



Voices Unheard, Stories Untold: The Plight of Women in Neelum Valley - AJK

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**KASHMIR INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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Introduction

Neelum Valley is a forested rural region of Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK),¹ known for its breath-taking natural beauty, lush green forests, springs and waterfalls and home to a variety of flora and fauna. It consists of Neelum District and the two tehsils of Athmuqam and Shardah with a total population of 190,228 (men: 98,877, women: 91,350)². The region, however, is underdeveloped having a very fragile infrastructure.

Since the establishment of the Line of Control (LoC),³ dividing Jammu and Kashmir between India and Pakistan, Neelum Valley has become highly volatile region of Kashmir. Pakistani and Indian troops are eyeball to eyeball over the narrow river bed between them. Since 1990, the people of Neelum Valley have witnessed some of the heaviest shelling and firing from across the LoC affecting every aspect of their lives. The lack of peace in the ensuing 14 years, until the ceasefire agreement in November 2003 brought insecurity and uncertainty in the lives of people. Their livelihoods, access to medical care, education and day-to-day life had been at the mercy of the unpredictable and fragile situation which had kept the community, particularly youth and women, isolated from the rest of the world, resulting in a social and economic stagnation.

Women are often perceived to be extremely vulnerable in conflicts and women of Kashmir are no exception. Their vulnerability is reflected in political, social, and economic domains which negatively affect their quality of life. It is also generally acknowledged that men and women experience the ramifications of conflict in different ways. Women of remote areas, like Neelum Valley, may have additional needs and concerns, especially if resources are scarce, mobility is limited, and they lack education and skill. These women are faced with multidimensional challenges while managing day-to-day lives and ensuring long term economic and social security. Although it is well established that a holistic approach towards sustainable peace requires active involvement of women as peace builders yet the harsh realities on the ground makes it very challenging task.

There is a paucity of literature and documented evidence that directly considers the narratives, experiences and perceptions of women who have lived in the LoC regions of AJK. The main purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the issues faced by women in the Neelum district and

1 Pakistan administered Jammu and Kashmir is officially named Azad Jammu and Kashmir

2 The District and gender population figures are projected for 2013, on the basis of the 1998 Census, Population Census Organisation – Islamabad. ii. Education Department, Muzaffarabad.

3 Line of Control (LoC) is a defacto line that divides and separates the two parts of Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

document their opinions in the context of the Kashmir conflict. This is a critical first step to begin meaningful engagement of women in any peace initiative at a community or national level.

Methodology

This research was carried out by Kashmir Institute of International Relations (KIIR) with the support of London based NGO, Conciliation Resources, to document the voices of women in Neelum Valley.

The research was conducted in the two tehsils of Neelum Valley: Athmuqam and Shardah including the villages of Kundal Shahi, Kutton (also known as Jagran Valley), Salkhala, Keran, Upper Neelum, Dawarrian, Dudhnial and Kel. The target group is the women inhabitants of the listed places.

This primary research was based on qualitative data collection, which employed a complementary range of mechanisms including one-on-one interviews, group meetings, focus group discussions and a questionnaires distributed to 100 participants.

The focus of the research can be divided into the following two categories:

1. Challenges women face in Neelum and the impact of Kashmir conflict;
2. The meaning of peace for Neelum women.

Following informal participatory discussions with the target group, a comprehensive questionnaire was drafted drawing on the broader issues the participants identified in the discussions. At this design stage, academics⁴ with an intimate understanding of Kashmir provided guidance in framing the questions with input shared by local politicians, gender specialists and human rights activists.⁵ Consultation with such a wide array of experts with local knowledge and understanding ensured the questionnaire would accurately capture the women's experience in the Neelum valley. The final questionnaire consisted of 12 questions and was disseminated to a random sample of 110 women throughout the target regions in both Urdu and English. Almost 100 completed questionnaires were returned, the results of which have been graphically represented and analysed below. A one-day focus group was conducted which had 20 women participants comprising social workers,

4 Dr. Shaheen Akhtar, Associate Professor at National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad; Dr. Syed Waqas Ali, PhD scholar at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad; Atia Anwer Zoon, Assistant Professor, Federal University, Islamabad.

5 Shah Ghulam Qadir, Ex-Speaker of AJK Assembly, political constituency District Neelum; Ershad Mehmood, Executive Director Centre for Peace, Development and Reform; Sardar Amjad Yousaf, Executive Director-Kashmir Institute of International Relations; Altaf Wani, Director Programmes-Kashmir Institute of International Relations; Ezabir Ali, Srinagar based Women and peacebuilding specialist; Ayesha Jehangir, human rights activist.

students and teachers. It was important that the participants constituted a diverse reflection of the Neelum women, which was achieved by utilising local active people to identify, liaise and build relationships with the women of the Neelum Valley.

Data through questionnaires was collected between 27 September 2013 and 20 October 2013. The focus group discussion was held in the Athmuqam-District Headquarters on 29 September 2013.

The first section of the questionnaire tried to gauge the challenges that women face in Neelum Valley and to assess how they have been affected by the conflict.

Women in Neelum: Challenges and Impact of Conflict

Between 1990 and 2003,⁶ Neelum Valley witnessed some of the heaviest firing and shelling in the area by the Indian Army. Fourteen years of violent conflict have left a deep psychological and traumatic impact on the minds of the local people, especially children and women.

