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## Gendered Narratives: Viewing Disasters from a Cultural-Religious Lens

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## **Gendered Narratives: Viewing Disasters from a Cultural-Religious Lens**

*Nazia Hassan and Aisha Alam\**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Pakistan, as an environmentally vulnerable country, has experienced many natural catastrophes over the last two decades, resulting in significant human, socioeconomic, infrastructural, and agricultural losses. These events have had diverse impacts on people based on class, gender, geography, and cultural diversity leading to varied perceptions influenced by their intersectionality. This study explores the prevailing cultural-religious interpretations regarding the causes of disasters within the local community of Upper Dir, one of the main vulnerable districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. Qualitative research methods were used to conduct interviews with the local community, ensuring gender balance among respondents to capture their diverse views. The study's major findings reveal that causes of disasters are interpreted through religious and cultural narratives, attributing deviation from these normative structures as responsible for their occurrence. Notably, these narratives are gendered as women's actions and their departure from traditional feminine traits and roles are considered the primary reasons for 'divine retribution' manifesting as disasters. In communities strongly shaped by cultural and religious beliefs, enhancing public awareness is critical for ensuring that disaster preparedness strategies resonate with local values and practices, ultimately helping to reduce the adverse impacts of disasters.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Environmental Vulnerability, Cultural-Religious Interpretations, Intersectionality, Gendered Narratives, Disaster Preparedness.

**JEL Classification Codes:** Q54

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Climate change and the resultant disasters—floods, storms, droughts, famine, and heat waves—have been on the rise worldwide. The increasing number of disasters and their multidimensional impacts have become a global concern, receiving the attention of many developmental institutions and programmes. Likewise, the social aspects of natural disasters have become an important perimeter to be studied and analysed. Interpreting natural disasters through a social perspective provides a framework for connecting natural hazards with social vulnerability (Massazza et al., 2019). Pakistan is one of the most environmentally vulnerable countries in the world and the catastrophic earthquake of 2005, floods of 2010 and 2011, followed by the disastrous floods of June-July 2022 and April 2024 are manifestations of its environmental vulnerability. These periodic disasters led to enormous human, economic, agricultural, and infrastructural losses in the country, particularly in Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. Being an agrarian country, Pakistan has a minimal contribution to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, its geographical location and socioeconomic conditions make it vulnerable to disasters.

People’s vulnerability amplifies the severity and impact of disastrous events, primarily due to marginalisation, inequitable resource distribution, and limited access to knowledge and support systems. According to a UN report, a hazard is a ‘latent danger’ that causes the ‘possible occurrence of a precarious circumstance whereas, a disaster is an extreme situation, that causes human, structural, and financial damage to people living in nearby risky locations’ (UNICEF 2020). A hazard turns into a disaster because of its impact and the way it threatens the lives and livelihoods of people, which is largely determined by the vulnerabilities of respective communities.

Considering the significance of people’s social positioning, which determine their vulnerabilities/adaptiveness to climate change, this study attempts to include socio-cultural and religious perspectives into the understanding of climate change, particularly disasters. People’s perceptions about the environment and climate change are important in shaping human-nature relationships, and they also influence vulnerabilities and responses toward natural disasters. Hence, this relation is always divergent across communities, geographies, and genders. Referring to the recurring floods in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, people’s perceptions of natural disasters are complex, shaped by religious, cultural, and economic factors. While some view these disasters as purely natural phenomena, independent of human actions, others interpret them as consequences of human deeds. Therefore, understanding how climate change and its resulting disasters are perceived and interpreted by the local community of Upper Dir is essential.

