



Social issues of widows and half-widows of political conflict: A study in Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper is intended to make an exploratory study of social issues of widows and half-widows of political conflict. This manuscript opens with the theoretical understanding of peace, conflict, political conflict and its possible consequences, rising social concerns of women due to political crisis and social issues pertaining to widows and half-widows of political trauma. The argument has been standardized by taking orientation from sociological perspectives of classical sociologists. This study draws on the experiences of widows and half widows to capture an often unseen and pernicious face of insecurity in Kashmir. It identifies how this population provides an immediate opportunity for meaningful engagement.

The universe for present study constitutes District Anantnag of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. A sample of 10 widows and 10 half-widows has been selected through snowball sampling making a sample size of 20 respondents. This study subscribes to exploratory type of research with survey as a method of research. The tools of data collection used are interview schedule, secondary data analysis and informal interpersonal discussion with the respondents. Different variables chosen for the present study were social conditions, economic conditions and remedies available/unavailable to widows and half-widows of political conflict.

The absence of husbands renders women economically vulnerable. As a result, they as well as 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. Then, in most of these cases, the maternal homes become the source of shelter and food. However, once again, they and their children are seen as burdens; as culturally a daughter is not supposed to live with her parents once the parents have fulfilled their duty of marrying her. In cases where there is no family able or willing to support, they are rendered homeless. The children may be put in an orphanage, for example, those run by the Jammu and Kashmir Yateem Trust. The prolonged nature of the husband's absence makes widows and half-widows vulnerable to several threats against their physical and mental well-being. While social networks have been crucial to most widows and half-widows for surviving their trauma, societal biases have at times aggravated their traumatization.

Keywords: widows, half-widows, conflict, victims, exclusion

1. Introduction

Every human group, community or social society presents many examples of altruism, helping, cooperation, agreement and social harmony. Each grouping or society also manifests numerous examples of competition, rivalry, opposition, disagreement, conflict and violence. Both conflict and peace are permanent and common aspects of the human condition. Being continuous social realities across time and space, there is need of their intensive academic study from the sociological perspective.

Peace has multiple meanings to offer and diversified messages to convey to different specialists working in particular areas of study. For a social scientist, peace is defined not just as the absence of negative aspects like war and violence (negative peace) but also the presence of positive ones like the conditions for a just and sustainable peace, including access to food and clean drinking water, education for women and children, security from physical harm, stability, good health, growth and other inviolable human rights (positive peace).

In sociology conflict is a struggle between and among

individuals or groups over values and claims to scarce resources, status symbols and power bases. Conflict is conceived as a purposeful struggle between collective actors who use social power to defeat or remove opponents in order to gain status, resources and push their values over other social groupings. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions. The problem, then, is not to court the frustrations of seeking to remove inevitability but rather of trying to keep conflicts in bounds.

The processes of peace and conflict are highly associated and give meaning to each other. In combination, it might be said that peace and conflict studies continued to work on the Enlightenment premise that peace might exist and could be created and therefore that a notion of peace was indeed necessary for the broader discipline of international relations (IR), as was also implied in the UN Charter (Richmond:2008) [18].

Political conflicts are those arising out of or challenging an uneven distribution of power, including relational, religious

and cultural power. Political conflicts are intercommunity conflicts that may be intergroup conflicts or conflicts between community and state. Intergroup conflicts erupt among different groups having almost equal power or takes place when a misunderstanding arises among people representing different groups. Conflict between Community and State arises due to opposite interests of people and state. The conflicts may be between state and general people or conflict of state with particular community or communities who develop uniform interests and mechanism to oppose the state apparatus.

Like all the major conflicts emerging in society and its associated institutions, conflicts arising in the power structures or political conflicts have diversified consequences on entire society. Politics are among the most ancient, enduring and consequential sources of conflict as they determine how power will be distributed among people, including over life and death, wealth and poverty, independence and obedience. Political conflicts may lead to disrupted social relations, emergence of social problems, increase in crime, unstable demographic variables, loss of human resource, loss of economic resource, poverty, forced migration and displacement, health issues, environmental degradation and threat to cultural preservation. It may manifest in the form of violence against gender, children, widows or any other section of society. They may have detrimental effects on primary education, increased number of war widows, child mortality and access to basic human needs.