During the escalation of tensions along the Line of Control, the already isolated region was pushed away. The local people suffered grave physical,



Meeting with women at Athmuqam - Neelum Valley, September (2013) @ KIIR

The quality of life in a rural setting like the Neelum Valley is a multifaceted phenomenon determined by the cumulative impact of numerous factors such as the satisfaction about physical and social environment, infrastructure, and access to various amenities, income and standard of living. The second part of the survey laid out 5 questions which focused on identifying and unpacking the main issues affecting Neelum's women. A common view that emerged from the survey respondents and the focus group is how the impact of the cross LoC firing has created an environment of insecurity and uncertainty which adds to their suffering. Participants also voiced their concerns about their personal safety affecting their mobility, access to economic opportunities, jobs, education, health, and livelihood.

humanitarian, and material losses. This isolation occurs mainly due to the exposed nature of roads to cross border firing and extreme winter season: the main road from Muzaffarabad to Neelum remains blocked due to heavy snow and land sliding from October through April. Road from Muzaffarabad to Athmuqam is relatively in better shape as compared to the road from Athmuqam, which leads to the end of Neelum-Tao-butt. After the 2003 ceasefire between India and Pakistan on LoC, the decade long peace could not heal trauma of the people. Fear of disruption still was looming large over the Neelum valley. Among the consequences of conflict, the impact on mental health of the people is one of the most significant.⁷

⁶ In November 2003, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Pakistan and India, officially ending hostilities across the LoC and a declaration of a peace process announced.

⁷ Kashmir: Violence and Mental Health, *MedicinsSansFrontieres*, 14 December 2006.

“We feel so haunted by the resonance of gunshots and shelling that even the sound of a cracker blown by children is so scary and fearful. It brings us back to the horrifying experiences of the past.”⁸

The impact of armed conflict on children, especially infants and young children cannot be considered in isolation from women since women are their primary caregivers. When women are affected so are children. In rural settings like Neelum Valley, women of a joint family unit share responsibility for children’s physical and psychological development. Women are responsible for maintaining the social fabric of their communities. During and after conflict; women are instrumental in providing a sense of family and community continuity that supports children healing from fear and trauma. Women’s physical and psychological health and survival are therefore critical to the well-being of children, both during and after the armed conflict.

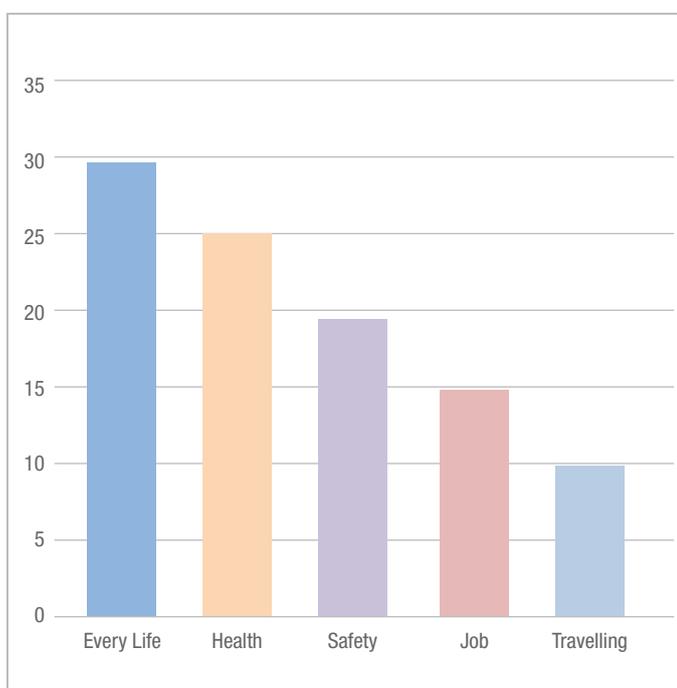


Chart 1. As women, what are the basic issues in your life?

Nearly one third of the women surveyed stated that everyday life is a basic issue for them, be it performing domestic chores as housewives, working or studying, and that day-to-day life is fundamentally challenging due to an unpredictable and unsafe environment. Almost twenty per cent of women highlighted personal safety as a basic issue. To ensure their safety during LoC firing, women would become housebound and trapped, restricting their mobility and their ability to continue with normal routine.

⁸ Quoted from a participant in the focus group discussion, 29 September 2013.

Twenty five per cent of respondents raised health as an issue of high concern for them. Health care facilities are virtually non-existent in Neelum valley particularly there is a lack of access to reproductive health care services. A large number of women suffer each year due to lack of quality reproductive health services and skilled health personnel during childbirth. According to the report published by Children First, Neelum valley has only three Community Midwife (CMWs) as compared to the other districts in AJK like Sudhonoti and Muzaffarabad having 21 and 12 CMWs respectively⁹.

To access adequate primary and tertiary health care services, families would have to travel long distances, the expense of which would be too much for a majority of poor families. Substantial progress is needed regarding antenatal care coverage.

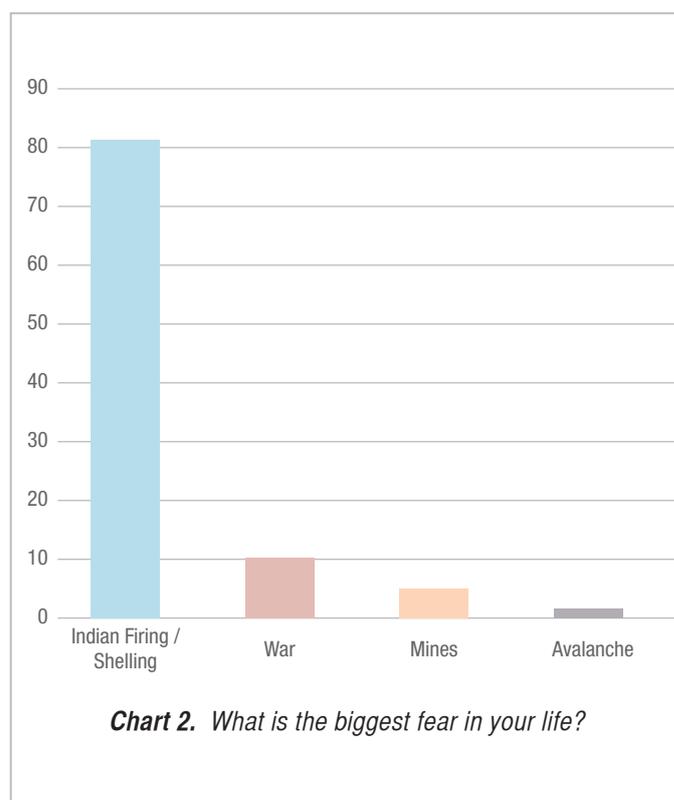


Chart 2. What is the biggest fear in your life?

