

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **‘Women and Armed Conflict: Widows in Kashmir’**

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The armed conflict in the state of J and K has touched the lives of all the people living in the Valley in some way or the other. Though, many women have become direct and indirect victims of this conflict. They have faced violence either indirectly in the form of loss/death of near and dear ones or become the direct victims of torture, assault etc. The paper is a sociological account of the experiences of the women who have lost their husbands to this Conflict going on in the Valley from the last two decades. The researcher utilizes the research tools of in-depth interview to understand and highlight the loss, deprivation and social stigma faced by these women which has more or less become a ‘Social Reality’ of their lives. It focuses on the personal narratives of these women highlighting the multiple experiences of deprivation and loss faced by them. The social stigma faced by these widows is also analyzed but at the same time, the paper highlights an important fact that in the struggle for survival these women have emerged stronger and an overwhelming majority of them is heading the households they live in.

**Key words:** Widows, armed conflict, widows, deprivation, trauma, social stigma.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Armed conflict has drastic effects on the overall social fabric of the society. It devastated people, families, communities and nations. It not only obliterates the present, but also mutilates the future. It shatters the lives of the current generation and the dreams of the next thereby leaving a huge impact on the society at large. In the prevalent form of modern armed conflict, every section of the population is affected. Though mostly men participate in the conflict openly, women and children are the ones mostly affected of such conflict. Their exposure to spaces of violence may sometimes have over-reaching effects on their overall social functioning. Armed conflicts may lead to the development of various psychological disorders among the sections of population directly and

indirectly exposed to violence.

In situations of armed conflict, communities as well as individuals are often affected in a way which destroys unity and solidarity of the social networks. Households are left without breadwinners, the livelihoods of individuals are threatened and the safety of communities and the human rights of individuals are not preserved. Aside from the physical and emotional trauma of these oppressive and deliberate actions, such events have long lasting effects upon the ability of these communities to recover in the wake of armed conflict (UNHCR, 1997).

There is no dearth of scholarly attention to the impact of armed conflict on women. A number of studies in this field have been undertaken by humanitarian and human

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rights organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the United Nations Development Fund for Women. Through these studies, it has been shown how often the plight of women and the impact of war on their lives have been ignored. The reports and studies on the effect of armed conflict was traditionally tended to incorporate women in the general category of civilians and have hence failed to highlight the different ways in which men and women experience armed conflict. Women owing to their position in the society are affected by wars differently than men. There are problems resulting from situations of conflict are, however, very often neglected. It is important, therefore, to focus attention on these issues and create awareness about the rights women have in these circumstances as well as present possible means to improve their situation.

In traditional societies of South Asia women are often categorized into two identities that is, as the wives of men and mothers of children. They are perceived as symbols of honor. As women are dependent on their husbands or fathers; death, disappearance or detainment of these men often have serious consequences on them. Widowhood is socially stigmatized in South Asia and becoming a widow means possible isolation, loss of dignity and individual identity, since widows become dependent on their relatives. They are frequently denied inheritance and property rights.

In situations of armed conflict, the sense of frustration and powerlessness may be manifested in a number of ways and in many cases, the worst hit victims are the women. Such a situation is compounded by the polarization of gender roles which frequently occurs during armed conflict. An image of masculinity is sometimes formed which encourages aggressive and misogynist behavior. On the other hand, women may be idealized as the bearers of a cultural identity and their bodies perceived as 'territory' to be conquered. Troops as well as rebels may also use rape and other forms of violence against women to increase men's subjugation and humiliation.

The beginning of tragedy for many Kashmiri women dates back to the insurgency of 1989. In 1987, state elections in Jammu and Kashmir were rigged which resulted in widespread dissatisfaction amongst the Kashmiri youth. Pakistan took advantage of the situation and began supporting the cause of Kashmiri disaffected youth who were calling for the creation of a separate state. Thus began a bitter proxy war against India and the situation soon gave rise to a virulent insurgent movement in Kashmir. (Ray, 2009, 5). The years of armed conflict in Jammu and Kashmir have claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people, and also wounded and displaced several thousands more. Since the beginning of the armed conflict between the government and the armed groups organized violence has almost become an everyday occurrence in several parts of the state. The state is one of the world's most heavily militarized places where special laws are currently promulgated.

