

## **A Study On Socio-Economic And Psychological Impact Of Armed Conflict On Widows And Half-Widows In Kashmir Valley**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the socio-economic and psychological impact of armed conflict on widows and half-widows in Kashmir. Published books and research articles have been utilised for the study. The study reveals that the widows and half-widows since 1989 bear witness to the fact that they continue to suffer immensely due to the death of their husbands or disappearance. When they lost/disappeared their life partner, are often deprived of support from traditional sources, which can cause economic hardship or deprivation. In many cases, half-widows and widows leave or forced to leave in-law's home. They are compelled to face the difficulties and insecurity such as limited choice of remarriage, gender division of labour, limiting job opportunities and pitiable economic support. The widows and half-widows labelled as mothers of disappeared sons, wives of militants, women victims of physical abuse, women heads of households, etc. The study also shows that mental health issues plagued them. They are suffering from symptoms of (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) PTSD, sleep disturbances, feelings of anxiety, together with the expression of extreme pain. Besides, half-widows complained of chronic physical symptoms that they ascribe to the disappearance, often found constant tension and anxiety. So, it could be concluded that the widows and half-widows facing various social, economic and psychological insecurities in Kashmir Valley due to armed conflict.*

**Key words:** Armed Conflict, Half-Widows, Kashmir, Socio-economic and Psychological, Widows.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Conflict refers to a struggle over values, status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of conflicting parties not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralise, injure

or eliminate their rivals. Such conflicts may take place between individuals, groups or between individuals and collectivises (Coser, 1956). According to Yahaya (2007), in the event of armed conflict, the whole society is affected negatively, because war is indiscriminate in its ability to inflict havoc the lives, properties and sources of livelihood. Loss of family members and social relationships inflict suffering on women and men alike, but women are affected in many different ways from men because of socio-cultural roles assigned to women by society. Women may lose their husbands and sons on the battlefield; they may also lose their girls and young children as civilian casualties, or witness their suffering as victims of assault. As the primary caregivers to children in among most ethnic groups in Ghana, women arguably suffer the loss of their children in gender-specific ways. Although the relationship of motherhood to women's stance toward war is debated, women in many different historical and cultural contexts have argued that a mother's suffering is unique (Rhene & Sirleaf, 2002).

Women issues are globally prevalent across societies and are assumed to be a natural phenomenon. The present international scenario also reflects the miseries of women being more intensified in the areas where political disturbances erupt. Women continue to be the worst victims due to political instability and suffer in diversified ways in the situation of political turmoil. These political conflicts affect all the people negatively in general and women in particular as they are a part of the patriarchal character of society (GSDRC, 2009). Thus, increasing evidence also shows that women experience conflict in a particular way as compared to men, something that is confirmed by those working in the field. Almost every instance of an armed conflict undoubtedly affects the whole society, but not to the same measure. Since women are particularly vulnerable, they tend to suffer more than men in almost every instance of armed conflict. War exacerbates the inequalities that exist in different forms and to varying degrees in all societies (Charu, 2004). An individual's sense of identity gets disrupted while living under severe conditions of prolonged conflict and organised violence (Das, 2007). This study deals with socio-economic effects of armed conflict on widows and half-widows in Jammu and Kashmir.

The position of women, which consists nearly half of the population of the country is not right, and the position of widow and half-widows are even worse. They face multiple and conflicting social challenges in every society. Their status is defined by a diverse group of interrelated and intersectional factors - social, cultural, religious, as well as economical. Widows across the world share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced financial stability. In both developed and developing nations, widows suffer a dramatic and

subtle transformation in their social status. The relative poverty of widows, especially those working in the unorganised sector and young widowed mothers, with children, marginalise them from mainstream society and increases their vulnerability to depression, ill-health and violence. Today, millions of the world's widows, of all ages, endure extreme poverty, violence, ostracism, homelessness, ill health and discrimination in law and custom. A lack of inheritance and land rights, widow abuse and the practice of degrading, and life-threatening mourning and burial rites are prime examples of human rights violations that are justified by "reliance on culture" and "tradition" within the world (World Bank, 2000). Widows, of all ages, are often evicted from their homes, stigmatised, physically abused, and even some killed. Widowed mothers, as sole supporters of their offspring, are forced to withdraw these children from school and to rely on their labour. The daughters of widows and half-widows may suffer multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse (Margaret, 2000). While the problems are worse in the developing world, recent conflicts elsewhere have created a new class of widows—the product of armed conflict and ethnic cleansing (Margaret, 1999). Although widows make up a significant proportion of the female population in all societies, with a few laudable exceptions, comprehensive research concerning their status in developing countries is lacking (WIDO, 1994). (Kumari, 1989) Studied on the survival strategies adopted by female-headed households varied according to the resource base, mainly land, and the socio-cultural milieu they belonged to. The study concludes that female-headed households fail to utilise the resources to the extent a male-headed household could due to a weak support structure for widows as well as lack of support from kith and kin. (Pinto, 2003) conducted a study on the status of widows under Islam is high as she is not discriminated against due to positive Quranic Injunctions.