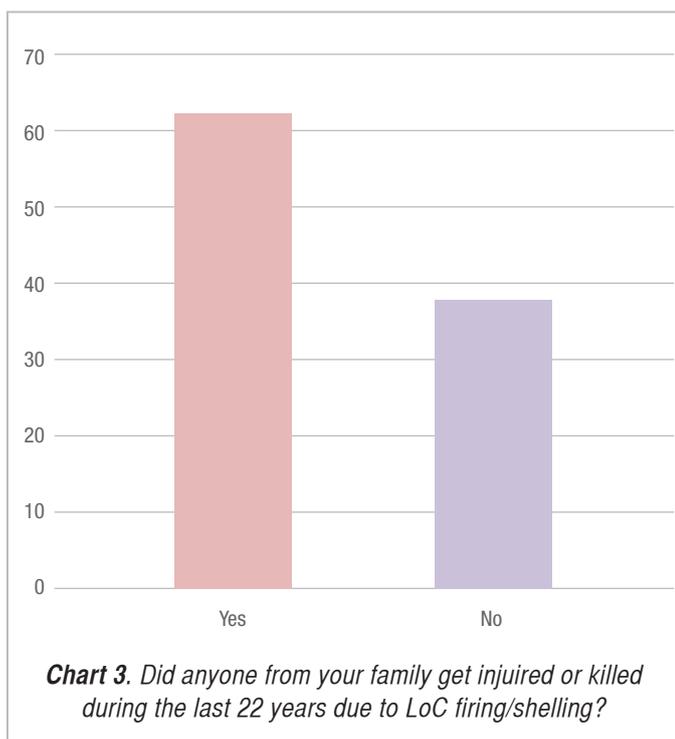
Over eighty per cent of respondents find Indian firing and shelling to be an overarching fear, affecting every aspect of their lives, including physical, psychological, and socio-economic dimensions. A further ten per cent of women considered the possibility of war(or the return to war) as their biggest fear. A small minority of five per cent raised concern about the presence of landmines as an issue having affected the local women both directly and indirectly. The presence of landmines has an impact on the livelihoods of people and can be seen where the male members of families have lost their lives or limbs due to deadly landmines, resulting in women becoming sole breadwinners in addition to their role within the household:

⁹ Children Firstresearch report “How far can I go? Social Mobility of CMWs in AJK” February 2012.

“My husband lost his legs when our house was hit by a shell from (the) Indian army, this accident brought the worst consequences for me. I find myself struggling at multiple fronts, taking care of my husband, my children, the fields, and managing outdoor works like collecting firewood, fetching water... at times I feel being caught between the devil and the deep sea...”¹⁰



Women in Shardah carrying firewood
Neelum Valley @ Amiruddin Mughal

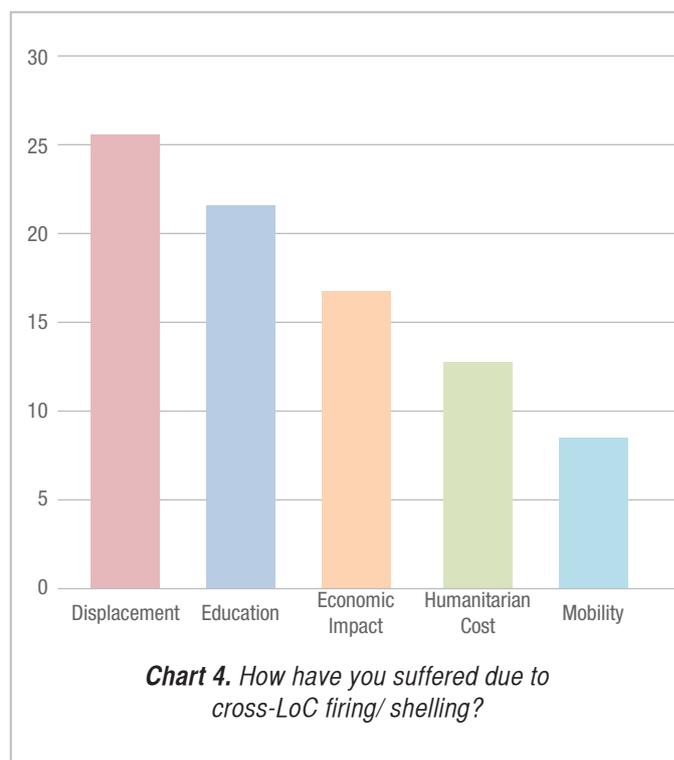


¹⁰ Quoted from a participant in the focus group discussion, 29 September 2013.

Tensions across the Line of Control, and the subsequent violence, have affected almost the entire population living in Neelum. Almost sixty four per cent of respondents are directly affected and at least one family member of the respondents have been injured or killed. The enormity of this statistics shows how painful and deeply rooted the scars are within the society.

“I lost my son in front of my eyes, while we were travelling back from Muzaffarabad, when the Indian fire broke out. I found myself to be the most helpless mother on earth who could not do anything to save her child. Since then I have not been able to sleep properly because on closing my eyes, I see my son dying. I will live with this pain till my death.”¹¹

The psychological impact of the suffering and trauma of those families who have lost loved ones during this period reverberates long after the end of violence which most of them see as temporary phase.

