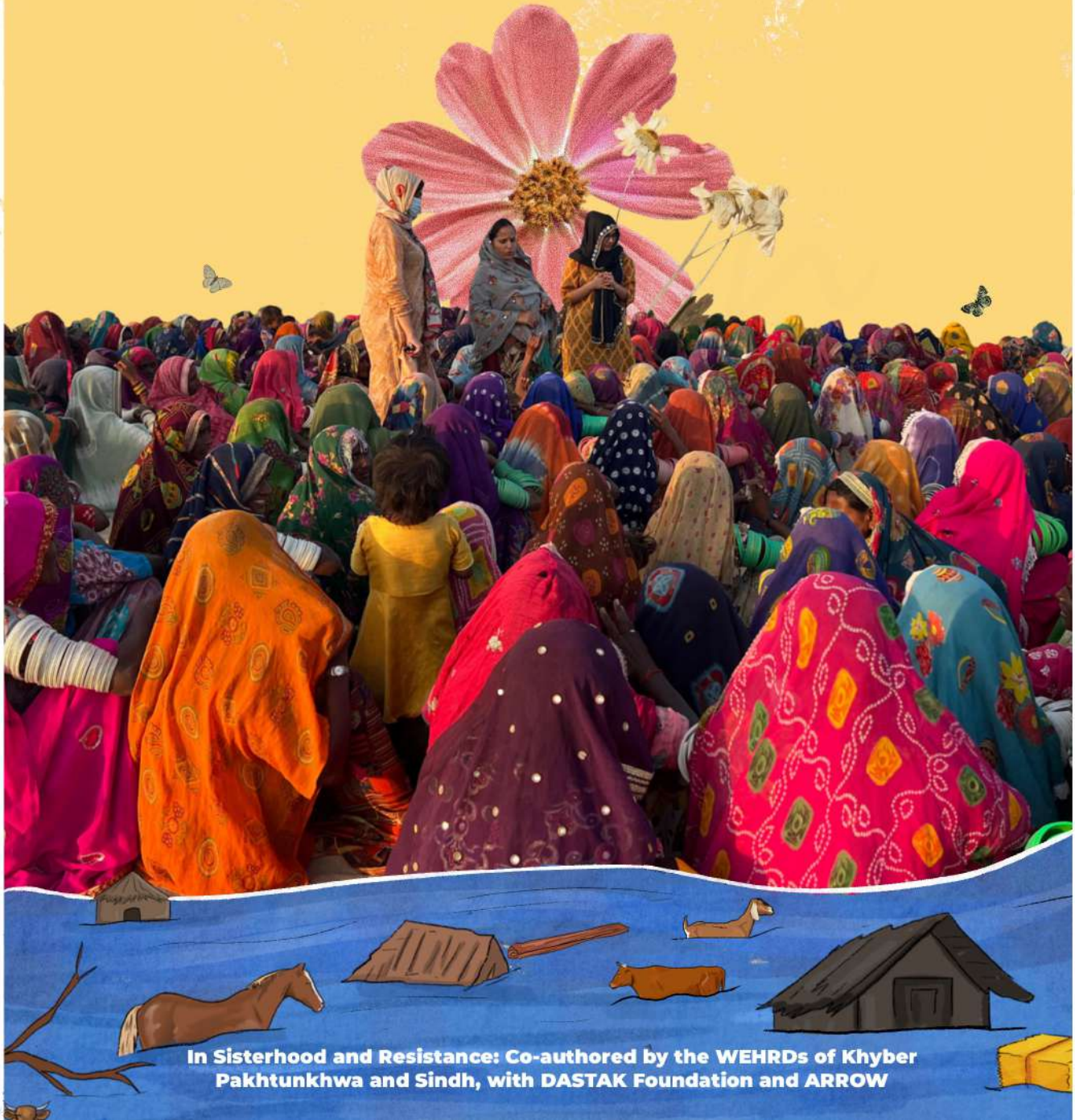
Resilience and Rights: Safety, Care and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Pakistan



In Sisterhood and Resistance: Co-authored by the WEHRDs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, with DASTAK Foundation and ARROW

Women آس Hope تعاون Collaborate اتحاد Solidarity خوشی Joy عورت

خیال Fear ڈر Grief غم Community برادری Loss نقصان Support سہارا Care

Sisterhood بہن چارہ . Dignity وقار . Soladarity اتحاد . Care دیکھ بھال

Fear خدشہ . Grief غم . Community بہن چارہ . Loss نقصان . Support سہارا . Care خیال

Women عورت . Joy خوشی . Solidarity اتحاد - collaborate تعاون . Hope آس

Climate Impact . Flood سیلاب . Resilience لچک . Rescue بچاؤ

2024

SCOPING STUDY: PAKISTAN

Resilience and Rights: Safety, Care and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Environmental Human Rights Defenders in Pakistan

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Acknowledgment

From the heart of DASTAK Foundation, just GRATITUDE!

In Sisterhood and Resistance: Co-authored by the Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh [Pakistan], with DASTAK Women Rights and Awareness Foundation and Asia-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW).

This scoping study sets up the knowledge foundations for Feminist Initiative for Environment Resilience and Collective Care of Eco-justice Defenders (FIERCE). FIERCE is a program for safeguarding, capacity bridging and strengthening networks of environmental human rights defenders [also identified as climate activists or climate advocates] and environmental defenders led civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan. It centers care, well-being and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for environmental defenders at the heart of climate action through working directly with defenders, defender-led CSOs and other stakeholders. FIERCE highlights the urgency and the need to acknowledge and prevent gender-based violence that they experience in the defense of land, natural resources, human rights and life.

This scoping study is curated with relentless dedication as a labor of courage, resilience, trust and care, representing the lived realities of Pakistan's Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders. We extend our deepest and heartfelt gratitude to these women who co-created with us this powerful narrative of their lived experiences under the dual gender and climate crises, despite receiving threats and attacks on their mobility, agency and autonomy. In this study, we at DASTAK Women Rights and Awareness Foundation and the WEHRDs from Peshawar, Karachi, Khairpur, Nowshera, Upper Chitral, Sanghar, Upper Dir, Badin, Charsadda, Umerkot, Swat and Mirpur Khas have reimagined the climate justice movement in Pakistan through the lens of safety, care and well-being. The bonds of sisterhood forged during climate emergencies are transforming into a collective movement for global and local accountability, essential to manifest gender-just climate action.

This study is rooted in the embodied and emotional experiences of Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) through their first-hand accounts of being first responders to climate emergencies. These invaluable insights were made possible through the collaboration and support of our dedicated local partners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, including Devender Kumar, Mehak Kumari, Huma Akbar, Asif Murad, Neelum Afridi, Waheed Rehmat, Mahpara Zaman, Nowshad Ali, Sufia Sultan, Noor-ul-Huda and many others. We also extend our deepest thanks to Javed and Zakir Lala, who navigated us safely through the mountains and plains, and to Hina Kumari and Afaaq Alam, whose homes and hospitality grounded us during our time in the field. This journey was possible through a collective trust-based relationship with these local partners, communities and WEHRDs, nurtured and sustained over the past three years. Forming the bedrock of our feminist participatory research, the care and trust of these communities and the strength and resilience of WEHRDs inspire us, sustain us, keep our faith alive, and gives us the strength to hope, to work for and to dream of a more just and equitable future.

We wholeheartedly acknowledge the indispensable contributions of our team, whose expertise, dedication, and unwavering commitment brought this vision to life, transforming it into a comprehensive and meaningful piece of feminist scholarship. We are grateful to Mariam Khalil, Hina Kumari, Mehak Kumari, Huma Akbar, Tuba Rafi, Neelum Afridi, Minahil Suleman and Tayyab Shahzad for their tireless interactions with WEHRDs and local communities to collect their stories through forging relationships of trust, care and reciprocity. We are also grateful to Maira Asif for her support in weaving these stories of first-hand accounts of WEHRDs into an all-inclusive and well-crafted feminist participatory action research study, while Laiba Aziz edited with diligence and care, and Wasfa Kamal and Musfirah Amjad illustrated these experiences with vision and heart. The collective hard work, unwavering commitment, and feminist dedication of the team, guided by the leadership and vision of Hira Amjad, have hopefully truthfully amplified the lived experiences of WEHRDs of Pakistan.

This work is also a testament to the strength of collaborative feminist movement building, driven by a shared commitment to justice, inclusion, and the elevation of voices that too often go unheard. It would not have been possible without the trust of Asia-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). We emphasize that feminist, participatory grassroots work is only possible when funders take patient and trusting chances on young feminists with a vision to transform the world. ARROW's collaboration with DASTAK Women Rights and Awareness Foundation, and their trust in the feminist vision and leadership of Hira Amjad, Founder and Executive Director of DASTAK Foundation, have been pivotal in bringing FIERCE to life, transforming it from a bold idea into a powerful, action-driven initiative. Ithas also enabled our humble attempt to honor the resilience of the land of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, enduring in the face of unprecedented human-created disasters.

To the WEHRDs who trusted us with their lived experiences, not simply as contributors but as co-authors of this work: we honor your stories, strength, and vision. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for Mother Earth and her spirit by defending its defenders.

رواج بدلے گا سماج بدلے گا، ہم بدلیں گے

Foreword

ARROW is a regional non-profit organization for women and young people, established in 1993, with consultative status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (UN ECOSOC). ARROW has been championing sexual rights and reproductive health for over 30 years. It has expanded to foster links among intersectional issues, from women's health, youth empowerment, and disability rights to climate justice.

The importance of understanding the nexus of climate justice, gender, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is key to implementing inclusive climate adaptation programs. It is essential to facilitate a feminist movement-building approach in working with stakeholders across the Global South, particularly in our Asia and Pacific region as we are at ground zero in terms of the effect of climate change.

Pakistan amongst its South Asian neighbors Bangladesh and India has witnessed catastrophic climatic events in the recent past. In advocating for the amplification of diverse women's voices on the nexus of climate and SRHR, it is important to understand the lived realities of women from our communities. ARROW is working with national level women's organizations in Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines and Fiji. The inclusion of Pakistan through DASTAK Foundation only enriched our body of knowledge as we explore the intricacies of feminist movements and how they shape the often overlooked facets of activism — our grief, our loss, our hopes, and, especially, our joy.

This narrative, collectively woven by the Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) of Pakistan and the DASTAK Foundation, is timely and relevant. It is a testament to the fact that our source of joy is each other, that we share more similarities than differences, and that our deeply rooted hope comes from standing together in co-creating a world where we can nurture one another.

Menka Goundan
Program Director
Asia-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)

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PAKISTAN GENDER EQUALITY SNAPSHOT 2024

145th Gender gap index

25/100 Availability of Gender Data Score

139th Educational Attainment

67.1 Percent Women Literacy Rate

30.4 Percent Women in Formal Labour Force

91.7 Percent Women in Informal Labour Force

143rd Economic Population

Executive Summary

In Pakistan, the intersection of gender and climate change is not an abstract idea, but a lived, palpable experience, especially for the women who stand at the forefront of environmental disasters. With each flood, drought, or heatwave, women bear the weight of this burden most heavily. Among them are the Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs), resilient figures who tirelessly navigate the dual forces of a climate crisis and deeply ingrained gender inequalities. This report seeks to weave together their stories—stories that reveal how intimately climate change and gender are connected, and why their experiences offer a unique and necessary lens through which we must confront both the climate emergency and the fight for justice.

The most critical, yet overlooked, aspect of this intersection is the role of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). For WEHRDs, ensuring access to SRHR services, not just for the women they serve but for themselves, is a matter of survival. In the chaos of disasters, women's basic health needs—maternal care, contraception and menstrual health—are often pushed aside or rendered inaccessible, further marginalizing them. This is not about health; it is about care as a fundamental human right. Centering SRHR in disaster responses affirms the feminist demand for equitable care systems that uphold the dignity and autonomy of all women. The personal experiences of these women highlight a stark reality: SRHR is not a secondary issue in disaster relief; it is foundational. If women cannot manage their reproductive health in times of crisis, they cannot protect their bodies, their families, or their communities. This report highlights the significance of SRHR as a core issue that must be addressed in the tandem with climate policies and disaster responses.

Central to this report is an exploration of the emotional landscape these women traverse. **Feminist participatory action research allows us to delve into their lived realities, not simply as case studies but as deeply felt human experiences.** The emotional spectrum—fear, grief, hope, exhaustion, and resilience—becomes a tool of analysis, a way to understand how the disaster unfolds not only in physical destruction but in the hearts and minds of the women living through it. The stories collected are rich with these emotions, capturing the rawness of survival, the pain of loss, and the delicate hope that still blooms amidst destruction. For WEHRDs, these emotions are often closely tied to their ability, or inability, to care for their own SRHR needs amidst the crises they manage.

WEHRDs, in their roles as both caretakers and activists, witness firsthand the suffering of others.

They are not just responding to environmental destruction; they are responding to the emotional and physical devastation of other women, children, and families.

They watch as mothers give birth without medical care, as girls and children are harassed and abused amid the chaos of displacement, and as entire communities are uprooted from their homes. Many of these women are denied access to contraception, maternal care, or even basic hygiene facilities, leaving them vulnerable to infection, disease, and unplanned pregnancies. These women bear witness to the deep and devastating impact of climate change on women's bodies, and it is through their eyes that

this report highlights the essential link between SRHR and climate resilience. Yet, in doing so, they carry the weight of their own struggles—burdens that remain largely invisible. This report sheds light on the quiet, steadfast work of these women, whose care for others often goes unnoticed, even as it is desperately needed.

Yet, even as they protect others, these women are rarely protected themselves. The report looks inward, reflecting on the personal challenges these defenders face in their work. Many experience suffocating effects of gender-based violence, family expectations, and societal pressure, all while trying to sustain themselves in environments that offer them little support. They are overburdened, their work unrecognized, their emotional and physical well-being compromised. The weight of their responsibilities is immense, and the mental toll is heavy. These women carry the trauma of their communities, all while battling the lack of resources, the scarcity of services, and their own diminishing mental health. Without access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, they are left vulnerable in their own workspaces—often lacking access to safe toilets, proper sanitation facilities, or privacy, making it difficult for them to manage even their own menstrual health. In these moments, this report urges us to ask: **Who cares for the caregivers?**

This inward reflection—both for the WEHRDs and us as a society—matters deeply. It invites us to rethink our responses to the climate crisis, not as an external battle but as an internal reckoning with how we treat those who stand at the forefront of disaster response. Feminism teaches us the value of care—of the self, of each other, and our communities. **To ask WEHRDs to care for themselves is not a selfish act; it is a revolutionary one**. Their well-being is essential for the survival of entire communities. Without their voices, their strength, and their resilience, the fabric of disaster response would unravel. This report calls us to center their needs, to understand that their health and emotional well-being are not secondary to the work—they are the work.

On a broader level, this report signals an urgent need for policy change. WEHRDs should not be seen as volunteers or caregivers; they must also be recognized as leaders, decision-makers, and experts in their own right. To exclude them from these conversations is to disregard the most vital perspectives.

This report advocates for SRHR resources, mental health support, protection from gender-based violence, and more equitable decision-making power for women in climate policies. It is a call to center their experiences in the very policies meant to protect the vulnerable. Without these critical changes, we are failing not only the WEHRDs but the communities they serve. **The intimate, needs for bodily autonomy and SRHR of these women must be prioritized to support their ongoing resilience in this essential work.**

What makes this report particularly significant is that no other body of work in Pakistan focuses so deeply in the experiences of WEHRDs. The work they do is essential, yet it remains invisible in the broader discussions on climate change and disaster relief. This report fills that gap not with statistics, but by sharing the raw, emotional, and deeply human stories of women on the frontlines. These stories are not merely tales of survival; they are testaments to the courage and resilience

that underpin every act of care, every moment of resistance.

As we look to the future, the way forward is clear. At the community level, women must be provided with safe spaces, access to health services, and protection from violence. Local governments and civil society organizations must prioritize training and resources for WEHRDs, while ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making. Globally and nationally, climate policies must include SRHR, recognizing that securing these rights is a foundational element of feminist care and an affirmation of dignity, autonomy, and justice. Governments and the international community must invest in gender-sensitive disaster response plans that place women and their well-being at the center of the conversation, framing care not as an afterthought but as the foundation of resilience and recovery. Without this, we risk losing the most critical frontline workers in the fight against climate change.

Invest in feminist care, champion gender-just solutions, defend those who defend us, and build a climate-resilient future. These imperatives are not optional—they are the building blocks of a just world, where care, equity, and sustainability converge to transform crises into opportunities for collective healing and renewal.

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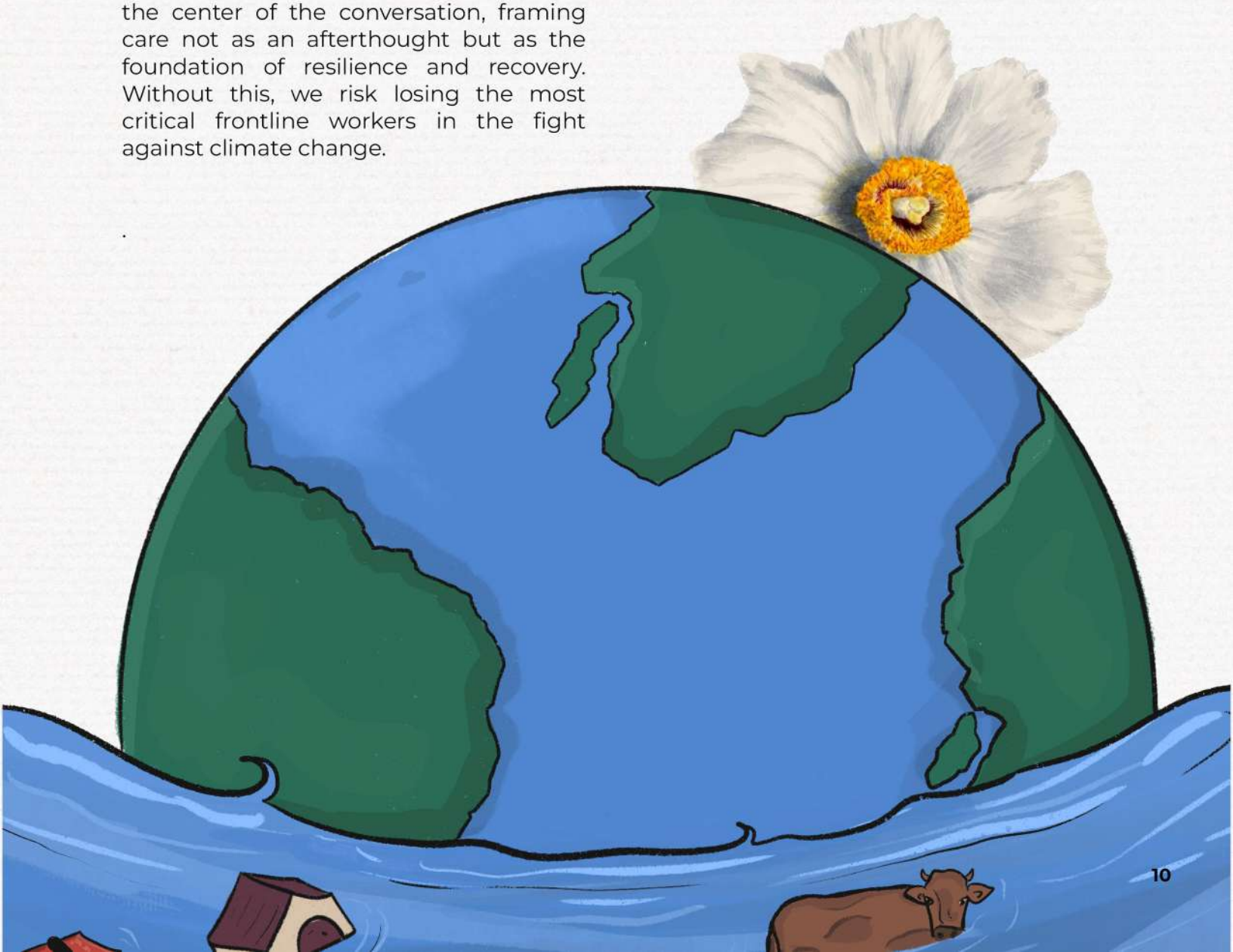


35th Most Vulnerable To Climate Change

8th Global Climate Risk Profiling

149th Most Ready For Climate Change

PAKISTAN 2022 FLOODS SNAPSHOT

Children aged **6-11** from **12** million households couldn't attend school

Around **650,000** Pregnant Women Had Poor Access To Maternal Services

Nearly **4** Million Children Lacked Access To Health Services

640,000 Flood-Affected Adolescent Girls At Increased Risk Of Child Marriage

Around **80** Percent In Flood-Affected Districts Reported Not Having Access To Female Latrine

Introduction

Pakistan stands at the crossroads of an unprecedented climate crisis, ranked as the fifth most climate-vulnerable country in the world by the Global Climate Risk Index 2023. The land is changing—scorched by relentless heatwaves, submerged by floods, and scarred by melting glaciers that once nourished its rivers. For millions of people, these environmental upheavals are no longer distant concerns but daily realities, reshaping their lives, livelihoods, and entire communities.

At the heart of this crisis are women and girls, who already bear the weight of deeply ingrained inequalities. As the climate crisis worsens, so do these inequalities. In times of disaster, the emotional toll on women is immense. They are tasked not only with navigating the physical dangers but also with keeping their families afloat—caring for children, securing food, and managing the household—often with little to no support. The unpredictability of the next disaster hovers like a constant threat, filling their days and nights with fear, not just for their homes and children but for their own safety, dignity, and basic needs.

This fear is heightened by disaster management systems that rarely consider women's unique needs. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)—access to contraception, menstrual hygiene products, safe childbirth, and protection from sexual violence—are often pushed to the margins, even though they are critical during these times. In this precarious landscape, Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) emerge as the first line of response.

The First Line of Defence

WEHRDs—emergency workers, NGO staff, teachers, health workers etc—are not only responding to disasters but also holding their communities together in the face of overwhelming challenges. Yet, their critical contributions are often overlooked. These women eco- defenders, who comfort children in flood-ravaged classrooms, wade through submerged villages to provide care, and risk their lives to save others, are the backbone of climate resilience and community's gender infrastructures. However, their own needs—personal hygiene, protection from violence, and financial security—are frequently neglected, straining the resilience and sustainability of their work and their well- being as human beings.

In this report, we are reimagining climate activism through a feminist lens, shedding light on the invisible emotional and physical labor that women, especially WEHRDs, perform. We call attention to their unrecognized work, their struggles, and their unspoken needs. We are not just collecting data; rather, we are gathering the unheard voices of those who run toward disaster when others flee. Their resilience, stretched to the breaking point, is a silent, ignored pillar holding up the nation's response to climate and gender crises response.

A Call for Collective Care

Care is not a luxury, nor is it an act of altruism confined to personal relationships. It is a fundamental human right, a cornerstone upon which the rights to health, dignity, and autonomy rest. This report redefines care not merely as an interpersonal act but as a societal and political obligation—a universal right that binds the threads of social justice, gender equity, and environmental resilience.

For Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs), the right to care encompasses their own well-being, the well-being of the women they serve, and the broader societal structures they seek to protect. These women stand on the frontlines of climate crises, offering their labor, resilience, and expertise to shield vulnerable communities from disaster. Yet their emotional exhaustion, SRHR challenges, and physical vulnerabilities are often invisible, overshadowed by their immense contributions.

This research urges us to step beyond applause for their selflessness. Applause does not build safe shelters, provide menstrual hygiene products, or guarantee access to mental health support. Care must be recognized as a right owed to WEHRDs—a right to be safeguarded, enabled, and sustained by systems that ensure their emotional and physical well-being. They need trauma-informed mental health services, accessible SRHR care in disaster zones, and policies that protect their dignity and safety as they navigate hostile work environments.

This call for collective care emphasizes a feminist ethos: care is never an individual burden. Emotional resilience is nurtured through communities and systems, not through sheer willpower. We must build structures of care—dedicated spaces for recovery, access to mental health professionals, and accountability mechanisms that ensure SRHR is integrated into disaster management frameworks. Without these supports, WEHRDs cannot continue to hold up the weight of their communities. Without their strength and sacrifice, gender-sensitive disaster response collapses, leaving communities vulnerable to the cascading impacts of climate change.

