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Security Nexus Conversation

BUILDING PEACE AND SECURITY: A WOMAN TRAILBLAZER IN PAKISTAN

By Ammara Aamer Khattak¹ and Saira Yamin²

**An Interview with Ms. Ammara Aamer Khattak, Additional Director, Pakistan Civil Services
Academy, Lahore**

Interviewed by Dr. Saira Yamin

Transcript prepared by Ms. Kamaile Patton, DK I APCSS Intern

In this interview Dr. Saira Yamin speaks to Ms. Ammara Khattak, a distinguished alumna of DK I APCSS who attended the Comprehensive Crisis Management course (CCM 15-1). Ms. Khattak is a senior Pakistan civil servant who has broken the glass ceiling many times. She is the first woman to have served in the prestigious position of Deputy Commissioner in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as the Director Relief and Operations managing refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) at Jalozei camp - the largest and oldest refugee camp in Pakistan - built after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Ms. Khattak has also held an appointment as a Special Judicial Magistrate in interior Sindh province. She has served in many remote and underdeveloped parts of her country, in positions of authority, in predominantly male institutional environments.

The full video podcast interview is available [at this link](#).

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Ms. Khattak, leading an all-male team as Deputy Commissioner in Abbottabad, Pakistan. 2016.

Saira Yamin (SY): Ammara, please tell us where you are assigned these days?

Ammara Khattak (AK): Having served local communities for the last fourteen years or so in underdeveloped areas, I am currently posted in Lahore as the Additional Director of Programs at the Civil Services Academy. The academy is for newly inducted civil servants in training as Assistant Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners who will be our future Secretaries and leaders. I am a faculty member, mentoring and advising them.

SY: Please tell us about some of your contributions to the upliftment of women belonging to disadvantaged communities, including refugees.

AK: I have done whatever I could in various positions to introduce gender mainstreaming policies. For instance, I have worked to mitigate the concerns of women with disabilities, those with special needs, particularly in IDP camps. When serving the communities at Jalojai camp, a somewhat challenging assignment, I observed women turning adversity into opportunity. They are considered illiterate women and are amongst the most disadvantaged, yet they demonstrate outstanding leadership with limited resources. We had some pilot projects at the camp, and in partnership with UN agencies, we were able to institute women-friendly spaces. It was a humanitarian project providing gender and child cells to protect vulnerable populations during disasters. The project catered to those with special needs as well. I believe it was the first such program and policy within a government department spelling out how we should respond to gendered insecurities during disasters. Drawing on this model, the Planning and Development

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Department of the Government of Pakistan is now incorporating gender considerations to address the needs of both women and children. I am very pleased that our efforts inspired them to do so. I want to acknowledge the work of my colleagues, many women *and* men, whose contributions are helping to advance this agenda. They have been successful in helping to build incredible momentum.



Ms. Khattak at the independence day rally Abbottabad, August 14, 2016

SY: What are some of the most significant barriers and opportunities for gender mainstreaming policies in the region?

AK: The most significant barriers in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh, are cultural. I would suggest that the language associated with gender involves stereotyping. Secondly, there is the issue of societal construction of specific roles to women and men and transgender people. All the genders are pigeon-holed, and it is challenging for society to accept someone who does not fit into their assigned role. So, the most significant barrier is psychological - not physical or legal, in my opinion. There is a social ladder with missing steps, hindering women from becoming leaders and reaching the top. Hence, their progress is slow. It is not about rule-setting. The law doesn't prohibit us from becoming officers but until we introduced the female quota, it wasn't possible to get there. A lot of it is about the education we

are giving to women and their access to it. To clarify my point, society as a whole needs to change, to reconstruct gender roles and transform their perspectives, to shift the paradigm. This is the most significant barrier for gender mainstreaming policies.

To respond to your question about opportunities, every threat could be turned into one. When we challenge stereotypes, we cross these barriers. So for us, the first-wavers, those who are now becoming the first-this and first-that, there are immense opportunities. There are so many fields that could open up if we see them as opportunities. There are so many assignments that may be taken on by women to demonstrate different models and innovations in practices in a male-dominant society. I think it is a great time to experience new things in the civil administrative services of the government.



Ms. Khattak after a briefing at the Finance Division in Islamabad, 2019.

SY: You have been assigned to some powerful positions traditionally only given to men. How do you navigate a primarily male-dominated environment where women are not generally not visible in positions of authority?

