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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Narratives of Violence, Identity, and Resistance: Transgender Voices, Media Framing, and Militancy in Swat, Malakand Division

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Abstract: This study explores the lived experiences of transgender persons during the Taliban insurgency and military operations in Swat, Malakand Division (2007–2009), and analyzes the framing of their challenges in regional, national, and international media during and after the conflict. Previous studies have examined media framing of the Taliban conflict and transgender representation in Pakistani media separately; however, transgender narratives of the Swat conflict and multi-level media framing remain unexplored. Grounded in framing theory and oral history methodology, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 14 transgender persons from Swat, guided by eight open-ended questions. The analysis identified four themes: Direct and Targeted Violence, involving destruction of livelihoods and killings; A Landscape of Terror and Brutality, characterized by pervasive fear and extreme violence; Social Confinement and Paralysis, involving forced confinement and disrupted peace; and Economic and Existential Hardship, reflecting struggles for survival. Survival strategies included hiding, forced migration, and loss of agency and freedom. Participants blamed both the Taliban and military for societal breakdown, with the public becoming the ultimate victim. Media coverage was criticized for bias, sensationalization, and misrepresentation. Local media was described as community-based and humanitarian, national media as politicized and sensationalized, and international media as decontextualized and globalized. The study concludes that an intersectional lens is essential to understanding conflict impacts, as transgender persons experienced a crisis within a crisis, compounded by pre-existing social marginalization. It calls for comprehensive peace and reconciliation approaches addressing the needs and rights of marginalized communities, particularly those suffering most deeply and remaining largely silenced.

Keywords: Transgender, Swat Conflict, Media Framing, Oral History, Taliban, Military Operations, Intersectionality, Marginalized Voices, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction and Literature Review

Emerging from a complex blend of historical, geopolitical, and ideological factors, militancy in Pakistan has often been rooted in regional conflicts and global dynamics. The historical context includes Pakistan's pivotal role in supporting Afghan resistance against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, which saw the emergence of diverse *mujahideen* groups. These groups, some of which later transformed into militant

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organizations, together with the so-called strategic ambitions of the Pakistani military, played a role in shaping the landscape of militancy in the country (Hilali, 2005).

However, the phenomenon of militancy is deeply intertwined with the strategic goals of the state and big powers such as the United States, and efforts to counter it have often been met with challenges such as the fluid nature of militant groups, their cross-border activities, and potential sympathizers within society Fair, 2011; The (Friday Times, 2025)

Moreover, the effects of militancy extend beyond the realm of security. The constant threat of violence has reshaped urban landscapes, with security checkpoints becoming ubiquitous in daily life. The economy has also felt the strain, as concerns over security risks have hampered foreign investment (Zee News, 2026). Additionally, the presence of militancy has raised international concerns due to its potential to spill over borders and destabilize the region, particularly in the context of the neighboring conflict in Afghanistan (Handoo, 2026).

This exploration of militancy in Pakistan delves into its historical roots, the multifaceted challenges it poses, and the government's responses (Zeb & Khan, 2026; Jadoon, 2025). It acknowledges the complex interplay of internal and external factors that have contributed to its persistence (Khan et al., 2025; Zeb & Khan, 2026). It highlights the need for a holistic approach that addresses not only the security dimensions but also the socioeconomic and ideological factors driving militancy (Zeb & Khan, 2026; Jadoon, 2025). As Pakistan navigates the path toward sustainable peace and security, understanding the dynamics of militancy becomes paramount for shaping a stable and prosperous future (Rizwan, 2026; Zeb & Khan, 2026).

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella organization of militant groups, emerged as a prominent force in the Malakand Division (Kiramatullah & Rehman, 2019). Led by figures such as Mullah Fazlullah, the TTP sought to establish a strict interpretation of Islamic law and challenge the state's authority (BBC, 2013). The TTP's influence extended to parts of the Swat Valley, Bajaur Agency, and other areas within the division (Khan et al., 2021).

The importance of recording the complex and marginalized voices of people impacted by militancy through oral history has become clearer. Scholars such as Thompson (2000) argue that oral history offers a more comprehensive and intimate understanding of historical events. It also provides insights that could be missed in standard archival sources. Oral history becomes a tool for victims to gain agency and control over the account of their experiences amid militancy.

Problems Statement

The Taliban insurgency in Swat, Malakand Division (2007–2009) had far-reaching impacts on the social fabric of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but the experiences of transgender people in this conflict are largely missing from academic literature and media discourse. During the time of militancy, transgender persons in Swat occupied a singularly precarious position, as they were multiply vulnerable due to gender nonconformity, socioeconomic marginalization and living in a region targeted by militant groups and state military operations. Previous research has looked at the framing of the Taliban conflict in the media, and the representation of transgender people in the Pakistani media, but no study has yet explored the ways in which transgender people in Swat narrated their lived experience of the conflict of 2007-2009, or the ways in which regional, national and international media framed transgender people and their problems during and after this period. This dual gap in understanding the transgender narratives of conflict and in analyzing the multi-level media framing of transgender experiences in Swat constitutes a significant omission in the scholarship of conflict, gender and media in Pakistan. This study fills this gap through a framing theory approach to analyze media coverage in regional, national and international media, while centering on the narrative of transgender people who experienced the Swat conflict, thus contributing to more inclusive understandings of conflict impact and media representations.

