

## Feminist Perspective on Conflict: A Case Study of Kashmir; Post 1989

Shafakat Hassan Mirza

M.A. Kashmir and South Asia Studies

### Abstract

'Her-story' and not 'His-story' is what I have portrayed in this paper.

We have an enormous amount of work done on the feminist perspective of conflict; from essentialist to post modern feminism, we have a plethora of literature dealing with the entire spectrum of the feminist thought, but here, I did not go into those theoretical nuances, rather, I put forward in the simplest form, how Kashmiri woman look at the conflict in their backyard. 1989 was a watershed in the recent history of Kashmir, when people took to streets and youth to arms, against the state, resulting in a violent conflict which affected all the shades of her people. Generally, the entire narrative is seen from a male eye, and, even if women are included, they are simply used as a tool and a weapon in the larger male narrative. Her sufferings, her struggle and her misery are not hers; rather, they belong to the collective honor of an entire community, fed into an already existing patriarchal outlook of the world. Here in, I have made an attempt to see the conflict from a feminine prism, from the eyes of a woman, not as a miserable cog in a patriarchal wheel of honor, rather, an individual who is complete in herself. In this project I have used both feminist literature as well as the literature available on Kashmir and Kashmiri women. Besides, I have conducted interviews with many women from Kashmir, who have seen the rise of militancy and how it affected their lives.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Violence against women, Women and conflict, Women and peace.

### Introduction

If we talk of the *Feminist perspective on conflict*, that would include a plethora of literature which this short paper can't reproduce, henceforth I have confined myself to present the Kashmir conflict from a feminine prism, under the general theoretical umbrella of feminism.

Before embarking on this task, I feel obliged to give a brief background of the topic and why I choose to write on it.

As has been rightly pointed out, one should write on issues, that he feels, he must. And, this topic is of deep concern to me. It is an unfortunate reality in any conflict that a lot of misery is overshadowed by the grand narratives of good vs. bad, resistance vs. occupation, nationalism vs. anti national, and, I believe the greatest historic wrong it has done is to women; half of the human race. Conflict, that are seldom created by women harm them the most, henceforth, the need to know and present how women feel about the conflict in their backyard, how they see themselves in the larger masculine narratives of David and Goliath, and, whether they feel a part of it or forcibly dragged into something they consider alien.

Any genuine sense of observation would easily conclude that even when women are spoken about in a conflict, they are usually used as a feeding system to the larger male narrative: *How reactionary the other party is that does not allow for women's rights. How bad our enemies are who violate our honor by abusing our women. We must fight to guard the honor of our women* and so on. But, here in, I wish to see women not as a male souvenir, rather a complete individual who has the ability to analyze the conflict from her eyes, and, I believe it does well to the cause of the neglected half of human race.

I intend it to be a female narrative, constructed by her, rather than a male version of putting *their women* in a masculine one. What I wish to do is to see how she sees it all, and, not how a man wishes her to see it, to present her version of the story and not how the man wishes her to fit in his. So it is: *Her story and not His story.*

### Research questions:

What is the feminist perspective on conflict?

How do women in Kashmir see the rise of armed conflict?

Do women consider themselves part of the larger narrative?

Do women feel alienated and sidelined in the larger conflict?

How do women view patriarchy and has the conflict furthered it?

Amid conflict, how do women identify themselves?

As a woman, what future do they see for themselves and their homeland?

## Research Methodology

For the purpose of research, I have used both literature as well as field work.

Literature includes the relevant works on feminism and conflict, plus the available works on Kashmiri women; from human rights reports to PhD thesis, I have tried to cover a vast array of written documents on the relevant subject.

In field work, I have used the questionnaire method to know the opinion of Kashmiri women, from divergent shades of life, regarding various issues related to the conflict, as well as the direct interview method. Both of these combined together have given me an in depth idea on how women see the conflict. Compiling the data also gave recognizable patterns, which I believe is a major success of this paper.

