an MA in International Relations from Karachi University. Suleman was the Head of Fine Art Department at IVS from 2008-2019 and is the founding member and director of Vasl Artists' Association Karachi, Odd Bird Art, Singapore, Pakistan, and Suleman Annual Grant for Arts – SAGA, Karachi, Pakistan

She has taken part in group exhibitions at international and local galleries, museums and foundations and her works are part of notable international public collections. Suleman's Monograph "Not everyone's Heaven" was printed by Skira in 2020. Her second book "Art, Violence and the State in the Killing Fields of Karachi" was co-authored with Mariam Ali Baig in 2022. Suleman lives and works in Karachi, Pakistan.

Asma Zohal was raised in a middle income-family and completed her primary and secondary education in Ghazni, Afghanistan. She has a BA in Law and Political Science and graduated with a degree from the Faculty of Law in 2021. As a trained lawyer, she is committed to raising awareness about justice for transgender persons' issues as well as educating and promoting understanding among people about the compulsions of people facing poverty, violence, displacement and an uncertain future.

Bahar Najafi is a former school teacher and is committed to seeing a better world especially for children. She is committed to human rights and women's rights and is currently studying at a university in Canada.

Clea Kahn has worked in the humanitarian sector for over 25 years with the UN, non-governmental organisations like Medecins Sans Frontieres, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the British government. She specialises in protection of civilians in armed conflict, refugees, and sexual and gender-based violence. She has worked with conflict-affected communities in Africa, Asia and Europe including Chad, DR Congo, Liberia, Sudan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. She holds an LL.M. in international human rights law and a doctorate in psychology, specialising in trauma-focused work. Based in the United Kingdom, she monitors immigration detention as part of an independent human rights mechanism.

Hasina Khairi is an English teacher and community activist dedicated to advancing social justice and empowering marginalized communities. Since 2018, she has actively advocated for women's rights, democracy, and equality, working to challenge injustice and promote inclusive opportunities. She is currently engaged in teaching English and literacy to women with limited access to education, helping them build confidence, independence, and essential communication skills. Through her work, she aims to create lasting impact by supporting women's empowerment and fostering positive social change in her community.

Karin Astrid Siegmann works as an Associate Professor in Labour and Gender Economics at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS), the Netherlands. Her research focuses on how gender, sexuality, immigration status and other social hierarchies shape people's work and livelihoods. She holds more than 25 years of experience in the interdisciplinary field of Development Studies, including extensive expertise on and collaboration with partners in Pakistan. She was the ListenH liaison for Pakistan and the project's overall coordinator since 2022.

Mehran Wazir is a researcher and development practitioner with over 15 years of experience working on borderlands (Pakistan–Afghanistan), particularly in the northwestern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. His work focuses on understanding the political, social, and historical dynamics of these cross-border regions, while promoting dialogue, connectivity, and collaboration among civil society across borderland. He currently serves as Chief Executive of the Centre for Regional Policy & Dialogue (CRPD), where he leads initiatives that bring together researchers, youth, and civil society organizations to strengthen cross-border engagement, regional dialogue, and peace-building efforts.

Nayab Kanwal has 15 years of experience working on short-term social impact projects with CBOs, NGOs, international organizations focusing on health, education, social protection, water and sanitation, livelihoods, ADR and conflict resolution. Her work is grounded in direct engagement with vulnerable communities, especially women, who face complex security and livelihood challenges in crisis affected environments.

Noreen Naseer hails from Kurram, a Merged District along the Pakistan Afghanistan border. She is presently serving as faculty in the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. She has several publications in international and academic journals on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas' conflict, peace building, and issues related to women's rights and child rights. As ListenH Associate Coordinator in Pakistan, Noreen has examined the gendered effects of conflict and displacement upon livelihoods and the role of humanitarian actors in Pakistan.

Saad Ali Khan is a gender studies scholar, poliltical worker and feminist activist with over a decade of experience in interdisciplinary research and advocacy. He has contributed to national and international collaborative projects addressing gender, transgender politics, religion, international politics, culture, and history. His work is grounded in critical approaches to men and masculinities studies, religious studies, international relations, and transgender/queer studies. Alongside academic engagement, he remains actively involved in social movements in Pakistan. Committed to participatory and collaborative methodologies, he approaches research as an ethical, reflexive practice, informed by attentive listening, critical inquiry, and a dedication to amplifying marginalised voices.

