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ISSN (Online) : 2455 - 3662
SJIF Impact Factor :3.395 (Morocco)

EPRA International Journal of
**Multidisciplinary
Research**

Volume: 2 Issue: 5 May 2016



Published By :
EPRA Journals

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NGOs: A KEY TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN KASHMIR

Aashaq Hussain Bhat¹

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

Showkat Ahmad Bhat²

²PhD Research Scholar, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. R. Moorthy³

³Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

The main focus of this paper is to study the problems of women in Kashmir. In a conflict prone state like Jammu and Kashmir, everyone is going to suffer at the hands of violence in one form or the other. The intensity faced is also different to different groups of people. Whether it is men or women, younger or elder, everyone has been the victim of long lasting conflict in Kashmir. But the most worst hit being the women. Women have suffered both due to armed violence and also due to the domestic violence including traditions and customs. The paper will highlight the major concerns of women in Kashmir and the role of NGOs in women empowerment in Kashmir.

KEYWORDS: Conflict, Women, NGOs and Women Empowerment etc.

INTRODUCTION

At the forefront of hostilities lies dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan since their independence from the British rule. The direct consequence of the dispute has resulted in three wars between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and severe implications of further conflict is felt between the two nations, because of being nuclear powers. Due to this ongoing conflict between these nations, chaos and disorder prevailed in Kashmir. The people of Kashmir are suffering from the lack of basic needs due to the lack of stable political order in the Valley. Besides that poverty and lack of services has resulted with the economic decline. Thus political instability, threat of attacks by rebels, occupation by troops from India and the total breakdown of rule of law has led to severe consequences for the people in Kashmir. The most vulnerable group being the women and children who most often become vulnerable to domestic and sexual abuse within the family by family members as well as outside by security forces

and rebels¹. Not only this, but the perpetrators are not even brought to justice due to weak political order and victims always live in the constant and unending fear of violence and abuse.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on women in Kashmir. Both Primary as well as secondary sources of data were used in the study. The primary data was obtained from the analysis of various NGOs working for women in Kashmir and their assessment was done through questionnaire provided to them and the secondary data was taken from various published research papers in journals, news paper reports, NGOs and State Government of Jammu and Kashmir.

WOMEN IN KASHMIR

As has been already pointed out that the most impacted among the victims of conflict in Kashmir are women. They had faced atrocities both inside their home as well as outside. In short women in Kashmir have faced domestic violence as well as

have become the victims of the ongoing conflict between the India and Pakistan. The most common forms of violence faced by women in Kashmir are:

1. Violence due to prevailing turmoil:

On February 23, 1991, an incident occurred at Kunan Poshpora, when units of army during their search and interrogation allegedly gang raped 53 women that night. However the number of women raped that night could be high as 100 as reported by Human Rights organizations including Human Rights Watch². Another incident is the alleged abduction, rape and murder of two young women in Shopian between 29 and 30 May at Bongam Shopian³. So many other such events occurred from the last two and a half decades in the state due to political turmoil.

2. Violence at Domestic level:

Domestic violence means violence within home or family. At home this violence is largely carried out by a husband or his family. It may include physical and sexual violence, accompanied by psychological abuse as well. As per estimation, 10% to 50% of women in the J&K State have suffered the domestic violence. As almost 70% of all crimes reported involve women being beaten up by their husbands. This violence is mostly related to matrimonial disputes and family bickering or quarrels and harassment relating to matters of dowry⁴.

3. Practices related to custom and tradition:

Traditional practices led the women to fall victim for their human rights violations. These practices are deeply rooted in the traditional and cultural society. Some of these practices in the J&K state are abortion based on sex selection, female infanticide and deliberate neglect of girls.

4. Preference for the male child:

Preference for the son affects women in the state to a great extent. The grave consequences of this can be anything from female infanticide to the neglect of girl child over her brother in terms of basic and essential needs such as nutrition, basic health care and education.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

According to Grossest Webster dictionary, the word "Empowerment" means "the authoritative situation or to be authorized or powerful". "Empower" in other words meant to authorize. So a process which assigns power or authority to women to challenge certain situations may be termed as

"Women Empowerment". As far as women's development issue is concerned, women empowerment is a process which has been nourished by policies and programs for development that enable women to get strength enough to challenge their passive or submissive social status or condition. The UNDP (1995) in their definition of empowerment includes the choice expansion for women and increased capacity to exercise that choice⁵. Access to economic opportunities would increase their choices and programs related to health and education would enhance their ability to make these choices advantageous to themselves. In voluntary organizations both at rural or urban level women had been more active than men. Thus women empowerment means expansion in the ability of women to expand their choices in those areas of strategic life where it was previously denied to them.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN KASHMIR