In many developing nations, the exact numbers of widows, their ages and other social and economic aspects of their lives are unknown. Almost worldwide, widows comprise a significant proportion of all women, ranging from 7% to 16% of all adult women (UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 2000). However, in some nations and regions, their proportion is far higher. In developed nations, widowhood is experienced primarily by older women, while in developing nations, it also affects younger women; many of them still rearing children. In some regions, girls become widows even before reaching adulthood (Trivedi et al., 2009).

## **2. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS**

**2.1.Widows:** A widow is a woman whose spouse has died, while a widower is a man whose spouse has died.

**2.2.Half-widows:** Half-widow is a term given to Kashmiri women whose husbands have disappeared and were still missing during the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. These women are called “half-widows” because they have no idea whether their husbands are dead or alive.

### **3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To understand the socio-economic conditions of widows and half-widows in Kashmir
- To address the psychological impact of armed conflict on widows and half-widows in Kashmir

### **4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study spells out the socio-economic and psychological problems of widows and half-widows due to the armed conflict in Kashmir. With the help of literature, the life of widows and half-widows in Kashmir can be understood. The present study charts out a comparative analysis of the different problems of widows and half-widows in Kashmir. The studies analyses published articles related to the socio-economic and psychological problems of widows and half-widows in Kashmir to assess the current scenario of these women and to make recommendations that are meant to protect the so-called weaker sex.

### **5. WIDOWS AND HALF-WIDOWS IN KASHMIR VALLEY**

One of the most severe consequences of the armed conflict in Kashmir valley is that people in detention go missing. Majority of missing persons are men, which leaves a large number of women awaiting news that would decide their fate, living lives of half-widows. A state like this results in a severe identity crisis amongst the women with the immense agony of not being sure whether they are still married or widowed. Some of them their loved ones were kept in different Jails outside Kashmir, and the bride either became a widow, a half widow or was raped. Pathetically, he shows how people wailed or lamented over their dear ones. Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), a group of victims and bereaved families say that 8000 to 10,000 people have been missing during different regimes, since 1989. The association has been campaigning against the phenomenon of enforced or involuntary disappearance since its formation in 1994 (Widows Half Widows). In another report carried out by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), a member organisation of the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, Srinagar (Khan, N. (2017). By conservative estimates, in 22 years of strife have seen more than 70,000 dead and more than 8,000 disappeared. The face of these violations, failures in the justice mechanisms in the state judiciary military tribunals and State Human Rights Commission amount to

impunity (Half Widow Half Wife). Kashmir conflict has left behind a large number of widows and half-widows; it is estimated that there are about 15,000 (Butalia, 2004).

## **6. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON WIDOWS AND HALF-WIDOWS IN KASHMIR VALLEY**

The on-going Kashmir conflict, which is long pending since decades, has rendered women as worst sufferers. They are sufferers of violence by militants and security forces (Behera, 2000). The number of rape, molestation cases, enforced disappearances and the number of widows, half-widows, half-orphans and orphans since 1989 bear witness to the fact that women continue to suffer immensely. According to Sudha Ramachandran, “in ethnic and nationalist struggles, women are regarded as the countries of cultural and ideological traditions, women are expected to dress and behave in ways that are prescribed by tradition. In Kashmir, the traditional dress code has been imposed on women by the militants. If women are seen outside without proper attire, they are attacked. Women who chose not to cover their hair or wear trousers have experienced acid and paint thrown on their faces. Women are required to dress simply so as not to attract the attention of men (Vanniasinkam, 2010). Violence has severely affected them socially, economically, psychologically. Besides prolonged life threat due to Kashmir conflict, they also face economic depravity.

The conflict worst hit the society was unprepared to meet the staggering numbers of widows who still face apathy at many quarters. Their relatives often refuse to support them, and they bear the burden of raising children alone. They are often illiterate and have little know-how to find paid work, or of their rights and entitlements. (Qayoom, 2014). The first difficulties surface soon after the death of their partners, in the forms of emotional stress, denial of inheritance rights, sexual harassment and general social undesirability. The second wave of difficulties arises gradually, as loss of control over the children, and a growing sense of inferiority. Finally, the widows are burdened by the long-term and growing demands of house care and the assignment of menial responsibilities. Altogether, women find their position thoroughly compromised. However, besides the increasing number of widows, the armed conflict has also given rise to many ‘half-widows’. These are women whose husbands have ‘disappeared’ or are missing in the conflict and often presumed dead, even though there is no proof of the death. When they lose/disappeared their life partner, widows and half-widows are often deprived of support from traditional sources, which can cause economic hardship or deprivation. They often feel unable to talk about their death/disappeared husbands, as they fear of ostracism and punishments. This is particularly so if the death of the