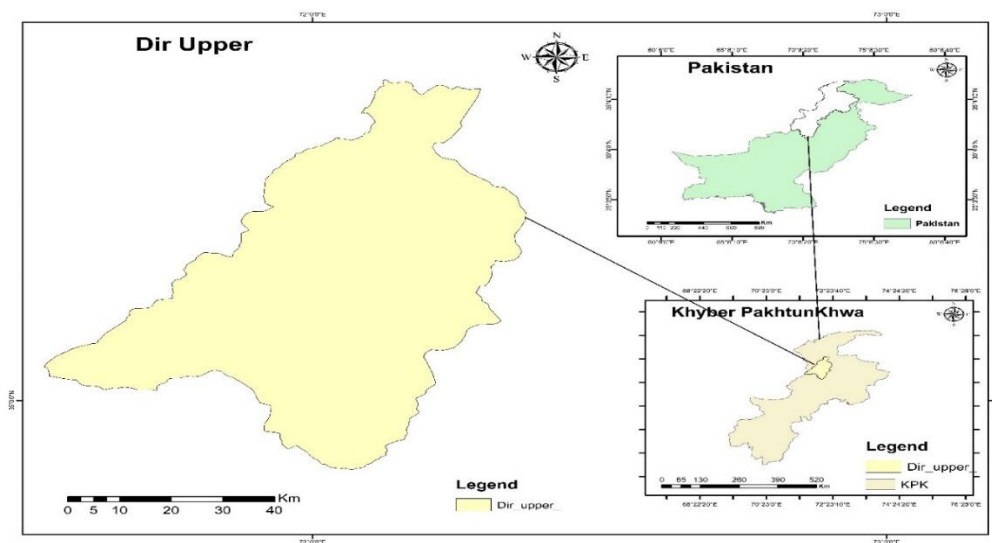
This paper begins with an introduction that reviews relevant literature, followed by a methodology section outlining the research approach. The findings are presented through a

detailed thematic analysis, leading to a conclusion that offers key insights and recommendations.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the existing literature on disasters within social sciences primarily focuses on the impacts of natural disasters and their socioeconomic and environmental/climate-related dimensions (Devi 2022; Iqbal et al., 2022; Chmutina and von Meding 2019; Shah et al., 2019). However, cultural and religious interpretations, particularly through a gendered lens, remain largely overlooked in disaster-related discourse and research. The available research on gender and disasters concentrates only on the gender-based impacts of disasters (Zaigham et al., 2023; Zeeshan et al., 2019; Abid et al., 2018). Likewise, some scholars have explored women's role in climate protection/and environmental conservation (Mago and Gunwal 2019). However, this literature lacks emphasis on how communities perceive the occurrence and presence of natural disasters and how these interpretations reflect gender blindness. This study offers a novel contribution to the climate change discourse by examining cultural and religious narratives on the causes of disasters through a gendered lens.

**Figure 1: Map of Upper Dir**



**Source:** Drawn from Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) 2022.

Numerous disasters occur globally each year, impacting human lives, livelihoods, and social structures within communities to varying degrees, depending on each country's socioeconomic conditions. Disasters are often understood as events triggered by natural hazards such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, storms, and tsunamis (Massazza et al., 2019). However, the definition of disasters remains a subject of debate among

scholars. While earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods are classified as natural hazards, they argue that such hazards only become disasters when they intersect with human vulnerability. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR 2019) asserts that there are no natural disasters—only natural hazards that occur independently of human action. Furthermore, a growing body of literature provides evidence linking anthropogenic climate change to the increasing frequency and severity of disasters (López et al., 2015).

Moreover, many studies stress the ‘un-naturalness’ (Tiranti 1977) of disasters where it is argued that nature and natural hazards are not responsible for disasters rather than human conditions and arrangements (socioeconomic, geographical, and political) convert a natural hazard into a disaster. Wells (2017) highlights that almost all disasters are the result of two factors: extreme natural events and poor human conditions and decisions.