## Feminist perspective on Conflict

*Since when before has an educated man asked a woman how in her opinion, war can be prevented?* (Woolf, page 3)

This is how Virginia Woolf begins her reply to a letter asking her opinion on *how to prevent war?*

Feminism means different things to different people, but was I given a chance to sum it up in a single sentence, that would be, looking at the world from a feminine prism.

A lot has been written on *Conflict and Feminism*: from essentialist feminism, which considers the feminine outlook of conflict as that of pacifism and peace, inevitably leading to the conclusion of *add women and stir*, which I consider pretty much factual as would come to light in this paper, to what Joseph Makanda terms as *Jehadi Feminism*, referring to the participation of women in terrorist activities in Syria (Makanda, p 1), feminism is a broad spectrum of ideas.

Having said this, it again needs to be made clear that this paper does not deal with the various theories of feminism with regards to conflict, rather what it focuses on, is to see the conflict in Kashmir from the eyes of a woman, not as a feeding system to the great masculine narrative, but as a complete individual in herself. Promoting women outlook and agency in the conflict is what this paper eventually intends to do.

Allow me to paraphrase the essence of what Mary Wollstonecraft has said in her famous work *A vindication of the rights of women*:

She deciphers and quite successfully, how women have been left out of the essential working of a progressive society. Even an enlightened mind like Rousseau in his *Emile (1762)* does not bother to extend his ideas to the education of girls. Women are trained only to expect marriage as *the great feature of their lives* (Bowdon, 2017, p 307)

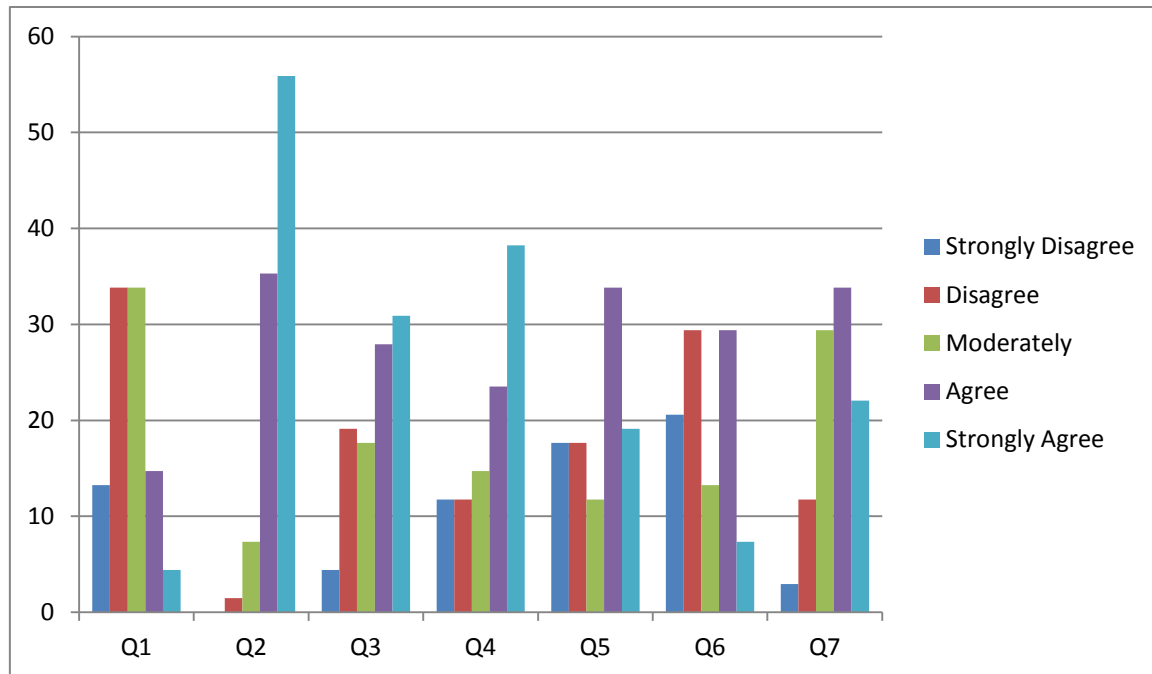
Quite similar ideas are expressed by J.S.Mill in his *Subjugation of Women*: How one sex is subordinated to the other and how it forms *one of the chief obstacles in human improvement*. (Mill, 2017)

