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Beyond the Protector and the Protected: Lived Experience, Gendered Security and Militarised Violence in Pakistan

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Abstract

Feminist security scholarship argues that the ostensibly neutral language of protection is structured by gendered assumptions about agency, vulnerability and legitimate violence. This paper examines what becomes visible when the protector/protected relationship is approached from women's lived experiences of militarised violence in Pakistan's conflict peripheries, principally Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and Balochistan. Combining feminist security studies, phenomenology, postcolonial feminist theory and affect theory, the paper develops an embodied, relational framework for protection, drawing on Tickner, Enloe, Butler, Das, Ahmed, Spivak and Wibben. It argues that women affected by militarised violence cannot be located as either passive recipients of protection or autonomous agents beyond vulnerability; rather, vulnerability, agency, care and political knowledge coexist. Methodologically, the study combines incident-level documentary evidence with survivor accounts, investigative journalism and conflict datasets, including Airwars, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the Global Terrorism Database and the South Asia Terrorism Portal. As the dataset remains under construction, the paper reports emerging analytical patterns rather than definitive casualty estimates. The paper makes three interventions: it reconceptualises protection as a contested, relational practice; it positions women's lived experience as a site from which security concepts can themselves be theorised; and it argues that Pakistan's conflict peripheries reveal the limits of frameworks separating military protection from everyday exposure and care.

Keywords: feminist security studies; lived experience; gendered security; militarisation; Pakistan; postcolonial feminism

Introduction

In the post-Westphalian nation-state system, security is traditionally imagined through a relationship of protection. The state, military or national security institutions are positioned as the primary actors capable of protecting a population, while civilians are positioned as those requiring protection. The relationship seems politically intuitive: those with coercive capacity protect those who lack it. Yet feminist scholarship has demonstrated that this apparent common sense rests upon a deeply gendered political ontology. The protector is associated with autonomy, rationality, authority and the legitimate capacity to exercise violence; the protected subject is associated with vulnerability, dependence and the need for external intervention (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2000).

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The significance of the distinction is not simply that women have historically been excluded from security institutions. This ontological problem is that women have often been incorporated into security discourse as objects of protection. Gender consequently becomes embedded within the very categories through which security is conceptualised. The political subject capable of exercising violence is implicitly masculinised, while the subject for whom security is provided is frequently feminised. Feminist security studies has spent several decades unsettling this configuration. Tickner (1992) demonstrated that conventional security discourse privileges masculinised assumptions about state power, autonomy and military capability. Enloe (2000) showed that militarisation is not confined to armies and battlefields but extends into households, labour, sexuality, nationalism and everyday social relations. Sjoberg (2013) subsequently developed a gendered account of war that challenged the assumption that women can be adequately represented either as peaceful victims or as exceptional female combatants.

This paper begins from that intellectual tradition but asks a more specific question: what happens to the protector/protected binary when security is examined through women's lived experiences of militarised violence?

The question is particularly important because vulnerability and agency do not necessarily occupy opposite positions. A woman can be exposed to military violence while caring for children. She can experience fear while making decisions about mobility and household survival. She can lose family members while becoming responsible for the economic and emotional continuity of the household. She can be positioned institutionally as a civilian victim while simultaneously producing knowledge about the security environment in which she lives. The analytical problem is therefore not simply that women have been inadequately represented. It is that the conceptual opposition between protector and protected is insufficiently capacious to describe the realities of life under militarisation (Enloe, 2014; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007; Tickner, 2001).

Pakistan provides an especially productive context for examining this problem. The conflict histories of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former FATA and Balochistan demonstrate that militarised protection does not operate within a politically empty landscape. These regions have experienced insurgency, counterinsurgency, military operations, displacement, surveillance, political contestation and multiple forms of civilian insecurity (Farooqi & Dover, 2023). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former FATA, the post-2001 security environment developed through the interaction of the war in Afghanistan, the emergence and expansion of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), militant violence, Pakistani military operations and the US drone campaign. In Balochistan, a distinct history of Baloch nationalist insurgency and state counterinsurgency has produced prolonged contestation over political authority, territorial control, resource distribution and citizenship. These histories matter because drone warfare should not be treated as an isolated technological phenomenon. The drone entered an already militarised environment in which populations were living with insurgency, military intervention and uncertainty. The question of what a drone means therefore cannot be separated from the wider security architecture within which it operates.

The 2009 Operation Rah-e-Rast in Swat provides a particularly important example. The Pakistani military operation was undertaken following the expansion of Taliban influence and the erosion

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of state authority in Swat. The operation succeeded in dislodging militant forces but was accompanied by mass displacement and extensive disruption to civilian life. Existing research estimates that approximately 2.5 million people were displaced during the operation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2009). More recent research identifies substantial social, educational, economic and psychological consequences of the campaign (Khan & Iqbal, 2025). The military operation therefore demonstrates a central tension that runs through this paper: an operation can be understood institutionally as an act of protection while simultaneously being experienced by civilians through displacement, destruction, fear and disruption. The same contradiction appears in a different form in Balochistan. Human Rights Watch documented enforced disappearances associated with Pakistan's security forces alongside abuses committed by Baloch armed groups (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The point here is not to construct an equivalence between different forms of violence. Nor is it to deny the violence perpetrated against civilians by insurgent organisations. Rather, the objective is to examine how civilian populations become positioned within competing security claims.

