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Kashmiri women in conflict: a feminist perspective

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Kashmiri women are diverse individuals with a wide range of origins, histories, experiences, and aspirations. Women in Kashmir are deeply entwined with the region's complicated socio-political landscape, especially in terms of the protracted conflict in Kashmir. The living patterns of women in Kashmir are severely influenced by insurgency, militancy, and the consequent militarization of the region, as well as a wide range of socio-economic, historical, religious, and geopolitical circumstances. Kashmiri women's day-to-day existence, safety, security, and mobility are strongly impacted by enhanced security protocols and the existence of armed personnel and militants in the region. Even though a great number of research works have been performed on Kashmir's politics, history, philosophy, and religion, the struggles and challenges faced by women amid the conflict need to be further explored. This research aimed to comprehend and unveil the situation of Kashmiri women in the conflict zone through a comprehensive review of the existing literature on gendered violations in Kashmir, thereby emphasizing the need for the recognition of the suffering of Kashmiri women from a feminist perspective. Furthermore, the contributions of Kashmiri women activists, politicians, and feminists were highlighted, thus accentuating their role towards gender equality and sustainable peace in the region.

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Introduction

Over the past 75 years, politics and geopolitics in Kashmir have shifted along complicated and contentious lines. Although Kashmir Valley, the center of Kashmiri culture, is entirely located within India, the ancient princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been divided between India and Pakistan. Since 1947, the two nuclear-armed neighbors of South Asia have fought four wars and experienced numerous crises and military standoffs, and the Kashmir issue has been at the center of one of the most unsolvable disputes in contemporary modern history (S. Ganguly et al., 2019). Although Pakistan has supported the separatist insurgency operating in the Kashmir Valley (Baggavalli, 2010; Ś. Ganguly, 1996; S. Ganguly and Kapur, 2010; Jones, 2008), a remarkable portion of Kashmiri separatist sentiment favors independence over annexation (Bradnock, 2010; Nair and Sambanis, 2019). Kashmiri people have suffered injuries, torture, humiliation, and deaths since 1989 (Mathur, 2016), not as a consequence of the fight between India and Pakistan but rather as a result of separatist insurgencies and India's military reaction to them. The conflict's dynamic character has an impact on millions of people's lives in the political, social, economic, and cultural domains (S. A. Bhat, 2019). The cycle of violence that pervaded J&K claimed thousands of lives and many sustained injuries that prevented them from working. A great number of women lost their spouses, fathers, sons, and brothers, who were the only ones who could provide for them, as well as their mothers, daughters, and sisters (H. A. Wani et al., 2013). Ganguly (1996) claimed that the Kashmir conflict took the lives of thousands of people on both sides, forcing people to migrate to Pakistan or other parts of India with their families. Various reports have estimated that about 100,000 to 300,000 Kashmiri Hindu Pandits have departed the valley as a consequence of insurgency (Ahmed, 2016; N. Bhat, 2023; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 1995; Mohanty, 2018; Panda, 2022; Rai, 2018; Sarkaria, 2009; Shekhawat, 2006). Human tragedy continued in a new form, with many families and members being forced to live separately from each other across the dividing Line of Control in Kashmir.

Kashmiri women have been the primary targets of armed actors. From rape to disappearances of male family members, from half widows to fighting for the honor of the family, and from disinheritance to facing domestic violence, Kashmiri women faced numerous hardships. There have been extensive reports on the atrocities committed against women in Kashmir (Amnesty International, 1999; Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993a, 1993b; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Jefferson, 2004; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018, 2019, 2022), which highlight the human rights violations including disappearance, rape, family separation, displacement, and victimization of Kashmiri women. In addition to physical crimes such as numerous rape cases and the murder of civilians by armed forces, there are several obvious aftermaths of conflicts, including the mental suffering due to living in conflict zones (UNHR, 2011). The conflict in Kashmir has also caused social and economic insecurity among Kashmiri women, resulting in lasting social and psychological distress (Sarvesh, 2022).

Researchers like Sarvesh (2022), S. Malik (2020), Shafi (2019), Zia (2019), I. Malik (2019); Jan et al. (2016), Manecksha (2017), Kazi (2007, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2018, 2022), Batool (2015), N. A. Khan (2010), Lucas (2009), Maqbool (2017), Maqbool Bhat (2017), Neogi (2022), Qutab (2017), Ray (2009, 2020), Shekhawat (2006) and Shekhawat (2009), and Chenoy (2002) have been effective in reporting, documenting, and highlighting the plight and suffering of Kashmiri women from unique perspectives and stood out because of their approach towards this issue. However, a great part of these works has focused on the nexus of conflict-

induced limitations and preexisting gender role expectations. Few researchers like D. Sharma (2023), Mehdi (2021), Mushtaq (2022, 2023), Parashar (2009, 2011), and Ray (2009) have explored other dimensions of the conflict that affect women's lives and agency. S. Malik (2020) examined the social and political contexts of aggrieved mothers in Kashmir through personal narratives. Deb (2016) and Kazi (2014, 2017, 2018) claimed that Kashmiri women were the worst sufferers of sexual violence, and the world is not much aware of the excessive rate of sexual crimes in Kashmir. Kashmiri women have been projected as victims of violence and symbolized as grieving wives, half-widows, martyrs' mothers, and raped women, but their resistance and activism are undervalued (Manchanda, 2001). Nyla Ali Khan (2010, 2014), Shazia Malik (2014, 2020), and a few other scholars endeavored to contextualize the historical action of Kashmiri women within the political framework of J&K during the 20th century. Including the voices of Kashmiri women in the creation of narratives about them in politics, society, and the media has been the goal of the work of Ather Zia (2016, 2019, 2020), Insha Malik (2015, 2019), Aaliya Anjum (2011), and others. Iqbal (2021, 2023; Iqbal and Magill, 2022) made an effort to portray the larger context of Kashmiri women's activism by viewing it as a movement involving women from various socioeconomic, religious, and educational backgrounds. Iqbal (2021) reported the experiences of Sikh, Sunni and Shia Muslim, Gujjar, Pahari, and Kashmiri Pandit women and argued that any analysis of human security in Kashmir is incomplete without considering the experiences of Kashmiri women.

Women in Kashmir are deeply entwined with the region's complicated socio-political landscape, especially with regard to the protracted struggle in Kashmir. In times of conflict, civilian women's domestic activism consists of both their survival tactics and the articulation and legitimization of resistance discourse (Manchanda, 2001). Kashmiri women defied the traditional family unit and went beyond their customary responsibilities as family caregivers. They came out of their houses and neighborhoods to show solidarity for their men. They visited jail facilities, security camps, the army, and the court in search of their men (D.K. Singh, 2010). Kashmiri women's daily survival tasks, including both their maternal and reproductive roles, are politicized. According to I. Malik (2015, 2019), rather than being victims or bystanders in the struggle, Kashmiri women have played important roles in politics that have not yet received enough recognition. In addition to their numerous contributions to political movements, I. Malik (2015, 2019) provided an engaging anthropological account of their local struggles against patriarchy. Kashmiri women are perceived as being either trapped in a violent war as victims or as supporting their "violent" men or abandoning the cause of women's rights in favor of "separatism." Sareen (2022) investigated the impact of violence on women and the ways in which women in Kashmir have responded to it by becoming enraged, angry, independent, and politically strong.

The idea that Kashmiri women are only victims of armed Indian aggression ignores the power structure that exists between Kashmiri men and women. Kashmiri women's stakes are more in having a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir conflict; therefore, their presence and role in any resolution towards the peace process are crucial. Gender sensitivity toward women's involvement in peace politics can make the peace process more comprehensive and sustainable. Kashmiri women need to play a more vivid and active role in conflict resolution, but regrettably, they are sidelined, underrepresented, and unseen during discussions and the peace-making process (Raazia and Rehman, 2021). Kazi (2014) reported the same conclusion that equal participation of

women and addressing their issues were indispensable to any effort or initiative taken to resolve the Kashmir conflict.

This research is a humble endeavor to revisit and bring forth various issues regarding Kashmiri women's suffering amid conflict and highlight their roles, contributions, and achievements despite the challenges.

Research objectives. Insurgency, militancy, and the ensuing militarization of the region, together with a variety of socio-economic, historical, religious, and geopolitical factors, have had significant impacts on women's quality of life in Kashmir. The day-to-day living, safety, security, and movement of Kashmiri women are significantly impacted by the region's militants, armed personnel, and stricter security regulations. Even though Kashmir's politics, architecture, history, philosophy, and religion have all been extensively studied, more research is still needed to fully understand the difficulties and obstacles that women confront in conflict zones. In this research, we endeavored to examine this issue from a gender viewpoint. This study expanded upon and closed some gaps in conflict and gender discourse, mostly focusing on more expansive political viewpoints. This research also aimed to provide a comprehensive review of the plight of Kashmiri women by identifying and reviewing the published literature and bringing together evidence from disparate and heterogeneous sources on the topic from a feminist perspective.

Methodology

Various researchers have investigated the Kashmir conflict; however, only a few have espoused to approach the issue from a feminist perspective (Cherukuri, 2021; Kaul, 2018, 2022; Mehdi, 2021; Mushtaq, 2022, 2023; Parashar, 2009; Raazia and Rehman, 2021; Ray, 2009; D. Sharma, 2023; Zia, 2016). This study aimed to investigate the plight of Kashmiri women from a feminist perspective through a traditional narrative literature review of secondary data available on the topic, thus providing insight into feminist perspectives and perceptions of this issue. Our goal was to contribute to scholarly discourse on the plight of Kashmiri women by interpreting and synthesizing contemporary research, providing an overview of the current state of knowledge on the subject, and presenting a thorough, comprehensive, and critical summary of key concepts, theories, findings, and debates from a variety of sources on the subject. Following a thematic structure, important events, and personalities were discussed together with trends, disagreements, controversies, and gaps in the literature. Rather than following a rigid set of inclusion criteria, the approach offered more flexibility and subjectivity and allowed for a more exploratory approach, enabling us to focus on offering a thorough grasp and understanding of the issue. By using qualitative methods, it becomes possible to study numerous invisible components of social exclusion that women suffer in a more comprehensive manner. Although qualitative approaches are sometimes viewed with skepticism, they reveal the compassionate sides concealed under copious amounts of statistical data. Various viewpoints from diverse feminist theorists were briefly introduced to explain the complex interrelationship between gender and conflict. The gender aspect of the conflict was highlighted, and the Kashmir issue was emphasized with reference to human rights and gender-based violations. A brief historical perspective of human rights violations like displacement, disappearances, patriarchy, domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault in Kashmir was presented and supported by evidence from various reliable sources. The perpetrators of these gender-based violations were identified, and the sufferings of Kashmiri women were briefly discussed. Furthermore, it was argued that rape is used as a weapon and a war strategy for the expression of political power

and vengeance to suppress women and destroy culture for the purpose of ethnic cleansing all over the world, particularly in Kashmir. The lack of educational opportunities and factors leading to a low literacy rate among Kashmiri women were briefly discussed. The participation of women in politics and human rights activism was highlighted. The contributions of prominent Kashmiri feminists were briefly emphasized. Finally, the effects of a patriarchal society and their roles in gender-related oppression and violence were also emphasized.

