

Women's Perspectives on Peace and Security in Conflict Zones: Exploring Life at the Line of Control in Azad Jammu and Kashmir

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This review paper examines the experiences and challenges faced by women in conflict zones, focusing on Kashmiri women living at the Line of Control (LoC) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. It sheds light on the daily realities of conflict for these women, which not only deprive them of adequate living standards but also subject them to long-term vulnerabilities and marginalization. The review paper draws from a comprehensive article search spanning from 2000 to 2024 across various databases by using thematic analysis to address women's experiences, perspectives, and roles in peace and security within the specified context ensuring relevance to the research topic, particularly in the conflict zones including AJ&K. A comprehensive understanding regarding to women's experiences in conflict zones is crucial. Empowering

women to actively engage in conflict resolution is essential to highlighting the challenges they face. It is imperative to bridge this gap by ensuring the significant inclusion of women, particularly Kashmiri women living at the Line of Control, in decision-making processes. Kashmiri women are uniquely positioned to advocate for the issues directly affecting them in conflict areas of the Line of Control in the State of AJ&K.

Keywords: *Armed conflict, Kashmiri women, Violence and inequality, Peace-building, United Nations, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Line of Control, living standard*

INTRODUCTION

Women worldwide grapple with various internal and external conflicts, spanning family, class, and social dynamics, with armed conflict standing out as one of the most perilous and devastating. Its direct and indirect impacts affect millions of women globally (Razaq & Malik, 2022). Both women and girls share another tragic similarity amidst conflict: they disproportionately bear the impact. While the rest of the population, women endure the common traumas of bombing, famines, epidemics, mass executions, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, forced migration, ethnic cleansing, threats, and intimidation (United Nations Secretary-General, 2002), they are also subjected to a specific form of violence and abuse (Bendavid et al., 2021).

Like other conflict regions all over the globe, Kashmiri women often experience unique challenges (Razaq & Malik, 2022) and perspectives regarding peace and

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security (Arostegui, 2013). Kashmiri Women who have been exposed to armed conflict lived through horrific situations and violence (Amjad, 2023) including sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking, physical injuries, and disabilities, and endure various forms of abuse (Bendavid et al., 2021). The protracted conflict over Kashmir has deeply affected the lives of women on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC) (Razaq & Malik, 2022). Women along LoC not only experienced psychological trauma and economic hardships but also lost their loved ones, and relatives, got dislocated, rendered widows or 'half widows' as their husbands 'disappeared' indefinitely (Akhtar, 2012; Amjad, 2023).

Although armed conflicts often impose negative consequences on women, they also prompt notable shifts in their societal roles and responsibilities worldwide (O'Sullivan, 2019). Despite the challenges of active participation in conflict settings, women often assume new responsibilities as household leaders, taking on both economic burdens and decision-making roles within families and communities in the absence of their counterparts (Baser, 2024). Understanding their roles and experiences is crucial for developing effective strategies for conflict resolution and ensuring the protection of women's rights by acknowledging their decision-making at all levels about preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts (Klot, 2011).

In Kashmir, women's voices, narratives, and roles are largely neglected from any dialogue regarding peace-

building processes. There has been little to no gender-sensitive analysis of the Kashmir conflict, particularly regarding its impact on women's lives, safety and security, educational attainment, socio-economic development, and well-being. Consequently, their perspectives on conflict resolution and peace-building in Kashmir, as well as the roles women can play in fostering connections within and across Kashmir, remain unexplored (Akhtar, 2012).

This paper argues that Kashmiri women are considered an important factor in civil society and a major stakeholder in the strategic peacebuilding process who can play a critical role in transforming the Kashmir conflict. Therefore, their perspectives and potential roles regarding to peace-building process in Kashmir should not be ignored in any dialogue or peace-making process. Under these circumstances, for a woman's active participation in the peacebuilding process, not only women's empowerment is crucial but also a strong linkage among socio-legal, economic, and political participation and their role in peacebuilding is essential. (Amjad, 2024). This paper aims to explore not only the lives of women along LoC in Kashmir but also the lives of women in conflict-affected areas all over the globe by focusing on their perspectives on peace and security.

This paper contends that to effectively promote peace, security, and justice for women, it is essential to recognize and address the specific needs and challenges experienced by women. Women's roles and responses in conflict and peace are different as compared to men. This paper provides insights into women's narratives of peace,

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conflict, and security from the perspective of the Line of Control in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and conflict regions all over the globe (Amjad, 2023).