The category of the civilian is therefore central. A civilian may be understood as the beneficiary of state protection, as a potential victim of insurgent violence, or within counterinsurgency logics as a population whose political and social affiliations may themselves become objects of suspicion. These classifications have material consequences because they shape whose vulnerability is recognised and whose suffering becomes politically legible.

The drone campaign intensifies this problem because of the distance between technological claims and lived experience. The dominant justification for remote strikes has often rested on precision, intelligence and the ability to minimise civilian casualties. Yet independent documentation has repeatedly identified uncertainty surrounding casualty figures, target identification and civilian status. TBIJ's investigative work reconstructs individual incidents from multiple sources, while Airwars approaches civilian harm through incident-level documentation and evidentiary assessment. Neither source should be treated as infallible. Their methodological importance lies partly in making uncertainty visible (Airwars, n.d.-a; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.-b).

The *Living Under Drones* investigation is particularly significant for the present study because it moved beyond casualty counting to examine the experiences of people living in areas affected by drone warfare. The research involved more than 130 interviews with victims, witnesses and experts and documented fear, trauma, disruption and changes in everyday behaviour alongside physical casualties (Cavallaro et al., 2012). This distinction between an event and an environment is central to the argument. A strike can be recorded as an event occurring on a particular date and at a particular location. Living under the possibility of a strike is different. Anticipation cannot easily be counted. Fear does not necessarily leave an incident record (Ahmed, 2004). A household changing its routines because of perceived danger may never enter a conflict database.

The epistemological question consequently becomes unavoidable: what kinds of insecurity become visible when security is studied through institutional records, and what kinds disappear?

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The paper brings this question into conversation with phenomenology and feminist epistemology. Phenomenological approaches draw attention to embodiment, temporality and the relationship between bodies and spaces. Ahmed's (2004) work on affect demonstrates how emotions are socially organised and become attached to bodies, places and objects. Das (2008) demonstrates how violence can enter the ordinary rather than remaining an exceptional interruption of everyday life. Spivak (2023) asks how marginalised subjects become represented and whether their speech is recognisable within dominant structures of knowledge. Wibben (2010) similarly argues for expanding security studies to recognise alternative narratives of security.

The paper's central proposition is that lived experience should not be understood merely as illustrative material appended to an otherwise complete theory of security. It can function as a **site of theorising**. Women's experiences of fear, care, displacement, vulnerability and survival can expose contradictions in the conceptual categories through which security is organised (Das, 2006).

The primary research question is therefore:

How do women lived experiences of militarised violence in Pakistan destabilise the gendered distinction between those who protect and those who are protected, and what does this reveal about the constitution of security itself?

Four objectives follow. First, the paper examines the protector/protected binary as a gendered architecture of militarised security. Second, it analyses women's experiences of drone warfare, counterinsurgency and militarised insecurity within everyday life in Pakistan. Third, it develops a feminist epistemological framework through which lived experience can become a source of theoretical insight. Fourth, it contributes to debates on embodiment, affect, everyday militarisation and postcolonial security.

The paper proceeds through a theoretical framework, contextual discussion of Pakistan's conflict peripheries, a methodological discussion of the documentary dataset currently under construction, an emerging findings and discussion section, and a conclusion identifying the paper's contributions.

Theoretical Framework: Protection, Embodiment and Lived Experience

Feminist security and the architecture of protection

The theoretical point of departure is feminist security studies' critique of the assumptions embedded within conventional security discourse. Tickner's (1992) intervention is foundational because it demonstrates that the apparently universal language of international security has historically been organised around masculinised assumptions concerning autonomy, rationality, state authority and legitimate violence. The protector/protected distinction should therefore be understood not simply as an institutional arrangement but as a gendered social relation. The

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military protector represents the capacity to act. The protected civilian represents the condition of vulnerability against which that capacity is justified(Sjoberg, 2013; Welland, 2018).

Enloe (2000) complicates this distinction by demonstrating that militarisation is socially distributed. Military power depends upon forms of labour and social organisation that are frequently rendered invisible. The military institution requires households, care work, gendered labour and cultural narratives of masculinity and sacrifice. Militarisation therefore enters ordinary life rather than remaining external to it. This insight is particularly important for the study of women affected by conflict. If military security is sustained partly through everyday social relations, then women cannot be located simply outside the security apparatus as protected civilians. Their labour may be constitutive of the social order that security institutions claim to defend (Enloe, 2000). The paper therefore treats protection as a political practice rather than a neutral condition.

Vulnerability, precarity and agency

Judith Butler's account of precarity provides a second theoretical foundation. Butler (2009) challenges the idea that vulnerability can be understood simply as an individual attribute. Exposure to violence is distributed through political and social arrangements, while the recognition of suffering is also uneven. This is particularly relevant to civilian harm. The question is not merely whether a person is vulnerable but whether their vulnerability becomes recognisable. A civilian death may be counted, disputed, classified or ignored depending upon the political and evidentiary framework through which it is encountered.

Butler's concept of grievability also helps explain why casualty counting is political. Not all deaths enter public consciousness in the same way. Some lives are readily represented as innocent victims, while others are rendered ambiguous through their association with contested categories such as militant, suspected militant or security threat. The analytical implication is that vulnerability should not be equated with passivity. Vulnerability and agency can coexist (Butler, 2010). A woman may be vulnerable to military violence and nevertheless exercise agency in caring for family members, negotiating mobility, seeking information, preserving livelihoods and interpreting political events(Butler, 2009, 2014). The paper therefore rejects a binary between vulnerable victim and autonomous agent. Instead, it examines their intersection.

