Malala Yousafzai:

One Girl’s Fight for Women’s Education in Pakistan

By Sudip Bhandari, Emma Keiski, Siri Ericson, Grace Freeman and Katie Studer

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Introduction

On the morning of October 9th, 2012, 15 year-old Malala Yousafzai was shot by the Taliban. Seated on a bus heading home from school, Malala was talking with her friends about schoolwork. It seemed to be like any other day. On this morning, however, a member of the Taliban boarded the bus, asked for Malala by name, and fired three shots at her. One of the bullets entered her forehead, traveled beneath her face, and lodged firmly in her shoulder. That same day, she was flown out of Pakistan to an intensive care unit in England. It has been too dangerous for her to return to her home country ever since.\(^1\)

Malala was targeted by the Taliban because of her controversial role in Pakistani politics. From a young age, Malala has advocated rights to education, especially for girls. In 2009, when Malala was only eleven years old, she began publishing an anonymous blog for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), detailing her daily fears and struggles of living in a country dominated by the Taliban. Today, she continues to challenge the institutionalized oppression of women in her country.\(^2\)

Malala’s story is significant because she is an international model of courageous resistance. She voluntarily and consciously endangered her life in order to make education a possibility and a reality for girls in her country. Moreover, Malala’s shooting caused a wave of international outrage and concern. It led to greater awareness of the human rights abuses in Pakistan and prompted international education institutions to pay more attention to the educational status in Pakistan. Currently residing in Birmingham, England, Malala is an active proponent of education as a fundamental social and economic right. The world needs more individuals like Malala with the audacity to confront institutionalized systems of oppression. In light of this need, this essay will explore the context and network in which Malala


\(^2\) Ibid.
Yousafzai was motivated to become a courageous resistor. Furthermore, it will delve into why she stood up against the political and social institutions created by the Taliban and the patriarchy pervasive in Pakistan.³

Active Resistance

In the presence of many passive bystanders, Malala is admirable for her resistance to the Taliban’s unjust ordinances. In her autobiography, I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban, Malala describes how Maulana Fazlullah, leader of an Islamic fundamentalist group and ally to the Pakistani Taliban, gained power through increasing levels of hostilities and violence. Even though Fazlullah rescinded many rights of the Pakistani people, he was met with little resistance. Malala says, “It was as though everyone were in a trance. My father said people had been seduced by Fazlullah. Some joined his men, thinking they would have better lives. […] Some came up to him and whispered, ‘don’t speak any more in this way—it’s risky.’ Meanwhile Pakistani authorities, like most people, did nothing.”⁴ Sadly, many people refrain from action because of the fear of persecution. Inaction is both ineffective and dangerous because, as Ervin Staub says, “a lack of protest can confirm the perpetrator’s faith in what they are doing.”⁵ In spite of difficult life conditions and fear of impending consequences, Malala spoke up and broke the cycle of silence. Her actions remind us that individuals are capable of placing significant pressure to authorities to start respecting human rights. Her preconditions, context, and network allowed her to resist Maulana Fazlullah and the Pakistani Taliban.

³ Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb, I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban, 125.
⁴ Ibid.
Preconditions

Malala grew up in a unique set of conditions, compared to the majority of girls in Pakistan. Both Malala’s father and community valued education, including education for women. Malala learned the value of resistance from her father, who encouraged her to be vocal about the unjust educational system in Pakistan and to accept responsibility for instituting change. The extent of her father’s support will be further described in the network section.

In addition to her father, the community in which Malala was born shaped her views on education. Malala was born in the Swat Valley, which once took pride in being called "the Switzerland of Pakistan." When she was born in 1997, the valley, which lies on the north-west part of Pakistan, was still peaceful. Historically, the northwest region has been one of Pakistan's least developed regions, but Swat, interestingly, has long been a bright spot in terms of education. Until 1969, it was a semi-autonomous principality led by a dynasty called Wali. The leader of the dynasty was called the Wali of Swat. The first Wali came to power in 1915 and, although uneducated, he laid foundations for a network of schools in the valley - the first boys' primary school was built in 1922, followed within a few years by the first girls' school in the Swat Valley. When his son came to power, the focus on education continued. The grandson of the first Wali of Swat, Adnan Aurangzeb, says, "It would have been unusual anywhere else in the [North-West] Frontier at that time, but in Swat girls were going to school." Soon, Swat Valley became known across Pakistan for the number of professionals it was producing - especially doctors and teachers. "Swat was proud of its record on education… one way to identify a Swati outside of Swat was that he always had a pen in his chest pocket, and that meant he was literate,"

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7 Ibid.
says Adnan Aurangzeb. The influence that Malala’s father and the Swat community had on Malala were instrumental for her to put education as a priority.