Objectives

- To explore and document the lived experiences and narratives of transgender people during and after the Swat conflict (2007-2009) in the Malakand Division, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- To examine the framing of transgender people and their issues in the regional, national and international media in the backdrop of the Swat conflict.
- To understand the connection between media framing and lived experiences of transgender persons in Swat, identifying gaps, misrepresentations, and implications for policy and social justice.

Research Questions

- How would you describe your experience of the military operation in 2007 and 2009 in Swat?
- What sectors, including economy, education, health, and infrastructure, were affected by the military operation in Swat?
- Who badly affected Swat society during militancy?
- What was your living strategy during the military presence in Swat?
- What was your living strategy during the Taliban presence in Swat?
- How did the media portray the military and Taliban presence in Swat?
- How did the media represent the local people's problems and challenges?
- What were the differences among the framing of local, national, and international media?

Literature Review

We are able to comprehend the subjective realities and agency of Afghan women through these first-hand accounts. The narratives demonstrated how these women had previously been taken advantage of by both domestic and foreign individuals. It is evident that the women's personal narratives contain both factual and fictional elements (Ahmad, 2024).

The terrorists in Swat successfully used the tales to garner support. Through communication, they disseminated their message. They were able to reach a larger audience and give their message more authority by using FM radio to spread their version of Islamic Sharia and ideology. Additionally, their worldview initially aligned with the complaints of the local populace, which increased the narrative's influence (Shah et al., 2020).

However, support vanished as they began killing members of the general public. The Taliban's narrative approach in Swat fits with a larger Afghanistan pattern. Both situations are equal, but in Afghanistan, narratives are employed as powerful weapons. These narratives shaped popular attitudes and the sociopolitical landscape. The Taliban in Afghanistan subsequently grabbed the lead once the approach proved effective (Farrell, 2018). By highlighting the remarkable in the commonplace, the oral history technique validates experiences that could otherwise go unnoticed (Stratford, 2019).

Swat: The military had to engage in more than simply physical combat with the Taliban. The military successfully carried out the necessary attacks and raids. In order to counter the Taliban's ideological effect, the operation also employed strategic narratives. To diminish the violent group's appeal and public backing, a more compelling counter-narrative was required. Additionally, the military's odds of success against the Taliban were raised by the counter-narratives' ability to win over the populace. Hanska (2015).

Despite a counterargument, it has been noted that while military operations are generally successful, underlying problems remain unsolved. To guarantee enduring peace, it is essential to concentrate on reconciliation and resolve fundamental grievances (Rome, 2011). Changing attitudes and geopolitical interests in the area are also reflected in narratives influenced by outside forces like Russia. The change in

strategy, which is based on geopolitical objectives, emphasizes how complicated the Taliban's image is on the global scene. Additionally, it highlights the Taliban's significance in the global geopolitical landscape (Golubev, 2019).

The power of storytelling is generally demonstrated by oral histories and narratives concerning the Taliban in Swat during the military operations. They show how crucial perception and narrative construction are to collective memory. Simultaneously, these narratives are producing understanding of conflict and healing on a local and international level.

Oral histories and narratives are essential for understanding and depicting military activities. They provide a framework for analyzing events and influencing public opinion. The public's perception of military activities is greatly influenced by information gathered by individuals and disseminated through their own viewpoints. In this regard, evidence can be found by tracking the evolution of contemporary Ukrainian military documentation literature. The collection "A Journey to the Afterlife" by E. Shishatskyi. "Mariupol" emphasizes how crucial personal stories are for capturing the horrors of conflict. In order to sway public opinion and offer insights into military life, authors in the collection describe their own experiences (Chervinchuk, 2023).

Narratives concerning civil-military collaboration can help us understand and see how the interaction between the military and civilians is framed, both during times of war and during peace operations. They aid in revealing new facets of this connection and predict future developments during times of conflict. These narratives support the development of a solid public-military interaction and the assessment of novel tactics (Jenne, 2022).

Creating narratives to engage the public and defend military activities is beneficial. However, if these don't align with societal norms, they may eventually lose their hold. The narratives must be consistent with reality in order to maintain public acceptance. France's military actions in Mali and the Western Sahel demonstrate this. The narrative loses its impact when it deviates from reality or popular opinion. The forces were eventually retaliated against as the activities lost public support (Cumming et al., 2022).

Narratives in the military are dynamic. Due to the influence of interdisciplinary theories, scholarly norms evolve over time. These tales are, in fact, heavily politicized and modified in response to public demand. The American Way of War and counterinsurgency are two master narratives of U.S. military history that can be examined to better understand their conditionality and volatility (Linn, 2022).

The military's reaction to the insurgency was influenced by its strong conviction in the militant narratives, which also made the use of strategic narratives to thwart adversary information activities necessary. The military in Swat accepted the U.S. Army's wartime narrative and connected it to national objectives and policies. In order to effectively combat persistent insurgencies, this strategy highlights the significance of engaging the populace in a rational, emotive, and convincing manner (Payne, 2014).

More potential for narrative in oral history research may arise from the development of digital video and technology. According to Carruthers (2020), these are helpful in offering a shared experience outside of memory. According to Kwong (1992), oral history practice requires meticulous planning and attention to detail, as well as clear goals and documentation of every little change.