Embodiment and phenomenology

Phenomenology contributes an analysis of how insecurity is lived through the body. Conflict datasets are structured around events. Lived experience is structured through duration, memory, anticipation and bodily orientation. A violent event may end in minutes, while its effects continue through changes in how people inhabit spaces and relationships. This is particularly significant in the context of drone warfare. The drone is not only a weapon that strikes a target. It can become an anticipated presence in the environment. The possibility of surveillance or attack can alter movement, gathering and perceptions of safety. Ahmed's (2004) theory of affect helps explain this process. Emotions are not simply private psychological states; they circulate between bodies and

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objects and acquire social and spatial significance. Fear can become attached to a landscape, a sound or a particular form of technology. Insecurity can therefore become embodied before violence occurs.

This does not mean that every person in a drone-affected community experiences the same fear or trauma. A phenomenological approach does not seek to homogenise experience. Rather, it asks how different bodies encounter the same security environment differently (Ahmed, 2004).

Violence and the ordinary

Veena Das's (2008) account of violence entering "the ordinary" provides a crucial temporal dimension. Violence should not be understood solely as a spectacular event that interrupts normal life. It can become incorporated into everyday practices, relationships and identities. This is especially relevant to militarised conflict where violence is intermittent but its consequences persistent. A strike destroys a home, but the household must subsequently reorganise. An injury creates new caregiving responsibilities. A death changes household income. Displacement alters social networks. Fear changes mobility. The aftermath therefore becomes part of the phenomenon being studied (Das, 2008). Das's contribution allows the analysis to move beyond the event towards the everyday practices through which people continue living after violence.

Representation, the subaltern and epistemic authority

Spivak's (1988) critique of representation introduces a further epistemological problem. The question is not simply whether marginalised people possess voices but how their voices become represented and recognised within systems of knowledge. This is directly relevant to civilian harm research. A woman may provide testimony concerning a strike, but that testimony enters an epistemic environment containing military claims, intelligence assessments, journalistic accounts, humanitarian reports and statistical databases. Her testimony therefore does not exist outside power. Yet this does not mean it should be dismissed as subjective. Rather, the research must examine how different forms of knowledge interact and whose categories become authoritative (Wibben, 2010).

Wibben's (2010) narrative approach to feminist security studies similarly challenges the assumption that security knowledge should be restricted to strategic and institutional narratives. Narratives can reveal meanings of security that disappear from conventional security analysis. The present paper consequently treats lived experience as **situated knowledge** rather than transparent truth. It requires interpretation, corroboration and reflexivity, but it also has the capacity to challenge established categories.

Postcolonial and decolonial dimensions

The paper additionally draws on postcolonial feminist thought to resist treating Pakistan simply as a site to which theories developed elsewhere are applied. Spivak's critique is important precisely because the production of knowledge is connected to colonial histories and unequal epistemic

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authority. Fanon's (1963) analysis of colonial violence likewise reminds us that violence operates through the organisation of space, bodies and political subjectivity.

A postcolonial feminist approach therefore asks how security categories developed through Euro-American strategic traditions travel into different political and historical contexts. This does not require rejecting established feminist security scholarship. It requires treating theory as an unfinished conversation in which empirical sites can alter conceptual assumptions. Pakistan consequently becomes more than a case study. It becomes an epistemic site from which dominant understandings of protection can be reconsidered.

The Embodied Militarised Security Framework

These theoretical traditions are synthesised in the paper through the Embodied Militarised Security Framework (EMSF).

The framework identifies five mutually constitutive dimensions:

Protection/exposure: military protection may coexist with civilian exposure.

Vulnerability/agency: vulnerability does not eliminate agency.

Embodiment/affect: insecurity is experienced through bodies, emotions, anticipation and spatial practices.

Care/social reproduction: everyday security is partly produced through care, household labour and social continuity.

Experience/epistemic authority: lived experience can challenge institutional representations of security.

The framework is relational rather than hierarchical. It does not replace state security with an idealised "women's perspective". Instead, it places institutional security claims into analytical relationship with everyday experiences.