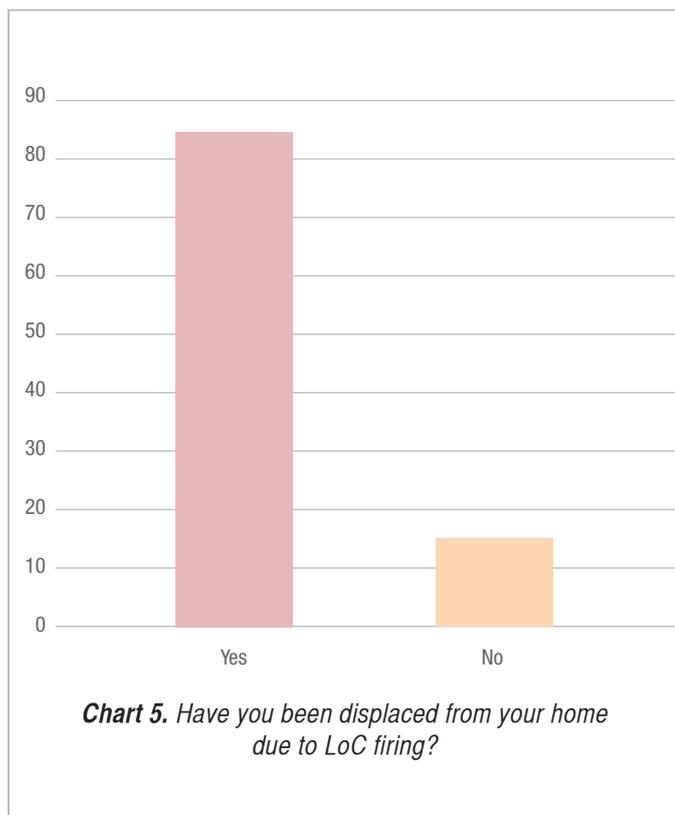


Displacement

Twenty five per cent of respondents surveyed, listed internal displacement as a result of the cross-Line of Control firing and believe that this is one of the hardest challenges they face. Driven from their homes and deprived of security, shelter, food, water, and livelihood, the hardship they endure is often so extreme that it threatens their very survival.

¹¹ Quoted from a participant in the focus group discussion, 29 September 2013.

“All I thought of was saving my children, saving our lives, not knowing where we are going or what we would need to take with us. All anyone thought of was saving themselves.”¹²



With eighty four per cent of respondents experiencing displacement during the conflict, it further illustrates the financial instability caused by cross-LoC tensions. For example, the main source of livelihood in the region is cattle and farming, which is directly threatened when residents have to abandon livestock and leave their homes at night and take refuge in the deep forests to save their lives. This is even more of an issue when instances of displacement occur for an undefined time period.

“(I feel) absolutely helpless and uncertain; we are just at the mercy of God and our survival is nothing but a miracle.”¹³

Education

Existing limitations on girls’ education is often intensified during conflict, further affecting access to educational facilities. The effect of conflict on personal safety, security, mobility and poverty all act as a barrier to education, particularly women’s education. This issue was reflected in the survey results with twenty

¹² Quoted from a participant in the focus group discussion, 29 September 2013.

¹³ Quoted from a participant in the focus group discussion, 29 September 2013.

five per cent of respondents believing that girls’ education in the Neelum District has suffered the most due to the protracted conflict. When children have to travel long and possibly unsafe distances to attend the nearest functioning school, girls are more likely to be made to stay at homes. Some families are unwilling to allow their daughters to live away from home or be exposed to the potential dangers of daily commuting to and from educational institutions.

In the South Asia region, educating a girl is traditionally perceived as less important. Where resources are limited and a choice has to be made as to who receives education, it is generally felt that investing in a boy’s education will bring greater dividends as they are seen as the future breadwinners. In contrast, as girls are likely to marry young and move to their husband’s household, their education is not seen as a top priority. Whilst significant progress has been made throughout AJK in reducing the gender gap in primary school enrolment, a large gap remains between rural and urban areas.¹⁴ Prevalent patterns show that rural girls are more likely to be out of school than rural boys, and they are twice as likely to be out of school as urban girls and less likely to reach secondary school education. In rural and remote areas of Neelum, there are greater social and cultural barriers, as well as poverty, labour requirements and distance “penalties” that prevent girls accessing education. If a half-kilometre is added to the distance to school, this will dramatically reduce girls’ enrolment. Therefore it is felt that constructing local schools in the most remote regions of the Neelum district will reduce school distance and may lead to the increased enrolment and attendance of girls. However, it has ultimately been a difficult environment to build schools in these conflict-affected areas.

Early Marriages

In different societies the phenomenon of early marriages may be driven by varying factors, such as economic survival, protection of young girls, conflict, and socio-cultural and religious values. The rise of this practice in Neelum Valley can be attributed to poverty and economic uncertainty, conditions arising from the conflict. Where poverty is acute, parents with limited options often attempt to relieve their financial burdens by marrying off their daughters at an early age. Early marriages deprive these young girls of the opportunity for personal development, education and participation in social lives, instead catapulting them into roles they are not psychologically and physically prepared for.

¹⁴ EMIS Education Department, Muzaffarabad, <http://pndajk.gov.pk/Documents/AJK%20at%20a%20glance%202013%20final.pdf>

Nishaat Begum is now 17 years old and a resident of Athmuqam-District headquarter. Nishaat was only 12 years old when she lost her father. Poverty, a lack of resources and above all social pressure were some of the challenges that Nishaat's widowed mother was confronted with upon the death of the family's patriarch. As a result, in her limited capacity she could only find safe passage in getting her daughter married. Therefore, at the age of 12, Nishaat was married to a man over 50 years old. She was compelled to engage in an incompatible relationship, which ultimately could not last long, leaving her with deep psychological and emotional scarring.¹⁵

Unfortunately, in remote conflict affected regions, such as Neelum, many girls have similar experiences highlighting the serious consequences of early marriage on the girls, their family and the community as a whole. Early marriage has a profound physical, psychological and emotional impact, reducing the educational and employment opportunities for girls and young women as well as curbing their personal growth. Additionally, there are added healthcare concerns when these young girls become pregnant too young for their immature bodies. It is also likely to mean they drop out of school.