Literature review

Women in conflict and feminist perspective. Gender-based violence, as demarcated by the United Nations, is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993). Gender-based violence is a ubiquitous phenomenon in almost all cultures worldwide (Swart, 2015). According to Tickner (1992), women have defined security as the absence of violence, whether it be military, economic, or sexual. This suggests that women have diverse conceptions of security that cover a wide range of factors. Women and girls in conflict zones or during war, under occupation, in armies, displaced from homes, and in refugee camps need special facilities. In fact, peacetime is also not secure for women, but war zones and armed conflict are worse and threaten them in particular ways. Cockburn (2007) pointed out that ideological or religious enmity masked as ethno-national, along with patriarchal, male-controlled, and misogynistic gender relations, were the main causes of war, prompting societies to behave violently. Feminist organizations against militarism and war have a clear understanding of this issue. Gender is a consequence of war because war and gender relations are mutually forming. Therefore, feminists have suggested a change in gender relations for peace. According to feminists, gender is related to developing a clearer understanding of issues related to war and peace. Feminist and gender perspectives help to understand gender and human security. Enloe (2004) suggested that by focusing only on the immediate war scene, we could not comprehend any armed conflict and its outcomes. By employing gender lenses during the analysis of refugee camps and peace negotiations, we could comprehend the causes and dynamics that initiated the conflict in the first place (Enloe, 2004). In feminist studies, the investigation of normative standards is grounded in women's epistemology (Weber, 2006). Gender analysis of global politics is a key component of feminism. Ideas of agency, interdependence, and criminality are complicated by feminist studies through the use of gender as an analytical category (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). Gender is now contested in the context of warfare. By redefining gender roles and identities in the context of conflict, it is evident that the assumptions derived from binary thinking are vulnerable to scrutiny (Cooke and Woollacott, 1993, p. 11). Since the 1980s, feminist theorizing has begun in the field of international relations, examining the experiences and roles of both males and females in conflict zones or war-ridden areas along with their impacts on them individually. Feminists have criticized the concepts and functions of world politics built around masculine norms, experiences, and values. According to Cockburn and Enloe (2012), patriarchy is the system that maintains the dominance of particular brands of masculinity while maintaining women in their designated roles by connecting militarized femininities to militarized masculinities. Patriarchy is a system of social relations where gender inequality exists between men and women, embedded in political, social, cultural, and economic

institutions, and women are collectively excluded from power, paid less, and more likely to experience poverty and unequal access to resources (Nash, 2009). Feminist research aimed to make the world realize the gendered effects of war. By adopting a feminist viewpoint, we can expose implicit gender power dynamics and dismantle the notion of a gender-neutral approach to international affairs (Puechguirbal, 2012). How and for whom is peace achieved? What change can be brought by treating women's issues as central and not marginal? How might women's empowerment change the meaning of power? Feminists analyze global politics from a different perspective. Feminist theories use the multifaceted prism of gender to produce alternative views of narratives. In international politics, these alternative views surpass the traditional concept of military formation by giving new perspectives on cooperative security arrangements and non-state-centric security (Laukka, 2018). Joseph (2013) and Singh (2010) studied the role gender plays in the formation of national identities in conflict-ridden South Asia and concluded that women are portrayed as the protectors of a nation's culture, morals, and traditions. The place of South Asian women in society is continually assessed in light of economic exploitation, right-wing nationalism, religious extremism, and patriarchal dominance (Hussein, 2018), where women are constructed as sources of 'national culture' or 'honor' just as the patriarchal view presents armed forces' violence as a valid 'defense' of the 'nation'. Feminist analysts have pointed out the relationship between war discourse and gender (Cockburn, 2007, 2013; Cockburn and Enloe, 2012; Enloe, 2004; Kesic, 2000; Lucas, 2009; Mazurana, 2005; Moser and Clark, 2001). Gender analysis concentrates on the distinct types of hostility that women encounter. Sexual abuse is the most severe and prevalent form of direct aggression against women and is used to intimidate and degrade the state's political opponents by repressing their sexuality. The idea of "honor" has deep cultural resonance in South Asia (Hussein, 2018; Joseph, 2013; D.K. Singh, 2010). Its use by the army deprives women of communal and governmental protection, which ultimately leaves them more vulnerable to male aggression. "Rape by the military epitomizes not just the sexualized contours of militarization but also the illegitimacy of a state that uses sexual violence against female citizens" (Kazi, 2007, p. 85). Gender analysis has demonstrated how militarization's successive effects are excessively sustained by women. Whether it is the death or disappearance of a loved one or family member, women go through personal trauma. Being deprived of protection from the state, these women face economic problems. Women's education and health are equally affected because teaching and nursing are professions usually dominated by women (Moser and Clark, 2001). All in all, the aggression related to militarization's political dimensions has very strong, direct, and adverse effects on women. The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan epitomizes this issue. Gender critiques show how different types of social, communal, or institutional violence negatively impact 'private' gender power relations. When men are humiliated and disgraced by the military forces, they try to exert more control over women through violence. Sexual assault on women, the denial of political rights to women, and the control of women's behavior and movement demonstrate how militarization is formed by constructions of gender. Kazi (2007) emphasized that gender is a vital part and not a peripheral effect of war, and the importance of gender studies and analyses rests in demonstrating how the social subservience of women is connected to the process of militarization. McKay (2004) proposed that the government and intergovernmental groups, along with non-governmental organizations, must operate in partnership to alleviate women's conditions and status as a fundamental aspect of human safety, especially in conflict regions. It is essential to comprehend both systemic (indirect) and direct violence against

women in order to address women's insecurity in all communities. Thus, at micro, mezzo, and macro levels, all projects, plans, and laws that promote human security must address this core feminist issue. Women's peacebuilding should be emphasized, encouraged, promoted, organized, sponsored, or funded, and executed at all levels to enhance women's wellbeing, safety, security, and growth.

Gender and feminist analysis of peace. Feminist peace movements around the globe study the influence of war on women and analyze masculinity's role and gender power relations in militarized societies. Cockburn (2013) argued that over time, disputes between communities have been brought on by differences in race or religion, the desire for autonomy or dominance, or acts of exclusion or extermination, and gender power dynamics play a critical role in both triggering war and bringing about revolutionary changes in societies. According to Barry (2011), the first step in deconstructing war acknowledged that the process of preparing soldiers for battle involved dehumanizing people. By recording and reporting the deliberate rape of women in conflicts and war, feminist researchers and analysts epitomize how this act of exclusive violence has political implications. Rape is among the various forms of violence that women experience during war. It is not the only form of violence, but it is the most widespread and common tactic employed during the war to break the enemy's movement. The term "rape" to express such incidents is a euphemism during war or in a conflict zone; therefore, the phrase "sexual violence" is used. The assessment of the UNIFEM expert panel on the effect of war or conflict on women reported the responses of women to their queries, and the results were horrifying (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) reported that they witnessed "Wombs punctured with guns. Women were raped and tortured in front of their husbands and children. Rifles forced into vaginas. Pregnant women are beaten to induce miscarriages. Fetuses ripped from wombs. Women kidnaped, blindfolded, and beaten on their way to work or school. We saw the scars, the pain, and the humiliation. We heard accounts of gang rapes, rape camps, mutilation, of murder, and sexual slavery. We saw the scars of brutality so extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death" (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002, p. 9).

Rape is a war strategy to destroy a culture for the purpose of ethnic cleansing. It is a way by which men of one community rape another community's women to dishonor them and prove they are weak (Cockburn, 2013). Stiglmayer (1994) claimed that rape in former Yugoslavia was part of military strategy. Rape reinforces the hegemonic masculinity required for warfare (Stiglmayer, 1994). It was the war in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda that directed international attention to rape as a war crime and enabled women's human rights activists and lawyers to prosecute it as a crime (Slapsak, 2001). *WILPF—Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, n.d.¹ is the oldest international women's peace organization in the world. Women have mobilized for peace in many conflict zones and against dictatorial regimes (Cockburn, 2001, 2007). At the Nairobi Forum in 1985, the women's movement for peace agenda started (Cagatay et al., 1986). UN Women (2015) is the most progressive blueprint ever for women's rights. It is still a powerful source of guidance and inspiration. The platform included human rights for women, women and the economy, violence against women, girl children, women and armed conflict, women in power and decision-making, women and health, women and the environment, women education and training, women and poverty, etc. The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing on September 4–15, 1995, demanded that "equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full

involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflict are essential for the maintenance of peace and security” (United Nations, 1996, para. 134). The efforts culminated with the adoption of the UNSC Resolution 1325, on 31 October 2000 (UNSC Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (Security Council Resolution 1325), 2000). UNSC 1325 acknowledges the impact of armed conflict on women and recognizes women’s role in preventing and resolving conflict in different countries. Its three themes are protection, inclusion, and the insertion of a gender perspective throughout peace processes. UNSC 1325 has been at the epicenter of women’s peace organizing since 2000, with the aim of ensuring its implementation while exploring relationships among women, peace, and feminism (Cohn et al., 2005; El-Bushra, 2007). UNSC 1325 made a very noteworthy contribution towards recognizing the impact of armed conflict on women and the significance of gender mainstreaming at all levels (Schirch and Sewak, 2005). Women’s participation and representation in policymaking have been low. Troops sent for peacekeeping continued to abuse local women who were under their care (Mazurana, 2005). Enloe (2004, 2010, 2014) focused on the role of women in national and international politics, especially issues related to gender-based discrimination, racial, ethnic, and national identities. According to McKay (2004), the focus should be on the involvement of women in the peace process. Gender equality and human rights for women should be the crucial factors in developing a constitution. During the development of programs and policies, both genders should be focused when analyzing their effects on both genders because men and women experience the erosion of security differently (Lammers, 1999). During armed conflicts and post-conflict, gender-specific effects make women suffer disproportionately (McKay, 2004). Gender justice is crucial for improving women’s human security, especially during war or in conflict zones. Gender justice means that legal processes are equitable, not in favor of men, and distinguish gender-specific injustices that women experience (McKay, 2000). Gender disparity contributes to inequality, breaches fundamental human rights, impedes psychological healing and rehabilitation, and keeps communities from reaching their full potential in the setting of armed wars and their aftermath (McKay, 2000, p. 562). Alkire (2003) conceptualized a framework for ‘human security’ and pointed out that ‘human security’ deals with protection from ‘critical pervasive threats in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfillment’. According to Alkire (2003), three categories of rights and freedoms that are the ‘vital core’ of ‘human security’ are survival, livelihood, and basic dignity. Unfortunately for Kashmiri people in general and women in particular, these rights are not available. Like men, women belong to collectivity as members, but the social construct is paradoxical because women are perceived “as both symbols and ‘others’ of the collectivity”. Women are seen as signifiers of the honor of collectivity (Cohn and Enloe, 2003; Enloe, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1992, 1997; Yuval-Davis et al., 1989), where nations fight wars to defend this honor.

Women in conflict. Evidence and data testify to a direct connection between war and gender across various historical contexts. Mass rape has been reported as the most noticeably gendered and sexualized aspect of war. UN agencies estimate that between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped during the three months of genocide in Rwanda (1994), more than 60,000 women were raped during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), more than 40,000 in Liberia (1989–2003), up to 60,000 in the former Yugoslavia (1992–1995), and at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1996 (International

Criminal Court, 2023; Peltola, 2018; United Nations, 2013). During World War II, the Japanese army enforced sexual slavery and raped between 20,000 and 80,000 women (Chang, 2000; Yoshimi, 2000). Around 200,000 rape cases of Bangladeshi women, including girls, by Pakistani armed forces were reported during the 1971-Bangladesh War of Liberation (Brownmiller, 1975; Jahan, 2012; Strahorn, 2021). The systematic rape of Bosnian women during the Bosnian conflict (1992–1995), was a manifestation of genocidal brutality (Brashear, 2018; Tompuri, 2010). Tompuri (2010) claimed that organized attacks were carried out against civilian populations, and violence against women was utilized as a military tactic aimed at ethnically cleansing the area. In former Yugoslavia, around 20,000 to 60,000 women were raped (Chenoy, 2002). Repeated incidences of homosexual rape were reported in camps in Kosovo (Kazi, 2007). The rape of women in Rwanda highlights that conventional concepts of war and protection of women and civilians were disobeyed (Kazi, 2007). In Cyprus, rapes were perpetrated during the inter-communal clashes of 1963–64 until the middle of 1974 (AKEL, 2016). Greek Cypriots raided Turkish Cypriot villages, where women were raped, and civilians were slaughtered. Also, during the invasion of Greek Cyprus in 1974, women were repeatedly raped by the Turkish army. Uludağ (2009), a Turkish Cypriot feminist journalist and researcher, highlighted such “untold stories” from both Greek and Turkish Cypriot sides. Ali-fendioğlu and Behçetoğulları (2019), recorded the experiences of Turkish Cypriot women during the ethnic conflict (1950s and 1974). Based on reports from 51 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and America, the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces claimed in 2007 that the number of rape incidents has increased throughout the past 20 years (Bastick et al., 2007). In general, during war, women continue to face abuses associated with armed conflict and civil unrest. Rape and sexual assault are employed to achieve specific military or political objectives. Milillo (2006) argued that strict cultural standards around women’s sexuality and gender roles contribute to the systematic nature of rape as a weapon of war, and organized mass rape damages the foundation of families and communities in addition to destroying individual women.

Kashmiri women in conflict. Women are the most vulnerable group in the Kashmir conflict and are the target of violence by state and non-state actors (Behera, 2000). Regardless of their faith and shaped by the patriarchal nature of their community, Kashmiri women have endured a life of unrelenting hardship. It has been very difficult for these women to fight against a decadent system and culture, and several topics need to be considered in order to evaluate the politics of identity that surround them (Ray, 2020). Victims are constantly in fear of further violence and abuse due to the weakened political state, which does not bring the criminals and perpetrators to justice (Maqbool, 2017). The late 1980s insurgency transformed the lives of Kashmiri people, with women and children being the most negatively impacted. Women were physically and sexually assaulted by both insurgents and security personnel (Nabi et al., 2017). According to police data, victims also include educated and economically independent women (P. Sharma, 2010). Kazi (2017) argued that it was very difficult to collect reliable statistics on rape in Kashmir, but existing evidence has proved that rape cases are frequent and widespread. Ever since the conflict, Kashmir has been exposed to extensive violence, in particular sexual assaults by armed forces. Rafiq (2013) claimed that during the course of the two-decade conflict, there have been far more incidents of sexual abuse against women committed by Indian military personnel than by militant insurgency groups.

According to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's statement in October 2013, "some 5125 cases of rape and 14,953 cases of molestation have been reported across the state's hundreds of police stations in the last 24 years" (T.M. Bhat, 2017). Neogi (2022) claimed that Kashmiri women have been emotionally and physically tormented by the security and military forces and, therefore, are the most affected communities that have battled against the military. Security forces use rape as an instrument of counter-insurgency in areas of militant presence to neutralize the defiance of the Kashmiri people and demoralize them (Jamwal, 2013; Kazi, 2014).

Kashmiri women's testimonies-based report revealed that security forces targeted women because of their support of the freedom struggle and to break the movement itself (Maqbool, 2017). Khan (2017) studied violence against women in Kashmir as reported by the "Greater Kashmir" (Kashmir edition), a newspaper of J&K. According to the newspaper, around 81 women committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide. 16 cases of rape and molestation, one case of acid attack, and seven murders were reported from mid-2014 until the end of 2016. Kupwara district had the highest suicide rate, followed by Anantnag and Baramulla, from mid-2014 until the end of 2016.

Rape, a weapon for expression of political power and vengeance. In 1995, former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, in the "Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing," referred to rape as a "reprehensible" and "depraved" weapon of war in J&K (Bhutto, 1995). Rape has been used as a weapon of humiliation in the patriarchal society of Kashmir. Kazi (2014) pointed out that Kashmiri women were sexually abused by armed forces to inscribe subordination to the larger community. It is a way to dishonor men by raping their women. Rape is used by soldiers as a vengeful weapon to humiliate, intimidate, and degrade. Sexual assault against Kashmiri women is the Indian force's strategy, rather than some individual act, in order to demoralize and intimidate Kashmiri people by humiliating their women because the brutal act of rape is committed in front of their husbands, children, and families (Maqbool, 2017). After rape incidents, when sexual assault by Indian forces in Kashmir is reported, the government responds with an official denial rather than investigation or prosecution. According to Jaleel (2011), in Kashmir, the prosecution and investigation against the armed forces for sexual assault cases are insignificant. Nyla Khan pointed out that "numerous cases of rape are reported to have been committed by Indian Security, and a number of women have been ruthlessly humiliated by members of the paramilitary troops" (N. A. Khan, 2010). J&K reported one incident of rape every day in 2020 (F. Hassan, 2022). During an anti-insurgency operation on the evening of February 23, 1991, members of the Indian Army's 4 Rajputana Rifles closed off the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in the Kupwara region of north Kashmir. It is purported that at least 23 women were gang-raped, but some estimates put the number closer to 40 (BBC News, 2017; The Hindu, 2013; The Hindustan Times, 2016). Initially, Indian government authorities denied it (Batool, 2015; N. A. Khan, 2010; Mushtaq et al. 2016). According to some reports, Indian forces mass raped 882 Kashmiri women in 1992 (Cohen, 2013; Jamwal, 2013; United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1994). Manecksha (2017) recorded the cases of sexual assault in Kashmir and concluded that women from the Gujjar community living on the periphery of Kashmiri society were vulnerable to sexual violence due to their location. Manecksha (2017) narrated the story of a 16-year-old girl named Hameeda who was sexually violated with a baton by a Kashmiri police officer in 2004. She was despised by her family as a "spoiled good," resulting in the breakup of her marriage. She wanted justice but instead became a patient of depression due to the

collective shaming she faced from society (van der Molen and Bal, 2011). In Shopian, Kashmiri women named Asiya and Nilofar were raped and murdered (T. M. Bhat, 2017). Government personnel manipulated and distorted forensic evidence to facilitate the crimes (Kazi, 2017, 2018). In 2011, at Gujjardoga in the Manazgam district of South Kashmir, two army men were accused of raping Ruqiya Bano. Army authorities declared that the victim was mentally unfit (Kazi, 2017). Over the last 24 years of conflict, more than two cases of rape or molestation have been reported in J&K every day; however, the conviction rate in these cases has been a dismal 3.26 percent (R. Hassan, 2019, 2023). India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has reported that "the number of cases of violence against women in J&K increased from 3069 in 2019 to 3414 in 2020, even while the national rate fell by 8.3 percent during the same period. In 2020, 1744 cases of assault on women with the intent to violate their modesty, as well as 243 cases of rape, were reported. Given the low reporting rate and the shroud of violent shame and social boycott that accompanies rape, especially in a society as conservative and patriarchal as Kashmir, the real numbers are likely to be significantly higher." (S. Roy et al., 2022). NCRB has reported that "crimes against women in J&K recorded an increase of 15.6% in 2021 compared to the preceding year, with more than 7000 people being arrested" (National Crime Records Bureau, 2021). The NCRB of India (2021) reported that "according to the 2011 census, there are 6,400,000 women in J&K and the crime rate per 100,000 population in 2021 stood at 61.6", "The report said 315 cases of rape, 1414 incidents of an attempt to rape and 14 dowry deaths were lodged in 2021, and incidentally, 91.4% of the accused involved in rape were known to the victim." The report also mentioned that "as many as 1851 cases were also registered in connection with assault on women with the intention to outrage their modesty. Of these, 14 cases were reported from shelter homes for women and children, and five rape cases were reported in custody."

