



IN THE SHADOW OF CONFLICT

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AN OVERVIEW OF SUPPORT SERVICES
AVAILABLE TO SURVIVORS
OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
IN KASHMIR,
PLUS A DIRECTORY OF RESOURCES

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This report is produced with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the state of support services available in the valley of Indian-administered Kashmir for survivors of gender-based violence. The report includes a directory of such services operating in Kashmir, and includes contact information, nature of services available, and area of operation. The information presented here is taken from multiple primary and secondary sources, and the information provided in the Directory is compiled from interviews done with persons primarily involved with the aforementioned services.¹

This report forms part of a larger research study undertaken on gender-based violence in conflict areas.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN KASHMIR

A comparative look at the data over five-years from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) for Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) reveals that crimes against women have increased more in Kashmir as compared to Jammu and Ladakh.² In the same time as Kashmir registered 1756 cases of violence against women, Jammu registered 1570 and Ladakh registered only 50. Ten percent of women in the age group 18-49 experienced physical violence in the period 2019-20;³ while there has been a 0.2% increase in domestic violence from five years ago.⁴ Since the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns, the situation has worsened. The Women Helpline (181), J&K reported a significant increase in the number of calls for domestic violence between May and September 2020.⁵

However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic increased the instances of gender-based violence against women and restricted their access to reaching out for help, the Kashmir valley was already witnessing the effects of a lockdown. In August 2019, the Government of India abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution which granted Kashmir autonomy within the Union. This move was followed by a blanket communications blockade (phones, broadband, 4G services) that effectively rendered Kashmiri people unreachable. This meant that women facing abuse not only lost access to formal and informal support services, but also lost social support they may have been receiving from friends and family, and were trapped with their abusers for months.

Sexual violence in Kashmir has an added dimension, given the conflict that has gripped the region since the late 1980s. In military occupations, civil unrests, wars, and protracted conflicts like in Kashmir, tactics beyond ordinary gunfire are adopted that target communities in their most

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² The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act of 2019 re-constituted the territory of J&K into two Indian-administered Union Territories- 'Jammu and Kashmir,' and 'Ladakh.'

³ IIPS, IFC, East-West Institute, *2019-2020 National Family Health Survey Jammu & Kashmir* (2021), available at: rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5Reports/Jammu&Kashmir.pdf [last accessed 16 March 2022].

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Interview with Ms. Purnima Dhar, program manager for Women Helpline (181), J&K.

vulnerable spots. Women and children often find themselves on the short end of this stick, and sexual violence is a common tool of oppression. According to a 2006 report by Médecins sans Frontières,⁶ ‘Kashmiri women are among the worst sufferers of sexual violence in the world. Sexual violence has been routinely perpetrated on Kashmiri women, with 11.6% of respondents saying they were victims of sexual abuse.’ The relationship between exposure to conflict and domestic violence positively correlates,⁷ and is a major threat to security for Kashmiri women. A study conducted in 2009⁸ on the effect of a community exposed to violence-in the case of a conflict zone like Kashmir, for instance-revealed that

...exposure to community violence normalises the use of aggressive behaviour. As a result, youths learn that violence is an effective method of problem solving and, therefore, are more likely to engage in violent acts themselves.

Two areas in particular remains overlooked in the general discourse regarding gender-based violence in Kashmir: the experiences of the transgender community, and sexual violence against men. Sexual violence against the transgender community is a global phenomenon;⁹ yet no comprehensive studies on this issue exist in academic literature on Kashmir, with underreporting prevalent in the media as well. This can be variously attributed to a lack of sympathy for this community as well as the desire to erase the proof of their identity.^{[10][11]} This is heightened by the lack of social understanding and support for transgender persons as compared to other survivors of sexual violence. On the other hand, notions of masculinity and shame, lack of accessible data, under-reporting of cases, and the narrow focus of seeing women as victims has made it difficult to start a meaningful discussion regarding male victims of sexual violence.

IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR PROBLEM AREAS IN THE PROVISION OF SUPPORT SERVICES

Eighty-four percent of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence in Kashmir never sought help or informed anyone of their situation.¹² As the Directory provided below reveals, there is a dearth of comprehensive and effective support services available to survivors of gender-based violence in Kashmir. Among those who sought help, only four percent went to the police. When it

⁶ Médecins sans Frontières, Kashmir: Violence and Mental Health, 14 December 2006, available at: www.msf.org/kashmir-violence-and-mental-health [last accessed 6 March 2022].

