

I risk being killed every day

Maryam Bibi, 59, on her struggle to run a women's charity in the tribal areas of Pakistan

I try to wake before sunrise to say my prayers. But it's not easy, as often I can't sleep because of the terrible things going on in my homeland of Waziristan. It's the most conservative area of Pakistan, where many people believe Osama Bin Laden is hiding. Our vehicles have been stolen, we've been shot at, and we've had fatwas issued against us. Recently one employee was dragged out of his vehicle by six men and we still don't know where he is.

Breakfast is normally tea with bread and a boiled egg. I am a widow and live in Peshawar with my unmarried son in my brother-in-law's house. As a woman, I am responsible for all household work, but I am rare among Waziri women in having a job, so I get in help.

Our office is close by and I like walking. But because of threats, the office vehicle often collects me.

I set up my agency, Khwendo Kor, which means Sisters' Home in Pashto, to empower women through education, access to better health and helping them set up small businesses. I run it from a house in Peshawar which is always full of women. We start the day with a meeting over milky tea to discuss how all our projects are going.

The tribal areas are very backward and women are just seen as beasts of burden to collect water and produce children. I know villages where not one woman can read or write a word. Battering women is common. My cousin was killed by her brother because it was rumoured she was having an affair. He was given the gun by their mother.

My birth as a third daughter was devastating for my mother, who had failed again to produce a son. Then my twin brother was born, and the village resounded with gunshot in jubilation. My aunt told me I was left on a bed and forgotten for the entire day. Later I had to take care of my brother, so I got to go to school to help him settle in. Me and my sisters



were the first girls in the village to be educated. People accused my father of turning us into prostitutes.

I had to marry my cousin, who was schizophrenic, and I was kept in strict purdah. I had four children and was often beaten by him. I was living like a shadow. Then one day my younger sister, who had become a doctor, came to visit. I realised I'd forgotten I was educated and decided I would do something.

'When we do polio vaccinations, religious groups say we're putting stamps on bodies to take them to America for research'

I bought a buffalo with the idea of selling milk. But the man who sold milk in the area started coming earlier, when the men were around, so I couldn't venture out. Also the buffalo was very hard to milk. In the end I had to sell it. Then I bought a rickshaw, but the driver cheated me and I lost all my money. In 1993 I set up Khwendo Kor. It's not easy. To help the women we had to persuade all the men, as they have

the say in allowing daughters, wives, sisters or granddaughters to attend school or become teachers.

If I'm not travelling, I have lunch in the office with my staff and any visiting women. We usually have nan bread with dhal or mutton curry. The lunch-time chat is a good chance to see how, through our work, women are becoming more confident. They realise the importance of sending their

daughters to school because they learn about medicine expiry dates and basic hygiene, which stops so many children dying of diarrhoea. We've trained 249 women teachers.

Political parties are banned in the tribal areas, but radical religious organisations have become very powerful. They are linked to the Taliban and get mosques and local media to spread propaganda. When we do polio vaccinations, they say

we're putting stamps on the bottoms of women and children to take their bodies to America for research. The US drone attacks, which have been going on for the past year, have made local people angry and our work even harder. We've had to stop work in many villages, and our children's learning centres have been blown up.

Because of all the threats, I no longer stay late in the office. Back home, I like cooking eggplant, chicken karahi or fried fish with vegetables, but rarely get to cook, so grab whatever the maid has left. I spend the evening replying to emails, writing reports or reading research papers, often by candlelight because of power cuts. I try to go to bed by 11pm, but with so much on my mind, I only sleep later. I was lucky a few years ago that I got the chance to spend a year at York University to write a thesis. Imagine: a Waziri woman in York! I think about that sometimes to try and help me sleep.

Interview by Christina Lamb. Photograph by Justin Sutcliffe