

Do women have say in deciding Kashmir's future?

Women have been some of the worst sufferers of the 17-year-old violence in Jammu and Kashmir, but they seem to have no space on the dialogue table as efforts are made for a final, peaceful solution to the conflict.

In recent times, though Kashmir has seen some women politicians - mainstream as well as separatist - there are hardly any instances of their trying to empower the fairer sex.

Asiya Andrabi, a hardline Islamist woman heading the Dukhtaran-e-Millat outfit, remains busy in propagating separatist politics and also in moral policing. Mehbooba Mufti, the People Democratic Party chief and MP, is caught in the web of a larger political game.

In the 89-member state assembly, there are just three women members of whom only one, Kanta Andotra of the Congress, is an elected legislator. The two others, Khem Lata Vakhloo and Shanti Devi, are nominated members.

Caught between the guns of terrorists and troops, the Kashmiri woman - anyway oppressed by the burden of patriarchy - has been left doubly scarred. She is left with no option but to grapple with mental trauma and economic hardships.

As a mother she has lost the apple of her eye. As a wife she has lost her emotional and financial support. She has been robbed of a brother endlessly. The violence has often stripped her of her honour. And yet, she finds herself outside the political spectrum.

Amid this sensitive and controversial reality, a Delhi-based NGO and research institute, Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (Wiscomp), has documented a first hand account of Kashmiri women.

The document, published here recently, is an initiative to break the silence of women in Kashmir and facilitate a process that 'encourages them to assert their agency'.

'Women in dialogue: Envisioning the road ahead in Jammu and Kashmir' is a step to tell policymakers and social and political activists that 'excluding more than half the population (from dialogue) risks the possibility of keeping several creative solutions and options out', says Sumona Das Gupta, assistant director Wiscomp.

The report is a collection of deliberations made during a Wiscomp convention that brought together political leaders, teachers, activists, journalists, academics and doctors - mostly women but men too - from the three regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh in order to facilitate a dialogue amongst diverse stakeholders.

The meeting, held here last year, led to recommendations by four working groups focusing on political, economic, cultural and other issues.

'When we talk about a gender sensitive discourse on Kashmir, we don't mean to exclude males. It's about building partnerships between men and women who agree that if conflict affects them differently it's only natural that they may want to access the peace process differently,' Gupta adds.

The report says participants underscored the role of women in deciding the political and economic future of Kashmir, while drawing attention towards 'disenchantment with the palpable and glaring absence of women on the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's roundtable confabs'.

'The absence of women in these working groups is both unacceptable and short-sighted, especially in view of the fact that women and children have been the worst affected by the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir,' said the participants, according to the report.

Drawing special attention to the case of half widows - women whose husbands have disappeared and are presumed dead but are bound by personal law not to remarry, the participants recommended that complete rehabilitation should be provided to all widows and half widows regardless of whether the husband was a militant or non-combatant.

'The act of the perpetrator should be de-linked from the plight of the widow and the family,' the report quotes participants as having said.

In order to empower the oppressed Kashmiri woman and help her gain financial independence, the participants recommended that an enabling environment should be created in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir and confidence generated among women to set up their own income generating units.

According to the report, Kashmiris unanimously underlined the need for 'adequate representation of women in the legislature of Jammu and Kashmir'.

Empowering women would shape the path for peace and reconciliation that would organically grow out of participatory dialogue and lead to peace and development of the state, opined the participants.

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