⁷ Fowler et. al, ‘Community Violence: a Meta-Analysis on the Effect of Exposure and Mental Health Outcomes of Children and Adolescents’ (2009) 21 *Development and Psychopathology* 227.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ As indicated by [this](#) TGEU project that is involved in producing research on the situation of human rights of the trans and gender-diverse people worldwide, including a monitor that reports and analyses fatal violence of gender-diverse and transgender people worldwide.

¹⁰ Bund, ‘Other Sex: A Study on Problems of Transgender Women of District Srinagar’ (2013) 2 *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 78-82.

¹¹ Bakhsh, ‘“He Wanted to Tear My Flesh”: In Kashmir, Sexual Violence against Transgenders Is Ignored’, *Kashmir Walla*, 8 January 2021.

¹² Tariq and Bashir, ‘Understating the Role of Formal and Informal Institutions in Combating Domestic Violence in Kashmir’ (2017) 24 *The Journal of Central Asian Studies* 171.

comes to support services, Kashmir has only two principal avenues for accessing formal support: the 181 helpline, and the J&K Police Women's Helpdesk. As a result, civil society organisations have to shoulder much of the weight of providing these services.

Society and family involvement plays an important role in either creating an environment of support for the survivors, or impunity for the perpetrators. A study¹³ conducted in 2017 on domestic violence in Kashmir highlighted the pattern of help-seeking among victims. Women tend to seek out informal agents like family, friends, members of the clergy, elders of the community, etc. before considering approaching the police. While this can lead to positive developments for the women, it can also lead to stigmatisation, or forced reconciliations. Women are asked to think about their children, and many women refrain from speaking out so as not to lose custody. This makes the role of civil society organisations that much more important, providing external support to the victims away from emotional or physical abuse that can result from speaking out against violence.

Some key institutional issues that need to be addressed with regards to support services in Kashmir are:

- With J&K no longer holding the status of a state after the abrogation of Article 370, the State Women's Commission was closed, and no equivalent Commission has been established in the Union Territory yet.
- Provision for creation and maintenance of shelter homes for victims fleeing abuse, as is mandated under the Domestic Violence Act, 2005. The erstwhile State Women's Commission had passed such a proposal but without any results from the government.
- Institutional insensitivity that results in the police failing to take timely action after reports of violence, dismissing concerns of stalking and threats, apathetic treatment of victims and their families, etc. This necessitates creating provisions for training of personnel and creating special medical and legal units designed for meeting the needs of victims of sexual violence.
- Lack of rehabilitation mechanisms, like long-term psychological support, and social support to reintegrate into society.
- Lack of avenues for the transgender community, social apathy and lack of formal and informal safety nets for their support.
- The financial dependence of women on their partners. This needs to be addressed on a social and institutional level, and ensuring financial independence should become a priority in rehabilitation support services.

As of March 2022, the organisation *Mehram: Women's Cell* filed a PIL seeking direction from the government of J&K for the setting up of shelter homes in Kashmir and sensitisation of personnel

¹³ *Ibid.*

involved with cases of gender-based violence. This has resulted in the High Court of J&K and Ladakh issuing a notice to the government for its response to the PIL.¹⁴

For a holistic approach to addressing the problem of gender-based violence, policy-making should also take into account:

- Societal pressure to not break up a family, and stigmatisation of divorce and women who stand up for themselves. Taking cultural and societal norms into consideration, many women believe that if they disclose domestic violence abuse, it will bring shame and embarrassment onto the family.
- Lack of awareness regarding gender and marriage rights, consent, and avenues available for pursuing perpetrators of violence.
- The social norms of shame that cause the survivors and their families to face further victimisation and even social ostracisation, especially in more remote areas. Survivors are often blamed for the assault, and treated as 'damaged goods', which contributes to the extremely low reporting rates for assault.

Therefore, the narrative of gender-based violence in Kashmiri society has two dimensions: it is heavily focused on victims of state-perpetrated violence, but without any means of redressal owing to the systemic state denial of such cases; and the informal support services that operate in the valley are more equipped to only handle cases of domestic abuse, but they have to work in the thick of stigmatisation and a culture of remaining quiet. Meanwhile survivors of violence from the transgender community and male victims remain outside the discourse altogether. As a result, the victims suffer the most.

Civil society support services for victims of gender-based violence in Kashmir face societal and institutional apathy. A majority of these services are female-led, and frequently face backlash for being 'too feminist.' It is difficult to work in a hostile environment, and that can be one reason for the low number of such organisations. Further, access to these services is dependent upon the victims' knowledge of its existence, which is often the result of a referral from another victim. In contrast, state-sponsored schemes and support services have the advantage of being more recognised, but as it currently stands, they lack the supportive structure of informal organisations. Overall, much is needed to be done to improve support services in Kashmir, and there is an urgent need for the state and civil society to work together.

