

Life-as-Lived Today: Perpetual (Undesired) Liminality of the Half-widows of Kashmir

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Abstract

According to Victor Turner, all liminality must eventually dissolve, for it is a state of great intensity that cannot exist very long without some sort of structure to stabilize it. This paper takes his lead and attempts to describe the liminal status of those women, the whereabouts of whose husbands are not known (they are locally referred to as 'half-widows') in the conflict zone of Kashmir, India. The article examines the concept of liminality based on life as lived today by these half-widows and shows how the effects of liminality operate in their day to day life, making them extremely vulnerable victims. In this, it is an attempt to expand upon the concept of liminality, originally linked almost exclusively to rites of passage. Furthermore, this paper reflects on the idea of permanent liminality that has been elaborated by sociologist Arpad Szakolczai. The narratives of the half-widows of Kashmir provide an example of how they are trapped in a form of "permanent liminality" far beyond what was initially defined as a "temporal state".

Keywords: Kashmir, half-widows, permanent liminality, vulnerability, India

Conflict: the Context of Liminality

Kashmir, over the past sixty years, has remained a contested terrain and has experienced political, social, economic and cultural turmoil. It is what Tariq Ali (2002: 233) calls “the unfinished business of partition”, and Kashmir has remained a bone of contention between Pakistan and India since the Independence/creation of both countries in 1947. The accession of Kashmir to the Union of India has dominated the historical relationship between India and Pakistan, where India asserts that Kashmir is an integral part of its territory, and Pakistan claims that as a predominantly Muslim territory, Kashmir's rightful place is in the Muslim majority state of Pakistan. The dispute over Kashmir has led to three full-scale wars in 1947, 1965 and 1971, and a limited war in Kargil in 1999 (Butalia 2002: xi). On the other hand, over the years, the erosion of Kashmir's autonomy and its integration within the Indian Union has caused resentment among a large section of people in Kashmir. The widespread frustration among Kashmiri Muslims about the policies pursued by New Delhi and some of their elected leaders has erupted into a freedom movement with strong secessionist overtones.

This state of alienation set the stage for armed militancy in the late 1980s, led by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). When the armed rebellion first began in 1989, most Kashmiris believed it would be a short struggle. Kashmiris were out in the streets in the tens of thousands, calling for ‘*azadi*’ or independence (Human Rights Watch 2006: 8). Ordinary Kashmiris never thought that it would be such a long and violent battle which would lead to so much suffering in their homeland. The Kashmir Valley witnessed a series of civil curfews, strikes and numerous demonstrations that often turned violent. The conflict “of” Kashmir (a dispute between India and Pakistan) gave way to conflict “in” Kashmir (a conflict within the territorial space in India) (Dasgupta 2001:4).

By 1990, Kashmir fell under the shadow of militarily backed central rule. The deployment of troops on the streets of Kashmir to curb armed insurgency swiftly militarized the Valley. Ever since then, this geographic space has remained not just theoretically but also practically a “liminal space”. Kashmir, even today, is on the “threshold and the people of Kashmir are resisting liminality in many and varied ways including violence. The region is continuously passing through the struggle of what one may call the *narrative of rupture*” (Shiv 2013).

Disappearances: the Reason for Liminal Half-widows

Since the beginning of the insurgency, thousands of Kashmiris have gone missing. According to the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP)¹, there have been an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 disappearances in Kashmir (APDP 2011). When people disappear, there are two kinds of victims: the individuals themselves who have gone missing, and their families, torn between despair and hope, living

with uncertainty and pain, waiting for news, sometimes for decades (ICRC 2014). In a sense, it is not merely the abducted person who is held hostage; the family and relatives too are held hostage until the person returns. The family of the “missing person” faces socio-economic hardships, physical suffering and psychological trauma. In that context, the phenomenon of enforced disappearance has become a severe scourge due to the fears it generates, anxieties it breeds, fatigue it inflicts, and the psychological strain it imposes on the relatives of the disappeared (Zahir 2012).