Women in Swat Valley understand that education gives them more options. Part of the reason for this drive to succeed is that only white-collar, professional jobs will allow these girls a life outside their homes. While poorly educated boys can hope to find jobs as unskilled workers, their female counterparts will find their earning power restricted to what they can do within the four walls of their home. Sewing is a common example. "For my brothers it was easy to think about the future," said Malala, "they can be anything they want. But for me it was hard and for that reason I wanted to become educated and empower myself with knowledge." Malala understood that if she was not educated, her only option was to find a husband and spend her life managing his house. That is why she was encouraged to resist. "I wanted to speak up for my rights," she says, "And also I didn't want my future to be just sitting in a room and be imprisoned in my four walls and just cooking and giving birth to children. I didn't want to see my life in that way." However, the insurgency of the Taliban in Pakistan continues to challenge Malala’s dream and enforce their extremist views upon her and other women in Pakistan. The deep roots of the Taliban in Pakistan and its ideology used to oppress women’s education create a political and social context in which Malala must reassert her commitment to her right to education in order to actualize her hopes for the future.

Context

Historical and Political Context of the Taliban in Pakistan

In response to a Soviet attack on neighboring Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan opened its western border to host Afghan mujahideen, guerrilla fighters and refugees. These refugees were largely

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 141.
10 Husain, “Malal: The Girl Who Was Shot for Going to School.”
concentrated in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. It was within these refugee camps that the leading Islamic clergy set up madrassa (Islamic school) networks. They were originally established by the clergy to recruit young fighters to the resistance movement against warlords, but were largely seen as the only “large-scale educational institution that gave shelter, food, and education” to the refugee orphans.” The madrassas socialized youths in their conservative religious doctrine. Malala’s father Ziauddin Yousafzai recalls that, much like the madrassas, attending the government school encouraged “learning by rote and students were not supposed to question teachers.” By discouraging students’ questioning of their teachers, the education Yousafzai and many young Pakistanis received then incorporated authoritarian methods in their teachings. According to professor Ervin Staub, in a culture with authoritarian institutions that place strong emphasis on obedience and respect for authority, “it is less likely that individuals will oppose leaders who scapegoat or advocate violence.” This authoritarian education formed a group of religious fundamentalist scholars called the Taliban that defeated the mujahideen in Afghanistan in 1996 with the support of Afghanistan and other countries.

The Pakistani government continued to offer the Afghan Taliban diplomatic recognition and access to the madrassas and mosque networks in Pakistan in order to train fighters and raise funds. Ultimately, this support for the Afghan Taliban forces allowed the Taliban to gain support in the NWFP. This support increased anti-Pakistani government sentiment and encouraged Islamic extremism in the

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13 Yousafzai, I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban, 23.


16 Akhtar, “Pakistan is a Dangerous and Insecure Place for Women,” 57.
The Taliban targeted, and effectively spread its influence in the areas in which the Pakistani government neglected to implement political and administrative reforms, specifically in the federally administered tribal areas (FATA) of Pakistan. As the Pakistani Taliban spread its influence throughout the FATA and NWFP, they authorized themselves as proper substitute leaders to the traditional tribal leaders. In 2007, the Pakistani Taliban established the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), a comprehensive organization of many Taliban-oriented groups; the leader of the TTP, Maulana Fazlullah lives in Swat, the NWFP district in which Malala was shot.

Taliban Ideology in Modern-Day Pakistan

Growing up, Malala saw the Taliban shut schools down throughout Pakistan. In 2013, government authorities in northwestern Pakistan reported that the Taliban had attacked more than 800 girls’ schools since 2009. The Taliban believes that girls’ education is a symbol of “Western decadence and government authority.” After shooting Malala, the Taliban issued a statement that said, “Malala has been targeted because of her pioneer role in preaching secularism… She was young but she was promoting Western culture in Pashtun areas. She was pro-West; she was speaking against the Taliban; she was calling President Obama her idol.” The Taliban saw Malala and her “Western” thinking as a threat to Pakistani nationalism and Islamic ideology. The Pakistani Taliban preaches to parents that girls’ education is “un-Islamic” and encourages them to reject education in order to reaffirm their commitment to Islam.

17 Ibid., 59-60.
18 Ghufran, “Pushtun Ethnonationalism and the Taliban Insurgency in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan,” 1106-1107.
20 Ibid.
21 Yousafzai, I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban, 256.
22 Siddiqui and Walsh, “Siege by Taliban Strains Pakistani Girls’ Schools.”
the extensive injustices and identified the very structures she hopes to dismantle in her goal to secure women’s rights to education.