The capacity to prevent, mitigate, or adapt to disaster has become far more challenging for developing countries, including Pakistan. Pakistan has been prone to natural hazards for the last two decades; despite the fact it contributes only 0.9% of GHG emissions (GoP 2021). Numerous studies have examined the causes of disasters (Alexander 1993), mitigation strategies (El-Masri and Tipple 2002), as well as aspects of preparedness, adaptation, and resilience (Graveline and Germain 2022; Mani and Goniewicz 2023). However, these studies ignore the fact that the success of disaster-management related measures depend on the perceptions and participation of local people. Strategies to reduce the risk of disasters can never be successful if disaster-related perceptions are not identified. Nazaruddin (2024) highlights the connection between disasters and religious beliefs, particularly in Islamic societies where Allah is the central expression of all aspects of life. He conceptualised the centrality of this divine power as a modeling system, interpreting human-experiences and worldly incidents through the signs of Allah. He supported his argument through a study conducted in the Acehnese society of Indonesia after the tsunami, which transformed into a more Islamic society, observing gender-based boundaries specified by religion. Bentzen (2013) also indicates the significance of belief system for disaster-related interpretations and used the term ‘religious coping.’ He argued that people cope with adverse life events by seeking comfort in their religion or associating the causes of disasters with the will of God (Jenkins et al., 2018). These studies discuss ‘religion’ as a source of comfort in pre- and post-disaster phases. However, the current scholarship lacks a perspective on cultural interpretations and native myths regarding the causes of disasters. Significantly, no previous research exists to link cultural conceptions of disaster with gender dynamics, that how these prevailing conceptions and notions are gendered and, in turn, how they affect the overall understanding of disasters.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study employed qualitative research methods to understand the causes of disasters through the socio-cultural interpretation and experiences of the study participants. This research was conducted in District Upper Dir, specifically in the locality of Dir Khas (Dir City), with ten residents—five women and five men. To ensure diversity in the data, participants were selected from two age groups: young (20-30 years) and older adults (40-60 years). All younger respondents had received formal education, whereas the older respondents were illiterate. The study employed purposive sampling to capture a range of perspectives, as this method is used to select respondents most likely to provide relevant and insightful information (Kelly et al., 2010, p. 317). It allows the researcher to select respondents with relevant and detailed knowledge directly related to the research question. Since qualitative research prioritises depth over generalisation, purposive sampling is well-suited for this study, ensuring the inclusion of respondents who can provide rich, context-specific insights.

The fieldwork was conducted between March and April 2024. In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they are well-suited for exploring respondents' subjective experiences in qualitative research. The interviews were conducted in the local language (Pashto), allowing respondents to articulate their thoughts and cultural perspectives freely while minimising the risk of misinterpretation and ensuring both inclusivity and data accuracy. The collected data was later translated into English.

The fieldwork process began with initial respondents who were known to the researcher through familial connections in Dir City, followed by outreach to additional study respondents. Interviewing female respondents was relatively straightforward; however, interviewing male respondents posed a challenge due to gender-related cultural norms. To address this, the researchers hired a male research assistant for data collection. However, relying solely on the assistant's findings was insufficient. Consequently, the researchers also conducted direct interviews with male respondents, which proved challenging but necessary for ensuring data reliability.

Following the fieldwork, the collected data was systematically categorised and analysed using an interpretive thematic approach. This process involved several steps:

- Developing understanding of the transcribed data and field notes to identify key interconnections.
- Broad categorisation of data, assigning codes to key concepts.
- Grouping codes into potential themes based on observed patterns in the primary data.
- Reviewing and refining the identified themes to ensure they captured the nuances in respondents' perspectives.

- Naming and structuring the themes to provide a meaningful analytical framework aligned with the study's objectives.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

According to the study respondents (both male and female), disasters frequently occurred in their locality in the form of floods, earthquakes, and heavy rainfall. They reported that floods affected their livelihoods, damaged water channels and agricultural land, and that untimely heavy rains harmed local fruits, crops, and vegetables. Moreover, they stated that the irrigation system was also impacted by floods, reducing crop production and affecting quality.

The findings of the study indicated that local people's perceptions of disasters were primarily shaped and influenced by cultural and religious narratives. The study respondents attributed disasters to various human deeds, which were largely explained in terms of normative gender (masculine and feminine) roles rather than the broader human-nature relationship. They perceived disasters as 'acts of God' (Chmutina and von Meding 2019) in response to deviations from expected gender behaviour, without acknowledging other anthropogenic activities, such as capitalist exploitation of nature, as contributing factors.

The study reveals that people often turn to religion which helps them make sense of the 'unimaginable catastrophe and find a way to accept it' during the pre- and post-disaster periods (Jenkins et al., 2018). Moreover, religious explanations are always complemented by cultural norms and traditions to facilitate the sense-making processes among people regarding any disaster. Cultural and religious structures not only guide people's ways of living and regulate gender dynamics and roles but also provide explanations for different natural and man-made disasters. Nazaruddin (2024) and Bentzen (2013) found that religious and cultural narratives provide a crucial 'framework for interpreting and understanding disasters.' This framework serves as a central modeling system that performs two crucial interrelated post-disaster functions: explanative and instructive. The explanatory function provides explanations for inexplicable disasters, while the instructive function offers guidance for subsequent actions and behaviour (Nazaruddin 2024).