Whatever be the reason and nature of the disappearances, the disappeared persons, largely men in conflict-affected areas, have left behind wives and families. The wives of such disappeared men are now known locally as ‘half-widows’, the whereabouts of whose husbands are not known (Rashid 2011). This phenomenon, new to Kashmir, has brought different interpretations and views. The term is referred to women whose husbands are “missing” and the legal position of their status is yet to be clarified both by the clergy and the law (Dewan 2002: 151). By conservative estimates, there are 1,500 women who are identified as half-widows “whose husbands are assumed dead but there is no proof to show they actually are” (Butalia 2002: xii). Disappearances seem, in fact, more gruesome than death because in the case of death, the wife accepts the fact that her husband is no more and she is a widow. The irony of the half-widows is the lingering hope that their husbands might be alive and may return one day. This is the reason why, in popular media, these women are also known as “waiting women”.

After the disappearance of the husband, women are placed on the threshold between waiting and living; of knowing and not knowing what comes next. They occupy a liminal space that denies them both the status of a wife and the dignity of a widow (Omar 2014). As their husbands are missing, they are in a dilemma as to whether they are still married, or widowed. Their status thus becomes liminal. In the patriarchal and hierarchical socio-cultural ethos of Kashmir, being a single woman with ‘liminal’ status, the half-widow is placed in a very precarious position. It is in this context that the paper examines the haunting questions of half-widows derived from her strange and unknown socio-cultural locality.

Liminality and Liminal Half-widows

In anthropology, liminality is derived from the Latin “limen”, which means “threshold” – that is, the part of a doorway that must be crossed when entering a house. It is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet transitioned to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. The theory of liminality in social contexts originally emerged with anthropologist Arnold van

Gennep's analysis of *rites de passages* (1960[1909]). In particular, van Gennep described ceremonies marking transitional events like funerals and weddings as possessing three major phases: separation, transition, and incorporation.

Victor Turner elaborated on van Gennep's *rites de passage* to describe this state of transitioning as a "liminal period", which is an unstructured in-between phase of rituals where participants transit from one social status to another. Turner used the phrase "Betwixt and between" to capture the essence of his theory of "liminality," to analyze rites of passage within tribal, socio-cultural systems. He defined liminal individuals or entities as neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions and at the same time being both (Turner 1967). Turner sees the "structural invisibility of the liminal person [as having] a twofold character". They are at once "no longer classified" and "not yet classified" (Hong 2012). Yet liminality is a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point, and as such it is a temporary state that ends when the initiate is reincorporated into the social structure (La Shure 2005).

This paper intends to move further on two counts that are prominently expressed in Turner's liminality, i.e. there is a defined time for transition and that the liminal stage has positive connotation.

'According to Turner, all liminality must eventually dissolve, for it is a state of great intensity that cannot exist very long without some sort of structure to stabilize it' (Homas 1979). However, when the concept is applied beyond ritual to modern societies, questions are being raised about the temporary state of liminal status. When the reintegration process in which the person is recognized as a part of the social order and is welcomed into that order with a new role does not take place, liminality becomes permanent. This idea of permanent liminality has been elaborated on extensively in numerous works by sociologist Arpad Szokolczai. In his book *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, Szokolczai (2000) argues that there are three types of permanent liminality, each closely related to one of the phases of the rites of passage. He acknowledges that "liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases in this sequence becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (Szokolczai 2000: 220).

Secondly, Turner attributed a rather univocally positive connotation to liminal situations, as ways of renewal. However, Agnes Horvath (2013) argues that liminal situations can be, and in actual fact in modern era, rather quite different: periods of uncertainly, anguish, even existential fear: a facing of the abyss in void. Van Gennep (1960) describes this experience as a boundless, marginalized one often accompanied by isolation and the suspension of social status. In liminal situations, the persons often live outside their normal environment where they come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially unstructured (Thomassen 2006). A more permanent period in this stage can also become very dangerous and destructive. In modern societies such state can bring social exclusion, making person live at the margin for rest of their lives.

The example of half-widows of Kashmir caught in conflict zone shows that, the women are kept on the “threshold” for a time period which is not defined. Over the last two and half decades, the half-widows are “waiting” in their liminal status and seem to provide glimpses into what permanent liminality could mean. Thus, going beyond a ritual base, this article examines the social locality in modern times in which the half-widows are faced with situations of ambiguities and dilemmas, in what appears to be a liminal phase that has become ‘fixed’. Further, with the help of the concept of liminality, this article analyses life as lived by the half-widows of Kashmir, and its in-between status that is not positive. Being almost perpetually frozen in this state, the half-widows are confronted with vulnerabilities and negative existential questions with no answers. Finally, while describing the impacts of living in such an ‘undesired’ liminal state, it explores whether there are possibilities of ‘crossing over’ to a state in which half-widows can participate as members and citizens of their community or country, or continue to struggle with their present ambivalence.

