

From Victimhood to Activism: An Empirical Study of South Asian Women's Rights Movements amidst State Violence

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Abstract: This paper argues that South Asian women assert their autonomy and confront repressive state institutions by negotiating with the epistemologies of political oppression within a misogynistic social order. In addition, this essay delineates the epistemic practices of autocratic regimes to understand how they inform the objectives and methodologies of women's resistance work. This paper's argument is substantiated through the analysis of three distinct South Asian women's rights organizations: the petitioners of the 1991 Kunan Poshpora mass rape case, who contested the military occupation in Kashmir, India; the Women's Action Forum (WAF), which protested the fundamentalist doctrines of General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship in Pakistan in the 1980s; and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which opposed the series of violent regimes that took power in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion in 1979. The results of this study indicate that South Asian women across a variety of political structures and national contexts operationalize their epistemic positionality to resist autocracies' architectures of political and gender violence. Women accomplish this by engaging strategically with spaces of participation and tailoring protest tactics to address the injustices to which they are subjected. These findings signify the advantageous perspectives that women possess when comprehending political violence and emphasize the need to include women's standpoints when discerning systems of oppression.

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Introduction

Throughout history, the public spaces in which street protests and political acts of defiance occur have been assumed to be dominated by men (Iqbal & Magill, 2022). However, a thorough inspection of political upheavals around the world reveals that women consistently participate in nonviolent movements and alternative politics to initiate drastic political changes in the geopolitical spaces they inhabit (Principe, 2016; Saeed, 2020). This is especially true in societies governed by oppressive and autocratic regimes, under which civilians experience widespread and indiscriminate atrocities (Strasser, 2016).

When questioned about their motivation for nonviolent protest, women provide a multitude of reasons for choosing to take to the streets. While many of their reasons for protesting do pertain to the well-being and protection of their communities at large, many women advocate against state oppression to rectify the violence that they themselves have experienced at the hands of state actors. A growing body of scholarship recognizes that violence against women is frequently weaponized in societies experiencing intractable state oppression (Geetha, 2016; Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Zia, 2019). However, the subtleties of women's experiences with gender violence are usually minimized to symbolically indicate the intensity of a particular

conflict, because sexual violations are perceived to be distinctive from other forms of political violence (Geetha, 2016; Kaur, 2020; Mushtaq et al., 2016).

While a victim of political torture is viewed as an exploited body whose abuse represents the state's abuse of power, a victim of sexual violence is reduced to being a gendered body—typically a raped, female body—who can be repeatedly assaulted and whose violation represents a triumph of masculinity (Geetha, 2016). The international community struggles to conceptualize systematic sexual violence as a symptom of deficient politics and instead rationalizes it as an unfortunate reality faced by women in conflict-ridden regions (MacKinnon, 1993). For this reason, the ontological suffering of women is commonly disregarded in discussions of political violence, which encourages the marginalization of women's perspectives in the mainstream narratives of these conflicts (Geetha, 2016; Kaur, 2020). In societies that are culturally prone to ostracizing victims of sexual assault, these women's experiences are frequently subjected to social amnesia, enabling the state to continue its methodical violation of women with impunity (Kaur, 2020; Mushtaq et al., 2016).

Women who are continually victimized by an oppressive state rarely endure these realities with passivity, and instead offer their enthusiastic support to both nonviolent opposition parties and violent insurgencies in defiance of prevailing political institutions. However, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that women's mere support of resistance movements results in no substantial change in the social order under which they experience

sexual abuse and discrimination. Instead, these misogynistic structures are typically reinforced during and after periods of political upheaval, making the realization and maintenance of women's rights an elusive aspiration (Brodsky, 2003; Geetha, 2016; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Sarvesh, 2024).

Consequently, women in societies experiencing pervasive conflict are doubly oppressed by both socially imposed gender hierarchies and the machinery of the repressive state, structures that are mutually conducive to cementing patriarchal norms (Mushtaq et al., 2016). Nevertheless, women in impossibly exploitative circumstances persist in their commitment to defend their rights and hold state authorities accountable by organizing their own demonstrations and associations. These separate nonviolent movements are created and led solely by women for the purpose of subverting social and political hegemonies (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Saeed, 2020).

Women's resolve to challenge autocracies has been especially evident in South Asia, despite these societies exhibiting a high cultural tolerance for sexual assault (Geetha, 2016). The dedication that South Asian women display to nonviolent protest could be attributed to context-specific circumstances, but that is an insufficient explanation for the tradition of gendered resistance that is apparent across the cultural, political, and religious diversity of the South Asian region. The consistency of South Asian women's resistance against atrocities suggests that a more fundamental aspect of state suppression is responsible for the proliferation of women's political dissent.

This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that exploitative state institutions across geopolitical regions are often similar in their reliance on exclusionary philosophies. Regardless of a state's unique national history, cultural context, and exact political ideology, oppressive regimes commonly propagate an epistemology of subordination and dehumanization (Hopgood, 2013; Mills, 2014). These epistemic practices can take a variety of forms but are necessary for the justification of political suppression and can be identified in a variety of repressive governments, including in South Asia (Dotson, 2018). The epistemologies of autocratic regimes stimulate women's discernment and eventual rejection of prevailing political and social norms, in addition to informing the rationale and methodology of women's advocacy work (Alcoff, 2007).

This research study argues that South Asian women assert their autonomy and confront repressive state institutions by negotiating with the epistemologies of political oppression within a misogynistic social order, thereby "demonstrating how victimhood can transform into activism" (Iqbal & Magill, 2022, p. 265). In order to understand the nuances of women's resistance to gendered violence in oppressive societies across South Asia, this paper will discuss a framework of political violence and gendered resistance and apply it to three distinct South Asian women's rights groups as case studies: the petitioners of the Kunan Poshpora mass rape case in Kashmir, India; the Women's Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan; and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) in Afghanistan. Through an examination of protestors' memoirs and first-hand accounts

(Brodsky, 2003; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Mushtaq et al., 2016), this essay will identify the epistemic and substantive conditions that were shared by the women in each country and discuss the particularities in their approaches to and strategies of resistance.¹

The selected women's organizations from India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are fairly distinct in their intentions and methods of protest, but they do exhibit some analogous characteristics. First, all three associations were created by women with the primary objective of advocating for the protection or realization of women's rights, which they did while commenting on the convergence of state and gender violence. All three organizations employed formalized,² nonviolent³ strategies to achieve their goals, and directly challenged the state machinery of their respective governments—the Kunan Poshpora petitioners contested India's military occupation and counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir, the WAF protested the fundamentalist doctrines of General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship in Pakistan in the 1980s, and RAWA opposed the procession of violent regimes that took power in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion in 1979. These similarities will be explicated further in succeeding sections. Beyond the few

noted similarities, the women's organizations examined in this paper utilized diverse protest tactics and were alike only in their endeavor to “turn sadness into anger, and anger into action” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 142), by condemning sexual and political atrocities and resisting brutal totalitarian regimes.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The first section delineates the epistemological and theoretical framework that will be utilized to discuss the autocracies in the central cases, and the second characterizes South Asian women's resistance work. The remaining three sections substantiate the arguments of the preceding sections and investigate each of the case studies by overviewing the historical context, identifying the regime's epistemologies and institutionalization of gender violence, and surveying the designated women's rights organization for its motivations, tactics, and outcomes.

The Epistemologies of Oppressive Regimes

The oppressive South Asian regimes examined in this paper attempted to consolidate their political power by implementing a distinctive political epistemology, which precipitated practices of repression and gender

¹ This paper does not intend to proclaim that women constitute a homogenous group in oppressive South Asian societies, because women's intersectional identities have a significant impact on the demonstration tactics that they use. However, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, mobilizing women are likely to emphasize the shared experiences that arise from living under oppressive regimes to augment the appeal of their movements, and these assertions of shared oppression are relevant to the argumentation of this essay (Hasanat, 2022; Saeed, 2020; Zia, 2019).

² In addition to conventional forms of nonviolent protest, women have been observed to resist state hegemonies by

implementing a more informal politics of emotion and everyday defiance. These forms of protest tend to be more spontaneous, but are still politically significant. For more information, see Kaur (2020) and Zia (2019).

³ While women often provide vital support to violent insurgencies by housing and feeding militants, they are far less likely to commit violence themselves in their own movements (Parashar, 2011; Strasser, 2016). Women's groups that do engage in violent militant activities embody complicated cultural and political positionalities (Parashar, 2011), but an adequate investigation of the juncture between gender and the use of violence are beyond the scope of this study.

violence. This section investigates the development of these epistemic realities and explicates the purpose of sexual assault within the context of these philosophies of violence.

The regimes discussed in this study used exclusionary notions of nationhood as a basis to establish their authority. In such discriminatory states, political right is generated through the distinction between citizens, who are afforded the rights and moral standing of “full persons,” and the othered “subpersons” of society (Mills, 2014). The privileges enjoyed by citizens can only have meaning if they are denied to subpersons, on account of their outsider status (Mohanty, 1988; Pateman, 1991). This results in a hierarchical political order that justifies and enables the dominance of its citizens through the systemic “exploitation of [the] bodies, land, [and] resources [of noncitizens], and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them” (Mills, 2014, p. 90). In this way, the regime operationalizes the domination and subordination of certain groups to establish its political authority.

Repressive states distinguish between citizens and subpersons on the basis of socially agreed-upon conceptions of identity. When these demarcations of identity are politicized by governments in their pursuit of legitimacy, political actors can sanctify the division between the citizenry and outsiders using a rhetoric of national identity (Pervez, 2012). Because the fabrication of nationhood often requires a recasting of existing group identities, regimes will construe their national identity by taking advantage of soft power variables (Pervez, 2012; Rafiq, 2022).

Pervez (2012) defines soft power variables as attractive and intangible power resources, like religion, cultural norms, and institutions, that appeal to people and encourage their compliance. Soft power variables are constructed via social imagination, meaning they are arbitrary and malleable. When a citizenry utilizes soft power variables to contrive its national identity, their inherent transience induces “securitized subjectivity,” whereby “subjects in a state desire securitization when they are afraid or feel a threat to the existence of their identity. In this situation, every self-identity requires a threat from others” (Pervez, 2012, p. 101). State leaders, to further consolidate their political power and solidify the domination of the citizenry, will deliberately vilify the subpersons of the political order, consequently ensuring a continued environment of securitized subjectivity (Pervez, 2012). By manufacturing an enduring security dilemma between dominant and subordinated groups, oppressive regimes convey to dominant groups that the protection provided by the state is necessary for the dominant identity group’s—and the nation state’s—survival, which legitimizes the state (Pervez, 2012; Rafiq, 2022).