Women issues are universally prevalent across societies and are assumed to be a natural phenomenon where India is not an exception. In Indian society also, these issues are extending to families, economic arrangements, political arrangements, religion, recreation, artistic production and so on. Women throughout India are vulnerable to many problems but the plights of women living in politically conflict zones of India are more prone to violence. In addition to all these turbulent conditions faced by women, the present international scenario also reflects the miseries of women being more intensified in the areas where political instability erupts. Women continue to be the worst victims of political disturbance and suffer in diversified ways in the situation of political turmoil. These political conflicts negatively affect all the people in general and women in particular as they are already carrying with them a number of disabilities due their gender and patriarchal character of society. Sexual violence particularly rape is often used as a weapon of war to destabilise families, groups and communities; to carry out ethnic cleansing and genocide; to instil fear in populations in order to dampen resistance; as a form of punishment and torture; and to affirm aggression (GSDRC: 2009) [7]. Sexual exploitation, trafficking and sexual slavery tend to increase in armed conflict (Ward and Marsh: 2006). Government officials, civilian authorities, peacekeepers and aid workers have been reported to demand sexual favours in exchange for necessities like safe passage, food and shelter. One of the most serious issues emerging due to political turmoil is the rising concerns and incidences of widows and half-widows (half-wife).

Widowhood is a state of social death even among the higher castes says Mohini Giri, a veteran activist in the fight for women's rights who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize

in 2005. She adds that widows are still accused of being responsible for their husband's death, and they are expected to have a spiritual life with many restrictions which affects them both physically and psychologically. According to the Home Ministry's National Crime Bureau of India, forty million widows continue to be deprived of their basic dignity as a kind of atonement for some sin. It is a punishment for being a woman and a widow in India. For India as a whole, mortality rates are 85 percent higher among widows than among married women, according to research by the Guild for Service (Sara Barrera and Eva Corbacho: 22 June 2012) [20]. Even in the most liberal era of mankind, widows are still enslaved and have yet to free themselves from the socio-cultural stigma associated with the term 'widowhood'. Being widow in the society communicates a message of pity, weakness, deprivation, isolation and needful. They are made to forget their desires and give up all the traits of femininity once they lose their spouse. They are socio-culturally and symbolically stigmatized and internalized to live a life of deprivation as evident by their dress code and social prohibitions attached to them. Since widows are socially tagged as unlucky and generally expected to wear white clothes as the white color could best possibly signify their personality according to an unjustified social taboo. Thousands of women travel to holy city of Varanasi for begging purposes or to take shelter in some ashram after they are thrown out of family due to unjustified myths associated with widowhood claiming them to bring bad luck after husband's death. Vrindavan and Radhakund are home to around 15,000 widows, most of whom were driven from their homes by family members. According to 2007 Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, it is an offense for children to abandon their parents but most of the widows in India are unaware to seek advantage under this and some others feel reluctant to express their issues due to prevalent conservative atmosphere that expects women to be submissive under the patriarchal hegemony.

Widows and half-widows as a result of political trauma constitute the most oppressed categories among all the widows whose life narrate a series of panic sufferings and reflect gloomy shades of darkness and desperation. Besides the issues that widows in general face, they are carrying tremendous signs of multidimensional poverty and generally expected to remain in perpetual mourning till the end of their lives. They face the serious form of alienation within self, society, judiciary and state also. They are forced to move from door to door to seek compensation and judicial justice and often ostracized from society after the death or disappearance of their husbands. They are exposed to extreme form of physical, sexual and psychological violence and enjoy least socio-economic status. Their number is very high in North Eastern States and the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

Women are labelled 'half-widows' when their husbands have been disappeared but not yet been declared dead. Such disappearances have been carried out by government forces (police), paramilitary, or military or by militants. Half-widows represent various forms of insecurity, signify rights violations and stand as a constant reminder of alienation. As wives of men thus 'disappeared,' half-widows face various economic, social, and emotional insecurities. The absence of husbands

thus renders them economically reliant, most often on their in-laws, with their property and custody rights undetermined. They are neither complete widows nor complete wives and in prolonged search of their own identities. Further, the uncertain nature and duration of the absence opens women to scrutiny and policing by their society as well as threats, extortion, and manipulation by those in external positions of power.

