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Kashmiri Women and the Changing Economy after Conflict: Indigenous Knowledge, Livelihoods, and Resilience

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Abstract:

The long-standing conflict in Kashmir has significantly changed social structures, economic relationships, and gender roles in the work economy. After years of insurgency and military presence, due to the loss or disappearance of male family members, Kashmiri women have become key stakeholders in supporting households and livelihoods. This paper examines the role of women in post-conflict Kashmir through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). It focuses on how traditional craft knowledge and skills helped facilitate Kashmiri women to claim economic agency and resilience.

Using traditional crafts like Pashmina shawl weaving, Kashmiri carpet weaving, and Kashmiri crewel embroidery, the paper places women's work in the context of local knowledge sharing, home-based production, and informal economic networks. These craft traditions are vital parts of local knowledge systems that mix craftsmanship and learning passed down from parents to children.

The paper explores how the period after the insurgency has greatly changed gender roles. Women have moved from mostly domestic responsibilities (as part of their conservative religious and cultural beliefs) to becoming essential contributors to household economies. By participating in local craft industries, women manage economic challenges while also preserving cultural heritage and supporting local economies. The analysis further points out how traditional indigenous production systems like the handicraft industry and farming serve as flexible strategies for making a living in situations marked by political unrest, market changes, and few formal job options, especially in the rural sector. It's also noteworthy how local government schemes like Karkhandar, J&K Women's Development Corporation, Credit Card and Mudra have helped foster the spirit of self-reliance among women in the Valley.

Key terms: Gender roles, Handicraft industry, Women empowerment, Rural entrepreneurship, and Feminist political economy.

Introduction

The long-drawn-out conflict in Kashmir has led to changes in its geopolitical and economic spheres. The adverse effects of a conflict deeply changed its social, economic, and gender rela-

tions within the society. Its impact is visible in its economy due to long curfews, cross-border tensions, trade disruptions leading to reduced investment from abroad, and even the direct destruction of shops and factories by the involved parties. Research shows that the GDP per capita can drop by 13-28% on average after a decade or so of conflict in a region (Benmelech & Monteiro, 2025). The conflict in Kashmir disrupted almost all major sectors of its economy, most importantly the tourism industry, which was the biggest cash cow in Kashmir. Other major sectors, like agriculture and handicrafts, also suffered serious hits due to the breakdown of normal life. The 1990s were a turning point in the economy of Kashmir and the upheavals to come. The ‘conflict economy’ (Habibullah, 2004), as certain scholars and institutes like the United States Institute of Peace call it, emerged as a result of the repeated patterns of disruptions and volatile circumstances that negatively impacted the transport, market access, long-term planning, etc., making consistent growth of any kind difficult.

The conflict also led to the disappearance, detention or loss of many male members of families involved in self-employed or small-scale ventures like agriculture, home-based handloom industries, handicrafts making, etc. This led to women taking over economic roles as heads of households. Figure 1 briefly explains the impact and outcome of the conflict on the economy of Kashmir. When the economy collapsed due to the decrease in the male workforce due to various reasons like arrests, deaths, or disappearances, the women entered the workforce not in an informal manner as before, but as important stakeholders. The loss of jobs in the formal sectors again led to the growth in home-based industries like papier mache, shawl weaving, etc. The institutional breakdown again led to the creation and rise of informal networks that have helped women alleviate poverty and financial instability by becoming financially secure through their ventures. This shift not only showed their resilience but also the structural inequality that women in a conservative society like Kashmir faced during the conflict. They had to depend on informal economies and community networks to do so, wherein they not only earned less compared to their male counterparts but also had limited market access.