The situation of Kashmiri women during the conflict and militarization in Kashmir has been described by two renowned authors on the topic: "Islam, Women & Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan" by N.A. Khan (2010) and "Between Democracy and Nation: Gender and Militarization in Kashmir" by Kazi (2007). The crossroads between gender and militarization in Kashmir have also been discussed in these books (Vibhuti, 2013). Along with governmental reports, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also reported on the Kashmir situation. During the 20 years of conflict, various NGOs have been concerned about the effects of conflict on women. An organization, WISCOMP², presented elaborate details on the human rights violations in Kashmir. Documents such as reports, news reports, editorials, and commentaries provide insight into the real situation and the effects of conflict on society. Médecins Sans Frontières (2006) carried out a study that indicated sexual violence against Kashmiri women was the highest relative to the other conflict zones in the world. Médecins Sans Frontières reported that sexual violence is a common tactic used to intimidate people in conflict, but it's not openly discussed in Kashmir. Despite this, the survey concluded that out of a total of 510 people, 11.6% of interviewees have experienced sexual violence since 1989, and 63.9% have heard about rape cases over the same period, while one in seven had witnessed rape. Deb (2016) referred to a study that found Kashmiri women were the worst victims of sexual violence across the world. According to Lucas (2009), in comparison to Chechnya, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka (conflict-experiencing regions), people who witnessed rape were the greatest in Kashmir. Kazi (2018) argued that the international community is not significantly aware of the excessive rate of sexual crimes in Kashmir. Cohen (2013) pointed out that, together with Bosnia and Rwanda, Kashmir was the

“worst” of the “so-called mass rape wars”. Rape perpetrators are generally military and security officials who are protected by official powers.

According to human rights groups, the Indian government had covered up 150 soldiers, either major or senior, who were accused of rape (Burke, 2010, 2015). Parvez Imroz, a Kashmiri lawyer and human rights activist, pointed out that numerous rape cases by soldiers were not reported (Haziq and Inzamam, 2016). Kanjwal (2023) pointed out that, in a patriarchal Kashmiri society, rape victims were blamed and shamed for loss of purity so they went through depression and psychological trauma, leading to marriage breakdown, breakup of families, or suicide. Van der Molen and Bal (2011) found that Kashmiri people avoided having matrimonial relations with women who belonged to areas where rape incidents had occurred. In *Kunan Poshpora*, the raped women were rejected by the society (village). Sometimes husbands of rape victims would take them back after militants encouraged them to do so, but they still abused them. A victim of sexual assault expressed that her husband blamed her for rape in spite of knowing the truth. The victims' relationships with their sons were also disturbed. The stigma of rape also ruins the lives of the girls, who were not victims themselves but were close relatives of rape victims. Society tortured them mentally and emotionally. If pregnant, they went through miscarriages or delivered disabled children (Women's Initiative, 2002). Some rape victims escaped to Azad Kashmir, which is part of Pakistan, as reported by journalists (Margolis, 2004).

Studies have revealed that sexual violence and other crimes like disappearances and killings by Indian forces have resulted in a rise in resistance from Kashmiri rebels (Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993b). In 2016, Kanhaiya Kumar, a Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student union president, was branded “anti-national” when he spoke out about the rapes of women in Kashmir by Indian soldiers (Haziq and Inzamam, 2016). Human Rights Watch pointed out that, although widespread cases of sexual crimes were reported internationally and by local human activists, they drew insignificant condemnation from the world (Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993a; Sajjad Khan, 2020). Bhat (2017) drew a parallel between rape incidents in India, stating that rape was a crime, whether “it is Delhi gang rape, or rape leading to the murder of *Manorama Thangjam*, a Manipuri woman, by the Indian army in 2004, or the Shopian double rape and murder case, or *Kunan Poshpora* mass rape.” The Delhi gang rape criminals were brought to justice as a priority, but justice was never done regarding the accused rapes in conflict zones like Kashmir and the northeast (Mathur, 2016). Ranjan (2015) questioned the role of India's government and believed that the government of India favored criminals instead of rape victims. He further maintained that Muslims of Kashmir were considered the ‘other’; therefore, Indian society is indifferent towards the rapes in Kashmir. Female activists from Kashmir took the initiative to write a book entitled “Do You Remember *Kunan Poshpora*?” (Batool, 2015) in order to remind the government about the widespread rape that had occurred in the valley. Mushtaq et al. (2016) examined questions of justice, stigma, state responsibility, and the long-term impacts of trauma through the personal accounts of victims of *Kunan Poshpora*. Hashmi (2007), a journalist, reported that the government orders inquiries into rape cases without any conclusion, and instead, the perpetrator acts are considered anti-militant, and hence they are appreciated by rewards. However, the leaders of the Kashmiri separatist movement claim that rape victims “have lost their honor for a greater cause.” Thus, Kashmir's prominent political parties as well as the separatists ignore the rape victims. The constant fear of rape and murder prevents Kashmiri women from reporting their plight (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, 2011; Kazi, 2007, 2018).

As a consequence of rape, besides physical violence, these women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and they fear further attacks. They are shunned by family and society. According to Vanniasinkam (2010), many of the women who were raped in *Kunan Poshpora*, could not get married even after 10 years. Their village became notorious as the “village of the raped women.” The stigma attached to this village and women extended to their children as well. Their daughters could not get married because of the stigma that they belonged to *Kunan Poshpora* village. One of the women who was raped, her married daughter, was sent back because her husband did not want to keep her for the sole reason that she belonged to that village. This gives us a glimpse into the lives of most Kashmiri women. They are abused by their family members, community, armed forces, and militants (Vanniasinkam, 2010).

Rape by militant groups in Kashmir. Around 12 different militant organizations operate in Kashmir, including *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) alongside other groups like *Hezbollah Mujahidin*, *Al-Jehad*, *Al-Barq*, *Hizbollah*, *Ikhwan-ul-Muslimin*, *Jamait-ul Mujahidin*, *Al-Umar Mujahidin*, *Tekriq-ul Mujahidin*, *Allah Tigers*, and *Ul-Umar Commandos* (Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993a). During the early days, there were seldom any reports of rape by the militants; however, in early 1990, militants started enforcing their interpretation of “Islamic” culture in Kashmir (Parashar, 2011; Punjabi, 2000). There were common threats to women to maintain purdah (or burqa—clothing that covered the entire body); otherwise, there would be severe consequences (Haq, 2017; Parashar, 2011). According to Human Rights Watch (1993a), these militant organizations have violated human rights and international humanitarian law as they are involved in crimes such as extortion, kidnaping, and murder. In cases of accusations of being a stoopigeon or supporters of opposing militant outfits, militants kidnaped women, raped them, and held them hostage to intimidate their families. (Haq, 2017; Pandey, 2018). These abductions and rapes referred to as “forced marriages” give some indication of the social ostracism suffered by rape victims and the code of silence and fear that stops people from openly condemning such abuses by militants. Many Muslim families fled from Kashmir because of the fear of rape by militants (Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993a). Many Hindu pandits left the valley out of fear of militant violence (Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993b; Rajput, 2012; Shekhawat, 2009). Kashmiris avoid reporting cases of sexual abuse by militants out of fear of revenge, which makes it difficult to conduct any investigation. Roy et al. (2022) gave voice to victims by providing a horrifying account of systematic rape and abuse by Islamist militants in Kashmir. An increase in rape cases caused an increase in abortions, as Baweja (2013) reported that there was a case of murder of a doctor for complaining to perform abortions. She was suspected of being an informer. There have been cases where the extended family was suspected of being informers or supporters of rival militant outfits. In such situations, the women of the family were sexually abused. In order to enforce an “Islamic” code of behavior, extremist militants committed various violent attacks on Kashmiri women; thus, an atmosphere of fear was created for women where the violent actions of militants enjoyed impunity. (Asia Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993b). D. Sharma (2023) claimed that the marriage of women from the Kashmir valley to militants in Kashmir fosters a sense of brotherhood. As it was evident from the data, these acts of rape and violence cannot be solely and directly attributed to the conflict in the region, as there are other contributing factors resulting in these crimes of violence, e.g., religious extremism, patriarchy, domestic violence, etc.

Half widows of Kashmir. More than 8000 Kashmiri men have been victims of the Indian Army's enforced disappearance since the struggle for independence and self-determination began in the Kashmir Valley in 1989 (Amnesty International, 1999; Zia, 2016). Many Kashmiris have been killed during the conflict, and many have forcibly disappeared, leaving their wives and families behind. Consequently, women were forced to become breadwinners for their families. Maqbool Bhat (2017) concluded that the conflict in Kashmir has led to social as well as economic insecurity among Kashmiri women. They suffer psychologically and emotionally because they were forced to live in a state where they were not sure if their husbands would return alive or not. These women are called "half widows" (A. Bashir, 2010; Crew, 2016; Hamid et al., 2021; Iqbal, 2021; S. Khan, 2018; Lucas, 2009; Manecksha, 2017; Qutab, 2017).

According to a human rights group's Coalition of Civil Societies (JKCCS) report, about 1500 Kashmiri women in J&K were half widowed (Crew, 2016). Over 2940 dead were discovered in 2700 unmarked mass graves spread across 55 villages in the Indian-administered districts of Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara between 1990 and 2009 (Bukhari, 2009; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Women sometimes assumed that their spouse may be buried in mass graves; however, there was no identification of the grave. The forced disappearance of Kashmiri men during the 1990s by the state to sabotage the freedom movement left women as half-widows because the men were not declared dead officially, which caused problems related to bank transfers, property rights, and inheritance because these official procedures required death certificates (Manecksha, 2017).