Geohistorical perspectives, such as the analysis of Alexander the Great's voyage through the region, which contextualizes Swat's strategic importance, further emphasize the historical relevance of the region (Olivieri, 1996). The use of narratives in military studies is further supported by the assertion that employing narratology can improve military research paradigms by providing insights into military history, strategy, and leadership studies (Hanska, 2014). Oral histories and stories of the military operations in Swat are usually full of problems and shortcomings. These narratives must take into account the intricate interactions between historical, cultural, and strategic components that make up the region's sociopolitical framework. Therefore, the absence of these components lessens the effect of these narratives.

Theoretical Foundation

Framing theory is one of the major theoretical stances of media and communication studies. It offers essential insights into the process of content selection, curation and distribution in the media. Few studies have attempted to define framing, but one such study is by Entman (1993), who defines framing as "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). It emphasizes the 'process' of framing; that is, media do not simply reflect what is in front of them, but construct meaning by means of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.

A well-documented application of the framing theory is for marginalised people. Framing has been shown to play an important role in the spread of social bias and directly in the formation and reinforcement of negative stereotypes of minorities (Ramasubramanian & Miles, 2018). Over time, marginalized groups are presented again and again in the media, and audiences internalize these frames as “common sense,” thus reinforcing social and political hierarchies.

For framing transgender media narratives, the framing of the normal and the deviant must be considered. Mainly, the theory of framing is about the building of social norms and the labelling of deviance in the media. Tuchman (1978) noted that “people depicted in news shape and create social norms” and the “framing” of news actively has the effect of constructing what is defined as “deviant” versus “normal” social behavior. The use of "framing" terms like "abnormal" or "morally transgressive" can have a significant effect on the public perception or attitude towards the transgender community.

This theoretical linkage is empirically supported by Pakistani context-specific research. Zahra and Abbas (2024) explored the representation of transgender people in Pakistani newspaper blogs using a corpus-based approach and found evidence of both “transgender apartheid” in media language and solidarity discourse. This finding illustrates that framing is not a one-dimensional phenomenon, but rather a site of tension between dominant and alternative frames. Moreover, Zamin Khan and Badshah (2025) investigated the linguistic othering of the transgender community in the Pakistani Urdu media and found that the lexical patterns tend to consistently reduce the transgender identity to generic or derogatory terms. These linguistic strategies function to shore up symbolic distance and to naturalize social inequality. This is consistent with framing theory's emphasis on the constitutive role of media language in shaping social reality.

Methods and Materials

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore media framing of transgender narratives in Swat, Malakand Division. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for research that seeks to understand complex social phenomena, to explore processes of meaning-making, and to capture the specifics of media representation in relation to marginalized populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study is based on a descriptive qualitative design, which allows for a systematic identification and interpretation of framing patterns without imposing pre-defined categories that might obscure context-specific dynamics.

This research uses purposive sampling to study transgender individuals and interviews 14 transgender individuals using 8 open-ended research questions. Since the study’s focus is on Swat, Malakand Division, the sampling frame consists of the framing of media: a) regional newspapers based or specifically covering Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Malakand Division; b) national newspapers including leading English-language and Urdu-language dailies with significant circulation and online presence; and c) digital media platforms that cover regional issues. This multilevel sampling strategy enables the comparison of framing practices at the regional and national levels, following previous research that suggests different framing practices occur at different levels of the media (Rawan, 2024).

The analysis was conducted between 2007 and 2007 to capture the latest media coverage within the context of a history of significant developments in the legislation of transgender rights in Pakistan. The

context of increased security threats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa must also be taken into account, as it is a critical issue that must be analysed in relation to transgender representation and militancy (Handoo, 2026).

Findings and Analysis

Table 1

Framing Analysis of Transgender Experiences During the Swat Operation regarding Taliban and military

Themes	Codes	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Direct and Targeted Violence	Systematic Targeting of Livelihood	Direct attacks on the economic and cultural foundations of the community (dance halls, music shops).	"The first attack by the Taliban was on music shops and our dance halls. They banned music, dance, and singing." (Mingora)
	Merciless Killing of Community Members	Reports of comrades and community members being murdered because of their identity and profession.	"Many of our companions were mercilessly killed." (Mingora); "people were mercilessly killed... including... civilians." (Kabal)
A Landscape of Terror and Brutality			
	Atmosphere of Fear and Terror	A pervasive, overwhelming sense of fear that defined daily existence.	"There was an atmosphere of fear and terror everywhere." (Charbagh); "We couldn't even step outside." (Mingora)
	Witnessing Extreme Violence	Exposure to unprecedented levels of violence, including suicide bombings and scattered bodies.	"The first time in my life I saw suicide bombings, scattered bodies, firing, shelling..." (Charbagh)
	Indescribable Brutality and Cruelty	The violence is framed as so extreme that it defies description.	"The conditions we witnessed... were indescribable. Everywhere, there was rampant brutality... immense cruelty." (Kabal)
Social Confinement and Paralysis			
	Forced Confinement & Imprisonment	The inability to leave home, leading to social and physical isolation.	"It was very difficult for us to leave our homes, and we mostly stayed indoors." (Khwazakhela); "We couldn't even step outside." (Mingora)
	Severe Disruption of Peace	The complete shattering of the normal, peaceful social order.	"the peace in our area was severely disrupted." (Khwazakhela); "There were issues of peace and security..." (Matta)
Economic and Existential Hardship			
	Struggle for Basic Survival	The conflict leading to a fight for fundamental needs like food.	"Our lives were so difficult, and we really struggled even to obtain one meal." (Mingora)
	Unfavorable and Bad Conditions	A general description of life becoming unbearable and oppressive.	"The circumstances were extremely poor... The circumstances were terrible." (Matta); "The situation was bleak." (Khwazakhela)

The trauma that the transgender community underwent during the Swat conflict is represented in Table 1, depicting a trauma experience surrounding violence, fear, and trauma as a way of life. The trauma experience surrounding violence, fear, and trauma as a way of life for Transgender is anlyzed below.