Impact	Outcome
Economic collapse	Women entered the workforce
Loss of jobs	Growth of home-based industries
Institutional breakdown	Rise of informal networks
Poverty & instability	Household financial resilience led by women

Figure 1

Feminist political economy reveals this gap and how gender shapes the economic lives and reveals the hidden, unpaid or undervalued labour that’s sustaining economies (Ferber & Nelson, 2003). The change in the labour force has been especially felt in the craft-making industry, where most women resorted to supporting themselves and their families. “The increasing number of women working in craft-based industries also reflects a change in ways of income generation post-conflict societies. To rise above financial strain due to the conflict, this reconstruction of both society and economy plays an important role”, as pointed out by Neelam Raina in *Women, Craft and the Post-Conflict Reconstruction of Kashmir*, 2009. Further development and upgradation of this sector could be an important source of income for Kashmir’s economy in the future, relying on its women labour force in particular.

This potential has been recognised by government agencies as well, and government schemes like micro-financing schemes like Mudra in rural sectors and skill-development schemes like Karkhandar play a pivotal role in reinforcing and empowering women to become important stakeholders in the economy and not just be passive recipients or invisible workforce in these industries. It also highlights how the tradition of crafts like carpet weaving, pashmina shawl making, papier mache, etc., that are crucial as means of income generation, are a part of the Indian Knowledge System passed down from generation to generation.

Indian Knowledge Systems

Indian Knowledge Systems, or IKS, are defined as traditional bodies of knowledge developed over thousands of years in the Indian subcontinent and include holistic, experiential and community-driven knowledge in areas like science and technology, medicine, agriculture, arts and crafts, etc. This knowledge was passed orally or through apprenticeship. Indian knowledge systems emphasised being in balance ecologically and being sustainable in nature. These practices were more often than not community-based and involved collective learning and or preservation. These techniques were adapted to suit the ecological and social changes. For instance, in the case of Kashmir, growing of lotus stems in a stagnant lake was taught to the community living in houseboats or around the Dal lake and became community knowledge. The local communities, like the hanjis, who are the local boatmen mostly living on and around the Dal lake, operate shikaras for transport, fishing and harvesting plants like lotus stems, are the stakeholders or carriers of this knowledge. They understand the ecosystem of the lake and the seasonal changes and their effects on the growth of the plants. The women of the community are equally involved in both supporting and active roles, like selling the produce.

Another example of IKS-based craft would be the newly emerging group of women who have taken up the male-dominated field of copper goods making. With the help of training at the local Handicrafts and Handlooms department, wherein the traditional knowledge of making copperware is imparted, a group of women have taken to the difficult craft. These crafts provide women from underprivileged and rural backgrounds in Kashmir with alternative earning sources, as opposed to struggling to find employment in the formal sector. According to Mukhtar a copper worker training the young girls,

“As the female copper workers continue to shine, their success has kindled a spark of inspiration in the hearts of young girls across Kashmir. Encouraged by the achievements of these trailblazers, more and more girls are expressing interest in pursuing the art of copperwork. This newfound enthusiasm is gradually eroding gender stereotypes and opening up avenues for future generations to explore their passions without limitations.”

By choosing wholly male-dominated crafts like copperware, women are breaking gender based-barriers and contributing to the legacy and tradition of their age-old culture. They are also opening up the gates to the newer generations and becoming custodians of the centuries-old craft, whose knowledge they will pass on to the next generation of women and help them achieve financial independence.

IKS-based livelihoods in Kashmir, especially those chosen by women, showcase how women negotiated their agency and resilience within the narrow and confined socio-political space during the conflict, converting the skills passed down from generations into creating financial stability in unstable times. Kashmir, being a conservative Muslim majority community, had mostly restricted their women from entering the male-dominated spheres or the formal markets. Their roles had been restricted to informal household settings where their labour was also not as valued or financially rewarded. However, with the onset of the conflict in the Valley, the roles also changed. The absence of male family members forced them to look for employment or means of surviving in the economy with whatever skills and traditional knowledge they had.

