



Impact of the War on Terror in Afghanistan on Combatants' Families from Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

JHSS

1-14

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Vol.34(1), 2026

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Abstract

The paper explores the impact post-9/11 US-led War on Terror in Afghanistan on combatants' families belonging to Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The combatants from Dir had crossed over to Afghanistan under Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) to help the Taliban in their fight against NATO forces. The fall of the Taliban government resulted in the deaths of majority of TNSM while many went missing. Their families back home in Dir faced a host of challenges which included emotional trauma, social stigma, economic hardships, and inheritance disputes. Besides, the Jihadi organizations covertly operating in the area offered financial support to attract the young ones of these families to join their ranks. Moreover, it also brings to the fore the cultural barriers that prevented the widows of the combatants from re-marrying and denial of share to combatants children under the pretext of denial of inheritance to orphaned grandchildren, highlighting the vulnerability of combatants families to manipulation. By charting the adverse impact of the conflict on these families provides a deeper understanding of the conditions of the marginalized ones including children of the combatants, their aged parents, and widows. The tool used for collecting primary data was unstructured interview through which the lived experiences of affected families were recorded. A total of 25 respondents identified through snowball sampling technique were interviewed, including 20 affected families members and 5 local key informants. The study attempts to contribute to the broader discourse and deeper understanding of the impact of wars on the marginalized populations.

Keywords: War on Terror, Combatants' Families, Economic Hardship, Social Marginalization, Radicalization, Post-Conflict Trauma

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Introduction:

This study examines the impact of the post-9/11 War on Terror in Afghanistan on the families of combatants from District Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The U.S-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan significantly impacted district Dir (both Lower and Upper) and the entire Malakand Division in KP. Mobilized by TNSM's leader Sufi Muhammad, local tribesmen organized a Lashkar (militia) of approximately 10,000 individuals who crossed into Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban against NATO forces (The Daily Dawn, 2001) (Sultan-i-Rome, 2012). The Taliban deployed these combatants to different war zones, where they suffered terrible losses including death, imprisonment by local war lords and many went missing (Struck, 2001).

The deaths of the combatants had profound impact on their families. As sole bread winners, the absence of combatants confronted their families with severe economic hardships, compelling the children to abandon their schools and involve in child labour. Similarly, social taboos and patriarchy prevented the young widows of the deceased combatants from re-marrying, keeping them financially dependent on their in-laws, parents or charities. Besides, the few combatants who had managed to return alive from Afghanistan, joined militant organizations, further augmenting the families' problems (Izharullah, 2015). The following table has demographic information regarding the combatants such as their age, level of education, profession, family size and political affiliation etc.

Demographic Profile of Combatants

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age	18-30 years	6	24	24	24
	31-40 years	5	20	20	44
	41-50 years	3	12	12	56
	Above 50 Years	11	44	44	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Education	Under Matric	7	28	28	28
	Intermediate	1	4	4	32
	Illiterate	17	68	68	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Profession	Unemployed	15	60	60	60
	Foreign Employment	4	16	16	76
	Labourer	4	16	16	92
	Others	2	8	8	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Total Children	1-3 Children	3	12	12	12
	4-6 Children	10	40	40	52

	Above 6 Children	9	36	36	88
	Married but No Children	1	4	4	92
	Unmarried	2	8	8	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Madrasa Education	No	25	100	100	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Religious Sect	Deoband	22	88	88	88
	Ahli-Hadees	3	12	12	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Political Affiliation	JI	20	80	80	80
	ANP	3	12	12	92
	PPP	2	8	8	100
	Total	25	100	100	
Certainty Regarding Death of Relatives in Afghanistan	Yes	7	28	28	28
	No	18	72	72	100
	Total	25	100	100	

Source: the table is based on the primary data collected through interviews with relatives of combatants and local informants.

Socio-Economic Impacts:

The following analysis explores the adverse socio-economic effects of the War on Terror in Afghanistan on the families of combatants from Dir. While the war has influenced various aspects of their lives, this study focuses on the most significant aspects, including the education of combatants' children, their involvement in labor, and their social vulnerabilities etc.

Education

Education is a critical foundation for societal progress, but conflicts severely disrupt this process, particularly in regions targeted by militant groups. In areas like Dir, the War on Terror and the activities of groups such as the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) destroyed schools and impeded access to education (Institute of Economic and Peace, 2016).