Conclusion: Reimagining Climate Justice

This report is more than a set of findings—it is a manifesto to reimagine the climate justice movement through the lens of care. At its heart lies the conviction that care—self-care, mutual care, and societal care—is the foundation for resilience. Climate change is not only a crisis of ecosystems; it is a crisis of justice, humanity, and care. For women, particularly WEHRDs, the stakes are higher, the burdens heavier, and the sacrifices more profound.

The future painted by this research is one where women eco defenders are not just acknowledged but actively supported. These women, who stand at the forefront of gender and climate action, deserve the time, space, and resources to care for themselves. Only by nurturing this environment can we hope to build a resilient and inclusive movement for climate and gender justice—one that honours the interconnectedness of all struggles for equity and justice, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued.

Before we move on to the report. Pause for a second.

Take a deep breath.

Securing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights amid the Climate Crisis

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) encompass much more than access to contraception and maternal healthcare. SRHR, as defined by the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission, is the state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sexuality and reproduction. It is about enabling individuals, particularly women, to make autonomous decisions about their bodies, health, and reproductive lives without facing discrimination or violence. These rights are essential not only for gender equality but also for societal well-being.[1]

The recognition of SRHR as a human right was a watershed moment in global policy discussions, particularly at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This marked a shift from population control frameworks toward a more expansive understanding that integrated women's rights, autonomy, and empowerment. SRHR became central to gender equality, reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Globally, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other major reports have documented how climate change exacerbates inequalities and health outcomes, including SRHR. Yet, the integration of SRHR into climate policies is still lacking. The Paris Agreement, the primary global framework for climate action, recognizes the need for gender-responsive approaches but does not explicitly mention SRHR.

Recently, in a hopeful development, *the Summit of the Future* in 2023 marked a pivotal moment for SRHR, with sexual rights being officially recognized as human rights for the first time at a global level. This development holds immense implications for the integration of SRHR into climate policies. By framing sexual and reproductive rights as fundamental to human dignity and well-being, the summit's recognition strengthens the argument that SRHR must be a core component of climate resilience strategies.

Furthermore, securing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is not just about ensuring access to medical services—it is an affirmation of the fundamental right to care. Rooted in feminist principles, the demand for SRHR recognizes care as a societal responsibility, encompassing the physical, emotional, and social well-being of individuals, particularly women and marginalized groups. SRHR is an integral aspect of the feminist vision of care, ensuring that individuals have the autonomy to make decisions about their bodies while being supported by systems that value their health, dignity, and equality. In the face of climate crises and systemic inequalities, protecting SRHR becomes a cornerstone of the broader feminist demand for care, justice, and collective well-being.

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR): A Global to Local Analysis

The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2016 by 196 countries under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), established a legally

[1] UNFPA (2019). Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: An Essential Element of Universal Health Coverage Background document for the Nairobi summit on ICPD25 – Accelerating the promise. (Link)

binding commitment to limit global temperature rise to below 2°C, while striving for a more ambitious target of 1.5°C. Central to the Paris Agreement are the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which outline how each country intends to address climate change through mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building measures. These NDCs are revised and submitted every five years, providing a framework for national climate policies. While NDCs have primarily focused on emission reductions and resilience-building, there has been an increasing recognition of the need to address social dimensions, particularly gender and health.

A review of 119 global NDCs shows a nascent, yet growing, recognition of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in climate policy, with only 38 countries (32%) mentioning SRHR, gender-based violence (GBV), or harmful practices such as child marriage. While maternal and newborn health appeared in 23 countries' NDCs, and GBV was referenced by 15 countries, other essential aspects of SRHR—such as access to contraception, adolescent SRHR, and comprehensive sexual education—remain under-addressed. The lack of integration of SRHR into climate policies points to a significant gap in recognizing the vital role that reproductive rights and health play in building climate resilience, especially for women and marginalized groups.[2]

Few NDCs move beyond situational analysis to include specific interventions or budget allocations for SRHR and GBV. This disconnect between policy recognition and action underscores the need for more comprehensive linkages between climate change, gender, and SRHR in national climate strategies.

The Impact in Pakistan: Where Climate Change and SRHR Collide

Pakistan ranks among the top ten most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. The country faces regular and severe climate disasters, including floods, droughts, and heatwaves. The effects of these events are felt most acutely by women and girls, who are often the first to experience the breakdown of healthcare systems, food insecurity, and displacement.[3] The 2022 floods, which displaced over 33 million people, provide a stark example of how climate change and SRHR intersect.

When the floods hit, pregnant women were forced to give birth in unsafe conditions as healthcare centers were destroyed. The United Nations Population Fund estimated that around 650,000 pregnant women and young girls were affected by this floods of 2022; in September 2022 alone, around 73,000 women were expected to give birth. [4]Women lost access to contraception, maternal care, and protection from SGBV in the overcrowded shelters. According to data, 65% of pregnant women in flood-affected districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), 63% in Sindh, and 50% in Punjab experienced diminished access to emergency obstetric and neonatal care.[5]

[2]UNFPA (2023). Sexual and reproductive health and rights and rights-based approaches in national climate documents: A global review of Nationally Determined Contributions since 2020. (Link)
[3] Abubakar, Syed Muhammad. n.d. "Women and Climate Change," Climate Action Network South Asia. (Link)
[4] UNFPA Press Release (2022). Women and girls bearing the brunt of the Pakistan Monsoon floods (Link)
[5] Bakhtiar, Nilofar. 2023. "Pushing the Gender Envelope." Development Advocate: Pakistan, 9, no. 4 (January 2023): 7–14. (Link)
[6] Waheed, Zainab. 2023. "Climate Change's greatest victims are women and girls," UNICEF South Asia. (Link)
[7] Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence. 2022. Gender Based Violence and its intersection with Climate Change. (Link)
[8] Ostby, Knut. 2023. "Turni-ng the Tide for Equality." Development Advocate: Pakistan, 9, no. 4 (January 2023): 1–2. (Link)

Making matters worse, gender-based violence is insidiously pervasive in Pakistan, with nearly 90% of women experiencing some form of domestic violence in their lifetime. [67] Rural women, in particular, face higher rates of violence, with 30% of rural women reporting physical abuse compared to 24% of urban women. The frequency of GBV spikes during times of climate-induced disaster, when women lose access to safe spaces and support networks.

For example, child marriage, which is both a form of GBV and a violation of SRHR, is significantly impacted by climate change. The 2022 floods made 640,000 adolescent girls more vulnerable to child marriage and gender-based violence.[8] In regions like Sindh, where economic pressures force families to marry off their daughters for financial relief, climate-induced poverty has led to an alarming rise in child marriages. The economic hardships caused by disasters, such as floods, often push families to marry of their daughters early. In Pakistan, the rise of *"monsoon brides"* in regions like Sindh reflects this distressing trend. Since the floods, 45 underage girls in just one village in Sindh were married off, a trend that reflects broader patterns across the country. UNICEF has estimated an 18% increase in child marriages in Pakistan due to climate-induced crises, effectively erasing years of progress in reducing child marriage. In Punjab, where child marriage prevalence is 27%, the cost of child marriage on education is staggering.[9]

A recent study estimated that nearly 66,000 girls were unable to complete secondary education due to child marriage in just one year, a trend exacerbated by climate-induced poverty. The compounded effects of climate change on women's health, economic opportunities, and safety highlight the urgency of integrating SRHR into Pakistan's climate adaptation strategies.[10]

Pakistan's NDC: A Gender Perspective

In 2021, Pakistan submitted its updated NDC, which outlined the country's goals for tackling climate change while promoting gender equity and vulnerable group inclusion. The country's NDC acknowledges the role of women in agriculture, food production, and household management, particularly during times of crisis. The NDC also recognizes the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and vulnerable populations, addressing issues such as disaster risk management, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and community resilience through several progressive gender-focused policies, such as:

1. **Disaster Risk Management:** Awareness campaigns, education, livelihood generation, and male sensitization are highlighted as mechanisms for preventing GBV during disasters. Access to information for women and girls is also a priority, with efforts to improve communication through local media such as radio.

2. **WASH:** Pakistan has committed to operationalizing its WASH Strategic Planning and Coordination Cell to enhance climate-resilient water, sanitation, and hygiene services. The Clean Green Pakistan Index, launched

[9] Memon, Falak Shad. 2020. "Climate Change and Violence Against Women: Study of A Flood-Affected Population in The Rural Area of Sindh, Pakistan." Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan, 27, no. 1: 65–85. (Link)

[10] NCSW and UN Women (2020). Costing Study on Child Marriage in Pakistan: A Report on Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Link)

in 2019, seeks to integrate accountability mechanisms for water and sanitation service delivery, yet it does not incorporate a gender lens on how women and girls are disproportionately affected by inadequate WASH infrastructure.

3. **Community Resilience:** Efforts to enhance community resilience in the WASH sector include vulnerability analysis for the specific needs of communities, although this is not gender-disaggregated. Women's unique needs, particularly in times of disaster, remain overlooked in these vulnerability assessments.

4. **Technology and Infrastructure:** Pakistan's NDC mentions plans to adopt low-cost, climate-resilient technologies for infrastructure, but does not include gender-sensitive approaches to ensure these technologies address the SRHR challenges women face during climate-induced displacement or disaster recovery.

Despite some references to gender and vulnerable groups, the NDC misses critical opportunities to address the intersection of SRHR and climate resilience. For example, while maternal health and GBV prevention are touched upon, broader issues like access to contraception, comprehensive reproductive health services, the protection of adolescent girls from harmful practices like child marriage, and safeguarding women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs) are glaringly absent. WEHRDs are essential to building climate resilience in Pakistan.

Their work bridges the gap between climate adaptation and gender-responsive solutions. However, without formal recognition, financial support, and legal protections, these defenders will continue to face significant barriers to their work.[11] **Pakistan's utter lack of commitment to gendered vulnerabilities is evidenced by the glaring zero rupees spent on the Gender Research and Knowledge Management Indicator on the Ministry of Climate Change's NDCs Achievement Cost (Million PKR) Tracker.[12]**

Pakistan's Gender and Climate Policy Landscape

Likewise, the rest of the policy landscape in Pakistan demonstrates a growing acknowledgment of the linkages between climate change and gender, but the depth and implementation of these connections remain uneven across regions and frameworks. National long-term action plans such as *5Es Framework and Pakistan Vision 2025* include gender-sensitive and climate-smart initiatives, emphasizing entrepreneurship, e-commerce, and equitable energy transitions. However while these policies recognize the importance of gender and climate, they often reduce women to victims rather than empowering them as active agents in addressing the challenges posed by climate change.

The ***Pakistan Climate Change Gender Action Plan (2022)*** makes significant strides in promoting women's roles in agriculture, food production, and climate-smart businesses. The plan recognizes the importance of integrating gender into climate resilience efforts, particularly in sectors like forestry, fisheries, and renewable energy, positioning women not only as

[11] MoCC GoP (2021). Pakistan's Updated NDC 2021 (Link)
[12] MoCC GoP (n.d.) NDCs Achievement Cost Tracker (Link)

beneficiaries but as contributors to sustainable development. Yet, despite this progress, there are still gaps in fully realizing the potential of these policies, particularly in integrating SRHR into the climate adaptation discourse.

At the provincial level, the landscape is similarly diverse. *The Sindh Climate Change Policy (2022)* and the *KP Climate Change Policy (2022)* both ensure that women are involved in decision-making processes and climate change mitigation efforts. However, while these policies emphasize the importance of gender inclusion, they do not sufficiently explore the links between gender and climate, leaving important intersections like SHRH and gender sensitive disaster management unrecognized.

Balochistan, with its newly adopted *Climate Change Policy(2024)*, stands out for its comprehensive approach. This policy ensures the inclusion of marginalized groups, including women, youth, transgender persons, and people with disabilities, in all stages of climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building. It calls for capacity-building, gender-disaggregated data collection, and the creation of diverse livelihoods, but the livelihoods and safeguarding of first defenders at the lines of the climate crisis do not receive due attention here either.

Even the most comprehensive frameworks which propose progressive reforms for adaptation, mitigation and resilience building do not address the institutional and societal challenges faced by the human labor force tasked to carry out these reforms and projects on the ground.

In some cases, policies even see abysmal backtracking. The National Policy on Vulnerable Groups in Disasters 2013 by National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) acknowledges women frontline workers as essential, urging their induction and recognizing women as active stakeholders in all phases of disaster relief, recovery and management. However the NDMA Plan 2024 merely refers to women as a passive, vulnerable group, similar to children or elderly, to be protected by state authorities. Despite the continuous classification of these groups as vulnerable, the relief support items checklist still lacks gender-sensitive and mobility aid devices,such as dignity kits, menstrual kits and wheelchairs.

It must be affirmed that WEHRDs are not just victims of climate change—they are leading efforts to protect their communities from its worst effects. They are at the forefront of fighting climate disasters and advocating for gender equality, particularly in rural and climate-vulnerable regions. Yet, their contributions often go unrecognized, and they face harassment, threats, and violence for their work.

While workplace protections and anti-gender-based violence laws exist at both national and provincial levels, such as the *Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010)* and its 2022 amendment with expanded definition of the workplace and harassment, specific interventions are needed to address the increased risks WEHRDs face when working with limited resources amid climate-induced crises, like displacement or the breakdown of social and institutional structures during disasters. As climate crises intensify, it becomes increasingly urgent to fully integrate the unique needs of WEHRDs into both national and provincial climate

strategies, ensuring that women are not only protected but empowered as key drivers of resilience in the face of climate change.

A Call to Action: Centering SRHR in Climate Resilience

This report comes at a crucial time. The climate crisis is accelerating, and Pakistan is on the frontlines. But the impact of climate change on women, their bodies, and their rights is still being overlooked. This report seeks to fill that gap by bringing the voices of Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) from the climate-affected regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh into the conversation. These women are not only fighting the worsening climate crisis but are also advocating for the recognition of gendered rights and needs as an essential part of climate resilience.

The evidence is clear: without prioritizing gender-sensitive climate policies, including Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, we are leaving women and girls to navigate an already brutal climate reality with even fewer resources. **WEHRDs are sounding the alarm, demanding that their needs—access to reproductive healthcare, protection from gender-based violence, and recognition as leaders in disaster response—be taken seriously.**

This report also calls for immediate changes in how Pakistan and the global community address the gendered impacts of climate change. It's not enough to talk about women's vulnerability; we need concrete action that integrates SRHR into climate adaptation, disaster response, and resilience-building. By amplifying the voices of WEHRDs, this report highlights the urgent need for policies that protect the health, rights, and safety of women and girls in the face of climate crises.

This is not just a conversation about climate change, gender, or even health. It's about survival. It's about recognizing that climate resilience cannot be achieved without addressing the SRHR needs of women and girls.

We cannot build a **Climate Resilent** future while ignoring the basic rights of half the population.

3,000,000 Make Fewer Than 4 antenatal Care Visits

140 Maternal Mortality (per 100,000 births)

680,000 Do Not Deliver In A Health Facility

41.2 Neonatal Mortality (per 1000 live births)

PAKISTAN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & RIGHTS SNAPSHOT 2024

3.5 Fertility Rate Per Woman

1,800,000 Do Not Receive Care Following An Obstetric Complication

930,000 Have Newborns Without Care In Case Of Complication

Feminist Participatory Action Research Methodology

The report you are holding in your hands is the culmination of a community-led, feminist research process conducted across ten districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh, regions deeply affected by climate change and often overlooked in disaster responses. Our focus was on Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs)—women at the frontlines of both environmental and gender justice.

Our methodology was grounded in Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), emphasizing shared knowledge creation, non-hierarchical relationships, and a reciprocal, trust-based process with the communities involved. Through this research, we aimed to explore how climate change, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the safety and well-being of WEHRDs intersect in Pakistan's climate-vulnerable areas. This approach allowed us to amplify the voices of WEHRDs while recognizing them as co-creators of knowledge, whose insights and lived experiences shaped the entirety of this report.

A Collaborative and Reciprocal Research Process

Our research was based on long-term relationships built over years of engagement with these communities. Dastak Foundation has been working in these areas, particularly during the 2022 and 2023 floods, when we were on the ground providing relief. These connections became the foundation of our research process. The trust and rapport established during these relief efforts meant that when we returned to the communities for this research, the women we had worked with saw us as allies rather than outsiders. They knew our intentions were rooted in a shared struggle for justice and resilience, making them willing to participate and contribute to the research.

Our engagement didn't end with the floods or the research process. We maintained contact with the communities through WhatsApp groups, informal check-ins, and continued support for their needs. This ongoing presence built the trust necessary to have honest conversations around sensitive topics such as SRHR, mental health, and the emotional toll of climate crises on WEHRDs. This relationship-building was key to the research's success, allowing participants to share their stories in a safe, supportive environment where their voices were valued and respected.

Research Tool: The FIERCE Approach

Our research design was heavily guided by the FIERCE (Feminist Initiative for Environmental Resilience and Collective Care) research tool, originally developed by Urgent Action Fund Asia-Pacific and indigenized by Dastak Foundation to suit Pakistan's specific socio-cultural context. The FIERCE tool provided a feminist framework to explore how climate change impacts SRHR, and how WEHRDs experience and respond to these challenges before, during, and after crises.

The FIERCE tool shaped the questions we asked and the methods we used, focusing on the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of WEHRDs and their communities. It framed the research within pre-crisis, during-crisis, and post-crisis contexts, allowing us to collect data on how women's health, safety, and reproductive rights are affected at different stages of a disaster.

Pre-Crisis Questions

- What are your personal security, health, and well-being concerns when working in climate -vulnerable environments?
- What are the specific threats you face in terms of safety and security?
- How are these threats affecting your physical and mental health, and your access to SRHR?
- What resources do you have to respond to these challenges, and where do you find gaps in support?

During-Crisis Questions

- What are your sexual/reproductive health concerns during the crisis? What are your mental health challenges?
- What are the ongoing security risks you face during the crisis,and how are they impacting your health and well-being?
- What actions have you taken to manage these risks, and where are you encountering difficulties?
- What additional resources or support do you need during the crisis?

Post-Crisis Questions

- Were your physical and mental health needs adequately addressed after the crisis?
- What were the most effective responses you received, and where were the gaps?
- How can you sustain these responses, and what lessons have you learned?
- What emerging needs are there that still need to be addressed?

These guiding questions provided a comprehensive understanding of the physical and mental health impacts on WEHRDs, while also shedding light on the gaps in support structures and the coping mechanisms developed by these women.

Methods: Focus Group Discussions, Interviews, and Ethnographic Observation

We employed a mix of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and ethnographic observation to explore these questions. Each method was chosen to deepen our understanding of how climate change impacts WEHRDs, particularly in terms of SRHR and well-being.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

We conducted 10 FGDs across selected districts, each involving 12 participants including WEHRDs, community leaders, and CSO representatives. These discussions were framed around the FIERCE tool, focusing on how women manage their health, safety, and reproductive rights in the context of climate crises.

The FGDs were designed to be interactive and collaborative. They became spaces of solidarity, where women could share their experiences and solutions with each other. For instance, women in KP shared how they developed informal communication networks to stay connected during floods when mobile networks failed. Similarly, women in Sindh talked about the collective care systems they developed to help each other during crises, such as pooling financial resources to access health services.

We used activities such as community mapping and role-playing to make these discussions more engaging and to help participants visualize the resources and gaps in their communities. These FGDs were not merely about gathering data; they served as cathartic spaces where women could reflect on their strength and resilience while also acknowledging the systemic failures they continue to face.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

In addition to FGDs, we conducted 8 KIIs—two from each FGD—to gather personalized stories for advocacy. These interviews provided deeper insights into the individual experiences of WEHRDs, focusing on how they navigate the gendered demands of their work during disasters and how their mental health and well-being are impacted.

For instance, one WEHRD shared how her SRHR needs were completely ignored during the 2022 floods, as she struggled to find a safe space to menstruate while simultaneously managing her role as a first responder. Another defender recounted the emotional toll of witnessing her community devastated by floods while receiving no formal support from the government.

These personal stories not only added depth to the research but also provided critical evidence for the advocacy that will follow this report.

Ethnographic Observation

Our research also relied heavily on ethnographic observation, which allowed us to immerse ourselves in the daily lives of the communities we were working with. Ethnography was crucial in providing a grounded, embodied understanding of how the climate crisis and gendered labor intersect in these regions.

We witnessed the collective grief that communities experience in the aftermath of disasters. We also spent time observing how women manage household duties, care for children, and navigate the broken infrastructure left by climate disasters. This allowed us to see firsthand the invisible labor that women take on during crises—caring for their families while also responding to community needs.

For example, in one village in Sindh, we observed how women created makeshift water collection systems during a drought, a form of labor that often goes unrecognized but is critical to the survival of their families. These observations provided rich context for the narratives we heard in FGDs and interviews, allowing us to better understand how women's roles are amplified during climate disasters.

Reflections and Challenges

While this research was rich in insights, it also presented several challenges. The geographical inaccessibility of certain areas, especially in KP, made it difficult to conduct interviews and gather data. Damaged roads and impassable terrain often delayed our research efforts. Additionally, the emotional intensity of the research presented its own challenges. Many participants shared deeply traumatic experiences, particularly around SRHR during climate disasters, which was emotionally taxing for both the participants and researchers.

Despite these challenges, the long-term trust-building we engaged in allowed for honest and vulnerable conversations. The community-led, feminist methodology was essential in creating an environment where these stories could be shared safely. Our ongoing relationship with these communities means that this research is not a one-time effort—it is part of a long-term engagement aimed at amplifying the voices of WEHRDs and advocating for systemic change.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. Our reliance on qualitative methods such

ras FGDs and KIIs means that the findings are narrative-rich but may not be representative of all WEHRDs in Pakistan. Additionally, logistical challenges such as limited access to remote areas and language barriers may have affected the depth of the data we were able to collect in certain districts. Lastly, the emotional toll of conducting research in trauma-stricken communities must be acknowledged. Both researchers and participants experienced emotional fatigue, which may have influenced the depth and nature of some conversations. Despite these limitations, this research provides a critical starting point for understanding the intersection of climate change, gender, and SRHR in Pakistan. The findings are a reflection of the feminist trust-building process that took place over time, and the richness of the narratives shared by WEHRDs provides invaluable insights into the challenges and resilience of these communities.

> “This is their knowledge and fight. But their fight is our fight.Our role is to amplify their voices and ensure that their stories are heard by those in positions of power.

Conclusion

Our methodology—rooted in feminist, participatory principles—was not just about data collection; it was about action, advocacy, and change. By centering the voices and experiences of WEHRDs, we ensure that this report reflects their knowledge, resilience, and struggles.

The Emotional Spectrum: A Journey Through Experiences

In Kishwar Naheed's poem"گھاس کی طرح " she writes:

"مگر پھر بھی اُگتی ہوں
کچلے جانے کے بعد بھی
سرسبز ہو جاتی ہوں"

This imagery of resilience resonates deeply with the WEHRDs in this report—women who, like the grass, continue to rise and rebuild even after being repeatedly crushed by systemic barriers, climate-induced disasters, and gender-based violence. They are simultaneously deeply vulnerable and immensely powerful. Their strength lies in their tireless efforts to protect both the environment and the most marginalized people affected by climate change. Yet, the challenges they face are vast: systemic barriers, gender-based violence, mental and physical burnout, and the constant risk of displacement.

This collection also speaks to a broader feminist struggle—one that Kamla Bhasin encapsulates in her statement, *"Feminism is about resistance, not just against oppressive structures, but against the very idea that we are powerless."* The WEHRDs are not powerless; they are warriors standing at the edges of both environmental devastation and societal oppression, embodying resilience, and defiance against the forces that seek to marginalize them. Their care, their strength, and their collective resistance are what keep the fight for justice alive.