2. Theoretical Orientation

2.1 Karl Marx

His principal preoccupation was with optics of class conflict and he saw inexorable decline of capitalism and this revolutionary change of existing 'social formations' was possible through collective violence. Marx (and Engels also) were well versed in military history, had great appreciation of Clausewitz's theory of warfare and clearly adopted a militarist discourse of collective struggle and revolutionary violence as essential to class conflict. His central focus was not so much on killing or incapacitating the bourgeoisie, as in real war, but rather on appropriating and redistributing their property. He singles out role of coercive apparatuses of modern state as being decisive in transforming any social order. As Marx puts it in *Capital* 'force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one' (Marx: 1999). Marx and Engels located the origin of women's oppression in the rise of class society.

2.2 Marxist Feminism

Capitalism and gender are enemies of women. Engels view oppression of women as an aspect of class structure. Control of private property not only allows some men to control other men but also allows all men to control women. First class-antagonism appearing in history coincides with development of antagonism between male and women in monogamous marriage, and first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male (Engels 1975:221) [6].

3. Objective of the Study

This paper is aimed to understand the social challenges faced by widows and half-widows of political conflict in Kashmir with special focus on their economic conditions and to investigate the available/unavailable remedies available to them. It also intends to put forth suggestions to the Government and Civil society to ameliorate the lives of widows and half-widows in Kashmir.

4. Review of Literature

Kazi Seema (2011) [11] in *In Kashmir: Gender, Militarization, and the Modern Nation-State* emphasizes that Kashmir is the world's most heavily militarized region—once described as both “an earthly paradise and the nuclear powder keg of South Asia.”

Although millions of Kashmiri civilians—and ultimately the world at large—are caught in the crosshairs of this deadly and potentially nuclear impasse, Kashmir's complex struggle for self-determination has been largely ignored and for far too long. Making thoughtful use of rare, candid interviews, Seema Kazi constructs global lessons from the daily experiences of women living under and resisting intensifying militarization and its terrible instruments—sexual violence, murder, family

destruction, widowhood, grinding poverty, and social death. Khan Nyla Ali (2010) [12] in *Islam, Women and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan* talks about a historical and political background to the present situation in Kashmir. She talks about a sense of loss and grief experienced by a Kashmiri woman for her once idyllic homeland that subsequently transformed into a particularly violent war zone that resembles a vast concentration camp swarming with soldiers. Khan addresses the gendered contours of the military's carte blanche in Kashmir where over 5000 women have been violated, even as mothers wait outside gloomy centres to catch a glimpse of their unfortunate sons.

Showkat A. Motta (2009) [21] in *Women in Kashmir Suffer Silently* claims that Women have borne the brunt of violence in the two decades of conflict in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir – raped, tortured, maimed and killed. According to a study by the Medecins Sans Frontieres, Kashmiri women are among the worst sufferers of sexual violence in the world. “Sexual violence has been routinely perpetrated on Kashmiri women, with 11.6% of respondents saying they were victims of sexual abuse,” says the 2005 study, adding that the figure is much higher than that of Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Chechnya. In Kashmir, it's difficult for police to take action against erring soldiers because of impunity provided to them through draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

Human Rights Watch (11 Sep. 2006) in *Everyone Lives in Fear* reported that Indian security forces have been implicated in many reports for enforced disappearances of thousands of Kashmiris where the security forces deny having their information and/or custody. The number of men disappeared have been so many to have a new term "half-widows" for their wives who end up impoverished.

5. Methodology of the Study

In order to obtain empirically dependable answers to the research questions, survey been chosen as method of study. Moreover the study subscribes to the exploratory method of research.

5.1 Population of the Study

The present study was conducted in Anantnag District of the State of Jammu and Kashmir having 22 districts in total. The district is internally divided into various administrative zones, wards, constituencies and several Mohallas. Hence, the target group (population) to be studied in this research includes the widows and half-widows of political conflict of Anantnag District. District Anantnag is purposively selected because it constitutes home to comparatively larger proportion of widow and half-widow victims of political conflict. The universe under study also offers a heterogeneous type of culture where people hail from different socio-economic and geographical settings thereafter enhances the accuracy of sampling.

5.2 Sample of the Study

Out of the total population, a sample of 10 widows and 10 half-widows has been selected through snowball sampling making a sample size of 20 respondents. Sample was selected from different administrative zones, wards, constituencies and several Mohallas to represent the population to be studied.

There are three kinds of widows namely young childless widows, a woman who becomes a widow after some years of marital span and has children. The third case is widow of 50 years and above of age called elderly widows. Sample for the present study was taken from the second category i.e. widows and half-widows having children.