AK: I wouldn't say my path was without challenges or difficulties. It was equally challenging for those who had never before received orders from a woman. You don't see much of that in our culture and society. So, it works both ways - we are learning by experience. It is a new development in my line of work. In my personal experience, it has not been easy. In our language, we use a word *cho mukhi*, meaning from four

fronts, that we are fighting on four fronts. My female contemporaries are trying to get out and be accepted in roles traditionally assigned to men, and they are fighting on four fronts. Why do I say so? First, these women have to prove that they are still women - not men - and have a different way of doing things, while still performing roles assigned to them at home because nobody is there to share the burden – the understanding has not yet developed. Secondly, women cannot afford to be mediocre officers. We have to be the best because we are the first ones - if we fail, we fail the ones trailing behind us. Generalizations are often made based on my performance. In various departments where I have worked, out of forty or fifty staff, I am often the only female. If among these forty men, a man fails, some men fail, but if I fail, all women fail, and the feminine way of doing things fails. Women don't have that privilege of being mediocre - we have to give it our all. We have to be the best so the path of other girls following our footsteps is not blocked. It is a considerable challenge and I had to work hard. I consider myself to be very privileged because I had the support of my family, my parents, and my husband, who is in the same service. He understood what I am doing and what I am trying to do and always stood by me.

I want to highlight that it's not only about being a woman; it's also about the work environment - the larger system that we are operating in. It affects you psychologically and influences how you make decisions. When you join a department where a woman has never worked before, you try to fit in. You might try to change your decision-making style and your way of doing things. To blend in, you might start adopting the environment which basically represents a patriarchal culture. So, the likelihood of adopting those norms and values - although you are a woman, remains. One has to be very conscious of this. One must remain aware that there are different ways of doing things and then adopt the right way. I have been struggling and I have been very conscious of that process while performing my tasks. I consider whether doing things in different ways would be better. What style should I adopt, the feminine style - whether the right lobe or the left lobe of the brain would be better to make that decision? So psychologically, it's very tricky for women at this time, particularly in Pakistan and the South Asian region. I hope we will do better.



Ms. Khattak in a meeting to discuss Program Management and Implementation Unit's collaboration with USAID's Sindh Basic Education Program. At the School Education and Literacy Department, Sindh, 2018.

SY: As a powerful official in the Pakistani civil services, how is your leadership style different than your male colleagues? How have your contributions impacted the security landscape?

AK: Building on my last comment, it's not about being a man or woman. It's about your way of thinking, about which side of the brain you are using more. My understanding of gender differences between feminine and masculine decision-making styles in administrative services is that as a woman, one often is better able to understand and adapt to the situation. In my personal experience, not citing research, what I have seen in the last twenty years is that for quick impact projects, the masculine approach is better. For instance, when you are in the field, when you are charging, when you have to get things done, giving an order - a commanding, masculine style of leadership, is impactful. For long-term projects - like building peace, like caregiving, like nurturing - it takes time, it takes motherhood. It takes time - just like nature does. Sustainability requires the feminine approach. It depends on your project. If you want to create long-lasting impact, it will take patience and kindness, generally considered feminine attributes. It's about the process as much as it is about the outcome. Most of the time, it's not merely about getting a project completed but equally importantly what will happen in the medium to long-term. What is different in my approach to work or the feminine approach is that I do not generally put a full-stop to my projects. After seeing a project through to its completion, although my work is done, I want to see it prosper. I want to ensure it will have a long-lasting impact. Patience is of the essence. Project assessment is critical and all the details that are involved in sustaining it. It is a work of art that the feminine side of the brain is skilled at. It is like building peace.

Women are caregivers. It is the role culturally assigned to them, particularly in our region. A caregiver is a peacebuilder. It is their traditional role that needs to be enhanced and adapted to the security sector

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because the security environment has changed. It is not just about a war on the borders or taking swords out in the battlefield. Peace and security begin in our homes and our communities. It is about ensuring food security and fighting climate change. It is about countering terrorism in my country. How we fought the war on terror, its impact on women and children and how we have responded. I think the principle is self-evident. If you have a primary stake in security, you need to have a position of power in decision making. So, in building peace, if you are a stakeholder, if you are facing the brunt, then it is critical to also have a say in decision-making. Women and children suffer disproportionately as they are more vulnerable. We, therefore, need to empower them by integrating their perspectives in decision making through all necessary means, including education and access to economic resources.