The patriarchal society of Kashmir saw half-widows with suspicion regarding their conduct, discouraged them from remarrying and often labeled them as adulterous. Whereas the victim's in-laws forced them to remarry within the family. Regarding the remarriage of a woman whose husband has disappeared, clerics disagreed on the number of years a half-widow must wait before remarrying. Mushtaq (2007) pointed out that according to Islamic law, these women can remarry, but unfortunately, there were disagreements among various sects on the issue of the remarriage of half-widows. Finally, in 2014, remarriage was decreed permissible after four years by clerics. Many women disagreed with remarrying for the betterment of their children or felt that marriage would hinder their struggle for justice (Manecksha, 2017; Qutab, 2017). They have various other reasons, such as social stigma, concern about their children, guilt about moving on with their lives, and fear of exclusion from society, which does not easily accept such remarriages (A. Bashir, 2010).

Kashmiri women victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence against women is a severe issue that jeopardizes their mental and physical health and has a detrimental impact on their quality of life. Domestic violence, primarily from husbands or family members, broken relationships with in-laws, wife abuse, marital violence, family problems, and harassment by male-dominated systems, is a fairly typical occurrence across most of the Kashmir region, and the victims are inevitably plagued by mental health problems, including flashbacks and stressors from their traumatic past, including abusive relationships, strained marriages, family strife, forced marriages, economic hardship, and a lack of autonomy (Rasool, 2022). A. Bashir and Rafiq (2023) identified several common causes of domestic violence across Kashmir's districts, including personality disorders, financial hardships, the influence of in-laws, extramarital affairs, substance misuse, and a lack of interest in a wife. Rasool (2022) identified a clear correlation between female suicide and domestic abuse.

According to the 2021 National Family Health Survey report, 11% of married women in J&K reported having been the victim of physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives, with husbands being the most common perpetrators (Farooz, 2022). M.A. Wani et al. (2020) investigated the odd phenomenon of braid chopping, which began abruptly on September 5, 2017, and stopped abruptly on October 22, 2017. The perpetrators used a sharp knife or pair of scissors to cut the women's hairlocks in the valley in an effort to terrorize, humiliate, and disgrace them. M.A. Wani et al. (2022) conducted an analysis of the State Crime Records Bureau J&K, Ministry of Home Affairs (GOI) 2012–2018, J&K statistical digest 2016, and Census of India 2011 records in order to determine the type of violence against women (VAW), and found that molestation (35%), kidnaping (30.03%), and domestic violence (11.9%) were the most common forms of VAW. The National Commission for Women (NCW) in J&K received the most complaints of crimes against women since 2014 in 2022, nearly 31,000. 30,864 complaints were filed with the NCW in 2021; in 2022, that number marginally rose to 30,957. According to the NCRB, crimes against women in J&K increased by 15.62 percent in 2021 over the previous year (R. Bashir, 2023). (Darakshan, 2023) reported that, even though it is frequently unreported, eve teasing is becoming more common in Kashmir, especially in Srinagar city, but it may also be occurring in areas and towns. The number of cases of "kidnaping of women" was 42 in 2020, 83 in 2021, 116 in 2022, and 36 so far in 2023. 2020 had 187 molestation cases reported, 2021 had 204, and 2022 had 227. Section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code was added in 1983 (Sanjana, 2023), designating domestic abuse as a distinct criminal offense. Kaur (2022) claimed that the number of victims is rising and that the prevalence of abuse is rather high. This makes the involvement of civil society, legal tools, and the federal and state governments necessary. As domestic violence has catastrophic effects on people's lives, particularly those of women and children, and can result in many forms of abuse, it becomes increasingly important to investigate this topic.

Enacted by the Indian Parliament in 2005, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (Government of India, 2005) aims to shield women from violence occurring in the home behind closed doors. In 2010, J&K put this Act into effect (Jammu and Kashmir State Legislature, 2010). Shafi (2019) investigated the types and prevalence of domestic abuse in Kashmir and claimed that although dowry deaths, infanticide, and other practices were not commonly practiced in Kashmir, women were nonetheless subjected to socially constructed inequality that caused them to be physically abused, subjugated, and victims of abuse from an early age. She further noted that domestic violence was only marginally reduced, despite the fact that laws and commissions have been able to control its intensity. When societal structure and gender disparity are in place, merely passing laws will not be effective. Violence against women is rooted in social and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality between women and men and disregard or even encourage violence against women. The phenomenon can be attributed to the historical imbalance of power between genders, wherein men have dominated and discriminated against women, impeding their ability to achieve full equality. Women in Kashmir share the same fortunes and sorrows of life as women in other parts of the world.

Economic plight of Kashmiri women. Kashmir has experienced significant economic losses amid the conflict. Every area of the economy has been impacted, including the manufacturing of handicrafts, horticulture, medium- and small-sized industries, tourism, etc. The wider economic progress of the region has been influenced by the conflict in Kashmir (Ahamad and Yasmin,

2012; Amir Ahmed, 2022; Burki, 2007; Butt and Pandow, 2012; Habibullah, 2004; Prakash, 2000). Prakash (2000) investigated the political economy of Kashmir since 1947 and revealed a significant relationship between militancy and unemployment. Further studies indicated that a corrupt administration, financial hardship, and a lack of employment opportunities were the main causes of militancy (Pandow, 2020; Prakash, 2000; Verma, 1994). For men and women alike, formal employment prospects have decreased as a result of limited industrialization and disruptions in multiple sectors. A complex combination of sociological, political, and economic issues affects the economic participation of Kashmiri women. The lack of access to economic possibilities exacerbates the state of the economy and highlights the pervasive gender prejudices in Kashmiri society, which emphasizes the need for women to have more economic agency and empowerment (Dhabhai, 2023).

J&K is an agrarian economy, and more than half of the workforce is engaged in agricultural activities (Jammu and Kashmir Government, 2023); however, <30% of Kashmir's total land area is suitable for farming, making it a labor-rich but land-poor state (Prakash, 2000). Women are frequently engaged in farming activities, and agriculture accounts for a sizeable portion of Kashmir's economy (Hussain, 2011). However, other than conflict-related issues, the agricultural industry has encountered problems related to hill farming (Partap, 2006) and climate-related challenges (Talib, 2007), that have impacted the livelihoods of those who depend on it. Traditionally, Kashmiri women have worked in the informal economy, producing shawls, papier-mâché, and carpets. Raina (2009) claimed that more Kashmiri women have been seen entering the craft sector in the conflict environment because they now have more responsibilities as heads of households and must therefore generate revenue. This industry requires modest literacy levels, and working indoors is relatively safe. Even though these pursuits can generate revenue, market accessibility, and economic sustainability may present difficulties.

The economic empowerment of women in Kashmir is impeded by restricted access to chances for education and skill development. To improve career opportunities and engage in a variety of economic activities, education is essential. Due to the loss of property and means of subsistence, the conflict has resulted in internal displacement and economic disruptions for many families, particularly those headed by women. Kashmiri women have battled the socio-economic and health consequences of the conflict by losing breadwinners to a bullet or to the oblivion of a disappearance (Pandith and Chitra, 2019). They were obliged to take on the roles of earners and caregivers as a consequence of the state's counteroffensive, which resulted in the execution or forced abduction of male relatives (Kazi, 2022). There is evidence of a whole reversal of economic roles, where women are expected to provide for their families, especially when it comes to initiatives aimed at reducing poverty. Women from the Hanji (Fisher) community in Kashmir have been actively engaged in generating revenue, which has helped alleviate poverty (T.A. Rather and Bhat, 2017). The emergence of working-class female-headed households in a traditional society has increased women's vulnerability in the absence of male kin. Working-class widows faced several challenges in their roles as female wage earners, including limited financial means, a dysfunctional and insensitive political system, and a constant threat of security personnel using predatory violence against them (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, 2011). Many widows suffer, struggle, and are neglected while living an invisible life (Qutab, 2017).

Kashmiri women's economic participation has decreased over the past few decades, despite increased rates of female literacy, which is indicative of the nature of the multifaceted challenges

faced by Kashmiri women (Evans et al., 2022). After being displaced, re-establishing economic stability can be rather difficult. The implementation of several initiatives aimed at empowering Kashmiri women economically includes microfinance schemes and entrepreneurship programs. The goal of these initiatives is to financially support women entrepreneurs and help them launch and grow their enterprises. Khan et al. (2022) examined the efficacy of microfinance-supported entrepreneurship to achieve women's overall empowerment. Research has shown that women's economic empowerment was positively impacted by microfinance-backed entrepreneurship, suggesting that women had the ability to spearhead economic progress through their entrepreneurial pursuits. In Pulwama, Jammu, and Kashmir, there have been reports of women starting their own businesses, economically empowering themselves, and forming self-help groups (Reshi and Sudha, 2023).

Kashmir's self-determination movement gave women a platform for active political engagement, which may also contribute to their economic empowerment (Kanth, 2018). Hassan (2023) claimed that journalism as a profession is helping Kashmiri women in conflict to move beyond victimhood discourse. Despite being educated and qualified, female journalists face stereotypical roles, job insecurity, and lower wages compared to their male counterparts, limiting their opportunities. Tourism has historically contributed to Kashmir's economy, although the sector has been impacted by political unrest and security issues (Amir Ahmed, 2022). Decreased visitor arrivals affect several industries, such as hospitality and handicrafts, which have indirect effects on women's business prospects. Several governmental and non-governmental groups strive to alleviate the financial difficulties that Kashmiri women encounter. Initiatives to increase women's engagement in the economy, skill development programs, and financial literacy campaigns are a few examples of these interventions.

It is imperative to acknowledge the interdependence between the economic condition of Kashmiri women and more general concerns such as political stability, conflict resolution, and regional development. In order to effectively address the underlying causes of economic difficulties as well as the pressing requirements of the economy, efforts to improve the state of the economy frequently call for a comprehensive strategy. Neogi (2022) concluded that the condition of Kashmiri women could only be improved through educational, health, and economic empowerment, as well as legal and psychosocial counseling aligned with campaigns against stereotypes of patriarchal mentality, which can help change the future of the valley.