Objective of the study

The main objective of this paper is to critically review existing literature to understand the multifaceted experiences of women living in conflict settings by exploring their roles, challenges, and contributions to peacebuilding efforts, to inform policy, advocacy, and interventions that promote gender-responsive approaches to peace and security in Line of Control (LoC) in the State of AJ&K and conflict-affected regions all over the globe.

Research question

How do Kashmiri women perceive and navigate their roles, challenges, and contributions to peace-building and security efforts in conflict-affected areas of the Line of Control in the State of AJ&K?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Across the world, armed conflict instills profound fear and uncertainty in the lives of women (Razaq & Malik, 2022). Women, exposed to such conflicts endure socioeconomic struggles, facing economic and food insecurity, social isolation, violence, and significant physical and psychological distress due to stress and trauma (Butt et al., 2020). The study of Ciruela-Lorenzo et al., (2020) highlighted that Colombian women face multifaceted

challenges during armed conflict. They experience significant barriers to accessing land, credit, and stable employment, leading to disproportionate levels of poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. The study underscored that women endure various forms of violence. Empowering women economically and politically should deem essential to elevate their marginalized status and enable meaningful participation in the peace process. Bateson et al., (2016) noted that Syrian women were experiencing significant threats, including physical violence, resource scarcity, and lack of access to healthcare services, attributed to the effects of war and economic instability.

The study underscores seven significant threats faced by Syrian women, encompassing environmental, community, personal, political, health, food, and economic security concerns. Despite these challenges, Syrian women assert their potential as peacemakers, advocating for collaboration among local governance, social services, and security agencies to address the plight of vulnerable women acting as powerless mothers, widows, caretakers, and refugees amidst conflict. The study of Amjad (2023), underscores that the absence of women from these critical decision-making forums of peacebuilding, which set the terms of ceasefires and determine power and wealth-sharing patterns, social development priorities, approaches to reparations and justice for atrocities, can have devastating consequences for women's efforts to participate in peacebuilding.

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According to Goetz et al., (2016), the exclusion of women from key decision-making arenas in peacebuilding, where ceasefire terms are established and power dynamics, wealth distribution patterns, social development agendas, reparation strategies, and justice for atrocities are determined, can severely hinder women's ability to engage effectively in peacebuilding initiatives. The study further uncovered that talking about the distinct needs and hurdles during armed conflicts requires not only the inclusion and active involvement of women in public decision-making but also the implementation of crucial affirmative action measures to combat discrimination and all forms of harm against women in public spheres affected by conflict or war.

Similarly, the study of Haeri and Puechguirbal (2010), highlights that Rwandan women routinely display remarkable resilience and fortitude by adopting new roles and taking on new responsibilities when confronted by the ravages of war or armed conflict. However, they continue to be depicted by many humanitarian actors as being intrinsically weak and vulnerable a depiction that results in the perceptible absence of women from decision-making bodies both during and in the wake of conflict. Such absence of women from decision-making bodies prevents them their contribution from peacebuilding process which is essential for their family and community survival.

Women's lives at Line of Control in Kashmir and UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security

The armed conflict, violence, and victimization in Kashmir and along the Line of Control (LoC) are profoundly affecting the lives of millions of women in the region (Jamwal et al., 2012). The ongoing conflict along LoC is putting the lives, health, and overall well-being of Kashmiri women at risk. This not only disrupts their day-to-day lives but also has lasting effects on their families and communities, which are vital for peaceful survival. (Razaq & Malik, 2022).

Jamwal and Shuchismita (2012) emphasize the stark contrast in the lives of Kashmiri women worldwide. Despite juggling numerous roles and responsibilities, they endure ongoing neglect stemming from impoverished socioeconomic circumstances, limited educational and healthcare access, and fractured social networks. According to Razaq and Malik (2022), the 76-year-long protracted armed conflict over the State of Kashmir has profoundly impacted women on both sides of LoC in multiple ways. The study by Akhtar (2012) added that Kashmiri women not only live in conflict zones but also experience direct and indirect adverse consequences of the Kashmir conflict in the form of direct killing, injuries, psychological distress, economic marginalization, and displacement.