Through the manipulation of soft power variables, oppressive regimes manufacture a nationalism that is dependent on the demarcation between dominant and subordinate identity groups. Because the maintenance of this division is essential for the preservation of the autocracy’s political power, the state then normalizes its unjust political order by regulating the production of knowledge to only validate the perspectives of dominant identities (Dotson, 2018; Fricker, 2007). In an exploitative society, dominant

identities, as part of their moral and political status as full persons, are entitled to epistemic power, or the operative power of knowledge possession, attribution, and production based on one's standing (*ibid.*). Only the designated dominant identities are granted the epistemic status to establish the valued aspects of reality and assert claims that feature a relationship with some privileged principle, such as truth (Dotson, 2018; Mills, 2014).

Dominant groups utilize their absolute grasp over the epistemic community to admit themselves to the epistemological high ground, which Dotson (2018) defines as “the contrastive privilege that generates a defense of one's claims and the ability or authority to challenge competing claims” (p. 139). Dotson (2018) notes that members of the epistemological high ground may believe that acquiring a certain level of epistemic power over time exempts them from having to consider positions that challenge their own. Mills (2014) contends that because dominant identities award *themselves* this epistemic status through the formation of their national identity, whatever incorrect beliefs emerge from their epistemically irresponsible institutions are simply corroborated by their supposed epistemic authority. Consequently, dominant identities develop what they understand to be the objectively “correct” interpretation of the world, an interpretation that is often a poor representation of reality (Dotson, 2018; Mills, 2014).

Conversely, identities marginalized by the political order are deprived of their epistemic power. When subordinated groups are denied access to society's epistemic community, they suffer from epistemic violence,

which “wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value” (Fricker, 2007, p. 5). Inflicting knowledge-based violence on subordinated groups is an important practice for states to assert their authority and uphold their nationalist ideology. Epistemic wrongs materialize in a variety of ways, but the three varieties that are most apparent in the regimes examined in this paper are willful ignorance, testimonial injustice, and hermeneutical marginalization. Each of these practices can be observed to varying degrees in each of the case studies, demonstrating the states' propensity for hegemonic policies and repressive tactics.

Epistemologists' representation of willful ignorance resembles Mills' (2015) previously discussed assertion that privileged groups in society must see the world wrongly in order to justify conquest, colonialism, and enslavement. To accomplish this, exploitative societies implement cognitive norms of assessment that enable the routine dismissal of countervailing evidence and the continual reinforcement of the dominant view (Alcoff, 2007). Since the epistemic power of privileged communities is self-ordained, not only does this system result in dominant groups “sequestering and holding as irrelevant” (Dotson, 2018, p. 146) the knowledge and claims of marginalized peoples, but it also encourages dominant groups to remain oblivious to the realities and challenges experienced by subordinated communities (Mills, 2014).

In this way, ignorance no longer constitutes the absence of epistemic practices but rather is a substantive epistemic practice in itself (Alcoff, 2007; Dotson, 2018). The

epistemic wrong of willful ignorance, defined by Alcoff (2007) as the active pursuit of a distorted or inaccurate account of reality, is particularly evident in societies that exhibit an immense imbalance of power between state actors and subordinated individuals, such as a repressive regime that has been legitimized. This environment motivates the state to set “itself above the law and the realm of justice, [refuse] to either recognize or take responsibility for the hurt it causes, and actually [relish] in its authority to be that way” (Geetha, 2016, p. xxvii). Though willful ignorance is, to some capacity, prevalent in all the case studies of this paper, the Indian administration in Kashmir appeared to pursue willful ignorance with the most dedication.

The second form of epistemic violence that will be explored in this essay is testimonial injustice. Fricker (2007) defines testimonial injustice as a prejudice on the hearer’s part which “causes them to give the speaker less credibility than they would otherwise have given...[the speaker] is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge” (p. 7). This credibility deficit is inflicted on the speaker on the basis of identity, when there is an expectation that the knower—either an individual, group, collective, or network—must embody or satisfy some condition for their proposition to be considered credible or believable (Dotson, 2018; Fricker, 2007). Subordinated groups, who are typically denied

access to the truth-making mechanisms of society owing to their socially imagined identity, are especially vulnerable to having their perspectives, realities, and epistemologies discounted by dominant identity groups (Dotson, 2018). The women in Kashmir and Pakistan frequently experienced testimonial injustice on account of either their gender or their belonging to marginalized communities, or both.

The third type of epistemic wrong that is pertinent to the argumentation of this paper is hermeneutical marginalization. The definition of hermeneutical marginalization provided by Fricker (2007) is grounded in the contention that privileged members of society have a disproportionate influence in developing and structuring collective social understandings, or the shared hermeneutical resource. This leads to the powerful drawing on their own experiences to make sense of social realities, leaving the powerless in society without a suitable vocabulary or conceptual understanding to make sense of their own experiences (Fricker, 2007). Underprivileged groups are thus hermeneutically marginalized, in that their social experiences are “left inadequately conceptualized and so ill-understood, perhaps even by the subject themselves...[that even] when they do have an adequate grip on the content of what they aim to convey, [powerless groups] are not heard as rational” (Fricker, 2007, p. 160).⁴ If members of a subordinated

⁴ A highly relevant example of hermeneutical marginalization is a woman experiencing workplace sexual harassment, before the concept of “sexual harassment” was popularized. While the harasser can continue his conduct unchallenged despite his unfamiliarity with the concept of sexual harassment (arguably, it is very much in his interest to remain

ignorant), the harassee is incapacitated because she cannot adequately comprehend or intelligibly communicate her experience. The harassee’s hermeneutical disadvantage leaves her feeling troubled and isolated, and renders her unable to protest her mistreatment or secure means to stop it (Fricker, 2007).

group are inclined to resist the structures under which they experience subordination, it is crucial for them to have the appropriate cognitive concepts to render their experience and realities intelligible, otherwise they are left vulnerable to experiencing hermeneutical injustice (Mills, 2014). Of the selected women's advocacy groups discussed in the central cases, the women of Afghanistan endured hermeneutical marginalization the most explicitly.

By implementing the epistemic injustices and structures of subordination discussed above, the repressive state fabricates a potent nationalism that acquires definition through the peripheralization of particular communities and the preservation of those peripheries (Mohanty, 1988). And because the ultimate triumph of a nation-state is the physical and symbolic performance of power over the bodies of its people, exclusionary nationalism can culminate in the demonization, domination, and ultimately, the destruction of subordinated bodies (Zia, 2019). Although the specific rights violations that oppressive regimes engage in depend on a variety of factors, including the administration's ideology and international and geopolitical circumstances, autocracies are consistently found to engender deteriorating conditions for women's rights (Geetha, 2016; MacKinnon, 1993).

The experience of systematic sexual assault and other forms of gendered violence

whilst living under a repressive state is one that is shared by women from diverse global backgrounds (Geetha, 2016; MacKinnon, 1993). The admission that rampant gendered violence is commonly used for political means was recognized relatively recently in the international human rights community,⁵ and the reason for this omission becomes clear after considering why regimes commit violence against women within the context of political suppression. In societies experiencing political violence, the substantive realities of sexual atrocities are obscured and violations take on symbolic value, an exceedingly dehumanizing development for victims. State actors commit sexual assault, not to violate the woman herself, but to humiliate and emasculate her allegedly deviant family, and by extension her greater community (Geetha, 2016; Zia, 2019). This insinuates that the victim's body is an enemy possession or territory that the state can conquer, subsequently transforming rape into a tactic that men employ to wage war with other men (Geetha, 2016).

The dynamics of politicized sexual violence are further confounded because of the profound impact that militarization and state suppression have on gender roles and cultural norms. In enduring political conflicts, the contest between political dissenters and the state's security forces results in a "masculinist social environment," because the consideration of gendered perspectives seems inessential when a discourse of security and sovereignty is

⁵ In the 1990s, the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda were the first international bodies to explicate rape as a crime against humanity, and to confirm the connection between sexual violence and other war crimes like torture, enslavement, and persecution. These tribunals' judgements and their

commentary on sexual violence cumulated in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in 1998, which enumerates various forms of sexual violence to constitute crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes (Geetha, 2016).

predominant (Mushtaq et al., 2016; Parashar, 2011; Sarvesh, 2024). The popular resistance movement, on behalf of a society that is threatened by violent state institutions and is struggling to cope with this violence, reinforces existing social structures by imposing undue regulation on women and exacerbating prevailing forms of gender discrimination (Geetha, 2016; Parashar, 2011; Zia 2019).

The state amplifies this phenomenon in an attempt to further suppress political dissidents. Women are identified as easy targets for harassment and exploitation, because if they survive assault at the hands of security forces, they are often denounced by their community and rendered socially dead—the state does not need to police them directly (Geetha, 2016). This is especially true in South Asian cultures, where social structures tend to harbor prejudice against sexual assault victims and consider a woman’s violation to represent a defilement of her family’s dignity or honor (Geetha, 2016; Sarvesh, 2024; Zia, 2019). For this reason, sexual assault survivors first experience violence at the hands of state actors, and are then condemned by the social order, including the popular resistance, for “giving in” to the enemy state (Geetha, 2016; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Zia, 2019). Consequently, both state institutions and social structures influence the systematic misogyny and gender norms that discriminate against women in politically unstable regions.

Although autocracies’ oppressive practices induce high rates of gender violence, it

would be erroneous to assume that state suppression is inflicted on women from every sector of society in identical ways. The South Asian societies that are discussed in the central cases contain immense diversity and the experiences of women vary greatly based on their geographical, linguistic, religious, ethnic, tribal, class, and caste identities. The multitude of hierarchies that are evident in these communities often complicates clear binaries between privilege and marginalization, and instead produces a spectrum of discrimination—women may seem to be victimized equally by a regime’s policies, but the way in which they actually experience the state’s oppression can be greatly dependent on their other identities (Geetha, 2016).⁶ These intersections of women’s identities are significant because they dictate why the violent regime is motivated to infringe a woman’s bodily integrity and deny her personhood, in addition to determining how the woman responds to her violation and what resources she can realistically access to rectify this injustice (ibid.). Accordingly, to regard all women in a conflicted society as homogenous risks depoliticizing their perspectives and robs their advocacy work of the nuances that are inherent to their subjectivity (de Vos & Delabre, 2018; Geetha, 2016; Mohanty, 1988).