The theme Direct and Targeted Violence indicates that the community was not a bystander, but rather directly targeted and victimized. The "Systematic Targeting of Livelihood" was the first wave of violence that the transgender community suffered when the Taliban deliberately attacked the cultural and economic sectors of the community: "the first attack on the community by the Taliban was on our music shops and our dance halls." The next phase was the "Merciless Killing of Community Members," with respondents stating: "many of us were mercilessly killed", highlighting a campaign for eradication.

The violence produced "A Landscape of Terror and Brutality." An "Atmosphere of Fear and Terror," became the common denominator of daily life, with a respondent summarizing: "There was an atmosphere of fear and terror everywhere." Fear was further exacerbated by "Witnessing Extreme Violence," and other forms of violence, including witnessing suicide bombs, coupled with the "scattered bodies" that became ominous reminders of violence and terror, and inflicted deep psychological scars. Many noted that the level of the violence was at times so bad it was described as "Indescribable Brutality and Cruelty" and suffering that official words could not describe or carry meaning.

"So, the community now experienced 'Social Confinement and Paralysis,' and a state of 'Forced Confinement & Imprisonment' set in, as they 'couldn't even step outside,' resulting in total social and physical isolation. This broke down their normal social order, with 'a Severe Disruption of Peace' moving from a once-peaceful place to a constant state of intimidation and fear. The final theme, 'Economic and Existential Hardship,' encodes the dispute on the struggles for survival. The conflict resulted in life being reduced to a basic 'Struggle for Basic Survival' and an uncertainty about 'even getting a single meal.

Table 2

Impact of Military Operations in Swat

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Societal Collapse	Complete Destruction	A general, overarching statement that all sectors and aspects of life were devastated.	3	"Every sector of life was affected; destruction was rampant, and no sector was spared." (Charbagh) "Everything was destroyed." (Khwazakhela) "Every aspect of life was affected..." (Mingora)
Economic Devastation & Livelihood Loss	Livelihood Abandoned	Direct references to the loss of income-generating activities and jobs.	5	"Livelihoods were ruined." (Khwazakhela) "Livelihoods were destroyed." (Matta) "We ourselves were severely impacted and had to endure starvation." (Kabal)
	Unemployment	Specific mention of people losing their employment.	1	"Many people became unemployed." (Kabal)
	Business/Market Loss	Damage to the formal and informal economic infrastructure like markets and business centers.	2	"Markets and business centres suffered heavy losses." (Matta)

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
	Community-Specific Ban	The targeted prohibition of the transgender community's primary profession (dance, music).	1	"...our livelihood depended on dance, singing, and musical gatherings, which were banned by the militants." (Mingora)
Infrastructure Destruction	Education	Specific damage to educational institutions like schools.	1	"Schools were blown up..." (Khwazakhela)
	Healthcare	Specific damage or closure of health facilities.	1	"...hospitals were almost closed..." (Khwazakhela)
	Transportation	Damage to roads and transportation networks.	1	"...roads were destroyed." (Khwazakhela)
Social & Personal Suffering	Forced Migration	The compulsion to leave their homes and areas due to the conflict.	1	"...we had to migrate..." (Mingora)
	Targeted Violence & Persecution	Direct threats, torture, and targeting of a specific group (the transgender community).	1	"...most of our community members were tortured and targeted." (Mingora)

In Table 2, we expand the lens to describe the total societal collapse that was experienced by the transgender community across all facets of life in Swat. The transgender point of view regarding the impact of military operations in Swat is put forward in the following analysis, based on their responses. The global theme is "Societal Collapse," which was referenced as "a complete destruction," where "no sector was spared." Respondents talked in broad strokes of comments like "Everything was destroyed" to describe the totality of the collapse. Underneath the umbrella of "Societal Collapse," the construct of "Economic Devastation & Livelihood Loss" was the primary driver too. The most enduring code was "Livelihood Abandoned," and again the respondents utilized simple, powerful comments like "livelihoods were ruined," and "livelihoods were destroyed," which led to "Unemployment" throughout life in Swat. The physical market economy also represented a "Business/Market Loss." As problematic was the "Community Specific Ban" that further impacted the transgender community, a direct targeting and prohibition of their primary means of employment, which was "dance, singing, and musical gatherings," which was a direct assault on their identity and means of living.

Destruction of "Infrastructure" was thorough, touching all essential services. Respondents noted the destruction of "Education" ("schools were blown up"), "Healthcare" ("hospitals were almost closed"), and "Transportation" ("roads were destroyed"), crippling essential societal functions.

The human cost is represented under "Social & Personal Suffering," which includes "Forced Migration" and, importantly, "Targeted Violence & Persecution" perpetrated against their community, with one respondent noting that "most of our community members were tortured and targeted."