Thus, for WEHRDs who stand at the intersection of two massive struggles: advocating for climate justice and fighting for gender equality, self-care becomes an essential form of resistance against a system that often marginalizes and ignores their voices. It is a way to protect not only their physical bodies but also their spirits, dreams, and the collective well-being of their communities. As the climate crisis intensifies, so does the vulnerability of these defenders, who face harassment, communal backlash, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Their activism is crucial, yet they operate with minimal support and recognition from the government or local authorities. This precarious situation leaves WEHRDs emotionally and physically exhausted, forcing them to neglect their own well-being to continue their advocacy. Thus, in the context of the climate crisis, this form of care transcends the individual, becoming a radical and necessary act of survival for the world.

Through this collection of narratives, we are seeking to encourage WEHRDs to pause and look inward—to confront the personal toll of their activism, to recognize their own courage, and to acknowledge the dreams they hold for their communities and for themselves. In a landscape that demands relentless action, WEHRDs must be allowed space to care for their own mental and physical health, as an integral part of sustaining themselves and their work. **"After so much work and mental stress, a person should get some mental retreat... so that[They/she] can get a day's release,"** notes a WEHRD from Peshawar, emphasizing self-care as a means to fuel their resilience, ensuring they can continue their critical work on the frontlines.

Emotional Structuring of the Report

The emotional structuring of this report—***Fear and Trauma; Shame and***

Guilt; Helplessness and Vulnerability; Feeling Trapped, Suffocated and Blamed; Grief and Loss; Frustration and Rage; Joy, Resilience and Community—is an intentional response to recognize self-care as self-preservation and political warfare. This emotional framework serves to humanize the experiences of Pakistani WEHRDs, who are often reduced to mere statistics or policy footnotes amid the climate crisis. By structuring the report around these core emotions, we offer a deeply personal and intimate window into their lived realities. Each section is designed to highlight the sacrifice, struggle, and unique needs of these women, showcasing the full range of their emotional labor—from the rawness of fear to the transformative power of resilience.

By weaving emotion into the core of the narrative, this report does not merely present data; it evokes the emotional landscape of these women's lives. This deliberate use of the emotional spectrum is grounded in affect theory, which recognizes that **emotions are not just personal but deeply political.** The intention is to move the reader into a state of empathy and action. By focusing on feelings, this report brings to the surface the urgency of the WEHRDs' experiences in ways that traditional data alone cannot convey. The spectrum of emotions invites readers to not only understand but to feel the weight of the crisis faced by these women. It is designed to provoke a response, both emotional and actionable, driving the reader to move beyond sympathy into solidarity and advocacy. Affect theory acknowledges that emotion can be a powerful tool for mobilization, for sparking the kind of response that leads to tangible change.

The report acknowledges that these emotions are not abstract; they are the embodied experiences of women who are standing at the frontlines of both environmental devastation and systemic gender inequality. By foregrounding emotion, we resist the depersonalization that so often occurs in policy discussions and place the women's humanity at the center of the narrative. The emotional spectrum not only conveys the intensity of the crisis they face but also insists on their right to care, healing, and visibility. This framework underscores the urgency of their needs while honouring the full depth of their courage, determination, and leadership.

We call on policymakers, institutions, and fellow advocates to support WEHRDs not only through resources and infrastructure but also through an acknowledgment of their humanity—their need for rest, for healing, for moments of joy amidst the struggle. Their survival is our survival, and their care is our collective responsibility. Before moving on to the analysis, we conclude this section with the rallying cry to action by Parveen Shakir's poem فریاد:

پاؤں کی زنجیر توڑ،
اُس قفس سے نکل
فریاد کر، جبر کو مات دے
اپنی زمین کا حق تو لے
چپ نا رہ، آواز بنا!

Let's take another short pause!

Notice how you are feeling at the moment. Is there a sensation in your body resonating with your emotions? Graphics guiding emotions and body connection.

You might be feeling stressed or anxious.

This could be a sign of worry or fear.

This could be a sign of worry or fear.

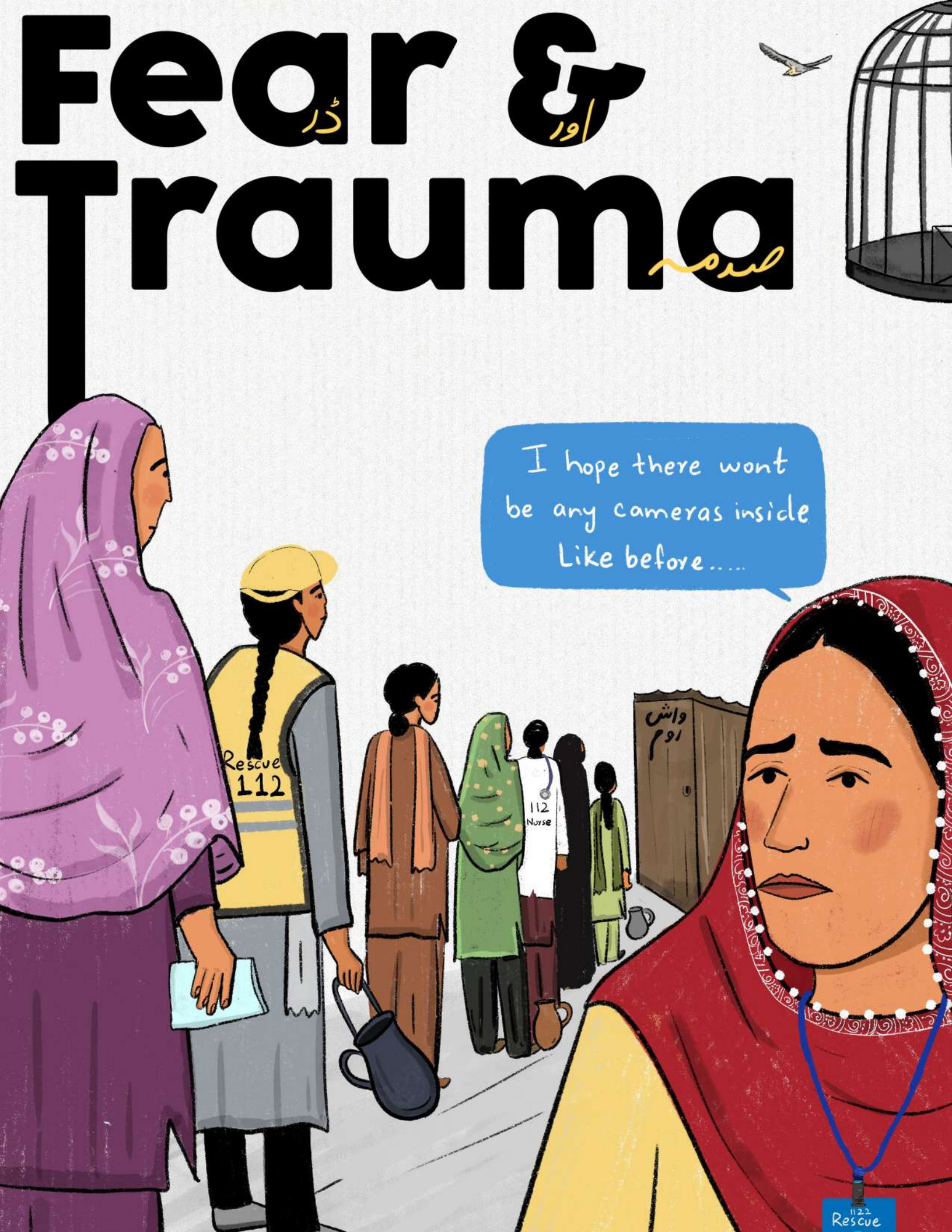
You could be feeling tired or overwhelmed.

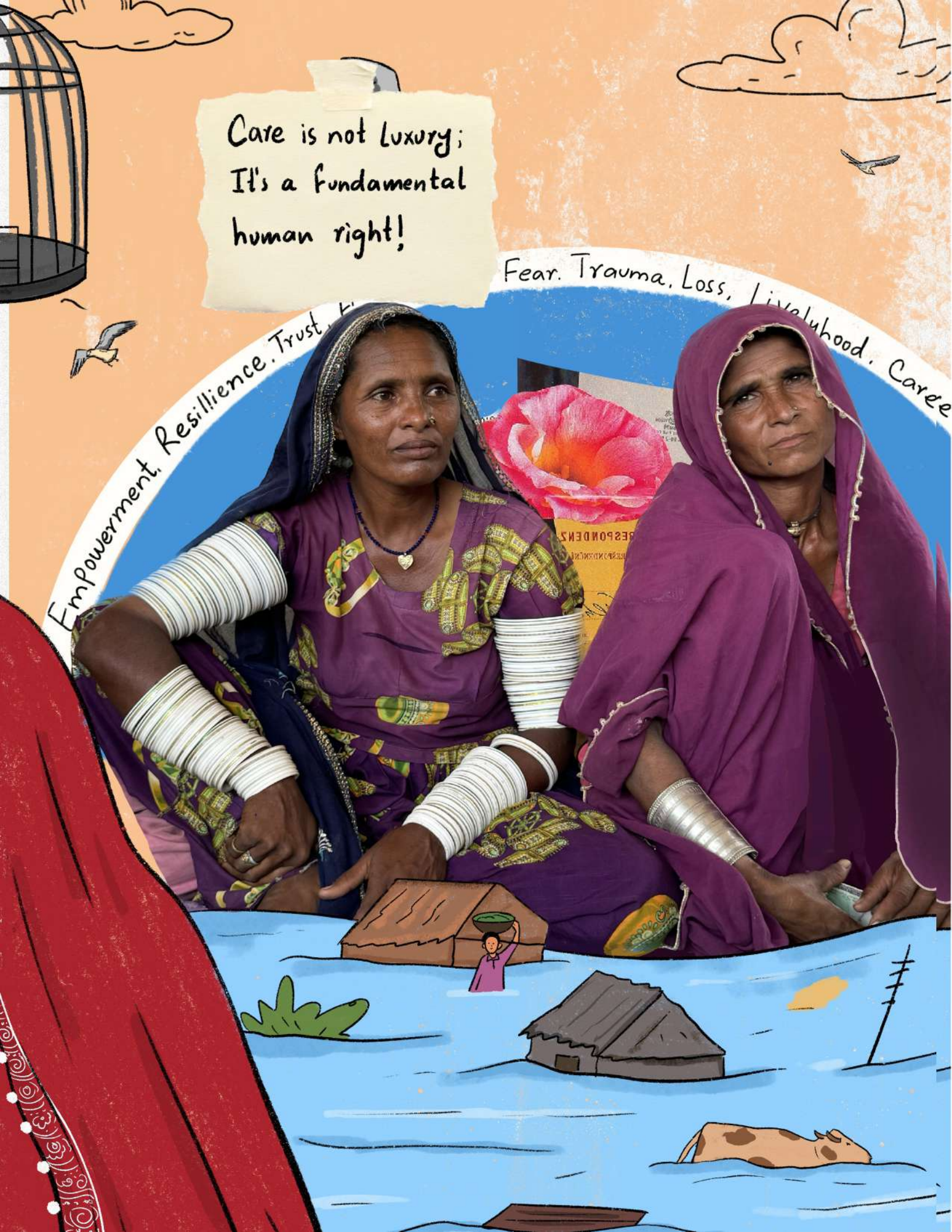
Maybe you are feeling happy or content.

A possible sign of anger or frustration.

Fear & Trauma

ڈر اور صدمہ




Care is not Luxury;
It's a fundamental
human right!
Empowerment. Resillience. Trust.
Fear. Trauma. Loss.

Fear and Trauma

Looming threat and anxiety

In the rugged landscapes of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), where towering mountains meet unpredictable rivers, the women living at the frontlines of climate change endure a constant, bone-deep fear. Mountainous terrain makes KP prone to landslides and glacier bursts in addition to floods. In areas like Upper Chitral, communities are vulnerable to sudden landslides and flash floods from glacial melt, increasing anxiety and fear of imminent disasters.

Fear is thus a daily companion—shaping the thoughts, actions, and relationships of the inhabitants of this area. This fear transcends immediate threats, reaching deep into their psyches, instilling a sense of vulnerability that lingers long after the disasters subside. Whether in the flood-prone valleys of Booni, the precarious heights of Brep, or the urban peripheries of Peshawar, the looming specter of climate-induced disasters casts a long shadow over every aspect of their lives.

In Booni, nestled in the heart of Chitral, women are no strangers to nature's wrath. The fear of floods, exacerbated by melting glaciers, has woven itself into the fabric of their existence. Every rainfall brings a surge of anxiety, a visceral reminder of the fragility of their safety. *"After 2010, when we suffered from glacier melting... people were so worried that even now, when it rains heavily, they get nervous,"* a woman from Booni recalls, her voice trembling with the weight of lived trauma. *"Even seeing water is distressing,"* another woman adds, echoing the depth of their trauma. The trauma is palpable, affecting not just their sleep but their mental health, as they continue to live on edge. *"Since then, I've been depressed. In winter, when it rains, I feel at peace, but in July and August, I can't sleep if I see clouds,"* one participant confessed, highlighting how the seasonal shifts serve as triggers for their fear.

The emotional toll of living in flood-prone areas is overwhelming. Women in Booni speak of a psychological burden of displacement. *"Whenever a flood comes, we leave. This whole area of KP Booni is a red zone, so we move to the other side of the river,"* one woman explains, describing how they keep essential documents ready and live in a constant state of readiness. This fear-induced hyper-vigilance drains both their physical and emotional energy. *"When the flood came, they left the baby at someone else's house because they had nothing. She said she cried a lot and felt bad but couldn't say anything,"* another woman shared, highlighting the personal toll such emergencies take. (Brep)

While the mountainous regions of KP face the terror of floods and melting glaciers, Sindh, particularly flood-prone areas like Mirpurkhas and Badin, experiences the unpredictability of rapid and severe monsoon floods, whereas Karachi remains susceptible to urban flooding. Here, the fear is just as pervasive and deeply gendered. *"Men can usually evacuate quickly, but women face significant difficulties,"* he continues, underscoring the gendered nature of this fear as women are often left behind to manage children, the elderly, and belongings.

"The biggest challenge is the change in weather patterns. We often can't predict floods; they come suddenly," shared a man from Badin, revealing the constant state of unease in the region. Likewise, a

participant from Umerkott underlined how the unpredictability of such events instills deep-rooted fear: *"Once, we were in the field around 2 or 3 p.m., and in one night in 2018, 35 or 40 people died from lightning. We saw lightning strike a woman".*

In these areas, the suddenness of disasters adds to the terror. However, the long-term psychological impact of living in disaster-prone areas has normalized fear and stress to the point where women express their emotional struggles with resignation. *"The winters are harsh, but they are still happy that they are safe. They also say that they can't sleep in the heat because they are so afraid,"* noted the translator as she summarized the sentiment of the participants in one of the sessions in Brep. This pattern reveals how women's resilience is continuously tested, leading to emotional exhaustion. **While they laugh and talk about their fears, the underlying trauma remains unresolved.**

Intergenerationally passing down trauma

This fear is not just a fleeting emotion but a permanent fixture in their lives. It has become intergenerational, passing from mother to child like an unwelcome inheritance. *"Children get so scared by loud noises that they won't eat for days. They are extremely disturbed,"* shared a participant from Reshun, reflecting how deeply this trauma has scarred the younger generation.

Their fear is raw, unprocessed, and manifests in heartbreaking ways. In Miragram, a mother recounts how "*recently, when it rained in April, all their children screamed when the rain started. They gathered in the courtyard of the house, thinking they might have to leave."*

The trauma is not fleeting but woven into the very fabric of their young lives. Even toddlers, as young as two years old, are showing signs of distress—exemplifying the depth of the trauma being passed down to the next generation. *"An aunt says that her small children sleep with their shoes by the pillow because they might have to run away at any time during the night."* another woman explains, emphasizing the 24-hour state of alert that these children live in. This inherited fear erodes the innocence of childhood, replacing it with an ever-present sense of danger.

A similar picture is painted in Sindh, where displacement and destruction of homes have become recurring nightmares for families. *"During the flood, our children were very scared of the electricity being out because we were living on the road. Due to the flood, our homes were destroyed,"* a woman from Mirpurkhas recalls. The trauma of losing one's home and the ensuing uncertainty is shared across both regions. In Sindh, as in KP, children become unwilling inheritors of fear, shaped by the relentless cycle of natural disasters that upend their lives.

Moreover, the auditory triggers of past disasters haunt both regions. In KP, loud noises trigger panic, especially for children. *"From June to September, we experience loud noises. When a car passes by, our children get scared. We get scared that a flood has come,"* a WEHRD from Peshawar notes. In Sindh, Umerkott, a similar trauma arises from lightning, a frequent climate-related event. "*There's a village in KP called Brep, and people were telling us that one night there was a loud noise, and everyone thought the glaciers had burst. The noise created trauma among people,"* adds the research team to the discussion from their prior conversation, pointing to how

communities remain on edge, fearing the worst with every thunderclap.

In Dir, for instance, the compounded effect of extreme weather events and lack of infrastructure leaves women in a state of continuous anxiety. "*They manage to survive here, but their mental health also gets worse during these three months because even when they are sleeping, they are half awake, listening for any sound of a flood,*" one woman explains. Unfortunately, the geography itself—steep, flood-prone, and poorly connected by roads—becomes a source of trauma for the land's inhabitants.

The lack of infrastructure and mental health services in both KP and Sindh deepens the emotional scars left by these events. One woman shares a heartbreaking story about an aunt who suffered a stroke during a flood, unable to handle the stress. "*After the flood subsided, they took her to a nearby hospital, but she died later,*" she says, underlining the human cost of unchecked mental stress. One woman from Mirpurkhas describes the situation bluntly: "*People go into shock when their crops are destroyed.*" Thus, the destruction of livelihoods and homes is not just a material loss but an emotional one, as entire families grapple with the psychological impact of repeated disasters.

Burden of Care amid Institutional Failure

One of the most significant sources of fear for WEHRDs is the overwhelming responsibility they bear, not just for their own safety but for the well-being of their families and communities. Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) often find themselves stretched to their limits, not only by the physical demands of their work but by the emotional strain that comes with it. These women are the first to respond to disasters, often prioritizing the needs of others while neglecting their own well-being. "*There's a security risk, we lose contact with our families, and there's also pressure from the organizations we work for to meet certain goals. We focus more on helping others than on ourselves. But we are the first responders, and people depend on us,*" explains a climate activist from Umerkott. Constant exposure to distressing situations leaves these women emotionally drained, yet there is little time or space for them to process their own trauma. The responsibility of being a first responder takes a heavy toll, as they carry the weight of their communities' suffering with no structured support to help them cope.

The fear that permeates both KP and Sindh is compounded by institutional failures and a lack of support from the government and local organizations. In both regions, women describe a harrowing reality of having to fend for themselves with minimal external aid. *"We always keep our documents ready. Whenever a flood comes, we leave everything behind and run,"* says one woman, her words resonating with the stark reality that these women and their families have little choice but to flee, time and again, from impending disaster.

"When such **Conditions** occur, the first thought that comes to our mind is to somehow save our **Children**

one participant from Booni explains, summarizing the immense burden of care that falls disproportionately on women. The fear for their children's safety adds a

layer of emotional complexity to their experience. *"They say that the children are also there, so mentally, they are very stressed, worrying about whether the children are safe or not,"* one woman in Brep shared, highlighting how the constant vigilance required during these disasters adds a new dimension to the fear they experience. The sense of helplessness these women feel in protecting their children from trauma is a pervasive theme in many of these narratives.

Despite the crises, women and particularly WEHRDs are expected to manage both domestic responsibilities and caregiving, even as their communities face the devastation brought by floods.*"Women do both men's and their own work, and they don't get enough nutrition,"* explained a health worker during a session in Booni. The physical toll of this unequal distribution of labor is compounded by nutritional deficiencies. Many women suffer from iron deficiency and poor health due to the lack of proper nourishment. "*Tests show very low vitamin D, iron deficiency, due to poor nutrition".* These deficiencies are symptomatic of deeper structural issues, where women's health is often deprioritized, even as they carry the burden of caring for others during disasters. Malnutrition further limits women's capacity to manage their workload, leading to a cycle of physical and emotional exhaustion.

Additionally, in moments of crisis, women particular Lady Health Workers (LHW) are the ones who provide emotional and physical support to their families and neighbours. This role, while vital, leaves them vulnerable to burnout. "*When a disaster strikes, people faint. We check on them when they get too anxious because it's very common here,"* one LHW from Booni shared. As first responders within their communities, women must simultaneously care for others while grappling with their own fears and anxieties. The emotional toll of working in crisis zones or enduring repeated climate disasters is immense, with many women reporting significant mental health struggles. One woman described the strain of managing her responsibilities alongside personal health issues: *"If I don't respect myself, how can anyone respect me?... We get tired of working. We need a break".*

Despite these clear signs of burnout, there is limited recognition or support for mental health needs in these regions, especially for first responders and women at the frontlines of climate disasters. As a WEHRD participant pointed out from Swat, "*In the flood, it was like this, that the girls were with us... There are no roads, she will have to wait there, and even if it's a delivery case, there is no place to take her".* However, even if they burn out and give it their all, as the social and institutional structures expect them to, the real fear of inadequate support structures in times of need prevents them from doing the work they do. A midwife from Sindh who had travelled to the Ghotki, Sindh area described how she learnt that, due to an absence of a midwife, 3-5 women helped a pregnant woman deliver by using glass to make a cut to help her. She further adds on the condition of pregnant women in a camp in Sindh: *"One woman had died from an infection, and there was another house that didn't have water for 3 to 4 floors. She was alone and was given food by someone. That woman was left alone there, and they would just leave and come back. Nothing reached her because she couldn't even come to the camp."* The lack of infrastructure to address mental and physical health challenges of their own and of the people they serve further

creates challenges for the first responders to carry out their jobs well. “Even if there are doctors, they are not nearby; they are in Faisalabad, Sindh Karachi, or Hyderabad.” (Badin) The distance to medical facilities leaves many women without the care they need during emergencies, forcing them to manage with whatever is available locally, which is often inadequate. This despair inculcates a deep sense of guilt and helpless in them furthering their vulnerability to a burnout.

Despite their essential roles, they often face the harsh reality of being overlooked by the institutions they work within. *"We see that the [first] respondents don't have a person who only cares for them. Respondents are going to take care of the victims, but there is no one to take care of the [first] respondents,"* shares an activist from Peshawar. Not only are they left without emotional support, but they also face threats and harassment in their work, intensifying their isolation. “*Every girl who comes [for help at shelters], there are 3 parties behind her. Parents, husband. And [inaudible].* And we are getting threats from all three places," illustrates the layered dangers they face.

With no systems in place to address their mental health or protect them from these risks, their emotional and physical well-being deteriorates, as noted by a woman from Peshawar: “There are no specific rules and regulations for duty hours. No one is given any hours. Due to restlessness, your mental health affects your emotional and physical health." Mental health resources are scarce, and most women in these areas report feeling emotionally drained, with little opportunity to rest or recover. “*I took a leave... but it [the trauma] stresses me a lot”* (Swat), one woman shared, acknowledging the toll that chronic stress and trauma have on her ability to work and live. The lack of mental health infrastructure compounds the challenges faced by women eco defenders who are already coping with gender-based violence, climate disasters, social isolation and institutional failure. This lack of institutional care underscores the systemic failure to recognize and support the critical emotional needs of WEHRDs..

Conclusion: Multi-layered Trauma

The fear experienced by WEHRDs (Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders) is not singular; it is multi-layered, woven together with issues of gender, health, mental well-being, and societal structures. This fear spans immediate terror during floods and landslides, the long-term trauma of living in disaster-prone areas, and the everyday fear of marginalization, being ignored, or facing harassment. Across regions from Booni to Peshawar to Karachi, women bear the weight of this fear while also taking on the responsibility of safeguarding their families and communities. Despite these overwhelming circumstances, the fear for their children, the need for food, and the fear of not being able to perform their duties come before their own self-preservation.

This selflessness is evident in how these women continue to show up for their communities despite personal trauma. Yet, in each region, they prioritize others, rarely looking inward to address their own emotional and physical needs. Women’s focus remains on the survival of their families.