Characterizing Women’s Resistance Work

In defiance of the epistemic injustices and sexual atrocities with which they are threatened, women persistently agitate for the realization of their rights and other anti-

⁶ For example, Zia (2019) describes how half-widows, or women whose husbands have been disappeared by the Indian government in Kashmir, India, are more likely to face harassment and assault than women who can still elicit their husband’s protection. Similarly, Mushtaq et al.

(2016) and Geetha (2016) emphasize that women living in rural areas experience significantly higher rates of violence at the hands of state actors in comparison to urban women.

authoritarian principles. This section discusses women's motivations for challenging state oppression and identifies the distinguishing features of their political dissent.

Because women's encounters with state violence are inextricably gendered, women inhabit complicated positionalities with respect to the epistemology of an exclusionary political order and the patriarchal structures it ordains (Kaur, 2020). This situatedness provides an explanation for why women are invigorated to challenge the state machinery under which they experience suppression and elucidates women's apparent affinity for alternative politics (Geetha, 2016).

Epistemologists contend that members of oppressed groups, having been excluded from the epistemic community by dominant identity groups, are less likely to engage in practices like willful ignorance (Alcoff, 2007), and therefore have "a more encompassing view of social reality than others...their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others" (Guru et al., 2020, pp. 60-1). In this way, those who are subjected to marginalization obtain epistemically relevant perspectives about the oppressive systems in which they live. Additionally, subordinated communities receive few benefits from their present reality, so rather than excuse existing injustices, they are motivated to use their accurate assessment of society to advocate for the necessary changes (Alcoff, 2007).

Gendered perspectives are particularly productive critics of society because the substantive features of gender identity and norms are culturally prescribed, and the existence of any gender-based prejudice can be

accredited to that group's particular social imagination. Subsequently, any critique of gender hierarchies can elide into a critique of society (Alcoff, 2007). However, this interrogation of social norms does not typically occur organically, and "it usually takes a crisis of some sort for a person to radically question one of their beliefs...we tend to conserve the beliefs we have until we are forced to call them into question" (Alcoff, 2007, p. 45).

As demonstrated in the previous section, the advent of state violence initiates a significant rearrangement of gender roles and cultural dynamics, mostly in the form of reinforcing patriarchy (Mushtaq et al., 2016; Parashar, 2011; Sarvesh, 2024). The fact that women experience state violence in distinctive ways as a consequence of their gender motivates them to apply their epistemic perspectives and challenge existing social arrangements. And because of the "acute gendering of authoritarian rule...[women's resistance] ma[kes] for a sustained critique of the state from a feminist perspective" (Geetha, 2016, p. 117). Consequently, women's rights advocates and organizations, including those discussed in this paper, confront the state for the exploitation and violence that it inflicts on women while also addressing the regime's systemic oppression of its citizens at large.

Women's dissent against autocratic governments is also significant because it frequently occurs outside of the established or popular resistance movement, even if they both are united in their dissent of state authorities. This trait of women's advocacy can be attributed to misogynistic social structures. Though it is common for women to be deeply invested in

demonstrations, insurgency activities, and other aspects of political life, the relevance or significance of their work is rarely recognized by the male leaders of the opposition groups, which can reiterate to women their uniquely disenfranchised position in society (Brodsky, 2003; Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Sarvesh, 2024). In the meta-narratives of conflict, women's every day, privatized realities do not constitute the sensational or "political" events that are emphasized by state vs. combatant frameworks (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Kaur, 2020; Sarvesh, 2024). Alternatively, when women are referenced within these dialogues, they are often relegated to the role of the passive, raped victim, whose violation is turned into a rallying cry by the insurgency (Geetha, 2016; Hasanat, 2022; Kaur, 2020). This erasure of women's dissent encourages them to form their own organizations that focus specifically on vindicating women's experiences in addition to combatting state oppression (Geetha, 2016).

Women's inclination to create movements that focus on their own perspectives to avoid being marginalized within existing dissent groups is corroborated by the literature on spaces of participation. de Vos and Delabre (2018) define participation as "different forms of engagement that influence decision making" (p. 219). Participation occurs in participatory spaces, and power relations dictate "what is possible within them, who may enter, and which interests, identities, and discourses are considered legitimate in such spaces" (de Vos &

Delabre, 2018, p. 219). They further describe spaces of participation as either closed, invited, or claimed/created. In closed spaces, only a limited group of actors are permitted to participate, and in invited spaces, the creators of the space expand participation by inviting other actors. Because those who create the space "give" power to those who are invited into it, it is difficult for power to be shared equally; invited spaces may become sites of resistance through a questioning of prevailing norms, but this resistance is not always effective because the division between the powerless and powerful cannot be denied (de Vos & Delabre, 2018). Actors who lack power and share common concerns or identifications create claimed/created spaces as alternatives to the spaces from which they are excluded. These spaces are created by community associations and social movements and can be interpreted as sites of resistance because actors create them for the purpose of subverting the hegemonies of preexisting spaces (ibid.).

The dimension of gender can alter the circumstances of participation and the kinds of resistance that are exhibited within those spaces. de Vos and Delabre (2018) assert that cultural norms about participation and familial representation can limit women's participation, even in invited spaces. Women often experience invited spaces as closed spaces, so women's mere presence in invited spaces does not indicate that women's participation is socially permissible, nor does it signify that women are adequately represented in those spaces.⁷ This is

⁷ For example, victims of institutionalized sexual violence might seek redress for the violations they have suffered by going to court, an invited space where the right to testify and present evidence must be bestowed on the petitioners

by the judicial system. But because the state is inclined to codify its impunity within its institutions, it is difficult for the victims of political violence to hold the state

also true in claimed/created spaces that are meant to serve as spaces of resistance but are dominated by men. If men control the strategies of resistance, the women who participate in the movement may defy cultural restrictions temporarily, but cannot effectively challenge broader gender hierarchies, and may instead become the primary recipients of the repercussions that accompany those forms of resistance (de Vos & Delabre, 2018; Geetha, 2016; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 2020; Parashar, 2011; Sarvesh, 2024). Women's decision to separate themselves from predominant resistance spaces also signifies an expression of women's unique epistemic standpoints, which are predictably distinct from those of male-dominated movements.

Additionally, women create their own spaces of participation to subvert the “binary—of either radical achievers or victims... [and to instead manifest] subjects in seemingly conflictual and fractured positions” (Kaur, 2020, p. 529). Hasanat (2022) elaborates that gendered resistance presents women with the opportunity to distance themselves from the predominant narrative that forces women to identify with exploitation or generalize the elements of their trauma. As political dissidents, women can instead engage in meaningful discourse about the violence they may have faced while demanding for changes in policy, power dynamics, and exclusionary practices as subjects with agency (Hasanat, 2022).⁸

accountable in the courts or other conventional spaces for actualizing justice (de Vos & Delabre, 2018; Geetha, 2016).

⁸ Hasanat (2022) emphasizes that gendered resistance must not be romanticized or be misleadingly equated to empowerment, because empowerment should not be an “offering” for women to reward them for their resistance.

It is within these theoretical parameters that women come together to confront state institutions and social practices. The associations discussed in the subsequent sections employed a variety of methods to express their dissent, and their methods were informed by the intersections of the activists' identities, the regime they were resisting, the participatory spaces they were interacting with, and other factors. However, the organizations did share some similarities in their approach to gendered resistance.

The advocacy work described in the central cases comprised of collective action, or “a group's decision to consciously change their circumstances... [the group is constructed through an] association between persons who have at least a minimal sense of themselves as connected to others in common purpose” (Saeed, 2020, p. 3). As a precursor to collective action, women tend to individually make the decision to pursue alternative politics when they feel their dignity has been violated beyond repair (Saeed, 2020). For most women, this occurs when they themselves are victimized by state actors, or when members of their family or community are subjected to state violence (Brodsky, 2003; Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Saeed, 2020). Many women note that they were politicized when state actors began marching into their homes to conduct unlawful searches or other extrajudicial abuses. Because the home is culturally construed as a feminine space, and

The notion of empowerment is frequently depicted as an earned achievement, which women are expected to embody continually whilst navigating their persisting social, political, religious, and national circumstances. Comprehending empowerment in such a narrow way limits the behaviors, actions, and choices that women have available to them (Hasanat, 2022).

is defined by ideas of security and intimacy, women often felt humiliated and violated when political violence infringed on private spaces (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Kaur, 2020; Saeed, 2020; Zia, 2019).

These policies of targeting women and women's spaces are intended to destabilize the family and the home life of political dissenters,⁹ but women are prone to operationalize these shared feelings of shame, indignity, and grief (Geetha, 2016). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term "structural essentialism," to describe the sociality acquired by experiences of loss or emotions like grief when they are circulated "through, between, and beyond the silent bodies of the protestors" (Kaur, 2020, p. 527). These activists instrumentalize the hegemonic nature of state violence to make their organizations' missions resonate with a wider audience and expand support for their stances.

It should be mentioned that despite their many strengths, the advocacy groups in the central cases were combatting powerful state institutions in highly repressive environments, and had to make compromises in their dissent of gender and state violence. Women's rights movements exhibit a certain leniency towards the social order while still questioning it, understanding that their families and communities are also experiencing the helplessness and distress of living under an autocratic regime (Geetha, 2016). Schoen (2019) utilizes the term "patriarchal bargains" to describe how women amalgamate compliance with and resistance to patriarchal structures.

⁹ Repressive states seldom take women's intersectionality into account when instituting patriarchal policies. This may inadvertently produce shared anxieties among women, which are then expressed in their advocacy work

Patriarchal bargains reaffirm the nuanced relationality that women's rights groups embody in their response to institutionalized violations and sexual torture.

Military Occupation and Gendered Resistance in Kashmir, India

In December of 2012, a young woman was gang raped and murdered in New Delhi, India, and the outrage over this crime sparked protests across the nation. In India's heavily militarized state of Jammu and Kashmir (hereafter Kashmir), the news of this tragedy was received by a community that is well acquainted with the cruelties of sexual violence (Mushtaq et al., 2016). Alongside their expression of solidarity, Kashmiri activists remarked with dismay that when Indian security forces inflicted similar atrocities on women in Kashmir, they never elicited a response of such magnitude, if at all, because sexual violence is considered forgivable when it is committed by uniformed men (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

However, after witnessing the intense public response that the 2012 New Delhi rape instigated, several young Kashmiri women were emboldened to come together and advocate for the reopening of the 1991 Kunan Poshpora mass rape case. This case had originally been filed to address the horrific events of February 23rd, 1991, when a regiment of the Indian army committed mass rape against as many as 50 women in the neighboring villages of Kunan and Poshpora in a single night (Kaur, 2020;

in ways that resonate with women in diverse circumstances (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Mushtaq et al., 2016).