Notably, this study found that gender dynamics played a dominant role in prevailing narratives, where deviations from religious or cultural gender norms were perceived as triggering divine wrath. The findings of the study were categorised into two broad themes: gender-based narratives and socio-environmental explanations. The former emphasised deviations from normative gender roles as causes of disasters, while the latter attributed disasters to social injustices and deforestation.

#### **4.1 Deviation from Normative Structures: A Major Factor behind Disasters**

This study reveals the centrality of narratives related to gender-based morality where non-normative gender roles and non-religious physical portrayals are considered responsible for divine wrath in the form of disasters. Here, ‘non-normative’ refers to those gender-based practices that do not comply with the intertwining religious-cultural traditions and norms. Study respondents highlighted the prevalence of various gender-based practices as examples of immorality, citing religious beliefs that assert when human beings stray from the righteous path (as prescribed by religious teachings), they will face punishment in the form of disasters and oppressive leadership. Based on these narratives, the following gender-related practices were identified as being perceived as causes of disasters in the studied area.

##### *Perceived Divine Retribution for Challenging Gendered Spaces*

Drawing upon religious and cultural norms of gender segregation and the division between public and private domains, study respondents, particularly the elderly, identified ‘immorality’ as a primary cause of Allah’s anger. They defined immorality as a violation of gender segregation norms and the public-private dichotomy, attributing disasters to such transgressions. Examples given of this perceived violation included women’s presence in public spaces, their freedom of mobility, use of mobile phones among women, and growing trend of co-education in Upper Dir.

These cultural and religious perspectives are deeply rooted in gender norms that afford men the privilege of unrestricted participation in social, economic, and political activities within the public sphere. In contrast, women are culturally confined to the domestic domain and discouraged from engaging in the masculine/public sphere. While this rigid public-private dichotomy limits women’s visibility, political empowerment, and participation in disaster management processes, it simultaneously reinforces gendered notions of propriety and transgression in the context of Upper Dir.

##### *Women’s Presence in Public Spaces and the Perceived Erosion of Norms*

The primary concern expressed by respondents was women’s increasing presence in public spaces, particularly in the local market (*bazaar*). They argued that in the past, women were rarely visible in such spaces, as they adhered strictly to religious and cultural norms. To avoid entering the local market, an area predominantly occupied by men, women would walk long distances and pass through agricultural fields. However, shifting socioeconomic dynamics were gradually normalising women’s presence in these traditionally masculine spaces, particularly in the local *bazaar*.

The term marketplace, as used by study respondents, referred specifically to local *bazaars*, which are traditionally considered male-dominated spaces. Recently, women had begun frequenting these markets as consumers, a trend that was met with strong disapproval by older female respondents. These women specifically criticised the practice of younger women shopping in the local market, arguing that it undermined the community's norms of piety. In this context, piety, a traditionally feminine attribute, was primarily associated with women's bodies and demeanour, whereas men were not subjected to the same expectations of embodying piety as an essential characteristic.

#### *Perceptions of Women's Mobility and Masculine Authority*

Field data revealed that respondents' concerns about women's presence in the local market were deeply tied to broader anxieties surrounding women's unrestricted movement. Male respondents, in particular, expressed discomfort with women's growing confidence in interacting freely within traditionally male-dominated spaces. Older male respondents specifically labelled this freedom of movement and confidence as disastrous in itself, arguing that it provoked both masculine anger and divine displeasure. These views reinforced the prevalence of 'social rules that prohibit women's participation in or contact with certain realms where the highest power of society resides' (Ortner 1972, p. 8).

Respondents perceived the increasing visibility of women in public spaces as a destabilising force, particularly for older generations who upheld strict gender segregation. They asserted that such trends were not only socially intolerable for men but also provoked divine wrath, ultimately leading to disasters.