Table 3

Perceptions of Responsibility for Harm in Swat

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Blame on the Military	Military as Primary Aggressor	Directly attributes the most damage or the orchestration of the conflict to the military.	2	"The Swati society suffered the most damage at the hands of the military. This was the military's own game..." (Charbagh)
Blame on the Taliban	Taliban as Primary Aggressor	Directly attributes the most damage to the Taliban, often citing the misuse of religion.	1	"The Swat society suffered the most damage at the hands of the Taliban, all in the name of religion." (Khwazakhela)
Shared Responsibility	Both Sides Harmed Society	Explicitly states that both the Taliban and the military caused significant harm to the public.	2	"Both sides caused great harm to Swati society." (Kabal) "Both harmed Swati society..." (Matta)
	Specific Taliban Actions	Details the harmful actions perpetrated by the Taliban.	2	"...the Taliban tortured ordinary people in the name of Sharia..." (Matta) "...our livelihood... were banned by the militants." (Mingora - from previous context)
	Specific Military Actions	Details the harmful actions perpetrated by the military.	2	"...the military ruined Swat's society in the name of the operation." (Matta) "Due to curfews... transportation system was disrupted..." (Mingora)
Consequences for Civilians	Public as Ultimate Victim	Framing the conflict as one where the general public suffered the most, regardless of the actors.	2	"...the public suffered, and Swat's beautiful valley turned into a battlefield..." (Kabal) "They affected us badly and greatly." (Mingora)
	Socio-Economic Disruption	Describing the indirect consequences of the conflict that crippled daily life (curfews, unemployment, supply shortages).	1	"Because of curfews, people were in lockdown and lost the opportunity to work, the transportation system was off-limits, and shortages of food and basic goods were experienced." (Mingora).

Table 3 presents the hierarchy used by the community for their suffering, and the blame they created is also depicted. The transgender perspective on putting responsibility for harm in Swat can be divided into the following themes.

One theme was blaming the "Military as Primary Aggressor," in which a Charbagh respondent reported it was "the military's own game." Others indicated blame was directed toward the "Taliban as Primary Aggressor," and cited misuse of religion in these responses.

A noticeable theme was "Shared Responsibility," where respondents stated in clear terms, "both sides harmed society." Each cited "Specific Taliban Actions," such as torture in the name of Sharia, and "Specific

Military Actions," where the military ruined operations and put curfews in place as an undue burden on civilian populations.

The "Consequences for Civilians" with the posture of civilians as the "Ultimate Victim." Regardless of perpetrators, the general consensus was formed by pointing out, "the public suffered," and the beautiful landscape of Swat was turned "into a battlefield." This suffering included substantial "Socio-Economic Disruption": mass employment/unemployment, collapsing forms of transport, and food shortages as indirect results of the event.

The analysis shows the transgender people's survival strategies during military presence in Swat. The main strategy was under the area of "Displacement & Confinement." Numerous individuals made a "Self-Imposed Confinement" choice of remaining indoors, not at the order of someone, but due to fear. As one summarises, We chose to remain in our homes." Likewise, for individuals who fled the fighting, "Forced Migration" to Mardan or Peshawar was the only option, as the continued fighting forced them out of the area entirely.

Another prominent theme is the "Psychological Trauma & Fear" of others during their survival strategies. The respondents described overwhelming "Fear and Trauma," stating, "people had become psychologically traumatised and debilitative" and "depression was present everywhere." A "Fear of Violence," especially of gunfire surrounding them, was a source of ongoing terror and dictated their actions.

Additionally, the community faced "Socio-Economic Hardship," which included significant "Economic Hardship," due to increased unemployment, and loss of "Property Damage," from loss of homes and livestock, as a result, further complicating their material loss.

Table 4

Survival Strategies During Military Presence in Swat

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Displacement & Confinement	Self-Imposed Confinement	Choosing to stay inside the home as a primary strategy to avoid danger, even without a direct order.	3	"We stayed in our homes and didn't go outside." (Charbagh) "We still avoided going outside... we preferred to stay in our homes." (Kabal) "We were confined to our dance halls..." (Mingora, from Q2 context)
	Forced Migration	Relocating to a different city (for instance, Mardan or Peshawar) to leave the conflict area behind.	2	"We had migrated to Mardan, before the army invaded Mardan by itself". (Khwazakhela) "We migrated to Peshawar when the army was still there". (Matta)
Psychological Trauma & Fear	Fear and Trauma	Conveying feelings of intense fear, psychological trauma, and depression as result of the conflict	3	"We were terrified of the gunfire..." (Charbagh) "Psychologically, people were traumatized, depression was widespread..." (Mingora)
	Fear of Violence	Specific mention of gunfire or the general climate of violence as the cause of fear.	2	"We were extremely afraid of the gunfire..." (Charbagh) "Due to the gunfire, we preferred to stay in our homes." (Kabal)

Socio-Economic Hardship	Economic Hardship	Mention of unemployment and loss of livelihood as a direct consequence of the situation.	1	"...unemployment increased..." (Mingora)
	Property Damage	Mention of physical damage to homes and personal property (like livestock).	1	"...livestock and homes were damaged." (Mingora)

Table 4 outlines the reactive and defensive strategies employed by the community to navigate the challenging military operations period.