Mushtaq et al., 2016). The case had been closed in 1991 itself amid a parade of buried evidence, ineffectual investigations, and other miscarriages of justice (Mushtaq et al., 2016). In April of 2013, 50 Kashmiri women filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in consultation with the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society to have the Kunan Poshpora case reopened. This section analyzes the investigations and resistance work conducted by these petitioners.

Historical Context

The circumstances under which the Kunan Poshpora mass rape occurred were foregrounded by the history of the Kashmir region prior to India's independence from British colonial rule. Under the British administration, Jammu and Kashmir was a Princely State and ruled by the repressive Dogra Dynasty (Wolpert, 2010). On July 22nd, 1931, Dogra soldiers opened fire on peaceful protestors and caused 22 casualties, to which the exploited Kashmiri people responded by initiating a state-wide revolt against the Hindu monarchy. This inspired a culture of resistance and the aspiration of democratic sovereignty in the state (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Zia, 2019).

In 1947, as the Indian subcontinent was being partitioned into the states of India and Pakistan, Viceroy Lord Mountbatten dictated that the royal rulers of the Princely States would decide for themselves whether to ascend to India or Pakistan (Wolpert, 2010). Considering that his dominion was geographically adjacent to Pakistan, that 77 percent of his subjects were Muslim, and that Pakistan had been created solely to serve as a homeland for the Muslims of South Asia, Maharaja Hari Singh was expected to integrate Kashmir into Pakistan. But instead,

the monarch proposed to keep Kashmir independent, which was not admissible to either India or Pakistan. Both nation states became engaged in a military conflict to secure the Kashmir region mere months after they attained independence (Wolpert, 2010; Zia, 2019).

The conflict was appealed to the United Nations Security Council, where both Pakistan and India insisted that the other remove their troops from the region first. (Wolpert, 2010). The UN Commission on India and Pakistan was eventually able to get both states to sign a ceasefire agreement and delineate the 460-mile ceasefire line, now known as the Line of Control (LOC), when India promised to hold an impartial plebiscite to determine the desires of the Kashmiri population in the portion of the Kashmir region that was now under its administration (Zia, 2019).

India has yet to fulfill this promise (Mushtaq et al., 2016). India contends that Maharaja Hari Singh signed an Instrument of Accession to India when Pakistan "invaded" Kashmir in 1947, and considers this document to be sufficient evidence of the region's desire to be integrated into the Indian state (Mushtaq et al., 2016; Zia, 2019). This account of Kashmir's history disregards India's promise to hold a plebiscite and denies the Kashmiri people the opportunity to assert their self-determination (ibid.). India's claims about the treaty of accession and tendency to present the conflict as a contest between Indian and Pakistani nationalism are contested by scholars, because this mainstream but reductive narrative erases India's own aggressive tactics to secure the territory and erases the Kashmiri people's

demand for sovereignty, a demand that predates the 1947 partition (Zia, 2019).

Nevertheless, since 1947, India has endeavored to retain Kashmir under its authority forcefully (Zia, 2019). In 1954, a presidential order “extended Indian citizenship and the fundamental rights charter to Kashmir. This charter...is unique in permitting preventative detention to curb threats to national security or public order” (Zia, 2019, pp. 57-8). The Indian administration’s undemocratic practices and military presence in Jammu and Kashmir steadily increased in severity as the second half of the 20th century progressed, but the situation reached a turning point in 1975, when young Kashmiri men and women joined the rest of the nation in protesting the suspension of India’s Constitution instituted by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Wolpert, 2010). Despite the drastic increase in the number of Indian troops and paramilitary forces stationed in Kashmir after 1975, the enlightened Kashmiri youth remained enthusiastic about democracy, integration, and economic development (Wolpert, 2010).

This generation’s optimism was misplaced, and the blatant rigging of the 1987 election led many to believe that the promised plebiscite and Kashmir’s self-determination could no longer be realized through non-violent means; young Kashmiris’ idealism was subsequently channeled into militancy (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Wolpert, 2010). The Indian state responded to this development by bringing Kashmir under central rule in 1990 and “pouring an unprecedented number of Indian armed forces into the state. Jammu and Kashmir became the most heavily

militarized region in the world” (Iqbal & Magill, 2022, pp. 254-5). Arbitrary arrests and shooting deaths had not been uncommon in Kashmir prior to 1989, but they took on new prevalence in the 1990s as engagements between Kashmir’s organized, militant resistance and India’s troops became commonplace (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Wolpert, 2010; Zia, 2019). The Kashmiri people endured the most intense violation of their human rights, including custodial and extra-judicial killings, assassinations, enforced disappearances, fake encounters, and rapes, like the Kunan Poshpora mass rape, at the hands of the Indian army during this period (Kaur, 2020; Zia, 2019).

By the late 1990s, popular support for the militancy had decreased significantly, and though Indian administrators admitted that the number of militants in Kashmir had subsided by the turn of the century, India’s counterinsurgency policies and military occupation in Kashmir remain in place (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Parashar, 2011; Zia, 2019). The Kashmiri people do not consider fixed elections and puppet governments to be sufficient compensation for their demands for self-determination, and since 2008, their commitment to resistance has materialized in a culture of civil disobedience, imbued with the hope that this kind of protest will lay the foundation for a more widespread uprising in the future (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Zia, 2019).

India’s Epistemology of Political and Gender Violence in Militarized Kashmir

Because the political process of partitioning the Indian subcontinent conceptually equated national identity to territoriality at the moment of India’s

decolonization, Indian nationalism was manifested through territorial domination (Rafiq, 2022; Zia, 2019). For this reason, the retention of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian Union is essential to India's sense of nationhood; as early as 1947, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was rallying his troops by claiming, "The Kashmir operation is a fight for the freedom of India" (Wolpert, 2010, p. 24). Accordingly, Kashmiri calls for self-determination threaten the geopolitical borders on which Indian nationalism is grounded. Because of this emphasis on territoriality, the political demarcation between Indian citizens and the subordinated Kashmiri people corresponds to a geographic boundary. The Kashmiri people quite literally inhabit the periphery of the Indian state, which signifies their marginalization in a number of ways.

India has resorted to decontextualizing the region's aspirations for national sovereignty and minimizing the conflict to a rivalry between Indian and Pakistani nationalism to justify the enduring presence of Indian troops in the region (Zia, 2019). By subverting Kashmiri self-determination from the mainstream, the Indian state presents Kashmir's demands for nationhood as traitorous and equates Kashmiri resistance to Pakistani terrorism (Geetha, 2016; Zia, 2019). In this way, the Indian state constructs a threat to its national sovereignty and asserts its obligation to securitize the region against "pro-Pakistani" elements, thereby rationalizing its repressive military occupation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

In order to justify the continuation of Indian military domination in Kashmir, the state fabricates a socially imagined Kashmiri

identity that is construed as a threat to the nation. Despite the fact that the people of Kashmir are Indian citizens as a matter of law (Zia, 2019), the military regime accentuates Kashmir's cultural, religious, geographical, and historical ties to Pakistan, and represents all Kashmiris as deviant and antagonistic to the Indian state by implication (Geetha, 2016; Mushtaq et al., 2016; Zia, 2019). Accordingly, the government renders the Kashmiri community collectively culpable for defying the Indian state and authorizes the suspension of human rights by utilizing a language of national security and anti-insurgency.

When every Kashmiri is seen as a potential suspect for being disloyal to the Indian state, the "Kashmiri body is...perceived by the Indian military occupiers to be killable, and this killability is justified; the killable Kashmiri body can be killed without remorse or accountability" (Zia, 2019, p. 50). The phenomenon of the killable Kashmiri is evidenced by the fact that Indian security forces have brought about thousands of deaths in Kashmir—by some estimates, as many as 100,000 Kashmiri people died between 1990 and 2011—without raising significant protest from the rest of the democratic nation (Iqbal & Magill, 2022). The conduct of India's military personnel is protected by counter-terrorism legislation, making the state's violations of civil liberties lawful and emphasizing the subordination of the Kashmiri population in the Indian political order (Kazi, 2009; Mushtaq et al., 2016).

These dynamics are conducive to the Indian army's reliance on sexual violence as a means of suppressing the Kashmiri people

(Geetha, 2016; Zia, 2019).¹⁰ Especially during the 1990s, Indian state actors endeavored to coerce the Kashmiri population into submission by engaging in the practice of reprisal rape, the targeted sexual violation of women suspected of being related to, housing, or feeding militants (Mushtaq et al., 2016).¹¹

The events that transpired in Kunan Poshpora in 1991 are a definitive example of reprisal rape. Kunan and Poshpora are located in the district of Kupwara, which borders the LOC and used to be militants' final stop before crossing the border into Pakistan to receive arms and training. For this reason, the residents of Kupwara continue to endure harsh military surveillance and have experienced the infringement of their human rights at disproportionately higher rates than the rest of Jammu and Kashmir, in the name of counterinsurgency efforts (Mushtaq et al., 2016). One such counterinsurgency strategy is the cordon-and-search operation, which consists of soldiers surrounding the designated area on all sides to restrict the movement of residents and performing door-to-door searches of homes to locate suspected militants, weapons, and other "anti-national elements" (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 73). In the 1990s, it was also common cordon-and-search procedure for the

army to forcibly gather men in public spaces or makeshift interrogation centers, and leave the women alone in their homes (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

It was under the guise of a cordon-and-search operation that army men from the 4th Rajputana Rifles, 68 Mountain Brigade arrived in the villages of Kunan and Poshpora on the night of February 23rd, 1991, ordered the men from their homes,¹² and raped upwards of 50 women in a single night. The victims ranged from 13 and 60 years old, and they reported that most of them were raped repeatedly by multiple, heavily intoxicated soldiers that night (Mushtaq et al., 2016).¹³ On the morning of February 24th, once the army had finished perpetrating its numerous violations, the cordon was lifted in the inner areas of the village. As the men returned to their homes from the detention centers, the villagers began to grasp the magnitude of the crimes that had been inflicted on their entire village community during the previous night (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

The Kunan Poshpora mass rape, besides uniting the two towns through a shared atrocity, signifies the extent of the unchecked hegemony enjoyed by Indian armed forces in Kashmir, both in their capacity to commit violence and their epistemic authority to evade

¹⁰ Kashmiri women, in addition to being the primary victims of sexual violence, are just as likely as Kashmiri men to endure physical violence and extrajudicial killing at the hands of Indian counterinsurgency forces (Geetha, 2016; Iqbal & Magill, 2022).