Saba Gul Khattak is a feminist scholar with a PhD in Political Science and has held senior research and policy roles in Pakistan across research,

government and non-government settings, including at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute and Planning Commission of Pakistan. She has been affiliated with the ListenH project, hosted at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) at Erasmus University, The Hague.

Saba contributes to interdisciplinary research on gender, conflict, and forced displacement. Her work focuses on women's rights, gender-based violence, human security, governance, and women, peace and conflict with a strong emphasis on translating research into policy and practice. She has published extensively on these themes

Surraya Mosawi, born into a refugee family in Iran, later returned to Afghanistan hoping to build a stable and permanent home but was displaced again in 2021 when she fled to Pakistan before eventually resettling in Canada.

Holding a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science from Herat University, Surraya has worked extensively with international organizations focusing on the structural causes of vulnerability. She documented the lived realities of Afghan women refugees compelled to engage in transitional sex for survival for ListenH project, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard with dignity and urgency.

Surraya also assisted approximately 180 families with U.S. resettlement applications though only a few escaped the threat of forced return from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

Taiba Pirzad is a dedicated defender of human rights and women's rights with over 20 years of experience serving the people of Afghanistan. Throughout her career, Taiba has been a key contributor to critical research and policy developments. Her work focuses on projects dedicated to women's rights regarding education, health, legal access, and property, ensuring that economic and social empowerment remains a central pillar of gender equality. Drriven by a lifelong commitment to humanitarian service, she continues to be a powerful voice for the displaced and the marginalized, bridging the gap between grassroots advocacy and international human rights standards.

Acknowledgments

Saba Gul Khattak

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The idea of producing a book of Photo Stories for advocacy was shared by Dorothea Hilhorst, Professor of Humanitarian Studies at ISS, during a ListenH workshop in 2024. How to tell the stories while upholding confidentiality was the next big question, to avoid 'outing' people, do we rely on cartoons and animation to enact the stories from interviews or do we share photographs? After intense discussions among team members, it was agreed that Photo Stories would be the best way forward. Clea Kahn provided trainings on photography techniques and ethics including constructing Photo Stories about sensitive topics while ensuring informed

consent, and complete anonymity of people and their locations. Clea also loaned cameras to the team so the quality of photos remains uniform. Special thanks to Noreen Naseer for taking risks to ensure that photos from the places where research participants lived are included.

Over the course of time, the security situation for our team members also kept changing; two of our team members could not travel from their homes due to militancy, military operations and prolonged road closures; three Afghan colleagues were resettled (to everyone's relief) while two Afghans faced mobility issues due to the government's deportation policy. This meant not everyone could contribute their Photo Stories in this book, but that did not mean that their physical absence should translate into their absence from this book. By contributing their reflections about ListenH, their presence remains a part of this book.

Heartfelt gratitude to Adeela Suleman, who volunteered her time to take the responsibility for creatively weaving the photo stories into a beautiful book with the eye of an artist. She gave her spirit into the work by writing, by overseeing the process and by ensuring each page and each foldout conveys the meaning and emotion that was intended. Thanks to Mamun M. Adil, whose editorial eye helped make the book flow. Special thanks to Mannan Hatim Ali and Mohammad Yousuf of D.Studio whose visual sensibility for the overall layout, attention to detail and gentle guidance have been instrumental in making the book accessible to our readers. I must add that I cannot thank Adeela Suleman and Mannan Hatim Ali enough as a team for tirelessly working through multiple drafts patiently, and meeting tight deadlines. Special thanks to Farhana Rafiq and Muhammad Abid Siddiqui of Topical Printers for their dedication and professionalism in bringing the final form of the book to life.

This book is a collective effort across the length breath of Pakistan, from the mountains in the north to the Arabian Sea in the south, and across countries and continents between the Netherlands, the UK and Canada. To each and every contributor, ListenH Pakistan is deeply grateful.

* Names changed at the authors' request