man is associated with, or perceived to be associated with, an opposition group of the armed conflict or political violence, since the widow can be extremely vulnerable to intimidation, violence or abuse, or even repudiation by the community. As a result, widows grieve in silence often with the added burden of raising a family. Those with dependent children often say that their main reason for going on within life is the responsibility of raising their children. These children, particularly girls, may themselves be subjected to discrimination and unfair treatment because of their mother's status. In some cultures, a widow and half-widows are responsible for their late husband's dependants; in others, she is taken in by his family. The situation can become desperate for those who must assume responsibility for dependent family members.

Furthermore, social traditions may be abandoned by families so overburdened with economic hardship resulting from war that they can no longer cope, or by families that no longer see themselves as under any obligation toward the widow and half-widow, for example, when the link between the family and the woman has been severed by the death/disappeared of the son. (Ashraf & Jahangir, 2018) reported that widows are compelled to experience the difficulties and insecurity such as limited choice of remarriage, gender division of labour limiting the job opportunities, strong patrilineal family structure and pitiable economic support. (Qadir, 2017) conducted a study on the absence of husband's renders women economically vulnerable. As a result, women and their children become dependent on others, most often on the husband's family. The half-widows, widows and their children are seen as constant reminders of the family's loss and as additional mouths to feed. In several cases, half-widows and widows leave or are forced to leave the in-law's home. Years of strife took toll on the lives of women who became the soft targets in the conflict situation, they become victims of violence, which has made them widows, half-widows and have been labelled as mothers of disappeared sons; wives of militants; women victims of physical abuse; women heads of households, etc. The "Half-widows" of Kashmir lead a more miserable life than widows. They keep running from place to place to get some information about their husbands as their husbands have not been declared dead, though missing, they are not entitled to the relief given to dependents of militancy victims. Half widows experience of economic, social and emotional insecurities.

## **7. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT OF WIDOWS AND HALF-WIDOWS IN KASHMIR VALLEY**

The various socio-economic problems lead to psychological problems among half-widows that mostly go unaddressed. Most of the half-widow reported anxiety (often described in terms of speeding up or palpitations), sleep disorders, and lack of interest in everyday activities. Many half-widows would exhibit Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); anxiety, panic attacks may be triggered by memories of the disappearance of the disappeared (APDP, 2011). The loss of a partner, a major breadwinner, so abruptly, and the assuming of male responsibilities often leads to stress and depression in the half-widows. The constant battle of the mind between hope and hopelessness of psyche. Coupled with this is the social stigma, the pressures to perform, the feeling of being an outcast and constant struggle to know for sure the fate of the missing and locate them possibly causes mental agony. Many half-widows feel that they live a life worse than that of widows, as they do not know and the widows know and can move on. For the half-widows, the grief of losing the dear one is prolonged and in many cases, unending (Qutab, 2011). They live in a state of disturbed bereavement and suffer from major depressive disorders (Robins, 2010). Mental and psychological disorders were a logical outcome in these circumstances (Rashid, 2011). As per mental health practitioners, female patients suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders is due to the sudden assumption of male responsibilities, psychological trauma, reported and unreported sexual violence and the overall stressful environment which is mostly contributing to the worsening of mental health (Zia, 2009). Majority of the Half-widows reported the symptoms of PTSD, sleep disturbances, feelings of anxiety, together with the expression of extreme pain. Besides, half-widows complained of chronic physical symptoms that they ascribe to the disappearance, most often as a result of the constant tension and anxiety and understood as somatic (Robins, 2010). Psychologically and emotionally, these women are living two lives one in which they strive to believe that their husbands shall come back home one day, and the other where they have to reconcile with the fact that their husbands may be dead during the conflict. They plagued a large number of mental health issues. From chronic depression to psychological trauma, these women were battling several mental illnesses as they struggled with daily life. Often, their physical illnesses were a manifestation of the mental stress that they were going through (Bhattacharya, 2016). As per report of (APDP, 2011), Association of Parents of Disappeared Person up to 2011 there are more than 1500 half widows in Kashmir, they are experienced by different challenges in their regular life like they are not eligible for the pension which is given to widows by state social welfare division, they can't get pay given by the legislature to casualties of contention, and they have no privilege to share the property of her spouse as they have no proof of the

husband's death, the law is likewise not supportive. Presently, it is also estimated that there are some 20,000 widows of the armed conflict, many of whom are very young (Qayoom, 2014).

