POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE
The War to Be Her
A Film by Erin Heidenreich
www.pbs.org/pov
When I first filmed in Pakistan—specifically in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (the northwest region along the Afghanistan border)—and the dusty landscape revealed homes made of cement compounds, with women dressed in burqas and men with long beards in turbans, the initial sensation I had was fear—for a moment. These images had been seared into my brain for years by Western news and media that told me this is what a terrorist looks like.

Images are powerful. Images combined with stories even more so. But, the people I met, even the strangers who harbored this American who was going undercover to tell Maria’s story, were compassionate and giving and just wanted connection and to be seen—as we all do.

I wanted to open up the perspective on the story we have been told about this part of the world; stories create beliefs inside us, making us think that something is true. Maria and her family happen to be from Waziristan, considered the home of the Taliban. Led by their faith, she and her family are out to do only good, to be a beacon of nonviolence and create equal opportunities for women and girls. Maria and her family inspired me beyond measure from the moment I first met them.

I have always been attracted to telling stories about people who are defining for themselves what it means to be a woman or a man and all of the baggage those descriptions carry with them. So much of what makes up our identities is based on how we see those labels in ourselves and what others project onto them.

I grew up with a single mom who faced workplace discrimination, so she went by a male pseudonym in her written correspondence and her deep voice didn’t betray her gender over the phone. All over the world, sometimes in nuanced ways and sometimes in life-threatening ways, girls and women are fighting to be seen, to work and even just to survive.

Maria’s story points a laser beam at this struggle to an extremely heightened degree and with such clarity that I realized her story could be emblematic of the obstacles girls all over the world are facing.

Every young person on this planet strives to figure out their identity. Every person, deep down inside, wants to thrive in life being and doing what feels right to them.

Like almost all children, Maria wanted to run around playing freely outside. She eventually wanted to participate in sports. Because she was a girl living in a conservative society, it was not appropriate or safe for her to do so. She wanted to play sports and she passed herself off as a boy, which allowed her freedom.

When I first met Maria, I was taken with the story of her childhood. But the question I asked myself when I was deciding whether or not to make a film was “What is the story now?” It immediately started to come together for me the moment I met her family.

Each of her siblings and her mom and dad reminded me of my family in some way. And I felt that if I could connect so deeply with them, others throughout the world would, too—no matter their country, religion or culture.
I had no idea about the journey we would go on. It took us into the furthest reaches of Taliban country and into the depths of our own hearts and asked the most fundamental questions: What lengths would you go to help your family? What are your values? At what cost do you fight to do good for humankind?

During the filmmaking, there were times when we were in extreme danger. We never knew whether a person was part of the Taliban, an informer, or not. Our tiny crew was extremely brave. Today when people ask me how I could have put myself through this—we often encountered situations that we were not sure we would get out of—I remind them that the filming only lasts so long. But Maria and her family live like this every day of their lives.

This story is unique in that it is showing a young person at a particular time in her life. If made 25 years from now, it might have a very different ending. That is the beauty of capturing life right now, of being present in what is unfolding—none of us know the future. And it takes a lot of courage and honesty to be in the moment with our own feelings and uncertainties. Maria and her family get through this with a deeply embedded value system, a drive to do what’s right and a sense of humor.

When we started filming years ago, one producer was concerned about whether this film would be relevant when we completed it. As it turns out, radical extremism, sexual discrimination, abuse and terrorism are still part of the daily news cycle and infiltrating homes and workplaces everywhere in the world.

I hope that the experience of seeing one family bound by love and working to create better lives for others can open hearts and minds beyond narrow stereotypical perceptions of Muslims, gender and what it means to be an athlete. Truly, we are all capable of making our corners of the world a little more compassionate.

Erin Heidenreich
Director, The War to Be Her
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As a young child, Maria Toorpakai displayed signs that she could become an elite competitor in her nation’s most popular sport. However, as a girl growing up in the Taliban-controlled tribal area of Waziristan, Pakistan, Maria had odds stacked against her. The War to Be Her celebrates Maria’s defiance as she becomes an international squash champion despite hailing from a region where girls are forbidden to attend school, listen to music or walk outside unescorted or uncovered.

As the documentary follows Maria’s journey as an athlete, we learn that her success is rooted in talent, resilience and a remarkable family. It may have been easier to abandon their country and religion, but her family remains committed to Islam and to Pakistan. Her mother is the principal of a school for girls that has been bombed three times, while her sister, Ayesha Gulalai, a former member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, is one of the youngest politicians in the country and was the only female representative from her region. Her brothers provide support and physical protection, bound and buoyed by the egalitarian spirit of their fearless father.

