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Issue Brief

Women in Kashmir

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Women have always been an active component of the Kashmiri society. Much of their political, social, educational and professional growth has seen a steady increase over the years. Most of it can be attributed to the norms of the Kashmiri society which encourages women's participation and empowerment. Historically women in Jammu and Kashmir had an elevated status and exerted ample influence for the uplift and improvement of the Kashmiri society. Even under the worst conditions, there were outstanding women who played a distinguished role in administrative and public affairs, owned lands and managed their own estates. Under the Muslim rule in Jammu and Kashmir since the 14th century, women exercised that influence in day-to-day affairs of the state. During the rule of Sultan Hiader Shah (1470-1472), his wife Gul Khatun made a mark in society and showed deep affection for people and admiration for indigenous culture.¹ Queen Hayat Khatun, under the reign of Hassan Shah (1472-1484), took great interest in education and established schools at their own expense. Queen Haba Khatun also known as "Nightingale of Kashmir", who was originally a peasant girl before marrying King Yousuf Shah (1579-1586), became a mystic poetess of 16th century. She is part of Kashmiri folk literature and is famous for introducing the melody of *rast rag* in Kashmiri.²

In the present day Kashmiri society, women have reached the height of their professional aspirations and are playing significant role in every sector including politics, literature as well as freedom struggle in occupied Jammu and Kashmir. The history of contemporary period has a very rich account of eminent Muslim women, who were legends of their times. Begum Akbar Jahan Abdullah also known as Madr-e-Meharban played a very active role in the "Quit Kashmir" movement from 1931-1947. She came to the fore after the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues in 1946. She also visited villages to encourage the oppressed Muslims to raise their voices against the British colonial rule and Dogra raj, led anti-government protests and kept the morale of fighters alive.³ At that time, a forum named Women's Self Defence Corps (WSDC) was formed which provided women the opportunity to discuss their issues. Many women including Zoon Gujjari and Miss Mahmuda Ahmed Shah were in the forefront under the banner of WSDC for social change and reform. Begum Zainab, another grass root level leader, under took charge of the political dimension of WSDC.⁴

Even today, Kashmiri women like Asiya Andrabi, founding leader of Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of Faith) and Shabnam Lone – a well-known lawyer - are playing pivotal role in freedom struggle. They are struggling for justice against cases of rape, violence and disappearances. They filed cases, and fought against the perpetrators by staging protests and by raising the issue of Jammu and Kashmir at national

and international levels. For example, Zamarud Habib, Chief of Tehreek-e-Khawateen and Fareeda Behan Ji, Chairperson Jammu and Kashmir Mass Movement, both despite imprisonment and being held hostages, raised the slogans of freedom against the illegal occupation by Indian Security Forces (ISF) and fought for women's rights on streets. Women repeatedly raised their voices against the human rights violations through writings and protests. During her imprisonment Zamarud Habib also wrote a book 'Prisoner No.100' which highlights the inhuman conditions prevalent in prisons. Women of Dukhtarane-Millat and Tehreek-e-Khawateen arranged marriages for girls belonging to economically backward families. Another Lady, Mehbooba Mufti has been the first Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir since April 4, 2016, and is an inspiration for Kashmiri women in and outside politics.

These women have encouraged Kashmiri women to come forward to be a part of the larger political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. Kashmiri women working abroad are also playing an important role in highlighting the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Many other women like Shamim Shawl have been highlighting the sufferings of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly women, on many international forums including the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Women in Kashmir are the worst affectees of decades long conflict and occupation of Jammu and Kashmir by the ISF. Kashmiri women, amidst this violence, have been target for rape, molestation, harassment, torture and crackdown by ISF. They have suffered the loss of their loved ones - sons, husbands, fathers and brothers - who disappeared in the custody of the ISF. A report released by Kashmir Media Service on March 8, 2016, revealed that since January 1989 - to date the state violence had rendered 22,810 women widowed, while 10,176 were molested by the Indian forces.⁵

Moreover, the incidents of violence in Kunan Poshpora, Kupwara and other places are a strong evidence of molestation or persecution against women organized by ISF to demoralize women who are becoming shields for their families. Rape was used by Indian forces as an important tool in Kashmir. Initially, during the crackdowns, it was not unusual for women to accompany their men so that they would be subjected to less harassment. But, now the trend has changed and women also come under increasing surveillance and violence. However, history bears testimony that despite appalling conditions; women of Kashmir have always met such challenges with courage. Kashmiri women have shown extreme resilience under dire circumstances and marched towards greater participation in society even in the face of violence against them by ISF.

The question is whether anything can be done to alleviate the sufferings of Kashmiri women and further enhance their role in the society?

The answer to this lies only in the resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue. Take the case of rape, which is one of the most unreported crimes in Kashmir and is used as a tool to punish and humiliate entire community. This crime is committed with impunity and the silence that surrounds the incidents, at international level, it is quite necessary to mobilize and educate people against these crimes against Kashmiri women. The government has set up few rehabilitation centers for the victims that are not enough and will change nothing as far as the larger political policy which encourages and shelters perpetrators of these crimes is concerned. Unless Kashmir's struggle for freedom from occupation does not bear fruit, women will continue to be persecuted and harassed. At the same time, women in Kashmir will continue to combat and overcome challenges prevalent in their homeland.

Without doubt, most Kashmiri women have been active components of their society. However, in the recent years, the transition of social and economic mainstream has been marred by conflict. Women seeking jobs and educational opportunities are not just a means for achieving gender development, but it is often an issue of survival and livelihood. The challenges, be they social or economical, that effects women in Kashmir have their roots in the existing political situation and these challenges would remain until and unless the issue of the freedom of Kashmir is resolved.

Notes and References

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- ² Kachru, Braj B. *Kashmiri Literature*. Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1981.
- ³ Srivastava, Gouri. *The Legend Makers: Some Eminent Muslim Women of India*. Concept Publishing Company, 2003.
- ⁴ Khan, Nyla Ali, and Gopalkrishan Gandhi. *The Life of a Kashmiri Woman: Dialectic of Resistance and Accommodation*. Springer, 2014.
- ⁵ "22,810 Women Widowed, 10,176 Molested since 1989 in IOK." *Kashmir Media Service*. April 12, 2016.