Gendered Consequences of Conflict in Kashmir

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Abstract—The protracted conflict in Jammu and Kashmir has resulted in complex humanitarian crises, of which gendered violence against women remains among the most underreported and least addressed [1][3]. While militarization and systemic instability dominate discourse, this paper focuses on the disproportionate impact on Kashmiri women. It draws from trauma prevalence surveys, rights-based documentation, and women's testimonies to examine sexual violence, enforced disappearances, restricted access to education and healthcare, trauma-related mental health disorders, and structural exclusion from legal and economic systems [2][3][9]. The study applies a feminist conflict-analysis lens to illuminate intersectional and systemic violence, revealing how patriarchal norms are intensified under militarized conditions [9][19]. The findings emphasize how important legal reform, education and livelihood support, gender-sensitive mental health treatments, and women's involvement in peacebuilding efforts are required. Addressing women's trauma and agency is evidently vital for the long-term peace and justice of the valley as well as for each person's own wellbeing.

Index Terms—Kashmir conflict, gender-based violence, militarization, trauma, women's rights, transitional justice, post-conflict recovery

I. INTRODUCTION

Beginning the Kashmir conflict and drastically altering the legal and social structure of the region [23], the 1947 separation of British India and Maharaja Hari Singh's accession to India guaranteed independence under Article 370 but was disputed until its repeal in August 2019. Long insurgencies, army occupation, curfews, communication hurdles, and a high civilian death rate have all followed the Valley since then [3]. Women in this context take on several roles, including caregivers, victims of militarized violence, advocates, and symbols of resistance [5][9]. Forced disappearances, displacement, prejudice as "half-widows," movement restrictions that are exacerbated during curfews or lockdowns, and sexual abuse used to terrify communities (e. g., documented incidents from Kunan and Poshpora) all aggravate women's vulnerability [25]. Mental health disorders—including PTSD, depression, and anxiety—are highly prevalent among women, yet remain poorly treated due to infrastructural limitations and cultural stigma [2][3][3].

Despite marginalization, women actively resist: leading grassroots protests (e.g. APDP), sustaining households via informal economies, and demanding policy inclusion—though mainstream peacebuilding often overlooks this agency [19]. This study critically reframes Kashmir discourse through women's experiences, with four objectives: document historical/political evolution; analyze gender-based violence; map socio-economic and psychosocial impacts; and propose gender-responsive recovery policies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of literature underscores the gendered dimensions of conflict, particularly in militarized zones like Kashmir. Early feminist scholarship on armed conflict (Enloe, 2000; Cockburn, 2004) emphasized the need to center women's experiences in both war and peace processes. In the context of Kashmir, this scholarship remains underdeveloped but is gradually expanding, revealing that the occupation and insurgency have profoundly shaped women's lives [26][27].

Parveen and Mudasir (2019) conducted one of the first empirical studies on the psychosocial effects of militarization on Kashmiri women, finding increased incidences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorders. These findings are echoed by Médecins Sans Frontières (2006), which reported that nearly 11% of Kashmiri women had experienced sexual violence in some form—figures likely underreported due to stigma [28][29].

A prominent theme in literature about impunity in Kashmir, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has drawn strong criticism from academics such Geelani (2013) and Human Rights Watch (2019). These studies claim that the lack of judicial supervision generates a "culture of impunity" that fosters especially sexual violence against women [30][31].

Another analytical literary school looks at the idea of "half-widows," a phrase found only in Kashmir that characterizes women whose spouses have disappeared but haven't been declared dead. This legal uncertainty produces social exclusion, psychological suffering, and severe financial hardship, according to Seema Kazi (2009). Several publications made available by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) provide more reinforcement for these encounters [32][33].

Comparative literature presents useful analogies. Other conflict zones, including Rwanda, Palestine, and Sri Lanka, provide data on the specificity and universality of gender-based violence in militarized contexts. Common experiences of Tamil women in Kashmir and Sri Lanka after the conflict include, according to Jayasundara-Smits (2012), restricted movement, government monitoring, and inadequate access to justice [34].