¹⁴ Rashid, 'Shelter homes for destitute women: HC issues notice to Govt on PIL', *Greater Kashmir*, 17 March 2022.

DIRECTORY OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

List A: NON-GOVERNMENTAL RESOURCES

S.No.	ORGANISATION	OPERATIONS		
1	Help Foundation	The Help Foundation works for empowering women through skill development and livelihood programs, relief and rehabilitation programs , advocacy, and also works in the sectors of healthcare, child rights, and education.		
House no. 50, Tulsibagh, behind Amar Singh College, Srinagar- 190008		TELEPHONE	EMAIL	WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA
		0194-2310256	helpfoundation1997@gmail.com centraloffice.hf@gmail.com	https://helpfoundationjk.com/
2	<i>Samanbal</i>	<i>Samanbal</i> is an informal support group that aims to bring together women from different backgrounds with similar experiences, to revive the aspect of community support and platform for women outside of their families to turn to. The connections are made through WhatsApp.		
		TELEPHONE	PERSON OF CONTACT	
		+91 9419002733	Ezabir Ali	
3	<i>Mehram: Women's Cell</i>	Mehram is a women-led group committed to working for upliftment, and and providing legal assistance and redressal to Kashmiri women against sexual and gender-based violence. Calling hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.		
		TELEPHONE	EMAIL	WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA
		+91 88996 38150	mehramkashmir@gmail.com	https://www.facebook.com/MehramKashmir/

4	Sonzal Welfare Trust	Sonzal is the only organisation in Kashmir working to build a supportive institutional framework for the transgender community so they can lead a life of dignity, access proper sexual and mental health care services, and sustain themselves.		
		TELEPHONE	PERSON OF CONTACT	EMAIL
		+91 70067 62967	Aijaz Ahmad Bund	help.humanity@riseup.net

List B: GOVERNMENTAL RESOURCES

S.No.	ORGANISATION	OPERATIONS		
1	Women Helpline (WHL)	The helpline acts as a first point of contact for the victims. They take complaints , and act as a referral for different agencies (like police, OSC, hospital). In addition, they provide information regarding rights, government schemes, and how to access them.		
		TELEPHONE	EMAIL	WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA
		181	help@181jandk.in sakhisrinagar@181jandk.in	http://181jandk.in/
2	J&K Police Women's Helpdesk	The help desk takes complaints from victims of domestic violence. The aim is to respond to these calls with timely and fair action.		
Rambagh Women Police Station		TELEPHONE	EMAIL	WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA
		+91 9596770601 +91 9596770602	-	-

List C: ONE STOP CENTRES

One Stop Centres (OSCs) are information hubs that are integrated with the 181 helpline, and operate on a district-level. They are intended to support women affected by violence, in private and public spaces, within the family, community and at the workplace.

As of April 2022, there are 19 OSCs in J&K. Only two OSCs are integrated with the helpline: from districts Jammu and Srinagar. Further, the OSC in Kathua is currently not functional due to a stay order from the High Court.

S.NO.	DISTRICT	PERSON OF CONTACT	CONTACT NUMBER
1	Anantnag	Shah Tajally	01932-222537
2	Bandipora	Ishrat Ayoub	+91 9697034563
3	Baramulla	Tasneem Kossar	+91 9622438489 +91 7006683184 +91 9596305005
4	Budgam	Dr. Farhana Asgar	+91 9906617777
5	Doda	Sandhya Devi	+91 7006641890
6	Ganderbal	Huzaiifa	+91 9797810011 0194-2419536
7	Jammu	Qazi Insha Shakeel	+91 9596866221
8	Kathua	Shivali Modeel	+91 6005467629
9	Kishtwar	Meenakshi Sharma	+91 7298249627 +91 9858448314

10	Kulgam	Dr. Peerzada Farhat	+91 7006367950 +91 9797966877
11	Kupwara	Tabasum	+91 9149748136
12	Pulwama	Yasmeena	+91 7889599985
13	Rajouri	Nitu Sharma	+91 9596731557
14	Ramban	Wahid-ul-Rehman	+91 8082251565
15	Reasi	Dr. Gulshan Kumar	+91 9419231875
16	Samba	Jaswinder Kour	+91 9906069648
17	Shopian	Uzma Rayees	+91 7780880398
18	Srinagar	Syed Rukhsana Alam	+91 7006311600
19	Udhampur	Arfa Sheikh	+91 9622263768

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