5.3 Tools and Techniques used for Data Collection

The tools and techniques of data collection used were interview schedule, secondary data analysis and informal interpersonal discussion with the respondents. Different variables chosen for the present study were social conditions, economic conditions and remedies available/unavailable to widows and half-widows of political conflict.

5.4 Procedure of Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through coding; data distribution and tabulation using Microsoft excel to get the results.

6. Findings and Discussions

The major findings of the present study mentioned below provide a clear situation regarding the social and economic challenges and availability of remedies to widows/half-widows of political crisis. They awake us to their turbulent situations due to socio-cultural stigma associated with 'widowhood' and the role of continuous political trauma in intensifying the same. Tables 1 to 8 given below present the social challenges faced by widows/half-widows of political crisis.

Data given in Table 1 clearly indicates that majority (65%) of widows and half-widows of political conflict live with their children only. Widows and Half-widows living with in-laws constitute 25%. The data further revealed that 5% of half-widows used to live with their parents/siblings along with their children and the remained 5% of half-widows were having same living arrangement but without children and no widow was seen from this category. This also indicates that half-widows after the disappearances of their husbands are not accepted by their in-laws and consequently they return to their own parents/siblings and sometimes they are not allowed to take children with them by their in-laws.

Table 2 indicates that 45% of widows were facing exclusion from society and self also and half widows constitute major portion of this population. Data shows 20% of widows were socially excluded and 15% were excluded from self. Thus 80% of the respondents were facing one or other type of social exclusion and only 20 % were socially included.

Table 3 indicates that most of the widows and half-widows (45%) were enjoying average health facilities followed by 35% enjoying poor health conditions. Only 20% of the widows and half-widows were keeping good health. In

comparison to widows, the health status of half-widows was much poorer.

Table 4 reflects that major proportion (50%) of respondents in the chosen sample was having negligible social contacts with their kins and most of them were half-widows. Only 15% of the widows and half-widows of political conflict were having frequent interaction with their kins and 35% used to interact periodically.

Data enclosed in table 5 also indicated that major segment (40%) of sample were not having any decision-making powers regarding self, society and their children. 35% were having decision making powers and most of these used to live with their children only. Widows and half-widows living with their in-laws were given least decision-making authorities.

Moreover, as per table 6, 45 % of the widows and half-widows were found to be illiterate. Among the literate class 20% passed senior secondary examination, 15% matriculate and 10% were under-matriculate and graduate each. Thus the overall education standard of widows and half-widows of political conflict was far below from satisfactory.

Data in table 7 given above also shows that most of the affected were Muslim women only with no victim belonging to any other religion although the state of Jammu and Kashmir is enclosing some Hindus, Sikhs and Christians also.

As far as the intention of re-marriage is concerned, table 8 clearly shows that most of the victims (55%) were not interested to remarry. The reason for being dis-interested was either due to bitter experiences of their past or to scarify for children. 35% of respondents were interested to re-marry in order to avoid a lot of socio-economic trouble that they routinely face but they did not succeed due to lack of family support or in some cases to avoid the social humiliation of marrying again. 10% were doubtful about their decision.

Table 9 given above indicates that majority (35%) of the widows and half-widows of political conflict were found to be Government employees. Data also reveals that 25% of widows and half-widows of political conflict are dependent on kins, 15% are engaged with agriculture, 10% are working as private employees and labourers each and only 5% are helped by civil society. It is important to mention here that major portion (60%) among widows is government employees while as among half-widows only 10% are employed in government sector. This huge difference may be due to the fact that most of the widows were given compensation by government after losing their husbands in political turmoil either in the form of cash or employment despite of being even illiterate in some cases but half-widows are still living in harsh economic situations left to their own mercy. Fig 1 and 2 presents the individual economic status of widows and half-widows respectively.

Table 1: Living Arrangement of Widows and Half-widows

Living Arrangement	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Living with children only	7	6	13	65
Living with in-laws	3	2	5	25
Living with siblings/parents along with children	0	1	1	5
Living with siblings/parents without children	0	1	1	5

Source: Primary Data

Table 2: Social Exclusion/Inclusion of Widows and Half-widows

Social Inclusion/Exclusion	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Socially Excluded	3	1	4	20
Excluded from self and society	2	7	9	45
Excluded from self only	2	1	3	15
No exclusion	3	1	4	20

*Source: Primary Data***Table 3:** Health Status of Widows and Half-widows

Health Conditions	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Good	2	2	4	20
Average	5	4	9	45
Poor	3	4	7	35