Data Collection Process

The issue of the half-widow is an off-shoot of the Kashmir conflict, a complex and vast struggle. The present study was undertaken to examine in-depth the socio-economic vulnerabilities of half-widows and how these vulnerabilities affect them in the context of the larger conflict in the region. The field investigation, undertaken from July 2013, lasted for over a year and was done in different phases, i.e. establishing initial rapport, mapping and identifying stakeholders, implementing interview schedules and conducting case studies. The focus of the study demanded that the identification of primary stakeholders i.e. half-widows should be done from among those who have been the victims of conflict in Kashmir since 1990 till date. This had serious implications not only for the identification of half-widows, but also to capture ‘historical’ details. Many of the identified women with their present unfavourable social, economic, psychological and physical conditions, were unable to recollect the happenings chronologically and in exact detail. Further, field investigations in conflict regions have additional complexities; at times it became extremely difficult, dangerous and delicate to undertake this study.

However, help in locating half-widows came from unexpected quarters: local officials, NGO personnel, a doctor, driver, businessmen and shopkeepers. There were immense difficulties in locating the women in far-flung areas as there were absolutely no leads. At times approaching a nearby police station to get some clue regarding half-widows created serious difficulties. The suspicion and fear that continue to permeate the Kashmir Valley in general in the context of conflict and political instability has brought a ‘trust deficit’ that curtails freedom in investigation to a great extent.

Often, women were reluctant to let researchers in, suspecting them to be associates of either side i.e. military or militants. At some places, the doors were closed on arrival and the researcher was told to leave immediately. Only after confirming identities was one granted entry. The fact that most of the field investigators were locals from Kashmir helped in proving one's credentials. Access to half-widows was also difficult due to the presence of others around her, especially other family members. The local socio-cultural context – where a woman (half-widow) lived continuously under community pressures, expectations, bound by traditions and unwritten laws – restricted her interactions with an outsider. Many times, even women who had been disowned by their own families and by their in-laws were not able to talk freely.

The health of the respondent was another adverse factor in talking freely or having interactions of longer duration, as a significant number of women were not in good health. Over the years, many of them have suffered from physical and mental illnesses. Language was another barrier, as some far-flung areas were dominated by *Gujjars* who spoke only *Gojri* or *Dogri*, the local dialect. As the research team only spoke Kashmiri and Hindi, they had to rely upon local interpreters for translation.

The women did not wish to talk much about traumatic experiences. Their weariness of shedding tears and sharing the same stories without any satisfactory responses was visible. In a few cases, women refused outright to let investigators in, as they had already been interviewed by numerous “visitors” and “report writers” earlier. The extremely painful and very different nature of cases had to be dealt with sensitivity in order to bring out the intricacies of each woman's narrative, without hurting or offending them.

There was a constant fear and insecurity of hostile forces around (militants, military personnel, separatists etc). The environment of fear and insecurity described in the Human Rights Watch (2006) report *Everyone lives in fear*, was often a real experience during this field investigation. However, the team, consisting of both male and female investigators, was able to establish a very good rapport with the half-widows, after the initial ice-breaking. Some of the investigators were local Kashmiris, and this helped respondents to locate them as their ‘own’. This helped in creating a comfort zone for deeper sharing. In order to maintain confidentiality, names have deliberately been changed and sensitive details have been omitted.

The methods adopted for the empirical investigations were both qualitative and quantitative. A structured interview schedule was implemented among 150 households of half-widows identified through snowballing method, geographically spread across nearly 140 villages² and towns in eight districts of the Kashmir Valley and the Poonch district of Jammu region. Based on the detailed household information drawn through structured interviews, more in-depth qualitative narratives capturing the experience of vulnerability were collected from half-widows through case studies and Focus Group Discussions. A similar exercise was undertaken

among other stakeholders from different walks of life, i.e. advocates, State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) personnel, health personnel, academicians, government officials, civil society group, journalists, and community leaders. Thus, the data collection process though difficult, led the investigators to gain 'insider's view' and the deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in issues of half-widow in the region.