Women must be empowered through greater visibility in security sector institutions. Although the numbers are not very encouraging, there is some change. In the year 2000, we barely inducted ten percent female civil servants. Ten years later, in 2020, in the last batch of trainee officers in our civil-services academy, the gender balance was nearly 50/50. In the police forces, it's less than two percent, and in the armed forces, even less than them. In general, in the Federal Government of Pakistan, if we look at the hierarchy, grades one to twenty-two - from the lowest positions to the highest, women's representation is less than five percent. This is not very good but hope lies in education and our universities. Female enrolment in public universities is more than 50 percent, sometimes more than 60 percent, which tells me that we are on the right track. But it will take time, and it will take effort by those who are paving the way to reach where we want to go in achieving gender equilibrium and mainstreaming.



Ms. Khattak receiving a Certificate of Excellence from Mr. Mark Sorenson, Executive Officer, USAID, Karachi, 2019.

SY: What can the governments in Pakistan and South Asia do to make security sector institutions more gender-inclusive, more friendly and responsive?

AK: I think for democratic countries, the first and foremost is women's representation in Parliament and increasing the number of incoming women politicians. In Pakistan, the system of indirect election needs to change. We have a quota for women, but we need to move beyond this system. Women's participation in general elections needs to be pushed by political parties. We need greater political will to bring women into politics so they may be in positions to speak for themselves and to represent their interests. So first and foremost, women must compete in general elections. Women should not be nominated but elected in our legislative bodies, be it in the rural village councils or at the highest forum in the Parliament.

Secondly, education is key to everything. We must help women joining our institutions in planning their careers. Presently, we are leaving it all up to them. Many women professionals are often the first to take this step in their families and there is no one to guide them. There has to be a targeted plan to assist them and to diversify their roles in the security sector. Traditionally in our region, women serve in the education sector or medical professions. Other fields are generally not open to them. Women must be mentored and encouraged. There must be a focused educational agenda building these women to serve in a variety of roles and professions.

My third recommendation is at the individual level. It is for women who are in power positions right now. They must understand they are flag bearers and torchbearers. When a woman is out there, thousands of eyes are on her as a role model. How she performs will influence societal trends in girls' education and in generating family support for their career aspirations. So, we have to be conscious of our responsibilities - both at institutional and individual levels. Women security professionals who are visible to others can play a pivotal role in changing lives.



Ms. Khattak at Independence Day celebrations at Jalal baba Auditorium. Abbottabad, 2016.

SY: As a woman security practitioner operating in a predominantly male institutional environment, how do you integrate your perspective? How do you ensure your voice is heard? What advice would you give to women in similar positions?

AK: You have to push it. You have to present your idea in three or four different ways. You have to understand where the other voices around the table are coming from. Understand that it is another side of the brain and it is difficult for them to grasp your perspective. You have to learn to speak their language and reframe your idea in many different ways. Sometimes you have to explain it again and again. Reframing has helped me, but it doesn't always work, and it doesn't matter. There is always another meeting and another opportunity to bring the matter up. Sometimes your ideas will be blocked - yet one has to be patient. Understand that it will be a long process for yourself and for the others in the institution to embrace your ideas. Remain persistent in your endeavors while going with the flow.



Ms. Khattak celebrating independence with school children. Abbottabad, August 2016.

SY: Any final words of advice for Pakistani women, South Asian women, or women in the Indo-Pacific generally speaking?

AK: Research studies and my personal experience suggest that women underestimate themselves. I don't know whether it is cultural, psychological, or perhaps other factors; however, as a woman, who is often in a minority in the security sector, we sometimes start doubting our own voice. Sometimes it's not a different perspective, just another way of spelling it out because we speak a different language. So being confident and knowing who you are is very important. If you are an asset to an institution, then you have to believe in yourself for others to see you as such. For new entrants in the workforce, I would like to highlight that due to our traditional roles at home, somewhat socially isolating and inhibiting, Pakistani women tend to be sometimes hesitant about interacting with male colleagues, particularly at the outset. If we want to succeed as professionals, we should improve our coordination, networking, confidence, and self-esteem in the workplace. Only then will we be able to pave the way for others as torchbearers.



Ms. Khattak after a briefing by the Resident Coordinator's office at United Nations Head Quarters, Islamabad. 2019.

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