

‘This is how these militants work. They want to win the hearts and minds of the people so they first see what the local problems are and target those responsible, and that way they get the support of the silent majority. That’s what they did in Waziristan when they went after kidnappers and bandits. After, when they get power, they behave like the criminals they once hunted down.’

Fazlullah’s broadcasts were often aimed at women. He must have known that many of our men were away from home, working in coal mines in the south or on building sites in the Gulf. Sometimes he would say, ‘Men, go outside now. I am talking to the women.’ Then he’d say, ‘Women are meant to fulfil their responsibilities in the home. Only in emergencies can they go outside, but then they must wear the veil.’ Sometimes his men would display the fancy clothes that they said they had taken from ‘decadent women’ to shame them.

My friends at school said their mothers listened to the Radio Mullah although our headmistress Madam Maryam told us not to. At home we only had my grandfather’s old radio, which was broken, but my mother’s friends all listened and told her what they heard. They praised Fazlullah and talked of his long hair, the way he rode a horse and behaved like the Prophet. Women would tell him their dreams and he would pray for them. My mother enjoyed these stories, but my father was horrified.

I was confused by Fazlullah’s words. In the Holy Quran it is not written that men should go outside and women should work all day in the home. In our Islamic studies class at school we used to write essays entitled ‘How the Prophet Lived’. We learned that the first wife of the Prophet was a businesswoman called Khadijah. She was forty, fifteen years older than him, and she had been married before, yet he still married her. I also knew from watching my own mother that Pashtun women are very powerful and strong. Her mother, my grandmother, had looked after all eight children alone after my grandfather had an accident and broke his pelvis and could not leave his bed for eight years.

A man goes out to work, he earns a wage, he comes back home, he eats, he sleeps. That’s what he does. Our men think earning money and ordering around others is where power lies. They don’t think power is in the hands of the woman who takes care of everyone all day long, and gives birth to their children. In our house my mother managed everything because my father was so busy. It was my mother who would wake up early in the morning, iron our school clothes, make our breakfast and teach us how to behave. It was my mother who would go to the market, shop for us and cook. All those things she did.

In the first year of the Taliban I had two operations, one to take out my appendix and the other to remove my tonsils. Khushal had his appendix out too. It was my mother who took us to hospital; my father just visited us and brought ice cream. Yet my mother still believed it was written in the Quran that women should not go out and women should not talk to men other than relatives they cannot marry. My father would say to her, ‘Pekai, purdah is not only in the veil, purdah is in the heart.’

Lots of women were so moved by what Fazlullah said that they gave him gold and money, particularly in poor villages or households where the husbands were working abroad. Tables were set up for the women to hand over their wedding bangles and necklaces and women queued up to do so or sent their sons. Some gave their life savings, believing that this would make God happy. He began building a vast red-brick headquarters in Imam Deri complete with a madrasa, a mosque and walls and levees to protect it from the Swat River. No one knew where he got the cement and iron bars from but the workforce was local. Every village had to take turns sending their men for a day to help build it. One day one of our Urdu teachers, Nawab Ali, told my father, ‘I won’t be coming to