Undesired Liminality and Questions of Half-widows

In any society there are vulnerable individuals and groups who have little power over events that affect them. The women of Jammu and Kashmir are such a group whose well-being is affected in a major way due to the ongoing conflict in Kashmir and the larger social context in which they are located add to their vulnerability immensely. The women of Kashmir are more vulnerable as traditional patriarchy prevails strongly in Kashmiri society. Both Kazi (2009) and Shekhawat (2014) strongly argue that:

in Kashmir, patriarchy did not cease to exist even momentarily during the conflict period. The escalation of conflict made women the most vulnerable object, of both, the patriarchal and traditional Islamic society and militarized state. Even in a woman's victimization, patriarchal values played crucial role. Women confronted discrimination from 'all men' surrounding them, whether militants, or security forces, or their own families. (Shekhawat 2014: 155)

The harsh and repressive gender relations that emerged during last three decades have victimized the women of Kashmir sexually, mentally, emotionally and physically. The societal control over women's public and private lives has increased many folds with the reinforcement of patriarchy, i.e. restricted lifestyle, wearing of the veil, etc. In addition to the hierarchic and patriarchic set up the women were deprived of space and courage to voice their opinion or opt for choices. Thus, the domain of decision making and speaking out was kept afar from women. That women are generally not allowed to speak in public forums showed in the meetings the research team conducted in Bandipora and Baramulla, there were 13 women present and only three men, but the women were not allowed to speak. Instead, a son, uncle or other relative were speaking on their behalf.

It is in this context, the absence of men in their families adds to their vulnerabilities immensely. The roles assumed by women after the death or disappearance of male family members, often confused her as to how to respond to news situations. The woman had no choice what role to play in society as it came to her unexpectedly. When the things turned ugly women had to take charge of their lives and responsibility of their families. They began to shoulder the economic responsibilities, to educate their children and drive the cart of daily life. They began to visit various jails, torture and detention centres and travelled to alien places; they began to follow

their legal suits (see Mushtaq 2012). It was difficult for women to come out of home, yet the conditions of conflict forced them to come out. 'Absence of men pushed many women into the public sphere to negotiate with both the state and society for their survival as well as of their families on an almost daily basis' (Shekhawat 2014: 90). Thus, emotional trauma and economic insecurity are the most immediate outcomes of widowhood or half-widowhood, and the women had to do the balancing act in a gender biased social context.

To accept the fact that one's husband has disappeared for many years and may not come back during one's lifetime is an emotional decision. No one can tell a woman to close the chapter and say that her husband is gone, he is dead, and it is best to accept this. It is her decision to choose to live with that hope. However, this "lingering hope" and the unending "waiting at the threshold" make half-widows different than other widows. We encountered a widow named *Rashida* in a village of Kashmir whose husband was killed by some unknown people. She insisted on knowing who killed her husband. After some time, another person disappeared from the same locality. *Rashida* went to the disappeared person's wife, *Salma*, who was pursuing the search for her husband in forests, hospitals, army camps and wherever she could afford to go. After witnessing the struggles of *Salma* the widow exclaimed that "I am better off than you; at least I am aware that my husband has been killed but you'll have to endure pain and live in a state of uncertainty for God knows how long".

This ambiguous status of half-widows, of course undesired, seems to have come to stay for a long time, without concrete responses as to its logical, political and social solutions. The disappearances of men were the cause of the liminality of half-widows. This period – starting from the disappearance of the husband, till knowing his definitive whereabouts – may be described as the "liminal period" for half-widows. The present study uncovered that as many as 37% of the half-widows interviewed have been in a liminal phase for 20 years or more, ever since their husbands disappeared. Little over 52% of them have been in this transition phase for 11 to 19 years, and 11% have been living without their husbands less than 10 years.

'Is he alive or dead?' is the recurring question, in the beginning when the disappearance took place, and even now, after the long and tiring search processes are, in some cases, over. It is difficult to accept, yet some half-widows live in hope. *Hafiza* from Baramulla raises the question:

He was taken in front of me. Tell me whether he is alive or is martyred. If he is martyred, I will go to the graveyard and that will give me peace of mind. If I come to know that my husband is at the remotest corner of the border, I will go there even if I have to beg. I admit that my husband was guilty, but why did he disappear? I will tell him to stay in jail but will at least meet him.