We can sum up the entire history of this subordination in one word: *The Second Sex* - How in the history of mankind, from the arena of politics to the field of theology, women have not only been sidelined but also used and abused by the first sex, not only in an accidental mishappening, but, by creating a proper discourse and power structure that hitherto has been to the detriment of the womenfolk.

Coming back to Virginia Woolf, whose work is a classic in conflict and women, and highly relevant to this paper, she argues and with absolute clarity and historic factuality on her side, how the experience of women in a male dominated society makes her definition of patriotism different from that of a man, how she does not necessarily take pride in values that a man does. (Woolf, p 8-9)

The point that Woolf raises in her book is precisely the bedrock of this paper: a feminist understanding of the Kashmir conflict, that is, to see how a woman, whose position, joy and misery, experience and trauma being different from a man, sees the conflict in her backyard. Where she finds herself in the larger narrative and what she proposes as a logical conclusion to the long standing dispute?

## Graphical Representation of the Survey



Q1: Women are playing a major role in Kashmir politics.

Q2: The conflict has badly affected women.

Q3: The rise of violent conflict, post 1989, has increased patriarchy.

Q4: Violence in Kashmir has no justification, from either of the sides.

Q5: The role and enforcement of religion on women has increased due to conflict.

Q6: At present it seems, no matter how the conflict ends, Kashmiri women will have no role in the future of Kashmir.

Q7: Due to the larger narrative of resistance vs. occupation, issues of women have been sidelined.

Now coming to the most essential part of the paper; as stated earlier, I have conducted a survey and some interviews for this paper. The survey whose graphical representation you have seen has been done online. Here in, I have asked women to give their opinion on certain statements.

It is necessary to add that in total 68 women participated, all of them Kashmiri and educated, and almost all, if not all, come from a Muslim family. Another thing to be pointed out is that 96% of the respondents lie in the ages 18-54.

To add to this, I have interviewed five women, which helped a lot in cross checking the results from the survey, besides, the survey also included an open ended question at the end:

Q8: As a woman, what kind of a resolution would you wish for Kashmir?

Since the answers to this question and the opinions given in the direct interview can't be represented on a graph, I will use the answers in other parts of the paper to draw conclusions.

## Violence Against Women

*You can shoot me, but don't rape me.* (Asia Watch)

-Says a woman when security forces barged into her house.

What usually comes to mind, and what is generally put on paper, while discussing *Women and Kashmir*, is the human rights violation and violence perpetrated against women by various political, and in particular, armed actors of the dispute.

Although in this paper, the acts of violence do not form the central topic of discussion, but any serious writing on Kashmir can't forget to mention the misery and trauma women have gone through in the armed conflict.

To start with the survey itself, as you must have seen in response to the second statement, *The conflict has badly affected women*, an overwhelming majority of the respondents, that is more than 90% agreed that women have been affected badly by the conflict.

For anyone aware of the happenings in Kashmir, this does not come as a surprise. The violence against women, particularly by gun wielding people is no exception. People have written over the issue extensively and human rights departments have documented the misery in great detail.

Here in, let us put forward a report by Asia Watch (a division of Human Rights Watch) and Physicians for human rights, titled: *Rape in Kashmir*.

Since sexual abuse is the frontline arsenal in an armed conflict, aimed at 'disgracing' and entire nation or community, I will begin with the aforesaid report.

In this report, which spans over 20 pages, violations by the security forces as well as militants have been documented.

