

Women Experiences and Struggles with Disappearances in Kashmir

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Abstract:

Women who experience disappearances have specific need and concerns which need to be addressed as well as addressed through policy inclusion for effective reconciliation and peacebuilding in context of Kashmir. The disappearances phenomenon in Kashmir has hit a large population and pushed them in the category of vulnerability and liminality. The group especially largely the women family members are likely to suffer much due the disappearances of son, husbands or brother. The paper highlights the problems of disappearances and measures for peacebuilding. The methodology adopted is the qualitative inquiry through conducting the group interviews with the female victims of enforced disappearances in Kashmir.

Keywords: Kashmir, struggles, disappearances, peacebuilding, vulnerable

Introduction

The paper highlights that the female victim of enforced disappearances has shown immense strength as survivors as well as agents. Despite the effective coping capabilities women victims of enforced disappearances still fall under the categorically of vulnerable who are in need of support and care. Feminist research on various subject discipline such as International Relations, Social Work, Political Science and Anthropology has differences in opinion with regards to women experiences in conflict. For instance, many feminist scholar of international discipline challenge traditional victimhood narrative like Malik who says Kashmiri Muslim women has an active role in the armed struggle underwent a process of self-constitution as per social and political context (Malik, 2015). Countering the traditional narrative of victimhood and lack of agency Malik recollects that Kashmiri Women has gone through the process of self- engagement within a social and political context through self-constitution. Whereas, sociology and social work perspective countered by Qutab in her case studies have mentioned the struggle and suffering of the women victimized due to the disappearance of their husband have made the women victims vulnerable by highlighting their the social, psychological, economic and legal implication of the half widows due to indirect victimization (Qutab 2012). Women are mothers, wives, sisters and daughters and hence play a crucial role in socialization process, particularly as primary caregivers and in shaping gender roles within the family and society. They are often seen as the "glue" that holds families together and are instrumental in raising the next generation, influencing their values and behaviours. However, societal expectations and cultural norms can create disparities in how women and men are socialized, sometimes leading to unequal opportunities and burdens. Socialization is culturally specific, and the roles and expectations placed on women can vary significantly different (Socialization Process - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics n.d.). Association of Parents of the Disappeared Person (APDP) is an organisation which is based Srinagar. APDP was founded by the mother, who is a victim of the disappearance (APDP-biography-02-02-2020.pdf n.d.). At the initial phase APDP was dealt only with the cases on disappearances but gradually they have shifted working on the different victims of conflict. Malik (2015) argues that women over the time have shifted themselves as per the social and political context.

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Where women have self-constituted with the victim-based organisation and has channelised their energy in advocating on human rights violation. Discussing and protesting about their experience and suffering. Although their protest doesn't deny the fact that they are victim and doesn't necessarily mean they are agents. The "victimhood" narrative in the Kashmir conflict is the existential reality which cannot be escaped despite of having an agency (Qutab, 2021). The women victim of enforced Disappearance has International Human Rights Intervention. The women in the conflict zone develop social intelligence by which they survive and sustain within the system. Putting women in the Centre of peace and conflict discourse we try to understand women's struggles and experiences which shapes, transforms and also liberate women through the process of suffering. The politics of Mourning(Zia 2016) is an act of Kashmiri women armed resistance. Using their tears as strongest feminine weapon women, women draw an international attention and call for human rights intervention. The experiences of women victim due to disappearances are the mostly the shared in the collective approach but the individual aspect of women as mother, wives, daughters are often overshadowed.

Objective: To understand Women's experiences and struggle with the disappearance in context to Kashmir conflict. **Methods:** A six-month field Study conducted on July 2021. Qualitative inquiry relied on Methodology research approach and used constructivist paradigm (observation and group interviews) to answer research questions.

Methodology. Methodology has been defined as "the method used in conducting the investigation" (Antwi & Hamza, 2015, p. 218). The methodological aspect of research agrees with the ontological and epistemological stances of the research. In relation to the constructivist paradigm, it is known that there is no single reality and the construction of multiple realities are made through interactions. In addition, social, cultural and historical perspectives play an important role in shaping people's sense about the world (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, the constructivist paradigm believes that the methodology utilized in research should explore "the minds and meaning-making, sense-making activities" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 40) as is often practiced in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014) such as the case study approach that uses methods including interviews and observations.