*Source: Primary Data***Table 4:** Connectivity of Widows and Half-widows with Kins

Connectivity with Kins	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Frequent	2	1	3	15
Periodical	5	2	7	35
Negligible	3	7	10	50

*Source: Primary Data***Table 5:** Decision Making Powers of Widows and Half-widows

Decision making Powers	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Complete	4	3	7	35
Partial	3	2	5	25
Not at all	3	5	8	40

*Source: Primary Data***Table 6:** Level of Education of Widows and Half-widows

Level of Education	widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Illiterate	4	5	9	45
Under Matriculate	1	1	2	10
Matriculate	2	1	3	15
Passed senior secondary	2	2	4	20
Graduate	1	1	2	10

*Source: Primary Data***Table 7:** Religious Status of Widows and Half-widows

Religion	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
Muslims	10	10	20	100
Others	0	0	0	0

*Source: Primary Data***Table 8:** Interest of Re-marriage of Widows and Half-widows

Interest of Re-marriage	Widows	Half-widows	Total	%age
No	7	4	11	55
Yes	2	5	7	35
Can't say exactly	1	1	2	10

*Source: Primary Data***Table 9:** Economic Status of Widows and Half-widows

Means of Livelihood	Widows	%age	Half-widows	%age	Total	%age
Agriculture	1	10	2	20	3	15
Govt. Employee	6	60	1	10	7	35
Private Employee	0	0	2	20	2	10
Dependent on Kins	2	20	3	30	5	25
Labourer	1	10	1	10	2	10
Helped by Civil Society	0	0	1	10	1	5

Source: Primary Data

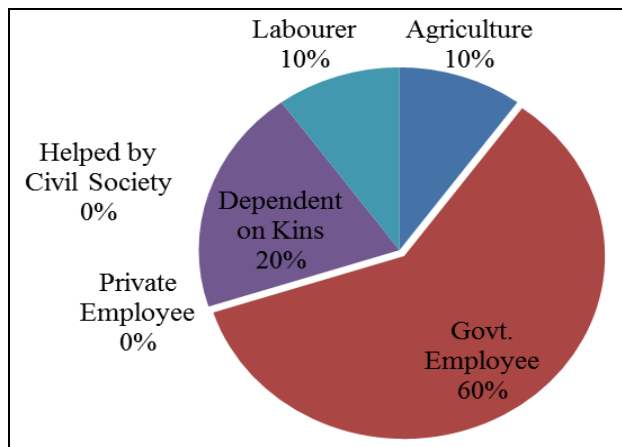


Fig 1: Economic Status of Widows

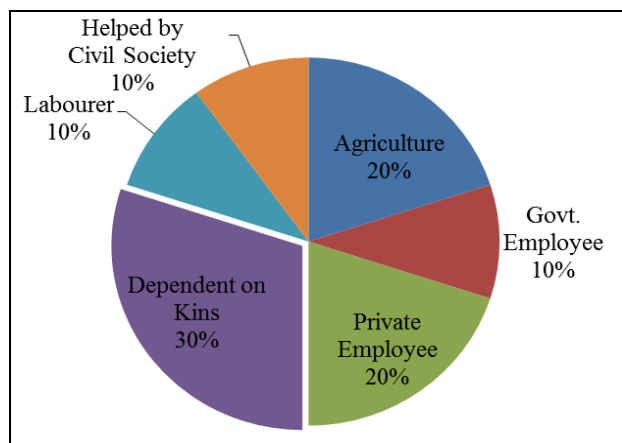


Fig 2: Economic Status of half-widows

Table 10 reveals that 70% of the widows of political conflict get remedies in one or the other form early or late but only minor portions of 30% half-widows get the same. Thus the situation of half-widows is comparatively harsh than that of widows. Half-widows and their children currently fail to receive due response and assistance from the government despite being an at-risk population that faces serious economic and social hardships. While most administrative remedies are unavailable to half-widows (for their widowhood status is undetermined); most legal remedies remain elusive due to the severe financial and emotional costs over multiple year timelines. Further, half-widows may face additional roadblocks from two possible sources: the perpetrators of the disappearance and the society that surrounds the half-widow. Despite its wide extent, the phenomenon of disappearances in Kashmir is not officially recognized by the government, which leads to several challenges for half-widows.

Table 11 given below indicates general socio-cultural problems faced by widows and half-widows. Out of 10 widows and 10 half-widows 5 widows and 7 half-widows are facing socio-cultural trouble in one or the other form constituting 50% and 70% respectively.