Empowerment of women is one of the main alternatives to bring the women in Kashmir out of their distress. Empowerment of women is a worldwide slogan that certainly aims at empowering the women in diverse spheres of her life⁶. The phrase "Women Empowerment" is used in two broad senses; general and specific. Generally it refers to make women self-dependent by providing access to all freedoms and opportunities, which are denied to them only because they are women. Specifically it refers to enhancement in their position in relation to the power structure of the society⁷. The word women empowerment connotes that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in social, political and economic arenas.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, a Central Act, was passed in 2005. It took 5 years for the government of the State to pass a similar act in the state. With the ever growing increase in the events of domestic violence, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) was passed by the State government in 2010. But very little efforts were made for its proper implementation, though the domestic violence against women was rising in Jammu and Kashmir. Economic empowerment has been recognized as the main one because it lays a strong influence on all other components of empowerment. With economic empowerment a women will gain visibility and voice at home, workplace and the community. Thus the necessity is to make the women know their economic role and increase their power and command on material resources. Keeping the above purpose in mind, the government has launched many more schemes for women empowerment. The main ones are:

1. Umeed
2. National Minorities Development & Finance Corporation (NMDFC)
3. National Backward Class Finance & Development Corporation(NBCFDC)
4. National Handicapped Finance & Development Corporation(NHFDC)
5. Sher-I-Kashmir Employment and Welfare Programme (SKEWP)

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN KASHMIR

1. Gross violence against women
2. Large number illiteracy and ignorance
3. Lacking authority to make decisions
4. Customs and cultural practices.
5. Low political participation of women.
6. Low and poor status of women
7. Less awareness
8. Poverty due to under or unemployment.

Though numerous schemes launched by the State government for empowering the women have not provided any worth mentioning outputs, so the need of other such organizations was felt that could mitigate the atrocities faced by the women folk in Kashmir both at home and outside as well and could improve their lot by empowering them with the means and ways to get out of their distressed conditions. Here the NGOs enter the women's social and cultural domain with determined efforts to bring her welfare.

NGO (Non-Governmental Organization)

An NGO (Non-governmental Organization) is an organization that is apart from government and neither any conventional business in the sense of being neither the part of Government nor a profit business⁸.

It is usually set up by ordinary citizens and grant funds from different sources like government, foundations, businesses, or private persons. They eventually engage in a wide range of activities and take different forms with regard to time and place. Some NGOs might be for charitable purpose, while others might be registered to exempt from taxes on a social recognition basis. Other might be acting as fronts for interests related to political, religious, economic or other.

The number of NGOs varies from place to place as United States is leading with estimated 1.5 million NGOs⁹. The number of NGOs in Russia is 277,000¹⁰ and it is estimated that India have around 2 million NGOs which is many times the number of primary schools and primary health centers present in India¹¹.

There is no definite and precise meaning of

NGO and the term has not been used consistently. The term NGO in some countries is used to describe an organization which is called NPO (Non-Profit Organization) in another country and vice-versa. NGOs are classified in number of ways but the most common way to classify is to focus on "orientation" and "level of operation". An NGO's orientation usually refers to the type of activities it takes on, which may include issues like human rights, environmental issues and issues related to health and developmental work. While as an NGO's level of operation indicates the scale at which an organization works, that may be local, regional, national, or international¹².

The history of International non-governmental organizations can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. As per estimation, there were 1083 NGOs by 1914. International NGOs were greatly concerned towards slavery and women suffrage. However, the phrase "non-governmental organization" became popular only with the establishment of UNO (United Nations Organization) in 1945¹³.

Origin and Development of NGOs in Kashmir:-

By examining the kind of a society that existed in the past and exists till date in Kashmir, the development of an NGO culture could be traced easily. The 'NGO' conceptuality at international level is relatively a new one, even though the concept has a more recent origin in case of Kashmir. Plurality has been the main characteristic of society in Kashmir. Traditionally the society in Kashmir has been a strong religious society. That is why the need of an NGO was never felt in the sphere of social concerns. The obvious examples can be traced that an orphan was adopted by one of his relatives or neighbors in the pre-extremist period i.e., period before 1989; hence no need of orphanages was felt. This trend was so common in Kashmir that every family could have been called an NGO. As the main problems concerning the society were taken up by the society itself, hence no need of an NGO was felt even though few social welfare or voluntary organizations could be traced at that period in Kashmir.

