

Peshwar 2 June 2010 (IRIN) - The family of Aurangzeb Afridi, 45, is divided. For the past six months, they have been living in Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's northwestern Khyber-Pakhtoonkh'wa province, after being displaced from the Orakzai Agency in tribal areas. Afridi wants to go back but his teenage daughters are reluctant to leave.

"Fighting has slowed down in and around our home town, Kalaya, and it is time to go back," Afridi told IRIN. He wants to take up farming again and look after his parents. "I miss our home. City life may be comfortable, with running water in taps and streets that are busy all the time, but it is not right for me," he said.

However, his teenage daughters, Sameera Bibi, 17, and Maryum Bibi, 15, would prefer to stay on in Peshawar. "There is so much opportunity here for women," Sameera said.

On 1 June, the Pakistan army announced that the military operation in the Orakzai Agency, one of seven tribal agencies on the Afghan border, was over after militants had been defeated. Fighting has been especially fierce in the territory since March this year and according to media reports, 200,000 people have been displaced since the end of 2009.

An update by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) from 28 May states that 44,965 families (or 328,244 individuals) displaced from Orakzai and the adjacent Kurram Agency have been registered in the Kohat and Hangu districts of Khyber-Pakhtoonkh'wa.

Registration of IDPs has been suspended in the two districts since 17 April after a suicide bombing at a registration point, but according to media reports, people have continued to stream out since then.

While some are contemplating return, young women such as Sameera and Maryam have been exposed to new opportunities during their displacement.

"I have seen women going out to work – even women who have their own offices in banks and other places. Our life in Orakzai is very limited by contrast," said Maryam. She, like her sister, would like to stay on, pursue an education and then perhaps a career.

Her cousins, with whom the family has been staying since December 2009, include a young woman studying to be a doctor and another, still at school, who aspires to be a lawyer.

Sameera and Maryam have been attending classes at a local institute for several months. At home, though both went to school, education was frequently disrupted by the violence and schools were targeted.

"There is really no education available to girls after Grade 8 in my home [village]. The teaching

standards are too poor and most girls drop out by Grade 5 or sooner,” Sameera told IRIN.

Poor literacy levels

According to the Asian Development Bank, literacy levels in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are 5.9 percent against a national level of 40 percent.

“For women in tribal areas the literacy rate is really very low, even below 1 percent. They also lack social mobility and awareness,” Roohi Bano, Regional Manager for the Peshawar-based Khwendo Kor NGO, which works for the education and development of women, told IRIN.

Bano said her organization tried to overcome these issues by “setting up groups to raise awareness about the need for reform”.

Such efforts will take time to bring results, however. Young women from tribal areas, particularly those who have seen a different kind of life by being displaced, are eager to change their futures.

“I went to Karachi with my parents while my father was searching for work, and I saw so many women head out each day to colleges. These women know how to stand up for themselves and work alongside men,” said Shandana Khan, 20 [not her real name]. “My mother cannot read and she has suffered years of oppression. She had no choice because she had no income of her own.”

But change is opposed by many. “An education for women just gives them the wrong ideas. After all, it is a girl’s fate to be married off and to bear children,” said Wazira Bibi, 60, from South Waziristan. “Life in cities has meant our girls now think differently. I hope this will not create problems in the future.”