Educational empowerment of Kashmiri women. Education for women is the most effective means of promoting their socio-economic mobility and a fundamental component in the creation of a just and equitable society. Educated women have the potential to be extremely important to the state's overall growth. Efforts have been made to improve access to education and empowerment for Kashmiri women (Baig, 2023; Suri, 2016, 2021; Yousuf and Maqbool, 2017). Kashmir is the only state in India that offers free public education to all of its residents at all levels. The first women's college was founded in 1950, and by the 1960s, Muslim females were beginning to emerge in significant numbers from both schools and universities (Choudhary, 2016; Mir, 2001). There were only 12 colleges for women out of the 95 total institutions in 2013–14. The capital cities of J&K state, Jammu and Srinagar, are home to one of the state's two central universities. Additionally, the state is home to six other universities with a combined enrollment capacity of 11,400 students: two of them are state universities and the other four are government-aided (T.A. Malik et al., 2020). The establishment of schools and

colleges has increased, providing more opportunities for girls to receive formal education. Despite improvements, gender disparities in education still persist. Socio-cultural factors, economic constraints, and traditional gender norms influence decisions regarding girls' education. Female literacy is significantly lower than male literacy; both rates are comparable to the national average (Ganie and Mohi Ud Din, 2015). According to the official statistics of the Department of School Education J&K (Department of School Education Kashmir, 2023), the male literacy rate is 78.26%, while the female literacy rate is 58.01%, which is further low in rural areas. R. Rashid and Maharashi (2015) blamed the poor female literacy rate in J&K mostly on the dearth of female teachers in schools, colleges, and universities as well as the location of these establishments in remote areas, while Suri (2021) attributed this disparity to the unique topography of J&K state, the sparse rural school network, the majority of people living in remote and inaccessible areas, the difficulty in accessing institutions, the lack of infrastructure, unpredictable weather, and conflict. Although the education of Kashmiri women has experienced progress over the years, various factors, including the ongoing conflict, have had a significant effect on the educational system in Kashmir.

Various researchers have investigated the effects of insurgency and patriarchy on education in Kashmir (F.A. Bhat et al., 2011; Choudhary, 2016; Ganie and Mohi Ud Din, 2015; I.M. Malik et al. 2017; S. Malik, 2014; Mir, 2001; Parlow, 2011; P. Singh, 2013). The regularity of academic activity for both boys and girls has been impacted by curfews, periodic school closures, and other disturbances. Girls who attend school feel less comfortable due to security issues in the area, especially the presence of armed troops. Sheikh and Mohammad (2022) examined the government's initiatives towards education in Kashmir and identified the political disturbance, patriarchy, conservative societal attitude, and lack of infrastructure and facilities as primary obstacles towards the education of Kashmiri women. Malik et al. (2017) identified poverty, parental illiteracy, child marriage, customs and cultural practices, molestation and abuse in school, and a lack of girls' schools and hostel facilities as the primary barriers to female education in Kashmir. S. Malik (2014) studied women's development in Kashmir since 1947, focusing on education, health, property rights, and employment, with emphasis on the role of women's agency in the political process and socio-economic development in the region. Many Kashmiri women have attended college and worked in a variety of fields. The area's colleges and universities provide women with the chance to pursue careers in academia and industry. The number of educated Kashmiri women working in a variety of sectors, such as healthcare, education, civil services, and business, has increased (S. Malik, 2014).

The Indian government has implemented programs and policies to support girls' education at both the regional and national levels. These programs include efforts to establish a supportive learning environment, scholarships, and inducements for families to send their daughters to school. Initiatives and programs such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)*, *Beti Anmol*, *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)*, *Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)*, *Saakshar Bharat Mission Program*, and *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)* have been put in place to raise awareness of the value of education and increase literacy rates (M.A. Rather and Thanikodi, 2016; Suri, 2016). It is acknowledged that women benefit from skill development and vocational training in addition to formal schooling. The goal of these programs is to increase their employability and financial autonomy. Although there has been progress, certain communities continue to face issues with gender roles and societal expectations (F.A. Bhat et al., 2011).

In order to raise the educational attainment of Kashmiri women, a number of issues, such as sociocultural norms, economic circumstances, and security concerns, must be addressed. Tariq et al. (2023) identified the relationship between mothers' educational attainment and stunting in children under five in J&K and concluded that children whose mothers are literate had a reduced risk of stunting than children whose mothers are illiterate. It is still crucial to acknowledge the role of education in empowering women and promoting societal development. Government agencies, nonprofits, and other community-based organizations must work diligently to accelerate the advancement of women's education in Kashmir.

Kashmiri women in politics. Women have participated in politics in Kashmir and have been actively involved in political movements, whether they be against the Dogra Regime or the late 1947 tribal invasion in the form of the Women Self Defense Corps (WSDC), Sheikh Abdullah's women's branch of the National Militia (Bhat, 2017). Kashmiri women have periodically demonstrated in the streets against the Indian army's violations of their human rights (Whitehead, 2022). Raazia and Rehman (2021) recognized that male political elites both lead and represent Kashmiri women. Although Kashmiri women are still expected to stay in their private lives, they have stepped out of their conventional roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives in order to assist and encourage their male family members.

Nyla Ali Khan (2014) attempted to challenge the prevalent paternalistic ideas about the relationship between women and politics by placing women at the center of Kashmir's political discourse. She also attempted to question the academic silence surrounding the gender dimensions of Kashmir's politics (Chowdhary, 2015). Nyla Ali Khan challenged conventional conceptions of women's agency in social change by placing her maternal grandmother, Akbar Jehan Abdullah, at the center of a historical investigation into the abortive Kashmiri independence struggle. Despite the patriarchal culture and the complicated political environment in the area as a result of the strife in Kashmir, a number of women from the region have actively participated in politics. S. Malik (2014) examined the role of women in the political developments in Kashmir, focusing on women's movements and socio-political organizations. Throughout Kashmir's political history, prominent female leaders have emerged and profoundly impacted the political climate in the region. Among these well-known individuals is Mehbooba Mufti, a notable figure in the region, who has held the position of Chief Minister of J&K. On April 4, 2016, she took the oath of office as the first female chief minister of J&K (Hindustan Times, 2016). She is well-known for being vociferous on regional concerns and for her strong participation in state politics (BBC News, 2020; Bhushan, 2020; Fareed, 2018; H. I. Rashid, 2022; The Hindu, 2023). A few Kashmiri female leaders belonging to various political families have been active in politics. Mehbooba Mufti is often criticized for being in politics because her father was a politician (Vibhuti, 2013). Farooq Abdullah's daughter, Safia Abdullah Khan, has been vocal in her criticism of the J&K administration (Mohan, 2023) and has led several human rights protests (Dawn News, 2019). Shabnam Lone, a lawyer and daughter of Abdul Ghani Lone (a Kashmiri separatist leader), was eminently placed to lead her father's party, yet it was eventually her brothers who inherited the reins of the party (Kazi, 2007). The controversial Asiya Andrabi established the Islamist *Dukhtaran-e-Millat* (DeM) in 1987. DeM is the outcome of the reformist urge among middle-class Muslims in Kashmir who believe that non-Islamic rituals and practices have tainted Islam in the region (Kazi, 2007). It is evident that there is no major political figure born from grass-roots politics. They are either

wives or daughters of leading political figures. Few Kashmiri women have entered mainstream politics after being involved in social and human rights actions. Their lobbying efforts frequently center on problems pertaining to women's rights, resolving disputes, and humanitarian issues.

Recently, a group of highly educated Muslim women, including Farida Khan, Darakhshan Andrabi, Hina Bhat, Parvaz Chauhan, and Rumisa Rafiq Wani, are critical of ancestral politics and are helping improve the reputation of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) (T. Bhat, 2023). They are adamant that the BJP is more likable to the general public than other political parties, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and that it offers a more equitable alternative and provides a level playing field, particularly for women (Arnimesh, 2023).

Women's political participation in Kashmir is remarkable considering the delicate and complicated political climate. Still, there are obstacles to overcome, such as cultural expectations, security worries, and a larger political environment. In order to guarantee various viewpoints and take into account the particular interests and concerns of Kashmiri women in political discourse, women's involvement in politics is crucial. Despite gender equality being one of the stated goals for the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy, relatively little emphasis was put on the resistance of Kashmiri women in post-August 2019 Kashmir. Throughout mainland India, the state's case for gender justice was overwhelmingly accepted, and it strengthened the nationalist alignment between Kashmir as a territory under threat and Kashmiri women as vulnerable targets of a patriarchal Muslim society in Kashmir (Kazi, 2022). It is anticipated that the recently passed historic law, which requires a one-third reservation of seats in parliament and assemblies for women, has the power to completely transform the representation of women in politics (UN Women, 2023). Women in leadership positions have the ability to promote cultural shifts that highlight gender parity and the value of women's contributions to the economy. It not only tackles the pressing need for gender parity in political voices but also provides a way forward to overcome the systemic issues that have limited women's participation in the labor force in India. Resolving these issues will accelerate economic growth and promote gender equality.