Furthermore, elderly respondents noted that women no longer felt bound to seek their husbands' permission before leaving their homes, a shift they strongly disapproved of. They criticised younger men for failing to enforce restrictions on women's mobility, labelling them as '*begherata*' (impudent or dishonourable). This societal expectation underscored deeply embedded cultural norms that positioned masculine authority as a crucial aspect of gender relations. It also highlighted the social pressure on young men, who were seen as equally responsible for maintaining the cultural norm of male control over women's mobility. This masculine authority was regarded as an essential characteristic of an ideal Pakhtun/Muslim man within the community's cultural framework.

Young study respondents were also critical of the women's freedom of mobility and argued that this freedom was discouraged both in Islam and in Pakhtun culture. The literature also highlighted prevalence of these cultural and religious notions which restrict women's mobility in Pakhtun society. Male respondents mentioned that the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) also increased women's presence in the local market because their offices were located in commercial areas (Waqas and Awan 2019). Women's prolonged wait outside these offices were perceived as acts of impiety, reflecting broader societal concerns

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about female behaviour and public visibility. A news report also pointed to the issue of BISP office locations and related problems for women as they had to stand in queues for hours to receive their money (Right News Tv 2024).

#### *Co-Education and Perceived Cultural Disruptions*

The emergence of a co-education system in District Upper Dir was identified by respondents as another critical factor perceived to contribute to social change and, by extension, disasters. Young respondents explained that due to a shortage of teaching staff, boys' and girls' colleges were merged to prevent disruptions in education. However, this shift was met with varying reactions. One young participant remarked that co-education had introduced the concept of 'dating' in Dir. In contrast, another participant argued that women's presence in the market posed greater cultural challenges than co-education. Co-education was not only considered a violation of gender segregation norms rather the related concerns also highlighted the complexity of social attitudes regarding gender roles, public behaviour, and interaction between men and women in various spheres of life.

#### *Mobile Phones as a Disruptor of Cultural and Religious Norms*

The widespread use of mobile phones emerged as the third perceived manifestation of immorality, coexisting with and reinforcing concerns about women's mobility and co-education. The study findings revealed that perceptions of mobile phone usage were deeply gendered, with respondents asserting that men and women should not have equal access to this technology. While elderly respondents viewed mobile phone use among women as culturally and religiously inappropriate, its use by men was not subject to the same scrutiny.

These concerns were linked to broader anxieties about moral corruption and religious transgression, based on the belief that mobile phones facilitate women's interaction with the outside world. This exposure, according to respondents, led women to adopt 'external ways,' distancing themselves from religious and cultural norms. Such changes were perceived as contributing to moral decline and, ultimately, as factors that provoked divine punishment in the form of disasters.

One elderly male participant remarked, '*Whatever these girls watch on mobile, they aspire to follow*' (Male, 59, Illiterate, Dir Upper), suggesting that mobile technology was driving uncontrollable shifts in gender dynamics. Another participant further reinforced this perception by stating, '*People say that the atom bomb is hazardous, but I say that mobile phones are more hazardous*' (Male, 55, Illiterate, Dir Upper).

Thus, mobile phones were widely viewed as a threat to cultural and religious values. Many respondents considered them a fundamental cause of divine wrath, arguing that mobile technology facilitated morally objectionable behaviour, particularly among women, by blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres, undermining the sanctity of

gender-segregated spaces, and encouraging increased interaction between men and women in both *bazaars* and educational institutions.

*Revealing the Concealed: Gendered Narratives and Regulation of Women's Bodies*

A key dimension of gendered narratives, as explored in this study, pertains to the societal emphasis on women's bodies and the expectations surrounding their veiling. The study respondents strongly associated morality with clothing practices, particularly regarding the visibility of women's bodies in public spaces. While both men's and women's attire was discussed, female dressing was a primary focus of criticism.

An elderly participant specifically condemned the increasing visibility of women's midriffs in marketplaces, asserting that proper *pardah* (veil) should cover the entire body, leaving only the eyes exposed. As Vasudev and Inbanathan (2021, p. 9) observe, 'Islamic discourses of piety place considerable emphasis on bodily practice, which becomes the means through which a pious Muslim woman comes into being.'