According to Urvashi Bhutalia (1999), in situations of conflict and particularly those involving religious identities, women are targeted in specific ways. "In times of conflict, particularly religious conflict, it is women who carry the honor of the community on their backs and bodies and defiling their bodies usually through rape is a way of hitting back at the other community". What this implies is that in most cases, the woman's identity becomes objectified as one that can be used to dishonor the "other" community. Thus, rape has often been used as a weapon of war but has taken various forms. Militants in Kashmir have used rape as a weapon to humiliate the Muslim community by violating its women. Other forms of atrocities have included attempts by militants to impose women's dress codes like wearing of the *burqa*. Militant and other fundamentalist groups have also gone to the extent of declaring family planning to be "un-Islamic".

There are, however, writers like Kazi (2009) who provide a different perspective by arguing that mainstream analyses of the conflict are limited only to discussions about the relationship between Kashmiri men and the Indian state. Such analyses are undoubtedly one-sided as they ignore the social dimensions of the conflict and its influence on women. Moreover, it is often falsely assumed that since women do not participate in the conflict directly, their voices and experiences are of little relevance. Kazi makes a very strong argument in support of examining the true identity of Kashmiri women but their experience as victims of armed conflict, deserves far greater attention.

### Conceptual Framework

Armed conflict which is defined as open, armed clashes between two or more centrally organized parties, with continuity between the clashes, in disputes about power over government and territory brings its own distinct forms of violence against women with it. The general breakdown in law and order which occurs during conflict leads to an increase in all forms of violence. The tensions of conflict and the frustration, powerlessness and loss of traditional male roles associated with widowhood may be manifested in an increased incidence of domestic violence against women.

Studies have now established that women experience armed conflict in different ways than men. The effects of armed conflict on women vary across cultures depending upon the role of women in particular societies. As Judith Gail Gardam and Hilary Charlesworth note 'One thing is clear: armed conflict often exacerbates inequalities (in this context, those based on gender) that exist in different forms and to varying degrees in all societies and that make women particularly vulnerable when armed conflict breaks out. Of the more than one billion people living in poverty today, the majority are women. They are, moreover, generally disadvantaged in terms of education and are considerably less mobile because of their traditional

role of caring for others. Furthermore, these inequalities continue after the cessation of hostilities. Women are often excluded from the reconstruction processes that takes place after armed conflict as well as from peace building initiatives (Gardam and Charlesworth 2000, 148 to 166).

Charlotte Lindsay points out that women bear the consequences of wars disproportionately and suffer violations of human rights in situations of armed conflict, including terrorism, torture, disappearance, rape, ethnic cleansing, family separation and displacement. Moreover, they endure lifelong social and psychological traumas. Along with children, women constitute 80% of the World's refugees and displaced persons (Lindsey 2001). Due to the traditional role structure of the family, the popular perception is that men are soldiers or aggressors and that women are wives, mothers, nurses and social workers. The reality of war is that while it is primarily men who are conscripted and killed in battle, women make up the majority of civilian casualties and suffer in their role as care givers owing to a breakdown in social structures. They suffer emotionally, psychologically and economically. The concept of men going to war and of women staying safely at home with children and the elderly does not reflect the reality of war (Lindsey 2001).

In recent years, much attention has been devoted by international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics and certain governments to the plight, needs and rights of women affected by armed conflict. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) published *Women Facing War* (2001), a study on the impact of armed conflict on women; the United Nations Security Council adopted Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security" (2000) which resulted in the production of a number of studies on this theme, by the Division for the Advancement of Women (2002) and UNIFEM (2002).

The conclusions of the *Women Facing War* study show that women's experience of armed conflict is multi-faceted: it means separation, loss of relatives, physical and economic insecurity, an increased risk of sexual violence, wounding, detention, deprivation and even death. In all conflicts, women suffer in ways specific to men. Yet they should not be seen as a homogenous group; different women will have different needs, vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms. Women in armed conflict are not passive and not necessarily "victims". Around the World, women become members of the regular armed forces, armed groups or their support services. Moreover, women are engaged as politicians, leaders of NGOs and active campaigners for peace (*Women Facing War* 2004).

In times of conflict, women and in some cases men, experience gender violence which exacerbates the general, common impact conflict has on people in general: death, injury, bereavement, displacement, loss of property and loss of livelihood. Combatants on either side use

sexual violence as a part of their battle plan. In any case, militarized societies experience and absorb higher levels of violence. (Rajagopalan 2010, 8). As women and men have different, culturally-determined social roles, they experience conflict in different ways. It is imperative to recognize these diverse factors of vulnerability and their consequences in order to adapt responses accordingly. At the same time, it must be appreciated that war precipitates changes in traditional roles, which are fluid rather than frozen in time. For example, in wartime, women daily demonstrate their resilience and coping mechanisms such as the capacity to engage in enterprise in the public sphere to sustain families. This shows that while everyone is responsible for improving the plight of women in wartime, there are significant benefits in ensuring that women themselves are involved in all measures taken on their behalf.