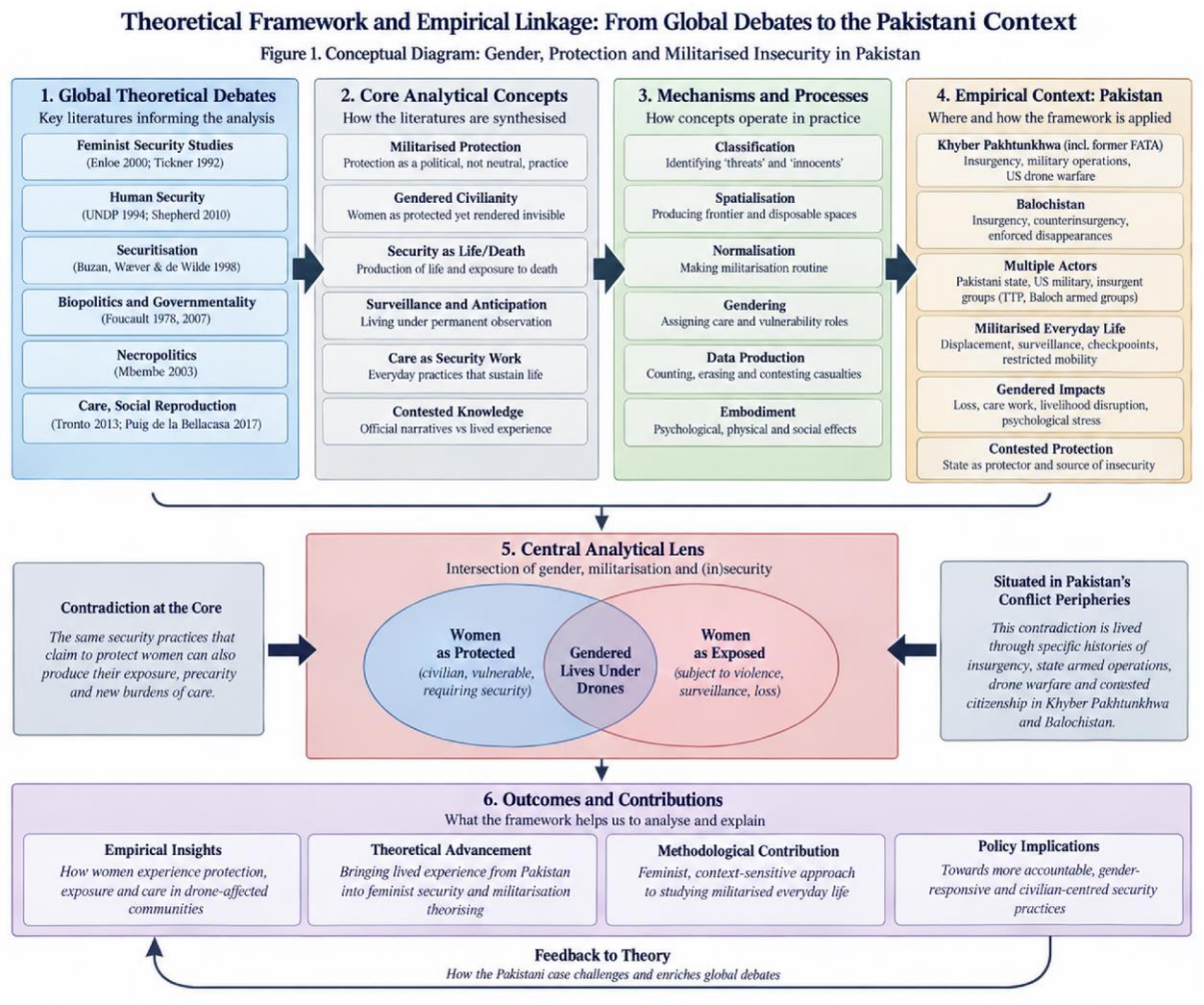
The resulting model can be represented as:

Feminist security theory → gendered protection → militarised practices → embodied exposure → everyday care and survival → lived knowledge → critique/reconceptualisation of security.

The Pakistani context enters at every stage rather than only at the end. Insurgency and counterinsurgency shape the security environment; drone warfare intensifies remote exposure; militarised governance structures civilianity; and women experience the consequences through bodies, households and social relationships.

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Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Gender, Protection and Militarised Insecurity in Pakistan



The central contradiction represented by the framework is that the same security architecture that claims to protect women can generate conditions of exposure, precarity and new burdens of care.

Pakistan: Insurgency, Counterinsurgency and the Militarised Production of Protection

Pakistan's conflict peripheries cannot be understood through the category of military protection alone. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former FATA and Balochistan have been shaped by distinct histories of insurgency, counterinsurgency, state-building and contested citizenship. These histories establish the political conditions within which civilians become subjects of protection, objects of security intervention and witnesses to competing forms of violence simultaneously (Farooqi & Dover, 2023, 2025; Rizwan et al., 2014). The civilian was therefore positioned ambiguously. Civilians were those whom the state claimed to protect from militant violence, but civilian populations could also become objects of suspicion within counterinsurgency practices.

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Balochistan provides a different configuration of militarised insecurity. The province has experienced recurrent Baloch nationalist insurgencies, armed attacks against state institutions and civilians, and prolonged counterinsurgency. Human Rights Watch's investigation documented enforced disappearances associated with security forces and also documented abuses committed by Baloch armed groups (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The report's methodology is itself revealing: researchers interviewed more than 100 people, while noting that witnesses often feared retaliation and that pseudonyms were therefore required.

The politics of disappearance is significant for this paper because it extends the question of civilian harm beyond physical casualty counts. In a drone strike, the problem can become whether a dead person is recognised as civilian. In disappearance, the problem becomes whether the absent person is institutionally recognised at all. Both situations reveal the politics of epistemic visibility. Balochistan consequently demonstrates the relevance of militarised citizenship: the relationship between citizen and state can become mediated through security practices, surveillance, detention and disappearance.

The state may claim the role of protector while its security apparatus becomes, for some communities, a source of insecurity. Again, this does not imply equivalence between state violence and insurgent violence. It means that the political category of protection must be analysed through the experiences of those living within contested security environments.

