

Pakistan's Pioneering Women Journalists

In Pakistan, where only 5% of all journalists are women, there is little coverage of women's issues and few women's voices are heard on the air. To address this issue, Internews established Pakistan's first university-based women's broadcast media center and radio station and is producing the nation's first radio program by and about women. Internews' work with women journalists in Pakistan is part of its overall goal to build an open, diverse, and socially responsible broadcast media sector in Pakistan. Here we profile seven women Internews has trained who are changing the face of journalism in Pakistan.

FRESHTA SHIKHANY, RADIO REPORTER AND DJ, PESHAWAR

Freshta Shikhany, aka "DJ Malaika," is a study in determination.

She fled Kabul in 1992 at age 9 when "rockets were flying all over the city" and sought refuge in the border town of Peshawar in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province.

Freshta got her early education in refugee schools and later joined an unregistered Afghan university to study journalism. A year into the course, Pakistani authorities closed down the school. Undaunted, Freshta and a few other students continued to study with volunteer teachers from the defunct university. Their classes, started in the backyard of a refugee organization, soon grew into a university when more refugee students joined. But two years later, this too closed down.

Freshta had family support, but no Pakistani institution would accept her as a student and allow her to finish her degree. Then she learned about the journalism training program run by Internews at the University of Peshawar. She was admitted as a special case due to her refugee status. Freshta went on to complete the radio journalism course offered by Internews.

Now, Freshta reports for the In-

ternews-supported program, *Da Pulay Poray* (whose Urdu name means "On the Borderline"). The weekly program, produced by a team of Pakistani and Afghan radio journalists, covers issues affecting populations along the Pak-Afghan border and airs on 15 radio stations in the cross-border region.

Freshta also has her own Dari language show on Buraq 104 – Peshawar's

first independent FM station.

"The program is about issues pertinent to the large Afghan refugee population settled here," she says. "With radio, I can give my community a voice." Freshta believes radio gives her anonymity, yet empowers her to take up issues of relevance to some 3.2 million Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan.



Freshta Shikhany went from being an Afghan refugee in Pakistan's North West Frontier province to a reporter for Internews' radio program, *Da Pulay Poray*, as well as having her own radio program on Peshawar's first independent FM station.



Nighat Hunzai was one of the first female graduates to volunteer to work on Internews' daily radio program for earthquake survivors, *Jazba-e-Tameer* ("Desire to Rebuild").

NIGHAT HUNZAI, RADIO PRODUCER, POWER 99, ABBOTTABAD

Born in the remote Skardu Valley in Northern Pakistan, Nighat Hunzai graduated from the Internews-run Peshawar University Broadcast Academy at just the right time.

In the aftermath of the October 2005 earthquake centered in Northern Pakistan, which killed 73,000 and displaced 3.5 million, women reporters who were prepared to cover the lives of women devastated by the tragedy were hard to come by in the conservative region. Nighat was the only female graduate who volunteered to join the Internews-initiated Pakistan Emergency Information Program (PEIP). The daily, hour-long program *Jazba-e-Tameer* ("Desire to Rebuild") highlighted issues necessary to rebuild lives in the earthquake region.

"When I first joined, I thought I would not stay long because it is difficult for a woman to work as a reporter," Nighat says. "Now I don't want to do anything but journalism."

Nighat brought to *Jazba-e-Tameer* the much-neglected stories of women affected by the quake. Her coverage highlighted problems faced by women, told in their own voices, and helped improve the disaster response of the humanitarian community.

Long after PEIP has concluded, Nighat continues to report for an

independent FM radio station set up during the emergency period to broadcast to the earthquake-affected areas.

"When I go out in the field, people still remember me from *Jazba*," she says. "I find women in the remotest areas listening to radio. I realize how much impact the tiny thing has."

She is now one of a handful of women working as a journalist for independent radio. She adds, "*Jazba* gave me the confidence to do mainstream reporting."

RASHIDA KIANI, ASSOCIATE PRODUCER, ISLAMABAD BUREAU, GEONEWS TELEVISION CHANNEL

A year ago, when Rashida Kiani joined *Tasveer Kahani* ("Picture Stories"), Pakistan's first field-based television documentary program focusing on human rights and the rule of law, she had only worked on short news reports at GeoNews, a premier independent cable television channel.

