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## DEVELOPMENT: THE ART OF SURVIVAL

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Beautiful handicrafts prepared by tribal women | Photos by the writer

Sultana Jana, 56, a resident of South Waziristan tribal agency was among the many tribal families forced to leave their homes and take refuge in the Jalozai internally displaced persons' (IDPs) camp in 2011. And like many other women in South Waziristan, Jana had already lost her sole bread-winner in a terrorist attack. "Like other women of my village, I also had lost my husband, a daily wager," she says.

As she recalls her days of struggle, Jana points out how difficult it was: “With four kids — two daughters and two sons — I had no one to look up to. Life for most, especially women, was no less than hell on earth. Scorching heat coupled with total dependence on charity had made our life very difficult.”

For Jana and a few of her fellow IDPs, what changed things was when a representative from the Women Community Centre (WCC) visited the camp. The WCC was started by the Centre of Excellence for Rural Development (CERD) in 2009 in collaboration with United Nations Human Rights Commission for Refugees (UNCHR), and aims to make women refugees self-reliant and financially independent.

*A crafts training programme for women  
in IDP camps has changed the lives of  
many former Fata residents*

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The 56-year-old resident recalls the official’s visit, “He asked us whether we knew any crafts. Not all but a few — including myself — did and the very next day, women trainers came to our camp and refreshed our previous knowledge and taught us even some new art with new tools.”

Jana completed her training in just three months along with 200 other Jalozai female camp residents. She now lives in Waziristan agency and has a home business where she stitches clothes for women in her neighbourhood as well as the nearby town.

So far, Jana is one of reportedly 3,000 people in Fata to benefit from the programme. A total of 41 training centres have been set up so far by the CERD at IDP camps in Peshawar, Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan, Lakki Marwat, Bannu and Khyber agency. In addition to training, the WCC also helps in promoting the women’s businesses and recently held a successful exhibition in Bannu district where handicrafts prepared by 700 women from Waziristan were

displayed.

Saif-ur-Rahman Durrani, chief of CERD says that under the CERD training workshops, women from the IDP camps had been able to polish their craft, learn new skills and were taught how to market themselves. “The main goal is to empower the most vulnerable women including widows, poor and totally dependent women between 18 and 30 years old. Most of these women are very talented but they don’t know how to make their designs more artistic and contemporary and how to market their products. That’s where we come in,” says Durrani. He adds that most IDPs have returned to their homes and have been running private training centres and home businesses.



Using their skills tribal women earn a substantial living to support their families

Clearly the programme has many success stories such as that of 45-year-old Meena Gul from Orakzai tribal agency. Along with five other women, Gul had learnt to embroider clothes and make pots from a local shrub called mezaray at the WCC set-up in the Bannu IDP camp five years ago.

Now running a successful training centre and business, Gul still remembers how overwhelmed she was all those years ago: “It is very painful to recall those

days when families were asked to leave their homes. I had lost my husband and two young sons in the war and I was living in an IDP camp with my two daughters and a son.”

Gul, however, was lucky enough to enrol in the WCC and in six months began receiving orders “from women in her own village, especially during the wedding season and Eid.”

“My kids are now going to school and I run my kitchen with great ease. Also I train around 15 young girls of my village at my home,” says a beaming Gul.

Even though marketed as a success, the programme has its detractors. Naheed Afridi, vice president of Awami National Party, Fata, whose organisation recently ran a crafts training programme for 300 women in Bara Khyber Agency argues that the impact isn't as deep as Durrani suggests. “[Given how patriarchal the region is] I don't think it will bring about a big change [in terms of 'empowerment'] but it will definitely have a trickling economic effect on women who don't have any other way to make a living,” she says.



Training in embroidery is a source of empowering tribal women

Nausheen Orakzai, chief of Da Qabaiylee Khwaindo Forum (Tribal Sisters Forum) — a local organisation comprising tribal young women — however, feels that training women can also ‘empower’ them. “A self-sustained and financially strong woman can speak loud and get herself heard anywhere in society,” she says. “The women living in Fata are very brave and have faced the hardest of challenges. They have the potential to change their fate once given a proper platform.”

Mehreen Afridi, chief of Fata Youth Forum (FYF) and chairperson of Fata Youth Empowerment and Development Association (FYEDA) — both voluntary organisations — feels that such workshops and opportunities should be provided by the government not the NGO sector. “It is the responsibility of the federal government to set up vocational institutes for women in Fata. Women are well-versed in their indigenous art but need a further push towards entrepreneurship,” says the social activist.

Naheed Afridi also feels that such centres and training workshops need to expand beyond IDP camps. “They should be [available] in tribal areas where a maximum number of women can get access to training.”

This is something that Durrani agrees on. He points out that his organisation has been working on a proposal with the federal government to set up more WCCs across the Fata region. At present, there are only two WCCs: one in Raghzai Sarwakai village in South Waziristan and another in Eidak town in North Waziristan, where 60 and 90 women respectively have been enrolled. Durrani hopes that the project will be rolled out to other tribal areas soon.

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