Economic and infrastructural impact

A legacy of uncertainty brought on by the firing and shelling in the last 14 years has led to scant infrastructural development and a lack of opportunities in the region. During this violent phase of conflict, the valley has remained disconnected from the rest of the world. Additionally, Neelum's harsh winters have further hampered development and exacerbated suffering. Large parts of Neelum Valley continue to have no access to clean water or electricity; and during winter, no usable road or telephone services. This lack of adequate infrastructure is an impediment to the development of the economy in AJK in general and empowerment of women in particular.

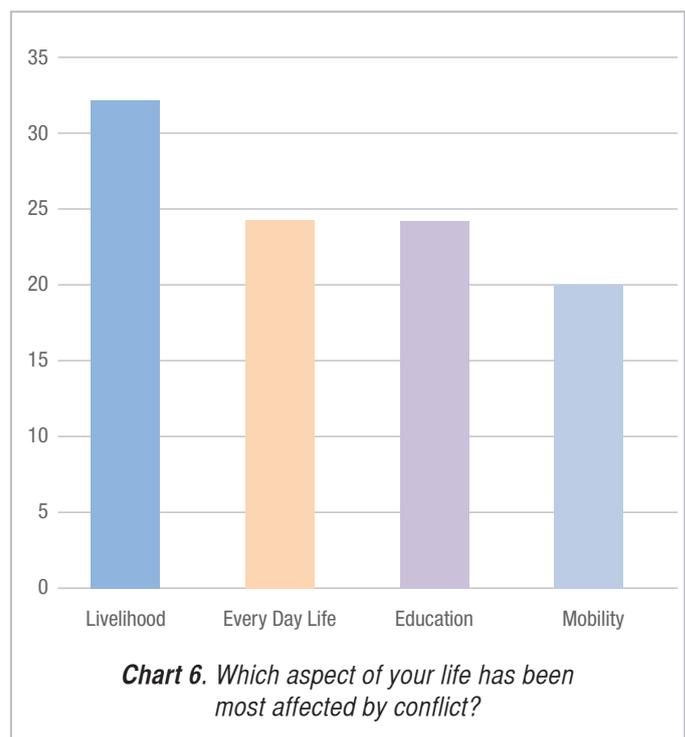
The research findings show that women in Neelum find mobility and economic opportunities as being the most affected during violent conflict. Twenty

¹⁵ The case-study of a young girl who along with her mother was a participant in the focus group discussion, 29 September 2013.

percent of respondents feel mobility issues have had a direct impact on their lives and well-being. Almost twenty per cent of respondents highlighted the issue of economic impact and thirty two per cent listed livelihood as the most important aspect of their lives being affected by the conflict.

Lack of Infrastructure

The lack of infrastructural development has arguably prevented women from fully enjoying their fundamental rights. Rural women spend more time than their urban counterparts in reproductive and household work, which includes collecting water and fuel, caring for children and nursing the sick as well as processing food. This disparity reflects poor rural infrastructure and services in addition to culturally assigned roles, which severely limit women's participation in employment opportunities, directly impinging on their quality of life. Moreover, inadequate physical infrastructure of roads and communication facilities remain a major obstacle towards achieving economic growth.

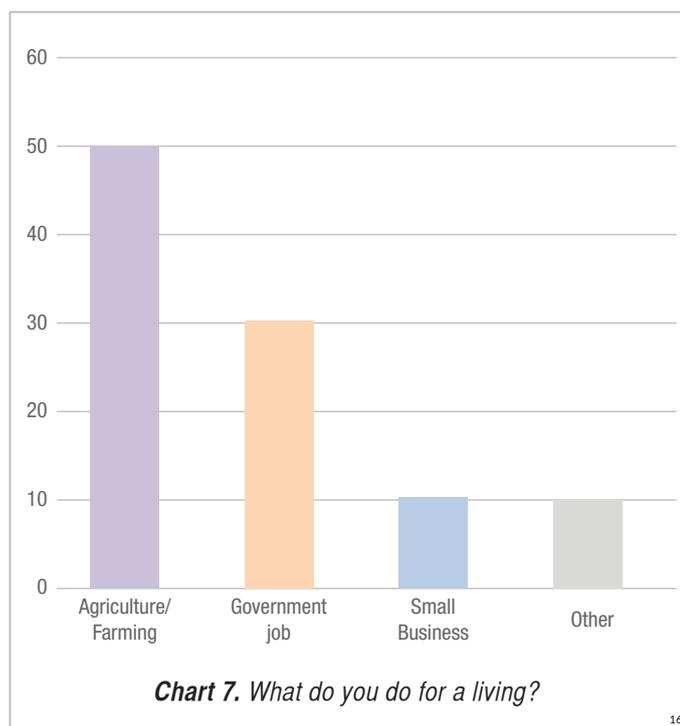


Since economic growth and development are intrinsically linked to infrastructure development, infrastructure services also contribute to improved productivity of business, households and government services. The time spent obtaining water and fuel or travelling to markets and service centres is often significant. When improved household connections, transport and telecommunication services are accessible, household members, particularly women and children, can enhance their quality of life. The expansion of infrastructure services also lowers costs, creating market opportunities for businesses,

which in turn contributes to increased investment and productivity, an essential for sustaining economic growth.

Economic Opportunities

There is a complex link between poverty, conflict and its impact on the lives of women, especially in remote areas. The overall economic condition of a family has a direct bearing on the lives of all family members in general, and of women in particular. In traditional patriarchal family structures women are the last on the list of beneficiaries in the household hierarchy and thus the biggest sufferers at the hands of poverty.