Why KPK and Balochistan belong in the same analytical frame

The two regions should not be collapsed into a single empirical conflict. Their histories, actors and forms of violence differ. Their analytical relationship is instead comparative. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa/FATA illustrates the intersection of insurgency, counterinsurgency, displacement and drone warfare. Balochistan illustrates the intersection of insurgency, militarised governance, contested citizenship and disappearance. Together they demonstrate how security peripheries can become spaces in which protection and exposure overlap. For women, this overlap is experienced through everyday life. The consequences of violence may include loss, displacement, caregiving, restricted movement, economic insecurity and uncertainty. The paper therefore moves from military intervention as an institutional practice towards militarisation as an everyday condition.

Methodology and Data-in-Progress

The methodological approach follows from the theoretical argument. If lived experience can expose the limitations of security categories, the research design must be capable of placing institutional evidence and lived accounts into analytical relation. The study adopts an interpretive feminist methodology informed by feminist epistemology, narrative security studies and critical approaches to conflict research (Duncanson & Woodward, 2016; Heath-Kelly, 2016; Wibben, 2010)

The empirical corpus combines four principal forms of evidence.

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First, the study constructs an incident-level documentary dataset from open-source conflict and civilian-harm archives. The principal sources are Airwars and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (Airwars, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). These are supplemented by relevant academic studies, human-rights reports and other documentary evidence.

Airwars publishes provisional assessments of civilian-harm claims and explains how reported incidents are graded, while the Bureau's Pakistan archive reconstructs reported US drone strikes from multiple sources and preserves uncertainty where accounts conflict (Airwars, n.d.-a; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.-b). These records are used as documentary leads for incident verification, not as final or exhaustive counts. The appearance of an incident in one archive, the attribution of a strike, and the classification of a person as civilian are separate questions. Keeping those distinctions visible is necessary because the research concerns not only reported violence but also the categories through which civilian harm becomes legible.

Second, the research uses published survivor and witness accounts, particularly the extensive testimony collected through *Living Under Drones*. This material provides access to dimensions of insecurity that incident-level datasets cannot capture.

Third, contextual conflict data are used to situate drone incidents within wider patterns of political violence. The Global Terrorism Database is useful for identifying patterns of terrorism and political violence (START, 2022). However, it is not treated as interchangeable with drone-strike datasets. The database covers terrorist events from 1970 through 2020, and its documentation notes that data collection methods changed across periods, which requires caution when interpreting longitudinal patterns (START, n.d.).

Fourth, the South Asia Terrorism Portal and other contextual sources are used to reconstruct conflict chronology and regional patterns (South Asia Terrorism Portal, n.d.).

The methodological principle is **triangulation without forced convergence**. Different sources are expected to disagree. An official statement, investigative report, witness testimony and conflict database may classify the same event differently. Rather than selecting whichever source appears most convenient, the research retains disagreements as part of the evidentiary record. The incident-level dataset is organised around variables including date, province, district, locality, target type, total reported deaths, civilian deaths, women killed, children killed, injuries, domestic-space damage, displacement, care disruption and source reliability.

To make this principle operational, each entry retains the source supporting a claim and the level of corroboration available. The coding does not infer gender, civilian status, injury, or displacement when a report does not identify it. When one archive includes an incident that another does not, the discrepancy is recorded rather than treated as proof that the incident did or did not occur. These procedures cannot eliminate the limits of open-source evidence, but they allow the analysis to distinguish what a source reports from what the researcher interprets. This distinction is central to a study concerned with how civilian harm becomes knowable.

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A crucial rule is that variables are coded only when supported by evidence. The absence of information is recorded as absence rather than converted into an assumption.

The dataset therefore distinguishes between:

Verified information;

Corroborated but incomplete information;

Disputed information;

Unverified reports;

and unresolved cases.

This approach is particularly important for casualty figures. Where credible sources provide different estimates, the dataset will preserve a minimum–maximum range rather than produce a false point estimate.

The research also distinguishes between incident data and experience data.

Incident data answer questions such as:

When did an event occur?

Where did it occur?

Who was reportedly targeted?

How many people were reported killed or injured?

Experience data address different questions:

How was insecurity experienced?

How did violence alter everyday routines?

How did households reorganise?

What forms of care became necessary?

How did fear alter movement or social interaction?

How were deaths interpreted by affected families?

These questions cannot be reduced to a single dataset.

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The qualitative material is therefore analysed through narrative and interpretive coding. The EMSF provides sensitising concepts rather than rigid deductive categories. The analysis identifies instances of protection/exposure, vulnerability/agency, embodiment/affect, care/social reproduction and epistemic contestation.

The research also adopts an epistemically reflexive position. The archive is not treated as a transparent window onto violence. Every dataset is shaped by its definitions, collection practices and sources. This is especially important in relation to civilianity. Whether a person is coded as civilian may depend upon competing accounts of identity, affiliation and targeting. A database may reproduce the assumptions of the institutions from which information is derived. The research consequently treats classification as part of the phenomenon.

Ethically, the present paper does not use the researchers' own experiences of living within conflict-affected environments as empirical evidence. This is a deliberate decision. First-person experience can be intellectually important, but it also raises questions of generalisability, positionality and researcher safety. In politically sensitive security research, public disclosure of identifying information can create risks for researchers and their families. The study instead practises reflexivity through methodological transparency.

The dataset remains in the collection and verification stage. This is not a weakness to be concealed. It is an accurate representation of the research process. Access to some datasets is constrained, some archives are incomplete, and incident-level casualty information often requires cross-checking.

Consequently, the tables presented in this paper are proposed analytical instruments rather than completed statistical results. This distinction protects the integrity of the research. It also allows the paper to make a substantive theoretical contribution without presenting provisional numerical evidence as settled fact.