In the introduction of the report itself, it has been summarized that security forces *have deliberately targeted civilians*, and with a particular reference to women it states:

*Rape is used as a means of targeting women whom the security forces accuse of being militant sympathizers; in raping them the security forces are attempting to punish and humiliate the entire community.*

In the same, it also asserts that militants, among other human rights violations have also committed rapes. (Asia Watch, p 1-2)

In the same report it has been said that the government of India has failed in bringing the perpetrators to justice, also asserting at the same time how armed groups have used rape to punish entire families believed to be informers. (Asia Watch, p4)

To avoid details and individual cases, which have been documented in this report, I recommend the original report to be read.

To sum it up, allow me to quote Tajamul Maqbool Bhat,

*The conflict in Kashmir has an effect on all sections of the society and women are no exception to it. Rather women are the worst sufferers of the conflict. It can be reflected from the fact that since 1989, there have been cases of rape, molestation, enforced disappearances, widows, half widows... (Bhat, p2)*

All of this has a tremendous effect on the psychology of the women, taking the example of the *half widows* Dr. Arshad Hussain, a prominent psychiatrist remarks:

*The relatives of the disappeared, especially the half widows often suffer from complicated grief, unresolved grief and PTSD. (Bhat, p5)*

What has been said here is only the tip of an iceberg. Since, this paper does not deal with these violations in particular; I need not to reproduce the individual accounts related.

But a few stats should be enough to rest my case:

Shazia Malik in her socio-cultural study of Kashmir points out that a study done by Medicins frontiers in mid 2005 reveals that Kashmiri women are among the worst sufferers of sexual violence in the world.

In another place she asked her respondents if they were ever sexually harassed by the armed forces and a staggering 41% replied in positive. (Malik, 2014, p 104,110)

Frenzy Manecksha also has a detailed account of such cases where women have been abused in numerous ways. One such word, which has become Kashmir's lexicon are the *half widows*, married women whose husband were taken, usually by the security forces never to return again. As they wander from pillar to post, searching for what was usually their sole bread winner, they face huge problems, both socially as well as economically. (Manecsha, 2017)

## **Patriarchy and the Conflict**

*...but everything was done to take away the opportunity for sin.*

-Bertrand Russell

Vibuti Ubott in his Ph.D thesis defines patriarchy as a system in which men dominate, exploit and oppress women. In it, men control the labor and sexuality of women. (Ubott, 2013)

If the famous work of J.S.Mill were to be summarized in his own words, patriarchy would stand as:

*The legal subordination of one sex to the other* (Mill, 2017, p1)

As is obvious from the above, patriarchy is not an accident, but an entrenched power system in which women are legally, culturally, socially and economically treated as a second fiddle to man. Her sexuality, labor, choices are all under male supervision, sanctified by culture and law. The outcome being, utter disregard for women as a complete human. To quote Bertrand Russell in this regard:

*In most civilized communities women have been denied almost all experience of the world and of affairs. They have been kept artificially stupid and therefore uninteresting.* (Russell, 2017, p16)

If I may be allowed to sum up what is already obvious, I would define patriarchy as an entrenched power system denying woman a status of an equal and complete individual.

There have been many studies on the effect of conflict on patriarchy. Some have suggested that it somewhat liberates women as it changes their economic roles in the absence of a man, while others have suggested that it further entrenches male dominance. Kashmir to me seems an ideal case study to divulge into the topic.

Oufee Maqbool in his study has given detailed arguments on how conflict in Kashmir has furthered patriarchy and forced women to the edge. (Maqbool, 2017)

This has been the general experience in conflict areas as rightly pointed out by Cynthia Loe. She argues in quite some detail how militarization furthers male dominance both in private and public sphere. (Loe, 2014, p7)

Now coming to the survey that I conducted, what can be clearly seen, despite difference in opinion is that more than 75% of the women, that participated, agree that patriarchy has increased (even if moderately) after the rise of armed conflict.

Add to this the fact, which came to light while interviewing women, that many feel patriarchy was always present and did go up particularly because of the conflict. Also note that the rise of armed conflict in the past three decades has coincided with the growth of technology and general education, which has somewhat reduced the effects of patriarchy.