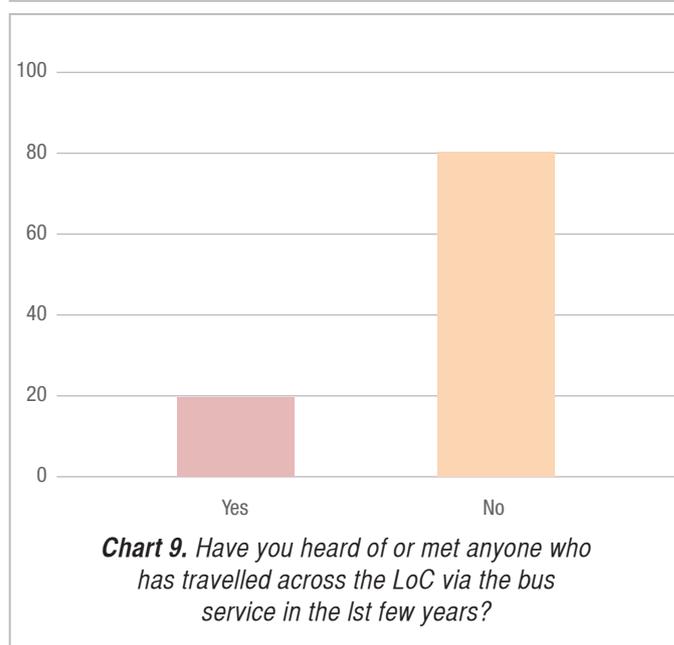
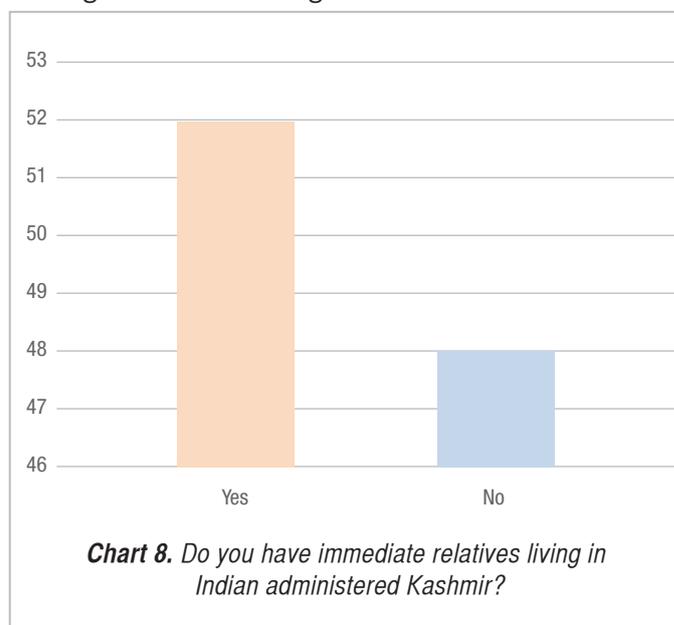
Unfortunately, the people of Neelum can only benefit from scant livelihood options available to them. Almost fifty per cent of the respondents engage themselves in agriculture and farming as their main source of income. Thirty per cent stated government jobs as a major employment opportunity, whereas ten per cent run small businesses as their occupation. Although agriculture is the major livelihood opportunity for the residents of Neelum, it has been affected in the past 14 years of cross-LoC shelling. This tense and destructive environment has not only restricted agriculture to small scale farming but has also damaged the fertility of land because of the poisonous ammunition.

Whilst the ceasefire has brought an official decade of peace in the region, significant work needs to be done to return agriculture to its original status as a sustainable livelihood option that presents economic

16 This question refers to the livelihood of the breadwinner for the family

potential. Ways to support this would include training sessions for local farmers to highlight the new and advanced methods of agriculture, provision of quality seeds and saplings, fertilisers and pesticides. If taken care of, agriculture can indirectly contribute to addressing other issues concerning women. For example, the economic prosperity emanating from a flourishing agricultural industry would lead to a reduction in poverty, which in the long run could help in eradicating the practice of early marriages and facilitating an increase in investment in girls' education.

Whilst Neelum has the potential for a tourism industry, which can benefit local workers by creating livelihood and investment opportunities, to date it has greatly suffered amidst the insecurity and fragility of the region with investors reluctant to invest. However, with its scenic beauty, rivers, streams, waterfalls, natural landscape and breath-taking views, it has, since the 2003 ceasefire, become an attraction for tourists visiting from different regions of Pakistan.



There is a good road from Muzaffarabad to Athmuqam-District Headquarter, with reasonable guest houses and resorts in major destinations like Kuttan, Athmuqam, Keran, Sharda and Kel. However, to date, progress has been limited due to many factors, structural as well as strategic. In addition to bringing economic prosperity, tourism can play a crucial role in building peace, strengthening cross-LoC linkages across all regions of Jammu and Kashmir. Both sides of divide witness shared and collective heritage of religious and spiritual places for Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. As Neelum hosts one of the holiest places for Hindu community like ancient Sharda Peeth temple therefore if opened for visitors and pilgrims living on the other side of LoC, it has a greater potential to foster relationships between people and connect divided communities across the LoC.