I Women Experiencing Disappearances

Mothers who are in search of the disappeared son keep the photograph for reminiscent of their sons whose disappearances have always haunted them. The door of the house has always been kept slightly open which denotes the mothers expects that their sons to come back home (Zia, 2019). There are mothers whose only sons was missing. Mothers form the large part of the women victim population and the activists of enforced disappearance. *Hafeeza Mathoo residing in the small house in Srinagar District only son 13 years old went missing and never to return back. Hafeeza Mathoo says "he was my only son I am searching him for 20 years". The family is left with only daughter Shafika who recently got married. Shafika is the sister who narrates the incident of her brother being disappeared. The victim is supposed to be the school going boy of thirteen years.²*

Javaid Ahmed Ahanger was young boy who got disappeared and never to come back. *As Parveena Ahanger says, "Mother's heart will always long for search. As a mother we cannot accept our son to be lost we will search we will fight till our last breath".* There is the huge uproar in the Kashmir as the maximum disappeared men were under the age of 25 years(Dsouza 2016).

Table 1: Background Information of Half mothers

Participants	Age	Education	Employed	Problem faced
Participants 1	48	under matric	thread worker	socio,economic,psychological
Participant 2	56	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological
Participant3	65	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological
Participant4	55	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological
Participant 5	56	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological
Participant 6	59	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological

² Interview conducted on July 2021

Participant 7	67	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological
Participant 8	75	under matric	Household	socio,economic,psychological

Source: Field Work

There are intergenerational impacts where Shabnam's mother was pregnant her father was disappeared. Shabnam says she is not normal child, she doesn't know about her father. *"My life is not normal. I face difficulty in the schools when my friends come with father during parents meeting. Despite the fact we don't know the whereabouts, we give legitimacy to his death by adding late in his name"*. Shaista who is also a daughter says *"if the persons get disappeared after few days the death body is found but, in our case, there is no such thing happened so in our case it is difficult to accept and convince our heart about death of our father. We think if our father existed, we would be well-off. Now we have to do the entire thing by you and handle the entire outside affair. We have to face difficulty in seeking the legal inheritance from the father house."* It is tough to survive and sustain in the family politics without the men support as the relationship changes gradually and the women without men are considered to be burden in the family³.

Table 2: Background Information of Half daughters

Participants	Age	Disappearances	Education	Employed	Married	Problem faced
Participant 1	16	not yet born	Plus 2	Student	Single	Socio, psychological
Participant 2	18	2	Plus 2	Student	Single	Financial,economic
Participant 3	28	3	Graduation	small business	Married	Socio, psychological
Participant 4	26	3	Graduate	Nurse	Single	socio-psychological
Participant 5	20	2	plus 2	Student	Single	socio-psychological
Participant 6	32	9	Graduation	driver own vechile	Married	social,economic
Participant 7	34	8	MA	Farming	Married	socio-psychological
Participant 8	18	2	plus 2	gym going	Unmarried	socio-psychological

Source: Field Work

Out of the 1500 women whose husbands were disappeared, 150 women who were interviewed 9 % of the women acknowledged that the husbands have been affiliated to the militant organisation and the rest doesn't know anything about this matter (D'Souza, 2015). *Shafiya is the wives of the disappeared man whose husband was affiliated with the Hizbul Mujahedeen. He got picked for interrogation and later disappeared. She later adds "I do acknowledge the fact that we committed mistake, during that time 1990's the situation was such. There was wave of joining and my husband joined...I do admit that we were mistaken but what is this kind of punishment making them invisible. The thirty years of the struggle, stress and pain is unforgiving and the time consumed is not going to come back"*. Disappearances has been held in time youth energy were early 1990s where militancy was at its peak. During that time people didn't know as they were influenced by wave of militancy. J&K's unemployment rate stands at 6.1%. *The government also informed that 3,70,811 unemployed youth have voluntarily registered on the employment portal by the end of January 2025*⁴. The youth unemployment rate (PS) in Jammu and Kashmir is 14.6%, with the educated youth unemployment rate being 23.3% and the overall unemployment rate being 4.8% (Kaboo and Tomar 2022). In the socio-cultural context of Kashmir, the disappeared man is given the status of *"Shahid"* which means martyr (Zia,). The Families in Kashmir are closely knitted, the family kins come together for support. Safiya stays with her In- Laws family she has send her own son to Mumbai, Maharashtra to keep him away from risk of violence as a consequence of the on-going armed conflict in Kashmir (India). The migration is the common phenomenon in Kashmir. The armed conflict that started in the 1990s transformed the socio-cultural fabric of society in Kashmir. As the Kashmiri insurgency began in the Kashmiri pandit community started migrating. (Bhat and Bashir 2023). On interviewing with Sajid (one of the Kashmiri Muslim migrants for employment) on his idea of staying outside Kashmir is,

³ Observations from the field.