To further my case, let me take help from the study of Shazia Malik, who quotes a study by Dabla which points out the 63% women in Kashmir feel there is widespread discrimination against women. (Malik, 2014, p64)

In her own study she says more than half of the respondents said that they were discriminated in education from their male siblings. (Malik, 2014, p66)

35% believed that their choice of career was constrained. (Malik, 2014, p70)

Among rural women 30%, and among urban 28% of respondents revealed that they had suffered domestic violence. (Malik, 2014, p 90-91)

These results are consistent with my study, and reveal the same patterns and conclusions, that women clearly feel they live in a male dominated society and have resentments of being discriminated in every field. Worthwhile would be adding to it what a couple of respondents exclaimed; tough Omar Abdullah did the same things as Mehbooba Mufti, the latter was made a particular target because of her being a women.

And, to sum it up as we started it, in the words of one respondent:

*Women are not forgiven for the crimes that men are.*

## **Cultural Violence against Women:**

*Wear Burkha or face bullets.*

By culture I refer to a wide array of things; from social norms to the way religion is interpreted, etc.

From the response of the fifth statement of my survey and the interviews I conducted, I found a clear, recognizable pattern.

I found that women in Kashmir do not find a contradiction between the identities of being a Muslim and a woman simultaneously.

They proudly adhere to their faith, simultaneously contesting the chauvinist male interpretation of religion. As you see in the responses of the relevant question, it has a fifty-fifty response and while comparing it to the interviews what comes out is that women don't have issues with religion per se, but have serious problems in the cultural interpretation of religion.

It is quite important to take you back to an issue that many women I interviewed spoke about, and is an ideal case study for our project: *The Burkha movement.*

It has been widely reported and documented how the *Burkha movement* began in Kashmir, where women, particularly college going girls, were forced to wear Burkha or face wrath. In fact two Kashmiri girls were even shot in their legs for wearing jeans. (Malik, 2014, p 137-138)

Naemma Mahjoor in particular has written a detailed account of the whole issue.

She narrates a story of her friend; how paint was thrown at her for not adhering to the proper *Islamic dress code*. She elaborates, which of late has been a topic of discussion as well, how a political movement for *Azadi* was turned into a religious movement, with raids on cafés and parks, and trying to impose *the will of God*. (Mahjoor, 2016)

From the interviews as well as the replies to the open ended question, what was more than obvious is that the respondents considered Kashmir to be a political issue, not a particularly religious one. Imposition of an extreme interpretation of religion did not find any buyers.

In this regard, one of my respondents in particular recollected her experience when this diktat was issued. She remembers how terrified she and her friends were and had to change the way they dressed.

The society in the meanwhile has also not been very friendly towards women, despite their sacrifices.

Vibuti Ubott writes in quite some detail how even their own societies have not come to the aid of women. In the famous Kunan Pushpora, mass rape incident, no women of the village had married and almost all have been deserted.

I find it necessary to quote him,

*The girls are teased and taunted even by village men, "did you enjoy it? Want some more?" None of the girls go outside of the village. Boys who got to school and college are teased by their fellow students: "You are from the raped village, do you have fun with them now?"*

In another case, she narrates how a woman who had been raped by the security forces found no place to hide, how she was deserted by her family as well as her in laws. (Ubott,2013)

Naeema Mahjoor has also narrated many stories of misery and trauma that women had to face, from being teased to being considered a violated thing that can be easily bought and so on. This eventually left them in the middle of nowhere. They seemed to be in a no man's land, in the fight of masculinity. (Mahjoor, 2016)

This goes on to show, how the misery of women, which comes from a conflict they had no share in creating, is used only as a political tool in the larger male narrative. In reality, these women, whose life has been traumatized, find no shade to sit under. They are abused by a society whose each and every institution is drenched in patriarchy and male chauvinism.

This unfortunately has been the general ethos of a patriarchal society; culture, society and religious interpretation all augment to the seconding of women, as Noor Zaheer narrates cases to show how in India itself, religion and culture are misused for horrific crimes against women. (Zaheer, 2015)

The same has been done by Shirin Ebadi of Iran. (Ebadi, 2016).