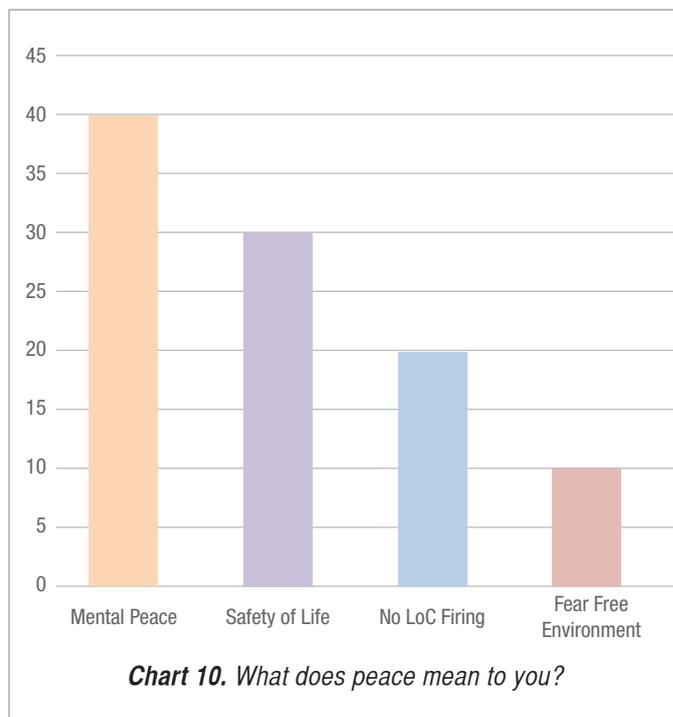
In this context, the existing Confidence Building Measures and more specifically cross LoC bus service has a greater role in creating and expanding existing tourism potential.¹⁷ There is a huge number of divided families born out of this conflict. Almost, fifty two per cent of respondents said that they had immediate relatives on the other side of the Line of Control, but only less than twenty per cent of respondents have managed to visit their relatives. This is mainly due to cumbersome and lengthy travel clearance procedures from the relevant government departments from the both sides of divide. Therefore, this CBM has been largely ineffective in quantitative expansion of its beneficiaries.

The meaning of Peace for Neelum women

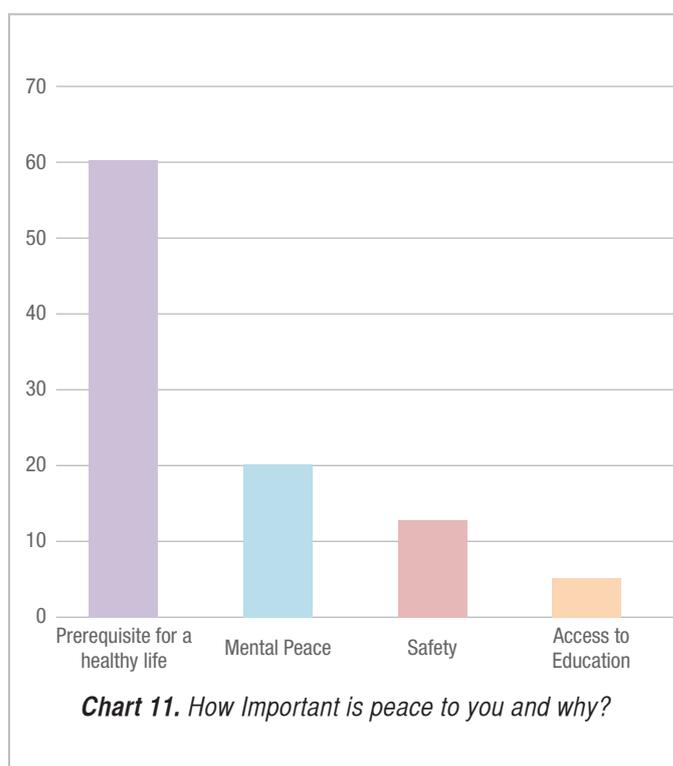
Peace is a relative term with different meanings and interpretations for people depending on the context. Peace and stability are prerequisites for the development and prosperity of any nation. In Neelum Valley, conflict has devastated the people as well as the functionality of the region. Research findings have shown the high level of trauma felt by women. The violence, cross Line of Control firing, fear, displacement, poverty and the loss of loved ones have all contributed to the deep scars on women's psychological health. As a result, a large proportion of Neelum women surveyed have experienced mental health disorders, which can act as important constraint in development efforts and need to be addressed in order to move forward.

When asked what peace means to them, forty per cent of respondents listed mental peace, viewing this as a condition for enabling an individual to play an active and constructive role in the community.

17 The cross-LoC bus service was initiated in 2005 as a confidence building measure (CBM) in the India-Pakistan peace process over Kashmir. It began with two bus services crossing the Line of Control allowing Kashmiris with family on the other side to visit them.



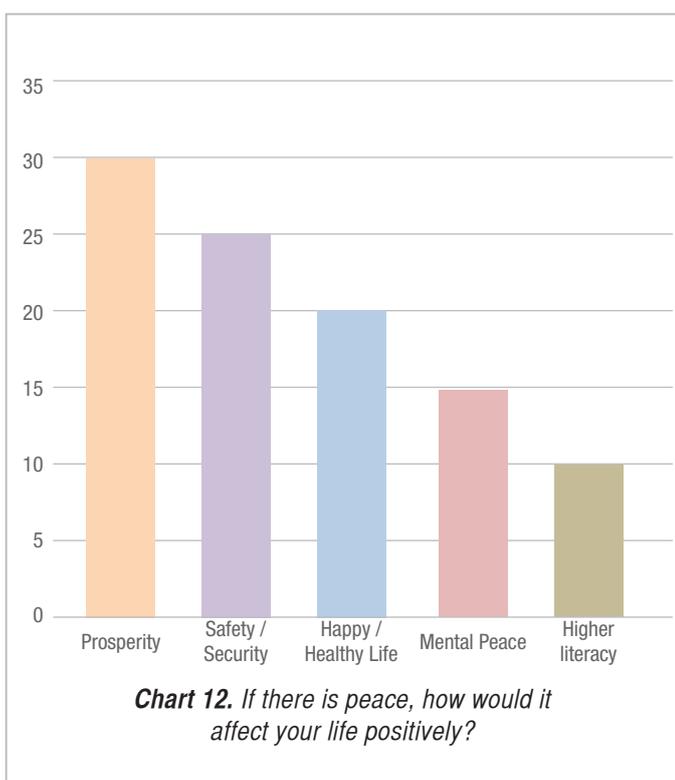
This figure highlights the psychological impact that the conflict has had in Neelum and the need to combat this element to enable them to be more effective citizen for the society. Almost thirty per cent of women surveyed believe that peace equates to safety of life, with ten per cent stating a fear-free environment, where you feel free and safe while moving in society to meet your individual, social and economic needs. Only twenty per cent of respondents equate peace with the end of physical dimensions of conflict, linking peace to the end of cross-Line of Control firing and shelling.