In addition, the very notion of vulnerability depends on an appreciation of what makes people vulnerable. This differs according to whether one is male or female, adult or child, rich or poor, deprived of freedom, displaced or a member of the civilian population generally. As women and men have different, culturally-determined social roles, they experience conflict in different ways. It is imperative to recognize these diverse factors of vulnerability and their consequences in order to adapt responses accordingly. At the same time, it must be appreciated that war precipitates changes in traditional roles, which are fluid rather than frozen in time. For example, in wartime, women daily demonstrate their resilience and coping mechanisms such as the capacity to engage in enterprise in the public sphere to sustain families. This shows that while everyone is responsible for improving the plight of women in wartime, there are significant benefits in ensuring that women themselves are involved in all measures taken on their behalf.

Although women are not vulnerable as such, they are often at risk in conflict situations. Women are particularly susceptible to the marginalization, poverty and suffering engendered by armed conflict, especially when they are already victims of discrimination in peace time. Women may also be at risk by virtue of the fact that they are often portrayed as symbolic bearers of their cultural or ethnic identity and as producers of future generations. The degree of vulnerability depends on the nature of each specific situation (Curtet-Lindsey et-al., 2004).

Charlotte Lindsey argues that armed conflict can lead to a change in the women's traditional roles. She maintains that armed conflicts greatly affect the lives of women and can completely change their role in the family, the community and the "public" domain. This is normally unplanned. The breakdown or disintegration of family and community networks forces women to assume new roles. Armed conflicts have created large numbers of female-headed households where the men have been conscripted, detained, displaced, have disappeared or are dead. Women invariably have to bear greater responsibility for

their children and their elderly relatives - and often the wider community - when the men in the family have gone. The very fact that many of the men folk are absent often heightens the insecurity and danger for the women and children left behind and also accelerates the breakdown of the traditional protection and support mechanisms upon which the community especially women have previously relied upon (Curtet-Lindsey et-al., 2004).

Such studies have done much to raise awareness of the way women are affected by armed conflict and how states and organizations have responded to their plight. Recommendations as to how to ensure the most appropriate responses to the needs of women have also ensued. However, for such work to be truly effective, it needs to be adapted for those who operate in situations of armed conflict.

Women are faced with challenges and in some cases redefining, the cultural and social perception of themselves and their former boundaries in society. Women may for the first time have the possibility of working outside the home, being the income earners, main decision-makers and heads of households, organizing themselves with other women and going into the public sphere, which is often the role of men. This is eloquently summed up by Ana Julia from El Salvador: "Before the war women were not taken into consideration. Women were only working in the home. But, when war came, women came out of the house to demonstrate their capability. In fact, it was the outcome of war that made women to be taken seriously and that they could do a lot of things. It made people realize that women are capable of changing our society.

As pointed out in the study submitted by the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) titled Women, Peace and Security in situations of armed conflict, severe mental and social stress can be caused by death, separation and loss of family and friends; loss of home and social environment; exposure to violence, including witnessing or directly experiencing rape, torture and the killing of friends or relatives; the weakening or severing of family and community bonds and networks; destruction of basic infrastructure; loss of economic livelihood opportunities and material deprivation. In the context of conflicts which are prolonged for many years, populations experience longer exposure to extreme stressors. Children live deprived of caring adults; parents experience anxiety about their ability to protect and provide for their children and adolescent heads of households fear for their safety and that of their siblings.

One of the ongoing discussions around women and armed conflict relates to the potential of building more equitable gender relations in post-conflict societies. It is argued that war breaks down traditions and communities but also opens new spaces for women. It is pointed out that women take on new tasks – often non-traditional tasks – and thus gain a new degree of freedom, flexibility and opportunity. Positive changes in social relationships,

including gender relations have been reported, for example, in Chad. Swarna Rajagopalan in her article 'Gender Violence, Conflict, Internal Displacement And Peace building' asserts that for women, the breakdown of social networks due to conflict is an important reason why they are so much more vulnerable in times of conflict. According to her conflict in a sense, creates opportunity and impunity together—'an opportunity-impunity window'.