## The Role Women Are Playing – From Their Own Eyes

*O Parth yield not to unmanliness. –Gita*

*I cannot sleep except in a Burkha.* (Mahjoor, 2016)

A crucial narrative present, in virtually all forms of conflict is the masculinity of war and the femininity of peace. This ends up invariably in two things: firstly men consider it as a badge of honor to fight, secondly, women are kept out of the decision making process, for they show weakness and timidity.

Ubott rightly points out how rape, as a weapon of war is used not just to harm physically but more importantly to *violate the honor of an entire community.* (Ubott, 2013)

In these terms of *honor and shame* lies the misery of half the human race. The idea that the body of a woman is the place where the honor of an entire family, community or nation resides is what gives impetus to massive abuse against them. The terms women upliftment, equal rights and the like will only be confined to books, unless a process of depoliticizing a woman's body does not take place.

This can be clearly seen in the case of Kashmir.

The report of Asia Watch quoted earlier narrates an ordeal were a women resisted attempt of security forces to rape her and they replied,

*We have orders, what can we do?* (Asia Watch, p 10)

Here we observe, how abusing women is not only a rare act of insanity, but a proper mechanism to *humiliate* an entire community, since the *honor* of the community is believed to reside in her body.

Another major effect of conflict on women, which has also been widely seen in Kashmir as well, is the militarization of women.

Cynthia Loe states on the most significant effect of militarization,

*Entrenchments of the ideas about manly men and real women.* (Loe, 2014)

In another instance she terms it as a process,

*Where woman who has a son is persuaded that the best way she can be a good mother is to allow the military recruiter to recruit her son.* (Shouten and Dunham, 2012)

Ruth L. Hiller, an Israeli activist rightly points out how her state has militarized the society, particularly women. She recalls an incident when her friend gave birth to a baby boy who after being circumcised was held by his grandfather, who said with pride *Another soldier is born to the house of Israel.* (Hiller, 2014)

For anyone having *Feminist curiosity*, can figure out with ease how our social ethos is rampant with such narratives, where a woman is forced to sacrifice for a cause that is not necessarily hers.

Coming to the survey, more than 80% of the respondents don't see women playing a major role in Kashmir politics. This again is confirmed from my interviews, where women felt that they lacked representation and decision making powers in corridors of resistance and power. Even a famous person, of the movement – Zamruda Habib, has said on more than one occasion that Huriyat neglected her for being a woman. (Saksena, 2018, p 52). Tough a personal experience, a lot of women feel the same way; being sidelined in the struggle. This goes well with the theoretical understanding of conflicts, when seen from the glass of a feminist.

Tough 85% of the respondents felt that their issues have been somewhat sidelined, but what was obvious from my interviews and the last open ended question is that women consider themselves an essential part of the society and share its suffering and by and large associate with the larger narrative of resistance, tough at times they may see it from a slightly different prism.

This proposition can be verified widely and independently. The PhD thesis of Ubott has a detailed account of how women were always an essential part of the resistance. (Ubott, 2013)

A relevant study has been done by Insha Malik on the subject, who discusses how women carved out their roles in the conflict. (Malik, *Imaginations of self and Struggle*)

## Women and Peace:

*Women are waging peace.* –Sharon Bhagwan Rolls

As I write this paper, talks are going between the US government and Taliban.

Who does not know the extent to which women in Afghanistan have suffered, during the last half century, but what is their role in these talks?

A New York Times article rightly points this out: *Afghan women fear peace with Taliban may mean war on them.*

This is ironic if not preposterous to see how women are excluded from the decision making capacity, while they face the brunt of the conflict.

It is also ironic as UN report suggests, how inclusion of women in conflict negotiations has been seen to increase the chances of a lasting peace, but still women are almost totally neglected in such processes. ([www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org))

Coming to Kashmir, in the open ended question section, not only did I find women's understanding of Kashmir conflict more nuanced than what I would usually expect from men, but also her solutions to the problems were more subtle and peace oriented.