*Educational and Social Context in Pakistan*

Malala advocates for girls’ education because Pakistan has despairingly fewer educational opportunities for girls. The overall educational state of Pakistan is rather dismal, but women are more disadvantaged than men. The female literacy rate is staggeringly low at 35%, while the male literacy rate is around 62%. The female literacy rate drops as low as 25% in the rural parts of Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan has one of the lowest literacy rates (49.9%) in South Asia. Furthermore, enrollment of girls to primary school drops from 55% percent in Grade 1 to almost 25% in Grade 6. This dismal education status in Pakistan is perpetuated by numerous social and economic factors, namely poverty, religious fundamentalism, gender discrimination, and governmental mismanagement.

Religious fundamentalism has a huge impact on Pakistan’s educational status, especially among girls. Many anti-feminist religious leaders justify women’s oppression in the name of Islam. Nasreen Akhtar, a scholar of international relations and the professor of political science at a university in Pakistan says, “All too often it is misguided Pakistani clerics, promoting pre-Islamic and inhuman social practices, who have been allowed to define the role of women in society.” For millions of Pakistanis, the religious clergy becomes the only source of information. Because Pakistan’s population is concentrated in rural areas, where 65% of the population is illiterate, “interpretations of Islam have varied and are usually limited to ‘hearing and believing’ knowledge promulgated by religious scholars.”

People thus tend to hold the view that Islam restricts women to the four walls of the home. Rural areas

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24 Akhtar, “Pakistan is a Dangerous and Insecure Place for Women,” 62.
of Pakistan, which consist of the majority of the population, have predefined roles for women, such as taking care of children, cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning the house, etc. These expectations translate directly into female literacy figures. People rationalize that if women are to be confined within four walls, society should not take on the financial burden of educating them. Extant customs and traditions advocated by religious clergy lead to family restrictions that often hold girls back from attending schools.

Even though hardliner religious clerics justify the oppression of women using Islam, the religion actually provides full protection and security for women. Amna Latif, a scholar of political science says, “After the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, women were granted many rights, including the right to pursue an education, have an inheritance, own a business/trade and property, and reject a marriage proposal, among other rights.” The Pakistani constitution, which is influenced by Quran (the holy book of Islam), ensures respect, safety, and equal rights for women. However, societal customs and traditions that restrict women’s rights, including the right to education, have overshadowed the fundamental teachings of Islam.

Despite repeated governmental efforts to lessen the gap between men and women, Pakistan still remains a male-dominated society where women struggle to enjoy their basic rights. Akhtar, the political science professor says, “Honor killings, forced marriage, and unprovoked violence against women are common in many areas.” Patriarchal societal structure limits access to education for girls. Men expect women to do household chores; as a result, girls are forced to remain behind to help their mothers in household chores, while boys head to school. Some female political leaders have had the courage to advocate for educational rights for girls, but are usually confronted with the humiliation by their male

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26 Ibid., 426.
27 Akhtar, “Pakistan is a Dangerous and Insecure Place for Women,” 36.
counterparts. Akhtar adds, “It is ironic that some government ministers, as well as members of parliament, are more rigid and harsh towards women in their lives than the average Pakistani male.”

Benazir Bhutto, a prominent feminist politician who advocated for women’s rights, was shot and killed by extremists who disagreed with her views. Many males in Pakistan are intolerant of females who fight for equal educational opportunities for girls. The dismal educational status and rudimentary social norms influenced Malala to raise her voice for justice and equality for women.

**Network**

In addition to a restrictive political and social context that incites Malala to act against the oppression of women’s education, she has had access to a network of political role models and leaders in her life that have inspired her to become a courageous resistor. Benazir Bhutto, the first female prime minister in the Islamic world, is an example of a woman who gave Malala hope for her country and inspiration for her own life in politics. Malala says, “It was because of Benazir that girls like me could think of speaking out and becoming politicians. She was our role model. She symbolized the end of dictatorship and the beginning of democracy, as well as sending a message of hope and strength to the rest of the world.”

Many Pakistanis, such as Malala, look to Bhutto for guidance. When Benazir was elected to be prime minister, Malala said, “Suddenly there was a lot of optimism about the future.” When Benazir was assassinated, Malala said, “It felt as if my country was running out of hope.”

Benazir was one woman who had a widespread impact on the attitudes of many Pakistanis. Her role in politics gave Malala the inspiration and political framework necessary for implementing change.

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28 Akhtar, “Pakistan is a Dangerous and Insecure Place for Women,” 39.
30 Ibid., 44.
31 Ibid., 133.
Malala’s father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, also had a significant influence in her motivations to become a social and political activist. Malala receives encouragement, guidance, and inspiration from her father. It seemed natural for her to assume the role of a BBC blogger because, she said, “They want to interview a small girl, but the girls are scared, and even if they’re not, their parents won’t allow it. I have a father who isn’t scared, who stands by me. He said, ‘You are a child and it’s your right to speak.’”32 Malala learned the value of resistance from her father. Her father encouraged her to see the education system as fundamentally unjust and to accept responsibility for instituting change. By the time Malala was born, her father had realized his dream of founding his own school, which began with just a few pupils, but soon blossomed into an establishment educating more than 1,000 girls and boys. Malala grew up with a father that was educated and believed women should be educated. He supported her efforts in standing up for women’s education. After watching and admiring political leaders such as her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, and the former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, Malala gained inspiration to become a political leader herself and inspire others.