¹¹ Mushtaq et al. (2016) detail an example of reprisal rape from October of 1992, where concrete evidence was procured confirming that several women were gang raped by a unit of the Indian army during a search operation. Although no soldiers were prosecuted, the government report was sure to note that two of the alleged rape victims were the wives of commanders in Hizbul

Mujahidin, a militant group, reaffirming the view that association with militants could be justifiably punished with punitive rape (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

¹² While held in the detention centers that night, the men of Kunan Poshpora were also subjected to torture, some of which was sexual in nature (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

¹³ It should be noted that while the Kunan Poshpora mass rape is by far the largest case of mass rape recorded in India, Indian security forces have inflicted similar atrocities on other towns in Kupwara district. For more information, see Mushtaq et al. (2016), pp. 48-9.

accountability. The Indian government's favored tactic to preserve the impunity of its armed forces is to remain obstinately ignorant of their crimes, and this epistemic practice is actualized through numerous, blatant violations of due process.

The administration's conduct regarding the Kunan Poshpora mass rape case demonstrates this phenomenon succinctly. The town leaders quickly notified the relevant authorities on February 25th and soon after, villagers began protesting for a First Information Report (FIR) to be submitted so that investigative procedures could begin (Mushtaq et al., 2016). The townspeople's concerns were not admitted to the record until March 4th—supposedly because of the weather—after which the authorities made preliminary investigations. The FIR was registered on March 8th (ibid.).

The police investigations that followed the delayed filing of the FIR requested that medical examinations be conducted on the victims, and despite being done nearly two weeks after the mass rape took place, the medical examinations of the victims provided evidence of forceful intercourse (Mushtaq et al., 2016). The doctors were required by law to file Medico Legal Certificates (MLCs) to confirm that the victims were raped, which they did, but these MLCs were not included in the police file for the Kunan Poshpora case; it is possible they were destroyed (ibid.).

In addition to the victims' statements and medical reports, the police were also provided with clothing, liquor bottles, and other pieces of evidence which should have been more than sufficient to prosecute the accused army

personnel (Mushtaq et al., 2016). However, as is indicated by the frequent transfers of the investigating officers on this case, the only missing component needed to prosecute the Kunan Poshpora case was “the commitment on the part of the authorities to make the culprits accountable for their crime” (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 104). The authorities' dedication to purposefully obscuring the realities of what had transpired and engaging in willfully ignorant practices materialized in a letter written in September of 1991 by the Director Prosecution, who dismissed the key pieces of evidence in the Kunan Poshpora case for being “stereotyped, and suffer[ing] from serious discrepancies and contradiction” (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 102). He considered the case unworthy to be tried in a court of law because the villagers' complaints were not recorded until March 4th, and because the alleged victims were not able to individually identify their assaulters (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

Even more alarming is the report written by BG Verghese following a supposedly independent inquiry by the Press Council of India (PCI). After discrediting the evidence that had been gathered up until that point, the PCI stated:

The Kunan rape story on close examination turns out to be a massive hoax, orchestrated by militant groups and their sympathizers and mentors in Kashmir and abroad as part of a sustained and cleverly contrived strategy of psychological warfare and as an entry point for re-inscribing Kashmir on an international agenda as a human rights issue (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 127).

Besides demonstrating how authorities situated on the epistemological high ground can distort renditions of reality, this report explicates the Indian administration's willingness to retain its epistemic dominance by unequivocally rejecting any perspective that is averse to its own political stance.

Ultimately, the police made a decision contingent upon the Director Prosecutor's biased letter and announced the Kunan Poshpora case was to be closed as "untraced" in October of 1991. The public was led to believe the case had been officially closed in 1991, but the closure report was actually filed in March of 2013, in anticipation of a petition that a group of Kashmiri women were organizing to reopen the case (Mushtaq et al., 2016).

Kashmiri Women's Dissent and the Kunan Poshpora PIL Campaign

Kashmiri women have engaged in critical advocacy work at several significant junctures in Kashmir's history, and their involvement in alternative politics provides meaningful insights about resistance in highly oppressive regimes and societies under the context of counterinsurgency. Kashmiri women have expressed political dissent alongside men from as early as the 1930s, during the anti-Dogra movement, and this collective memory has coalesced into a legacy of gendered resistance that continues to galvanize women to protest in contemporary times (Iqbal & Magill, 2022).

This was certainly evident during the height of the Kashmiri insurgency in the 1990s; women and men were united with a common ideology and goal of creating an independent

Kashmir, which encouraged women to lead public demonstrations in large numbers as well as house and feed militants (Parashar, 2011). Militant groups, even those opposed to the involvement of women, were able to thrive only because women took on a plethora of responsibilities to accommodate the insurgency's activities and operationalized social and familial networks so that the militancy could acquire legitimacy and popularity (ibid.).

Despite this, women's support of the militancy was short-lived, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, insurgent groups only accepted women's support insofar as it was confined to their socially-prescribed roles as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters (Parashar, 2011). This enabled militant groups to impose more regressive social rules as part of their resistance to state institutions, which only marginalized women further (Sarvesh, 2024). In addition, despite sharing strong nationalist aspirations with the armed resistance, women faced abuse at the hands of the insurgency as well as Indian security forces. Parashar (2011) explains that state actors were not the only perpetrators of sexual violence in Kashmir during the 1990s, but there is a dearth of reliable information available about the violations enacted by militant groups because civilians are fearful of reprisal. Both sides of the Kashmir conflict engaged in human rights abuses, and women borne the brunt of those violations (Parashar, 2011).

For these reasons, by the late 1990s, most women had withdrawn their support of the armed resistance and instead took to persistent civil disobedience to protest the mounting repercussions of Indian counterinsurgency

efforts (Parashar, 2011). These regular, planned demonstrations had defined leadership and mass appeal, and were often conducted in response to specific atrocities perpetrated by Indian security forces (Iqbal & Magill, 2022). The creation of a separate women's resistance space was also necessitated by the fact that both the army and militants would view women with suspicion, because engaging in political dissent does not conform to the gender norms prescribed to women in Kashmiri society (Sarvesh, 2024; Zia, 2019).

Recently, there has been a revitalization of women's protest in Kashmir, with both young female students and older, stay-at-home women participating in demonstrations (Iqbal & Magill, 2022; Zia, 2019). These protestors explain that their reasoning for taking to the streets is derived from community loyalty and a collective mistrust of state forces. One of the demonstrators interviewed by Iqbal and Magill (2022) clarified that "our community is very small, [so] every time there is a disappearance or killing, the dead are like my sons, my brothers" (p. 260). By relying on personal experience rather than political ideology to establish commonality between protestors, Kashmiri women are operationalizing their shared experiences to be a motivating force for collective resistance (Hasanat, 2022; Iqbal & Magill, 2022). In a militarized society like Kashmir, where state actors have managed to subordinate an entire community indiscriminately, the lived experiences of women share much commonality and are a powerful and effective resource to encourage women to push for social change.

The residents of Kunan Poshpora incorporated these components into their advocacy work following the 1991 mass rape. It should be noted that between 1991 and 2013, when the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to reopen the case was filed, the villagers and survivors were far from silent victims. Samreena Mushtaq, one of the Kunan Poshpora case petitioners who initiated the PIL process, notes that if the villagers had not continued to demand justice for the violations they had suffered at the hands of the Indian army, the FIR would never have been filed in 1991, and there would have been no records available for the petitioners to understand why the case needed to be reopened in 2013 (Mushtaq et al., 2016). When asked why holding the Indian armed forces accountable is so important, one Kunan Poshpora survivor explains, "The reason we want to file the case is because we did not want them to do it again. We knew that if we remained silent, they would do it again, if not in our village then somewhere else" (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 117). This survivor describes their commitment to advocacy as a means of community loyalty, similar to how other Kashmiri women protestors have framed their work.

The petitioners who initiated the PIL process met through the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) on February 23rd, 2013 and began developing a campaign to assemble the petition and demand that the High Court reinvestigate the mass rape and torture case. By April 20th, 2013, the advocates were able to collect the signatures of 50 Kashmiri women and submit their PIL (Mushtaq et al., 2016). Although the Srinagar High Court refused to admit the PIL in May of 2013 for

being “premature,” a month later the Sub-Judicial magistrate of Kupwara ordered that the case be reopened for further investigations (ibid.). Unfortunately, legal proceedings for these investigations and related protest petitions have stalled since 2015, when the Indian Supreme Court stayed the orders for reinvestigations (“Kunan Poshpora,” 2021).

The Kunan Poshpora petitioners’ instance of advocacy is considerably limited in comparison to the work done by the WAF in Pakistan or RAWA in Afghanistan, but this is attributable to the materialities that these Kashmiri women were confronting. Firstly, the Indian state enjoys considerable advantages that supplement its ability to curb dissent. Unlike the relatively young regimes in the other central cases of this paper, Indian democracy has retained power with minimal interruption for nearly 80 years. Since 1947, the state’s policy regarding Kashmir has remained largely unchanged, which has allowed for the disparities between Kashmir and the rest of the nation to be normalized and the epistemology of Kashmiri subordination to become ingrained in the political order (Mushtaq et al., 2016; Wolpert, 2010). Furthermore, in Kashmir, human rights violations like arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings are still regular occurrences, civil society remains stifled, and organized protest is still dangerous and difficult to conduct (Zia, 2019).

These realities enable India to enjoy complete domination of the epistemic community in Kashmir, which permits Indian security forces to violate the rights of civilians in the region with impunity. Essar Batool, another petitioner for the Kunan Poshpora case, reflects

how her middle-class upbringing kept her largely oblivious to her people’s circumstances despite her having lived in Kashmir her entire life. She explains:

The state subtly manages to control opinions and views, and block the truth by controlling structures that are supposedly for the development of people...I might come across as a confused soul who was for long ignorant of the reality of her own land, but that is the baggage that comes with living in a militarized zone. The occupiers have control over too many institutions—legal systems, media, education, governance—and they can easily distort your opinions and disrupt your critical abilities (Mushtaq et al., 2016, pp. 26-28).