The psychological and social impacts of armed conflict are inter-twined. Changes in social interactions may create psychological distress. Studies have shown the grave consequences of gender-based social repression on the psychological well-being of women. In a study on women's health in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, interviewees attributed their depression to Taliban policies that restricted their movement, access to employment and education opportunities and caused isolation, financial hardship and fear. Among the study group, 65% of the women reported where considering suicide and 16% reported having attempted to commit suicide.

The proliferation of armed conflicts and the high levels of military and civilian casualties in those conflicts have meant that there are large numbers of widows in many countries. This has a major impact not only on women but on society in general. Widowhood often changes the social and economic roles of women in the household and community and the structure of the family. The impact of widowhood differs between cultures and religions. However, it can affect the physical safety, identity and mobility of women. Widowhood can also affect their access to basic goods and services necessary for survival and their rights to inheritance, land and property, in addition to the wider impact it has on the community.

### **The Kashmir Conflict**

For more than a decade now, Kashmir has been caught up in the grip of conflict that had its beginnings as a militant movement fighting for self determination which has turned into a battle involving not less than a hundred different militant groups with the Indian security forces pitted against them. All sides of this battle use violence and it is the common people of Kashmir whose lives are deeply affected by this conflict (Butalia 2002).

The current phase of Kashmiri nationalism began at the end of the eighties. Over the years the nature of this movement as well as the actors in it has changed radically. Paid mercenaries and trained militants from across the border have entered the picture, the sheen and romance of militancy for many young men in Kashmir has worn off and militant attacks on ordinary people in market places etc. have become commonplace. Repression and counter insurgency measures have been swift to follow and it is estimated that between 60,000 to 70,000

people have died, some 4000 are believed to be missing or in illegal detention, more than a million have been displaced, the number of widows and half-widows is said to be more than 15,000 (Butalia 2004)

The Armed conflict situation after 1989, the people of Kashmir landed up in a new exposure zone and they have experienced a range of psychological and social deprivation, lack of security (a daily fear of life and dignity) displacement, abuse of human rights, including random acts of violence and destruction and uncertainty among the population, loss of social networks and family structure that comprises the fabric and meaning of daily life, loss of daily activity, the loss of social roles that guide behavior, loss of livelihood and no access to employment opportunities; resulting in extreme poverty and poor environment. Such things increased the vulnerability of the conflict affected areas

It is widely accepted that while women seldom create conflict, they are often (along with children and aged) its chief victims and sufferers. Nowhere this is truer than in Kashmir (Butalia 2002)

The Kashmir conflict has impacted the Kashmiri women in a number of ways. They have suffered from all quarters. Talking about direct impact of the conflict on women, some of them were tortured and punished by the security forces while others by the militants. Along with attacks and threats on their life and safety these women have faced rape, death of loved ones, torture, trauma and other forms of violence. The indirect impact of conflict on women was that because of the death/ disappearance of their husbands who were the main bread winners of their family, their Social World was overnight transformed. They had to suffer for no fault of their own. 'As a result many women are forced to venture out of homes in search for remunerative work and also face harassment by armed forces.' Even now she writes, 'many of such women who are left behind in the armed conflict as survivors lead an invisible existence in suffering and neglect' (Qutub, 2011). According to Sudha Ramachandran, "In ethnic and nationalist struggles, women are regarded as the couriers 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 to not attract attention of men (Vanniasinkam 2010, 13-14).

By rendering women powerless, the long-term impacts are devastating. Many of the women who have experienced violence are suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder and live in constant fear of further attacks. The patriarchal society has grown stronger with men having much more power and control over women's choices in dress, reproduction and marriage. The clear delineation

of gender roles in Kashmiri society has further alienated women (Vanniasinkam, 2010, 14). Conflict in Kashmir has left behind a large number of widows whose husbands have been killed by either security forces or militants. It is estimated that there are about 20,000 widows of armed conflict (Kazi, 2009). The conflict hit society was unprepared to meet the staggering number of widows who still face apathy from many quarters. Relatives often refuse to support them and they bear the burden of raising children alone. They are often illiterate and have little knowledge of their rights and entitlements (Qutub, 2011).

The present paper focuses on the indirect effects of armed conflict in Kashmir focusing its impact on the widows. The conclusions are drawn on the experiences of a sample of forty widows whose husbands were killed in the ongoing armed conflict. The field study for the same was conducted in thirteen villages of district Ganderbal of the state of J and K from August to November, 2012. The methodological tools of case study focusing on the personal narratives of the respondents, interview schedule and non participant observation were utilized. The respondents were in the age group of 29 to 52 years. The tool of purposive sampling was used to identify the widows. The interview was carried using un-structured interview schedule. The mean age of the sampled widows was 29 years and the mean monthly income of 98% of the widows was less than 2000 rupees per month. The average age at widowhood was 29.5 years.