The film provides viewers a glimpse of this family’s predictably difficult life under Taliban repression, but also reveals its members to be models of nonviolent resistance to the conformity, oppressive gender norms and distortions of Islam imposed by extreme fundamentalism.

Maria finds inspiration, strength and comfort in athletic competition; audiences will find inspiration in her courage.
The War to Be Her is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to gender roles, women in Islam or sports and girls coming of age, including *The World Before Her, The Light in Her Eyes, Dalya’s Other Country, What Tomorrow Brings, The Boxing Girls of Kabul, Burqa Boxers, Light Fly, Fly High* and *Shadya*.
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the “Key Issues” section
- High school students, youth groups and clubs
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries

The War to Be Her is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- athletic competition
- courage
- family support
- gender equality
- gender norms
- international athletic competition
- leadership
- Pakistan
- patriarchy
- religious extremism
- resistance
- resilience
- squash
- Taliban
- violence/nonviolence
- women/girls in Islam
- women/girls in sports
- women’s rights
- women’s studies

**USING THIS GUIDE**

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use *The War to Be Her* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit [www.pov.org/engage](http://www.pov.org/engage)
The Taliban in Waziristan

Waziristan is a mountainous region in northwest Pakistan near the border with Afghanistan. Most of Waziristan falls within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a semi-autonomous region within Pakistan. Home to the Pashtun ethnic group, Waziristan is deeply conservative. Since 2001, militants driven out by the war in Afghanistan have regrouped across the border, and as a result the region has served as a hub of Islamic extremism.

The predominant group in the area is the Taliban, a jihadist movement that seeks to restore a fundamentalist version of Islamic law. Under Taliban rule, men are required to grow beards and women must cover their bodies completely in public. Women are forbidden to go out in public without being accompanied by male relatives and are discouraged from leaving their houses. Television, music and films are banned, and girls are not allowed to attend school or participate in traditionally male activities, including sports. The Taliban enforces its mandate through violence, issuing death threats and publicly executing suspected dissidents.

The Taliban focused its attention on Maria and her family when she gained a high profile due to her squash championships. Her family has had to move repeatedly to different regions of Pakistan due to threats from the Taliban.

Sources:

Maria Toorpakai and Her Family

Maria’s father was born into a prominent political family in the South Waziristan region of northwest Pakistan. He and his wife are both schoolteachers. Maria has five siblings: an older sister, an older brother and three younger brothers.

When raising their children, Maria’s parents defied the conservative norms of their community by treating the boys and girls equally. They educated their daughters and allowed Maria to dress up as a boy to play squash. Their insistence on gender equality has put them at odds with the Taliban in Waziristan. Despite ongoing threats from the extremist group, they encourage their daughters to excel in male-dominated areas of society.

Maria’s older sister, Ayesha Gulalai, was a member of the National Assembly of Pakistan for five years and is an outspoken advocate for women’s rights, especially in the country’s tribal regions. Maria has cited her older sister as a role model and her “greatest inspiration.”

Sources

Maria Toorpakai Foundation. “About Maria’s Father.” http://mariatoorpakai.org/message-from-marias-father/


Maria and her family pose for a photo. Photo courtesy of The War to Be Her
Maria Toorpakai Wazir – Since 2006, Maria has been a professional squash player. She is also an advocate for women’s rights in Pakistan and the author of a 2016 memoir, *A Different Kind of Daughter: The Girl Who Hid from the Taliban in Plain Sight*.

Ayesha Gulalai Wazir – Maria’s older sister, a politician and former member of the National Assembly of Pakistan and now chief of her own political party, Pakistan Tehreek-Insaf Gulalai.

Shamsul Qayyum Wazir – Maria’s father

Yasrab Nayab Wazir – Maria’s mother
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could ask Maria or any of her family members a single question, what would you want to know and why?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?

Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to ________.
Resistance

How should the rest of the world respond to situations like Maria’s, where families are threatened for encouraging education and equitable treatment for women and girls?

Maria explains, “The tribal areas need a lot of attention. These Taliban groups or militants or rebels, all they want, money, all they want, power. Nothing else. They don’t care about religion. They do not care about humanity. When these kids will grow up without education, without any hope of life, they will become militants. They will become Taliban…who cannot differentiate between the real Islam and the Islam that they follow.” What’s the connection between poverty, neglect or lack of education and Taliban-style extremism?

Ayesha Gulalai says, “I pray that this military oppression brings lasting peace to Pakistan, but obviously, you have to find a long-lasting solution to the problem. It’s not always about [a] military solution.” What do you think she means?

Aside from military actions, what other strategies could help secure peace?