These limits also shape what the current paper can claim. It does not report a completed count of drone strikes, civilian deaths, or women harmed, and it does not treat the proposed table as a set of results. The documentary material is used to identify analytical tensions and to show why the distinction between institutional protection and everyday security requires closer examination. The emerging findings should therefore be read as interpretive propositions grounded in the sources discussed, rather than as statistically established patterns. As verification proceeds, the analysis may be strengthened, qualified, or revised in response to evidence that does not fit the initial framework.

Regional comparison is also treated cautiously. The same variable may be documented in different ways across provinces, and the available record is uneven. A lack of a reported women-specific casualty count cannot be read as proof that women were not affected; nor can a general civilian-harm report establish the gendered effects of a particular incident. Such claims require corroborating testimony or documentary detail. The analysis therefore keeps the difference between absence of evidence and evidence of absence explicit.

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Proposed Data Structure and Emerging Analytical Findings

The empirical stage of the project is designed to produce an incident-level dataset capable of linking documentary evidence to the theoretical framework.

Table 1. Proposed Drone-Warfare and Civilian-Harm Dataset

Variable	Operational definition	Principal source	Status
Date	Date of reported strike	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
District	Administrative location	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
Village/locality	Locality where available	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
Target type	Individual, vehicle, compound, gathering, infrastructure, unknown	Airwars/TBIJ	Coding ongoing
Total killed	Minimum–maximum reported	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
Civilians killed	Minimum–maximum	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
Women killed	Explicitly identified women	Airwars/TBIJ/other sources	Verification ongoing
Children killed	Explicitly identified children	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
Injuries	Reported injuries	Airwars/TBIJ	Verification ongoing
Domestic space	Residential/household location affected	Documentary evidence	Coding ongoing
Displacement	Reported displacement	Humanitarian/documentary sources	Coding ongoing
Care disruption	Evidence of altered care/social reproduction	Published accounts	Qualitative coding
Lived experience	Survivor/witness account	Published studies	Case mapping
Source reliability	Degree of corroboration	Cross-source comparison	Coding ongoing
Theoretical category	EMSF analytical code	Authors	Coding ongoing

The proposed dataset will subsequently permit descriptive analysis by year, district, casualty category and type of target. However, the statistical component is subordinate to the interpretive objective. The research does not seek simply to establish a number of strikes. It asks what those incidents reveal about the relationship between protection, exposure and lived security.

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Emerging Analytical Findings: Militarised protection produces contradictory civilian positions

Five emerging analytical findings of the paper are used to structure the discussion below.

The first emerging finding is that protection is not simply delivered to civilians from outside. It reorganises the conditions under which civilian life is lived. The protector/protected relationship assumes a relatively clear distinction between the agent of security and its beneficiary. The Pakistani cases complicate this distinction. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, military operations could be justified as necessary responses to militant violence and the restoration of state authority. Yet civilians could simultaneously experience displacement and disruption. In drone-affected areas, remote military force could be presented as a means of protecting populations from militant threats while generating fear and uncertainty.

The contradiction is therefore not simply between "good" and "bad" security. It is between institutional security as protection and security as lived experience. The same security practice can occupy both positions.

Gendered civilianity

The second finding concerns the gendering of civilianity. Women are often represented in conflict discourse through vulnerability. Yet this vulnerability frequently becomes intelligible only through relationships: women are mothers, wives, daughters, caregivers and members of households. This relational construction can obscure women's own political agency.

The death of a husband or male household member may transform a woman's economic responsibilities. Injury may produce new caregiving roles. Displacement may alter access to education, healthcare and livelihoods. These consequences are not secondary to security. They are security consequences.

A feminist approach therefore asks not only who was killed but what social relations had to be reconstructed after the killing.

Drone warfare as anticipation

The third finding concerns temporality. The event-based archive records strikes. The lived-experience archive records anticipation. The distinction matters because anticipatory insecurity can alter behaviour before violence occurs. The *Living Under Drones* research provides an important foundation for this argument. Its interviews documented the psychological and social consequences of living under persistent drone surveillance and strike activity (Cavallaro et al., 2012).

From a phenomenological perspective, the drone therefore becomes more than a weapon. It becomes part of the environment through which bodies orient themselves. A gathering can become

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a security decision. Travel can become a calculation. Ordinary sounds can acquire new meanings. These effects are difficult to capture through casualty data but are central to understanding lived security.

This temporal structure has been developed further in related scholarship on the acoustic dimension of drone warfare, which identifies what has been termed a "belliphonics of loitering": a persistent, low-level sound that signals the possibility of lethal action without reliably indicating when, or whether, that action will follow (Ahmed, 2026). The case of Mamana Bibi illustrates what occurs when this anticipated threat is realised. A grandmother in her sixties who served as her village's midwife, she was killed by a drone-fired missile while gathering vegetables in a family field, with her grandchildren present (Ahmed, 2026). The labour she was performing at the moment of her death was unambiguously reproductive and caregiving in character — sustaining household subsistence — yet it placed her within the operational field of a security apparatus organised around the identification of threat rather than the protection of everyday survival. Such cases indicate that anticipatory insecurity is not simply a psychological condition; it structures the very spaces, labour and routines through which ordinary life, and its gendered burdens of care, must continue.