Between 2007 and 2009, the Taliban's campaign against schools in (KP) caused substantial damage, with over 800 schools destroyed, primarily in the Malakand Division (Khan T. , 2013). The TTP expanded its anti-education activities from Swat to the surrounding districts of Dir, Buner, and others, severely disrupting education in these areas (Seltzer, 2016).

The impact of the War on Terror on education extended beyond the activities of the Taliban. In Dir, combatants who crossed over to Afghanistan under TNSM for 'Jihad', left behind large families including children of various ages, ranging from infants to school-going adolescents. After their departure, the responsibility of raising and educating the children fell largely on their mothers, who in the conservative society of Dir are not encouraged to work outside the home. As a result, many children had to leave school and work to support their families (Majeedullah, 2019).

Of all the combatants' families studied only two children, one supported by a grandparent and another by a paternal uncle continued their education. The rest of the children, both male and female, dropped out of school. Many male children sought work in big cities or abroad. Although, in such cases, kinship networks traditionally provide support in tribal societies, however, many of the combatants' extended families were impoverished and unable to offer substantial help. Consequently, the orphans were forced to work to sustain their families (Haider, After jihad: Abandoned ..., 2014).

The analysis of the collected data revealed that 8% of combatants' children continued studying while the rest 92% dropped out of school. Thus, large number of children were deprived of education. The lack of education and proper skills, made them extremely vulnerable for extremist narratives and militant organizations to employ them for terrorist activities.

Child Labour

Child labour is defined as any work performed by a child that prevents or interferes with his/her right to education, or it may be harmful to their mental, physical, social or moral development. All such labours are illegal for children under the age of 15 years. Moreover, the employment of a child below 18 years in hazardous work is prohibited under international agreements and treaties. Likewise, the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, under article 11 (3) also prohibits the engagement of children in labour (Nagi, 2013: 281)(Fatima, 2018: 388). Child labour is considered as a serious social problem that needs to be eliminated (Malik, 2012). After the departure of the combatants to Afghanistan, their children back home had no other option but to involve in labour to support their families.

Since, majority of the combatants were the sole bread winners and had been the only source of income of their families, therefore, the worst financial conditions forced their children to work as labourers in local shops, hotels, vegetable markets or wherever they found any work who could pay wages. There are thousands of such families in Dir and in Malakand Division who due to financial constraints involved their children in child labour in order to acquire a livelihood (Haider, After jihad: Abandoned ..., 2014) (Majeedullah, 2019).

The following cases illustrate the prevalence and consequences of child labour among the families of combatants. One such case was that of Baligh Jan, a labourer from BarawalBandi, Upper Dir, whose family became economically vulnerable after he left for Afghanistan. Although his eldest son, Bin Yameen, was only four years old at the time of his father's departure, he eventually assumed the primary responsibility for financially supporting the household. Bin Yameen began working in the local vegetable market, and later his two younger brothers also joined him in supplementing the family income. With the combined efforts of Bin Yameen and his mother, the family managed to arrange the marriages of four out of five daughters. Bin Yameen remained the principal breadwinner, supporting an ailing mother and three younger siblings (Haider, 2014).

A similar situation was observed in the case of Badshah Zada, a labourer from QaderKalay, Upper Dir, who left for Afghanistan at the age of thirty, leaving behind a wife and two young sons. Initially, the household was supported by the grandmother, SafiaBibi, who worked as a domestic help in affluent households for a modest income. Over time, the two sons engaged in child labour, working in local hotels and teashops to sustain the family (Haider, 2014).

The difficulty of tasks and harsh working conditions for children result in premature aging, depression, malnutrition, and drug dependency among children. Without protection, the children work in demeaning condition, which is in violation of the fundamental rights. Moreover, bitter memories of the child labour leave negative imprints on the psyche of the individual. In addition, child labour prevents the children from getting formal education, undermining their possibility to become professionals and live a healthy social life. There are also higher chances of sexual exploitation as children working at young age are more exposed to be exploited (Humanium, 2010).

Housing Problem

The importance of proper housing is well recognized, and it is often said that housing is second only to food in basic necessities. Some scholars argue, however, that if people have a home, they can take care of the rest, including food (Igwe P.U, 2017). According to the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (2010), approximately 30% of the urban population worldwide lives in slum conditions, facing issues such as inadequate clean water, unsafe buildings, and overcrowding (Habitat, 2012).