From this one prime question, other questions follow that express the deep sense of ambiguity and dilemmas faced by half-widows. This phenomenon is remarkably

captured by the “to be or not to be” syndrome drawn from *Hamlet*, which serves to explain the predicament and uncertainty in life-as-lived by the women within this ‘liminal stage’.

1. To search or not to search?
2. To declare or not to declare the death of the husband?
3. To remarry or not to remarry?
4. To fight or not to fight the battle for justice?
5. Do I belong anywhere?
6. But what do I do now?

1) To search or not to search?

After her husband who had left home did not return, the obvious step for a woman was to make an inquiry and search for him. However, there were two haunting questions that needed to be answered: whether to search or not, and if yes, where to search? Nearly 9% of the women indicated that they did not search for their missing husbands. This negative response seems surprising, but it provides glimpses into the depth of vulnerabilities that some of the women must have faced at the time when their husbands went missing. In some cases, these women were not educated. Not knowing the procedures, and devoid of any proper guidance, they remained at home, waiting. The young age and inexperience of some half-widows made it difficult to handle the complex situations of searching for their husbands and negotiating arduous follow-ups. On the other hand, there were also external factors that played an important role in blocking the search processes.

Sakina from Bandipora had a brother-in-law who was an army informer; thus fear of militants was the reason behind the reluctance of the family and neighbourhood to search for her husband. A further inquiry into this reveals that the socio-political elements involved in the “missing or disappearance” episodes are sensitive and risky if one shows any association or closeness with state or non-state forces. Searching for a person who had connections either with militant groups or state forces created fear and insecurity for women and their households.

However, as many as 91% of women made efforts to locate their lost husbands. They were haunted by another question: where was one to search for them? Accessing information on disappeared persons remains one of the biggest challenges for the relatives of the disappeared. The way in which the entire abduction is carried out makes it nearly impossible to obtain reliable information on the whereabouts of disappeared persons and their fate. When the location of the disappeared person is not known, it is impossible to initiate concrete searches or legal action (APDP 2011). In Kashmir, where a large number of men have disappeared, leaving behind their wives and children, family and relatives have gone from place to place, searching for their missing men. They have gone to police stations, jails, hospitals, army camps and far-off villages, but with no results.

2) To declare or not to declare the death of the husband?

Every half-widow lives with hope, and is waiting for her husband to return home. However, over a period of time, there is a natural acceptance of the husband not coming back. Thus, some of the women accept that he will not return, and they decide to move on. But this 'natural acceptance' is not the case with everyone. Many women live life of struggle, fighting for survival without economic and social support. At times, she is compelled to undertake the process of declaring the death of the husband. In both cases, it is the woman who is the sufferer because in case the husband returns, it is the woman who would be made to feel guilty about choosing to declare him dead.

Another important reason is economic: the government of Jammu and Kashmir has issued two government orders where people killed in 'militancy-related' incidents, but not themselves 'involved in militant activities' are entitled to an ex-gratia payment of Rs 100,000 (1 lakh) and are entitled to a government job for the next of kin on compassionate grounds. Ex-gratia can be received only when the husband is declared to be dead, and since their husbands have not been declared dead officially, the half-widow is not entitled to ex-gratia payment by the state.

The declaration of the death of the missing husband changes the legal status of the woman to a widow and not a half-widow. Despite this, there are among those who have received compensation after declaring the death of their husband, women who are still waiting for them to return. The legal declaration does not end their liminal status. The dilemma continues to haunt the women; for them compensation is only a means to meet the economic crisis in the household. There are many instances when the woman refused any ex-gratia compensation, demanding to see the face of the husband whether dead or alive.

3) To remarry or not to remarry?

The half-widows are mostly Muslim, and under the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act 1939, a woman married under Muslim law is entitled to obtain a decree for the dissolution of marriage if the whereabouts of her husband have not been known for a period of four years. However, there are differences of opinion and confusion about the remarriage of half-widows and the acceptable waiting period for the same. Since the concept of the half-widow is not mentioned in the Quran, there is no clear guideline as to how to proceed with remarriage. This issue is clearly related to law and religion.

There is no consensus in Islamic law (*Sharia*) on their remarriage. All major schools of thoughts have differing views on this matter. There is also an opinion that if the husband remains missing, without informing about his whereabouts even after proper investigation, the marriage is considered dissolved. Opinions also differ on the validity of a second marriage, should the first husband return.

