Case study # 3

On October 8, 2005, an earthquake of magnitude 7.6 hit northern Pakistan with devastating consequences, killing an estimated 73,000 people and leaving more than 5 million people homeless.

On November 14, a 12-year-old girl named Sobia and her brother Khairuddin arrive in one of the largest camps for displaced Pakistanis, Mehra Camp, in North-West Frontier Province. Sobia and Khairuddin arrive with a family from the Rashang area, which is one of the most culturally conservative earthquake-affected areas. Sobia and Khairuddin are registered together with the family of Misri, and his wife Ayesha and their three children, ages five, three, and one. The Pakistani Army, managing the camp, gives Misri a registration card for a family of seven. They are also provided with a tent, and shown their plot in the camp to set up.

Khairuddin, 8 years old, is disabled with a congenital club foot, and he seems close to and highly dependent on his sister. Both children are petrified of the frequent aftershocks that shake the area.

The family is first visited by two Pakistani humanitarian workers about a week after they arrive in the camp. Sobia serves tea to the women and to Ayesha during the visit. About a week later, Khairuddin tells Sobia that he heard some older boys talking about a play area in the camp, where there were soccer balls. Sobia says she had seen other children, including girls, playing in a big tent. Sobia asks Khairuddin if he wants to visit the play area, but he says no. Sobia is curious about the play area, but decides not to go, since neither Misri nor Ayesha gave her permission. Besides, she does not want to go without Khairuddin.

Two weeks later, two other workers come to visit the family, and they talk about a school opening in the camp. The workers ask Misri if his children can go to school. Misri says that only his oldest boy was old enough – 5 years old – but says that Khairuddin and Sobia might want to attend. The workers tell Misri that the children should go. The female worker asks Sobia if she wants to go, but Sobia isn’t sure about Ayesha’s attitude, so she just shrugs her shoulders. The female worker tells Sobia that books and a uniform would be provided. So Sobia agrees to go. Later she checks with Khairuddin, who says that he wants to go to school – he had been in the second form at the school in their village, although Sobia was not enrolled.

Before the first day of school, Sobia asks Ayesha if she can have some material for a sanitary cloth, which she needs for school. Ayesha refuses, saying that she doesn’t even have enough for herself, that she doesn’t want Sobia to go to school anyway, and that if she stays at home she wouldn’t need the cloth. So only Khairuddin goes to school, and Sobia stays in the tent to help Ayesha with the younger children.

Two weeks later, workers from the school return when only Ayesha and Sobia are at home with the children. They ask Sobia why she isn’t attending school. Ayesha answers instead, saying that Sobia isn’t allowed to go. She tells the workers that Sobia’s parents had not allowed her to go to school in the village, and so she shouldn’t go now, either. The workers ask Sobia about her parents, learning that her mother was still in the village with her younger sister. Sobia doesn’t
know if her father had returned from his job outside the village. Their home, like many others, had been badly damaged. When Misri and Ayesha left for Mehra camp to get assistance, Sobia’s mother asked them to take Khairuddin and Sobia, while she went to stay at her brother’s house. The workers take notes and ask them if they need anything. Ayesha says that they need sanitary material, and the workers promise to bring some. One week later, the workers return and bring enough cloth for both of them.

A month later, the worker notices that Sobia did not accompany Khairuddin to the school. When asked why, Khairuddin replies that an uncle is visiting, and that they will return home with him.

At Sobia’s tent, the worker finds Sobia and Ayesha with Misri and a visitor. Misri introduces the middle-aged visitor as Sobia’s uncle, Zulfiqan. He has arrived from Rashang, and intends to take Sobia and Khairuddin back to their parents. Zulfiqan says that the worst part of the winter is over, and people should return to the village to rebuild. Sobia serves tea, but does not look at the worker or say a word. As the worker leaves, she pulls Sobia aside and asks her if she wants to go back to the village. Sobia shrugs, looks down, and says only that Khairuddin does not want to leave the camp school.