Akhtar's (2012) study also highlights that despite facing significant challenges, the narrative, voices, roles, and perspectives of Kashmiri women remain conspicuously absent from the discussion on conflict

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resolution and peacebuilding in Kashmir. This absence raises serious question about United Nations Security Council Resolution's 1325 agenda. Amjad's (2023) study underscores the importance of recognizing the distinct needs and challenges of Kashmiri women amidst the enduring 76-year Kashmir conflict. It advocates for a shift in peacebuilding efforts from superficial measures to a comprehensive approach that genuinely includes and seeks justice for women.

Women's inclusion in peacebuilding activities

International recognition and acceptance of women's inclusion in peacebuilding activities have increased globally (Hedstrom & Senarathna, 2015; Martin, 2018). The main purpose of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) was to address the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls by promoting their participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding efforts and ensure their protection from gender-based violence and other types of harms during and after conflict (Arostegui, 2013). Likewise, integrating women into political decision-making in transitional societies is crucial for advancing gender justice, equality, and women's human rights as well as fostering relationships in demilitarized contexts. The study emphasizes that women's involvement in peacebuilding is fundamental for establishing sustainable peace and is a key factor in ensuring security, justice, social and

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economic development, reconciliation, and conflict prevention.

Insufficient advancing women’s engagement under UNSCR 1325: Failure to promote Peace and Security

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, as its origins in the broader context of women’s rights activism. This groundbreaking Resolution requires any parties in armed conflict to protect women and to promote women's participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. It recognizes that women and girls are particularly affected in situations of crisis and armed conflict and declares that their participation at all levels of prevention, resolution, reconstruction, and peacekeeping of conflicts is essential to achieving sustained peace and security (Miller et al., 2014).

The study of O’Sullivan (2019) shows that the current form of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda primarily emphasizes positive changes within the security sectors, yet it falls short in addressing austerity measures and implementing gender-blind reforms that could alleviate social and economic insecurities associated with gender-based violence. This lack of attention to broader insecurities is evident in the agenda that prevents women’s influential contribution in the peacebuilding process who are considered the most marginalized group and experienced extra hardship during the period of conflict (Martin, 2018; Razaq & Malik, 2022).

According to Goetz et al. (2017) lack of women’s direct participation in peace processes remains one of the

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most poorly implemented elements of the women, peace and security agenda outlined in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Due to such poorly implemented elements, war or conflict crimes against women may go unpunished, encouraging a climate of impunity for all forms of gender-based violence.

Critique of UNSCR 1324's ineffectiveness stemming from insufficient women's involvement in Peacebuilding

The International Agenda Women, Peace, and Security was institutionalized by UNSCR 1325 in 2000, to observe and monitor the situations of women during armed conflict or war situations and urge that women play a pivotal role in peacebuilding role. Such a role of women could lead to an increase the women's participation in women empowerment dynamic that could further challenge the power dynamics and dominancy that exist all over the globe.

O'Sullivan's (2019) study underscores Ukraine's pioneering adoption of the National Action Plan (NAP) under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2016-2020), highlighting the intertwining of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda with military security. However, the study critiques this linkage, arguing that it leads more to militarization than peace, overlooking wider insecurities such as socioeconomic disparities exacerbated by conflict and institutional reform. Consequently, the agenda's effectiveness in facilitating women's participation in peacebuilding processes, particularly for

those disproportionately affected by armed conflict and lack of essential resources, is questioned.

In the context of Kashmir, Chowdary and Ubbott's (2016) study underscores the multiple forms of military victimization experienced by Kashmiri women. They endure violence and their bodies become battlegrounds for both security forces and militants. Moreover, they grapple with the challenges of destitution when their male members are killed or go missing, they are facing psychological trauma and numerous health issues. Despite these adversities, their participation in peace-building processes remains invisible and unaddressed, raising serious concerns regarding compliance with UNSCR 1325.

The study of Shekhawat (2015) highlights that women are considered the most marginalized group during any conflict situation. Like other conflict regions, Kashmiri women are visible in conflict and experience adverse consequences of such conflict in the form of violence, gender discrimination, and loss of loved ones but are invisible in the peace-making process at all levels. Such underrepresentation of women in peace-building efforts leaves them vulnerable to accessing the necessary living conditions crucial for sustainable family survival.

METHODOLOGY

This is a review article based on relevant research articles and policy reports published between 2000 to 2024 on various databases (PubMed, Medline, Springer Link, Google Scholar) that discuss women's experiences during

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armed conflict regions all over the globe including Kashmir. This review paper also identifies women’s perspectives on peace and security in conflict zones, particularly focusing on the Line of Control (LoC) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The inclusion criteria of this review paper are based on the selection of articles that specifically address women’s experiences, perspectives, and roles in peace and security within the specified context.