Moreover, scholarly critiques of the legal and legislative reactions to gender violence in war zones have started to show themselves. For instance, Chinkin and Charlesworth (2006) critique how global human rights law overlooks the experiences of women in war-torn regions. Their study is in agreement with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for greater female participation in peacebuilding [35], though it is mostly unexecuted in the Kashmiri setting. Literary works also include cultural stories. Recent studies investigate the several means Kashmiri women use poetry, storytelling, and digital media as forms of opposition. Claiming political agency and capturing lived experiences, these means of communication offer a counternarrative to the prevailing political rhetoric, according to Zia (2019) [36].

Digital ethnography studies (Shah, 2020; Bukhari, 2021) demonstrate how Kashmiri women navigate state-imposed internet blackouts and surveillance, using encrypted apps and decentralized networks to mobilize, share resources, and raise global awareness [37][38]. These acts of resistance are not just technological but deeply political.

In sum, existing literature illustrates a dual narrative of victimhood and resistance. While women suffer disproportionately from the effects of armed conflict, they also play critical roles in resilience and peacebuilding. This review reveals significant gaps in documentation, especially concerning rural women, and underscores the need for intersectional research that captures caste, class, religion, and geographical diversity within the Kashmiri female experience [39].

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis approach, synthesizing secondary data sources to illuminate intersectional experiences of Kashmiri women during prolonged conflict.

3.2 Data Sources

- Mental health surveys (e.g., 2015 Kashmir Survey by MSF/IMHANS/Kashmir University) providing prevalence estimates for PTSD, depression, and anxiety [2][4].
- Human rights and NGO reports documenting sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and impunity under AFSPA (e.g. HRW, Amnesty) [9][21].
- Academic literature including research on half-widows, gender politics post-Article 370, and women entrepreneurs [7][19][11].
- Media archives and survivor narratives reflecting lived experiences during raids, lockdowns, and activism.

3.3 Data Analysis

Using NVivo, data were coded across themes including violence, education, healthcare, mental health, legal access, economic livelihood, and agency. Triangulation ensured cross-verification amongst academic sources, reports, and media accounts.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of gendered violence, only publicly available secondary materials were used. Survivor narratives were anonymized in source reporting. Analysis aimed to respect dignity, avoid sensationalism, and maintain reflexivity given the geopolitical context.

3.5 Limitations

Reliance on secondary data limits access to recent field-level nuances and direct testimonies. Lack of primary qualitative fieldwork constrains the ability to capture local variation. Future longitudinal and participatory research is recommended.

IV. RESULTS

The analysis of secondary data revealed multifaceted gender-based consequences of conflict on Kashmiri women. Psychological trauma was among the most consistent themes, with over 60% of female respondents in the MSF/IMHANS study showing symptoms of depression or PTSD [2][4]. Women reported persistent anxiety, fear of raids, and sleeplessness linked to militarization and frequent encounters with violence.

Survivor narratives cited in Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports point to systemic sexual violence, especially during military crackdowns in the 1990s. The Kunan-Poshpora incident (1991) remains emblematic of impunity, with legal redress still pending decades later [9][21].

Social exclusion is another major outcome. So-called "half-widows," whose husbands have disappeared, lack legal status and access to property or welfare schemes. These women frequently face stigma from both state institutions and society [7].

On an economic level, many women — particularly in the rural areas — took center stage as breadwinners by working on the farms, in small-scale trading or doing needlework. But even the fragile sources of income were interrupted by lockdowns after 2019 [11]. This created a decline in girls' access to education, while dropout rates saw a significant rise [15].

There were parts of strength despite these challenges. The J&K Women's Welfare Trust and APDP are some of the women's collectives providing emotional support, professional training and legal aid. If civil society's role in enhancing women's voice remains subdued even during an internet blackout, what we see is the after-life of women as agents and political actors [19].

V. DISCUSSION

This research demonstrates that the violence against women in militarised conflict such as Kashmir is structural and systematic rather than of an episodic nature. It operates at symbolic, economic, psychological and literal levels. Rape, sexual torture, and enforced disappearance are not only tools of domination, but systems of social control and political oppression [9].