Kashmiri women as human right activists. Despite the constraints imposed by the prolonged conflict, more and more educated and young women in the legal, academic, and media fields are striving for constructive peace in Kashmir (Qureshi, 2018). Due to the human rights crisis in Kashmir, a number of activists and groups have emerged, working nonstop to campaign for justice, raise awareness of human rights violations, and foster peace in the region. It is pertinent to mention that Kashmiri activism is a complicated and contentious arena where people's perceptions might vary greatly among locals. In addition, difficulties, and disputes about the activities of activists in the region have been brought about by the political and security circumstances in Kashmir. Several activists from Kashmir have made great contributions to the causes of social justice, peace, and human rights. A female-dominated movement, the Association of the Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), was monumental in drawing attention to the 8000–10,000 Kashmiri men who disappeared during the conflict (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, 2011; Zia, 2016, 2019). Human rights campaigner Parveena Ahangar is from Kashmir and is the founder of the APDP. Parveena Ahangar has received recognition for her unwavering work. In 2017, she was awarded the Rafto Prize for Human Rights (Rafto Foundation, 2017), and in 2019, she was included in the BBC 100 Women list of remarkable and powerful women worldwide (BBC News, 2019). Mushaal Mullick, the wife of

famous Kashmiri separatist leader Yasin Malik, who led the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), is the chairperson of the "Peace and Culture Organization" in Kashmir. Mushaal Malik has actively spoken out on matters pertaining to the Kashmir dispute and has fought for the rights of the people living in Kashmir (Dawn News, 2022; Radio Pakistan, 2022, 2023). Essar Batool is a human rights activist from Indian-occupied Kashmir who works as a professional social worker (Batool, 2017). She is a petitioner in the 1991 *Kunan Poshpora* mass rape lawsuit against the Indian Armed Forces and co-author of the book "*Do you remember Kunan poshpora?*" (Batool, 2015), which goes into great depth about the crime. She also works to support young women's expression and places, as well as to create forums for youth discourse centered on gender awareness. She also volunteers with the Jammu & Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, helping to expose human rights abuses in J&K (Mushtaq et al., 2016). Based in Kashmir, Masrat Zahra, a photojournalist and advocate of women's rights whose work has focused on addressing gender and human rights concerns as well as recording the lives of women in conflict, is living in exile in the US (Host, 2023; International Women's Media Foundation, 2023). Nadiya Shafi, a video reporter from Srinagar, won the "Martha Farrell Award for Excellence in Women's Empowerment" in 2018 (DD News, 2018). With leading mystic poets like Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon, Rupa Bhavani, and Arnimaal, Kashmir has a rich heritage of female poets and scholars (Mattoo, 2019). Nighat Sahiba's poetry rebukes patriarchy and exposes the realities of women's lives in a militarily controlled, hypermasculine conflict zone (A.A. Bhat, 2018). Nighat and several other feminist poets and writers from Kashmir frequently explored the realities of women amidst violence, challenging traditional standards and patriarchal beliefs. These scholars, along with others, support the feminist conversation in Kashmir by talking about anything from political rights and empowerment to gender-based violence. Ather Zia is a feminist academic, poet, and anthropologist from Kashmir. Her writings on gender, militarization, and the effects of conflict on women in Kashmir are comprehensive. Zia (2019) explored APDP activism by highlighting the ways in which women, typically from very low socioeconomic backgrounds, have entered the public sphere in a milieu rife with violence. They have managed to do this by negotiating a patriarchal society and the widespread militarization of the region. Nevertheless, women have succeeded in creating a niche for themselves, what Zia calls a "female consciousness." Their activity, which pushes the boundaries of social acceptability, has the power to transform society (Bouzas, 2021).

Do Kashmiri women take part in militancy?. The way that insurgency has affected women's roles in Kashmir is a complicated phenomenon that is shaped by a violent social milieu where women are used by several militant factions that control the region to further enhance their right-wing agendas. As an example, consider Kashmir's sole all-reactionary women's group, *Dukhtaran-e-Milat* (DeM) (daughters of the nation). It reduces Kashmiri women's agency and turns them into a silent cultural icon whose actions are governed by the Islamic code of conduct (Parashar, 2011). Although Kashmiri women may not have taken a direct part in militancy, they have helped financially and logistically by distributing ammunition, influencing security force personnel to keep an eye on their operations, and more. Kashmiri women became facilitators by delivering weapons, informing militants, giving them food and shelter, and assisting them in evading capture during the frequent and terrifying raids by the Indian military (Aaliya, 2011; Raazia and Rehman, 2021; Ramachandran and Jabbar, 2003). According to Ray (2009), Muslim women's organizations like DeM have fought to rally women in their favor while providing haven to militants, the exact men who

were the main cause of women's suffering in society. According to DeM, Kashmiri women were sacrificing figures for the cause of *Azaadi* (Freedom). Parashar (2009) argued that the creation of autonomy for feminist subjects in Kashmir cannot be attributed to women's involvement in militancy for three reasons: first, women adopting agential roles are still enmeshed in patriarchal militant ideology; second, powerful women actively work to restrict the autonomy of women who defy patriarchal religious doctrines; and third, women in Kashmir are not adopting agential roles for their freedom or cause, but rather to oppose the state apparatus.

Evolution of feminism in Kashmir. Several Indian women gained prominence and voiced their opposition to the British Raj during the colonial era (Norvell, 1997). However, feminist politics in India first emerged through the Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829, a law that declared the practice of burning or burying alive Hindu widows unlawful and subject to criminal penalties (Atwal, 2019). The feminist trajectory was aided by the custom's eradication, but its rhetorical outlines stayed within the bounds of emancipating women rather than pursuing an ideal throughout time. The varied landscape of feminist activism in Kashmir encompasses the endeavors of individuals, collectives, and institutions dedicated to promoting social justice, women's rights, and gender equality. According to the nationalist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks of feminism, the lack of autonomy for feminist subjects in India can be linked to the independence movement and colonial setting (Gandhi, 2019).

Pande (2018) investigated the backdrop of the women's movement, feminism's emergence, and gender roles in India. Pande divided the autonomy of feminist subjects into three phases: the first, from 1850 to 1915; the second, from 1915 to 1947; and the third, from 1947 to the present. Pande further divided the third period into three stages: the present (1975 to date) and the periods of accommodation (1947–1960), crisis (1960–1975), and the present (1975–to date). According to Pande's categorization, feminist speech underwent new developments with each epoch. In the first phase, nationalists were more concerned with updating the status of their culture through social and religious reforms in the private sphere than they were with colonial Raj threatening to encroach on their sovereignty, as they had done in the public and political spheres. The second phase focused on finding a solution for women's dilemma within the nationalist political framework, which sought political independence from the British. State-sponsored feminism has been the driving force behind legislative reforms after independence, including the Indian Constitution's formal equality of sexes declaration and the Hindu Code Bills, which codified and revised customary laws regarding marriage, succession, and other matters (A. Roy, 2010). Marxist feminism and ecofeminism gained momentum during the 1960s–1975 crisis era (D'Eaubonne, 2022; Kollontai, 1977; Shiva, 1988). The question of how gender and caste identities connect with religion has been discussed since 1975, and there has been a consistent rise in the number of women's welfare organizations since 1975 (Pande, 2018).

Khan (2014) offered a unique blend of feminist memoirs and autobiography about her grandmother, Begum Akbar Jehan. Jehan was the spouse of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, a socialist, political activist, and the first prime minister of the princely state of J&K. Khan (2014) created a highly detailed history of a time and place that was both beautiful and desperate in its quest for autonomy from the 1950s to the 1970s by skillfully fusing personal memoir, archival research, oral history, and feminist philosophy. The political unrest and intricate social structure prevalent in Kashmir influence feminist movements inside the region. Kanjwal (2018) argued that although Kashmiri women

benefited from several economic and educational opportunities, we also need to be aware of the ways in which the state turned into a propagandist for patriarchy. The lack of an indigenous, grassroots women's movement in Kashmir during this period of state-sponsored feminism was one of its drawbacks because those addressing women's issues there were solely reliant on the state, which was becoming increasingly contested and politicized (Kanjwal 2018).

An independent group of Kashmiri feminists, *Zanaan Wanaan* (ZW) (2021), "Women Speak" produces independent studies, supports artistic endeavors, participates in feminist action locally, and strives to fortify the women's movement in Kashmir. They also recently published a feminist manifesto for Kashmiri futures (Wanaan, 2023). Mushtaq (2022) investigated the political connotations, ramifications, and potency of the slogans and songs of Kashmiri Muslim women against the multifaceted aggression in Kashmir. Mushtaq (2022) argued that Kashmiri women are engaged in an act of "memory-making" when they observe, reflect, write down, and perform these songs. Through narrating their own experiences, Kashmiri women not only question prevailing methods of knowledge generation in which they have predominantly been represented, advocated for, or excluded from their own narratives, but they also reposition their agency from the periphery to the core.

Feminism takes on special aspects in the context of Kashmir, where the area has seen a protracted battle and political upheaval; it frequently intersects with more general political and socio-economic problems. The protracted violence in Kashmir has significantly impacted the lives of women. In Kashmir, feminist action frequently focuses on tackling the unique difficulties and vulnerabilities that women encounter during armed conflicts, such as family member loss, displacement, and the region's militarization. Pandit (2023) argued that Indian feminist researchers, under the pretense of conducting "postcolonial" research, have marginalized Kashmiri women by portraying them as victims of "Islamic patriarchy" or as brainwashed advocates of violent and military resistance. Anthropologist, feminist historian, and human rights advocate Angana Chatterji has concentrated on problems associated with violence in Kashmir. Her contributions to understanding the effects of conflict on women in the region go beyond the realm of women's rights (Chatterji et al., 2019; A. Roy et al., 2011). However, Malik (2019) argued that feminist concepts of "agency" and "victimhood" are problematic and insufficient to comprehend the political activity and intersubjectivity of women. Malik (2019) addresses women's rights generally, concentrating on how Muslim women in Kashmir discovered innovative and frequently rebellious means to assert their rights. It is imperative to acknowledge that feminism, like any other movement, is not a homogenous entity in Kashmir. Within the larger framework of feminism, different people and groups may have different priorities, approaches, and viewpoints. Furthermore, feminist activity in the area takes on distinct dimensions due to the intricate political situation in Kashmir. D. Sharma (2023) argued that, because women were subjected to numerous counter-discourses against their liberty, they were in triple jeopardy. It is impossible to characterize feminism and autonomy in Kashmir in a vacuum; female power dynamics interact with both the militarization of Kashmir and the ethnic violence resulting from the divisions. In terms of sympathy and support for Kashmiri women and their struggle, Indian feminists remain silent on the specific political issue that centers around the lives of these women (S.A. Wani, 2021). Zia (2019) characterized Indian feminism in this instance as "imperial brown feminism," placing the situation under the heading of imperial or colonial feminism. Indian feminist scholars condemn women's organizations like *Dukhtaran-e-Millat* and *Muslim Khawateen Markaz* for

endorsing separatists and militants while neglecting the atrocities perpetrated by these same men against Kashmiri women. I. Malik (2015, 2019) exposed the fallacy of these arguments by stating that Indian feminism ignores the impact of militarization on Kashmiri women, much as white feminism disregarded the issue of race for African American women. The Indian settler-colonial project in Kashmir is discussed in the Harvard Law Review (2021), but the effects of occupation, militarization, and violent nationalist drive are also evident in Indian feminism, where issues of “ethnicity,” “caste,” and “religion” are usually disregarded. Kaul (2018) argued that the way in which nationalism attempts to legitimize and normalize violence in Kashmir is largely dependent on the gendered discourses of representation, cartography, and possession. Kaul (2018) claimed that Kashmir is to be shielded from the repressive Muslim and Pakistani gaze as well as from the grasp of the Hindu majority state on the Pakistani side, in reference to the patriarchal notion of the Indian nation. Regarding the Kashmir dispute, both governments’ nationalisms are founded on the patriarchal notion of nation-states, which is where religion and ultra-masculinity collide. The popular conception of independence, how it should be attained, and who the main players in the process are obscure the stories of women within Kashmiri culture and its nationalism.