⁴ <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/latest-news/jks-unemployment-rate-stands-at-6-1-govt/>

“The situation in Kashmir not ongoing conflict has created the situation of fear where locals live with uncertainty”. If a man goes out of house there is an uncertainty of returning back. Safiya says, *“I was very young when I was married. My husband disappeared when I was very young. I had only one son whom is sent to Maharashtra for higher studies and job.”* According to Dr Waqar Amin⁵, *“Enforced disappearance occur from state as well as not state parties. Enforced Disappearances from State is not expected. Even the militants should have trail. Nation State should not be determined by religion. It was the Zia -Ul- Haq policies of using Religion in the politics, where the Pakistan was made on the basis on the two-nation theory whereas, India inception was not formed in that spirit and conscience.”*⁶ Begum Jahan belongs to the Gujar Tribe⁷ originally from the Kupwara residing now in Budgam. She has also suffered from internal migration. Since, Kupwara and Baramulla district is in the border and the cases of disappearances are more prevalent. She has three daughters and two sons. Elder son is married and the other one is searching for the job. After the disappearances of her husband, she alone has taken the responsibility of the family. She says *“if at least we can be compensated by a government job so that we can live a better life.”* The two daughters are already in their adulthood. The elder daughter is been engaged in the relative. She says, *“I have to suffer and experience a lot of physical assault during the process of the searching her husband.”*

In Boat Colony Bemina, Srinagar lives a half widow who was forced to remarry his brother. Her later husband was a drug addict. She acknowledged that her former husband had affiliation. She does household chores in the two families for her livelihood. She has two children from her former husband now both are married. She is now taking care of her two children from her later husband and same time she is taking care of grandchildren. Her daughter and son both choose to run away. Here we see the challenges and struggle of children for seeking a proper childhood. Marriages in Kashmir are the costly affair and children do assume the cost and make their decision accordingly.

Table 3: Background information of half widows

Participants	Age	Date /Year of Disappearance	Education	Husband's occupations	current occupation	No. of Children
Participant 1	58	1994	Matric	Driver	Household	2
participant 2	52	1995	higher secondary	Labourer	Household	4
participant 3	47	1997	Matric	Stone Cutter	menial labour	2
participant 4	42	1994	Matric	Militant	Household	2
participant 5	43	1996	Matric	carpet weaving	Household	4
participant 6	44	1995	9 th	Militant	Household	2
participant 7	50	1994	7 th	Labourer	cow rearing /milking	4
participant8	49	1997	11 th	Labourer	Stitching/household	1

Sources: Field Work

II Women Struggles with Disappearances

“Struggles” can encompass a wide range of challenges and difficulties. These can be personal, like overcoming mental health issues, physical limitations, or relationship problems, or they can be external, such as financial hardship, societal discrimination, or natural disasters. Struggles are a part of life, and they can lead to personal growth and resilience. Women face unique and disproportionate challenges during conflict, including increased vulnerability to gender-based violence, displacement, and economic hardship (Women are increasingly at-risk in conflict, underrepresented in peace processes, according to UN Secretary-General report 2023; Women’s human rights and gender-

⁵ Assistant Professor, Department of Social work , Kashmir University .His research was the first research as set the base for the further research on the enforced disappearance in Kashmir

⁶ Interview on June2021

⁷ The Gujjars are a well-known semi-nomadic pastoral population that may be found in Srinagar, Anantnag, Pulwama, Doda, Kishtwar, Jammu, and other districts of Jammu and Kashmir. The Pir Panjal and Himalayan Ranges surround the steep terrain. In J&K, they are classified as Scheduled Tribes.

related concerns in situations of conflict and instability | OHCHR n.d.). 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 (Zeeshan and Aliefendioğlu 2024).

Struggle with Self

In this section, we try to understand the various phases of struggles the women victim of enforced disappearances undergo under such circumstances. The first level of struggles is the struggle with self. The first phase is **realization**. At this level woman realizes at that point at which disappearances have occurred and she has to live the life without husband/ brother/ father. The disappearance is not death. According one of the respondents who says, *"During death the body is being buried and act of ritual is conducted in social gathering. The relatives mourn over the dead body and partially accept that the person is dead. The dead certificate is being issued by the doctor (Medical Officer) as a proof of the death. In case of disappearance the acceptance of death is very difficult because dead body is not found"*. According to Junaid half orphan *"disappearance is a never-ending process; the first step towards accepting disappearance is realizing that disappearance has occurred. Sometimes, the disappearance occurred in front of their eyes from home and another time the family member went (go) to market or for work and never returned home"*. There is the large prevalence's of disappearances cases which has either of two incidences. Hence, living in the conflict situation is difficult when it comes in assuring one's life.

The second phase in struggles with self refers to **overcoming liminality**

"The women whose male member is been disappeared and their whereabouts has not been known, in this situation women struggle with self. The second phases are the most crucial phase of a women where women are in the state of liminality or dilemma."