They did, however, also meet with exploitative conditions on account of being women, as their lack of education (in some cases), absence of male relatives and lack of exposure to wider markets hampered their growth. Despite all the challenges, the participation of women in IKS-based crafts industries has risen to over 60% post-conflict. Government schemes and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have also aided in this growth by providing finance and access to markets. UMEED, a J&K rural livelihood mission, has helped over 7 lakh women form 80000 groups and benefit from training, loans, market links, and entrepreneurship support (Asian News International, 2026). The following table charts the impact of some of these schemes:

Scheme	Impact	Success Metrics
UMEED	7 lakh+ women, 15,000+ SHGs	40% income rise, poverty reduction
Mission Shakti	28,000+ beneficiaries yearly	Financial inclusion, skill uptake
Saath	25,000+ trained	Entrepreneurship growth
NRLM	Thousands in SHGs	Self-employment in handicrafts

Figure 2

Figure 2 shows how the aforementioned government schemes impacted their beneficiaries and how the success of these schemes led to income rise, poverty alleviation, skill uptake by more and more women, and growth in the number of entrepreneurship in the valley. It reflects how the women in the valley, along with the aid of government schemes and NGOs, successfully used indigenous knowledge systems to create livelihoods for themselves in a post-conflict society. It is also noteworthy how women have also taken up earlier male-dominated crafts and created a niche for themselves, making them a part of the rich cultural heritage of the crafts in the valley, like copperware making.

Kashmiri women and Feminist political economy

For decades, the conflict has not only shaped the political atmosphere of the Valley but also indelibly impacted the economy, even structurally altering households. The shifting landscapes also altered or transformed women's roles in society, mostly due to necessity, as the absence or death of male family members pushed them out into the world and made them a part of the formal workforce. Where they had earlier been home-based, and their labour amounted to informal, undervalued and domestic, the conflict altered their roles and they became the primary anchors of their households. From caregiving roles to those of primary earners of their families, women became the core of their household economies, as it was their labour that provided stability during the unstable times of the conflict.

The spirit of Kashmiri women to adapt to the changing times and become part of the formal economy as a workforce during times of distress also reflects an innate resilience. Sylvia Chant terms this as the "feminisation of responsibility" (Chant, S. 2008), wherein women take up both caregiving and income generation roles to cope with the changes in household economies. The responsibilities became more layered as they were still the primary caregivers, had to handle the emotional trauma and stress of themselves and their family members, along with indulging

in productive labour to generate income. In the case of Kashmiri women, it was their use of Indian knowledge systems like pashmina shawl weaving, embroidery, carpet making, papier mache, copperware making, and agricultural engagements that sustained them. The boundaries between the home and the market space have also become fluid, as mostly these women work from their homes and their homes have become their workshops. This change can be seen as a collective form of resilience, as the communities of women working in these small-scale enterprises are also interdependent, as most of the time they work in groups, creating informal networks of work.

Conclusion

Kashmiri women's lives post-conflict have been living examples of transformation and adaptation to the changing times and what the necessity demands. By using practices deeply rooted in their knowledge systems, the women in Kashmir have not only been able to sustain their livelihood in challenging times but also carried forward their cultural identities and heritage. Adopting ancient knowledge systems has helped them when formal economies and jobs were not viable options. It also stands as a testament to the fact that IKS are not ancient relics or outdated but still viable and adaptive sources of income and livelihoods. They are important tools in the hands of the marginalised or distressed during instability of formal economies and can be adapted to and used to bring stability to the particular region.

The future holds great potential to use these practices to create alternate sources of income and adapt them to make them more ecologically and now digitally viable and sustainable. For instance, in the valley, the digitisation of markets and future potential scarcity of raw materials like the pashmina have to be considered, and the business models have to be planned accordingly or adapt to the changes and still flourish. Many efforts in this direction are also visible, as many of the small-scale women-led businesses now have a digital presence connecting them to markets not just in other parts of India but also the world. It can serve as an important tool to take the Kashmiri handicrafts and weaving products to international markets.

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