The findings underscore how gendered expectations regarding clothing and bodily visibility are deeply embedded in cultural and religious frameworks, reinforcing the notion that women's morality is intrinsically tied to their physical presentation in public spaces. Respondents argued that women's clothing styles, which fail to keep their bodies veiled and maintain their sanctity, were influenced by Western and modern ways. Respondents attributed these fashion trends particularly for women as a divergence from Islamic teachings and Pakhtun customs, arguing they evoked divine wrath and disasters. They expressed that deviation from religious teachings not only led to moral decay but also incurred divine displeasure, potentially resulting in calamities and disasters. They also quoted the proverb that a woman's appropriate place in society (socially and culturally) was either her house or her grave. This underscores the respondents' beliefs that upholding traditional values and religious principles is essential for maintaining societal harmony and seeking divine protection.

Nazaruddin (2024) underscores the centrality of religious narratives in Islamic societies, arguing that all human experiences are interpreted in relation to Allah. In Upper Dir, people's perceptions and experiences of disasters were largely framed through dominant cultural and religious lenses, wherein women's bodily practices were considered markers of piety or impiety, directly linked to divine displeasure and the occurrence of natural disasters. These narratives not only positioned women's perceived impiety as a cause of divine wrath but also cast them as intermediaries between nature (natural hazards and disasters) and culture (adherence to cultural norms). As Ortner (1972, p. 25) suggests, 'This intermediacy may have the significance of mediating, i.e., performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture.' Within this framework, women's observance of veiling, their adherence to Islamic principles of piety, and their

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compliance with gender segregation norms were perceived as potential means of appeasing Allah, thereby reducing divine anger and mitigating the risks of natural disasters.

#### *Gendered Bodily Practices among Men and Perceptions of Moral Decline*

While discussions on bodily practices primarily centred on women, some elderly respondents also criticised young men for adopting modern grooming styles, particularly in relation to their beards. They argued that the Islamic style of beard differed from contemporary trends, expressing disapproval of young men who altered their beards to align with modern styles. One elderly respondent went further, condemning young men for following what he described as the same path of immorality as women, deviating from societal and religious norms. Criticism was particularly directed at men who had opened shops catering to male customers, choosing to either trim or completely shave their beards while engaging in direct conversations with women in their shops. This behaviour was perceived as a violation of traditional gender boundaries and an erosion of established moral codes.

This theme highlights how both men's and women's bodily practices were linked to the occurrence of disasters. While women were criticised for not adhering to strict veiling norms, men were reprimanded for altering their beards, with both behaviours seen as contributing to divine displeasure. Elderly respondents attributed these shifts to a broader societal decline, arguing that the deviation of both young men and women from traditional norms was causing distress for the entire community. These perspectives effectively reduce men and women to their physical appearance, overlooking their broader capacities and societal contributions. By framing bodily practices as central to moral order, such conceptions reinforce the idea that disasters are a direct consequence of perceived moral failings rather than structural or environmental factors.

## **4.2 Linking Non-normative Sexual Behaviour to Disasters**

Another aspect of gendered narratives regarding immorality, which highlights how normative structures are violated, relates to sexuality and its norms. The societal definition of (in)appropriate gender behaviour also incorporates norms governing sexual behaviour of individuals. According to the prevailing gender order, 'heterosexuality' is the norm for Pashtun community members, and compliance with this norm results in the construction of 'normal' and clear identities for individuals (Shah and Shah 2024). However, deviation from this sexual norm was considered unacceptable both religiously and culturally. Young respondents in the study identified the presence of what they perceived as deviant sexual behaviour, particularly homosexuality, as a significant factor provoking divine punishment in the form of disasters. They asserted that while adultery was not as prevalent in their area compared to larger cities such as Lahore (Punjab, Pakistan), homosexuality was becoming

increasingly common. This perception framed non-normative sexual behaviour as a moral transgression that disrupted societal and religious norms, thereby invoking divine wrath.

These narratives reflect broader cultural and religious discourses that associate disasters with perceived moral decline, reinforcing the belief that maintaining strict adherence to traditional sexual and gender norms is essential for social and spiritual order

It was observed by the researchers that some respondents avoided the usage of the term 'homosexuality' in their conversation. Instead, they referred to it as '*da qoome Loot amal*' (the behaviour of Prophet Loot's (AS) people). This terminology reflects a direct association with the Quranic narrative of Prophet Loot (AS), whose tribe was described as engaging in same-sex relations and, as a result, was ultimately destroyed by divine punishment through catastrophic disasters.