A year into working on the program, Rashida has produced in-depth documentaries on issues as varied as medical negligence, honor killings, HIV/AIDS, and *vanni*, the tradition of giving away young girls in marriage to settle blood feuds.

Rashida's documentaries have had enormous impact. They

have enjoyed multiple reruns during prime time and have attracted government sponsorship. The documentary on *vanni*, for example, helped settle a decade-old violent dispute between two families. The medical negligence documentary resulted in compensation for the victim's family after a decade.

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— Nighat Hunzai, Radio Producer

Another documentary that aired on the Internews-supported series invoked a Supreme Court action against the practice of human organ trade, ordering the government to enact a law to address the problem.

"I learned about research when I started working on the series," says Rashida. "My trainers helped me learn about structure, pacing, layers and in-depth investigation. They would go through each line of my scripts, which helped me improve my scripts. No one had ever done that before."

Rashida, who has recently been promoted to associate producer, is one of the few Pakistani women journalists working for television. Her promotion, she says, came about because of her work on the documentary series.



Rashida Kiani's documentaries covering women, health and violence issues have had an enormous impact in Pakistan.



Nabeela Aslam, the fifth of six daughters from a farming family in rural Punjab, now produces three radio programs with her team dealing with women's issues.

NABEELA ASLAM, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, MERI AWAZ SUNO, ISLAMABAD

Nabeela Aslam came to Internews from a print background. Now, she says, all she wants to do is radio.

For Nabeela, doing radio mainly means reporting, producing, training and marketing for *Meri Awaz Suno* ("Hear My Voice"), the Internews-supported women's radio production house which produces Pakistan's first syndicated radio program by the same name.

Nabeela comes from a farming family in rural Punjab. The fifth of six daughters, she left home early to pursue a reporting career. She worked with a liberal newspaper until it closed down and then as a newsletter editor for a non-profit health organization. One day she saw an advertisement seeking producers for the weekly *Meri Awaz Suno* radio program, and she was soon hooked.

Internews launched *Meri Awaz Suno* in 2003 to give women a profile in Pakistani media. In Pakistan, only about 5% of all journalists are women, which means that even issues affecting women are reported from a male perspective. Nabeela and her team at *Meri Awaz Suno* have been producing a 15-minute radio magazine, which covers mainstream issues from women's perspectives.

Meri Awaz Suno is now broadcast on some 20 FM stations across Pakistan. In addition to *Meri Awaz Suno*, Na-

beela and her team produce two other programs – *Shakhsi Khakay* ("Personal Profiles"), in-depth profiles of famous and not-so-famous women in Pakistan, and a radio drama series on women's reproductive health issues.

"Women speaking about issues in their own voices is very powerful. We need more women on

air!" says Nabeela.

Meri Awaz Suno has trained 140 women in radio journalism at the Fatima Jinnah Women's University (where it was housed in 2005), Rawalpindi; Kinnaird College, Lahore; and the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

"Radio journalism is developing in Pakistan," says Nabeela. "With training, women can produce quality work and be on a par with their male colleagues."

TASNEEM AHMAR, DIRECTOR, UKS, ISLAMABAD

When Internews was planning to set up *Meri Awaz Suno* to strengthen the role of women in Pakistani media, "Uks – Research, Resource and Publication Centre on Women and Media," an Islamabad-based non-profit, was a natural partner.

Uks had been monitoring the portrayal of women in Pakistani media and had been training reporters on gender-sensitive reporting techniques since 1997. The *Meri Awaz Suno* radio initiative at Uks was launched with Tasneem Ahmar as executive producer.

"Radio complemented the work Uks was already doing with women and media," says Tasneem. "A radio program was an opportunity to use media for women's development, to do something for women by women."

Internews helped establish a radio production facility at Uks – the first for women journalists in Pakistan – and hired and trained five women journalists, including Tasneem, to report on women's issues. These were the country's first professionally-trained radio journalists in the private sector.