### **Implications of widowhood**

A positive implication of widowhood on many of the sampled respondents was that it has led to the opening of new social spaces for many of such widowed women in a highly patriarchal society like Kashmir. Armed Conflict has led to the emergence of female headed households in the valley of Kashmir. It has thrown such women out of the traditional role structure and they have to perform roles like earning livelihood which were traditionally the domain of the males of the household. In most cases of widows, the husbands were the main bread winners of their family. The death of their husbands brought unending economic miseries to them. The world of the many such widowed women in Kashmir changed overnight following the death of their husband. The burden of responsibilities on the widow increased manifold and she had to arrange everything for the household. Right from arranging food for the children and other members of the family she had to take care of the education of her children. Due to lack of education, many of them had to seek employment based on unskilled manual labor. Some of them learnt the traditional art of embroidery and as a result are engaged in shawl work. During agricultural season most of them go for

agricultural work in the nearby villages. While others who are not well built for physical labour spin cotton on the charkha (Yander in Kashmiri). Most of them have been provided ex gratia by the government and what is shocking is that some of them do not even get the widow pension of 200 rupees per month given by the Social welfare department of the state government. There has been no support (in many cases studied by the author) so far from the various Non Governmental Organizations operating in the state.

The effects of armed conflict on the health of women particularly the widows have been disastrous. All of the sampled widows said that they had sleeping trouble ranging from difficulty in falling asleep, getting up in the middle of the night, having nightmares, to not falling asleep at all. Other health problems included post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder, hallucinations, high blood pressure etc. Most of them admitted having consulted a psychiatrist at one point of time or the other. Farida\* admits that she still has nightmares of the episode when her husband was killed. *'My heart starts beating fast when I hear the dogs bark incessantly at night', sometimes I get up in the middle of the night and feel like beating my children. I do not feel like talking to anybody. And there are times when I do not feel like getting up and going for work', she admits.*

The respondents revealed that that they cannot tolerate high noise and as a result have difficulty in attending to many of their social duties like attending marriages, funerals etc. Thus the lack of proper psychological well being also acts as an impediment in the discharge of their social responsibilities. Some of the widowed women are restricted to their homes and have very limited access to the 'public' areas of life. Thus when their rights are infringed like the denial of inheritance rights to the property of their late husbands' by their in-laws, they are unable to raise their voices and as such fight for their rights. Legal issues are often seen as the domain of the male members of the family and the widespread lack of literacy skills of women banned them from learning about their rights and they shy away from approaching public authorities. Many of them are expected to care for the households and children and thus do not have the time to travel long distances if the police or legal offices are far. Besides, they might fear reprisal or other disapproving reactions of their community. The problem as many people would agree lies in the system itself, since it is highly dominated by men. Women are under-represented in judicial process which explains why these processes are so frequently gender biased. Female lawyers may be inaccessible and often no support services are available to women. Chesfeeda\*, a widow in her 30's did not approach the court when her father-in-law denied her and her children rights of inheritance to his property. *'I was advised not to go to police and court by my brothers as it would lead to a huge impact on their social prestige. Till now my children have not received a single penny out of*

*their father's property', she says.*

Many widows admit that even after their husbands were killed they still face stigma. They admitted that they have to dress modestly and have restrictions in talking to strangers especially males as they fear that it would bring a bad name to their children and family. For many women like Salima (name changed), whose husband was killed by militants alleging that he worked as an informer of the security forces, being the wife of an 'informer' (Mukhbir in Kashmiri) still acts as a source of stigma and threat to her. The level of social stigma is so high for others like Nabla\* who had to sell all land and build a separate two room house as she was previously living with her in laws. *'Since I was living with my husband's brother and his family, I thought people would talk nonsense about me and my brother-in-law which might hamper my only daughter's marriage, so I sold all land and built this house', she says.*

### Some Case Studies

Sarwar Jan\* a Paktoon woman was 19 year old when she was married to Ghulam Mohiddin a surrendered militant. After 5 years of marriage he again took arms and joined the militants. During this time army would regularly come to her house, she was tortured and beaten when they came to know that she had met her husband. In 2001 when ceasefire was declared by the militants, she was taken by her husband and they took refuge in a village in Anantnag. On 6<sup>th</sup> February 2002, both of them were arrested by the Special Task Force of the J and K police. Her husband was killed and she was sent back home after interrogation. She was seven months pregnant that time. Her son was born two months after the death of her husband. With no one to support her financially she started doing embroidery on shawls and earns 600 to 700 rupees a month. Her son repeatedly asks her about his father. The scars of torture are still visible on her face. She says she attempted suicide many times but the only things which makes her live is her son.