Discussion and conclusion

Kashmiri women are a dynamic and diverse population with a range of roles, experiences, and contributions to society. Kashmir’s complicated political landscape and long history of violence have had a distinctive impact on the lives of Kashmiri women. Kashmir is known for its diverse culture, and women’s experiences can differ according to their socioeconomic background, religion, and ethnicity. Numerous communities, each with its own unique customs and traditions, including Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others, call the region home. The number of educational possibilities for Kashmiri women has increased over time. Numerous women seek postsecondary education and work in a variety of professions, including healthcare, education, media, and the arts. Kashmiri women make significant contributions to the region’s rich cultural legacy via their artistic, literary, musical, and other creative endeavors. In their works, female poets, writers, and painters examine themes of resistance, love, and identity. At regional and national levels, a few Kashmiri women have actively participated in politics. They take part in political activism, addressing problems with development and government as well as fighting for the rights of the Kashmiri people. Gender-based violence, economic inequality, and societal expectations are issues that Kashmiri women face. Efforts are being made to solve these issues and provide chances for women’s empowerment. Women’s rights activists and NGOs work on projects pertaining to women’s health, education, economic empowerment, and legal rights. The general wellbeing of Kashmiri women is the goal of these initiatives. The variety of experiences that Kashmiri women have to offer should be acknowledged, and debates about them should be sensitive to the intricate sociopolitical backdrop of the area.

Women in Kashmir, like women everywhere else, make important contributions to the social, cultural, and economic fabric of their communities. However, the lives of women have been significantly impacted by the protracted conflict in Kashmir. Since 1989, cases of rape, harassment, enforced disappearances, orphans, half widows, and half orphans have provided evidence of continual violence against women. Their agony has multiple layers because they suffer from physical, psychological, social, and economic problems. Kashmiri women have suffered from being uprooted, losing loved ones, and dealing with the difficulties of

residing in a conflict zone. Kashmiri society is a patriarchal society, and in addition to fundamentalism, the overall lack of law in the valley amplifies the widespread violence against women. Even before the conflict, they were treated as second-class citizens, but with the increase in the magnitude of the conflict, their situation worsened. The Kashmiri people are deprived of basic needs, along with a lack of order. Not only women but also children become victims of violence and sexual assault by security forces and rebels, along with the domestic violence they face at home by their family. They are greatly impacted by a variety of socioeconomic, historical, religious, and geopolitical factors, as well as the insurgency, militancy, and ensuing militarization of the area. They have to battle for justice in addition to fighting for their own subsistence. Kashmiri women continue to be the victims of conflict because of unfavorable circumstances, a patriarchal society, a lack of education and opportunities, inadequate laws, onerous legal procedures, a dearth of rehabilitation programs, and inaction on the part of the government apparatus. Kashmiri women are marginalized and oppressed by two forms of patriarchy: the social order and the militarized environment in Kashmir. One of the foremost reasons behind women’s sufferings is the patriarchal system of Kashmir and the subcontinent, i.e., India and Pakistan. Patriarchy is deeply rooted in Kashmiri society. Men are pushed by the patriarchal system to behave in a specific manner. For example, when Kashmiri women are raped, they are later stigmatized. This behavior has its roots in the patriarchal system that controls women’s bodies and sexuality while the men in society are forced to act accordingly. Stigmatizing women and not marrying a rape victim is the behavior that Kashmir’s patriarchal society expects from its men. The *Kunan Poshpura* incident provides a glimpse of a deep-rooted patriarchal society. In cases of the forced disappearance of family members, the half-widows are forced to marry within the family; otherwise, their character is considered suspicious if they want to live alone with their children. Again, the behavior of men is according to what patriarchy expects them to be. Thus, both genders of Kashmiri society are victims in their own ways of the society’s norms, which are dictated by patriarchy.

Besides living under constant threat of conflict and fear of patriarchy, Kashmiri women face economic deprivation, which overshadows their lives with financial deficiencies. Lack of education or any skill has turned these women into unskilled laborers. Insufficient income for these women meant they could not manage their households, and any additional health problems further aggravated the economic situation of women in Kashmir. Ideological or religious enmity masked as an ethno-national cause, along with patriarchal gender relations, are the root causes of war, prompting people towards violence. Kashmiri women need to escape men with guns and demonization of the honor culture. When we look at the Kashmir conflict from a gender perspective, the situation appears to be very bleak. In the midst of the violence in Kashmir, women are living on thin ice.

Feminists see militarism and war with a clear understanding of this issue. War and gender relations are reciprocally forming, and gender is a consequence of war. Gender-based violence in Kashmir is a contentious and sensitive topic among Indian feminist circles. Initially, they refuse to recognize that Kashmir is under military occupation, and if they do, they do not view Kashmiri women as active participants in the resistance movement. Moreover, Kashmiri women are opportunistically sidelined and haphazardly tossed around for objectification and exploitation sanctioned by society and culture in a variety of settings and times after being shut out of the Indian feminist discourse. Various authors acknowledge that Indian security forces often rape women in Kashmir, but they neglect to address the wrongs committed by militants against Kashmiri women. The risky

presumption that the insurgents were innocent runs throughout the texts, preventing the authors from fully addressing the negative aspects of the decades that women in Kashmir endured under occupation in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, the unquestioning adoration of some women groups, such as DeM, which occasionally employed illegal tactics and threats to push its beliefs on the public, seriously undermines the Kashmir Valley's traditional, pluralist, and tolerant culture.

Scholars, journalists, and politicians present a one-dimensional image of Kashmiri women. Journalists and scholars have mostly restricted their depictions of Kashmiri women to those of victims of violence (particularly sexual violence and the loss of male family members due to conflict), while mainstream politicians in India present them as restricted by a lack of opportunities in life as a result of the patriarchy and violence in J&K. Mehdi (2021) argued that in histories of armed conflict, women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways. A focus on their vulnerability highlights them primarily as victims of violence and downplays their actions. Even if it is a fact that women are victimized in conflicts, the emphasis placed solely on this aspect drastically limits the representation of women. This is evident in the writings on the conflict in Kashmir; where women are frequently portrayed as combat victims but are rarely acknowledged as political actors. Some women have turned into activists, fighting for the rights of people impacted by the violence as well as for justice and peace. Women from Kashmir have proven to be resilient in the face of hardship. Many women actively engaged in social and political movements, adding to the larger story of struggle against various types of injustice and oppression. In the context of conflict and societal development, feminist action in the region is dynamic and adapts to the changing issues encountered by Kashmiri women. Human rights activists work under difficult conditions, frequently exposed to the dangers to their personal safety because of the delicate nature of their work. These women activists have played a major role in advancing women's rights and tackling the difficulties that women encounter in relation to the conflict in Kashmir. In a region riven by political unrest and protracted conflict, their work addresses issues including violence against women, access to justice, and women's empowerment.

In Kashmir, feminist expression is frequently expressed through literature, the arts, and other creative endeavors. Women artists and writers utilize their work to emphasize themes connected to gender, identity, and the consequences of conflict. Kashmiri feminists fight against many types of violence against women, such as gender-based violence made worse by the conflict, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse. They promote access to justice, legal reforms, and assistance for survivors. This involves initiatives to support women's education, overturn laws that discriminate, and expand economic opportunities to empower women both socially and economically. Kashmiri feminists advocate for more women taking part in political and community decision-making. They stress how crucial it is for women to have a say in the policies that impact both their lives and the region's overall growth. They also question cultural assumptions and long-standing patriarchal conventions that might restrict the roles and opportunities available to women. Promoting a reassessment of gender roles in families and communities is part of this. Feminist activists promote gender equality and justice as common goals and call attention to the effects of conflict on women. Realizing that women play a crucial role in establishing enduring peace, several feminist activists in Kashmir work to promote peace. They stress how important it is to consider the viewpoints and experiences of women when resolving disputes.

Kashmiri women's lives are still shaped by traditional gender norms, particularly in more traditional regions. Nonetheless,

there is a continuous change, with more and more women questioning the established norms and taking part in decision-making processes. Women in Kashmir have suffered in numerous ways, and therefore, their presence and role in any resolution towards the peace process in Kashmir are crucial. Their stakes are more in having a peaceful Kashmir. Gender sensitivity toward women's involvement in peace politics will make the peace process more comprehensive. Feminists strongly believe that gender is integral to developing a clearer understanding of issues related to war and peace. Feminist and gender perspectives help understand the gender of human security as well. A feminist perspective is helpful in creating and executing programs and policies regarding human security. Understanding both direct and structural (indirect) violence against women is vital to women's insecurity in all societies. Subsequently, any initiatives, programs, and policies that encourage human security need to address this fundamental feminist concern at all levels. Women's peace-building activities should be emphasized, encouraged, promoted, organized, sponsored, or funded, and executed to enhance women's wellbeing, safety, security, and growth. The government and intergovernmental groups, along with NGOs, must operate in partnership to alleviate women's conditions and status as a fundamental aspect of human safety, especially in conflict regions.

Data availability

The authors have analyzed various articles by different authors, all of whom have been cited as required.

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Notes

- 1 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is one of the world's longest-standing women's peace organizations since 1915, focused on addressing the root causes of violence through a feminist lens.
- 2 WISCOMP is a pioneering peacebuilding initiative in South Asia. Established in 1999, it foregrounds women's leadership in the areas of peace and security and promotes cultures of pluralism and coexistence in the region.

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SZ: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing original draft and editing of the manuscript. HA: supervision of theoretical background and literature, composing methodology and review.

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