In this context, the strategies were a result of "Targeted Persecution & Fear," and the community faced a "Direct Threat of Violence," as several respondents reported they feared being killed. This was made worse with "Ideological Opposition," as the community could not publicly engage in music and dance, as their profession was anathema to the Taliban, and they were visible and explicit targets.

Their response shows a clear pattern of "Sequential Survival Strategies." The initial stage became "Initial Confinement/Hiding," which was described as "to hide initially," and then "stay quiet." When it became untenable, the second stage was "Forced Migration," a necessity; so we left the area." These movements from hiding to fleeing illustrate a graduated response to an increasing threat.

This ultimately culminated in a significant "Loss of Agency & Freedom." The code "Forced Confinement" describes this state of being trapped by severe and military-directed persecution in fear, not choice.

Table 5

Survival Strategies During Taliban Presence in Swat

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
1. Targeted Persecution & Fear	Direct Threat of Violence	Explicit statements of being killed, targeted, or facing death.	4	"The Taliban were killing us..." (Charbagh) "...we feared being killed..." (Khwazakhela)
	Ideological Opposition	Specific mention that their profession (dance/music) was opposed by the Taliban, making them a target.	2	"...we were associated with dance and music, which the Taliban opposed." (Kabal)
2. Sequential Survival Strategies	Initial Confinement/Hiding	The first-stage strategy of hiding indoors or staying quiet to avoid detection.	5	"Our strategy was to hide initially..." (Kabal) "We stayed quiet and couldn't go outside..." (Khwazakhela) "...we were confined to our homes." (Matta)
	Forced Migration	The second-stage strategy of leaving Swat entirely to escape the threat.	5	"...so we left the area." (Charbagh) "...and then quietly leave the area..." (Kabal) "Later, we were forced

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
				to migrate." (Matta) "...we moved to Mardan, Charsadda, and other areas." (Mingora)
3. Loss of Agency & Freedom	Forced Confinement	Being forced to stay indoors, not by choice but due to extreme fear of violence.	3	"...we were confined." (Khwazakhela) "...we were confined to our homes." (Matta) "Initially, we were confined to our dance halls..." (Mingora)

Table 5 shows a more sequential and almost hopeless pattern of survival strategies, specifically under the threat of the Taliban, highlighting a loss of agency.

In this instance, the strategies were a result of "Targeted Persecution & Fear," and the community faced a "Direct Threat of Violence," as several respondents reported they feared being killed. This was made worse with "Ideological Opposition," as the community could not publicly engage in music and dance, as their profession was anathema to the Taliban, and they were visible and explicit targets.

Their response shows a clear pattern of "Sequential Survival Strategies." The initial stage became "Initial Confinement/Hiding," which was described as "to hide initially," and then "stay quiet." When it became untenable, the second stage was "Forced Migration," a necessity; so we left the area." These movements from hiding to fleeing illustrate a graduated response to an increasing threat.

This ultimately culminated in a significant "Loss of Agency & Freedom." The code "Forced Confinement" describes this state of being trapped by severe and military-directed persecution in fear, not choice.

Table 6

Transgender Perception about Media Portrayal During the Swat Conflict

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
1. Accusations of Bias and Shifting Allegiance	Shifting Support / Appeasement	The media first supported/promoted the Taliban and then later shifted to supporting/promoting the military.	3	"The media appeased both sides---first, they promoted the Taliban, and later, they promoted the military." (Charbagh) "In the beginning, the media supported Taliban and later, they presented army is heroic." (Khwazakhela) "Initially, there was biased reporting about the Taliban, and later about the military." (Matta)
	Exaggeration and Bias	The media significantly distorted the issues at hand and exhibited bias in their	2	"The media magnified the occupancy of the Taliban and the army in Swat. There was biased

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
		coverage one way or the other.		reporting initially..." (Matta)
2. Negative Impact of Media Coverage	Sensationalism and Fear-Mongering	The media's portrayal terrified the public by sensationalizing the conflict and describing the Swat war zone.	2	"the media further frightened people by portraying Swat as a war zone." (Kabal) "The media exaggerated the presence..." (Matta)
3. Positive Role of Media	Positive & Informative Portrayal	The media portrayed the military in a positive light and provided the public with timely and useful information about the conflict.	1	"The media portrayed the military operation positively and kept the public informed about the Taliban and military actions in a timely manner." (Mingora)

Table 6 reflects the community's essential evaluation of the media's conduct. The community's judgment was overwhelmingly negative and emphasized the media's "Bias," "Shift," and "Sensationalism."

The major critique was "Accusations of Bias and Shifting Allegiance," while respondents described a "Shifting Support/Appeasement," noting that the media "first supported the Taliban, then they supported the military." This perspective characterized the media as unprincipled, appeasing power. Respondents also accused the media of "Exaggeration and Bias" in reporting.

A main consequence was "Negative Results of Media Coverage," as these respondents claimed the media displayed "Sensationalism and Fear-mongering" to ultimately "cause more fear by showing Swat as a war zone," exacerbating public trauma.

In contrast, one respondent offered "Positive Role of Media," where he articulated that the media provided a "Positive & Informative Portrayal" of the military and kept the public up to date. The presence of a single, positive evaluation represents a different, temporally-defined viewpoint, albeit a minority opinion.