ANALYSIS

For this review paper, thematic analysis was used to identify common themes, patterns, and key findings across the selected articles. Thematic analysis involves systematically coding and categorizing data to identify recurring topics and ideas as well as operating iteratively as a flexible and useful research tool, to provide potentially rich and detailed conceptualized knowledge (Peel, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2023). In this review paper relevant data from each article, related to women’s experiences in conflict zones and their perspective on peace and security in conflict regions including Kashmir.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Women’s Experiences, Challenges, and Contributions to Peace and Security in Conflict-Affected Regions

Sr.	Super Theme	Sub-Theme
1.	Women’s Experiences	Experiences of Violence and Trauma

	Economic hardships and livelihood challenges
	Lack of Access to healthcare, Loss of love ones and psychological distress
2. Women's Challenges	Gender-based discrimination and inequality Poor access to education and essential resources
3. Women's Contributions	Displacement Peacebuilding initiatives and activism Leadership roles and decision-making Community resilience and social cohesion

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of this review paper is organized into three main themes, which reflect how the lives of women are adversely affected by armed conflict all over the globe and particularly in the State of Kashmir through insecurity, violence, trauma, economic hardships, livelihood challenges, lack of access to healthcare, loss of loved ones, psychological distress and challenges to gender equality.

Women's experiences

Armed conflict is an emerging phenomenon in today's world that directly and indirectly affects millions of women each year (Razaq & Malik, 2022). Prior studies (Baser, 2024) revealed that, during armed conflict or

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crises, due to insecurity, women are direct victims of violence (sexual, physical, and psychological violence) that lead to causes of psychological distress, trauma, and mental illness. The other studies (Amjad, 2023) underscore that in Kashmir women are not only the victims of warfare or violence but also experience unpredictable disrupted social structures and breakdown in social order due to insecurity and uncertainty (Razaq & Malik, 2022). Similarly, previous studies (Pandit et al., 2020; Akhtar & Bilal, 2021) emphasize that such disruption in essential socioeconomic resources prevents Kashmiri women from adequate living standards which are crucial for family and community survival. Likewise, the study (Sudan, 2023), highlights that in conflict regions high-level lack of resources leads to the prevalence of economic hardship and livelihood challenges among women. Such challenges prevent women access to health care services in any distressed situation.

The study by Swaine (2019) revealed that women experience not only the web of problems such as poverty, loss of homes and livelihood, displacement, and violence but also experience an increased risk of female-headed households during conflict settings. The prior studies (Akhtar, 2012; Qutab, 2021; Razaq & Malik, 2022) highlight that Kashmiri women are not only directly and indirectly affected by the adverse consequences of the Kashmir conflict but also experience extra hardship due to the death or abduction of their male counterpart. Such harsh circumstances lead to long-term psychological

distress and traumatic situations among them. The perspectives of Kashmiri women who are living in conflict settings are diverse as compared to women in non-conflict regions regarding armed conflict. They experience adverse consequences daily, as armed conflict arises every day in their lives that enhances pressure on them and disrupts their day-to-day lives in general.

Women's challenges

Women exposed to armed conflict not only experience a high prevalence of discrimination but also, gender-based violence, a high-level lack of crucial resources, and displacement. Previous studies (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016; Mootz et al., 2017) emphasized that armed conflict leads to numerous forms of gender-based violence including physical, psychological, child marriages, and sexual violence, which significantly impact women's health and well-being. Exposure to such violence hinders women from effectively managing life stressors, thus limiting their ability to actively engage in family and community activities (Razaq & Malik, 2022).

Prior studies (Jensen, 2019; Onditi et al., 2021) described that during armed conflict, gender-based violence and displacement create gender inequalities, economic marginalization, and structural vulnerabilities among women that exacerbate stigmatization and humiliation. Previous studies (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016) described that like other adverse consequences of armed conflict, women experience displacement that leads to shaping their changing status, roles, responsibilities,

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and social relations. These changes further cause the prevalence of economic marginalization and losses of social capital due to the death and abduction of loved ones. Such a deleterious environment not only creates poverty, and violence but also increases the risk of domestic violence and sexual harassment (McWilliams, 2013).