For the families of combatants from Dir, housing remained a critical issue. Nearly all these families lived in joint family systems with their paternal relatives. Due to limited accommodation, couples often shared a single room with their children. As most of the combatants belonged to poor families, hence, the married combatants were living in a single room of a shared

house. Over time, as children grew, it became increasingly difficult for these families to continue living in a single room (Khan A. , 2019).

The data collected indicated that the combatants had left for Afghanistan in 2001, leaving behind large numbers of children, each of whom now required their own space. In addition, the growing number of extended family members (such as uncles) further strained the available living space, leading to overcrowding. In some cases, families were forced to live in dilapidated houses at risk of collapse. The shared ownership of the land and lack of financial resources to construct new or repair the old houses compounded the housing problem for the combatants families (Khan, 2019).

Social Vulnerability

Social vulnerability refers to the diminished capacity of the people, societies and organization to resist the negative impact from various challenges to which they are faced with. Certain characteristics inherent in the cultural values, social interactions and institutions of the prevailing system expose people to the adverse impact of any threatening phenomenon. Thus, social vulnerability can be defined as inability of the individual or a group of people to cope with, resist, and recover from adverse impact of man-made or natural hazard (Burton et al, 2018).

In light of the above definitions, combatants' wives, children and aged parents were left socially vulnerable and faced variety of problems. In the absence of parent and guardian, the combatants' children were exposed to many social evils prevalent in society, such as, drug addiction, substance abuse and other immoral activities. In Pakhtun social structure, father or male guardian plays the role of a protector, financial supporter, caregiver along with social and emotional role model. The unknown status of Combatants in Afghanistan, deprived combatants' children of all mentioned amenities. Consequently, they from a very small age had to perform responsibilities which their parent needed to do for them (Safi-ullah, 2019).

The children of the combatants were confronted with strange emotional and psychological problems and challenges. As in case of Sardar Naeem from Kot (Bala) Hayaseri, left for *Jihad* in Afghanistan when his only son was 4 months old. After some time, the widow was re-married to her brother-in-law, younger brother of the combatant (Muhammad, 2019).

The son of Sardar Naeem, Ayaz, when turned eighteen. He completed his matriculation with the support of his grandparents. However, a problem emerged when he attempted to obtain his Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC), which is a prerequisite for admission to any college in Pakistan. Ayaz insisted that his biological father's name, Sardar Naeem, be listed in the parent section. However, according to the National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA), his mother was officially recorded as

married to her brother-in-law. Consequently, Ayaz could not be officially documented as Sardar Naeem's son. Ayaz's refusal to accept his uncle as his father reflected a common psychological response observed in similar cases, highlighting the emotional and social complexities faced by children in such circumstances (Muhammad, 2019).

Owing to a strong patriarchal system in the area, the wives and daughters of the combatants were left at the mercy of the male members of the family i.e. father i-in-law, brothers in law etc. As family of a 'martyr', combatants' widows and daughters had to take special care of the honour which is deeply associated with women by staying within the four wall of home. In the presence of combatant, the wife had one male to determine her status and social interaction while after his departure to Afghanistan, she had many male guardians such as father-in-law, brother-in-laws and brothers, father etc., to instruct and direct her behaviour. Keeping in view family honour, daughters of the combatants had also had to quit schools and got betrothed at young age (Maula, 2019).

Thomson Reuters Foundation, in its experts' poll in 2011, ranked Pakistan as the 3rd worst place for female in the world (Bhattacharya, 2014). Unfortunately, in Pakistan patriarchy has deprived women to raise their voice against the physical or sexual violence, as those who speak up are looked at with contempt and viewed as the one who tarnish the image of family in society. Accordingly, to avoid being seen an ill reputed person, majority of women do not report their cases violence (Bhattacharya, 2014). The combatants' female dependents too could not raise their voice in case of suffering any violence.

However, only one such case of sexual violence surfaced. Khan Bahadur, a combatant from Hondak (Payan), Maidan, Dir (lower) had left a wife with four children, two sons and two daughters. The family was attacked at night by three men of the same locality who had the intention of molestation. The mother filed lawsuit against the offenders and after a long trial they were sentenced to six months imprisonment(Safi-ullah, 2019).

It is irony of fate that in Pukhtun society the victim of molestation is considered a stigma for the whole family. Instead of condemning the offender, victim specially girls in such cases are considered responsible for the situation. The females who dare to speak against such incidents are not only dubbed as immoral but also lose chances to be proposed for marriage (Arab Naz et al, 2012). A perfect example of such cases were the two daughters of combatant, Khan Bahadur, who were married off in far off areas likely due to the reason that people in locality were not proposing them for marriage because of the said incident (Safi-ullah, 2019).

