

Documenting a Pakistani Girl's Transformation

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Published: October 7, 2013

There is a story to Malala Yousafzai's improbable transformation from a quiet, deferential 11-year-old living near Pakistan's tribal areas to a teenage spokeswoman for girls' education. Malala, shot in the head by the Taliban last year, has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, to be announced on Friday.

It begins with her determined father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, but gets pushed forward by intense news media coverage of her daring campaign. I met Malala in 2009, when she was determined to defy the odds and become a doctor. I spent six months making two documentaries about her life that helped bring her brave campaign to the world, transforming her into a public figure. After the Taliban tried to silence her, The New York Times wove the footage together into a single, 32-minute documentary.

Since the attack last October, I have at times struggled with a question journalists often confront: By giving her a platform, did I inadvertently play a role in her shooting? I wanted to understand how this all unfolded so I began combing through nearly 20 hours of unseen footage of the family long before they were coached by publicists, and before they had signed multimillion-dollar book and movie deals.

While my original documentary tells the story of Malala's struggle for education in the face of the Taliban, this back story also raises

some sobering and difficult questions. Malala was a brave young girl, advocating for a better future for all girls in her country, but was it fair for her to fight so publicly in such a dangerous environment? Or was she thrust into the limelight by adults captivated by the power of a child staring down the Taliban?



Given Malala's re-emergence on the world stage — healing from her wounds and nominated for the Nobel — I thought it was a good time to answer the five questions people often ask me about how I came to know this resilient young woman.

How did you find Malala?

In December 2008, while working as a reporter in The Times's bureau in Afghanistan, I read a small news article in the Pakistani press about how the Taliban in the Swat Valley planned to ban girls' education in January 2009. The ban would affect 50,000 schoolgirls, and I was astonished that the story was not being more aggressively reported in the media.

When I went to Pakistan to report, a courageous Pakistani journalist who had reported in Swat, Irfan Ashraf, introduced me to a private school owner, Ziauddin Yousafzai, who was campaigning to save his business. He showed up with his 11-year-old daughter, Malala.

After a lengthy interview with Zia, I asked him if I could ask Malala a few questions. She began answering in Pashtu, and Irfan translated. After about 10 minutes, I realized from Malala's facial expressions that she understood my questions. I interrupted to ask if she spoke English, and she said, "Yes, I was just saying there is a fear in my heart." I turned to Zia and Irfan and said: "What's wrong with you people? She speaks better English than the rest of you and you are translating for her!" We all laughed.

When I sat across Malala on the floor that day, it certainly never occurred to me that this shy girl would become so prominent.

Why would her father participate in such a documentary, knowing the dangers?

When we first met, I saw Zia as a middleman, someone who could introduce me to a family affected by the crisis in Swat. He quickly said no family would agree. Later that day, we discussed if his family could be documented. He was cautious, but intrigued. He saw The Times as a megaphone to the outside world. His friend Fazal Maula Zahid, an activist who co-founded a local organization advocating for peace in Swat, sat with us during our first interview. He bluntly told Ziauddin that the crisis demanded that they serve as agents of change. A lot was being said in Pashtu as well, so I didn't understand all of the discussions. As Zia described the harrowing dangers in Swat, I became skittish. It was the only time in my career that a source was becoming increasingly interested in a story, while I was becoming increasingly tentative.

At the end of a long day, Zia reasoned that he was already a known leader in Swat, and if the Taliban already wanted him, they could find him. After talking with my editors in New York

and to Irfan, we all agreed to proceed, acknowledging that we would have to take many safety precautions over the months.

Where is Malala's mother in all of this?

Malala's father may be a progressive educator, but her family is very traditional. As in most families in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, where they lived, her father works and her mother is a homemaker. In the larger region around Swat, only one girl in five attends school. Malala's own mother is illiterate, and Ziauddin told me she did not interact with men outside the family. I was never able to speak with her, and rarely saw her at all, because, as her husband explained, "she was not habituated to be on camera."

Over time, Zia and I became friends, and we talked about everything. He would ask me to describe the beaches of Rio, and I solicited his interpretations on Rumi. But the issue of his wife was always a source of tension, and we had many honest discussions about our divergent views.

One day while recording, I pressed him on the topic, saying: "It's not just the camera. It's the culture. Otherwise, we could all have dinner together." He replied, "You are right. We have some limitations."

At times, Zia and I gently debated the topic in Malala's presence, but she never spoke. I often wondered if the limitations were the choice of Malala's mother, or if these restrictions were imposed. Once I asked Malala on camera, "What does your mother think of your father's activism?" and she replied that her mother did not care about those things.

How were your documentaries connected to the tragedy that followed?

After my documentaries aired, the family's life changed dramatically. Donations poured in. Awards arrived. Dignitaries visited. The American Embassy sent Zia on a free trip to the United States. In the bombastic Pakistani press, Malala became the de facto voice of Swat.

One night, Zia was bragging about meeting a Turkish diplomat. I tried to use humor to ground him, and said, "Why are you always bragging about meeting these people? They should be bragging about meeting you!" He said, "You are right," and we laughed.

In late 2010, the situation in Swat began to improve sharply. Targeted killings by the Taliban were less frequent. The school that Zia owned reopened. Enrollment spiked. I returned to Swat and spent a week roaming freely in remote areas that were once Taliban strongholds. But as Malala became more emboldened, she continued to speak out, even more forcefully, against the Taliban. She told the BBC that the Taliban were not human, and she often talked

to reporters about how she imagined an assassination attempt. Two years after I left Pakistan, the Taliban shot her in the head.

The Taliban issued a statement addressing why they tried to kill Malala. In addition to condemning her outspokenness, they also blamed the foreign media for not giving them a voice. The Taliban are a small minority, but they do represent a real faction within Pakistan. Today, four years after the documentaries aired, Pakistan is still engaged in a lively debate about whether to enter peace talks with the Taliban. Meanwhile, a steady flow of terrorist attacks continues to kill thousands of Pakistanis each year.



Ultimately, the Taliban claimed responsibility for the shooting. Malala and her father thanked me for giving them a voice. But the question of protecting sources is something that foreign correspondents worry about all the time. The decisions are not easy, and there is no formula for making them. While giving people a platform to the world, we do everything we can to avoid situations in which our reporting turns people into targets. But most of the time, we just don't know what will happen. My reporting certainly

heightened the family's status, and sparked their appetite for recognition.

What has changed in Pakistan since you made your films?

Pakistan continues to be one of the worst places to be a woman. More than half of Pakistani girls are not educated. Pakistan also has the world's second lowest rate of female employment in the world, according to the World Economic Forum Gender Parity Report — lower even than Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan's failure to educate its citizenry is rooted in government ineffectiveness. Despite a recent increase, Pakistan still spends only about 2 percent of its gross domestic product on education. That is less than it spends on subsidies for its national airline, and only half the global average. Another major problem, which is often left out of the discussion, is the mentality of Pakistani men — fathers, brothers and uncles — many of whom still firmly believe that women belong at home.