It is not a mere coincidence that among the 67 responses I got, on how to resolve the Kashmir conflict, 18 directly made the use of word *Peace*, and 16 others used words that can be translated into *Peace*, which makes a total of 34, more than half, making a direct reference to *Peace* as the logical and sane end to the conflict.

In the fourth statement we also found that more than 61% did not find any justification for violence, no matter from where it emanated.

These findings are highly consistent with a great body of literature that argue an inclusion of women in the peace processes will vastly increase the chances of an everlasting resolution to violent conflicts.

To name one, Shelly Anderson rightly points out, how women have been at the forefront of peace movements, but their efforts have been neglected by the war frenzy people, who glorify violence. (Anderson, p 27-28)

The same has been argued by Sharon in her study. She rightly states that the feminist study of conflict is in itself an alternate to the realistic paradigm of IR.

It sees and seeks the solution end more than the problem end.

In great details has she written on how feminism seeks to redefine the terms of conflict: peace, power, violence and so on.

She also cites, what is more relevant to our study, how feminists have argued in favor of peace initiatives by women, since they were themselves subject to oppression, as well alluded to the idea of *Maternal Thinking*. (Sharoni, 2010)

Having said this, it is also important to note that although women feel sidelined in the political landscape, they have not lost hope for a better tomorrow. From the results of Q6, what we come to know is that more than a majority believe that they will have a role in the future of Kashmir, tough, as stated earlier, they are highly dissatisfied with the present happenings.

The study concludes that participation of women in the conflict will highly increase the prospects of peace and women do feel isolated and consider it their right to be included in the political process.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Certain facts have come to light during this research.

Women do not create conflict but end up being victimized the most. The patriarchal mindset, under the shade of which conflict grows, sidelines women from the centre stage of decision making.

Feminist theory of conflict resonates in the armed conflict that has gripped Kashmir for more than three decades. Women have faced massive human rights violations, from both the state and non state actors. Despite this, rather than allowing women to come forward, as individuals on the political scene, they have been mostly used as a launching pad for various ideologies. Creating political leverage from the misery of half the human race has been at the forefront of any conflict, and Kashmir is not an exception.

Kashmiri women though not completely united under a common cause do have well informed and genuine outlook towards the conflict and what affects them

From both the available literature as well as my personal work on the same, an obvious pattern comes out. Women take pride in being Kashmiri Muslims. They do not feel a contradiction in combining the identities of being a Muslim, a Kashmiri and a woman simultaneously. They strongly feel as a part of the community and share the joy and sorrows of their homeland. They for sure are not happy with the status quo and there is widespread sympathy and support for the resistance. But, having said that, what also comes out is that they feel highly sidelined and victimized from all sides of the conflict. They feel that the political struggle, as well as religion is being hijacked by reactionary forces, who not only side line women but also victimize them using religion and resistance as a façade for their acts. Tough women are highly dissatisfied by the current scheme of events; they have not let go hope for a better future.

We know as a matter of fact that the inclusion of women in political discourse leads to better chances of lasting peace, this taken together with the trauma and misery that women have had to face, and still do, calls for the governments of both India and Pakistan, as well as the local Kashmiri leadership to include women in all forms and stages of political settings and dialogue, not for the sake of it, rather genuinely believing that women representation is a goal to be achieved.

UN resolution 1325 and CEDAW is an essential goal that all involved parties must make sure is implemented.

For women themselves, it is of utmost necessity to organize better. No matter how good and genuine your demands and ideas are, when they are disorganized, no one seems to hear them. What is required is to form women bodies, from different age groups, education and economic backgrounds. To share their ideas, their stories and to work together for a better future should be the goal of such settings. The first step to make others see you as a complete individual is to view yourself as one. Weakness is a sin and for issues that concern all the women, they must unite for a common cause against the forces that imprison her soul.

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