> “We are very stressed, but we have to manage it ourselves because whatever needs to be done, we have to do it”

remarked a participant in Sindh Badin, highlighting the sense of duty overriding personal well-being.

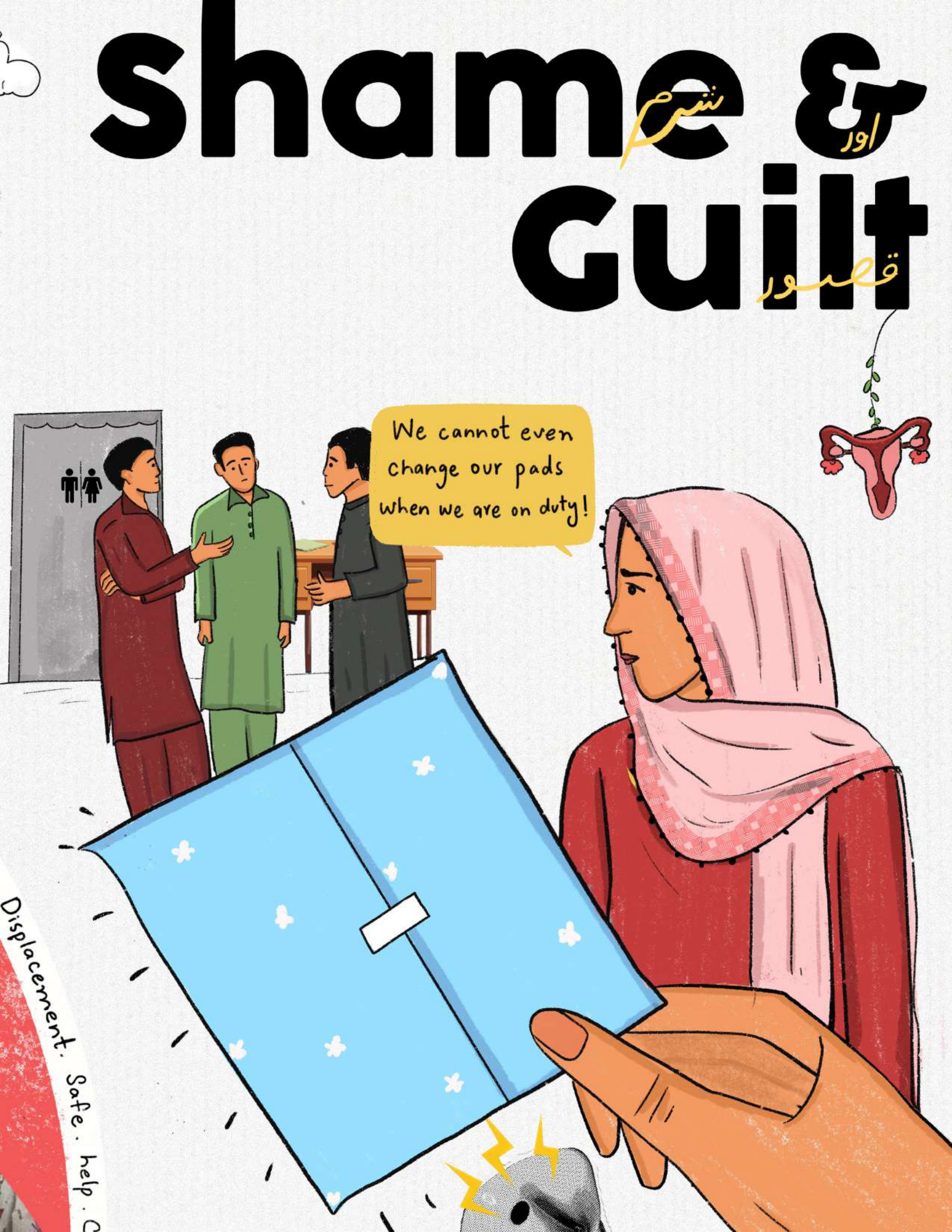
Even in spaces where they have the option to seek support, like taking menstrual leave or stepping back for self-care, they hesitate. When WEHRDs were asked if they had ever thought of taking menstrual leave, the response was a resounding 'no,' regardless of the location. This tendency reflects an ingrained pressure to keep going, driven by the needs of their families and communities. As one woman from KP said, *"I used to feed my daughter, but I stopped feeding her. We worked 24 hours."* The fear of failing to provide for others, even amidst disasters, overshadows their need for rest and care.

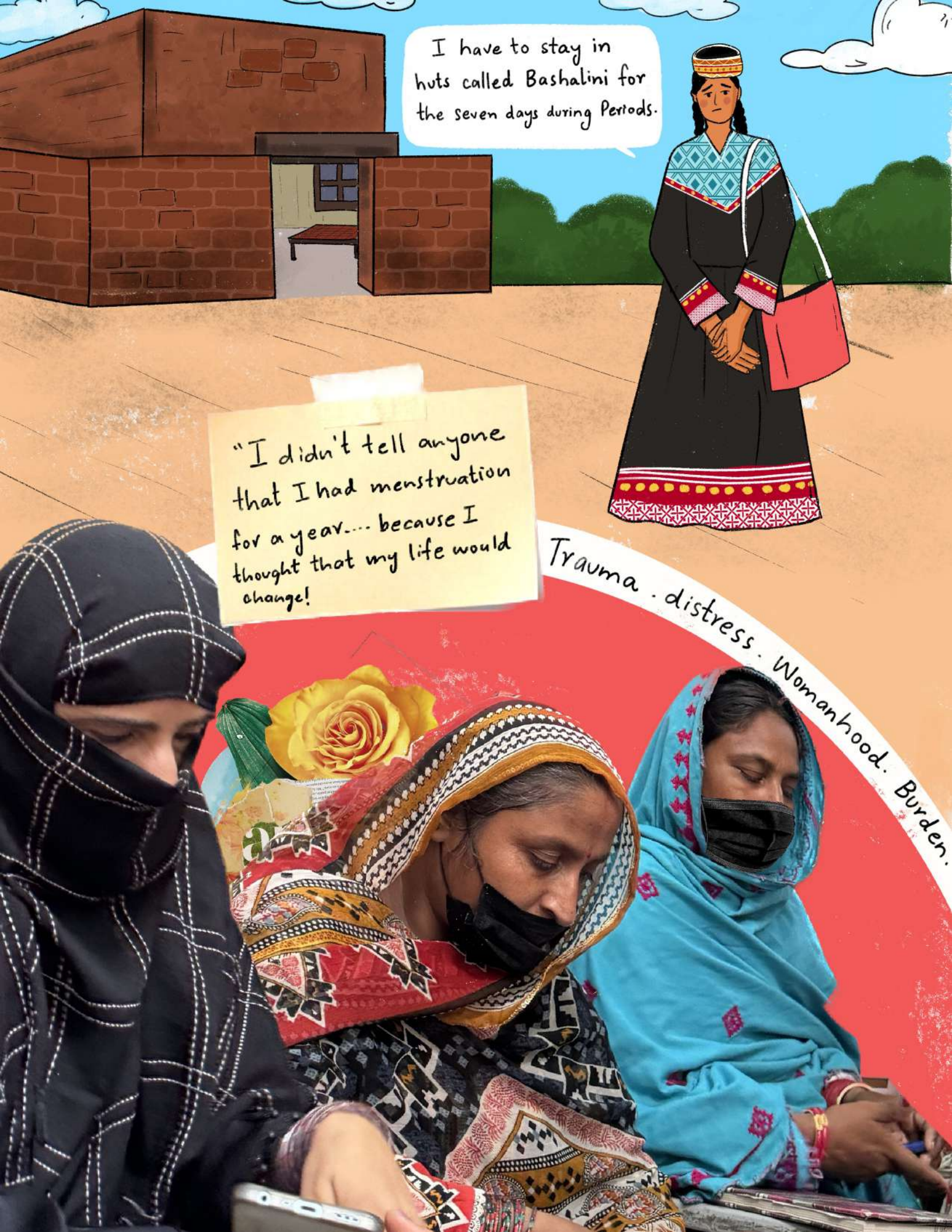
The trauma that climate change inflicts is not just environmental; it is deeply personal, leaving lasting emotional scars that these women quietly carry. The urgency for mental health services, healthcare support, and institutional recognition is clear.

Without these systems in place, these women remain on the frontlines, shouldering not just the immediate impacts of disasters but the long-term emotional toll they leave behind.

shame & Guilt

شرم اور قصور




I have to stay in huts called Bashalini for the seven days during Periods.
"I didn't tell anyone that I had menstruation for a year.... because I thought that my life would change!
Trauma . distress . Womanhood . Burden .

Shame and Guilt

Shame and guilt are more than just personal emotions for women in KP and Sindh; they are reflections of societal structures that control how women navigate their health, bodies, and identities. Deeply ingrained in cultural taboos and gender expectations, these emotions are woven into the lives of women, shaping their experiences, especially when it comes to managing menstruation and reproductive health. Shame emerges from the rigid cultural restrictions placed upon their bodies, while guilt arises from the overwhelming pressure to balance caregiving with personal well-being. This chapter explores the role of shame and guilt in shaping the daily lives of women and the structural forces that perpetuate these emotional burdens.

Menstrual Health: A Shameful Taboo

In both KP and Sindh, menstruation is a source of deep-rooted shame, with girls and women facing stigma from a young age. This stigma often begins when a girl experiences her first period, unprepared and uninformed about what is happening to her body. One woman in Swat recounted her first experience: "*I'm going to the bathroom, and I'm bleeding. I thought I was going to die. I told my mother... she just told me not to fast and not to pray. But she didn't tell me why it was happening. Just that it will happen every month now.*" This lack of communication reveals how shame around menstruation is passed down through generations, leaving young girls to face their first periods with fear rather than understanding. In this moment, the mother's refusal to explain signifies a generational perpetuation of silence, further embedding shame into the cultural fabric.

In some cases, this shame is so overwhelming that girls hide their menstruation for as long as possible. One girl in Swat hid her period for an entire year, saying, "*I didn't tell anyone that I had menstruation for a year... because I thought that my life would change. My clothes would change. My games would stop.*" Here, menstruation is more than a physical change; it symbolizes the end of childhood freedom and the beginning of womanhood, with all the restrictions that come with it. For many girls, menstruation marks a loss of autonomy over their own bodies.

The shame surrounding menstruation often leads to dangerous misunderstandings and punitive actions. One woman from Dir shared how a young girl was beaten by her brother after he miqsinterpreted her actions: "*Once, a girl had this issue, and she was washing her cloth at night in secret. Her brother came in and saw her hiding it. He thought she was doing something wrong and hit her.*" The violence that ensued highlights not only the ignorance surrounding menstruation but also the broader societal implications of gender and bodily control, where women's bodies are constantly policed by male relatives. This reflects a larger pattern of women being forced to hide their natural bodily functions to avoid judgment, misunderstanding, and punishment.

An extreme cultural practice penalising menstruation is found in KP Kalash, a small polytheist religious and ethnic minority of Pakistan. The Kalash tribe completely excludes women from public engagement due to fear of impurity and requires girls to stay in huts called Bashalini for the seven days they are menstruating. The women have to leave immediately for the menstrual house, even in the middle of the night, at the first

sign that their periods had started. However some families may allow them to stay the night for safety reasons.

Similarly, in the cultural understanding of Islam, the majority religion in Pakistan, menstrual blood is considered an impurity and women are not allowed to fast, pray or touch the Quran during menstuation. Cultural perceptions such as the belief that angels **curses** women untill they **bathe and purify themselves** after their bleeding ends, are prevalent in parts of Punjab, with each region of the country having unique stereotypes around menstruation. For example, in Torkham,KP the local belief equates women's menstrual blood as akin to a pig's blood, juxtaposing women against a haram animal and effectively dehumanizing them. Ironically, the religion Islam does not consider menstrual blood as impure: *"When one of their women menstruated, the Jews would not eat with her or sit with her in their houses. The Companions of the Prophet (Peace & Blessings of Allah be upon Him) asked the Prophet (Peace & Blessings of Allah be upon Him) about this, and Allah revealed the words (interpretation of the meaning): 'They ask you about menstruation. Say: That is an adhaa (a harmful thing for a husband to have intercourse with his wife while she is having her menses), therefore keep away from women during menses and go not unto them till they have purified (from menses and taken a bath) ..."* [al-Baqarah 2:222]. Certain interpretations consider the relaxation from prayer, fasting and intercourse as God's blessing to women during their difficult time of the month. Particularly Hadith (a form of Islamic oral tradition containing the purported words, actions, and the silent approvals of the Prophet Muhammad) on the Prophet's conduct with his wives during their periods affirm the latter interpretation of allowing menstruation to be a time of showing kindness to women and allowing them rest. In Sahih Bukhari, Book 6, Um Salama (the Prophet's wife) shows that segregating or separating menstruating women is not an Islamic provision: *"While I was laying with the Prophet under a single woolen sheet, I got the menses. I slipped away and put on the clothes for menses. He said, "Have you got "Nifas" (menses)?" I replied, "Yes." He then called me and made me lie with him under the same sheet."* Likewise, Aisha (the Prophet's wife) narrates the Prophet leaning on her lap and recite Qur'an while she would be menstruating.

Nonetheless, in Pakistan, the stigma surrounding menstruation as impure remains deeply entrenched. During the 2022 floods, when menstrual products were included in relief packages by the Dastak team, men in the community reacted with outrage. "After the floods we distributed pads with rations, and it was turned into a big mess by the men of Bahrain. They made it an issue of honor." Men treated food or other relief items touching clean pads as unsanitary and refused to take them, demonstrating how shame around menstruation is not just a personal burden but a community-wide issue that reinforces gendered norms of honor and dishonor.

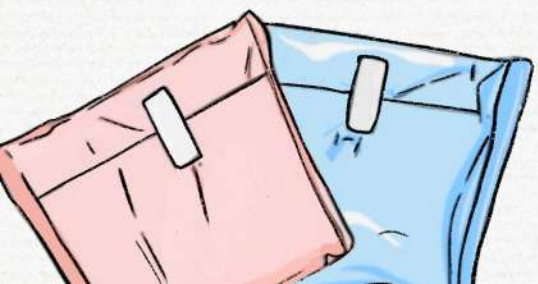
The shame surrounding menstruation is compounded by cultural misconceptions that limit women's agency during their periods. Women are often told that they cannot engage in certain activities such as bathing, exercising, eating spicy food while menstruating, reinforcing a sense of guilt for even acknowledging their bodily needs. In KP, one woman noted, "*There are many ignorant women who say that during periods, 'You shouldn't do this, you*

shouldn't do that.' The child will grow up with misconceptions." These beliefs are passed down from generation to generation, creating a restrictive environment where women feel compelled to hide their menstrual cycles out of shame and guilt

In Sindh, similar cultural taboos persist. Women are often told not to bathe during menstruation, as one woman in Badin shared: *"No, that shouldn't be done. It's said that bathing can lead to diseases."* This myth, while rooted in ignorance, becomes a form of control over women's bodies, where they are unable to care for themselves during their periods. However, in some areas of Sindh, there are signs of resistance against these misconceptions. One woman in Mirpurkhas highlighted the importance of hygiene during menstruation: *"How can a person feel fresh if they don't bathe during menstruation? If we don't stay fresh, we will get sick."* This tension between traditional beliefs and emerging awareness underscores the complex ways in which shame and guilt operate within these communities.

Climate Change and Its Impact on Menstrual Health

Climate disasters exacerbate the shame and guilt women experience around menstruation. During floods, earthquakes, and other crises, women are expected to prioritize the survival of their families, often at the expense of their own health. One woman from Swat described the impossible choice she faces: "*There are 10 other problems. But who will do the housework? Who will take care of the children? Who will take care of the husband? A woman's own health is not equal.*"



> The expectation that women must prioritize caregiving over self-care leads to feelings of guilt when they are unable to manage their own health needs during disasters.

The physical stress of climate disasters also has direct consequences on women's menstrual health. One woman from Reshun described how the floods disrupted her menstrual cycle: *"Personally, if I tell you, I had my period around July 26 when the flood came here, but it suddenly stopped, and my body completely dried up. After 2-3 months, it returned to normal."* This disruption, caused by both physical and emotional stress, illustrates how women's bodies bear the brunt of climate crises. The lack of resources during these times further compounds the problem. One participant noted, *"Their cramps have increased after the flood. Their blood pressure shot up, though they are very young... because they are under a lot of stress."*

Even when sanitary products are available, women often struggle to voice their needs in a culture that prioritizes survival over health. During the 2022 floods, one participant from Sindh observed, "*The community was more focused on food and water needs, but women were quietly asking for sanitary products.*" This silence prevents women from advocating for their own health, even in the direst circumstances.

Reproductive Control and Guilt

Shame and guilt surrounding reproductive health extend far beyond menstruation; they encompass a broader range of family planning issues

deeply rooted in patriarchal control. In many communities, women have little to no say over their reproductive choices, with these decisions often being dictated by male family members. One woman from Swat illustrated this lack of autonomy: *"We give the condoms to the women who have a husband... She takes injections. She cannot use the medicines."* (Swat) *"They [husbands] don't let their wives use them [condoms], so how can they use them themselves?"* (Badin. This loss of control over their own bodies contributes to a deep sense of guilt and helplessness, as women feel powerless in managing their reproductive health. This form of reproductive control is not only a reflection of gender inequality but also a manifestation of societal expectations that continue to perpetuate the suppression of women's agency over their own bodies.

In Sindh, the situation is similarly bleak. Cultural norms shape the way women approach family planning, and despite the availability of contraceptives, many women remain reluctant to use them due to societal pressures. The weight of social expectations means that conversations around reproductive health are often taboo, and discussing them openly can invite judgment. In one instance, sanitary products provided by NGOs were left unused, sitting in wards, because the women were either unaware of how to use them or too ashamed to ask. (Swat)

Large family sizes further strain already limited resources, particularly in regions affected by climate disasters. This unchecked population growth, exacerbated by cultural expectations to have many children, traps families in cycles of poverty. As one participant in Sindh humorously put it, *"Families usually have many children... Everyone here has a cricket team"* (Badin). While the metaphor may invoke humor, the consequences are dire. The inability to control family size, coupled with the scarcity of resources, leaves families—especially women—struggling to provide for their children in a region already grappling with the impacts of climate change.

Access to family planning resources also remains a major issue. While it was a positive trend that many WEHRDs reported using IUDs or condoms, these resources are often only available in cities, leaving women in rural areas without the necessary tools to control their reproductive health. *"We get IUDs inserted when we go to the city, and we also use condoms"* (Mirpurkhas). The difficulty of accessing these resourcehighlights the systemic barriers women face, with limited healthcare infrastructure and cultural taboos compounding the issue.

Unsafe abortions, complicated pregnancies, unattended reproductive healthcare compounded by climate-induced health crises, become another channel through which women suffer disproportionately. The absence of healthcare infrastructure, as well as societal taboos around reproductive health, leaves women without the resources they need, increasing the likelihood of fatal outcomes during and after pregnancies. "*Imagine there is a village up there. The road to Lower Chitral and Booni is five hours long. Because of landslides, the village is divided into two parts. There is a flood, and some pregnant women are on the other side,*" shared a woman from Swat, highlighting the inaccessibility to safe healthcare for women during disasters. Another woman from Dir also reaffirmed, *"There is a problem with water. MRI, CT scan, and other than that, lighting,"* indicating the

lack of medical infrastructure necessary to protect women during emergencies.

Beyond infrastructure, a major factor contributing to the current situation is the lack of comprehensive education around family planning. Many women are unaware of the various contraceptive options available to them or how to use these options effectively. The research team recounted a particularly striking instance during a focus group discussion in Swat about a health worker finding a women had misunderstood the use of condoms: "*She said she uses it actively but on her thumb*". The woman had taken a demonstration of condom use quite literally, placing the condom on her thumb, not understanding its intended use. This level of ignorance showcases the broader systemic failure in educating women about reproductive health.

Lady health workers, the first line of defence for women's health, are overworked and undertrained. Most are middle-pass, capable of providing only basic information and referrals to doctors and hospitals. Each worker is managing more than 900 families on her own and faces mistreatment from the public, who see them with suspicion, believing they are "ruining our women." This gap also extends to broader climate awareness. One respondent described the challenges faced when interacting with communities during disasters: "*People do not know what to do. When I go to a village to give a session, the women first say, 'We are poor, we don't understand.*" (Sanghar) The lack of awareness makes it difficult to implement effective disaster management or climate resilience strategies at the community level, leaving vulnerable populations unprepared.

Another participant recounted how her neighbour, a health worker, left condoms scattered around a shared staircase, completely misunderstanding their use. Children played with the condoms because the mother, lacking proper education, did not comprehend their purpose. (Swat). The situation also highlights the need for advocates to design simpler, more compassionate educational campaigns that cater to the realities on the ground. People in these communities are often starting from scratch, and education must be handled with patience and sensitivity.

The Workplace and Menstrual Silence

The stigma surrounding menstruation extends far beyond the home. In professional settings, women often feel unable to address their menstrual health needs, perpetuating a cycle of silence. During a disaster management training session, one woman shared *"During our training, I was in so much pain that I had to sit in the bathroom. The situation was uncomfortable because I couldn't tell my male supervisor about my problem."* This narrative highlights how the shame tied to menstruation inhibits women from seeking help, even in environments where their physical well-being is critical. In Swat, one woman expressed the difficulties faced: "*There are no segregated bathrooms... We don't have a separate bathroom for women*." This lack of basic infrastructure forces women to manage their menstruation in unsanitary and undignified conditions, exacerbating feelings of shame and guilt.

In Sindh, women are similarly restricted by societal norms that prevent them from openly managing their menstrual health. One woman explained, *"When boys are at home, we don't even go to the washroom in front of them."* This lack of privacy extends to professional spaces, where

women are unable to openly carry pads or tampons: *"We cannot even take our pads out of our bags."*

However, despite the overwhelming physical and emotional toll menstruation places on women, many are reluctant to take menstrual leave, fearing it would undermine their professionalism or invite ridicule. One woman from KP expressed her concern, stating, *"If 10 women are in the same place, and 5 of them cycle together, if all 5 of them take a day off, they will get a chance to make fun of us."* Thus, while it might be obvious from the data and the stories that the secrecy around menstruation is causing harm to women's lives, it does not mean women want to talk about their periods openly.It must be noted that some women valued their dignity and respect over their discomfort, so much so that some women rejected the idea of taking a menstrual leave because it amounts to announcing one is on her period to the office. The acceptance of the many needs and vulnerabilities of women during menstruation subsume under their adherence to cultural values of preserving a women's dignity. Resistance does not always come just from the fear of judgement or ridicule but out of a respect for cultural conformity as well, as noted by one participant during a conversation menstrual leave: *"First of all, it is a matter of honor and respect.* Every woman has her own respect."

In this complex web of shame, cultural expectations, and personal dignity, the silence surrounding menstruation is not only a reflection of societal barriers but also of women's own agency in navigating these deeply ingrained norms. Their resistance to discussing or seeking accommodations for menstruation, such as menstrual leave, highlights a nuanced struggle where honor and respect are often prioritized over personal comfort, illustrating how the preservation of dignity can be as important as the alleviation of physical discomfort in the context of deeply embedded cultural values.

Women's Policing of Gender Norms

In many communities in KP and Sindh, it's easy to assume that the enforcement of rigid gender norms is a male-dominated practice. However, the reality is more complex, as women themselves play significant roles in policing these norms, often reinforcing the very stereotypes they struggle against. Within households, hierarchies of age and status—such as the role of a mother-in-law—create power dynamics that perpetuate these norms. For example, the assumption that women will automatically discuss personal issues such as menstruation or family planning with each other easily is false. In fact, many younger women are hesitant to bring up such topics even among other women due to fear of judgment or retribution from older female family members. "*The first thing I asked was if they used family planning contraceptives, and they said yes, but the discussion turned to using pads. Some women admitted to being too shy to even discuss it," LHW from Swat shares her experiences of working with married young girls.* (Swat).