The Indian administration in Kashmir has taken complete advantage of its hegemonic epistemic power to enshrine the immunity of state actors into legislation and ensure the judiciary is complicit in maintaining the machinery of oppression in Kashmir.

The resistance strategies enacted by the Kunan Poshpora petitioners are noteworthy because they signify the tradeoffs that advocates must make in the face of highly inequitable circumstances. It is an established fact that a mass rape occurred in Kunan and Poshpora on February 23rd/24th, 1991, there is ample evidence affirming this, and yet the state has found ways to declare that no such event transpired (Geetha, 2016; Mushtaq et al., 2016). Therefore, the petitioners chose to practice a politics of memory to pressure the state to remember and acknowledge the violence it

inflicted on the women of Kunan and Poshpora, even if this meant that the survivors and petitioners would be exposing themselves to additional rights abuses.

This dynamic was best demonstrated by the fact that the petitioners chose to pursue justice for the Kunan Poshpora survivors through the courts, and invited space, rather than creating a novel space for participation, like a street protest. The judiciary, as a state institution where subordinated parties must be granted access to advocate for themselves, constitutes an invited space (de Vos & Delabre, 2018). This was a significant compromise on the petitioners' part, because resistance in invited spaces must occur within hegemonic norms, and in this case, within the constraints of a legal system that has no interest in observing principles like the rule of law.

The power inequities between the Indian state and the Kashmiri people are too great to be dismissed, and in a courtroom, the already disenfranchised Kunan Poshpora villagers were highly vulnerable to testimonial injustices and civil wrongs. The petitioners were confronted with this reality when, as part of the court's deliberations on the Kunan Poshpora police closure report, the Judicial Magistrate was discovered to be "recording the statements of the [Kunan Poshpora] survivors in open court, humiliating and traumatizing them, and violating the Indian Supreme Court's directions on the conduct of rape cases" (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 175). The continued discrimination of Kashmiri individuals in the justice system is a consequential actuality that constituted a significant barrier to the pursuit of a judicious ruling in this case.

The Kunan Poshpora petitioners maintain that they sought to stage their resistance in the courts, not necessarily to fulfill their expectations of justice, but rather to

make the Indian Army answerable, to make them understand that they cannot go scot-free and repeat the same crime. Our struggle is not about outcomes but developing a culture of resistance where people will question impunity, where we will not remain silent in the face of injustice... To live a life with dignity and honor is more important than anything else (Mushtaq et al., 2016, p. 174).

This approach to the court case indicates that the petitioners intended to primarily overcome the overt willful ignorance exhibited by the Indian state in its handling of the Kunan Poshpora case, rather than pursue idealist notions of justice, because denying the very existence of the atrocity is far more pernicious than any discriminatory treatment that Kunan Poshpora survivors might face in court. For this reason, it was strategic for the Kunan Poshpora petitioners to stage their resistance in the same state institution that was responsible for denying the Kunan Poshpora survivors justice in 1991.

It is also notable that most of the women who initiated the PIL campaign were not residents of the rural Kupwara district, but instead were young, educated, middle-class women from Srinagar, the capital city of Jammu and Kashmir. The petitioners' comparatively privileged circumstances did not make them or their families any less vulnerable to state violence (Mushtaq et al., 2016), but it does explain their capability and desire to take their cause directly to the Indian court system,

something the residents of Kunan Poshpora were not inclined to attempt.

In summary, because the Kunan Poshpora petitioners were attempting to assert their claims within a political order that has a proclivity for erasing human rights violations (Mushtaq et al., 2016), their chosen method of resistance should be embraced as imperfect but should not be disregarded for its supposed lack of results. Despite the pervasive political and epistemic suppression in Kashmir, women continue to challenge the state's impunity and assert their agency to the best of their ability.

Women's Opposition to Martial Law and Fundamentalist Rule in 1980s Pakistan

In an unprecedented ruling for the *Fehmida and Allah Bux v. State* case in 1981, the Pakistani judiciary sentenced a man to be stoned to death and a woman to receive 100 lashes for the charge of adultery under the new Hudood Ordinance. In order to persuade their daughter Fehmida, a woman who had eloped, to end her marriage and return home, Fehmida's parents filed a police report claiming that their daughter had been abducted. However, because Fehmida was pregnant when the police recovered her, and because the couple had not registered their marriage until after she became pregnant, the judge charged the couple with adultery (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

An abduction case had somehow mutated into an adultery case, and while the sentence itself was not supported by any law or ordinance, it did signify the spirit of the Hudood

Ordinances, which had been enacted by the fundamentalist administration of General Zia-ul-Haq for the purpose of policing women, criminalizing their sexuality, and generally undermining their legal personhood (Geetha, 2016; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Naturally, the *Fehmida and Allah Bux* ruling outraged women across Pakistan, who responded by creating the Women's Action Forum (WAF). This organization played a significant role in the sustained resistance against Zia's regime and the consolidation of the Pakistani women's rights movement (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). This section contextualizes the political and epistemic circumstances within which the WAF was formed and characterizes its resistance work.

Historical Context

Due to the circumstances of the nation's conception, Pakistan's political institutions have maintained a complicated relationship with their austere Islamic political sects and have struggled with the imposition of religious norms in state affairs. During the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, the withdrawing British forces carelessly circumscribed the territory of Pakistan, a land meant to serve as the homeland for the Muslims of South Asia, to satisfy the demands of Mohammad Ali Jinnah and his political party, the Muslim League (Mohan, 2016; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Wolpert, 2010).¹⁴ The partition instigated a mass migration, which displaced between 12 to 14 million people, and the Pakistani political arena that emerged in its aftermath was divided into

¹⁴ The 1940 Lahore Resolution describes the Muslim League's concern about the possible political marginalization of Muslims in an independent India, but does not actually express a desire for partition or an

aspiration for nationality. However, British colonial administrators interpreted these claims to be protestations of self-determination, for which the easiest solution was partition (Rafiq, 2022).

two contradictory groups: erudite political elites, who had served as administrators under the colonial government and had immigrated to Pakistan, and the right wing, orthodox *ulema* (religious scholars) and landlords (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Rafiq, 2022; Saeed, 2020).

While the Pakistani bureaucrats were by no means opposed to the principles promulgated by Islam or the Quran, their vision of Pakistan comprised of a modern, non-theocratic state that exhibited the precepts of “democracy, right of speech, freedom of conscience, emancipation of women, human dignity, [and] tolerance” (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 8). Their primary reasoning for creating Pakistan had been to create a land where Muslims could practice their religion without being prosecuted, and the realization of this goal did not require Islam to be incorporated into the law (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

The *ulema*, on the other hand, contended that Pakistan should be a truly Islamic state where the Quran served as the basis for law and only religious scholars such as themselves had the epistemic authority to apply and interpret the law (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). As a compromise, Pakistani political leadership provided the *ulema* with an advisory role in the legislature under the 1956 constitution, partially because they had no desire to be labeled as “un-Islamic” and lose legitimacy, and because instrumentalizing the social capital of religion allowed political elites to consolidate Pakistan’s diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups into a coherent national population (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Pervez, 2012).

As a result, the orthodox Islamic faction remained a viable pressure group in Pakistan, and the tension between bureaucratic elites and conservative religious elements has defined much of Pakistan’s political history since then. The military dictator General Ayub Khan was particularly notorious for first repealing the powers of Islamic advocates, and then invoking religious rhetoric for his own political gains (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The same was true of Ayub Khan’s successor, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. However, Bhutto’s political opportunism and Western ideals made him deeply unpopular among a plethora of political parties, including Islamic reactionaries and working class unions (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Wolpert, 2010).

The consequential coalition of political opponents that had been ostracized by Bhutto during his time in office reacted badly to Bhutto’s attempts to rig the 1977 elections, and amid the ensuing political instability, General Zia-ul-Haq arrested Bhutto, assumed political power, and imposed martial law to avoid a “national crisis” (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Wolpert, 2010). Perhaps the most defining feature of Zia’s rule was his Islamization of Pakistan, which he enacted nine months after ascending to power by supporting existing extreme right wing political parties and codifying their religious pronouncements in ordinances and reforms (Kalra & Butt, 2019). Scholars agree that Zia pursued Islamization, not to propagate a definitive religious ideology, but rather in an attempt to legitimize his regime and ensure its survival (Kalra & Butt, 2019; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Pervez, 2012). This was demonstrated by the administration’s ever-changing definition of what constituted “Islamic” and “un-Islamic” conduct (ibid.). This

inconsistency meant that the legal changes instituted by the government under Zia were often more symbolic than substantive, and were prone to modification if the reforms were confronted with stringent protest (Kalra & Butt, 2019; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

Nevertheless, Zia's endeavors to maintain political power through the politicization of Islam justified the subordination of anyone considered "un-Islamic," and included the suppression of democracy and dissent. Women, democratic political parties, human rights activists, and religious minorities became the primary targets of the regime's coercive tactics, which validated discriminatory social norms and cultural practices outside of the political realm (Kalra & Butt, 2019; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Saeed, 2020). Consequently, Pakistani citizens endured an extraordinary number of human rights violations under Zia's government, including torture, public floggings and executions, extra-judicial killings, and arbitrary detention (Kalra & Butt, 2019; Saeed, 2020).

Interestingly, Zia might have been held accountable for his illegal coup and forced to give up his power had it not been for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Concerned about the spread of communism, the United States gave Zia \$10 billion worth of weapons and ammunition to fortify Pakistan and deter Soviet expansion. Backed by American funding, Zia received the legitimization he so desired and was able to preserve his oppressive hold on power until his death in 1988 (Kalra & Butt, 2019; Wolpert, 2010).

Zia's Military Dictatorship and the Subordination of Pakistani Women

Zia relied heavily on the subordination of women to secure his government's political authority, which had far-reaching social repercussions for Pakistani women. Zia initially struggled to unite the regressive clergy, landlords, and military within his administration, but these political sects were able to find common ground on the topic of women's place in an Islamic society (Geetha, 2016). Beginning in 1979, the regime began passing directives mandating that women wear "Islamic" dress in public, limiting their access to public spaces, and undermining their status as legal subjects (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

The most alarming of these decrees were the Hudood Ordinances. These edicts criminalized adultery and fornication, and dictated that for a rape or adultery conviction to be sentenced with the maximum punishment, the case must be supported by the testimony of four male eyewitnesses—women could not provide testimony at all if maximum punishment is sought (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). This law erroneously equated rape with adultery and placed an unreasonable evidentiary standard on rape cases, which protected the rapist. Furthermore, a woman could be charged with adultery by testifying in her own rape case, and if she was pregnant, her pregnancy could be used as evidence against her (ibid.). However, a woman's testimony was inadmissible in a case brought against a man, so men were unlikely to be charged with adultery and rapists could easily be acquitted for lack of evidence (ibid.). The passage of the Hudood Ordinances did not raise any concerns, even among the prominent

female advocates of the time, but when the ordinance was applied to the *Fehmida and Allah Bux v. State* case in 1981, its detrimental consequences became clear.