Widowhood in Pakhtun Society

As a result of combatants' death in Afghanistan scores of women got widowed in Dir and in Malakand Division. These widows of the combatants had been facing all the hardship and problems that are associated with widowhood in Pakhtun society. In Pakhtun society there is no formal tradition for widow's remarriage. The traditional Pakhtun social structure, for a variety of reasons often discourages the remarriage of a widow (Naz et al, 2012). One reason (being many in the background) for discouragement of re-marriage is that of *peghor* (Satire) and *Tor* (stigma) from the agnatic rivals (*Tarboor*) which can cause a life-long enmity. Even if she is allowed for re-marriage it would be in the immediate family members, brother-in-law (*lewar*). As in the case of Ahmad Khan whose widow was remarried to his brother. Unlike the normal women, widows are treated differently and a kind of sympathy exists for them in Pakhtun society. However, the sympathy decreases with the passage of time and the situation gets worst for widows to live (Naz et al, 2012).

In Dir, other than cultural problem, local people have developed and associated different superstitious beliefs with widowhood. As locally a widow is considered unlucky (*Badqismata*) due to which her husband died and the superstitious belief that if the widow is remarried her next husband would also die. Therefore, this superstitious belief deprives her of remarriage. Besides, the above reasons, if a widow renounces the idea of re-marriage and sacrifice her entire life for the sake of her children, she is praised in Pakhtun society in general and in Dir in Particular (Mirza, 2012).

Considering the aforementioned cultural and superstitious beliefs, only one out of the 25 combatants' widows remarried, and that too within the immediate family, to her brother-in-law. They sacrificed their lives for the sake of their children. Being widows, they single handedly parented their children which is a formidable task in Pakhtun society. However, constant struggle and challenges made them extremely vulnerable, resultantly majority of them have been suffering from a variety of psychological problems (Begum, 2019).

Psychological Impact on Bereaved Families

Due to the huge social, economic and psychological burden and death of their kith and kin, different diseases were noticed in the families of the combatants particularly the widows and old parents. Hypertension, diabetes, but most importantly mental disorders such as Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression were common among grieving widows (Menhas, 2019). The associated loneliness with widowhood create fear of being alone which results in loss of self-esteem as a woman. Moreover, the widows also feel the loss of human association thus try to remain alone and become unresponsive

(Trevidi et al, 2009).

The emotional problem in case of death of a close relative remains a serious one. In Pakhtun society, the widow feels the loss even if her experience with husband is not a pleasant one. For a widow, everything changes with the death of her husband, as she loses the role of the spouse, her social life also changes from long association with a single man to dependency on many people. Similarly, parents also suffer and feel the loss of the deceased son. Recent studies in field conclude that death of a family member causes depressive episodes among the survivors. The possibility of depression increases in cases when the widow is young (Trevidi et al, 2009).

Majority of the combatants' widows and mothers were suffering from such psychological diseases. However, due to lack of awareness, instead of proper psychological therapy and treatment the changed behaviour due to depression and anxiety among the family members of the combatant were seen as bereavement which is culturally considered as normal (Khan A. , 2019).

Militant Tendencies among Combatants' Children

The participation of a large number of combatants from Dir in the post-9/11 'Afghan Jihad' and their deaths there left serious repercussions on their families. Many of the families could not confirm for a long time whether their relative was deceased or alive. Among the 25 identified families, only a few reported that only the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement provided limited assistance by inviting them to Islamabad to identify their missing relatives through photographs of deceased combatants. However, for an extended period the families continued their search independently (Hussain, 2019).

Some of the families informed the researcher of the support provided by certain *Jihadi* organizations operating in the area. The support items included food, clothing and other necessary supplies particularly on special occasions such *Ramadhan* and *Eids* (Hussain, 2019). The lack of financial resources, illiteracy and social marginalization coupled with assistance from militant organizations, left the youths of these families extremely vulnerable for recruitment in such organizations. The concerns of recruitment from the same areas were further reinforced with continued return of the dead bodies of militants in Afghanistan to Dir (Dawn, 2015).