This form of internalized policing creates a complex web where control is not just imposed by men, but also maintained and reinforced by women themselves, perpetuating a cycle of silence and shame. The hierarchy within families often determines who has the right to speak on certain matters, with younger women being silenced or corrected when they attempt to challenge outdated norms. A striking example comes from a woman in Peshawar, who recalled how her

mother-in-law wanted her to have a child and locked her in a room with her brother-in-law, resulting in a pregnancy. The violation of her body was not just an act of male control but also a reflection of how older women, in positions of familial authority, exert pressure to conform to traditional expectations of fertility and motherhood. Thus, gendered oppression operates on multiple levels, not just between men and women, but within the female community itself, where women often serve as enforcers of the very norms that limit their own freedoms.

Complex Layers of Modesty and Power Dynamics

Modesty is deeply ingrained in cultural and religious identity in Pakistan, and even in all-women spaces, some topics are considered too sensitive or shameful to discuss. This internalization of modesty has created environments where women self-censor out of fear of breaking social taboos. A participant from Booni revealed that even in hospitals, many women avoid discussing menstruation or reproductive health issues with male doctors, indicating the depth of modesty concerns. (Booni).

However, this self-censorship does not not just occur in front of men but even among other women. Lady Health Workers mentioned being asked by mothers to tell daughters about periods in their place because the mothers were too embarrassed to talk about the topic. A participant explained how daughter found out about menstruation due to her poor health during her cycle but asserted the modesty restraints preventing discussion on the topic among mothers, daughters and sisters: "*When I was very sick, she found out about it. On the other hand, the kids also feel shy around their mothers, sisters, or anyone else. I know that there is a community health nurse in every government school who guides the kids.*" (Swat). Likewise, in our discussions, women showed hesitance in discussing their periods in the women's-only focus group discussions asserting that they were "shy in these matters." These misconceptions not only restrict their freedom but also reinforce the sense of shame associated with menstruation and endanger their health.

The Violation of Privacy and Modesty During Disasters

In disaster management, women's modesty needs are often considered secondary, if at all. Essential items like scarves or abayas are frequently overlooked in aid distribution, despite their cultural and religious significance. One woman from Peshawar described how, after a flood, her immediate reaction upon regaining consciousness was to find her abaya: "*When I regained my senses, I checked the abaya (cloak) I was wearing—thankfully—I had grabbed it in my hand*" (Peshawar). This small but poignant detail underscoreshow deeply rooted modesty is in women's sense of safety and identity.

> For many women in KP and Sindh, maintaining modesty is not a peripheral concern but a fundamental part of their well-being, even in the midst of a disaster.

However, in times of climate disasters, the cultural expectations of women's modesty are not simply ignored but also often violated, especially when aid organizations arrive with cameras and insist on capturing photographic evidence before distributing help. This not only invades women's privacy but also puts them at risk, as being photographed

without consent can have severe social repercussions. One woman from Peshawar shared, *"It is difficult even in the monsoons. People come and ask for something. Some people don't make videos. They give us something for these things. They sell it to us. They make movies. They say that we will give you a house if you will give them a picture"* (Peshawar).

These concerns extend to social media, where the rapid dissemination of images adds another layer of fear. One activist recounted her experience during a training program: *"I went to Nepal for training. A woman took my picture, and I told her not to post it on Facebook, but she did. That Facebook ID was connected to my sister, and when I returned, she told me that my picture was posted on Facebook. That woman then sent me a friend request, but I didn't accept it out of fear that she might see my pictures again. Even a small passport-size photo can create a big problem"* (Peshawar). This incident highlights how women's privacy and modesty concerns are ignored even in professional settings, where the sharing of photos without consent can result in severe personal repercussions.

Ignoring these needs not only disrespects cultural norms but also alienates women from the very aid systems designed to help them. **When aid organizations fail to consider these deeply personal and culturally embedded needs, they risk alienating the communities they aim to serve.** Modesty is not an afterthought for women in these regions; it is a priority that must be integrated into disaster management planning. Unfortunately, these concerns are often sidelined in favour of providing basic survival items like food and water, overlooking the fact that maintaining cultural and personal dignity is also a vital aspect of recovery during and after a crisis.

Conclusion: Navigating Shame and Guilt

The shame and guilt that women experience around menstruation and reproductive health are not isolated emotions; they are the result of deeply embedded cultural norms, economic barriers, and systemic neglect. These emotions shape how women interact with their own bodies, their families, and their communities, leaving them trapped in a cycle of silence and self-sacrifice.

In KP, there has been a positive trend toward teaching reproductive health in schools, with biology chapters on reproduction being included in the curriculum. Students are learning about these topics from a younger age, with one woman sharing that *"nowadays everyone knows"* because *"they read about this in biology books"* (Swat). In some schools, teachers are actively engaging both boys and girls in discussions about reproductive health, breaking long-standing taboos. One mother from KP remarked how teachers informed students about basic hygiene, such as wearing appropriate undergarments, signalling a shift towards more openness in education (Swat).

However, in Punjab and Sindh, the situation is starkly different. Teachers often avoid teaching chapters on reproduction, going so far as to staple the pages of biology books together and ensuring that students do not open them. In many cases, they repeatedly check to make sure these chapters are skipped during lessons, reinforcing the cultural taboo surrounding reproductive health.

This contrast in educational approaches mirrors the broader societal struggles women face regarding reproductive health and menstruation, tied deeply to feelings of shame and guilt. This reluctance permeates workplaces, homes, and public spaces, where women often feel the weight of societal expectations pressing down on them. While the solution isn't as simple as providing menstrual leave or reproductive education alone, it is the first crucial step in the right direction. The deeper challenge lies in reshaping societal perceptions, supporting women's health needs, and creating environments where women can openly advocate for their well-being without shame. Only through such multi-faceted efforts can the guilt and shame that women carry be alleviated, leading to a future where both their reproductive rights and personal dignity are fully recognized and respected.

Who cares for the caregivers?

Is there funding for care?

Is safety and care a basic human right of WEHRDs?

Helplessness & Vulnerability

بے بسی اور کمزوری


The water is so dirty that its not drinkable & causing diseases Like rashes & diarheal
سپتال

Helplessness and Vulnerability

In the mountainous terrain of KP and the flood-prone coastal regions of Sindh, the women at the frontlines of climate disasters are left to shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden. With climate change increasing the frequency and intensity of floods, landslides, and heatwaves, women eco defenders are not just facing the elements—they are contending with deep-rooted systemic failures that amplify their vulnerabilities. Whether navigating the aftermath of a natural disaster or fighting to secure basic resources, women eco-defenders find themselves helpless against a system that has long neglected their needs.

The Weight of Displacement

This emotional toll is intensified by the recurring reality of displacement. Women from Booni frequently spoke about the constant fear and instability that comes with having to relocate due to floods. *"Whenever a flood comes, we leave. This whole area of KP Booni is a red zone, so we move to the other side of the river,"* one woman shared. The act of uprooting families every time a disaster strikes leaves communities in a perpetual state of anxiety, never feeling truly secure in their homes. The situation is no better in Sindh, where families, displaced by floods, are forced into makeshift camps with little hope of rebuilding their homes. *"We still don't know if their homes are rebuilt. They are not built yet,"* lamented one participant from Sanghar.Temporary shelters lack gender-specific solutions, further endangering women and girls. ***"We set up tents, but they are not enough. If there's a separate tent for girls or specific needs, that would help, but it doesn't happen,"*** a woman from Booni highlighted. This oversight underscores the failure to account for women's unique vulnerabilities during displacement. Women across KP and Sindh carry an overwhelming emotional burden in the aftermath of natural disasters. They are not just responsible for their own survival but also for managing their households and caring for their families. As one woman expressed, *"All the household chores fall on women... they lose their mental balance. This isn't just from floods, but other disasters too."* (Booni). The stress of managing domestic responsibilities amidst such crises compounds the psychological toll women endure, often with little to no external support.

And while it might be assumed the urban centres would fare better in infrastructure and disaster response services than the mountainous Chitral or the Coastal Badin, it does not not seem to be the case: *"You might not know the issues in Sindh Karachi after the rains... Our lives become miserable with even a small amount of rain; the power goes out."* The line between support and fending for oneself seems to be financial rather than geographical.

> Helplessness engulfs all those who do not have financial stability, as only the wealthiest are able to secure their homes and access resources in times of crises.

Breakdown of Healthcare Systems

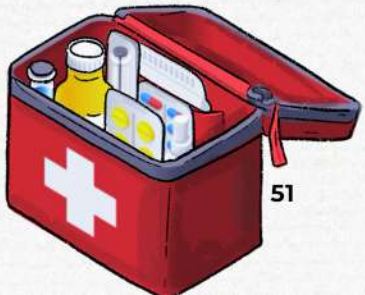
A critical issue highlighted by participants is the lack of awareness around health and climate-related problems, especially for women. This knowledge gap is pervasive across rural communities, particularly in Sindh. One participant shared a story about a woman she employs, saying, "*The*

girl who works in my house, I give her ORS. She asks why she feels this way, and I say it's because of sweating. So, women don't know about their health; there could be many internal problems" (Karachi). This lack of basic health knowledge leaves many women vulnerable to preventable illnesses, especially during extreme weather events like heatwaves.

Furthermore, the physical infrastructure—or lack thereof—not only makes everyday life more difficult but also perpetuates a cycle of health risks. In Sindh, for example, stagnant water left behind after floods creates fertile ground for diseases like diarrhea and skin infections, disproportionately affecting women and children. *"There are also scorpions and other insects. We stayed in the open for two months because the houses were full of mud. This area is exposed with no shade, and the direct sunlight caused a lot of damage."* (Chuinj). Without access to clean water or proper sanitation, these health issues become chronic, adding to the cycle of vulnerability. Similarly, in KP, landslides and washed-out roads further isolate communities, cutting off access to even the most basic healthcare. A woman from Booni highlighted this challenge: *"First, our water system is cut off. We have to go far to get water."* This lack of basic infrastructure puts an additional strain on women, who are already tasked with managing the household and providing for their families in times of crisis.

The limitations of healthcare are evident across KP. In Peshawar, hospitals struggle with shortages of beds, leaving patients on the floor during times of high need. *"Last night I had 15 patients, we had to place two of them on the floor without mattresses because we don't have more than 13 beds,"* recounts a healthcare worker. This kind of resource scarcity is not limited to beds. In critical moments, even the most basic medical supplies are lacking. *"There are no blood banks in our hospital,"* shares another worker from Peshawar. Without these essential resources, communities are left vulnerable, unable to respond to the scale of the crisis unfolding around them. Women in Badin noted in likewise exacerbation: *"There should be a good gynaecologist here. There should be 2 or 3 hospitals, but there's only one. It's very crowded, and the hygiene conditions are very poor."*

The women in Swat face similar challenges, compounded by the region's isolation and frequent landslides that cut off entire communities. *"Imagine there is a village up there. The road to Lower Chitral and Bhoomi is 5 hours long. Because of landsliding, the village is divided into two parts. There is a flood. Some pregnant women are on the other side,"* one woman recalls, underscoring the dangerous intersections of displacement and the lack of access to healthcare. When roads are blocked or washed away, even basic medical care becomes inaccessible, leading to tragedies like the disruption of childbirth. *"During the flood of 2015, her delivery took place at home. Because of that, she couldn't have any help nearby. Therefore, her delivery was at home, and now she cannot have another baby because her organ was disrupted due to lack of proper treatment,"* a woman shares, exposing the life-threatening implications of inadequate healthcare infrastructure during climate disasters. Even outside of the disasters, there is no caesarean facility in Upper Chitral and women from surrounding 15 to 20 villages have to travel to Chitral city, with many dying on the way.



In Sindh, the experience is just as harrowing. One woman from Sindh Mirpurkhas describes the chaotic and life-threatening journey of a pregnant relative: "*During the rains, my pregnant daughter-in-law was dragged through the water to the hospital.*" Likewise in Badin, a CSO activist notes on the dismal situation: *"The condition of the civil hospitals is very bad. Now, we are sitting here, and the hospital is nearby, but there are small villages far away that don't get access."*

In both regions, the lack of proper infrastructure, inadequate medical facilities, and limited access to basic services during floods make displacement even more devastating. Blocked roads and destroyed homes are recurring challenges: *"The whole system of life gets disrupted"* (Sanghar).

Infrastructural Gaps and Their Devastating Consequences

In both KP and Sindh, the inadequacies in infrastructure and disaster preparedness are glaringly evident, with mobility being a particularly significant issue for remote communities. One woman from Charsadda encapsulated this when she stated, *"The main issue was mobility. Access to doctors and aid is not sufficient."* In regions like Chitral,when roads are blocked or washed away, women are not only cut off from essential services like healthcare but are also forced into isolation. This isolation becomes a compounding factor that exacerbates their vulnerability, particularly during disasters when rapid access to services is a matter of life and death.

The inadequacies in basic infrastructure—whether protective barriers or emergency shelters—leave women and their families constantly exposed to the ravages of natural disasters. In KP's Booni, a woman lamented, *"We don't have good quality protective walls, and there isn't an area built yet where, if a flood comes, we can go."* In a situation where shelter is already hard to access, women shared their frustration with relief organizations being quick to take back the tents after they assume the situation has stabilized and emphasizes that that tents are a safe space which need to be a permanent fixture in these repetitive cycles of flooding: *"Tents should be permanent because when problems start again, having them in advance would allow us to make arrangements and use them as needed."* (Chuinj).

After the disaster passes, people are expected to clean up after floods and mitigate damage without any external support. "*There's no basic management here; when a flood happens, people regret it. They clean their fields themselves without any help,*" shared one participant (Booni). In Sindh, people are similarly left to manage recovery efforts without institutional support. One woman from Badin explained, "*We've made many appeals, but no action has been taken. We handle everything ourselves, like removing water from homes with machines*" (Badin).

Despite the urgent needs of communities, many government programs and NGOs have failed to adequately support those affected by climate disasters. Corruption and the mishandling of aid during disaster relief efforts are recurring issues that leave many vulnerable families without the resources they desperately need. *"Some people got shelters, but those without homes did not even get tents. There is a problem in relief distribution, and they feel that corruption has occurred*," shared a participant from

Miragram. In some cases, participants reported misconduct, such as missing or misappropriated rations during flood relief efforts. "*We made the list, and after two days, we asked them where the rations were. They said the rations had been received, but nothing was distributed"(*Sanghar). These reports of corruption and inefficiency undermine the ability of relief efforts to provide meaningful help during crises.

In the absence of structured disaster response plans, NGOs and local relief organizations often step in. However, their operations are hampered by bureaucratic processes and resource constraints. One participant from Umerkot noted, *"During emergencies, we work with limited resources. NGOs don't act without data. There's an assessment process, and often we have to skip some villages because we don't have enough supplies"*(Umerkot). The random distribution of aid, determined by logistical and resource limitations, leaves entire villages without necessary relief, leaving behind a sense of helplessness.

The government and local authorities largely remain absent during crises: *"If we talk about measures, especially in the context of climate and SRHR, we don't have any funding. Whether it's NDMA (National Disaster Management Authority) or PDMA (Provincial Disaster Management Authority), there are outdated tents, and when floods happen, the resources are far from enough."* (Umerkott).The failure of government agencies to respond effectively to these disasters only deepens the sense of helplessness. As one woman from Upper Dir shared, *"We didn't get the right support... We contacted all the Assistant Commissioners and District Commissioners in Upper Dir... but no one answered."*

The lack of financial stability exacerbates these issues, with survival largely dependent on a family's economic standing. *"Only those are safe, whose homes and fields are good, and who have money,"* one woman from Sindh observed, highlighting the stark inequalities that determine who can access resources during a crisis (Badin). Likewise, in KP, as well, when people are asked if the local government helps them in any way, *"No, only if you have a strong reference only then."* (Swat). The unequal distribution of aid not only deprives families of basic necessities but also fosters a sense of injustice and mistrust toward governmental and non-governmental organizations. However, without the required wealth or social status, people are left to face the wrath of the water alone.

Systemic Failures and Community Burden

In the mountainous regions of KP and the coastal areas of Sindh, climate-induced disasters like floods and landslides are recurrent events that expose the inadequacies of infrastructure and preparedness systems. Roads often become blocked by landslides, isolating communities and cutting them off from essential services for days. *"The main issue was mobility. Access to doctors and aid is not sufficient,"* shared one woman from Charsadda, highlighting the dire situation. With evacuation routes leading uphill during floods or landslides, the physical terrain itself exacerbates the challenges women face as they struggle to protect their families.

Local volunteer networks, though crucial, are insufficient to address the scope of these crises. In KP, where floods give a mere 30-minute warning, volunteers must rush to mitigate damage. *"When the rainy season starts, they give alerts, and*

there is a network of volunteers... They have 30 minutes to mitigate," explained one participant from Brep. One woman pointed out, *"If someone is connected to social media, they know about it. Otherwise... they don't have any information about the rain"* (Badin). This lack of communication infrastructure leaves rural areas particularly vulnerable to sudden climate events. However, the reliance on such local efforts and informal media channels is a reflection of the larger institutional failure failure—the absence of formal disaster preparedness systems that could provide sustained, adequate relief. Women, in particular, bear the brunt of this void, as they are left to manage both household duties and community needs with little outside help.

The lack of institutional response becomes even more apparent in the accounts of women who work as front-line responders. These women not only face the trauma of the disaster but also endure the pressure of managing relief efforts with minimal support. As one participant reflected, "*During the floods in 2022 or earlier in 2011, our local staff was under immense pressure and workload. Due to the lack of mental health support, we were affected ourselves"* (Umerkot). This underscores the cyclical nature of trauma in disaster-hit regions, where both the affected and the responders suffer from the strain of an unsupportive system.

In the face of such overwhelming challenges, women do what they can, but their efforts often feel insufficient. As one woman poignantly admitted, *"Sometimes, despite all efforts, the work is not sustainable... we do what we can, but it's not enough."* The absence of institutional support means that the collective resilience of women is the glue that holds their communities together. Yet, this resilience is fragile, constantly threatened by the next flood, the next disaster. (Booni).

Water Scarcity and Sanitation Crisis

One of the most pressing challenges women face during climate disasters is the collapse of water and sanitation systems, which forces women into perilous situations. One woman described facing life-threatening conditions just to collect water from the river amidst floods: *"At 3 PM, we all went to the river to collect water. When floods hit again, people were stuck in the river. The path was flooded, and people had to pull each other out" (Reshun).*

Beyond the immediate physical danger, the lack of clean water results in long-term health risks: *"The water was so dirty that it wasn't drinkable... But it still caused many diseases, like diarrhea" (Reshun).* The burden of dealing with these health impacts, especially in households, falls primarily on women, who must care for sick family members while also securing basic resources. This situation is particularly dire for pregnant women, who already face inadequate healthcare services, as noted in Badin: *"All the work is being done. There are no services here, no emergency services for pregnant women"*

Sanitation systems are often the first to collapse in the wake of climate disasters, leaving women in unsanitary and degrading conditions. While men can relieve themselves across the road, women need private, hygienic spaces to defecate and to manage their menstruation. Furthermore, the water to clean themselves needs to be clean to avoid infections or other health complications, especially for those who are menstruating or pregnant. The lack of such facilities forces women into unsafe

and undignified practices, increasing their vulnerability to illness and adding to the emotional strain of surviving in disaster-hit regions. In Reshun, one woman shared, *“We used nearby houses for bathrooms, but if there was no water, we had to go to the river to collect it and then use it for washing and cooking”*. Likewise, in Sindh, the situation is similarly dire. Women from Sanghar mentioned how they had to walk long distances just to access a bathroom: *"There are no bathrooms there; you have to go far, it takes two hours".*

In temporary shelters set up after disasters, the absence of basic sanitation facilities is a glaring example of how women’s needs are consistently overlooked by the government and authorities. Despite their critical role in disaster recovery, women are forced into unsanitary conditions that heighten health risks, particularly for those managing menstruation or caring for children. Overcrowded shelters during climate disasters, such as those with only 15 bathrooms shared by four families in Mirpurkhas or where 200-300 people rely on just 2-3 washrooms in Badin, create serious health risks for women and children, especially as girls often report walking long distances to access toilets, worsening vulnerabilities during menstruation and pregnancy. Contaminated water further exacerbates issues, leading to diseases like diarrhea: *“Medical care for children is not proper... when they drink unfiltered water, they get stomach-aches and vomiting" (Reshun).* This neglect reflects the broader patriarchal structures at play, where male-centric approaches to disaster management fail to prioritize women's hygiene, safety, and dignity: *"We stayed in those tents, but they were in an open area with no washrooms or services,"* recounted a woman from Chuinj.

Such conditions are particularly detrimental for women managing menstrual hygiene, as inadequatefacilities increase their vulnerability to infections such as urinary tract infections (UTIs), bacterial vaginosis, and reproductive tract infections. Furthermore, the psychological stress of displacement and inadequate infrastructure compounds physical ailments, with one woman explaining, *"They feel very lethargic, and every month they experience vomiting and physical weakness. It might be due to stress" (Miragram).* However, the poor state of healthcare services seems to be a recurring issue across KP and Sindh. These systemic failures leave entire communities exposed to preventable diseases.

These challenges are not just logistical but are deeply tied to structural inequalities that leave women disproportionately affected by disasters. The physical and emotional toll of navigating these crises without adequate support leaves women vulnerable to both short-term and long-term health risks.

Conclusion: Helplessness as a Reflection of Systemic Failure

Women in disaster-hit areas of KP and Sindh find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle. Despite their best efforts, they are continually faced with the same obstacles: poor infrastructure, lack of mobility, inadequate healthcare, and the absence of formal disaster preparedness systems. Their resilience, while admirable, is constantly tested, and the systemic failures that exacerbate their struggles go unaddressed. The narratives of helplessness and vulnerability from the women of KP and Sindh reflect more than just personal experiences; they expose the deep systemic failures that leave these women and their communities

abandoned in the face of disaster.

Whether it's the lack of clean water, the absence of healthcare, or the unchecked rise in gender-based violence, the stories of these women reveal a profound and ongoing struggle for agency in a world that constantly undermines their efforts. You should not need a direct reference to the Assistant Commissioner to access basic crisis support. From Booni to Sanghar to Mirpurkhas, women are left to bear the brunt of climate disasters on their own, managing households, health crises, and displacement with little support from those in power.

> "The weight of **Survival** rests heavily on their shoulders, making their helplessness both a personal and collective cry for systemic change. But these women are not passively waiting for their cries to be **Heard**

In Upper Chitral, to overcome failing communication channels, women would pass information and critical basic resources such as clothes, pads and medicine through local bus drivers traveling between areas on their daily routes. This informal network of community ingenuity developed a regular, effective and economical communication and delivery system proving the mettle and resilient spirit of WEHRDs.

Let's pause again to perform a small grounding exercise to bring yourself back to your body-mind.