**International Reaction to attack on Malala**

The global response to Malala’s shooting has been largely positive in the western world. On her 16th Birthday, July 12, 2013, Malala was invited to speak to the United Nations in her first public appearance following the incident. This speech was part of the Malala Day event that was organized in large part by Gordon Brown, former British Prime Minister and recent appointee to United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education. The goal of Malala Day was to kick start Brown’s “I am Malala” campaign in an effort to further Malala’s impact on the fight for women’s education rights globally. This

prestigious appearance was widely publicized by western news media. In fact, with the help of Brown’s efforts, Malala’s message has been bolstered in the news media of several countries and even shared in her memoir *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban*. In accordance with this global fame, Malala was also nominated for, and later became the recipient of, the World Children’s Prize (similar to the Nobel Peace Prize received by adults) that aims to acknowledge children who serve as role models for their peers and make their voices heard in the fight for the rights of children all over the world.\(^{33}\)

The response to Malala’s publicity from the people of her native Swat Valley in Pakistan, however, has been mixed. Everyone knows who she is and is aware of her attack. Many also know that the reason for the attack was that Malala and her family had long been known as fighters for education rights. As a result of the shooting, however, Malala’s fame has grown, which has created negative reputation among some people of Swat. Some see her as a figurehead who is merely seeking attention for herself rather than directing the attention toward her cause. Others fear that the extremists could come to power again in the area and that any sign of support could lead to attacks on the supporter and their family. Other even question whether the event was related to Malala’s fight for education at all. “I have been working for female education for 25 years, and never received a threat,” said Dilshad Begum, the district education officer for Swat.\(^{34}\) Many such advocates of women’s rights in education wish that Malala would return to her home and be more active with the people there. What some fail to realize, however, is the danger that await her in Swat. In an interview with Jon Stewart, Malala herself

\(\text{\begin{footnotesize}\text{33} Brown, Gordon, “How Malala forced terrorists onto defensive.” }\text{CNN, 19 July, 2013.}\end{footnotesize}}\)

\(\text{\begin{footnotesize}\text{34} Walsh, Declan, “Pakistani Girl, a Global Heroine After an Attack, Has Critics at Home.” }\text{The New York Times, 11 October, 2013.}\end{footnotesize}}\)
said that her ideal would be to return to the home she considers her paradise. Despite the violence and continued threats, she hopes to someday return to the home country she was forced to leave behind.\textsuperscript{35}

**Conclusion**

Overall, Pakistan experienced a continuum of destruction as human rights were continually denied with the insurgence of the Taliban in the region. Malala says, “First the Taliban took our music, then our Buddha’s, then our history.” \textsuperscript{36} The Taliban oppressed women through laws governing the clothes they could wear, music they could listen to, places they could go, and things they could do. In addition, women were expected to be fully submissive to and subservient to men. In a long history of oppression, Malala considered the denial of education for young girls as the final straw which demanded opposition.

As human rights abuses were occurring in Pakistan, Malala’s made the courageous decision to take a stand. Growing up in a town that valued education, receiving support from her family, and gaining inspiration from Benazir Bhutto, Malala was predisposed to help. She used the positive influences in her life, namely the preconditions of being raised in a more liberal community and her network of activist role models, to overcome her oppressive political and social contexts. Malala identified the denial of education as a fundamental problem and she identified herself as responsible for change.

When Malala took a stand, people within her country and across the world took notice. Malala is significant because, as Staub says, “Bystanders can exert powerful influence. They can define the


\textsuperscript{36} Yousafzai, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, 123.
meaning of events and move others towards empathy or indifference.”37 As an active resistor, Malala played a crucial role in guiding individuals from ignorance and indifference to compassion and concern.

Malala was only eleven years old when she began blogging for BBC. She began as an anonymous writer and progressively shifted into the international spotlight. To counter the continuum of destruction implemented by the Taliban, Malala took steps along a continuum of benevolence. Although humble, her initial contributions to the BBC blog strengthened her commitment to the cause and gave her the courage to become an outspoken, world-renowned activist. As Staub says, “Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born. Very often the rescuers make only a small commitment at the start – to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps.”38 Malala exemplifies Staub’s vision of a hero. She reminds the world that small acts can have a significant impact and every person has the capacity to implement change.

38 Ibid., 87.