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The Burden of Conflict that Women of Kashmir Bear

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Women face an unequal burden from the conflict in Kashmir. As state and society turn against them, circumstances force them to renegotiate their positions and even their consciousness.

Being young in Kashmir is a curse. Asif's life is an example of how precarious young lives are in an atmosphere of severe mistrust. The killing of two militants by security personnel in 2017 left Asif, a resident of Khudwani in Kulgam, dangling between two mutually antagonistic suspicions: of being an informant for the security personnel and of being an 'overground worker' for the militants.

As a suspected sympathiser of militants, he became a target for security personnel and was held multiple times under a revolving door detention technique. He was taken multiple times to 'Cargo', the interrogation centre in Srinagar that is alleged to use torture to elicit information from suspects. In 2018, ironically, Asif was killed by the Hizbul Mujahideen, who suspected he was a police informant.

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Asif is survived by his wife, Muntaza, and two daughters, the elder of whom sits beside Asif's belongings for several hours in a day and has developed stress-induced ailments after her father's death. Muntaza had to marry Asif's younger brother for a slightly more secure and less stigmatised life. Asif's brother had to give up on his various aspirations to adjust to the suddenness of the new reality. Muntaza now prefers to be aloof, limiting her interactions with her immediate family.

In a conversation in September 2020, Muntaza claimed that Asif died as a martyr. In Kashmir, it is believed that being associated with militants leaves a more respectful legacy than being linked with an informant. Despite this Muntaza underscored the helplessness associated with having to pick one side over the other, turning life into a binary choice between a martyr and a traitor. Sitting with the younger daughter in her lap, she wonders how she would explain the irony in Asif's death to the child.

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Like Muntaza, Sadaf from Aeshmuqam in Anantnag district too has a story of how the lives of women are caught between a perpetual social stigma and the negative social labelling of character. Sadaf's husband 'disappeared' from Srinagar in 2000. (The family alleges that security personnel took away Sadaf's husband, suspecting him to be linked with insurgent groups). Her brother-in-law (who is physically disabled), approached her for marriage. Sadaf rejected the proposal for several reasons, including concerns about the fate of her daughter from her first marriage. Her natal family, whom she came to stay with, denied her space or money or a share in property, making her even more vulnerable to the vagaries of a conflict zone.

With help from a local organisation, Sadaf got a temporary place to stay on a plot of land belonging to her natal family. Yet Sadaf and her daughter struggled every day even for necessities like water, as her brother often blocked its supply. Simple everyday decisions posed a big challenge. Sadaf could not leave her daughter at home when she went out for work as it risked the child's physical safety. Taking her along, though, attracted allegations of getting her daughter into prostitution. This forced Sadaf to get her daughter married very young against her will. Today, though Sadaf has managed to find a small place to stay with the help of a local organisation, the shadows of her past and present are bound to follow her, with her life hanging around the labyrinthine uncertainties of societal- and conflict-induced vulnerabilities.

A vulnerable population

The young population of Kashmir is extremely vulnerable to the repercussions of excessive militarisation: surveillance, suspicion, joblessness, and torn families. Beyond the loss of lives, people across Kashmir suffer from the loss of agency in negotiating their everyday lives, as the stories of Muntaza and Sadaf show. People find it difficult to share their experiences due to fear of repercussions as security agencies are omnipresent. Past experiences can very well reoccur, or at the least and cast shadows on a whole lifetime.

> The strain forces women to renegotiate their position in their societies, in their families, and even their consciousness: a reflection of their life struggles and the changing social fabric of Kashmir.

A complex web of repercussions ensnares the lives of Kashmiri women, who have to make peace with the existing and imposed socio-cultural order in society because of the conflict. The strain forces women to renegotiate their position in their societies, in their families, and even their consciousness: a reflection of their life struggles and the changing social fabric of Kashmir. Women's lives are impacted distinctly in almost every situation, yet their particular problems are often neglected both by society and state institutions.

With the abrogation of Article 370 and the security enhancement throughout Jammu and Kashmir, immediately followed by the physical restrictions due to Covid-19, a renewed narrative of national security has engulfed the people of Kashmir. Each incident in a conflict zone has distressing consequences beyond the immediate. When a house suspected of harbouring militants is taken down by security personnel, several other houses in the close-knit Kashmiri mohallas are also destroyed or damaged. Security operations dispossess a host of people who are completely unrelated to the confrontation and yet get dragged into the conflict. The way conflict is dealt with induces more conflict: such measures that are highly unlikely to lead to any peaceful solution.

Mutual suspicions erode trust in a fair system and the values of the Kashmiri socio-cultural fabric. The story of Ishrat, from Danwuth near Kokernag in Anantnag district, narrates how a problem that started with her husband's arrest spiralled to numerous other social and personal problems.