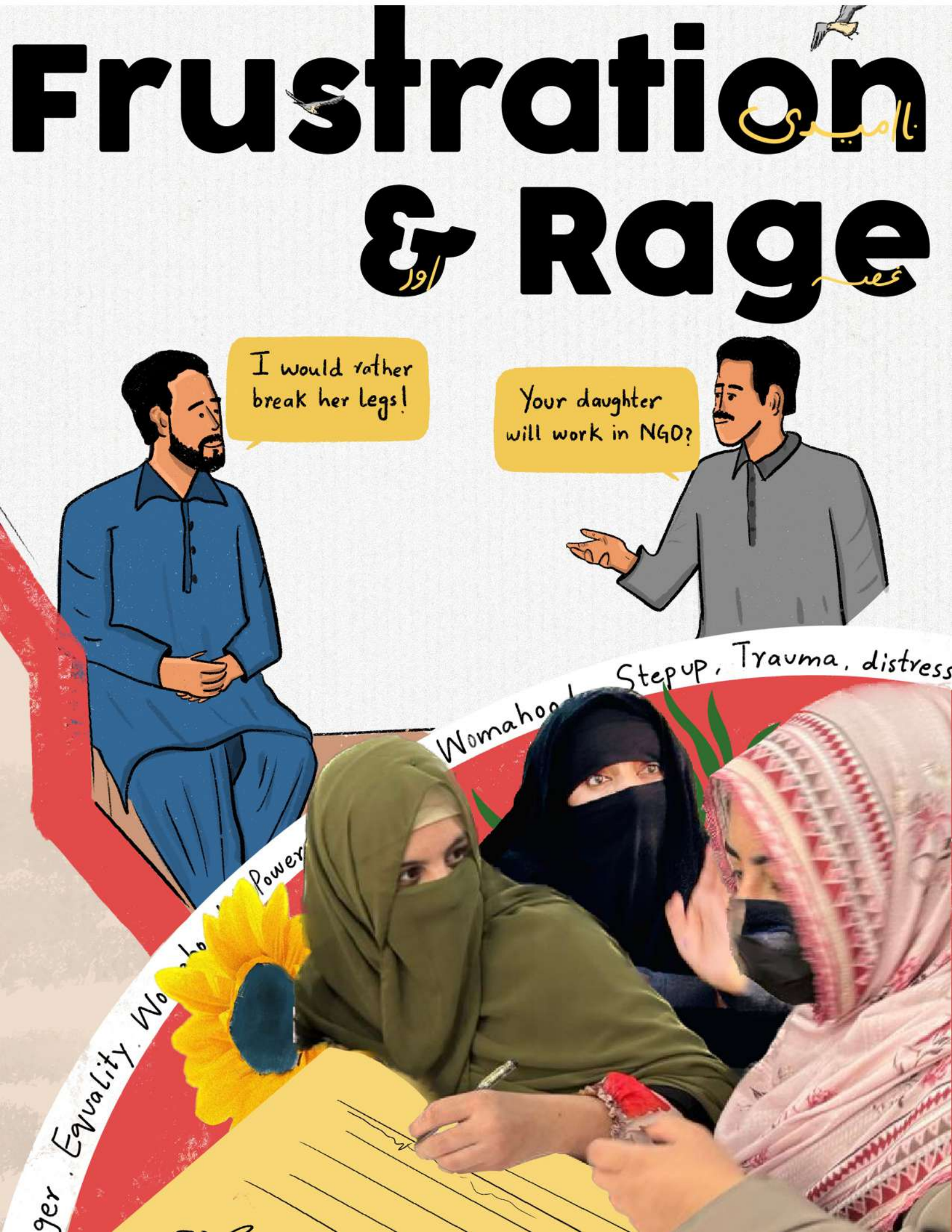
Find things you can touch

and focus on their texture

(example: cloth, mobile or chair)

Frustration & Rage

ناامیدی اور غصہ




I wish we had more women in Rescue 112. People mock me but I still work....
Women Signup for Rescue 112 but they dont showup!
RESCUE

Frustration, Suffocation and Rage

Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) not only face the dangers posed by climate change but are also trapped in suffocating webs of patriarchy, societal control, and systemic violence. While their work is crucial to protecting communities from environmental disasters, it is fraught with personal and professional challenges that undermine their autonomy and drain their emotional and physical strength. The stories they share are filled with pain, harassment, and overwhelming responsibility, making their already difficult work almost unbearable.

Disaster Relief: Disappointing and Enraging

In KP's Booni region, where climate disasters have uprooted lives repeatedly, women feel disillusioned by the endless cycle of destruction and inadequate response. *"Why are we still asking for the same things—walls, protection, safety? It's always the same conversation, and nothing changes,"* one woman from Booni lamented. Despite years of devastation, the focus remains on temporary relief, with little effort to build lasting solutions. ***"They give us buckets and blankets, but what we need are sustainable solutions. Why aren't they listening to what we really need?"*** she added, voicing the collective frustration of women left to rebuild their lives without real support.

This sentiment echoes loudly in Sindh, where women also find themselves sidelined during disasters. Relief efforts often miss the mark, leaving them to struggle with unmet needs. *"During floods, when we distribute food, we might have to skip one village to support another, which is deeply frustrating,"* explained an activist from Umerkot.

Women are exhausted from being forced to rely on flawed systems that don't serve them properly. *"The needs of the community may differ from what we bring. During the 2022 flood, donors were forcing us to include certain items in the distribution, but the community said they didn't need them,"* another activist from Umerkott pointed out, highlighting the disconnect between what is provided and what is actually needed.

They see relief efforts arrive, but often mismanaged or not distributed to the people who need them most. *"The tents and blankets that arrived didn't reach the people properly. The relief is never used properly,"* a local government official observed. Even when aid is available, it doesn't address the deeper needs of the community, leaving them in a perpetual state of recovery without any real progress. Another woman captured this sense of despair, saying, *"Everything is destroyed by the floods, and nothing gets better. We do all the work, and still, we are the ones left behind."*

In both KP and Sindh, women express anger at being ignored and left to carry the heaviest burdens without acknowledgement or help. They have been asking for better infrastructure and resources for years, but their pleas continue to fall on deaf ears. "*We've made many appeals, but no action has been taken. We handle everything ourselves,"* said a woman from Badin, reflecting the frustration shared by many across disaster-prone regions.

When asked if any community-level flood response plans were in place, one

participant admitted, *"People need guidance. No one knows what to do." (Badin).* The absence of governmental or organizational support further intensifies this uncertainty, leaving communities to fend for themselves during crises, often at great personal cost.

Mental Health Crisis: Ignored

For WEHRDs, the emotional and psychological burden they carry is heavy, yet they have few ways to express or resolve their trauma. One participant mentioned the toll it takes on those involved in climate journalism, saying, *"It takes a toll on our mental health. This is something affecting all of us, and it's out of our control" (Karachi).* The lack of structured mental health support in disaster-stricken areas like Booni leaves communities, especially women, with few resources to cope with the psychological toll of repeated climate-induced traumas. One WEHRD noted, *"There are many people who are in constant trauma and live under the threat of violence, but they have no outlet."* This suffocation—feeling trapped not just by societal expectations but by the limitations of mental health services—exacerbates their emotional exhaustion. One particularly harrowing case involved a young girl being blackmailed with intimate photos, which led to suicidal thoughts. "*A girl asked for help as she was suicidal and was being blackmailed with her pictures,*" said one WEHRD, highlighting the intersection of mental health struggles with societal pressures. While some interventions exist, they are insufficient. *"There is a psychologist at BMC, but there is no one-on-one system in place. SRSP had a psychiatrist who conducted sessions with students last year, but it didn't continue,"* explained one teacher from Booni, illustrating the fragmented and inconsistent nature of mental health services in these regions. *"They transfer patients to other districts or refer them to psychologists" (Booni).* **These lapses in mental health infrastructure compound the stress women face as they carry the emotional burdens of their families and communities without adequate mediums for support.**

Mental health care is deeply stigmatized, and many women are reluctant to seek help due to cultural taboos around psychological illness. Compounding this issue is the lack of support in the workplace for women experiencing mental health issues. One woman expressed frustration about being denied time off to address her mental health, sharing: *"I have a balance of leave. And I am not getting a leave. The D.C. is saying that the election is coming. You can also get a duty in the election."* Likewise in Sindh, one activist from Umerkott notes: *"there's no concept of paternal leave here, right? In our organization, it's there, but no one uses it. We have 10 days, but we mostly take just three".*Another woman eco defender from Umerkot expressed the same frustrations: *"We work in trauma situations, and we ourselves are at risk during such disasters. These organizations need to be sensitized. They need to give us space, enhance our capacity, appreciate and acknowledge our work."*

WEHRDs in Chitral highlighted a crucial component of holistic well-being by pointing out that the lack of opportunities for growth and employment are also contributing to the mental health challenges of women in Chitral: "*In Chitral, women are highly educated and have more knowledge than men in the education field, but they have more psychological problems because they don't have access to opportunities."* In Booni, the link between mental health and livelihood is drawn even more succinctly: *"We need help with training*

and providing opportunities for our girls. Initially, there was a business started by a woman, but there was resistance from the community. Over time, things improved. We want opportunities for our girls to have chances to work and train. There are many suicides happening. Previously, we had goats and buffaloes, and people used to graze them. With education, people moved away, and there are no jobs in the government or private sector here." Thus the mental health infrastructure cannot be viewed through only a pathological lens of disease and cure. Rather, when the basic needs of a human being of shelter, safety, nutrition, livelihood and community are not met in a balanced manner, a mental health crisis becomes inevitable. Particularly in disaster situations, the recovery efforts utilize men for their physical strength and women are kept out of the field due to socio-cultural norms. *"As a female, we have not worked in the flood ourselves, because there are the same barriers here, societal issues,"* explains one WEHRD from KP.

When disaster recovery organizations are unable to break the gender silos during the relief efforts, women become the perpetual victims and the empowerment of the male breadwinner through livelihood generation is prioritized instead.

Despite being on the frontlines, women's ability to participate in life-saving efforts is limited by cultural norms that keep them from taking on more active roles. *"The biggest challenge with us is that there are no girls with us [in Rescue 1122]. Why will her family allow this?"* she added, reflecting on the restrictions that prevent women from contributing further rescue efforts during times of crisis. These binary notions also invisibilize the relief women provide during disasters as domestic duties or feminine work of no actual value.

Family and Societal Control: The Weight of Tradition

Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) in both KP and Sindh are uniquely positioned at the intersection of their professional duties and the restrictive gender norms imposed by their families and communities. While their work is critical in protecting communities from the growing threat of climate change, it comes with a heavy personal toll, as societal expectations around gender roles continue to exert control over their lives.

For many WEHRDs, the most immediate and powerful force limiting their autonomy comes from within their own families. In regions where traditional gender roles dominate, women are often seen as bearers of family honor, and any deviation from expected behavior is met with resistance or punishment. A woman from Sindh ,Badin ,described how her own family members sought to control her movements: *"Our own family members will beat us. They say, 'Why did you go out?' So, we have to ignore them and go to work."* This struggle to balance professional aspirations with familial expectations is common, particularly in KP, where one woman recounted her father's disapproval of her job at an NGO: *"My father said, 'Don't do this job. I can't tell people that my daughter works at IFC (an NGO). If you become a lecturer or a doctor, I can say that, but I can't say she works in that organization because of the social environment.'"* This pressure to conform to socially respectable feminine professions often leaves women feeling suffocated by the expectations of their families, restricting their ability to freely choose their careers.

The systemic neglect they face is mirrored by the societal restrictions on their mobility and autonomy. Women are constantly reminded that their place is not in leadership or public spaces. "*We don't get any support from our family members. They should appreciate us, but they don't. Then, in society, if we do any physical activity like plantation work... the men there really gave me a hard time,saying, 'You are ruining our women,'* shared a woman from Peshawar, describing the societal backlash she faced for simply participating in community rebuilding efforts. Women feel particularly suffocated by societal expectations, as a WEHRD from Sindh, Badin, notes: "*The biggest issue is that women are not listened to. No one listens to us here, and men are considered superior. If a woman is listened to with care, 80% of her stress will go away*" (Badin).

Climate disasters amplify patriarchal control in various insidious ways. For example, one woman recounted how men take advantage of the chaos that follows natural disasters to tighten their grip on women's mobility and choices. *"Here the agency is compromised in a way that women are not allowed to roam freely and go out on their own,"* she shared. With roads cut off and infrastructure broken, the little autonomy women may have had is stripped away entirely. The restrictions imposed on them are not only geographical but social, placing them in a situation where their very freedom of movement is curtailed by the family and society under the pretext of protection.

The interplay between climate disasters and forced marriages also emerges as a troubling trend. The increase in poverty caused by floods and landslides often pushes families to marry off their daughters earlier, using marriage as a way to reduce the financial burden on the household. A harrowing example of this was shared by a woman from Charsadda: *"She was married when she was just 12. Her father wasn't around much, and he pressured her to marry early. Her in-laws made her work all day long. She was only 14 years old."* Early marriages are not just about cultural norms but are also economic survival strategies that come at the expense of young girls' futures. This family-driven control over women's choices extends beyond the workplace. In many cases, women are expected to manage domestic responsibilities in addition to their professional duties, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion. One WEHRD from Dir highlighted this double burden: *"We work in the morning, and when we come in the evening, we cannot rest; we have to do double shifts first in the office and then home."* This unequal division of labor reflects broader societal expectations that place the majority of domestic work on women, even when they are already contributing financially to the household. Education and professional work, while valued by some families, is still seen as secondary to traditional roles in many areas. "*In my family they say teachers and doctors are okay, not knowing doctors have a night shift but for police and lawyers, they do not consider them a female profession,*"one woman explained. These patriachal expectations not only limit women's ability to rest but also reinforce the notion that their primary role remains within the domestic sphere, regardless of their professional commitments.

Activists also shared stories of women's health becoming another site of violence and control: *"If there is an emergency, an accident, which normally happens in accidents, there are males, but along with the males, in the local transport, or in our cars, there are also female victims. So,*

their first demand is that the boys will not touch them." With the rampant perception that "*Women sign up in Rescue 1122. And then they don't come. And they don't work",* and the reality of mere 5 women rescue workers in the whole of Swat who also face mobility issues at night, the lack of access to proper medical care exacerbates the risks women face, especially during pregnancies. *"So many girls died because of excessive bleeding. Now this is obviously a problem of GBV. There is also a problem of safety as well as health and hygiene," a woman from Swat revealed.*

Beyond family control, societal norms surrounding women's mobility and appearance further limit their freedom and reinforce patriarchal power structures. Cultural norms often dictate how women should dress and behave in public, with deviations from these norms being met with shaming or threats. One woman from the research team shared a harrowing experience of public shaming: *"An old man came from behind and said, 'You're doing something sinful, haram. I was literally scared,'"* after seeing her wearing jeans and a shirt. This incident highlights how women's appearance and mobility are tightly controlled by societal expectations, creating an environment where women are constantly scrutinized and policed.

In regions like Chitral, gender-based restrictions extend into women's financial autonomy as well. Islamic law grants women the right to inherit property, but cultural practices often prevent them from claiming their inheritance. A local teacher noted, "*Very few people give property to daughters willingly,*" reflecting how deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to control women's financial agency. Interestingly, many women noted feelings of shame and guilt for asking for their inheritance and felt it to be right and a matter of pride and respect to waive it to their brothers. This deep-seated gender-discrimination ensures that women simply don't ask for their inheritance and even when women try to assert their rights, they are often discouraged by family members or society, reinforcing cycles of dependence and financial insecurity.

The financial control extends from inheritance and men's earnings to the income made by women being taken away by men. *"When you talk about empowerment, it means you should have the right to make decisions and control what you earn. But here, even when women run shops, the money still goes to men,"* remarked another participant from Booni. These norms not only limit women's economic independence but also reflect broader societal systems that prioritize male authority in matters of wealth and inheritance. Furthermore, societal expectations often discourage women from asserting themselves, especially when it comes to legal or financial disputes. One woman described: *"It's usually the husband of the daughter who takes legal action for oppression and such matters"* (Booni). This points to the limited autonomy women have in making legal decisions without a male guardian, further highlighting the need for greater awareness of rights, legal empowerment and support systems to help women realise and exercise their rights.

The suppression of women's voices extends beyond the home and into public life. Cultural and familial control over women's behavior ensures that their needs and perspectives are often ignored, particularly during times of crisis like floods. When WEHRDs conducted relief work during the 2022 floods, they found

that women rarely spoke about their own needs, prioritizing the needs of their families instead. "*They would only say what their children or animals needed. They never talked about their own needs,*" recounted one member of the research team from Dastak Foundation. This reflects a broader societal expectation that women should prioritize the well-being of others over their own, even in life-threatening situations. Many women had a hard time answering questions which were directed at their well-being as individuals. Women tended to see themselves as an extension of the family with their individual self needing to be subsumed for the greater good.

However, resistance exists everywhere there is oppression and some women are beginning to push back against these cultural norms. One woman recounted a conversation with her uncle: *"He said I have sent my daughter to a religious seminary but will never send her to a college, and I replied that when she needs a female doctor, then what?"* (Charsadda). Likewise, a woman from Peshawar enraged, highlighted how gender inequality is embedded in cultural practices, such as at weddings, where food is served to men first: *"At weddings, food is served to the men first, and only afterward to the women. In households, sons are often served food first. The leg piece is especially reserved for the son."* She was mad and her rage was the resistance against these symbolic acts of everyday inequality which reinforce the idea that men are more deserving of resources and care, reflecting how gender inequality permeates even the most mundane aspects of life. This challenge to patriarchal thinking reflects a growing awareness among women of the need to assert their rights and demand access to education and professional opportunities.

The Plague of Gender-Based Violence

Women, whether as eco-defenders or civilians, are not only battling climate crises but also facing daily harassment as they try to perform their jobs or manage their household affairs. Whether during disaster relief efforts or in their day-to-day travels, they are regularly subjected to inappropriate behavior from men. One woman recounted her experience while traveling with a group of women: *"I was traveling with a caravan of women. One man got into the car, and he started making inappropriate advances. I stopped him... I was furious and wanted to make it clear that this behavior was unacceptable."* Even in moments of crisis, like flood relief efforts, women face harassment, making an already traumatic situation worse. One activist shared a disturbing memory: *"Women face harassment during flood reliefs. And I witnessed a man harassing women and being involved in bad touch."* This predatory behavior, even in moments of community need, reflects the pervasive nature of harassment and how it follows women into every sphere of their lives. The impunity with which these men harass women in Pakistan has horrifyingly normalized such violence so much so that a WEHRD from Peshawar narrates being touched inappropriately by a child on a bus: *"When I was traveling on the bus, a child behind me was touching me, and I was being patient, thinking maybe it will stop."*

This harassment is not limited to moments of crisis; it is a daily reality for many WEHRDs and women in both KP and Sindh. As one woman from Sindh lamented, "*The men leave on their bikes, but when we have to go, we face harassment. Tell me, where is a woman safe?*" This ongoing threat of violence and harassment demonstrates the insidious

pervasiveness of structural gender inequality, where even those women who work to protect their communities are not protected themselves. This frustration is not just isolated to rural areas. Women in urban spaces, too, face harassment and restrictions that prevent them from fully engaging in their work. *"I was inside the shop, and the shopkeeper was literally masturbating in front of us. It was really traumatic for me. My sister was with me, but still, that person literally didn't care,"* recounted one woman from Peshawar. This casual dismissal of women's safety and dignity is a stark reminder of the societal indifference that fuels their rage. The societal acceptance of harassment and violence against women reflects the broader patriarchal structures that devalue women's lives and limit their participation in public life.

Perhaps the most suffocating reality for WEHRDs is this constant threat of violence that looms over their lives. Honor killings remain a prevalent threat in KP, with women often bearing the brunt of their families' obsession with control. One woman recalled a chilling story: *"Let me tell you an incident of Torkhow. At dismissal, a boy and girl were walking together coincidentally, and when the brother saw his sister, he killed her and later the parents refused to acknowledge that they ever had a daughter."* The brutality with which women are punished for perceived transgressions underscores the perilous nature of their lives, where their autonomy is constantly at risk of being violently taken away. However, in some cases, honor prevails gender norms and boys are also killed if caught embroiled in an activity deemed dishonorable: *"This also happens if a boy talks to a girl on the phone, they kill him too."* However, due to subjective nature of deciding on honor, ulterior motives can be pushed through the honor agenda, creating an environment of fear, particularly for WEHRDs who already being accused of "ruining our women" for trespassing on gender norms: *"Yes, it's in the name of honor. Last week, my cousin was shot over a land dispute, and he died on the spot."*

In some cases, even institutional protections, like shelters, are not enough to keep women safe. One WEHRD from Dir recounted how families manipulate the system to exact revenge on their daughters: *"They take them out on bail or through the permission of District Commissioner and poison them, saying it was an appendix issue or heart attack or something else."* This story highlights the devastating reality that even when women seek protection, they are not truly safe. In Sanghar, Sindh, activists noted: *"Cases of domestic violence have increased a lot. We have received many reports that men are venting their anger on women."* Furthermore, a direct link to climate change was drawn when asked if after the rain, when the displaced returned to their homes, was there any fighting or disagreements between husband and wife because of the lack of food or other things? Woman from Mirpurkhas replied vehemently: *"Yes, there were a lot of arguments, especially about food,"* drawing a clear relationship between gender-based violence and climate crisis. The crisis situation also creates opportunities for predators to harm women in need: *"During floods, they do not even listen to instructions... a woman was raped and murdered while being lured in for money"* (Charsadda). Gender-based violence, at home, workplace and public spaces, is exacerbated during emergencies, as women become more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and the traditional social, familiar and legal structures of protection break down.

This violence extends into every aspect of activist women's lives, from public spaces to their own homes. One woman from Peshawar recounted how her child was subjected to sexual violence by her own father: *"A 3-year-old girl, her vagina was swelling. Who did this? Her father."* While she expressed horror at the man's actions and despair at the lack of avenues to justice, she also blamed herself for leaving her alone with him for her work. This internalization of blame, common among WEHRDs, reveals the weight of societal expectations placed on women—not only to be activists and protectors of the environment but to also fulfill the demanding roles of caretakers and homemakers without support. Women, even when striving for justice in the public sphere, are forced to navigate cycles of abuse and guilt within their personal lives. Despite their courage, these women are trapped in a society that continues to blame them for their victimization, illustrating the urgent need for comprehensive legal, social, and psychological support systems that acknowledge and address the multifaceted oppression they endure.

In the context of climate disasters, it's not only women who face increased marginalization. Transgender individuals are often excluded from relief efforts, further complicating their already precarious existence. One journalist covering marginalized communities noted that transgenders were particularly vulnerable during the floods, as they were *"turned away by big names who refuse to help" and "were segregated as people didn't give them rations, saying they were non-Muslim."* (Karachi). The exclusion of transgender individuals from relief efforts reflects how systemic biases—whether religious, cultural, or gender-based—are carried into disaster response, leaving those already on the fringes even more vulnerable. This systemic exclusion underscores how climate crises exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities, further deepening the divide for marginalized communities.

The situation for children during disasters is equally dire, as they face heightened exposure to abuse, early marriages, and child labor due to the collapse of protective systems. Despite some efforts to provide alternatives, particularly in preventing child marriages, abuse remains rampant, especially among boys. The higher prevalence of abuse among boys can be attributed to cultural norms that make boys more visible in public spheres, where they are often put to work or left unsupervised, increasing their vulnerability. The chaotic conditions during climate crises—displacement, loss of adult supervision, and breakdown of social order—intensify these risks. One participant remarked, *"Children are not only abused but also face violence... especially boys,"* pointing to how the absence of comprehensive child protection frameworks compounds the trauma faced during disasters.

This failure highlights critical gaps in infrastructure and social services, where children remain particularly vulnerable due to insufficient education and policies addressing child protection. As one participant suggested, *"The education department should have policies where, at the school level, sessions on topics like good touch and bad touch are held."* Without proactive interventions, children continue to fall through the cracks of disaster response systems. The prevalence of abuse during crises demonstrates the broader systemic failures of infrastructure and governance, where vulnerable populations—including women, children, and marginalized groups—are neglected. For WEHRDs, this reflects the urgent need

to challenge not only the immediate impacts of climate disasters but also the deep-rooted social hierarchies that perpetuate these vulnerabilities.