The Zia regime is unique among the cases of this paper for actively pursuing the marginalization of women as a central component of its political agenda. Concerningly, this intentional implementation of misogynistic policies did not passively induce a patriarchal social environment, but in fact encouraged its proliferation. In 1978, as soon as Zia co-opted members of Jamaat-e-Islami, an extremely right wing religious political party, into his cabinet and launched a general Islamization campaign in the media, women observed an immediate change in the social atmosphere and recorded a series of distressing instances where women were assaulted for their appearance or behavior in public by complete strangers (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) explain that Islamization “gave many a frustrated male the opening he had been looking for to openly criticize and take action against women who were not modest enough in his personal subjective opinion” (p. 79). These capricious dogmas about women’s modesty were extrapolated by men to police every area of women’s social lives. It was now considered immodest for women to sit in the front row of a lecture hall or appear in commercials for an extended period of time (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

These practices were justified by a social imagination that viewed women as inherently obscene, corrupt, and immoral (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). This pontification of women’s character normalized gender violence, because

women’s conduct or mere presence in public could now be considered justification for any harassment, rape, or killing that they experienced (ibid.). Women’s political and social liberties deteriorated rapidly due to this epistemology, but women identified strategies to express their objections to these developments within a few years.

Gendered Resistance in Pakistan and the WAF

Pakistani women first mobilized as a distinct political group in pre-partition India, and this experience informed their approach to political protest in the subsequent decades. The leaders of the Muslim League sought the support of Muslim women as they campaigned for the creation of Pakistan in the 1940s, and the movement flourished once women began participating in the League’s activities (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Women led their own demonstrations and were even arrested for their politics, signifying their commitment to the Pakistan movement and to the League (ibid.).

These developments enabled women to engage critically with a discourse of women’s rights and familiarize themselves with the process of organizing themselves. Additionally, the social parameters of acceptable behavior for women were altered drastically to accommodate women’s participation in the Pakistan movement. As part of their nationalist struggle, these women “cast off their veils, left their homes, approached strangers, confronted the police, and entered politics” (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 47). This kind of conduct would have been unthinkable for women merely 50 years prior (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the majority of women's advocacy work persisted in the form of social welfare. Though the cause was not exactly political, women found meaningful opportunities to remain active in public spaces, and avoid being relegated back into their homes, by resettling and rehabilitating the millions of refugees that arrived in Pakistan after the partition (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The magnitude of this endeavor, and the resolute commitment displayed by women who undertook this cause, rendered the visibility and presence of women in public spaces a necessity (*ibid.*).¹⁵

As the circumstances of the partition refugees improved, women organized into other professional, social welfare, and educational organizations, the most prominent of which was the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). The APWA was created to "channel women's energies into more permanent and long-term efforts" (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 52), and undertook the advancement of women's education, social and cultural consciousness, and economic opportunities. Most women's groups like the APWA were non-political by their own admission and focused more on the augmentation of women's social rights than their political rights (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

The few women's associations that were determined to codify women's rights into law attained many successes in the decades

preceding the commencement of Zia's martial law. From as early as 1948, the women who served in Pakistan's legislature, the Punjab Assembly, and Constituent Assembly were introducing women's rights legislation in their respective assemblies, and when their efforts were subverted, women took to the streets to pressure the legislative bodies into reconsidering their decision (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). In this way, the Muslim Personal Law of Shariat, which codified a woman's right to inherit property, the Charter of Women's Rights, which secured equal pay for equal work, Pakistan's first Constitution, which enshrined universal suffrage and reserved seats for women in territorial legislatures, and the Family Law Ordinance, which discouraged polygamy and regulated divorce, were all put into effect by 1961 (*ibid.*).

These legal strides in women's rights were accompanied by women pursuing a widening range of careers, but the most significant social changes with regards to women's rights began when Bhutto entered office in 1970. As part of his anti-Ayub campaign, Bhutto and his Pakistan People's Party mobilized women and encouraged their participation in the electoral process (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Bhutto's administration also put a new Constitution into effect in 1973 that explicitly outlawed discrimination on the basis of sex. Women were appointed to noteworthy political offices within the government, and political women's organizations proliferated for

¹⁵ In addition to encouraging women to engage in relief work, Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Khan, the wife of Pakistan's first Prime minister, created the Pakistan Women's National Guard in 1948. This organization provided women with self-defense training so that they could be considered a part of the country's defense system.

Unsurprisingly, this short-lived venture was widely criticized; social welfare was seen as an extension of women's domestic and motherly duties, but the same could not be said about women's self-defense (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

the first time (ibid.). Shirkat Gah, the predecessor to the WAF, was founded during this time by a group of young, middle and upper-middle class women who, upon finishing their Western education, wished to cultivate women's social and economic development and act as a pressure group for the protection of working women's rights (ibid.).

This atmosphere of incremental but steady progression in women's rights convinced many Pakistani women that their social and political emancipation was inevitable (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). For this reason, the Islamization campaigns that followed the 1977 coup were alarming, not only because they explicitly subordinated the status of women in Pakistani society, but also because they signified a reversal of women's hard-earned accomplishments from previous decades (ibid.).

As an increasing number of women became acquainted with and angered by the regressive social order that emerged as a direct result of Zia's orthodox policies, women once again organized themselves. In 1981, the leaders of Shirkat Gah called on as many women's associations and concerned individuals as they could to act collectively and preserve the rights of women. The resulting platform was named the Women's Action Forum (WAF) (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).¹⁶ The WAF was intended to be a non-governmental "lobby-come-pressure group whose main objective was to raise consciousness and promote and protect the rights of women in Pakistan" (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 125).

¹⁶ The WAF intended to be an affiliation group rather than a cohesive organization because it was formed through the collaboration of several preexisting women's organizations and individual advocates. Therefore, the WAF described itself as a non-hierarchical "non-

The association group was outraged by the regime's eagerness to expel women from public spaces, which they rightly believed was a scheme to consign women back into their homes, and by the government's manipulation of Islam to suppress women. The WAF actively contested the enactment of measures like the Hudood Ordinances and was deeply alarmed by rumors about the Family Law Ordinances being repealed (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The association enjoyed widespread popularity and opened chapters in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Peshawar within six months of its creation (ibid.).

The creation of the WAF indicated the primacy of class identity among Pakistani women's initiatives. Rural and working-class women endured the majority of the arbitrary arrests and floggings decreed by measures like the Hudood Ordinances. The professional, elite, and urban women involved in the WAF were not the primary victims of Zia's draconian policies (Geetha, 2016). However, the *Fehmida and Allah Bux v. State* case demonstrated that the Hudood Ordinances could be used to infringe on the personal liberties of any woman, including a woman whose class may have protected her from discrimination in the past (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Women in the upper echelons of society were motivated to assemble the WAF and resist the regime only after they felt that their own rights were threatened. This fact does not suggest that the WAF's advocacy work was any less significant,

structured, informal, free-floating group of active people" (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 74). This well-meaning infrastructure proved to be problematic within a few years (ibid.).

but it does reveal a noteworthy limitation of its positionality.

The WAF was able to intercept Zia's encroachment of women's rights for several reasons. First, it presented itself as an apolitical organization, a decisive choice in a political environment where dissent was heavily policed. The WAF distanced itself from political parties and parliamentary politics in part to protect itself from being outlawed, but also because the other political movements of the time were not interested in the preservation of women's rights (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). After 1977, multiple Pakistani political groups and organizations had united to form the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy to demand that martial law be lifted. However, none of the affiliated parties were remotely concerned by the passage of the Hudood Ordinances or had spoken out about the condition of women's rights under Zia's military dictatorship. The anti-martial law movement proved to be largely unsuccessful, though it did try to acquire the WAF's support after 1983, when the WAF proved its ability to mobilize women in a mass-protest by staging the one of the only productive anti-martial law demonstrations in Lahore at that time (ibid.).¹⁷ It was clear to the WAF that the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy was insincere in its commitment to advancing women's rights, which reinforced the WAF's desire to remain separate from the existing political scene. Additionally, since laws like the Family Law Ordinance had managed to be passed during Ayub Khan's military dictatorship, the WAF identified that it was the

reactionary application of Islam that was detrimental to women's rights in Zia's Pakistan, not the nature of his administration (ibid.). For this reason, the WAF avoided opposing the regime solely on political grounds.

Instead, the WAF identified unfavorable political developments and countered them with arguments using the same religious rhetoric implemented by Zia's administration (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The WAF's use of religious doctrines to rebut the state's justifications for suppressing women's rights is likely the main reason for its success in resisting the regime. Zia's regime considered itself to be the authority on Quranic interpretations, and the quality of religiosity was the characteristic from which the regime derived its political dominance and epistemic privileges in fundamentalist Pakistan. In this political order, credibility was tied to being "Islamic," so the administration was intent on justifying each of its promulgations on religious terms.

The WAF, rather than adopting a more hardline feminist approach, which might have been apprehensive of religion serving as a vanguard for women's rights, contradicted the state's religious dogmas by presenting its own interpretations of religious doctrines that upheld egalitarian gender roles (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Within a political order that was intent on inflicting testimonial injustice on women by, for example, denying their credibility in a court of law, it was necessary for the WAF to establish its credibility while also critiquing the state's policies. By utilizing the religious language of the regime, the WAF

¹⁷ The other successful anti-martial law demonstrations in Lahore during this time were led by lawyers and trade

unions, not the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

admitted itself into the epistemic community, and by supporting its stances with Quranic evidence, the WAF protected its arguments from being undermined by the regime.