How does Maria use sports as a form of resistance against those who would limit women and girls? Imagine you are a girl who isn’t interested in being an athlete. What message would you take from Maria’s words and experiences?

Ayesha reports that in many villages people are “naming their children—their daughters—after me and Maria.” What difference does it make to have role models who share your background (gender, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality)?

Maria’s father has been an advocate for education, gender equality, and nonviolence. For a time, he was imprisoned in a mental hospital for his beliefs. Can you think of any other examples of authorities using the label “mentally ill” to undermine opposition or nonconformity? In a community that believes women to be inferior, is it insane to believe that women are equal?
The film ends with Maria saying:

I can bring change to the mindset, to the existing mentality and show [Pakistani girls] that they... have to come out of their region. They have to explore the world. They have to look beyond imagination. We are very strong, we are very intelligent. If you think big, you do bigger. And you have to work hard for that. Life comes once and people die even on bed or even in accident. If it’s written that way, so let it be. Once you cross that line that... that you are not afraid of death, you feel so close to Allah... to God. All you want to keep doing is good after good, good after good. Our bravery is in educating woman, respecting woman, empowering woman. No one is a slave of anyone on this earth. Everyone is free. You are born free, and you have to live free.

Why does the Taliban see this message as a threat? Do you share her belief that “if you think big, you do bigger”?

**Gender Discrimination**

Maria recalls, “When I was 12, all of a sudden, people started shouting that there’s a girl, a girl, a girl, you know. Leering at me very differently. They push you. They want to touch you... It was so disrespectful.” Have you ever experienced or witnessed anything similar? How and why do behavior expectations change for girls when they reach puberty?

Maria says that serious Taliban threats started when, at 16, she let her hair grow out. She describes her reaction: “I couldn’t see them... How are they going to come? Where are they going to come from? What are they going to do to us? And that depression actually took me to think like, should I have a gun, or should I have a cyanide pill?” How can misogyny or gender-based harassment lead to mental health issues?”
Maria recognizes that because of her parents, she and her siblings “grew up very unique”—without “gender discrimination” at home. They learned that you earn achievements in life not by the happenstance of being born a boy or girl, but by your behavior and with “hard work.” How would the world be different if every family raised children that way?

**Gender Identity**

As a child, Maria longed “to play outside,” be “rough and tumble,” and “run around freely” like the boys, rather than “sit at one place for hours and hours and playing with dolls at home.” In her community, the only way to do that was to pass as a boy, dressing in boys’ clothes and keeping her hair short. Why have so many cultures associated things like confidence, athleticism, strength and freedom of movement with being male? What’s the difference between wanting to be a boy and wanting to be able to do the things that boys do?

Maria says, “For me, I’m a strong and more like a masculine personality. And I don’t feel very… I don’t know how to say it. I’m not a guy, but I’m not a girl mentally, like psychologically. I don’t know where to go at the moment. Where do I fit in? I have no idea.” If you were Maria’s friend, what would you want to say to her about where she fits in?

**Sports**

Maria explains that in her region of Pakistan, a girl “playing sports is an extreme act.” What’s the reaction to girls’ involvement in sports where you live? How does support for girls’ sports compare to the support for boys’ sports? Has it always been that way?
Like many elite international athletes, Maria feels pressure because she is representing her country. As a female athlete, she knows that if she doesn’t perform well, “it’s indirectly affecting the rest of the women in Pakistan.” How do the pressures Maria faces compare to those faced by male competitors?

Maria is forced to stop playing and go into hiding because she fears bringing “hidden trouble for my family.” Maria says, “I know the higher we go, the higher we achieve, the more the risk is going to be. I am in the spotlight, and that is scary for me.” As a coach, what would you do or say to help an athlete in such circumstances? What actions could international sports organizations take to help?

Maria states, “I want to tell girls fear is taught. That you are born free, and you are born brave.” How does Maria use sports to help girls build confidence and shed their fears? What makes sports a particularly useful tool for reaching her goals?

Maria says her father tells her, “Don’t be scared. Come on, you are the number one. Do it. You’re the best. Do it.” Go for it. Just keep taking risks.” She acknowledges, “I’m lucky that I have a very supportive family.” What did you learn from the film about the power of parents in building children’s resilience and drive? What did you learn about the particular importance of a supportive father, especially in a patriarchal culture?

Maria says, “Squash gave me a whole different life, because I had no other way out.” Do you know of other athletes who have used sports as a “way out”? What did their circumstances have in common with Maria’s?