Conclusion: The Suffocating Reality for WEHRDs

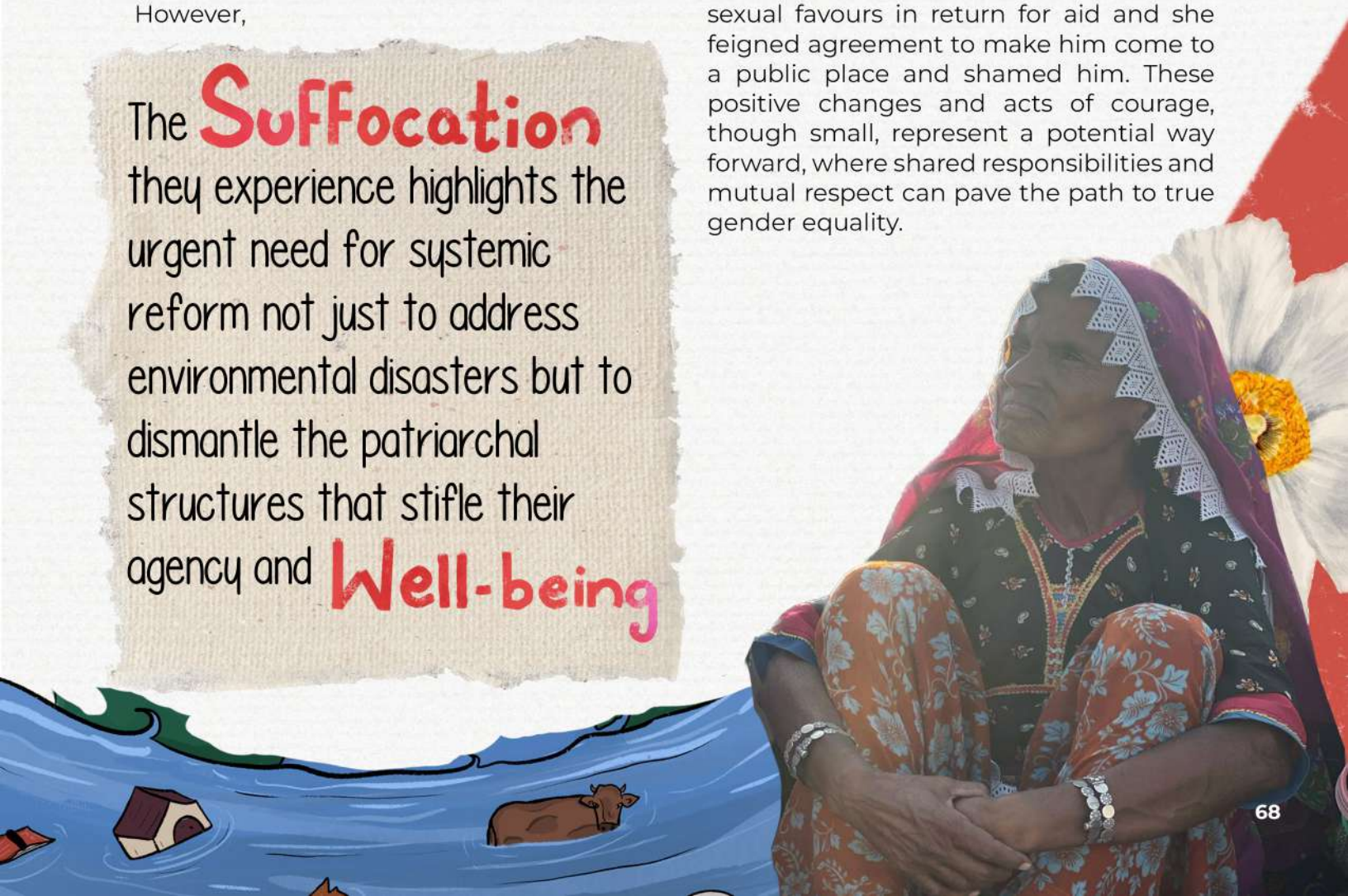
The struggles faced by WEHRDs paint a stark picture of women trapped by layers of societal expectations, familial control, public harassment, and systemic violence. These women, dedicated to defending human rights and addressing environmental crises, must also contend with deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that hinder their autonomy, dignity, and freedom. Their professional and personal battles are intertwined, reflecting a broader societal resistance to women stepping outside traditional roles. Despite these overwhelming barriers, they persist, driven by a vision of change and a desire to protect their communities.

However,

The **Suffocation** they experience highlights the urgent need for systemic reform not just to address environmental disasters but to dismantle the patriarchal structures that stifle their agency and **Well-being**

Mental health support, workplace protections, and legal frameworks must be strengthened to support their resilience. An activist from Karachi proposed her solution to spread awareness of the actual needs of women in crises: "*So, I think there needs to be pressure from NGOs or anyone who can press the media and tell them they need to provide safety kits.*" Acquiring this bare minimum support should not require this much effort by the communities in crises. But unfortunately it does.

Yet, there is hope. Small shifts toward more equitable gender roles are emerging, especially among younger generations and within progressive families. One woman from Charsadda shared how her husband took on cooking duties while she rested, showing that traditional expectations are slowly being challenged. Likewise, a WEHRD in KP shared how a man blackmailed her for sexual favours in return for aid and she feigned agreement to make him come to a public place and shamed him. These positive changes and acts of courage, though small, represent a potential way forward, where shared responsibilities and mutual respect can pave the path to true gender equality.



Grief & Loss

غم اور نقصان


tection. Stability. Womanhood
emotional. despair. Responsibility. Disaster

Grief and Loss

In the climate-affected regions of KP and Sindh, grief takes many forms for Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs). Their grief is not solely about homes swept away by floods or crops ruined by erratic weather patterns. Instead, it is a profound, all-encompassing sense of loss—one that erodes not only physical possessions but also cultural identity, traditions, and the communal bonds that have tied these women to their land for generations. The natural disasters are relentless, uprooting both tangible and intangible aspects of life. For WEHRDs, this is particularly poignant because they are often at the forefront of defending their communities from the very forces that wreak such havoc. Yet, despite their efforts, they too are left grappling with personal and collective grief that reverberates through their stories.

Loss of Rhythm of Life

For WEHRDs and the communities they protect, the grief begins with the physical destruction brought on by climate change but extends much deeper, to the loss of daily routines and cultural practices that once provided stability. For many women, this disruption is not just inconvenient—it is a forced departure from a way of life that once gave them purpose and security. A woman from Booni captures this sense of displacement: *"The floods took away more than just houses. They took our memories, our traditions. Everything feels disrupted."* The obliteration of their routines has caused a profound emotional toll, as women, who are primarily responsible for maintaining household activities and cultural traditions, find themselves suddenly disconnected from the life they once knew.

Celebrations and communal traditions, which once symbolized joy and unity, are now fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. One woman from Booni shared, "This *year, there was heavy rain during Nowruz. We couldn't celebrate like we used to... we stayed inside, and it caused a lot of problems."* Events like Nowruz, once a time of renewal and celebration, have been overtaken by the fear of the next disaster. These celebrations, which once strengthened social bonds, have now become hollow moments, underscoring the broader emotional toll that climate change takes on these women.

In Sindh, the emotional devastation is equally palpable. A woman from Badin described a tragic event during an evacuation: *"People just walked over her [during an evacuation stampede], leading to her death, and her sister witnessed everything."* This type of senseless loss amplifies the collective trauma experienced by women, who are often responsible for protecting their families during such crises.

Loss of Livelihoods and Relationship with the Land

Agriculture, which is central to many women's livelihoods, has been decimated by unpredictable weather patterns. One woman from Booni described how the once-predictable rhythms of farming have become uncertain: "*We used to grow so many vegetables, but now... the onions won't ripen on time, and we don't know how to manage."* The natural cycles that once dictated planting and harvest seasons have been disrupted, shattering not only the food security of these communities but also the emotional connection women have with the land.

In Sindh, the loss of agricultural productivity has far-reaching

consequences. *"Understand how our cultivation was destroyed in the flood. Now, the effect is that vegetables and fruits, which were available at certain rates, are not available at those rates anymore,"* explained a woman from Karachi. This economic blow is particularly challenging for women who are often the primary caretakers of their households. One woman from Sanghar highlighted the emotional toll this takes: *"People go into shock when their crops are destroyed."*

Livestock, another key source of income and sustenance, is often wiped out in these disasters. *"The flood came at 3:00 AM, and with it, our livestock, goats, and chickens were lost. Everything was destroyed with the water,"* recounted one woman from KP. For women, who are often responsible for managing livestock, this loss is devastating. Without livestock, they are left without a means to provide for their families, and the grief extends beyond the immediate financial loss to a deeper sense of despair.

The loss of land further compounds the economic challenges faced by these women. *"Since the land is no longer available, we can't keep livestock or animals at home, which were a major source of our income,"* another participant from KP shared. Without access to land or livestock, women are forced to rely on external aid, which is often insufficient and temporary. WEHRDs, who are tasked with organizing aid and relief, find themselves in a constant battle to provide for their communities while knowing that these solutions are not sustainable. The grief they feel is compounded by the knowledge that their efforts, though vital, may not be enough to restore the stability that their communities once had.

Displacement and Emotional Toll

The emotional toll of repeated displacement is immense for women and WEHRDs alike. Each flood or landslide forces families from their homes, often leaving them with nowhere to go and no support system in place. A participant from Sindh, Sanghar, described the emotional devastation: "*Many women were pregnant, and children were sick. People were displaced and living on the road for one month."*

The physical toll of these disasters is closely tied to the emotional toll. For women, displacement often means a lack of access to basic healthcare and resources. One woman from Sindh, Karachi recounted, *"Now the flood came, and three women were due; two of them died during transfer, and one was very difficult to get to."* The stress of displacement, combined with poor living conditions and limited medical access, exacerbates health risks for women, particularly for those who are pregnant or have young children. WEHRDs, who often act as intermediaries between their communities and aid organizations, find themselves powerless in the face of these systemic failures.

This grief is particularly gendered, as women bear a disproportionate share of the emotional and physical labor during disasters. As primary caregivers, they are responsible for finding shelter, securing food, and caring for children, all while mourning the loss of their homes and livelihoods. The weight of this responsibility leaves little room for self-care or recovery.

Culture and Heritage Loss

The environmental destruction caused by climate change also threatens the cultural and ecological heritage that

once defined these regions. In KP, where natural beauty and cultural practices are deeply intertwined, the loss of forests, rivers, and traditional practices is keenly felt. "All the forests have been cut down and are gone," lamented a local woman from KP.

The floods not only destroy homes but also wash away centuries of cultural practices and heritage. One woman from Booni shared, *"The village was rich in culture and heritage... Due to the flood, everything is gone."* The connection between generations—between youth and their elders—is severed as traditions tied to music, oral histories, and local festivals are lost to the waters. The grief they feel is not just for the loss of property but for the erosion of a way of life that once defined their communities.

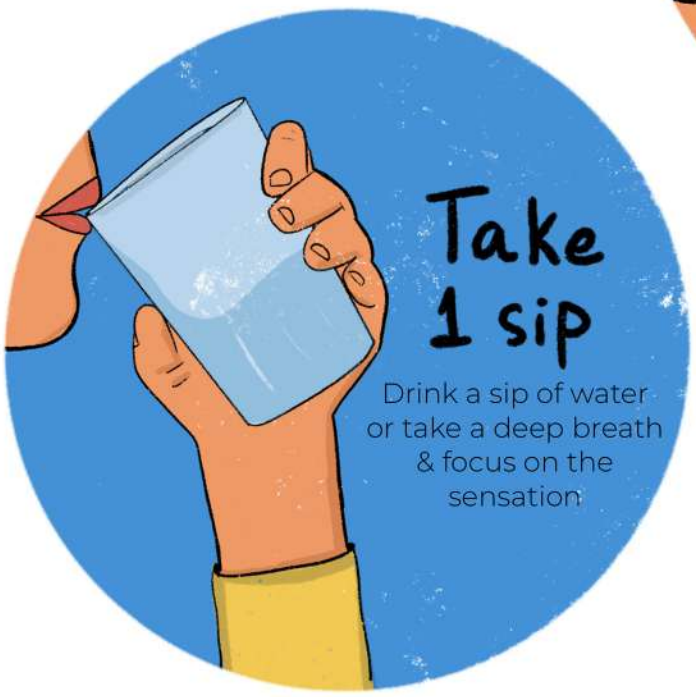
Conclusion: The Erosion of Life

Grief and loss in these regions transcend the physical—they are about the slow erosion of identity, culture, and community. For WEHRDs and the community they work with, each flood or landslide is not just a singular event but part of a long, drawn-out mourning process for a way of life that is disappearing before their eyes. As they navigate these deeply personal and collective losses, they carry the weight of history, culture, and memory, knowing that the land they love may never fully recover.

But grief like loss is not everlasting and the women of Reshun are making sure of it. Through the Women's Village Bank, a Livelihood Fund is created to avoid taking loans from bank because of their high interest rates: *"There were 3 funds; 2 are finished. We are currently running one, with a recovery fund of 600,000, with 120,000 allocated for office expenses and 60,000 given to the poor. We provide this for free, 5,000 each. Overall, the fund was about 820,000."* Women come together to pay the loans of those who are unable to pay on time and the scheme has not seen a loan default through such communal support.

Amid the losses, newfound ties of **Sisterhood** piece together glimpses of **hope**, much needed in desolate times.

We are nearing the end.
Let's do another grounding exercise together.



Joy, Resilience & Community

خوشی قوت اور برادری


Whenever there's a disaster, we all come together..... no one can do it alone, but together we make things happen!

Joy, Resilience, and Community

We honor the multiplicity of emotional and physical experiences of courage, resilience, and struggles of Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) on the frontlines of climate and gender crises in Pakistan through Arundati Roy's powerful reminder of what truly matters amid all the chaos:

"To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget."

WEHRDs in climate-affected regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh, and the communities they serve, have become emblematic of such resilience. These women balance multiple roles—caretakers, community leaders, and first responders in the face of natural disasters—while grappling with systemic neglect, patriarchal barriers, and the consequences of climate change. Despite these overwhelming challenges, they have built informal networks to address the failures of state infrastructure and external support. **However, this resilience, while admirable, has limits. Without recognition, sustainable infrastructure, and long-term solutions, the burden these women carry threatens to wear down even the strongest among them.**

Coming Together for One Another

A critical aspect of resilience in KP and Sindh is the informal, community-based early warning systems that women rely on to protect each other in times of crisis. In KP, communities have developed organic networks to alert one another in advance of impending floods. *"We pass on information through our organizations, making sure everyone knows how to respond when the time comes,"* explained a climate activist from KP. Whether by shouting warnings from house to house or using mobile phones when networks are functional, these activists have taken the initiative to protect their communities in the absence of formal government systems, filling in the gap the government has left.

This shared responsibility extends beyond disaster preparation. In Sindh, a woman from Badin recalled how community members came together during the floods when formal help was nowhere to be found: *"When the flood came, we had no one to help us, so we helped each other. We shared food, water, and whatever little we had."* This communal resilience is central to survival. The ability to organize, share, and mobilize resources in the absence of state intervention underscores the strength of community bonds.

The women of KP and Sindh demonstrate that community care and collaboration are essential during disasters. "Whenever there's a disaster, we all come together... no one can do it alone, but together we make things happen," one woman from KP observed. The power of unity is particularly evident when it comes to hosting displaced families. In KP, families open their homes to those displaced by floods, relying on a long-standing tradition of communal

support. One participant shared, *"Our community system is so strong. During the flood, 30 to 40 people stayed at Razia's house and her relatives' houses, and they arranged food for us."*

In a society where access to formal financial institutions is fraught with bureaucratic hurdles, grassroots initiatives have proven critical to improving women's access to life-saving finance. A woman from Booni shared, *"We help each other financially too... women lend to women, and we find ways to survive without the help of banks."* The collective financial management these women engage in is not just an economic strategy—it's a form of resistance against systemic neglect. This control over finances has empowered women to be resourceful during disasters, forming informal lending and saving schemes to sustain their communities.

This form of collective care is not unique to KP; in Sindh, women practice similar support mechanisms. In one case, a woman from Mirpurkhas recounted how, after giving birth during a flood, someone provided financial assistance to help her family through the crisis. *"The biggest problem was traveling because of the blocked roads. After the delivery, someone helped us by giving us money."* Such acts of care, though small in scale, are life-saving in the absence of governmental support.

In addition to physical and financial support, women in these regions bolster their communities by sharing knowledge and skills. In Booni, women have taken it upon themselves to organize training programs, teaching each other essential skills for economic survival. *"We gather the ladies from our community because, as you know, no area can function well without women... BLSO provided us with briefings and training for cultivation and other things,"* one woman explained. The knowledge these women pass on plays a vital role in ensuring that their communities can continue to thrive, even under the constant threat of climate disasters.

Informal Support Systems: The Backbone of Survival

While community networks provide crucial physical and financial support, they cannot fully address the emotional and psychological toll that disasters take on women. The trauma of repeated floods and the loss of homes, livelihoods, and loved ones have led to widespread mental health challenges, especially among women and children. In KP, Miragram, one participant explained how trauma manifests in their community: *"Children sometimes hallucinate, seeing things. Teenagers often hear voices or see things due to trauma."* The absence of formal mental health services only worsens these challenges.

Women have created their own informal systems of emotional support to overcome the lack of support infrastructure. *"First, we take care of the woman. She is mentally stressed, so we tell her, 'Sit down, drink some water. We are like your sisters,'"* a participant from Dir shared. This form of collective care helps alleviate some of the emotional burden, but it is not enough. Without proper mental health infrastructure, women and children are left to navigate trauma on their own, often leading to long-term psychological issues that impede recovery.

This communal care is not just a means of survival; it is a form of resistance

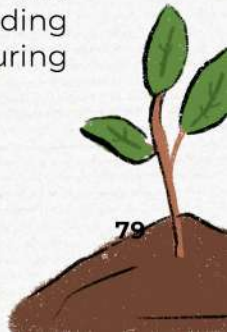
against the isolation and helplessness that often accompany disasters. *"The first thing we did was arrange drinking water together... we struggled a lot, but we made it happen,"* another woman from Sindh shared. These acts of solidarity provide hope and strength, showing that even when everything else falls apart, community bonds remain strong. Activists working on the ground work through the same beliefs of community being family to support people and build their mental resilience to get through the crises: *"First, we take God's name and then tell them to take care of their children and love their family members, not to fight, and to live with love and affection."*(Mirpurkhas).

These acts of resilience extend beyond the immediate aftermath of disasters. Despite the lack of formal infrastructure or government aid, these women have created their own safety nets, making sure no one is left behind. This communal resilience is both a source of strength and a testament to their commitment to one another: "*The real point is that its everyone's duty to protect another person, no matter who they are."* One striking example comes from a woman in Booni, who, after the flood, made underwear for young girls by hand and distributed them within the community. *"She did stitching work, so she had cloth and made underwear for girls by hand. She distributed these clothes to the girls, managing things like this within the community"* (Brep). These acts of care are vital in areas where resources are scarce, and the community must rely on each other for survival.

These informal systems of support also extend to protecting each other's safety during disasters. In one instance, when floodwaters came, a family left their baby with a neighbour because they had no other choice. *"They left the baby at someone else's house because they had nothing,"* shared one woman from KP Brep. The trust and mutual aid that permeate these communities are a testament to their resilience, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

While the absence of government intervention creates significant challenges, community solidarity remains a source of resilience. In some areas, participants described acts of collective care, such as contributing to dowries for poor families. One woman remarked, *"If someone from a very poor family is getting married, people come together to give dowry"* (Badin). However, these acts of kindness, though commendable, are few and far between. As another participant pointed out, *"It's not the case everywhere; it's very rare."* (Badin). This duality reflects both the strength and the limitations of community-driven solutions in the absence of formal structures.

Thus, this system of informal care, while essential, also highlights a gap in formal disaster preparedness. There is a growing call for more structured, safe spaces to shelter women and children during emergencies. *"People go to elevated places for safety during floods. We need a community hall or a safe space with basic facilities like water and washrooms,"* a Lady Healthy Worker from Booni suggested during a discussion on local health challenges. While these informal networks demonstrate remarkable resilience, the lack of dedicated infrastructure exposes the limits of community efforts and points to the need for governmental and organizational intervention in providing safe shelters and proper facilities during times of crisis.



The community's reliance on these informal systems is also a testament to their adaptability, but it underlines the vulnerability of regions that lack state-supported disaster management structures. One participant reflected on how floods displace people, but some communities remain relatively unaffected, suggesting that disaster risk is unevenly distributed across Chitral. *"Even if the flood comes, KP Booni might not face damage outside of Booni, but other areas nearby, like Lusht, might suffer."* This uneven distribution of vulnerability calls for a more comprehensive approach to disaster preparedness, one that recognizes the different risks faced by various areas.

In addition, women often bear the brunt of managing household responsibilities while also participating in informal community care systems. This adds to their already significant burden, leaving them physically and emotionally drained. As one woman stated, *"We are very stressed, but we have to manage it ourselves because whatever needs to be done, we have to do it"* (Badin). The lack of mental health resources exacerbates these stresses, with participants noting, *"There is no psychologist here; mental health issues are not considered important"* (Badin). A woman from Sindh Sanghar explained how repeated disasters and stress have taken a toll on women's reproductive health: "*They became very weak. If the mother is not healthy, the baby cannot drink milk properly and will not be healthy.*" The intertwining of physical and mental health challenges underscores the urgent need for comprehensive health services that address both the emotional and physical well-being of these communities.

Resilience, Recognition, and the Need for Long-Term Solutions

The resilience displayed by women in KP and Sindh is undeniable. They have repeatedly shown that, even in the face of systemic failures and climate disasters, they can rebuild their communities. However, resilience should not be romanticized as a permanent solution. The continued lack of long-term support, sustainable infrastructure, and government intervention threatens to wear down even the strongest among them.

Women in Sindh, for instance, have demonstrated time and again their determination to rebuild. *"Even after the floods, we know our community will rebuild—because that's what we do. We don't give up,"* said a woman from Badin. Yet, this resilience should not be an excuse for neglect. These women deserve long-term solutions, not just temporary relief.

Reliance on informal networks also reveals the vulnerabilities of these communities. While women's resilience and collective care are admirable, these systems are not enough to meet the overwhelming needs during and after disasters. *"We were used to a busy lifestyle, but now we have nothing, so we think a lot, which is affecting our mental health,"* noted another woman. The absence of formal support structures leaves women with a sense of loss—not only in terms of livelihood but also in terms of their mental and emotional well-being.

Despite the lack of institutional support, communities are finding ways to survive and support each other. Many women shared stories of resilience, highlighting

the importance of community care. One participant said, "*During the floods, we worked together. We managed our livelihood through embroidery, making dupattas and dresses, and doing household work*" (Sanghar). This sense of collective effort is vital in areas where formal support systems are lacking. As one activist in Booni pointed out, *"I believe that we don't need just ration like 4 kilos of ghee and lentils. Instead of that, we need training for our girls so they can work and manage health and hygiene."*

Investing in vocational training and education will empower women to become self-reliant and help their communities recover in more sustainable ways.

Conclusion: Recognition, Support, and Sustainability

The women of KP and Sindh are not waiting for help to arrive. They are actively creating their own systems of care, support, and survival in the face of climate disasters. However, their resilience is not infinite, and it should not be romanticized as a reason to continue neglecting their needs. Their strength is burn out of necessity, not choice, and it is time for the broader society, governments, and organizations to recognize this resilience for what it is: a call for recognition, support, and long-term solutions.

Women in these regions are not passive victims; they are active agents of change.

Their efforts **Deserve** to be supported with sustainable infrastructure, comprehensive health services, and educational **Opportunities**

It is only by addressing the root causes of their vulnerability—climate change, systemic neglect, and gender inequality—that we can ensure that these women, and their communities, can not only survive but thrive in the face of future challenges.

Moving Forward: How change is possible?

Change is not just a distant hope—it is unfolding through the courage and resilience of those on the frontlines of the climate and gender crises. While the layers of challenges may seem insurmountable, this report demonstrates that transformation is not only possible but already in motion. The following recommendations illustrate how we can sustain and amplify this change. By centering women, particularly WEHRDs, and addressing their needs with culturally sensitive, inclusive, and accessible SRHR services, we can create a foundation for long-term resilience. These actionable steps aim to dismantle systemic barriers, foster equity, and ensure that no one is left behind, regardless of their socioeconomic or geographic circumstances. Change is possible, and this is how we can achieve it—together.

For Families and Community Members

1. **Set Up Private Toilets for Women in Shelters and Homes**
   If families are in temporary shelters due to a disaster, ensure that women and girls have access to private, clean, and safe toilets. This can be done using simple curtains, makeshift partitions, or by designating separate areas for women, where other women can keep guard and assist in maintenance.

2. **Engage Men to Support Women's Health**
   Family elders can gently remind men to care for the women in their families, whether by ensuring their privacy or by asking simple, yet crucial, questions: Are you safe? Do you need water or food? Can I help with something?