In this light, a three-part consultation with Ulema (religious scholars) on the issues of half-widows in Kashmir came out with a consensus decision in December 2013, paving the way for half-widows to remarry four years after their husbands' disappearance. This was the first such initiative by civil society groups in Kashmir in the past 23 years of conflict, but it was too late for most of the half-widows who continue to suffer psychologically and physically; especially the half-widows who were very young when their husband disappeared.

The remarriage of a half-widow, on the other hand, is more than just a question of law and governance, and needs to be located in the cultural milieu and family conditions. There was no clarity on the issue among half-widows themselves. Nearly 35% of half-widows felt that they should not re-marry and 20% felt they should. However, a little over 45% of them were confused as they are not sure what they should do. The women have also expressed a divided opinion over whether or not the community encourages them to remarry. As many as 45% women feel that the community does encourage half-widows to remarry. On the other hand, 43% are of the opinion that the community does not encourage such practices.

In many cases the remarriage of half-widows who have children from the missing husband is a difficult proposition. Often the price that they have to pay for re-marrying is separation from their children as their new families refuse to accept the children borne of first husband. In such cases, the children are put in extremely vulnerable conditions and are a burden to already ailing grandparents. In some cases the children of the half-widows of the first husband suffer the most, as they do not see the second husband of their mother as their father. Often children become victims of differential treatment from the second husband. Therefore, many women refused to remarry. *Saleema* from Poonch district was very clear that the women whose husbands have disappeared should not remarry because they have to look after their children. She herself did not agree to remarry as she has two daughters and she needs to take care of them. For her now the marriage does not remain at the level of a man and a woman but her children become part of her decision-making.

4) To fight or not to fight the battle for justice?

Only 44% of half-widows have ever been to court to access legal recourse regarding the disappearance of their husbands. This clearly indicates that a large number of women have not gone to the judiciary to pursue justice. In a state where on-going conflict has brought to focus issues of large-scale violations of human rights, it is indeed surprising that only 28% of the respondents are aware of the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC). A large majority of the respondents who had lost someone close in the family did not feel the need to know about state bodies like the State Human Rights Commission. This once again points to how people perceive justice mechanisms in the state.

On the other hand, there are other difficulties of dealing with the phenomenon of disappearance; the first is the anonymity of the group which had caused the disappearance, particularly when disappeared men were civilians and not affiliated to any group. As the men were picked up when they were out of the house or at work places etc., family members and relatives are not sure who the perpetrators are. When the identity of the kidnapers is not known, families do not know what to do to get their men released. More than 61% of half-widows were not aware of the perpetrator/agency responsible for their husband's disappearance. As many as 39% women said that they know the perpetrators responsible for the disappearance of their husbands. However, naming the agency/group/forces responsible for disappearance is not that easy, and the question of one's affiliations to either group would be inviting trouble. Often the perpetrators' political influence or money power prevents families from raising their voice. The majority of the women confirmed that their husbands were *not* affiliated to any group and if they were, the women were not aware of it. Hence, with whom and against whom do they fight the battle for justice?

This has left many women silent, unable to voice the pain and anger as they were not able to prove their case in the court of law. Some women have expressed their situation as 'caught between the devil and the deep sea'.

5) Do I belong anywhere?

In spite of facing numerous difficulties and being in a very vulnerable state, many of the women cannot or do not want to go back to their maternal homes. In Kashmiri society the marriage practices are patrilocal, and it is considered the duty of the parents to marry their daughter and take her to the in-laws' house where she and her husband will live. The society is by and large patriarchal, and believes that the rightful place of a woman, once she is married, is with her in-laws, and she is not welcome in her maternal home. Here, the critical issue after the disappearance of the husband is the status of the woman in the family. Her claim over the family property depends entirely on the status she holds. Many women have been deprived of their share in the property, increasing their social and economic vulnerabilities. One of the respondents, *Naseema* from Baramulla explains:

I was at my in-laws. I didn't know where my husband went. I had a six-month old baby at that time. My in-laws evicted me saying I don't belong there. Since then I stay with my paternal family. My daughter has attained a marriageable age. My father-in-law gave me no share of property. He and my mother-in-law are dead. I have two brothers-in-law. I sought help from many people to get my daughter's share in the property but everyone told me that because her grandfather has not given anything to her, she can't be given her share. My brother-in-laws said they had no third brother, and so my daughter has no share in their property.