Care as security work

The fourth finding is the invisibility of care. Conventional security analysis tends to privilege activities associated with strategic decision-making, military force and political authority. Yet when violence enters everyday life, someone must sustain social reproduction. Women may perform substantial amounts of this work because gendered social organisation assigns caregiving responsibilities unevenly. The theoretical importance is not that women are inherently more caring.

It is that care becomes a security practice when institutions fail to guarantee everyday continuity. This extends Enloe's (2000) analysis of militarisation and Das's (2008) account of violence entering ordinary life. Security can therefore be produced from below.

The politics of counting

The fifth finding concerns numerical knowledge. Casualty numbers appear objective because they are numerical. Yet numbers depend upon classification.

Who is civilian?

Who is militant?

Who is unidentified?

Which source is credible?

What happens when accounts disagree?

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These questions become particularly important in remote warfare, where physical distance separates those using force from those experiencing its consequences. The research therefore treats uncertainty as analytically meaningful rather than simply as a methodological inconvenience. The resulting dataset will retain ranges and disputed cases where necessary. This approach also prevents the paper from making a common error in conflict research: presenting a single number as if it represented an uncontested empirical reality.

The problem of counting also has a gendered dimension. When an incident report records a total number of deaths without identifying the sex, age, family role or civilian status of those killed, those details remain unknown in the dataset. They should not be reconstructed from assumptions about household composition or local gender roles. At the same time, the absence of such information does not mean that gender is irrelevant to the consequences of an attack. It means that the available record may be unable to show how losses affected care, income, mobility or family responsibilities. The analysis must hold these two points together: gendered effects matter, but they require evidence rather than inference.

Discussion: From Protected Women to Women as Security Knowers

The emerging findings allow the paper to return to its central theoretical problem. Why does the protector/protected binary persist? Partly because it performs an important political function. It simplifies the relationship between power and vulnerability. The protector appears as the agent. The protected appears as the beneficiary. The relationship consequently legitimises intervention.

Feminist security theory has long challenged this structure, but the Pakistani case demonstrates that its persistence is not simply discursive. It is embedded in institutions, technologies, classifications and everyday social practices. Drone warfare makes this visible because the technological distance between operator and target intensifies the separation between protector and protected.

The operator occupies a position of strategic knowledge. The civilian occupies the position of experiential uncertainty. Yet the civilian may know things the operator cannot know: who lived in a house, who was responsible for children, how a community interpreted an event, how fear altered everyday behaviour. This is an epistemic reversal. The security institution may possess technological knowledge of targeting while lacking experiential knowledge of security. The lived experience of women therefore matters not simply because it provides "human stories". It may provide forms of knowledge unavailable to the security apparatus itself.

This is where Spivak's intervention becomes especially relevant (Spivak, 2004). The question is not whether women speak. They do. The question is whether the categories through which their speech is received allow their knowledge to alter the terms of security discourse. A woman describing fear under drones may be interpreted as a victim. The same account can instead be read as evidence that the definition of security is incomplete. This is the paper's epistemological intervention.

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Lived experience is not merely an object of security research; it can become a location from which security theory is revised.

But this does not mean romanticising experience. Experience is situated, selective and mediated. A single testimony cannot establish a general empirical claim. Nor should the voices of affected communities be treated as automatically politically innocent. The appropriate methodological response is triangulation. Testimony should be placed alongside documentary evidence, conflict datasets, investigative journalism and other accounts. But triangulation should not erase disagreement. Disagreement may reveal the politics of knowledge. This is especially important in Pakistan's conflict peripheries, where competing authorities may produce competing accounts of the same event. The politics of protection therefore becomes inseparable from the politics of knowledge.

Who has the authority to define an event? Who determines civilian status? Who decides whether fear constitutes harm? Who counts the dead? Who records the displaced? Who is heard? These questions connect the empirical material directly to feminist epistemology.

Harding's (1991) work on standpoint and feminist knowledge production is relevant here because knowledge is not produced from a neutral position. The location of the knower shapes what can become visible. The paper does not claim that women possess an automatically superior standpoint. Rather, it argues that marginalised locations can expose aspects of political reality that dominant positions systematically obscure (Harding, 1991). Pakistan's conflict peripheries therefore become epistemically productive precisely because they challenge assumptions formed from the institutional centre.

Contributions to the Literature

The paper makes five connected contributions.

First: feminist security studies

The first contribution is conceptual. The paper moves beyond identifying the protector/protected binary as gendered and examines how it breaks down empirically. Women affected by militarised violence are neither simply protected nor simply exposed. They inhabit both positions. They can be recipients of protection and producers of everyday security. This demonstrates that vulnerability and agency should be theorised relationally rather than oppositionally.

Second: postcolonial feminist security

The second contribution is epistemological. Pakistan is treated not merely as an empirical case to which feminist theory is applied but as a site from which theory can be reformulated. The experiences of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA and Balochistan expose assumptions within conventional security categories concerning civilianity, protection, territory and political authority.

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The direction of theoretical travel therefore changes. Theory does not simply move from the centre to the periphery. The periphery can speak back to theory.