The third stages of struggles refer to **balancing life**. In this phase women have tried to balance the life where she is aware of her role as a mother, wives, daughter, daughter in law. Simultaneously she knows that she has to accept the unexpected challenge of disappearances. The women understand that as their male member is absent, they need to go out and stay in without male support. They need to face the all the difficult without men support. They need to be economically empowered to meet survival needs. They need to visit the victim association for sharing their problems, need. They have to keep and manage their own livelihood through earning their own bread and butter. They have to provide the education to their children.

The fourth phases of struggles refer to **recognition of self**. Recognition of self is discourses on their identity of being a victim woman. This Identity is in conflict which helps in the recognition of self. The self refers to their Kashmiri identity, gendered identity, class identity and class refers to victim class. In these phases they learn to negotiate themselves with the realities of life and try to learn the mechanisms of survival which builds their social intelligence which is very much important life skills to survive in conflict zone.

Societal Struggles

Struggles in society refers to the women struggles in society within the norms of the Social Institutions refer to the women struggle with the society post disappearance of their male members. The three major struggles the women face are a) Socialization b) Stigmatization c) Social Surveillance.

Socialization

Post disappearance, the socialization of the women doesn't remain same. Difficulty in socialization process starts when women time is largely spent in searching their family member. The life is never same as before. Now the women suffer social isolation and exclusion. Women experience in change in societal behaviour. In some cases, it is experienced in home. *"Most of our productive time went in searching, our life style and socialisation has changed. We have visited army camps, jails police thana regularly and it has become part of our daily routine."* says Mobina

Stigmatization:

At early phases it was likely to be generalised as criminal, withdrawal of societal support especially as when the disappearances occur from the non-state forces⁸ but in the later phase of conflict most of the family has experienced harm. *“At first neighbourhood and relatives talked about us whenever we went out to search, people did not understand our problems and difficulties; later when they saw our interviews in Television, they started respecting us and they understood our cause.” as said by one of the responded.*

Surveillance:

From government agencies, defence personal, CBI, Interpole agencies keeps their movement watched which creates mobility difficult. *“Since disappearances has occurred in the home, we are under the surveillance.”*

Struggles with State

This struggles in the women’s journey consisted in three mechanisms

- 1) Seeking criminal justice system.
- 2) Truth and Reconciliation process

Justice seeking Mechanism has to go through two phases 1) First phase consisting of the filing a First Information Report (FIR). Filing First Information Reports is the first step towards justice seeking. FIR is the first information Report which recognizes that the person is missing. The Missing report is been filed in the register in the nearest Thana. The report filing process itself is difficult. As interviewed by Parveena Ahanger *“It’s very difficult to file a report as these report, as law enforcement officers doesn’t believe that state authorities disappear a person. As S says, “It took eight years to file a FIR in local police station. “The first phase of justice seeking mechanism itself takes sometimes five, eight and ten years. Without FIR, missing report a person is technically not considered as a case of disappearances as such.*

Truth and reconciliation

The recollection of the positive past of Kashmiri Muslim -Hindu community via shared history as the base for co-existence can form the important steps for the reconciliation in Kashmir(Majumdar 2017).Peace is about relationships within ourselves and others, unity, curiosity, and addressing inequity and injustice(Neustater, 2025).As per the interviews conducted with the women , peace according to them is justice.

Conclusion

Female headed household in Jammu and Kashmir constitute 8.2% as per census 2011(India - FH-01 (SC): Female headed households (excluding institutional households) from scheduled castes by predominant material of roof and wall of census houses occupied by them, Jammu and Kashmir - 2011 n.d.) (Dar and Singh 2018). The double burden for managing the family and work to which women are not prepared under the existing patriarchy. Conflict can disrupt livelihoods, leaving women to shoulder the burden of supporting their families with limited resources, and often leading to increased poverty. Mental health and wellbeing are the important concern, the trauma of conflict can have long-lasting effects on women's mental health, including PTSD and depression. Patriarchy is experienced everyday but not understood.

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⁸ Based on the observation on field visit in July 2021.

Ethical Consideration

An oral and Written consent was taken from the respondent. While dealing with the human subjects it is very necessary to take a written informed consent of the participants. A written informed consent form was made under the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines needed for conducting the social sciences research on human subject. The brief description of the Aim & objectives of the research was explained to the participants before conducting Focused group discussion. The productive time spend on the participation of Focused Group Discussion was paid minimum honourarium for TA and DA as per guidelines. Realizing the sensitivity of the issue out intentions was not to scratch the wound of the wounded but to understand the perspectivity of Sovereignty, Identity, Invisible pain, freedom and Peacebuilding.

Ethical Approval

The Doctoral Research topic is approved in Board of Studies (BOS) and School Board Central University of Jammu.

Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict of Interest

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