As nine dead bodies who were killed in a U.S. drone strike in Babrak Thana in province of Khost Afghanistan, were returned to Upper Dir in November 2015. In the same month, five dead bodies were brought back to lower Dir, and nine to District Swat from Afghanistan (Dawn, 2015).

Worst Economic Conditions:

After the departure of the combatants for *Jihad* and their subsequent

killing in Afghanistan, confronted their families with worst economic conditions. A few families who were financially stable, sold their properties both movable and immovable such as landed properties, vehicles, and gold etc., in order to meet the daily requirement of the family. But the poor families, with no immediate help neither from the government side nor from any Non-Governmental Organization(NGO), overtime plunged into worst financial conditions. Since majority of the combatants belonged to poor family, therefore, the grandparents and uncles could not provide any help to the widow and orphans. Only a few of these families were supported by the uncles and grandparents, however, they were also not satisfied. They expressed a lot of reproaches and complaints against the ill-treatment and shenanigans of uncles, cousins and grandparents (Reman, 2019). Thus, with no one to support them, majority of the combatants' children and widows had to depend on charities (Ahmad F. , 2019).

Denial of Share in Property to Orphaned Grandchildren

Apart from social problems and emotional pain due to loss of parent in Afghanistan, the combatants' children who had some shared property, had to suffer another financial setback from their uncles. Some of the respondents revealed that their uncles were denying them their share in property under the denial of share to orphaned grandchild in property in Islamic *Sharia*(Ayatullah, 2019). However, many Islamic scholars disagree with the interpretation and opines that a grandson is like a son, therefore, in case of the death of a son, the grandson should be given the share of his father (Saleem, 2016).

Thus, under this law many of the combatants' children were denied their share in property. As in case of the Children of combatant, from village Reidgi, District Dir (lower), the paternal uncles openly denied them share in property (Majeedullah, 2019). While some of the respondents revealed that although they had not been openly told regarding the denial of share but the delaying tactics showed their intention of not granting their share in the property. Most of the combatants' children were feeling nervous to ask for their share in property due to fear of this law (Bakht, 2019).

Fraudsters' Deceit of Affected Families

None of the 25 respondent families could confirm the status of their family member that whether he was dead or alive in Afghanistan. The lack of authentic information provided an opportunity for the fraudsters to play with emotion of the aggrieved people. Thus, arrival of fake news regarding the missing combatants continued for years. Fraudsters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, used to call the affected families and would narrate different stories about combatants that either he was in jail or in the custody of forces of

Northern Alliance or of warlords. They used to demand huge ransom money for the release of combatants from jails or from the private captivity of different warlords in Afghanistan. Though, majority of the combatants' families could not pay huge sums of demanded money but many of them fell victim to the fabricated stories of the fraudsters (Muhammad, 2019).

Umer Hussain son of a combatant from Hayaseri, MaidanDir (Lower), informed the researcher that many fraudsters from Pakistan and Afghanistan gave them false information about the whereabouts of his father in Afghanistan. He added that they asked for rupees 1.2 million for the release of his father, the amount were provided by selling a piece of land in village. The person who took the money was an Afghan, he went with promise of bringing his father but never came back (Hussain, 2019).

Similarly, the family of Muhammad Mukhtiar, a young combatant from village Takatak, was deceived by another man namely Bahram from Afghanistan who took 1.5 lac rupees from the father of Mukhtiar and disappeared (Menhas, 2019).

Many of such combatants' families had been deceived by fraudsters who took large sums of money from the affected families with the promise that they would bring their family member back from Afghanistan. Although, initially some of the combatants had returned from Afghanistan on their own but none of the families who paid money for the release of their members came back. Hence, on the one hand the deceit on the part of fraudster increased the financial problems of families and on the other hand prolonged the grief of the families by narrating false stories of them being alive (Jamil, 2019).

Conclusion

This study examines the deep and lasting impact on the families of the combatants who had participated in post-9/11 Afghan war. The deaths of the majority of of combatants in Afghanistan faced their families in Dir and in the entire Malakand Division with challenges of social stigma, economic deprivation and psychological issues. The research highlights how the young children dropped out of schools and got involved in child labour, the widows could not remarry due cultural barriers, and the fraudulent schemes worsened their financial conditions. These problems show the profound impact and enduring consequences of the wars on the affected communities. The study is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the challenges experienced by the families along with addressing the social and cultural aspects of the crises. By documenting the struggles of the families, will ensure the recognition of their harsh experiences and will inform the future discourse and research on the impact of wars on vulnerable communities.

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