Table 10: Availability/Un-availability of Remedies to Widows and Half-widows

Type of Remedy	Widows	%age	Half-widows	%age
Legal	1	10	1	10
Administrative	5	50	1	10
Other	1	10	1	10
No Remedies	3	30	7	70
Total	10	100	10	100

Source: Primary Data

Table 11: Socio-cultural Status of widows and Half-widows

Incidence of widowhood	Socio-cultural Status	Number	%age
Widows	Psychological trauma, Post-traumatic disorders, Stress, Emotional distress, Rumors & accusations, Social ostracism, Limited freedom to remarry, Lack of social support, Sexual harassment.	5	50
Half-widows	Psychological trauma, Post-traumatic disorders, Stress, Emotional distress, Rumors & accusations, Social ostracism, Domestic violence, Limited freedom to remarry, Lack of social support, Sexual harassment, Restricted employment opportunities, Patrilocality.	7	70

7. Key Recommendations

1. A streamlined system for compensation, without room for delays, harassment, or coercion, must be instituted for widows and half-widows.
2. A special bench in the Jammu and Kashmir High Court must be constituted to hear cases filed by widows and half-widows on an expedited basis.
3. The government must allow free civil society activity around the cases of widows and half-widows. The central Indian Government must ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.
4. Disappearance cases must be resolved; families must be told the whereabouts of their loved ones, whether dead or alive.
5. Perpetrators of enforced disappearances must be punished under the full extent of the law.
6. Security laws, particularly AFSPA, that stand as barriers to redressal, must be repealed.

7. A complete survey of those killed and disappeared must be undertaken and the results presented to the public.
8. Indian and international civil society must recognize the issues faced by widows and half-widows in Kashmir and advocate the government to act on the opportunity to bring meaningful change to a visible and vulnerable section of Kashmiri society.
9. Civil society—local, Indian, and international— must consider funding initiatives that directly aid widows and half-widows, such as health care programs, income generating projects, and scholarships for the children.
10. Islamic scholars must develop and publicize a consensus around the ‘waiting period’ of 4 years, after which a half-widow be permitted to re-marry under Islamic law.
11. A holistic understanding of women’s rights issues must be promoted and a rights-based approach developed.
12. An increased investment in women’s leadership must be made.

8. Conclusion

Throughout the troubled decades, Kashmiri women have challenged the label of 'victims' and played a robust role in civil society, even though they are not often seen in leadership positions. Widows and Half-widows are a stark and pernicious, often unidentified, face of the insecurity in Kashmir that stands as a hindrance to broader improvement. As displayed by the summers of 2008, 2009, and 2010, unaddressed needs and lack of space for civil society action can result in vicious cycles of violence. The population of widows and half-widows provides an immediate and meaningful opportunity for positive change and engagement in Indian-administered Kashmir. Kashmiri grassroots organizations face an uphill battle as they work with inadequate resources toward peace and justice in the face of instability and insecurity. Despite the severity of challenges, the small successes of local organizations provide a model for the attention and action required from national and international groups. The Indian government, the Kashmir government, and Indian and international civil society must not squander this opportunity for change. Half-widows and widows demand and deserve immediate action.

The absence of husbands renders women economically vulnerable. In already socioeconomically weak families, that is the status of most families who suffered disappearances, such vulnerability leads to destitution. The half-widow is mostly not equipped, educationally or socially, to begin earning for her family. As a result she, as well as any children she has, become dependent on others, most often the husband's family (given the cultural context where parents live in a joint family with their sons and daughters-in-law, not with their married daughters). In the in-laws' family, relationships often sour after the disappearance. The half-widow and her children are seen as constant reminders of the family's loss and as additional mouths to feed. In several cases, half-widow leave or are forced to leave the in-law's' home. Then, in most of these cases, the maternal homes become the source of shelter and food. However, once again, the half-widow and her children are seen as burdens; culturally, a daughter is not supposed to live with her parents once the parents have fulfilled their duty of marrying her. In cases where there is no family able or willing to support the half-widow and her children, they are rendered homeless. The children may be put in an orphanage, for example, those run by the Jammu and Kashmir Yateem Trust. The prolonged nature of the husband's absence makes widows and half-widows vulnerable to several threats against their physical and mental well-being. While social networks have been crucial to most widows and half-widows for surviving their trauma, societal biases have at times further traumatized them.

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