Many young half-widows continue to live with their parents-in-law, in houses which they do not own. Not being the owner of the house means that they are dependent on people who are the owners of the house. Various attempts are made by many half-widows to ask for their right to property like house, land etc. which are denied to them by their parents-in-law. The problem of their own rights in property; particularly immovable property like land and houses owned by the families of their husbands, have not been settled.

In some cases it has also been noted that half-widows do not want to live with their in-laws as they are treated more as domestic help than as members of the family. Many of them want to leave these houses, but where do they go from there? Many of them wish to live in their parents' homes, but cannot. They carry on with a life of dilemmas, facing hard and stressful times, with a sense of not belonging anywhere.

6) But what do I do now?

The armed conflict has imposed new and alien roles on the women of Kashmir. Half-widows are forced to take up different roles and responsibilities unfamiliar to them, like being a woman without her spouse, and becoming the head of the household, caring and bringing up children, managing family matters, connecting with social networks, etc. However, in a traditional patriarchal society, women, especially half-widows, are subdued in many ways. Being without an earning member in the family means that women are forced to go and seek work, but the moment she steps out of the home, or stays away from it, family members would accuse her of being a woman of 'bad character'. Within this hostile environment, vulnerable half-widows who hope their husbands will return have to deal with the existential question: but what do I do now?

This tragic incidence mentioned by a young mother, *Sayeeda* shows the struggle of a woman who even today, many years after her husband's disappearance, is alone and lonely:

My child was the tender age of 2 years when his father disappeared. Now he is 6 years old. His friends at school asked him about his father. I don't know how to make him understand reality because I had told him that he has gone out of Kashmir for work. I didn't want him to experience the trauma I was experiencing. I wanted him to get some more time before he knew. But now we don't know how to deal with the situation. I know his father is not proved dead, but has disappeared. Should we disclose the truth or keep the child in darkness, saying his father has gone for work? My son then will live with this for his whole life. And what if someone else tells him? He will not trust his mother who has been closest to him. He will develop mistrust.

Economic and cultural conditions confront half-widows with yet other sets of questions that are beyond their control. The family composition of the households shows that nearly 47% of the surveyed half-widows have children below the age of 21,

and many of them are daughters. One could easily presume that the responsibility of bringing up these young and growing children would fall on their mothers. Having a daughter of marriageable age in the house is a 'psychological burden' and makes the woman more vulnerable in the absence of her husband. In socio-cultural context of Kashmir one needs to understand why it is a 'psychological burden'. Firstly, making financial arrangements for marriage – many of the half-widows live in poor economic conditions and find it extremely difficult to mobilise the huge resources necessary to meet the expenses of social customs at marriage. Secondly, due to numerous deaths and disappearances of young men, in the past three decades, matches for young women are difficult to find. 'Late marriages', due to not finding proper matches for young girls, is a growing phenomenon in Kashmir. In a conflict situation and in the context of numerous rapes and sexual assaults on women, having a young daughter at home is also seen as a threat. In their present situation many of the half-widows are finding themselves in a difficult position.

Culture of Conflict and Conditions of Women

The women of Kashmir have been direct and indirect targets of violence and their sufferings are severe. Yet over the last two and a half decades, despite multiple dimensions of vulnerability, some of these women seek to challenge the discourse that sees them only as victims. Despite their vulnerability, their ability to cope with and confront risk has managed to keep them from becoming victims. They have not remained 'passive', or led entirely subdued lives (Qutab 2012: 274). Some half-widows have attempted to transcend victimhood to ensure better lives for their household, especially their children. Thus, the identity of a woman as a vulnerable victim in the conflict situation of Kashmir is critically challenged by stories of women who have travelled from vulnerability to finding power within (Aaliya 2011; Shekhawat 2014).

However, what haunts Kashmir today is that the half-widows *are* a significant part of Kashmiri society: they serve as a continuous reminder of the largely un-addressed pain and anguish of women caught in conflict. There is a deep sense of victimhood present in some of the narratives presented by women as they live today, silently saying, "who cares when we cry". As individuals, these women are trapped in undesired situations from which they wait to emerge. A victim is a survivor who waits for justice. Victimhood is a state of being, a liminal identity comprising waiting. A victim is a person suspended between an old normalcy from which she is disembedded, and to which she is waiting to return, and in this, it is "an unhappy state between personhood and citizenship" (Shiv 2013). Women of Kashmir have assumed new identities like 'rape victims', 'abducted women', 'widows', 'half-widows' and so on. Women have borne the truth of brutalization (Kazi 2009; Shekhawat 2014).