“It seems that stress, fear and anxiety prevail all around. Catching easy sleep appears a hard task now. Flashbacks come like nightmares making the whole night sleepless for me.”¹⁸

When asked how peace is important to them, the vast majority of respondents felt it is a necessary component of a healthy life. Having lived in a conflict zone for so many years, any peace along the line of control defines and affects every aspect of their lives. Peace equates to an environment where women feel safe and secure and have free access to basic facilities of education, health and mobility. Hence, fourteen per cent of women relate peace to their safety, twenty per cent to securing and improving a mental peace, an issue that has affected many of the constituents in conflict-affected Neelum.

When asked about peace and its positive impact on their lives, the survey respondents linked peace to crucial aspects of their lives. Almost twenty per cent women believe that life cannot be happy and healthy without a sustained peace in society and thirty per cent of them link peace with prosperity. For them, peace in the region would improve the region’s infrastructure, which is essential in creating economic opportunities. Twenty five per cent of women state that peace will bring safety and security for them and fifteen per cent directly state it would be beneficial for their mental health.



18 Experience of a focus group participant, 2013.

Gender Mainstreaming: A way Forward

Women of Neelum need to be heard, given importance to their narrative of conflict, which is unique and different from the male dominated discourse in Neelum. Although a lot has been written on this conflict, the narrative of women living near the Line of Control and the trauma they experience has been lacking in attention. Unfortunately, the voices of the women who have struggled with over a decade of cross-LoC tension remain unheard, even in existing peacebuilding initiatives. To address this, it is essential to recognise the importance of women and build their capacity to articulate their needs and views.

Supporting women at all levels to communicate will enable them to identify the important issues and find common grounds for action, building a sense of identity and participation in order to mobilise them to promote their perspectives on peace and security and implement their decisions countering extremist narratives. For example, by building the capacity of local civil society organisations (CSOs) as well as local community networks and linking them to wider networks of national and international organisations, which will enable them to play a key role in community building, thus strengthening their capacity for peace. It will also empower such groups to respond to the needs of internally displaced persons, the disabled, widows and orphans through psychological counselling for trauma victims, community infrastructure building, economic engagement and recovery, and on a broader level, advocating for the rights and representation of women in peace structures and political processes.

The key challenge is to ensure that these women (especially along the whole LoC region in AJK) do not remain isolated from the broader community and we find ways to increase awareness at the community level, fostering long-term inclusion and sustainability. Women living along the LoC region of AJK in remote places such as the Neelum Valley, have a greater deficit in education that has broader long-term implications for family well-being and poverty reduction. Access to education and training can have a major impact on their potential to access and benefit from income-generating opportunities and improve their overall well-being. Equipping these women with vocational skills and small livelihood grants will not only empower but also help them rediscover their own sense of agency. When women are economically and socially empowered, they become a potent force for change.

Conclusion:

This research focuses exclusively on analysing women's experience in the conflict-affected district of Neelum in AJK. This study has aimed to understand the problems and challenges faced by women, focusing specifically on the impact of conflict, the issues they struggle with and their notion of peace. Using the data collected through interviews, group meetings, a focus group discussion and questionnaire, this study seeks to contribute to a process of assessing the needs of women and identifying their priorities. It is hoped that these insights can be used to inform future initiatives from the perspective of women.

In order to effectively facilitate the inclusion of women in peacebuilding initiatives at the local, national or international level, a deep understanding of the key issues that concern them is necessary. At the international level, there is a consensus that women should be included in all peace talks. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security acknowledges the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and advocates the critical role they play in the processes of peacebuilding and conflict prevention.¹⁹

To improve the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions at the national and international level, there is a need to root any engagement in an informed understanding of the local context. This study has attempted to illustrate two important points of interest to this discourse. Firstly, the unheard voices of marginalised women in Neelum, AJK have been highlighted, which is essential in understanding their perspective regarding the challenges they face stemming from the violence associated with the conflict. The study also highlights the important role of women in any sustained peace initiative and tends to explore the avenues in which women can be trained and engaged in both within the community as well in cross-LoC dialogue.

Effective peacebuilding mechanisms are inclusive and lay emphasis on civil society engagement and participation of communities which are marginalised especially women. There is a need to give women a sense of ownership, reframing their role as potential agents of change with influence over their situation rather than powerless victims. Whilst women tend to be the most marginalised in conflict, it is important to acknowledge that women are not a homogenous group, with multiple factors such as education, location, class and opportunity determining how they are individually affected by conflict.

Similarly, challenges faced by rural women will differ from those faced by women living in the

urban areas. For example, in a remote rural area like Neelum, women are faced with insecurity, displacement, poverty and poor healthcare. Therefore, a response to women issues in this context needs to focus on the household and community level, involving economic and social welfare. In stark contrast, privileged and well off urban women are more likely to aspire for political leadership. Whether poor or privileged, rural or urban, women are important players in peacebuilding initiatives, with any sustainable peace requiring their full participation in the peace process. Their involvement in mechanisms, which prevent conflict, stop war, and stabilise regions damaged by conflict, is essential.

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security; adopted 31 October 2000.

About Kashmir Institute of International Relations (KIIR)

Kashmir Institute of International Relations is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization established in 1993 in Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir. With the motto of "Peace through Dialogue" KIIR is working for a peaceful South Asia. KIIR believes peace can only be achieved by the resolution of the Kashmir dispute through substantive dialogue between India, Pakistan and Kashmiris.

To achieve this goal, KIIR has engaged policymakers and policy implementers: Members of Parliament, Political Activists, Lawyers, Journalists, Academics and Social Activists. KIIR is working to enhance the capacity of Kashmiri civil society actors in the areas of reconciliation, negotiation skills and conflict resolution. The objective of these initiatives is to facilitate dialogue that is conducive to reconciliation and peace in the region.

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