Near it, they similarly encounter the evil impacts of the steady wretchedness, trans-generational trauma, and PTSD. They have the symptoms of chronic fear, anxiety, stress etc. According to Dr Arshad Hussain, Psychiatrist from Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Srinagar, the relatives of the vanished, especially the half-widows, frequently experience complicated grief, unresolved grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The prolonged absence of their husbands opens these ladies to examination and policing by their general public and also dangers and control by people with noteworthy impact. The psychiatric disease hospital Srinagar shows that 15% of women are suffering from stress and prolonged trauma 70 to 80 % has acute depression, 16% have PTSD. Rita Pal (2003) Luis Ponte projects coordinator of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in Kashmir say patients visit MSF counselling centres are 20 to 40 years old and 65 to 70 % among are women.

Half-widows further suffer when they are separated from their children. Given the aforementioned tense dynamics in the in-laws home, their in-laws at times choose to keep their grandchildren, while turning out the half-widow and providing no visitation rights. In other cases, the half-widow natal family take "Her" only on the condition that the children will remain with their paternal side or sent to the orphanage. In many cases, children are divided between the half widow's parents and in-laws, and she may never see one/some of her children. Their forced status as "single women" coupled with gender bias results in half-widow facing social isolation, shamming and physical vulnerability.

## **8. RESULTS**

The widows and half-widows are often deprived of support from traditional sources, which can cause economic hardship or deprivation. They often feel unable to talk about their death/disappeared husbands, as they fear ostracism and other punishments. In several cases, half-widows and widows leave or are forced to leave the in-law's home. Years of strife took toll on the lives of women who became the soft targets in the conflict situation, they become victims of violence, which has made them widows, half-widows and have been labelled as disabled wife/wife of disappeared husband; half-wife; wives of militants; women victims of physical abuse; women heads of households, etc. As a result, widows and half-widows grieve in silence often with the added burden of raising a family. Those dependent children often say

that their main reason for going on within life is the responsibility of raising their children. These children, particularly female children, may themselves be subjected to discrimination and unfair treatment because of their mother's status. Widows are compelled to experience the difficulties and insecurity such as limited choice of remarriage, gender division of labour, limiting the job opportunities, strong patrilineal family structure and pitiable economic support. They keep running from one place to another place to get some information about their husbands as their husbands have not been declared dead, though missing, they are not entitled to the relief given to dependents of militancy victims.

In the absence of a partner, a major breadwinner, so abruptly, and the assuming of male responsibilities often leads to stress and depression in the half-widows. Mental health problems plagued a large number of widows and half-widows. From chronic depression to psychological trauma, these women were battling several mental illnesses as they struggled with daily life. Often, their physical illnesses were a manifestation of the mental stress that they were going through. Half widows also found to suffer when they are separated from their children. Given the aforementioned tense dynamics in the in-laws home, their in-laws at times choose to keep their grandchildren, while turning out the half-widows and providing no visitation rights. In other cases, half widow's natal family take "Her" only on the condition that the children will remain with their paternal side or sent to the orphanage. So they got status as "single women" coupled with gender bias result in half-widow facing social isolation, shaming and physical vulnerability.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- In this regard, the government and non-government organisations (NGOs) should give financial support and resettlement packages to victims of the conflict in the Jammu and Kashmir. The governments and other stakeholders should increase small scale credit facilities for widows and half-widows, life-enhancing opportunities, counselling services for conflict victims to improve their lives in Jammu and Kashmir.
- The governmental and non-governmental organisations can intervene in the areas of health, especially mental health, by providing adequate health facilities and psychosocial support services to the widows and half-widows. The services may include psychosocial counselling and emotional support.
- The central government should not treat Jammu and Kashmir with a step-motherly approach as they treat it as its integral part. The pending cases in the judiciary related

to widows and half-widows subjugation should be solved by the friendly approach of state and centre.

## 10. CONCLUSION

As per the present study, the widows and half-widows are facing multiple socio-economic and psychological problems in the conflict situation. Which includes, they are unable to talk about their death/disappeared husbands, as they fear ostracism and other punishments. They are forcibly to leave the in-law's home and also labelled as a disabled wife/wife of the disappeared husband; half-wife; wives of militants; women victims of physical abuse; women heads of households, etc. As a result, widows and half-widows grieve in silence often with the added burden of raising a family. As a result, widows and half-widows grieve in silence often with the added burden of raising a family. Those dependent children often say that their main reason for going on within life is the responsibility of raising their children. In the absence of a partner, a major breadwinner, so abruptly, and the assuming of male responsibilities often leads to stress and depression in the half-widows. Mental health problems plagued a large number of widows and half-widows. From chronic depression to psychological trauma, these women were battling several mental illnesses as they struggled with daily life.

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