Table 7

Transgender Perception about Media Representation of Local Challenges

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Critical Assessment of Media Failure	Inadequate Highlighting of Issues	A direct statement that the media did not do enough or failed to properly cover the people's problems.	2	"The media did not adequately highlight the problems and challenges faced by the local people as it should have." (Matta)
	Sensationalism over Substance	Criticism that the media focused on spreading fear and reporting violent events (blasts, deaths) rather than on the underlying humanitarian issues.	1	"The media didn't do much; they only spread fear and kept reporting that a blast had occurred... and people were killed..." (Charbagh)
Positive Assessment of Media Role	Effective Highlighting of Issues	A direct statement that the media did an excellent or very good job of	3	"The media did an excellent job highlighting the problems and challenges..."

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
		highlighting the people's problems.		(Khwazakhela) "The media represented the public very well..." (Mingora) "Yes, the media highlighted the public's issues..." (Kabal)
	Acting as a Bridge to Authorities	The media played a key role in informing the government or authorities about the people's difficulties in a timely manner.	2	"They kept the authorities informed in a timely manner." (Khwazakhela) "...kept the government informed about the people's difficulties." (Mingora)
	Platform for Voice	Specific mention of the media (including FM radio) providing a platform to air public issues.	1	"...the media highlighted the public's issues on TV and radio, mostly on FM radio." (Kabal)

Table 7 contains a bifurcated assessment of media treatment of different challenges of the local population. Perceptions of Media Representation of Local Challenges were divided into different themes. The analysis shows that "Critical Assessment of Media Failure" was a recurrent theme. Some thought there was "Inadequate Highlighting of Issues," claiming that the media "did not suitably highlight the problems... as it should have." Others offered a critique that emphasized the issue of "Sensationalism over Substance," considering that the media used broadcasting fears through coverage of explosions and deaths, rather than the back story as humanitarian. Despite this, they confidently part of a "Positive Assessment of Media Role". Many considered that the media was "Effective Highlighting of Issues," to the point that someone said they "did an excellent job." There was also a recognition of the media's advantage as a "Bridge to Authorities," to keep the government informed of the problems of people. There was also a respect for media being a "Platform for Voice," especially through local FM radio.

Table 8

Perceived Differences in Media Framing Across Levels

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Limited Media Access	Reliance on Local/FM Radio	Mention of using primarily local FM radio as a source of information.	2	"We only relied on FM radio for information." (Charbagh) "...local media only provided information from FM radio..." (Matta)
	Lack of Knowledge	Explicit statement of not knowing about the differences or the media's work in detail.	2	"We didn't know what else the media was doing..." (Charbagh) "Sir, I don't know much about the media..." (Kabal)
Critical Analysis of Media Framing	Local Media: Community-Focused & Humanitarian	Framing that focuses on ground realities, personal stories, and emotional/humanitarian angles.	3	"The context of local media... their focus on immediate context and stories involving someone else... with emphasis on

Theme	Code	Description	Code Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
				emotional and humanitarian elements." (Mingora) "Local media tends to tell a story of events taking place in local communities, or individual human beings as a whole..." (Khwazakhela)
	National Media: Politicized and sensationalized	In media framing, events are connected to national peer-level politics and security, and sensationalized or oversimplified.	3	"The national media... contextualized the event within a political background and a security view... sometimes imitating the state's own narrative." (Mingora) "National Pakistani media often depict transgender individuals as sensationalist language and policy-related contextualization which lacks nuance." (Khwazakhela)
	International Media: De-contextualized & Globalized	Based on global event narratives (terrorism, human rights), while ignoring or simplifying contexts on the local level.	3	"International media... contextualizes the war in terms of a global narrative... that translates local contingencies into larger geopolitical story lines." (Mingora) "International media tends to theorize transgender rights... venue for a worldwide human rights... discourse. That discourse often leaves local experience out." (Khwazakhela)
	Misrepresentation / Contrary Reporting	Media national and international represented contrary to reality.	2	"The situation was false represented on the television." (Charbagh) "The media (national and international) reported contrary to the actual situation." (Matta)

The last 8 table illustrates a nuanced understanding of how distinct levels of media framed the conflict and their observations on the limited access that impacted their perceptions.

We use the theme of "Limited Media Access" to situate their views. A number of them "Relied on Local/FM Radio," some explained there was "Lack of Knowledge" about the national media landscape, indicating "I don't know" However, they were able to offer a precise "Critical Analysis of Media Framing" and Local Media" as "Community Focused & Humanitarian," showing concern for "immediate ground realities" and "personal accounts." They considered "National Media" to be "Politicized & Sensationalized," connecting events to "wider political & security issues," often disregarding detail. "International Media" conversations were

characterized as "Decontextualized & Globalized," fitting into existing global narratives about the conflict, with "the narratives being terrorism and human rights," with attention to local complexity disregarded. This resulted in frequently feeling that "Misrepresentation / Contrary Reporting" was composed that did not align with their realities.

Discussion

The accounts of transgender community reveal a significantly different and terrible experience of violence, which is systematically targeted based on identity and stands out among the rest of the civilian population. Their stories help shed light on the impact of pre-existing social marginalization on the conflict in a violent way, causing a crisis within a crisis of vulnerable groups (Carpenter, 2017). This discussion goes beyond a general overview of civilian victimization to highlight how gender identity, socioeconomic status, and career intersect, resulting in an unprecedented and extensive case of victimization. It requires a nuanced understanding of conflict that is sensitive to the particular mechanisms by which violence is mediated by local social stratifications and biases (Buss, 2009; Henry, 2016; Sjoberg, 2016; Loken, 2017; Angeli, 2024; Rose, 2025).

