

The Impact of the Conflict in Kashmir on Women and Their Role in Peacebuilding

The conflict in Kashmir, a region claimed by both India and Pakistan, one of the most militarized regions in the world, has persisted for decades, leading to immense suffering and disruption for people living in the area. Throughout this conflict, Kashmiri women have suffered a significant burden, facing psychological trauma, social disintegration, and gender-based violence. Despite these challenges, they have emerged as inspiring figures in grassroots peace initiatives, conflict resolution, and educational advancement. This essay discusses the impact of the conflict on Kashmiri women and spotlights their roles in creating peace and rebuilding communities.

The continuous state of conflict in Kashmir has affected the mental well-being of its women. The ongoing violence, loss of loved ones, and constant fear of insecurity have taken a heavy toll on their psychological health. Many women in Kashmir have experienced the tragic loss of family members due to the conflict, whether through death or disappearance, leading to grief and trauma. Additionally, the sense of displacement, where families are uprooted from their homes and communities, further brings on feelings of anxiety and distress. This prolonged state of conflict has resulted in a widespread prevalence of mental health issues among Kashmiri women, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The constant threat of violence and uncertainty about the future create a sense of fear and hopelessness, contributing to the decline in their mental well-being. Studies have shown that the prevalence of mental health disorders among Kashmiri women is significantly higher compared to the general

population, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support and intervention programs (Kazi, 2020).

Moreover, the lack of security and stability disrupts the daily lives of Kashmiri women, affecting their social roles and responsibilities within their families and communities. Women, often left as sole caretakers due to the disappearance or death of male family members, face the struggles of both providing for their families while coping with their own trauma. This has led to many women-headed households, which, while showcasing their resilience, also highlights the socio-economic challenges they face in a conflict-ridden environment (Khan & Jabeen, 2019).

In addition to the psychological toll, gender-based violence remains a disturbing issue in Kashmir. Reports of sexual violence by armed forces and militants have been well-documented, intensifying the already precarious situation of Kashmiri women. These acts of violence have long-term impacts on both the physical and psychological health of the victims, often leading to chronic pain, disability, and psychological trauma. The culture of perpetrators being exempted from punishments surrounding these acts further complexes the situation. Many victims refrain from reporting incidents due to fear of punishment or societal shame, which perpetuates a cycle of silence and victimization. Addressing gender based violence in Kashmir requires high level legal reforms and support systems to ensure justice and rehabilitation for the survivors.

Despite the ongoing conflict, Kashmiri women have demonstrated remarkable resilience, transforming from victims to survivors and advocates for peace. Their involvement in grassroots initiatives is a testament to their strength and determination to rebuild their communities.

Organizations and community groups led by women have been important in advocating for human rights and justice for the victims of the conflict. One prominent example of a woman making a change in Kashmir is Parveena Ahangar, founder of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). Ahangar's activism began after her son, Javaid Ahmad Ahangar, was taken into custody by security forces in 1990 and never returned (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons [APDP], n.d.). Since then, she has been tirelessly advocating for the rights of the disappeared and their families.

Through APDP, Ahangar has provided a platform for families to share their stories, document cases of enforced disappearances, and demand accountability from the authorities. Under Ahangar's leadership, APDP has organized protests, hunger strikes, and awareness campaigns to bring attention to the issue of enforced disappearances in Kashmir. Despite facing intimidation and harassment, Ahangar has remained dedicated in her pursuit of justice, earning her the nickname "Iron Lady of Kashmir." Ahangar's advocacy has led to international recognition of the human rights violations in Kashmir and has put pressure on the government to address the issue. Her efforts have provided a voice to the voiceless and have empowered other women to speak out against injustice.

Through her resilience and determination, Ahangar has inspired a new generation of activists and brought hope to countless families still searching for their loved ones. Women's approaches to conflict resolution often differ from those of men, focusing more on dialogue, community engagement, and non-violence. These approaches highlight the importance of social cohesion and reconciliation, which are both needed for sustainable peace. Including women in

peace negotiations and decision-making processes can lead to more comprehensive and lasting solutions to the conflict (Kazi, 2020).

Education is a powerful tool for peacebuilding, and Kashmiri women are at the forefront of educational initiatives. Schools and community centers run by women provide not only academic education but also psychosocial support and vocational training. These initiatives empower women and young girls, giving them the skills and confidence to contribute to their communities' development. One notable initiative is the work of the Haji Public School, founded by Sabbah Haji, which provides quality education to children in a remote village in the Doda district of Jammu and Kashmir. The school focuses on holistic development and encourages critical thinking and community involvement, helping to create a new generation of peace advocates (Haji, 2020).

In conclusion, the conflict in Kashmir has profoundly impacted women, affecting their psychological and social well-being, exposing them to gender-based violence, and challenging their roles within their communities. Despite these challenges, Kashmiri women have emerged as strong leaders in grassroots peace initiatives, conflict resolution, and educational advancement. Their resilience and determination to bring peace and rebuild their communities underscore the importance of including women in all aspects of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Empowering Kashmiri women and supporting their initiatives can pave the way for a more peaceful and just future for the region.

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