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 [Business ▾](#) |
 [Weird](#) |
 [Entertainment](#) |
 [Health](#) |
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 [Instep Today](#)

[Today's Paper ▾](#) |
 [Opinion ▾](#) |
 [Blog](#) |
 [The News On Sunday](#) |
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 [Musharraf](#) |
 [PCB](#) |
 [LB Polls](#) |
 [Karachi](#) |

[Jang/Geo Response to Allegations](#)

You are here: [Home](#) > [Today's Paper](#) > [Peshawar](#)

TODAYS' NEWSPAPER

BACK ISSUES

Peshawar

US-based granddaughter serving Swatis

Late Wali-e-Swat's

Farzana Ali Khan
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 From Print Edition

Today's Newspaper	
Top story	National
World	Business
Sports	Karachi
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Peshawar	Editorial
Opinion	Newspost

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MINGORA: The granddaughter of the late Wali-e-Swat has been living in the United States but her work for the welfare of the Swati people means she has to stay for long periods in the place of her birth.

Zebunnisa Jilani, president of the Swat Relief Initiative (SRI), said she is committed to work for the underprivileged women and children in Swat. Born in 1952 in Saidu Sharif in Swat, she grew up with her grandparents and her aunt, and was fifth among her siblings, with no boys in the family.

Zebunnisa recounts how she became aware of the gender inequality in the society. "When I was young, I was told how unhappy everyone was over my birth being a girl, and how the family rejoiced when my brother was born a year later," she said.

"There was lamentation over my birth as everyone wanted my grandfather to have a grandson after four girls," Zebunnisa said.

"I would frequently see how inferior women were in our society compared to men. Because my grandfather was the ruler of Swat and he personally decided cases regarding women issues, a lot of women in distress would come to my grandmother for help," she elaborated.

"My father was the second child of my grandfather. He was born with an eye problem and could not be sent to the Doon School in Dehradun, India like his other brothers and cousins. "When he grew up he would spend all his time and money helping small boys in Swat with scholarships in getting education. My grandfather along with his engineers would go to inspect what was his pride: schools, clinics, police stations and administration units every couple of miles," Zebunnisa recalled.

She opined that the Wali of Swat's administration reflected the best of Pakhtun culture, Islam and modernity. "His government was a combination of progressive laws and the regional codes of conduct set by the jirgas of the region. The balance between traditional culture, religion and modernity ensured a progressive, efficient and enlightened system," she explained.

At the age of 25, Zebunnisa got married to Arshad Jilani, the son of

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Major General Ghulam Jilani who was a very good friend of her grandfather. The family settled in New Jersey in the US.

While living in the United States, Arshad Jilani got transferred to China where the couple lived for four years. In China, she got her certificate in traditional Chinese medicine. On return to the United States, she enrolled in a school to get a degree in nutrition.

“Three years back, I was shocked over the destruction of property and homes in Swat due to the conflict between the Taliban and army, which led to a huge displacement of people of Swat. The plight of my people prompted me to help them and hence I decided to set up the Swat Relief Initiative to assist the Swati population.”

After collecting funds from generous friends and organisations like the Abbot Laboratories, Wyeth Laboratories and National Rural Support Programme, Zebunnisa came to Pakistan in March 2009 to help the internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The SRI worked tirelessly during the summer, forming two mobile health units, each comprising an ambulance with a doctor, three nurse practitioners, a nutritionist, a pharmacist, medicines and other supplies.

“We were able to treat 400 to 500 patients a day and gave them free medicines, while others much larger organisations in the area were seeing an average of 100 patients a day,” she added.

“Since women and children were the most vulnerable groups, our main focus was on this population. Among women our main target was pregnant and lactating ones as we discovered there were almost 70,000 pregnant women among the IDPs,” she said.

About her future plans, she said that this year they were intending an integrative community development centred around social mobilisation to empower people at the grassroots to register improvements in education, health, economic development and environment. She also has plans for an energy project that will take advantage of the existing watermill technology.

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