One of the main themes in Direct and Targeted Violence, which involves the intentional targeting of livelihoods through the systematic destruction of dance halls and music stores, was called the Systematic Targeting of Livelihood. This was a direct assault on the cultural and economic foundations of their community. This correlates with the terms of cultural genocide or socio-cultural genocide when the lifestyle of a group is destroyed systematically (Hinton, 2002). This economic sabotage, alongside the merciless killing of community members, leads to an extermination strategy based on the severe and brutal interpretation of gender and morality by the Taliban (Bari, 2010; Ashraf, 2024). The secondary effect of the overall conflict was not just a collateral feature of the atmosphere of fear and terror but a measured instrument of power that, in turn, compelled a hyper-visible community into a new regime of forced confinement and imprisonment and social paralysis (Butler, 2016).

The data reveal a subtle sense of responsibility and harm, as captured under the thematic analysis of “Perceptions of Responsibility.” Although certain participants pointed to the Taliban or the military individually, the theme of “Shared Responsibility” is a loud one that indicates a sense that both violent forces, whose concerted efforts destroyed Swat’s society. This indicates a civilian point of view that many binary conflict studies fail to consider when analyzing the counter-insurgency actions by the state, which, however justified by a quest to liberate the state, is perceived by people as a different kind of oppressive violence through collateral destruction, curfews, and economic disruption (Rashid et al., 2016; Sanaullah, 2020). The very fact that the community presents itself as the ultimate victim underlines their status as the lowest on the power chain, becoming the most affected by the activity of all of the armed groups (Mertus & Benjamin, 2000).

The tragic sequence of resistance–flight, as seen in the community’s crime prevention strategies, is detailed in the tables on Survival Strategies. The sequence between the initial confinement/hiding and the forced migration describes a progressive reaction to an increasing existential threat. This displacement pattern is one of the frequent survival strategies of persecuted groups; nevertheless, in the case of the transgender community, it was further aggravated by marginality, meaning that they were less likely to have sufficient money to leave promptly and thus could be exploited more easily in the process of displacement (Anker, 2017). Their so-called “Loss of Agency & Freedom” is a significant effect of targeted violence, as it deprives people of the ability to make the most fundamental choices in their lives, whether it is about movement or livelihood (Björkdahl & Mannergren-Selimovic, 2015).

The community’s critical thinking about the media shows advanced knowledge of the portrayal of their unhappiness, or rather, a false depiction of it. Their understanding of the media as being subjected to considerable political and military pressures and, as a result, covering the subject of Shifting

Support/Appeasement is consistent with the criticism of Pakistani media being exposed to volatile and often sensationalistic media (Yousaf, 2020; Azim & Usman Shakir, 2023; Lee, 2024; Javed et al., 2025). By drawing a rough line between the so-called Community-Centered and local media and the so-called Politicized and Sensationalized national and Decontextualized, globalized international media, this illustrates that they understand the framing concept for influencing people and, by extension, the media as well. Their situation was noted as a victim of generalized accounts of terrorism or human rights, without recourse to local peculiarities; this criticism is echoed in the academic literature of the mainstream media's failure to appropriately address the intersectional specificities of conflict (Kassova, 2020).

The experiences of transgender community in the Swat conflict bring out the vitality of using an intersectional lens to explain the human, holistic side of a war. The conflict could not be a single instance of political violence but a multi-tier attack that affected their identity, means of livelihood, and social being. They both bore the particular and savage kind of persecution by the Taliban. They became the casualties of a general breakdown of society, together with the collateral damage caused by the military operation, which made them ultimate casualties of a massive power game. The fact that they shifted from confinement to forced migration forms the basis of their survival tactics, their loss of agency, and the profound vulnerability of the marginalized groups in times of crisis. Moreover, their critical insight into the media illustrates how the local, national, and international media lack consistency and precision in presenting their unique humanitarian crises, frequently adopting simplistic or even sensationalist approaches. The story of the transgender community of Swat reduces in a very harsh way the idea that not every part of peace and security can be equally enjoyed, and that only a very active approach, aimed at meeting the needs and interests of the most discriminated groups, can reconcile the situation and help them overcome the trauma.

Conclusions

The experience of the transgender community particularly highlights the standpoint of state failure and multiple identities coming into conflict. Their systematic targeting, through the destruction of livelihoods and cultural life, and gender-based extermination, was made invisible by media stories that proved either sensationalizing terrorism or addressing human rights violations of intersectional specificities. This observation validates the public perception that mainstream conflict analysis dismisses those at the intersection of identity; in this case, the community identified the phenomenon as "mollification," in which media coverage bowed to political-military pressures rather than bearing witness.

Their survival strategies, moving from confinement to forced migration, underscore a profound loss of agency and the extreme vulnerability of marginalized groups in times of crisis. Furthermore, their perceptive critique of the media reveals a failure of local, national, and international outlets to consistently and accurately represent their unique humanitarian crisis, often subsuming it within simplistic or sensationalist frames. The story of the transgender community in Swat is a stark reminder that peace and security are not universally experienced; true conflict resolution and post-conflict reconciliation must actively address the needs and rights of the most marginalized, whose suffering is often the deepest and most silenced.

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