> Regular visits by police and constant surveillance lead to social discomfort and increased vulnerability. Ishrat trembles with anxiety on meeting new people.

Ishrat's husband Tariq was arrested in 2018 on charges of 'stone-pelting' by security personnel. (The family says this is a dubious charge, laid on him by a group of men with whom he had a scuffle over an issue of vehicle parking.) Attempts to procure Tariq's release from the Jammu jail only resulted in a loss of money. After successive extensions of his custody, the army eventually released him. But the possibility of being taken away again hangs over him.

After Tariq's arrest, Ishrat was sent away by her in-laws to her economically weak parents. Getting Ishrat married had been financially very challenging for her family. Ishrat's return with a child has forced her younger sister to stop her education and work at the bottling plant of a mineral water company. The sister now feels that her life is mundane and purposeless.

Ishrat's marriage has become a cause for social taunts and stigma after her husband's arrest. Regular visits by police and constant surveillance lead to social discomfort and increased vulnerability. Ishrat trembles with anxiety about meeting new people. Compared with the past, life is now a burden for her. For Ishrat and women like her, continued stress in her family has led to the ill-health of her father and mother, who have heart ailments. Even Ishrat's health has deteriorated.

The wages of suspicion

When security personnel and the government are constantly looking to trace culpability or links to something/someone suspicious, it becomes a hurdle in everyday life. Accessing social benefits becomes another traumatic experience even as a sense of loss has been normalised by the increasing frequency of incidents.

> For compensation, victims have to prove that their presence at the point of action, which runs the risk of being linked to militants.

Any civilian claim to compensation for disabilities from military action poses a struggle. For compensation, victims have to prove that their presence at the point of action, which runs the risk of being linked to militants. Women with conflict-induced injuries face even more fraught circumstances. For a woman in Handwara in Kupwara district who lost her limb in an IED blast, interrogation proved to be a deterrent when she wanted to apply for a job in the handicapped quota. Her husband had also left her after her physical injury.

Compensation from the government (which is anyway difficult to get), attracts social stigma in Kashmir. There is social and cultural pressure against any state succour because of the belief it weakens the collective cause, as the very same state offering money or a job is responsible for the conditions. This double-bind creates a loop of loss: hopes, stigma, dilemma and guilt. Whatever one does, one is likely to be disturbed.

The case of pellet victims portrays a completely different picture of struggle in Kashmiri lives. Pellet injuries are life long, but there is a huge risk in seeking treatment at local hospitals. Victims can be identified by security forces from hospital records and labelled as stone-pelters; and be targeted, monitored, interrogated, and possibly even detained. Such labelling leads to interrogations and persistent harassment of the women of their families, with security forces enquiring the whereabouts of their wards. Today, it is very difficult for any pellet victim to be treated in a hospital in Kashmir without being interrogated by security personnel. Some of the victims go as far as Amritsar and Chandigarh to get treated, just to avoid surveillance and targeting.

Conclusions

Kashmiri women have been at the direct and indirect receiving ends of the conflict with layered and complex consequences. Conflict affects and complicates social relationships for them. All of these cumulatively have negative consequences for women in a turmoil situation.

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The post-Article 370 abrogation phase in Kashmir has seen a vigorous intensification of hostilities, suspicion and an attempt to use security in a way that has created social fissures among the Kashmiris. Personal animosities and scores are settled by providing wrong information by one group to implicate the other, resulting in the disproportionate use of harsh security laws for even minor scuffles.

The effects of conflict on Kashmiris within Kashmir are palpably visible. Outside Kashmir, it may not be as obvious, but the consequences are as destabilising. Conflict follows even individuals who try to leave Kashmir and go away to other places (especially elsewhere in India) to reset their lives. A Kashmiri girl who came to study in a prestigious college of Delhi University was advised by friends not to wear a hijab to avoid being distinctly identified post the abrogation of Article 370. In the days after the abrogation, she felt extremely scared of the language being used by a Hindutva brigade that came to her hostel distributing sweets. The cumulative impact of her life in Kashmir and outside, as a Kashmiri girl, has forced her repeatedly to seek therapy.

When the state reveals itself through its most powerful structures in a visibly weaponised form, it alienates people further leading to multiple capability deprivations and legal inequalities. Particularly for women in turmoil zones under such circumstances, these capability deprivations constitute various forms of social exclusion, interlaced with pre-existing social norms and conflict-induced vulnerabilities. The perpetuity of social exclusion in turmoil zones further stifles people's agency to overcome impediments. The conflict-induced difficulties are relived and renegotiated daily as a consequence of living in a protracted conflict region. Borrowing from William Faulkner, one can say that for the Kashmiri people: "The past is never dead. It's not even past".

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