Third: lived experience

The third contribution concerns lived experience. The paper develops the proposition that lived experience can operate as a form of theorising. This differs from treating testimony as illustrative evidence. The question is not simply: What happened to women? It is: What do women's experiences reveal about the conceptual categories through which security is understood? This shift is important for feminist sociology, anthropology and security studies

Fourth: militarisation and social reproduction

The fourth contribution concerns the everyday. Militarisation does not stop when a strike ends. It enters households through loss, care, displacement, economic disruption and altered mobility. Women's labour in sustaining social life consequently becomes analytically relevant to security. This extends feminist critiques of militarisation into the domain of everyday survival.

Fifth: epistemology of civilian harm

Finally, the paper contributes to research on civilian harm by demonstrating why casualty counting must be connected to classification and lived experience. Numbers matter, but they are produced through categories. The question of civilian harm therefore involves both an empirical problem and an epistemological one.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that women's experiences of militarised violence destabilise one of the most persistent relationships within security discourse: the distinction between protector and protected. The distinction is powerful because it appears intuitive. "Someone possesses the capacity to protect. Someone else requires protection". Yet the experiences examined here demonstrate that the relationship is considerably more complicated.

Women living within conflict-affected communities can be exposed to violence while simultaneously protecting others. They can experience vulnerability while exercising agency. They can inhabit domestic spaces transformed by military violence while sustaining the social relationships necessary for everyday life. They can be represented as victims while producing knowledge capable of challenging official accounts.

These contradictions are not anomalies. They are theoretically productive. The Pakistani context demonstrates why:

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former FATA reveal the interaction between insurgency, counterinsurgency, displacement and drone warfare. Balochistan reveals a different configuration

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involving insurgency, militarised governance and contested citizenship. Neither context can be reduced to a simple opposition between violent state and innocent civilian population. Civilians experience multiple forms of violence, while the state retains distinctive institutional authority to classify threats, legitimate coercion and define protection.

The concept of militarised protection must therefore remain attentive to this asymmetry. The central argument is not that military protection is inherently illegitimate. Nor is it that all forms of state violence and insurgent violence are equivalent. Rather, the argument is that protection must be evaluated from the position of those who experience its consequences. This requires taking the temporal and embodied dimensions of insecurity.

A drone strike is an event:

Living under drones can become an environment.

A military operation is an institutional act.

Displacement is an everyday condition.

A casualty is a number.

A death can reorganise an entire household.

These distinctions matter because they reveal the limits of event-centred security analysis. The paper consequently proposes the Embodied Militarised Security Framework as a way of connecting institutional security practices to vulnerability, affect, care and lived knowledge. Its central analytical claim is that vulnerability and agency should not be treated as opposites.

Women can be vulnerable and agentic. They can be protected and exposed. They can experience violence and produce security. They can be objects of security policy and subjects of security knowledge. This reconceptualisation also changes the epistemological status of lived experience. Experience should not simply be appended to security research as anecdotal material. It can challenge the categories through which security is known.

The testimony of an affected woman may therefore matter not only because it tells researchers what happened but because it can reveal what the dominant security framework is unable to see. This is the point at which the paper moves from a feminist critique of security towards a broader sociology of security.

Security:

is not simply something states possess or militaries deliver.

It is produced through relationships.

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It is negotiated within households.

It is experienced through bodies.

It is carried through memory and affect.

It is sustained through care.

And it is contested through knowledge.

The most significant implication is therefore a reversal of the conventional security question. Rather than asking only **who protects whom**, we must ask:

What forms of vulnerability, agency, care and knowledge are produced through the very practices that claim to protect?

That question shifts analytical attention from the military protector towards the social world in which protection is experienced. It also allows women affected by militarised violence to appear not simply as those for whom security is provided but as subjects capable of revealing what security means.

The contribution of lived experience lies precisely there. It does not offer a final or unmediated truth about war. It offers a critical vantage point from which the categories through which war is understood can be questioned. For feminist security studies, the implication is that the protector/protected binary should be treated not as a settled description of political reality but as an object of analysis. For postcolonial security studies, the implication is that conflict peripheries should be understood as sites of theoretical production rather than merely empirical testing grounds. For the sociology of lived experience, the implication is that everyday survival can itself constitute a form of political and epistemic practice. And for research on Pakistan, the implication is that women's experiences of militarised insecurity deserve to be situated not at the margins of security analysis but at its conceptual centre.

The dataset on which this paper is based remains under construction. That incompleteness is acknowledged rather than concealed. The next stage of the research will complete incident-level verification, triangulate casualty estimates across Airwars, TBIJ and other documentary sources, and develop a more systematic analysis of gendered civilian harm.

The empirical work will therefore continue. The theoretical proposition, however, is already clear:

"Those who are constituted as the protected are not merely recipients of security. Their lived experiences can reveal how security is produced, whose vulnerability it privileges, what forms of violence it renders visible, and what forms of life it leaves unrecognised".

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Statements and Declarations

Ethical Considerations

This paper does not report primary data collection involving human participants. The analysis draws on secondary, publicly available documentary sources (including Human Rights Watch reports, the Living Under Drones study, and open-source conflict databases such as Airwars, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the Global Terrorism Database, and the South Asia Terrorism Portal). No Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee approval was required for this stage of the research, as no original human-subjects data collection has yet taken place.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable. No primary human participant data were collected for this paper.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

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Data Availability Statement

The incident-level documentary dataset discussed in this paper remains under construction and verification at the time of submission, as stated in the manuscript. Sources drawn upon are publicly available secondary materials, cited in the reference list (Airwars, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the Global Terrorism Database, the South Asia Terrorism Portal, and Human Rights Watch reports).

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