Respondents' belief systems were closely aligned with these religious narratives, reinforcing the perception that those involved in what they considered sinful behaviour were destined to face God's wrath in the form of disasters. Some respondents referenced the 2022 floods in Kalam (a small village and tourist destination in Swat Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) as an example of divine retribution for perceived immoral activities. They claimed that the floods specifically destroyed hotels that were allegedly involved in behaviours considered immoral, such as homosexual activities, alcohol supply, and the provision of women for entertainment purposes. The respondents interpreted this event as an act of divine intervention, signifying God's disapproval of such practices. Male respondents, in particular, reinforced this perspective by asserting that history had repeatedly demonstrated that immorality leads to the downfall of societies.

#### **4.3 Social Problems: A Minimal Contribution to Disaster Narratives**

A few respondents, particularly younger ones, introduced an alternative perspective by identifying social injustices and environmental degradation as contributing factors to disasters. They argued that unequal social structures, exploitation of natural resources, and unsustainable practices were prevalent in their area and had the potential to trigger disasters. However, despite acknowledging these factors, such explanations were marginalised within survey findings on disasters.

#### **4.4 Perceptions about Social Injustices and Link with Divine Wrath**

Study respondents identified social injustices as an inherent part of their societal structure, citing issues such as innocent killings, the practice of '*sud*' (interest-based financial transactions), drug supply, and the denial of women's inheritance rights. These injustices were framed within a religious discourse, with respondents drawing on historical and religious examples to illustrate the connection between social justice and divine wrath. One frequently cited example was from the era of Hazrat Umar (RA), the second caliph of Islam,

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renowned for his fairness and justice. Respondents recalled a religious account in which an earthquake occurred during his rule. According to the narrative, Hazrat Umar (RA) struck the ground with his stick and declared, '*Does Umar deny you justice?*', after which the earthquake immediately ceased. By narrating this story, respondents highlighted the moral and religious significance of justice, suggesting that the denial of justice in their own locality could invite divine punishment in the form of disasters.

Elderly respondents, regardless of gender, strongly condemned these practices and questioned, '*In the presence of all these sins, how can we expect to escape from God's wrath?*' This sentiment reinforced the belief that disasters were divine retributions for societal transgressions. Apart from increasing availability and use of drugs among young men, young respondents also pointed to gender inequality in land rights, particularly the denial of women's inheritance rights, as a persistent but largely overlooked form of social injustice. They pointed out that while this issue remained minimally discussed within broader community discourses on justice, they believed it could be more effectively addressed through the intervention of local religious leaders.

Beyond discussions on immorality, social injustices, and the denial of women's inheritance rights, study respondents also addressed the material relationship between nature, the environment, and the residents of Upper Dir. Young respondents, in particular, highlighted overpopulation, deforestation, and illegal land ownership as contributing factors to disasters. They maintained that population growth had increased pollution, particularly noise pollution, recalling their childhood when '*rickshaws*' were absent from Dir. However, expansion of transportation and urbanisation had contributed considerably to environmental degradation. Moreover, they linked population growth to the expansion of residential and commercial construction, which had led to widespread deforestation as forests were cleared to make space for settlements.

Respondents noted that agricultural land had been extended too close to the river, making it increasingly vulnerable to damage from water flows. An elderly participant cited an old Pashto proverb, which translates to 'water never changes its path,' reinforcing the belief that natural forces will inevitably reclaim their course if human interventions disrupt them. This saying reflects deep-rooted cultural and indigenous wisdom that could serve as valuable guidance for planning construction around rivers. However, despite its significance, adherence to this principle in practice remains minimal, particularly among men who are often involved in land use and urban expansion. Men have historically exploited natural resources for economic and material gains, prioritising short-term benefits over long-term sustainability. This pattern of environmental exploitation contrasts with the role of women, who have played a limited part in the degradation of nature. However, despite their minimal role in resource exploitation, women are disproportionately held responsible for disasters in social and religious discourses. This gendered discrepancy in

the observance of cultural wisdom and environmental responsibility has contributed to an imbalanced narrative, where one gender, primarily women, is directly blamed for disturbing the balance of nature, while the actions of the other, primarily men, remain largely unexamined.