3. **Encourage Young Girls to Become Quiet Health Champions**
   Young girls can be empowered to
   quietly become community health supporters. With training from local health workers or midwives, they can distribute hygiene kits, offer menstrual health advice, and provide support within their homes and neighborhoods, ensuring SRHR (sexual and reproductive health rights) services are discreetly offered in times of need.

4. **Create Safe, Communal Spaces in the Community**
   Families can work together to identify elevated safe spaces ahead of time. These areas, whether a hall or a home, should have basic facilities like water and toilets. Knowing where to go ahead of time can reduce panic and ensure safety when disaster strikes.

5 **Support Each Other's Mental Health**
   Families can practice active listening—when a woman is stressed, sit with her, ask how she's feeling, and truly listen.Sometimes, having someone who hears and acknowledges their fears can help women manage the overwhelming stress they face in these challenging times.

6. **Families can encourage open conversations**
   Encourage open conversations with children about good and bad touch and check-in with them regularly about their safety,especially in shelters.

For Local Women's Groups and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

1. **Appoint a Trusted Female Community Member for SRHR Discussions**
   In each neighbourhood, assign and train a trusted, respected female figure (mother, sister, or elder) to serve as a point of contact for discussions about sexual and reproductive health, especially during crises. This person should check in with women in displacement settlements about their basic SHRH needs including clean water for washing, access to safe toilets, health issues such as UTIs or vaginal infections, nutritional and medical needs of pregnant women and menstrual needs of women and girls.

2. **Host Women-Only Health Clinics**
   Create temporary women-only health clinics in disaster-affected areas where they can consult female doctors or midwives for SRHR needs. These health clinics should focus both on providing emergency health care and basic health management information.The information sharing should assume basic level of knowledge and guide people in simple manner. For example, teaching women how to check expiration dates on their medicines.

3. **Train Local Women in Midwifery and First Aid**
   Equip women in remote areas with basic midwifery and first aid skills. In times of disaster, roads may be blocked and help may be far away, but with just a little training, these women can support each other during childbirth or emergencies, offering strength when it's needed most.

4. **Partner with Religious Leaders for Discreet SRHR Kit Distribution**
   Take local religious leaders into confidence before distributing SRHR kits (menstrual health kits, pregnancy kits, etc.) alongside other aid supplies. Their support can ease community fears and help women receive essential products without suspicion or hesitation.

5. **Include a Female Advocate on Disaster Response Committees**
   A woman advocate from each community to join local disaster response committees. She can bring forward the specific needs of women—whether it's clean water, safe spaces, or health concerns. Her voice will ensure that the response is more inclusive and considers everyone's needs.

6. **Establish an Anonymous Feedback Box for Reporting Harassment**
   Placing an anonymous feedback box in field offices or community spaces where women can safely report issues without fear of retaliation.

7. **Offer Childcare at Important Community Meetings**
   In many cases, women can't attend important meetings or training sessions because they don't have anywhere safe to leave their children. By setting up a small, supervised play area, you can ensure women can fully participate, knowing their children are safe and cared for.

8. **Skill Development During Recovery Phases**
Provide women in disaster-affected areas with skill development opportunities during recovery phases. For example, introduce short-term training in handicrafts, food processing, or tailoring, so women can quickly start generating income even in temporary shelters.

9. **Mobile Vocational Training Centers**
Set up mobile vocational trainingcenters that travel to hard-to-reach disaster areas, offering training in skills like sewing, basic IT skills, or home-based small businesses. These centers can operate in partnership with local women's groups and trainers

10. **Income-Generating Kits**
Distribute livelihood kits to women, including materials and tools for starting small-scale businesses (e.g., sewing machines, poultry farming kits, or kitchen gardening tools). Provide guidance on how to sustain these activities post-crisis.

11. **Cash-for-Work Programs**
Implement cash-for-work programs for women, allowing them to engage in community rebuilding efforts (e.g., debris clearing, rebuilding homes), while earning income. Ensure the work is suited to women's capacities and provides flexibility for family care.

12. **Mentorship and Business Incubation**
Create a mentorship network of local female entrepreneurs to help women start small businesses during recovery. Offer basic business incubation services like market linkages and financial literacy, tailored to women's needs in disaster settings.

13. **Focus on Traditional and Non-Traditional Roles**
Expand skill training to include both traditional (handicrafts, food preservation) and non-traditional roles (construction, solar panel installation, mobile repair), diversifying women's income streams during crises.

For Religious and Local Leaders

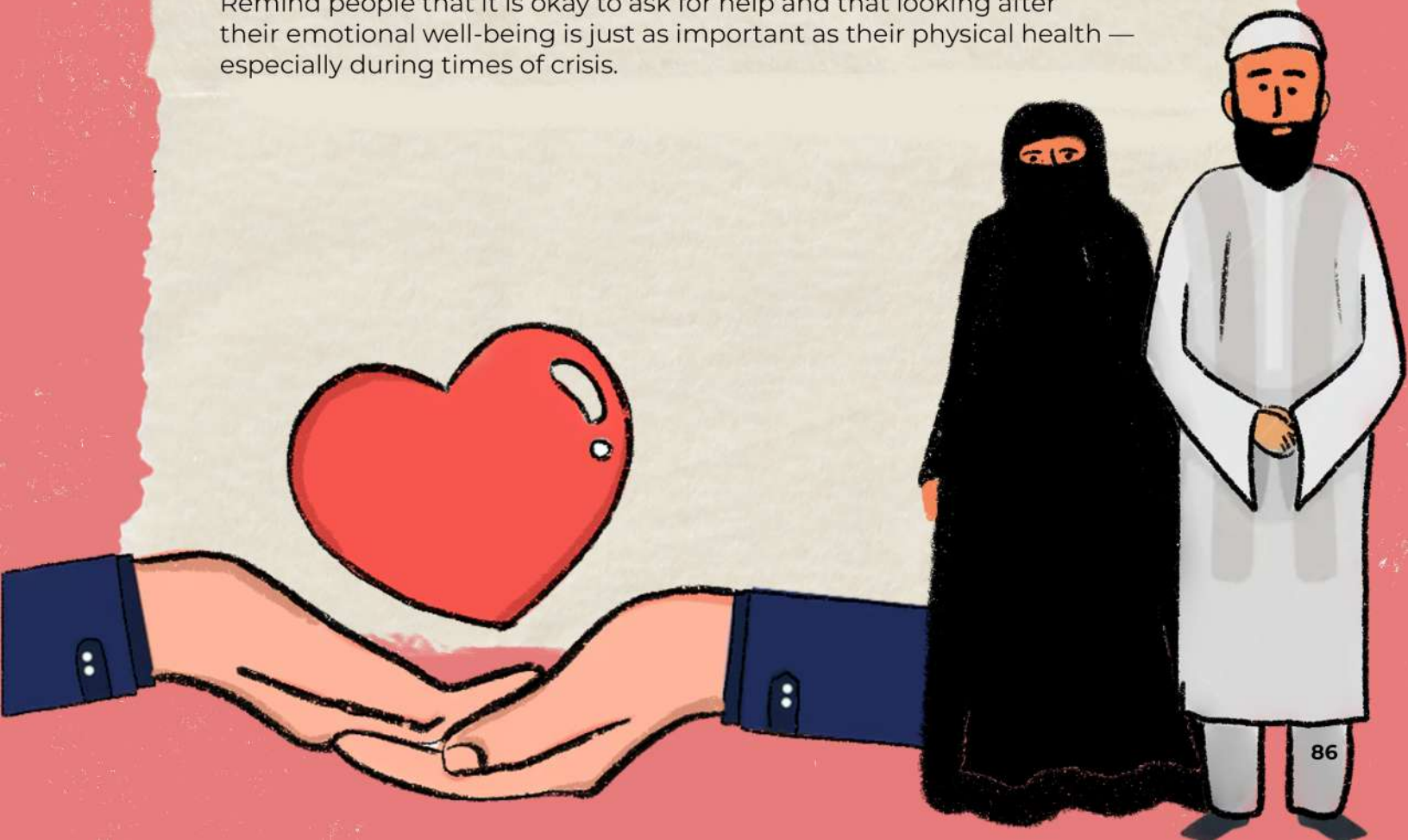
1. **Lead by Example: Condemn Gender based Violence in Crisis Situations**
   Use your platform to speak out against violence, particularly in times of crisis. Offer men an alternative—encourage them to share their frustrations with elders or in safe spaces, rather than turning to violence. Offer support to victims of GBV including women, children, and trans persons and connect them with relevant authorities as needed.

2. **Ensure Kindness for all**
   Spread message of kindness towards all people irrespective of identity markers during crisis situations, particularly for trans persons who might face additional discrimination during relief efforts.

3. **Encourage Men to Share Household Chores**
   Remind men that helping with chores is not just about convenience; it's part of their religious duties. Start small—encourage men to take on just one task a day, like cooking or fetching water or offering women time to rest while they watch over the kids.

4. **Organize Community Discussions on Menstrual Health**
   Host community gatherings where trusted female figures can provide women with basic information on menstrual health. These discussions can be held in informal settings, allowing women to learn in a way that feels comfortable and non-intrusive.

5. **Promote Mental Health Through Local Sermons**
   Remind people that it is okay to ask for help and that looking after their emotional well-being is just as important as their physical health — especially during times of crisis.



For Local Governments and Disaster Management Authorities (NDMA/PDMA)

1. **Assign a Female Officer to Every Field Team**
   Ensure that each disaster response team includes at least one female officer who is specifically trained to handle SRHR concerns. This includes Rescue 1122, nurses, doctors, police officers, NGO workers and a vast array of frontline WEHRDs who are essential in emergency situations and whose presence in all teams should be ensured.

2. **Create Private Women-Only Spaces in Disaster Shelters**
   In every disaster shelter, designate women-only spaces where they can rest, talk, and share their concerns without fear. These private areas can provide a sense of security and comfort during chaotic times.

3. **Install Safe Toilets for Women in Public Spaces**
   In public shelters, install toilets that are well-lit, with locks and located close to shelter areas. Do occasional spot checks to ensure the toilets are functioning and safe.

4. **Support Short-Term "Emotional First Aid" Training**
   Fund brief, easy-to-implement workshops for WEHRDs to provide them with tools for immediate stress management and emotional well-being during crises.

5. **Launch Mobile SRHR Clinics in Disaster Areas**
   Set up mobile health clinics in partnership with local healthcare providers to bring SRHR services directly to women in hard-to-reach areas.Ensure that providing basic healthcare management information including mental health support, is a mandatory component of mobile health clinics. This should include guidance on topics like food to avoid during pregnancies, techniques for practising deep breathing when stressed, and ways to recognisze ones's emotions.

6. **Disability-Inclusive Training**
   Provide training to all disaster response teams and healthcare workers on how to support people with disabilities during crises. Include protocols on assisting people with mobility, vision, and hearing impairments in evacuation and healthcare settings

7. **Safety and Security**
   Work with local authorities to ensure that women and trans persons are not subject to violence or discrimination in disaster settings. Create safe reporting mechanisms for any GBV or harassment incidents.

8. **Broadcast SRHR Information via Radio or SMS**
   Use radio, text messaging, or loudspeaker announcements in local languages to regularly inform people of basic healthcare management during disasters such as stress management, pain management, WASH. Use these systems to keep the people informed about updates on the crisis situation as well.

9. **Collect Gender-Disaggregated Data with Simple Checklists**
   Implement easy-to-use, one-page checklists for disaster response teams to gather gender-disaggregated data. Knowing how many pregnant women, nursing mothers, or female first responders are affected will make it easier to tailor aid effectively.

10. **Integrate Livelihood Training into Disaster Relief**
    As part of disaster relief efforts, mandate that a percentage of aid efforts are directed toward livelihood and skill training for women. Ensure that local disaster response plans incorporate these training initiatives alongside the provision of basic necessities.

11. **Create Local Employment Opportunities Post-Disaster**
    Work with local businesses and industries to provide temporary employment opportunities for women in recovery areas, such as food distribution, logistics, or local administration roles, giving them an immediate source of income post-disaster.

12. **Public-Private Partnerships for Skill Development**
    Foster partnerships between local governments, businesses, and NGOs to create sustainable livelihood opportunities for women in disaster-prone areas. Focus on skill training in areas like agriculture, renewable energy, and healthcare, with long-term job prospects.

13. **Tailored Support for Home-Based Enterprises**
    Provide grants and support to help women start or revive home-based businesses affected by disasters. Offer assistance with procuring materials, equipment, and micro-loans with low-interest rates for women to reestablish their income.

14. **Ensure equal representation of women in policy making**
    Require all teams across board to ensure women are participating, not simply present, in policy making and implementation.

15. **Make space for women's active participation:**
    Facilitate conversations in a gender-sensitive manner. Encourage women who are silent in meetings or pushed to the back of the room or are talked over by their male colleagues to express their opinions. Check in with them to make sure they feel heard. Validate and credit contributions of women in your teams publicly.

For Health Care Providers

1. **Ensure that Equity in Access:**
   Services must be accessible to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay, socioeconomic status, geographic location, ethnicity, education, or gender.

2. **Ensure that Quality of Care:**
   Services, facilities, and commodities must be of high quality, delivered safely, efficiently, and in a people-centered manner.

3. **Set Up Women-Only Consultation Hours or Medical Camps in Healthcare Centers:**
   Offer dedicated consultation hours at healthcare centers where only female patients are seen by doctors and nurses, ensuring comprehensive provision of services.

4. **Distribute SRHR Materials in a Culturally Sensitive Manner:**
   Ensure that any SRHR materials (e.g., contraception, menstrual health kits) are given to women in a culturally sensitive manner. Ask people about their preferred methods of sexual and reproductive healthcare management and advise them on adapting their existing practices if safety concerns are brought up.

5. **Give SRHR Training and Material to Men:**
   Distribute contraceptives and family planning information among men as well. Encourage men through religious, cultural, scientific, and other logical arguments on the importance of family planning, and how to effectively use contraceptives.

6. **Culturally Sensitive SRHR Information for Sexual and Gender Minorities:**
   Provide SRHR education and materials that are inclusive of sexual and gender minorities' needs, explaining reproductive health, mental health, and gender-specific safety protocols in a manner that is respectful of their identities.

7. **Provide HIV/AIDS Medications:**
   Ensure emergency healthcare services include confidential HIV/AIDS testing, distribution of contraceptives, and antiretroviral medication for those living with HIV. Disseminate the availability of these services in a culturally sensitive manner to avoid further stigmatizing persons with HIV/AIDS.

8. **Create a Mental Health Support Network for Women:**
   Partner with local psychologists to provide mental health support for women, with a special focus on dealing with trauma from GBV, miscarriages, or maternal health crises during disasters.

9. **Partner with Local Midwives to Offer Continuous Care:**
   Strengthen ties with local midwives and health workers to ensure that SRHR services are integrated into regular check-ups, especially post-disaster when clinics are overwhelmed.

For Global and International Aid Agencies

1. **Create Micro-Grants for WEHRDs**
   Establish small, flexible grantsthat WEHRDs can access quickly to cover immediate needs like transport, mental health support, or safety equipment. These grants don't need to be large—a small amount can go a long way in supporting their essential work.

2. **Deploy Female-Led Health Teams to Disaster Areas**
   When international medical teams arrive, ensure that at least one team is female-led and focused on SRHR. This helps women feel comfortable and ensures their specific needs are addressed in a culturally sensitive way.

3. **Integrate SRHR Into Every Relief Package**
   Make sure that every aid package distributed in disaster zones includes SRHR products—like menstrual hygiene items or basic contraception—packaged discreetly to ensure women feel comfortable accepting them.

4. **Foster Peer-to-Peer Learning Networks for WEHRDs**
   Create spaces—online or offline—where WEHRDs can connect, share advice, and support one another. Peer-to-peer networks offer a sense of community and shared experience, helping them stay resilient in their work.

5. **Include Gender-Sensitive Guidelines in All Funding Agreements**
   Require local organizations to follow basic gender-sensitive guidelines in their work, such as ensuring women have access to clean toilets, separate sleeping areas, or mental health support, in exchange for funding.

6. **Support Women's Groups in Disaster Resilience**
   Prioritize partnerships with women-led organizations that focus on SRHR, offering them resources to enhance their role in post-disaster recovery.

7. **Ensure Female Representation in Decision-Making**
   Work with local governments to ensure that women are represented in decision-making forums where disaster response strategies are formulated.

8. **Offer Technical Support to Governments for SRHR**
   Provide governments like Pakistan's with technica assistance to integrate SRHR into climate adaptation policies and disaster risk reduction strategies.

9. **Create a Gender-Disaggregated Database for Disaster Response**
   Build global databases that collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data in disaster zones, ensuring that SRHR is included in all assessments.

10. **Advocate for SRHR in Global Climate Agreements**
    Push for the inclusion of SRHR in climate adaptation and disaster response plans, ensuring that women's health and well-being are prioritized on the global stage. This could include advocating for SRHR to be included in Pakistan's NDCs (Nationally Determined Contributions)

WEHRD Checklist for Daily Work Safety

Work Safety

☐ **Emergency Contact:** Do you have a designated emergency contact? Make sure they know you will contact them in case of an emergency.

☐ **Contact Information:** Do you know the phone number and name of your line manager and who to report to if there is an issue?

☐ **Work Hours:** Are your working hours clear? Stick to them to avoid burnout.

☐ **Personal Safety Items:** Do you have pepper spray, a whistle, or a personal alarm for safety? Keep them accessible.

☐ **Sanitation Supplies:** Do you have sanitary pads and hygiene items for the day? Pack a small hygiene kit.

☐ **Complaints:** Do you know who to contact and how to report if there's an issue, such as harassment or unsafe conditions? Have that information on hand.

Physical Health

☐ **Hydration:** Did you drink enough water today? Carry a water bottle with you.

☐ **Rest:** Did you take a short break or rest today? Make sure to pause, even for 5 minutes.

☐ **Nutrition:** Did you eat a proper meal? Pack a small snack or fruit if needed.

☐ **Movement:** Did you stretch or walk around? Take a moment to move your body, especially if sitting for long periods.

Mental Health

□ **Deep Breaths:** Take a deep breath. How are you feeling emotionally? Pause and check in with yourself.

□ **Time for Yourself:** Have you set aside some quiet time, even just for a few minutes?

□ **Celebrate Yourself:** Did you celebrate your work recently? Tell yourself thank you for being so amazing.

□ **Overwhelmed:** If things are too much, who can you talk to for support or to share how you're feeling?

Community & Peer Check-In

□ **Friend Check-In:** Did you check in on a friend or colleague today? Supporting each other makes a big difference.

□ **New Learning:** Did you learn something new recently that can help your work or community? Sharing knowledge strengthens everyone.

□ **Ask for Help:** If you need assistance, did you ask a trusted friend or colleague for help?

□ **Peer Communication:** Is there an emergency plan in place with your peers? Make sure you all know how to contact each other in case of crisis.

□ **Community Connections**: Are you reaching out to your local community for updates and needs?

Final Reflections

ہم گناہگار عورتیں
جو اجنبی راہوں پر چلتی ہیں
جو سوچتی ہیں
ہم گناہگار عورتیں
جو بات کرتی ہیں
جو سنتی ہیں
جو سوچتی ہیں

Kishwar Naheed's powerful poem, *Hum Gunahgar Auratein,* encapsulates the spirit of defiance and resilience that flows through the veins of the Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders (WEHRDs) in Pakistan. Naheed's words speak of women who dare to tread on paths deemed forbidden by society—women who refuse to be silent, remain unseen, or submit to the suffocating patriarchal norms that bind them. These are the same women who form the backbone of this report—WEHRDs fighting not just for their survival, but for the survival of their communities, land, and the future of their children in the face of climate disaster and systemic oppression.

The research undertaken for this report aimed to highlight the lived realities of women on the frontlines of climate change in Pakistan. These women, especially those in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, endure the twin burdens of environmental degradation and deeply ingrained gender inequality. Through the voices of these women, this report has revealed the stark gaps in disaster preparedness, the lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, and the absence of mental health and reproductive services in times of crisis. Women are forced to navigate broken systems that neglect their needs and overlook their critical roles as first responders, caregivers, and leaders in the community.

Care emerges as the heart of this report—not just as an act of empathy but as a fundamental human right. Enshrined in international frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, care is integral to the right to health, dignity, and equality. Feminist principles recognize care as a societal responsibility, transcending its relegation to individual or familial domains. The protection and promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), a cornerstone of feminist care demands, lie at the core of addressing the intersecting crises of gender and climate justice. Without access to SRHR services—safe spaces, contraceptives, and maternal care—WEHRDs and the women they support cannot exercise autonomy over their bodies or lives, let alone contribute fully to the resilience of their communities.

Like the "gunahgar auratein" in Naheed's poem, these women defy societal expectations. They rise every day to protect their families, homes, and environment, despite their voices are often being dismissed. These are women who speak up for their rights, demand accountability, and refuse to be silenced-woman who (بات کرتی ہیں... سوچتی" ہیں) (speak, think). Yet, as this report shows, the price of their defiance is high. They face harassment, violence, and institutional neglect, whether in the form of inadequate disaster relief, unsafe shelters, or a lack of access to essential healthcare services.

The findings presented here make clear that the climate crisis is a gendered crisis. Women in disaster-affected areas are not just victims; they are also agents of change. However, their resilience and leadership are often overlooked. As

Naheed reminds us, these are the women who " (اجنبی راہوں پر چلتی ہیں)" (walk on unfamiliar paths), forging their way in a world that refuses to make space for them. The women of KP and Sindh have long been asking for localized community-led disaster response systems, access to trauma centers, financial independence, and the provision of safe spaces during emergencies. Yet, time and again, their calls for change go unanswered, and they are left to rebuild their lives with inadequate resources.

In moments of crisis, these women are the first to act, relying on each other when institutional support fails. The resilience of communities is held together by the informal networks that women have created, networks that Naheed's poem echoes—a solidarity built on shared struggle and mutual care. These women have made it clear that they do not need more temporary fixes or token gestures. They demand sustainable solutions: trauma centers, mental health services, gender-segregated shelters with menstrual hygiene facilities, and community-based disaster response mechanisms that center their needs and expertise.

Naheed's poem does not only capture the frustration and defiance of these women; it also calls for collective recognition of their struggle. In *Hum Gunahgar Auratein,* there is an acknowledgment of the women who challenge societal norms—those who refuse to accept the status quo. In the same spirit, the findings of this report urge us to see the women of climate-affected regions in Pakistan for who they truly are: the frontline defenders of both human rights and the environment. They are not asking for permission to lead. They are already leading—organizing within their communities, mobilizing resources, and ensuring that no one is left behind, even as government institutions fail them.

As this report draws to a close, the call to action is clear: We cannot continue to fail these women. Their resilience should not be romanticized as an excuse for systemic neglect. It must be supported with real, actionable change. Care, as a human right, demands accountability and investment. This includes dedicated funding for feminist care—spanning mental health support, SRHR services, and comprehensive GBV prevention efforts and Gender-Just Climate Solutions. Without these resources, the very survival of the WEHRDs, their communities, and their shared struggle for justice is at risk.

The recommendations laid out in this report—from the establishment of gender-sensitive shelters to the introduction of comprehensive mental health services and the promotion of women's leadership in disaster response—are not optional; they are essential. By centering feminist principles of care, we can challenge entrenched systems of inequality and rebuild communities in ways that are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

It is time to honor the courage of the *gunahgar auratein*—the women who have dared to stand up, speak out, and demand a better future. These are women who " (اپنے نشان چھوڑ دیے ہیں)" (have left their mark on every road). Now, it is our responsibility to ensure that their struggles are not in vain, that their demands are not dismissed, and that their contributions are not erased. The climate crisis is here, and it disproportionately affects women. If we are to build a more just and resilient

future, we must begin by listening to these women, amplifying their voices, and enacting the transformative changes they are fighting for. The demand for feminist action can no longer wait. Now is the time to:

- **Fund Feminist Care**
- **Center Gender-Just Climate Solution**
- **Defend the Defenders**
- **Build Climate Resilience**

Before you put this report down, take a moment, notice your breath, your feelings, any sensations in your body, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and thank yourself for everything you do to make the world a better place.