The post extremist period (i.e., period after 1989) marked a turning point for NGOs and it was here that the need of an NGO was greatly felt in Kashmir. The increase in violence led to the increase in the number of casualties and victims of violence. Over the few years, the Indian army's efforts and ways to crush the militancy in the Valley greatly disrupted the normal life of the people. Other direct consequences were the shortage of food and supplies. Curfews came to be imposed, offices began to remain closed and the tourist and other commercial activities

that Kashmir had flourished upon began to be affected adversely.

With this turmoil, the need of someone to relieve the lives of common masses was greatly felt. Numerous problems like increase in the number of killings, orphans, widows, psychiatric disorders, curtailing of freedom of speech and expression as well as free movement within the territory, unemployment and many more led a derailing effect on the peace and life of common masses in Kashmir.

As the problems go on increasing day by day, more NGOs and local initiatives began to come up to the fore to meet the needs of the society. But numerous factors were impeding their growth, the foremost being the increased violence. It became a major hindrance in the normal functioning and development of NGOs. The NGOs could not function in such an environment where the lives of its workers are constantly at risk. Another hindrance that affected the effective functioning and development of NGOs was the strategy of the government to curtail the increased militancy and its support among the masses. From a defensive to the more offensive and aggressive strategy in the post 1990 period, to curb the militancy in the valley, the people came to feel the harsh consequences of militancy for themselves and were not ready to help the victims. The aim of the government was to crush the militancy and its support among the masses in the Valley, the government was in no way playing the positive role in the development of NGOs because it felt that an active NGOs would reduce the effects of militancy which would led the local people to believe that militancy could be continued without disturbing their lives. Without an active and effective NGOs working to bring relief in their sufferings, the people began to feel adverse effects of militancy and strategy of government to eliminate militancy and its support in the Valley.

The next main step in the development of NGOs in the Kashmir Valley was the decision of the government to conduct elections in 1996 on free and fair basis or may at least seem so. For that very

purpose it felt the need of democratic institutions including media and NGOs, which had become the forum for projecting a democratic character to international and domestic communities. Study has revealed that a dramatic increase in the functioning of NGOs in the State started from 1996-1997 period. These NGOs were mostly Government sponsored or one of the many agencies of government working for the restoration of peace and normalcy in J&K. These NGOs, as came to be called as GONGOs or Governmental NGOs, evolved over a short span of time and exist even today, at least on paper.

NGOs Working for Women Empowerment in Kashmir:-

In Kashmir NGOs being the part of social welfare and development are working actively for social welfare activities and social development programmes of both urban as well as rural communities. NGOs in Kashmir are always ready to go ahead in the works of upliftment and betterment of children, women development, Education, social awareness and so on.

NGOs in Kashmir are working for child education, welfare and rights, women empowerment and development, old age homes for aged persons, physically as well as mentally handicapped persons, and upliftment of women and children of rural communities. NGOs in Kashmir are organizing different programmes for education, health, social justice, disaster management, natural resources, agricultural development, social awareness, upliftment of backward and deprived communities, poverty alleviation and distress relief programmes. The issues that had become main part of the active NGOs in Kashmir are environment conservation and protection, human rights, social equality, legal issues, drinking water, RTI (Right to Information), Development both of rural and urban communities, forming self help groups and supporting these groups, R&D (Research and Development).

The main NGOs with their main achievements working for the women empowerment in Kashmir are:

S.No	Name of NGO	Major Achievements
1	STEP	50 families affected by unrest and suffering from abject poverty were provided 100% grant based support by establishing income generation units.
2	NEAT (NGOs Education And Trainings)	Creche centres, health and education etc.
3	Voluntary Organisation On Environment And Socio – Economic Planning	Various projects funded by Govt. of India or Sate Govt. in various fields like Vocational Education, Handicrafts, Aged, Children, Women etc. at far flung areas of Anantnag.
4	Duri Yateem Social Welfare Organisation	Orphan home for children b/w 3 years of age, who had lost their parents in the violation. Upliftment of orphans, widows, handicapped and mentally retired persons. Works especially for empowerment of women and children.
5	Self Employed Women’s Association Sewa	Women Development and Empowerment, Vocational education and trainings
6	New Kashmir Women And Child Welfare Society	Awareness programmes, skill upgradation training programmes for destitute & deserving women and girls of different areas. Formation of Self Help Groups and individual Entrepreneurs.
7	J And K Habakhatoon Foundation	Women and child development, safe drinking water, awareness generation camps and family counseling centres.
8	Women’s Era Welfare Society	Working with Ministry of Textiles, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Women and Child Development and Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports
9	J And K Women And Child Development Organization	Women and Child Development, Women Empowerment, Vocational Education and Trainings. Development of Health and Hygiene.
10	Unique Women And Child Development Society	Emancipation of Women and Children, Awareness camps, Social economic development programmes, Educational programmes and vocational training.
11	Valley Women’s Welfare Society	Upliftment of Women through various governmental schemes
12	Shabi Alam Women’s Welfare Society	Conducting projects and programmes funded by central and state government. Women upliftment and welfare.
13	Nazakat Mahila Mandal Women Welfare Society	Women Empowerment, Relief and Rehabilitation.
14	Happy home Women’s Children and Downtrodden Society	Rural Development, women Development, Handicraft/Handloom Development & Khadi Development.
15	Women And Children Welfare Society	Education, Health, Vocational Trainings, Environmental etc.
16	Border State Women Educational And Welfare Society	Conducted various computer oriented projects/seminars/programmes for downtrodden women of far flung areas. Opened a number of job oriented programmes for women.
17	Alsidedeq Women’s Children Welfare Society	Conducted number of medical camps and trained more than 80 girls in skill training, cutting and tailoring.
18	Mother Helpage	Supported 500 needy families through women empowerment, thousands of families have been provided tools for income generation, support provide to thousands of poor and orphan students in terms of education, health and nutrition, support for elderly women and widows and generally empowering women in the state.

Source: Survey data

Means that NGOs adopt for Women Empowerment in Kashmir:-

Though a good number of NGOs are working in the Kashmir valley, but the NGOs working for emancipation for women are quite a few. From the analysis of NGOs working for women, we find that these NGOs are mainly working for their empowerment, whether it is through education or awareness, through economic aid or skill development and by providing them access to basic amenities of life like food, drinking water and medical care etc. These NGOs adopted different means for their empowerment in the Valley, the main ones are:

1. Through Education:-

In the development of every society, education plays a very pivotal role. Through education the horizons of our mindset is widened. It provides a new outlook for mankind and greatly empowers those who are powerless. World over studies have revealed the most important tool for the empowerment of women is education itself. Through proper education and training imparted to women make them play their roles in social, economic and political spheres as equal members of the society. Keeping in mind the importance of education for women emancipation and empowerment, the NGOs in Kashmir have adopted the education as an instrument for women upliftment and welfare. Many more educational institutions were opened up in the far flung areas of Kashmir. Various measure positive measures were taken for girl education in the Valley. Free education is being provided to the poor and orphan children throughout the Valley.

2. Through awareness camps:-

Another measure used by the NGOs for women empowerment in Kashmir is through conducting many awareness camps for women. Through these camps, women were provided awareness about their right both in civil as well political spheres. Various awareness programmes were organized for women in the far flung areas of Kashmir to enhance their potentialities in various spheres of life.

3. Through Socio-economic means:-

Another important measure for the women empowerment adopted by the NGOs in Kashmir is through socio-economic means. Through this measure, women who unable to provide for their own sustenance were provide financial aid. Many more downtrodden women were provided financial aid to generate economic units. Even various training camps and programmes were organized, where these women were provided

vocational and skill development training. Various socio-economic development programmes were organized for the general welfare of women. Basic health facilities were provided to the women and many more upliftment measures were adopted for the destitute women in Kashmir.

4. Women's Participation:-

This is one of the main tools adopted for the women empowerment by the NGOs in Kashmir. This is based on the concept of "by women and for women". More and more women were made to participate in social as well as political activities in the Valley. Women were encouraged to be part of social programmes organized for women welfare. They were made to become the part of various self help groups and NGOs working in the Valley. A research conducted by K. Suri in 2013 on the role of NGOs in the prevention of conflict reveals that the most vulnerable group to violence and conflict are women than men in the State of Jammu and Kashmir¹⁴. However the participation of women in the peace process seems to be a good sign regarding the efforts made by the NGOs to maintain the condition so f stability in the conflict affected areas.

CONCLUSION

Though the conflict remains the main feature of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, the major victim of this conflict had been the women folk in Kashmir. They have faced the domestic violence at the hands of their family members inside their homes and outside by militancy and security troops. Serious consequences of the conflict have been felt by the women in Kashmir resulting in many social, economic as well as health including mental problems. Although the State Government has launched many schemes for their development but they had not been successful. Hence the need of NGOs was felt more seriously. Although there is not a good number of NGOs for women in Kashmir, yet they had come up with good results regarding women empowerment and upliftment. There is a need of such more NGOs and self help groups, so that the women in Kashmir who had lived a distress and destitute will come up with a secure future where she will have a free access and choice in the matters concerning social, economic and political fields.

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