The questions that come along with the liminal status have impacted the half-widows of Kashmir in many and varied ways. The marginalization of women in the broader culture of conflict in Kashmir is painful, but an accepted reality in the region. Ordinary people, especially women living in the patriarchal set-up in Kashmir, have limited space to express themselves. Since trust is the first casualty in conflict-affected regions, many women do not share or reveal the stories that caused them trauma. Hence, they are stuck in and with their trauma for years.

A large number of half-widows have become economically vulnerable, finding it extremely difficult to manage the economic affairs of the family. Additionally, some are physically and psychologically not in a position to undertake productive economic activities. Nearly 51% of the half-widows surveyed suffer from physical ailments and over 35% suffer from mental disorders which have made their lives difficult. In many cases, women are not able to access quality medical treatment for serious ailments due to poor financial conditions. A substantial number of half-widows have been denied their right to property by parents-in-law. In the absence of any consensus among religious and community leaders regarding their right to property, there is little possibility of conditions improving any time soon.

The conflict in the State of Jammu and Kashmir has given rise to many human rights violations. A large number of women are either unaware of actual protocol or are not in a position to comply with complicated procedures which prevent them from accessing justice. The study shows that very few half-widows were able to reach or access free legal aid after the disappearance of their husband. Many of them were not even able to register an FIR (First Information Report) or proceed with registering a case in the court. The judiciary is the hope of the vulnerable women of Kashmir. When other doors are closed for many women, it is only the judiciary that could potentially bring hope to these women in distress. However, the lack of much-needed assistance from judiciary and human rights institutions in the state has left many without justice, thus waiting in prolonged liminality without any closure.

The challenges posed by “disappearances” are indeed threats to any democratic society and those affected by it. While the people of Kashmir expect a political solution to the existing conflict, for family members, the disappearance of close relatives is an issue that is beyond the politics of freedom. The state will have to answer its people, not with armed forces and military might, but in a transparent way, as to who is responsible for these disappearances and where the missing men are. The first task of the state is to transform the victim into a citizen. In that direction, the central government should give serious thought for withdrawal or repealing of laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Thus, in the larger context of the culture of conflict in Kashmir, all forms of gendered violence need to be addressed to end the liminality of half-widows.

Is Transition Possible from the Threshold?

On 21 December 2010, the UN General Assembly decided to declare a special day to draw the attention of the world to the fate of individuals who have disappeared. The International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances is observed annually on 30 August. While carrying out silent protests and monthly sit-ins, the affected family members under the aegis of APDP (Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons) have been demanding to put an end to enforced disappearances and to provide them with the whereabouts of their dear ones who have been missing for years. The relatives and half-widows no longer wish to remain in this “undesired” state of liminality. The struggle to move out of liminality is visible in their continuous resistance on the streets of Srinagar and in national and international forums.

Liminality and the questions that come along with it will not end till justice is provided to the victims of conflict. The vulnerabilities of half-widows have been caused by multiple dimensions and therefore the mitigation of these vulnerabilities can happen only if multiple stakeholders like state actors, non-state actors and communities intervene positively in creating a “normal culture”. Till then the half-widows – the ‘waiting women’ of Kashmir – will not cross the “threshold”. If they do not, then the expanded meaning of liminality i.e., something which is no longer a temporary phase but a permanent one, finds an appropriate example in the life-as-lived by the women in this conflict zone.

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Notes

¹ The APDP was founded in 1994, when a large number of parents used to visit the high court to file or pursue Habeas Corpus petitions. The relatives used to take individual efforts in a disorganized manner. Finally, the founder of this organisation, a practising lawyer and a human rights activist named Parvez Imroze, with the help of the Chairperson (herself a victim of enforced disappearances), put together a collective forum for collective efforts. The APDP is technically not a human rights group but an association of sufferers wronged by the functioning of the state, campaigning to know the whereabouts of their missing relatives. Any victim of disappearances could be a member of the association. The association has no political affiliations or political positions. It is an independent group seeking justice from the state. See <http://www.apdpkashmir.blogspot.in/> for more details.

² Our observation that most disappearances have occurred in rural areas is also confirmed by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (2011).

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