Tasneem's long media experience and Uks' history of working for women in the media gave the program its focus. Under Tasneem's leadership, the program was able to achieve the purpose for which it was established – to give woman a voice in the media.

The reporters for *Meri Awaz Suno* produced programs on difficult issues that were considered taboo in Pakistani society – honor killing, rape victims overcoming their ordeals, women in politics and sports and women living with HIV/AIDS.

"The partnership with Internews gave Uks a new identity and a new lease of life," says Tasneem. "And maybe also a facelift!"

Uks continues to produce radio series on development issues in Pakistan. The issues include poverty, peace and justice, violence against women, women and water, rebuilding lives in the earthquake region, and crimes of honor.



Tasneem Ahmar has long supported changing women's image in the media.

SHAZIA GUL, STATION MANAGER, CAMPUS RADIO, PESHAWAR UNIVERSITY, NWFP

Internews put Shazia Gul through a series of radio production and management trainings to run the campus radio station it helped build at the University of Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. She is now the first woman in Pakistan to manage a campus radio station. Shazia's interest in current affairs ensures that the station has a heavy focus on news and information programming.

"It was Internews that polished my skills – from producing news bulletins, features, documentaries and specialty programs to managing radio operations and training students," she says.

Following her training, Shazia became manager of Peshawar University's radio station, which trains students in practical radio journalism. Peshawar University was the first university in Pakistan to have a broadcast academy and a radio station. Both were built and supported by Internews.

"Students who graduated three years ago did not have the same opportunity," says Shazia. Following a five-week radio journalism course that Internews runs through the university's broadcast academy, students can participate in a two-month long internship at the stations. Shazia estimates that 300

students have passed through the station to occupy important radio industry jobs in the region.

The student-produced programs, broadcast on the campus radio and independent local stations, are heard not just in the vicinity of the university, but also in the tribal areas of NWFP.

"Earlier we had to depend on newspapers and government stations to train our students; now it is our students producing programs for them," says Shazia.

SARA FARID, BROADCAST JOURNALIST, ISLAMABAD

When Sara Farid started working with Internews on the women's radio program, *Meri Awaz Suno* ("Hear My Voice") in August 2003, she hadn't had any experience working with radio. Now she says she has "a great passion for radio." She joined the team as a reporter/producer, then worked her way up to senior producer and then to executive producer of *Meri Awaz Suno*.

In 2005, Farid participated in a six-day Internews training program on reporting about HIV/AIDS. She made a documentary focusing on the life of Shukria Gul, a woman from Lahore who is living with HIV and working to educate others about AIDS.

"After meeting Shukria Gul who is HIV-positive and a normal human being, I realized there is no need to attach any stigma to such people. She is as normal as I am. In fact, she is extraordinary because of the work she is doing," says Farid.

Farid has also produced programs on child labor, honor killings and forced marriages. "All men cannot reach women in our society. There are certain women, they don't let men come in their houses. But we have an edge, we can go there . . . so we can come



Sara Farid started working on the Internews-supported radio program, *Meri Awaz Suno*, and has now joined Pakistan's upcoming TV station Dawn TV.

INTERNEWS PAKISTAN

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Shazia Gul is the first woman in Pakistan to manage a campus radio station.

aboard with the story."

The style of Farid's documentary on child labor was unconventional by Pakistani standards – there were no "experts" or analysts interviewed for the program. Rather, the documentary focused on the life of a 16-year-old boy who has been working to support his family since the age of eight. "Our basic idea of a story is to give voice to the unheard— that's why we try to get personal stories and then get the social sector's and government's viewpoint," she says.

After the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, Farid helped bring news and information to the hundreds of thousands of earthquake survivors, many of them still residing in IDP camps. Early in 2006, Sara Farid switched from *Meri Awaz Suno* to Internews Pakistan's TV documentary series on rights and rules of law issues. She produced three documentaries with Pakistan's GeoNews TV channel before leaving Internews to join an upcoming Pakistani TV channel, Dawn TV. Farid credits Internews' with contributing to her meteoric rise as a broadcast journalist.

Donors of work highlighted in this flyer include the Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau of the US State Department, the UK Department for International Development, Pact, Inc., the US Agency for International Development and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.