## **5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Raising community awareness about environmental challenges, natural hazards, and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is crucial for building resilience in Upper Dir. This requires a collaborative approach involving government institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and local community leaders to effectively address disaster perceptions and integrate scientific knowledge with cultural and religious beliefs.

The government should actively engage religious leaders to facilitate discussions on the intersection of climate, gender, and disaster beliefs during Friday sermons, which attract a large male audience as part of their religious practice. This strategy could help reshape perceptions by integrating disaster awareness into religious discourse, making it more relatable and widely accepted. Local government bodies should also be included in DRR efforts to ensure that gender concerns are addressed effectively, promoting inclusive and equitable disaster preparedness strategies.

NGOs can play a vital role by organising community dialogues that bring together elders, young men, and older generations to engage in meaningful discussions on disaster causes. These discussions should bridge deeply entrenched religious and cultural beliefs with scientific and rational explanations for improving understanding of disaster risks.

In addition to addressing perceptions, it is essential to implement concrete policy measures. Institutional bodies/government agencies involved in disaster-related policymaking must actively collaborate with local communities to gain a deeper understanding of their concerns, cultural wisdom, and indigenous perspectives on the environment and DRR. Furthermore, these institutions should sensitise local communities about the actual causes of disasters, in order to prevent unplanned use of land, forests, and rivers to mitigate the risks associated with natural hazards; and enhance disaster preparedness by equipping the local population with the knowledge and strategies necessary to respond effectively to potential disasters.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study reveals that perceptions regarding disasters are significantly focused on cultural and religious gendered narratives. These narratives are derived from established societal norms that provide rationales for 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' masculine and feminine behaviour. The study indicates the existence of two parallel, rather contrasting, views about disasters in Upper Dir.

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First, disasters are perceived as ‘natural’ phenomena and explained in terms of ‘divine punishment’, ‘God’s act’ or ‘God’s wrath’. Although these phrases show the supremacy of God’s existence, these conceptions are not only defined and interpreted from a male perspective, they also impose an essentialist view of disasters, through their association with Allah’s anger/will.

Disasters were simultaneously perceived as an outcome of anthropogenic factors, yet these were largely framed within gendered moral discourses rather than environmental or structural explanations. In this perspective, human activities were not primarily linked to interactions with natural elements but instead to perceived moral transgressions, particularly those associated with women’s behaviour and mobility. Women’s presence in public spaces, such as marketplaces (*bazaars*), their attendance in co-educational institutions, and their use of mobile phones were cited as examples of behavioural deviations, reinforcing a ‘piety vs. impiety’ narrative. These perceptions were deeply gendered, as men, who hold dominant societal positions, were subjected to less stringent moral and religious scrutiny than women.

While homosexuality among men and grooming practices related to beards were also identified as deviations from the heteronormative and religious order, these concerns were primarily raised by younger participants and were not widely endorsed by older respondents. This discourse underscores the interconnection between morality, perceived indecency, and divine punishment, where disasters are framed as a consequence of human moral failings rather than environmental mismanagement or broader socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

The study concludes that women play no direct role in environmental degradation, such as deforestation, illegal expansion of agricultural land onto riverbanks, or environmental damage caused by commercial activities. Despite these scientifically established factors contributing to disasters, women were consistently held responsible for societal disruptions due to the dominance of religious and cultural interpretations, shaped by masculine perspectives. The local community’s perception of nature and natural hazards is closely tied to women’s bodies and their adherence to normative gender structures. According to this belief system, nature remains stable and controlled only when women’s mobility and piety are strictly regulated. These narratives align with the ‘nature-culture’ dichotomy (Ortner 1972), where women are symbolically linked to nature, while men are associated with culture, reinforcing a hierarchical framework that dictates gender roles and moral expectations. In essence, the study found that gender-based deviations from normative structures, particularly those challenging culturally and religiously prescribed gender roles, are perceived as transgressions that provoke divine punishment in the form of disasters. This moralised interpretation of disasters reflects broader social anxieties about shifting

gender dynamics, where women's changing roles are framed as existential threats to both cultural order and environmental stability.

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