Farida\* 36 year old widow still remembers the day when her husband and four children were sitting in a room in her house. Her husband Muhammad Shafi Sheikh was an agricultural labourer. She was seven months pregnant that time. She was clipping the nails of her husband when unidentified militants came and shot him at his head. Her four children were in the same room and parts of her husband's head were thrown over her feet. She was 25 year old at that time. Her eldest daughter was 9 year old. She still remembers that cold winter night and from that day onwards no one in her house dares to enter that room after dark. Farida lives in abject poverty with her children three of whom left studies because of lack of money. She is very weak physically because she cannot undertake hard physical labor. She now helps her neighbors with domestic work in return for

a meager sum of money.

Rafiq\* was 25 year old when her husband, a contractor was killed by unidentified gunmen who had demanded a huge amount of money from him. They came to his house at 7:30 in the evening and took her husband along. Her 9 year old son started crying when he saw them taking his father away and they threw a Kangdi (an earthen pot filled with charcoal and used for warmth in winters) at him. Rafiq ran to look for her husband when she heard gun shots, after running for about ten minutes she saw his body beaten before being shot. His left arm was broken. She started crying and no one in the village came out of the houses. She admits that no help was offered to her from any quarter and she could not sustain her family had she not taken an initiative herself. *'Had I kept thinking as to what my husband had done and why was he killed, I would have gone mad and my children would have remained illiterate'* she says. By doing embroidery on shawls which fetched her small amount of money, she educated her two sons one of whom is a teacher and another village level worker.

Nabla\* was 40 year old when her husband left home at around 4 pm for some work and was killed by unidentified gunmen at Wussan Ganderbal. She had seven children and only one of her sons was earning that time. She admits *"When an FIR was registered in the local police station, I did not pursue the case further because I thought my children would go astray. In the search for justice, I would lose resources which I could use for educating my children. So instead of looking for killers of my husband I focused on the education of my children all of whom are well settled in government jobs now."* She started a small business soon after the death of her husband and with her one son pooled resources for the payment of school fees and other dues for the education of her children. Now when all her children are well settled she remembers the past with a sense of admiration for her determination. *"Though I faced life bravely after my husband, there is a scar which will never go, few questions which will never be answered which will only stop haunting me the day I reach my grave"*, she says. Instances like this reveal that armed conflict has also led to a new kind of growth as well as the utilization of potential hitherto unknown to many women in Kashmir society. A strong sense of unresolved grief was also seen among most of the widows who till this day do not know why they were pushed into such situations with no fault of their own.

An important thing which came up out of the research is that while the widows whose husbands were killed by security forces were very fearless and openly held the security forces responsible. Others whose husbands were killed by militants were hesitant in admitting it openly. Thus armed conflict in the valley of Kashmir has led to a situation in which the widows of conflict are challenging and in some cases redefining, the course of the cultural and social perception of themselves and as well as their

former boundaries in society. Owing to the armed conflict, many of such widows have for the first time in their lives had the possibility of working outside the home, the chance of being the income earners, core decision-makers and heads of their respective house-holds.

## CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that widowed women in Kashmir have suffered immensely because of the armed conflict that has been plaguing their lives for over two decades. As the spectrum and scope of violence were widespread so has been the devastating impact on the lives of such women who had to assume matriarchal roles not because they chose to do so, but essentially because the conflict catapulted them into such a dominant role. As a consequence of the resulting responsibilities created by domestic tragedies women in the Valley have found an evolutionary confidence and maturity that was hitherto unknown to them. As tragedies resulting from the loss of spouse, brother, child or father turned the World upside down for women in the Valley, they have emerged as role models of confidence, patience, perseverance and fortitude that has given a new meaning and bearing to their lives. Not only have women emerged power resilient and stronger, they have given a new title and meaning to their roles as household runners and torch bearers in a society that has been benighted because of continued violence. This fact could not be more eloquently summarized by Ana Julia from El Salvador in the 'Report on Women Facing War' who writes:

"Before the war women were not taken into consideration. Women were only working in the home. But, when war came, women came out of the house to demonstrate their capability. In part it was war which meant that women could be taken seriously and that they could do a lot of things. It made people realize that women are capable of changing our society.

## Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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