The militaryization also serves to consolidate patriarchy in Kashmiri society. Women are more vulnerable in the event of abduction or killing, because they are dependent on male family members to legally and financially identify them. Moreover, legislation such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) render criminals de facto immune— allowing violence to persist without consequence [21]. Astonishing consequences for mental health follow. Particularly among women, the incidence of PTSD and depression surpasses international conflict-zone averages [2]. Lack of female-centered mental health infrastructure, societal stigma, and governmental neglect compound these problems. Studies by MSF and IMHANS show that almost 70% of Kashmiri women in conflict-affected regions suffer at least one trauma-related symptom—a number far over those in non-conflict areas of India [2]. However, this narrative must also account for agency. Women's collectives and female leaders play crucial roles in justice-seeking, education, and peacebuilding, often under extreme duress. Post-2019 developments such as the revocation of Article 370 curtailed many women's rights initiatives, but also galvanized new forms of activism, especially among the youth and urban women [11]. Organizations like the APDP and the J&K Women's Welfare Trust have been vital platforms for collective expression and legal advocacy [4][19].

The rise of digital media has allowed for broader awareness and advocacy. Social media platforms have become critical in amplifying female voices and documenting human rights abuses in real-time. Despite frequent internet shutdowns, Kashmiri women have found innovative ways to circumvent digital repression and ensure their voices are heard [22][23]. Furthermore, cultural expression through poetry, film, and art has emerged as a medium of resistance. Kashmiri women artists increasingly use creative outlets to highlight the emotional and psychological toll of militarization. This aligns with global trends in post-conflict zones, where art becomes a powerful tool for healing and mobilization [18].

Comparative analysis with other conflict zones (e.g., Palestine, Sri Lanka, Rwanda) shows similar patterns of gendered harm—but Kashmir remains uniquely positioned due to its democratic context juxtaposed with intense militarization. In Sri Lanka, Tamil women faced parallel challenges post-war, including sexual violence by military forces and limited access to justice [20]. In Palestine, women's roles in resistance movements have highlighted similar struggles for identity and autonomy under occupation [16].

Policy responses remain inadequate. There is a need for trauma-informed healthcare, legal reform, educational protection policies, and economic rehabilitation programs that explicitly include women. The current government's policies, while highlighting economic development, have failed to integrate conflict-sensitive gender approaches. Programs addressing women's education, employment, and legal rights need substantial restructuring to cater to the unique socio-political challenges of the region [17][14].

Excluding women from official peace talks is one glaring omission that endangers the possibility of inclusive, lasting peace. At best superficial is India's engagement with the United Nations' Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, which encourages the participation of women in peacebuilding activities, in Kashmir [16]. Important first steps toward peace are empowerment of local women leaders, policy dialogue participation, and support systems.

Restating the need of rethinking justice and peace systems from a gender-sensitive viewpoint in conflict zones like Kashmir, the chat ends. When women are recognized as both victims and active contributors to societal rebuilding, a more thorough and long-lasting means of conflict resolution is guaranteed.

VI. CONCLUSION

Violence against women in Kashmir is ingrained in a wider environment of strife, state authority, and patriarchy; it is neither haphazard nor fleeting. This research has shown that the deliberate targeting of women is a dominance tactic rather than just a consequence of military. Psychological trauma, legal silence, and economic disenfranchisement analysis reveals that women in Kashmir are disproportionately impacted by the present conflict [2][21].

But the story of Kashmiri women is not just of victims. Seeing them as proactive ambassadors of resilience and resistance is both inspiring and instructive. From the mothers of the missing who hold weekly protests in Srinagar to the youthful digital activists who promote awareness on international channels [4][19], Kashmiri women have repeatedly battled against oppression both openly and quietly. Notwithstanding institutional apathy, stigma, and surveillance, they have organized via grass-roots activities, art, policy, and education [18][27].

If lasting peace is to be attained, gender equity should be the focus of any future policy revisions or negotiations. Removing tyrannical legislation like AFSPA, ensuring trauma-informed care access, creating gender-sensitive employment possibilities, and including women at all levels of governance and decision-making all demonstrate this [25][30]. Furthermore, creating partnerships between local women-led initiatives and worldwide human rights frameworks might provide a forum for ongoing support and responsibility [31].

For international awareness and action, constant lobbying rather than intermittent rage is necessary. The international community has a responsibility to support peace initiatives that acknowledge the particular needs and aims of women in conflict zones, highlight local voices, and lobby for institutional transformation. [16, 24].

Ultimately, one cannot predict Kashmir's future without the strong involvement of its women. Their experiences, challenges, and ideas should be included in the social, political, and cultural renewal of the region. Kashmir cannot have justice, peace, or reconciliation without gender equality. Only when women's voices are seriously heard—not only included but also empowered—will true healing be possible.

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