Based on what you see in the film, can you identify specific characteristics, actions or circumstances that nurture Maria’s resilience and passion to become a champion? How is innate talent transformed into high caliber performance? What has to happen for a champion to emerge?
Pakistan

How does Maria’s description of everyday routines, with cities more open to equality for women than rural areas, compare to what you have heard about Pakistan or the Taliban? How does it compare to life where you live?

What did you know about squash before the film? What did you learn about its role in Pakistan?

Why do you think it is important to Maria to play again in Pakistan? Why not just stay in Toronto? What did it mean to her and to those around her for her to play in Pakistan?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
Taking Action

- Find groups advocating for gender equality or girls’ education and ask what you can do to help.
- Create a support network for female athletes in your community and/or start booster clubs for girls’ teams.
- Create a study circle to look at women’s lives under the Taliban and how issues of equality relate to U.S. policy toward countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Culminate your work by meeting with political representatives to let them know what you would like the U.S. to do.
FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

Original Online Content on POV

The website for The War to Be Her—www.pbs.org/pov/wartobeher—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with the filmmaker; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features.

Maria Toorpakai

MARIA TOORPAKAI FOUNDATION
mariatoorpakai.org/

The website of Maria’s foundation includes links to interviews with her, as well as information about the foundation’s work.

SQUASH INFO
squashinfo.com/players/1288-maria-toor-pakai

You can follow Maria’s athletic career here.

Pakistan

ALL PAKISTAN FEMINISTS ASSOCIATION
https://www.facebook.com/AllPakistanFeministsAssociation/

A source for news and advocacy for gender equality in Pakistan.

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE: “CELEBRATING SOME OF PAKISTAN’S FINEST CURRENT SPORTSWOMEN”

An article highlighting female athletes in Pakistan.

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP:
EDUCATION REFORM IN PAKISTAN
https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/education-reform-pakistan

This is a 2014 report on education in Pakistan, with a focus on how inadequate and unequal education contributes to radicalization. Also related is the group’s report on violence against women in Pakistan:

MALALA FUND
malala.org/

Founded by Pakistani Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, this organization promotes education for girls. As a teenager, Malala was shot by the Taliban for her advocacy of girls’ education.
Women and Girls in Sports

**GIRLS INC.**
https://girlsinc.org/
Girls Inc. inspires all girls to be strong, smart and bold through direct service and advocacy.

**PLAY LIKE A GIRL**
https://www.iplaylikeagirl.org/
Play Like a Girl programs harness the natural properties of sport to prepare young women for the workforce by combining their love of sports with STEM education.

**WOMEN’S SPORTS FOUNDATION**
www.womenssportsfoundation.org
Focused on women and girls in the U.S., this organization also features important research on the benefits of girls participating in sports.

Islam and Women’s Rights

**MASLAHA**
islamandfeminism.org
The website for this organization based in the UK includes a good list of links to articles and related organizations.

**MUSAWAH**
musawah.org
Founded by Muslim women, this organization provides examples of how to make the case that the Koran supports equality for women, girls’ education and more.

**SISTERS IN ISLAM**
sistersinislam.org.my
Sisters in Islam is a Malaysian activist group fighting for women’s equality within Islam. The website includes summaries of debates over issues such as the hijab and age of marriage.

Maria teaches Pakistani locals how to play squash. 
Photo courtesy of The War to Be Her
Produced by American Documentary, Inc., 
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brating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and in-
spire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices 
and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social is-
sues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary 
broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community 
engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films 
that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives. 
POV films have won 37 Emmy® Awards, 21 George Foster 
Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, 
three Academy Awards®, and the first-ever George Polk Docu-
mentary Film Award. The POV series has been honored with a 
Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Tel-
evision Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Cu-
rated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent 
Producers (NALIP) Award for Corporate Commitment to Diver-
sity. Learn more at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Spark (www.pbs.org/pov) 

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives 
and interactive production for POV. The department has con-
tinually experimented with web-based documentaries, produc-
ing PBS’ first program website and the first Snapchat-native 
documentary. It has won major awards for its work, including a 
Webby Award and over 19 nominations. Now with a singular 
focus on incubating and distributing interactive productions, 
POV Spark continues to explore the future of independent non-
fiction media through its co-productions, acquisitions and POV 
Labs, where media makers and technologists collaborate to rein-
vent storytelling forms.

POV Engage (www.pbs.org/pov/engage) 

The POV Engage team works with educators, community or-
ganizations and PBS stations to present more than 800 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion 
guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. 
With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the 
most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org) 

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia arts or-
ganization dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting 
contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives 
rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst 
for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engage-
ment activities around socially relevant content on television, 
online and in community settings. These activities are designed 
to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational op-
portunities and community participation. AmDoc is a 501(c)(3) 
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