Likewise, prior studies (Mushtaq & Fatima, 2016; But & Virk, 2020) highlighted that Kashmiri women living at the Line of Control (LoC) confront numerous challenges stemming from the Kashmir conflict such as insecurity, fear, violence, loss of loved ones, socio-psychological distress and high-level lack of essential resources. They are compelled to endure these harsh realities daily, yet their perspectives remain largely overlooked and unheard in conflict resolution efforts (Akhtar, 2013; Razaq & Malik, 2022).

Women's contributions

The active engagement of women is vital in peacebuilding resolutions as they frequently endure the adverse consequences of conflicts in crises or emergencies. Their active participation in peacebuilding processes is crucial for highlighting their experiences, challenges, and hardships. However, their limited political involvement undermines their representation in mainstream bodies, which is inadequate for effectively advocating their experiences in conflict scenarios.

Previous studies (Porter, 2003; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016) highlight that for women sufficient participation, the United Nations established more inclusive practices through the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) by addressing 12 critical areas of concern, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on ‘Women, Peace and Security agenda and UN Commission of the Status of Women. The purpose of such practices and agreements was to include women in all stages of peace processes and to secure their full participation in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. Despite having such agreements, the practical and political participation of women in peacebuilding processes and negotiating tables is still unseen and unaddressed, particularly in the context of Kashmir and other developing conflict regions all over the globe (Akhtar, 2013).

Similarly, the study of Kidane (2014) emphasizes the importance of women’s participation is essential in defining protection measures and contributing to strengthening protection mechanisms and combating impunity. However, military armed forces have traditionally been male-dominated institutions, perpetuating the portrayal of women as vulnerable victims in need of male protection during war or armed conflict. This perspective on women’s vulnerability hinders their involvement in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

Likewise, a previous study (Erzurum & Eren, 2014) highlights the indispensable role of women in peacebuilding and decision-making processes, asserting that neither governmental nor nongovernmental

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institutions can achieve lasting peace without empowering women in these efforts. (Akhtar, 2013). Women experience the impact of combat activities uniquely, facing additional hardships and roles during armed conflict (Razaq & Malik, 2022). Consequently, their interests and priorities diverge from those of men. These factors explicitly display the need for women's involvement in the decision-making process to understand and develop effective strategies for addressing diverse conditions in conflict and post-conflict settings (Erzurum & Eren, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In light of the complexity surrounding armed conflict and its disproportionate impact on women, it is evident that a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences in conflict zones is paramount. Empowering women to actively engage in conflict resolution is crucial to addressing the multifaceted challenges they face. Despite international agreements advocating for women's participation in peacebuilding efforts, practical implementation remains inadequate, leaving women's voices unheard and their needs unaddressed.

It is imperative to bridge this gap by ensuring meaningful inclusion of women, particularly Kashmiri women who are living in the Line of Control (LoC) in decision-making processes, as they are uniquely positioned to advocate for the issues affecting them directly. It is also crucial the practical participation of

Kashmiri women would ensure practicing the practical implementation of Chapter VI and Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter that pertain to the peaceful resolution of disputes and actions to maintain or restore international peace and security, respectively. For this, prioritizing women's involvement is essential in conflict resolution that can better mitigate the adverse consequences of armed conflict and work towards building sustainable peace in conflict-affected regions.

LIMITATIONS

Based on the nature of the research topic, this review paper contains the following limitations:

- There was a potential lack of existing research and literature regarding the specific context of Azad Jammu & Kashmir, due to this it was difficult to build on previous findings and theoretical framework.
- Due to the dynamic nature of the armed conflict and political instability, it was difficult to capture a consistent and accurate picture of women's perspectives and the challenges they faced over time. These circumstances were also affecting the women's perspectives and experiences which further led to external pressure on the research process in the conflict zones of AJ&K.
- The sensitivity of the conflict zones of the Line of Control also led to limited generalizability of the findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on the prior discussion, the review paper suggests the following recommendations:

- To increase women's participation in peace negotiations and decision-making processes, their practical representation must be advocated at local, national, and international forums.
- Implementation of gender-sensitive policies and programs should be urged to address the specific needs and challenges of women living at the Line of Control (LoC) in the State of Azad Jammu & Kashmir.
- To track the changes in women's perspectives and understand their challenges over time, longitudinal studies could be conducted especially considering the evolving political and security landscape of AJ&K. This could help the national and international community to understand the experiences of women in conflict settings.

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