For example, upon hearing that a new Law of Evidence had been proposed that would reduce the credence of one woman's testimony to be half that of a man's, the WAF published a position paper that proclaims the WAF opposed the law both because it reduced women's status in society and because the law was not supported by the Quran (The Women's Action Forum [WAF], as cited by Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The paper then conducts a linguistic and theological analysis of selected verses of the Quran, and concludes:

Nowhere in the Quran is a single woman disqualified from bearing testimony. God calls forth all the believers, obviously both men and women, to bear witness and depose the truth...[An] unwarranted and rigid interpretation [of the Quran] in fact excludes women from being believers and would have very serious consequences...Since the message of Islam is peace and equality, any laws formulated which do not conform to the spirit of Islam will weaken the moral fiber of society and result in dissatisfaction and frustration amongst the people. It is repugnant to the spirit of Islam to exclude one half of the believing population from the equal status and position that is the right generated to them by Islam. Any move to introduce the law which institutionalizes a reduced status of women would expose women to

injustices and leave them entirely unprotected from any offense committed to them (WAF, as cited by Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, pp. 185-6).

Ironically, the scriptural framing of the WAF's stance allowed the affiliation group to accuse the regime of being "un-Islamic," an accusation that right-wing parties and reactionary groups habitually assigned to dissenting women's associations like the WAF (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The WAF understood that, whether or not the government had legitimacy, the ordinances passed by it would be resistant to amendment or repeal, so it was more important to oppose specific laws and policies than try to challenge the administration in its entirety (ibid.). Ultimately, incorporating religious doctrines into their publications presented the WAF with the opportunity to expose the regime's hypocrisy while asserting its demands for women's rights.

Another reason for the WAF's success was its use of advocacy methods that strategically engaged with spaces of participation, to hold accountable a regime that evaded responsibility at every turn. Because most of Zia's policies intended to prohibit women's access to public spaces and institutions, the WAF needed to utilize alternative spaces to present women's perspectives and oppose the state's perspective on the proper place for women in society. One space that the WAF relied on extensively to assert its demands was the press, whose attention the WAF attracted by publishing position papers, signature campaigns, and statements in addition to staging demonstrations (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

One campaign that signified this strategy was the WAF's fight against the exclusion of women's participation in spectator sports. Several Pakistani women's teams that had been selected for international tournaments had their trips canceled without explanation between 1980 and 1982, and when the WAF investigated the trend, they discovered that religious leaders in Islamabad had preached that it was "un-Islamic" for women to participate in sports in front of foreign men, and had successfully lobbied the government into canceling the teams' trips (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

Because the government never issued any written directive on this matter, the WAF elicited clarifications and formal acknowledgements from sports officials to expose the regime's discriminatory conduct.¹⁸ When explanations were not forthcoming,¹⁹ women athletes and organizations, led by the WAF, staged a demonstration at Lahore Airport as the all-male Pakistan team left for the 1982 Asian Games. The display of solidarity between the coalition of women's organizations and sports associations garnered significant press coverage and emphasized to the international community that Pakistani women had been excluded from the Asian Games against their will (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). This demonstration was noteworthy because many of the ordinances of the time attempted to ostracize women in public spaces, but attracting and maintaining the attention of the press enabled the WAF to bring women's perspectives

to the forefront and emphasize the prejudicial nature of the state's policies.

This advocacy model worked for the WAF in a very specific political environment, and though it would not be appropriate to call the WAF's strategies opportunistic, they were certainly not sustainable. As previously mentioned, The WAF and other prominent women's organizations of the time were primarily created and run by upper class women, and this led to the WAF becoming insensitive to the intersectionality of its supporters. Initially, class divisions between women were not a serious concern because laws like the Hudood Ordinances subordinated women indiscriminately, so women were equally vulnerable to discrimination under the Zia regime, regardless of their other intersecting identities (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). This was partially the reason the WAF had such mass appeal immediately after its creation, as it was one of the only women's rights groups that specifically addressed the status of women's rights under the fundamentalist political order.

However, as the WAF's influence grew, it experienced pressure to expand the scope of its work beyond causes that were strictly deemed "women's issues." Upper-class women could afford to disregard the intersections of class and were generally shielded from the issues faced by teachers, trade unions, journalists, and writers' groups. For this reason, the WAF resisted supporting women if they were engaged

¹⁸ In one instance, the Federal Minister for Sports and Culture told the WAF that women were excluded from the 16th National Games in 1982 on the recommendation of the Pakistan Olympic Association (POA), but the POA stated that it made no such declaration (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

¹⁹ Issuing such a directive would put Pakistan at risk of being expelled from the International Olympic Association, so the government avoided committing itself to a written statement that expressly documented its policy to exclude women from sporting events (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

in union activities, fighting landlord terrorism, or advocating for justice in criminal proceedings (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987), writing in the final years of the Zia dictatorship, correctly predicted that if the WAF did not begin to support the movements in which working class women participated, the WAF's authority as a pressure group for women's rights would be substantially reduced in the future.

Another reason for the WAF to falter in its efficacy as a women's rights group was the reactive nature of its work. The WAF was able to acquire support during General Zia's reign because it lobbied against specific policies, court cases, and directives as the opportunities arose. It was practical for an apolitical women's rights organization to focus its work in this way under a regime that was dedicated to systematically subordinating women. However, Zia lifted martial law in 1985, and amid the restoration of political activities, "the relentless push to deprive [women] of their rights seemed to have stopped" (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987, p. 148). Because of these characteristics of the WAF's work, the affiliation group struggled to retain the influence it had accumulated under a more repressive political atmosphere (Saeed, 2020).

Saeed (2020) argues that the WAF's accomplishments under martial law were not, in fact, so impressive; most of the laws that the WAF advocated against, including the Hudood Ordinances and the Law of Evidence, were nevertheless enshrined into law and are still in effect today. While this is true, it should be noted that many of these laws were substantially modified and their scope reduced because of the

opposition work done by organizations like the WAF (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). It would be a great disservice to label the movement itself as a failure when it continued the legacy of women's resistance in Pakistan and implemented strategies curated for the nation's novel sociopolitical context.

Political Repression and Women's Advocacy for Democracy in post-1979 Afghanistan

In 1999, the Taliban publicly executed a woman in Kabul for allegedly murdering her husband. Members of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) smuggled a camera into the stadium where the execution took place and were able to capture and publish footage of the atrocity. In 2001, CNN broadcasted RAWA's footage to millions of people as part of their documentary *Behind the Veil*, which presented the actualities of life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule to the international community (Brodsky, 2003). Reporting on the realities in Afghanistan is just one of the many endeavors that RAWA has undertaken since its founding in 1977. This section investigates the establishment of RAWA and analyzes its strategies for resisting the series of oppressive regimes that installed themselves in Afghanistan in the last few decades of the 20th century.

Historical Context

Afghanistan serves as one of the geopolitical boundary lands of South Asia and its territorial conquest has been the objective of several empires. The British, with the hope of deterring Russian expansion, attempted to annex the region of Afghanistan into their colonial South Asian empire several times, but

were only successful in placing Afghanistan under protected state status in 1879, an arrangement that lasted a mere 40 years (Brodsky, 2003; Wolpert, 2010). In 1919, Emir Amanullah Khan signed the Anglo-Afghan Treaty and reinstated Afghanistan's political sovereignty. His reign, and the long reign of his son, Zahir Shah, were defined by modernizing reforms and civil stability (Brodsky, 2003; Maley, 2014). By the 1970s, this environment had enabled the emergence of a diverse political fabric, composed of "leftists, including Marxist and Maoist organizations, [and] right-wing Islamic traditionalists and revivalists, with left-of-center socialist and pro-democracy movements in the middle" (Brodsky, 2003, pp. 41-2).

Unfortunately, Zahir Shah's governance also encouraged gradual political polarization, and the atmosphere of political variance was terminated in 1973, when the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), with the support of the Soviet Union, overthrew Zahir Shah in a bloodless coup and instated Mohammed Daoud as president (Brodsky, 2003). In 1978, the PDPA's own members staged a violent revolt against Daoud, and the Taraki administration that materialized afterwards became intent on suppressing political opposition (Brodsky 2003; Sinno, 2008). The new government was met with armed resistance in both rural areas and major cities. The regime's agrarian reforms and secular policies were particularly unpopular in rural Afghanistan, and local tribal and religious leaders became increasingly active in leading armed revolts (*ibid.*). The PDPA was largely unsuccessful at restraining the growing resistance across the country, and the USSR,

worried that the Marxist PDPA state would fail, decided to intervene militarily in Afghanistan in 1979 (Brodsky, 2003).

From 1979 to 1987, the Parcham administration, the Afghan puppet government during the Soviet occupation, inflicted unprecedented violence on Afghan civilians as part of its agenda to eliminate the tangential factions of the PDPA and other opposition groups from the country. The regime faced the most significant resistance from the countryside where mujahideen groups—guerilla fighters who were often armed by foreign powers—strove to reclaim territory for themselves and liberate the country from the Soviet occupation (Sinno, 2008). Because the PDPA found it incredibly difficult to undermine the familial, tribal, ethnic, and religious ties on which the mujahideen groups were formed, the Soviet army and the puppet Afghan regime ultimately took to heavily bombing the countryside to contain the insurgency (Brodsky, 2003; Sinno, 2008). This strategy resulted in high civilian casualties, and scholars estimate as many as 1.9 million Afghan deaths occurred while the communist regime was in power, amounting to about 240 unnatural deaths every day for over a decade (Brodsky, 2003; Maley, 2014).

The fervent opposition of the mujahideen groups, in conjunction with the enduring party infighting within the PDPA, motivated the Soviet Union to withdraw its military presence from Afghanistan in 1989 (Brodsky, 2003; Sinno, 2008). Interestingly, the Parcham government managed to remain in power for another two years, but it was eventually succeeded by a group of fundamentalist factions that formed an interim,

power-sharing government in 1992 (Brodsky, 2003). Though political violence did subside during this period, the ethnically and ideologically diverse mujahideen groups continued to compete for territory. The sectarian conflicts that arose between them resulted in a complete disintegration of political institutions, and it was this state of disorder and lawlessness that allowed for the Taliban movement to take control of Kabul in 1996 (Brodsky, 2003; Maley 2008; Sinno, 2008).

Political Violence and the Regression of Afghan Women's Liberties

As the central government struggled to retain control of the country during the Soviet occupation, its primary strategy for consolidating its political power was to suppress groups on the basis of ideology, or subordinate anyone considered to be a political dissenter. In the cities of Afghanistan, the only areas of the country that the Parcham administration effectively dominated, the communist regime indiscriminately expelled any group that opposed its rule, regardless of its position on the political spectrum. The government utilized guerilla bombs, assassinations, and other police state tactics to suppress political actors that were fundamentalist or "Maoist" (Brodsky, 2003). The mujahideen factions, which were the only sources of governance in rural Afghanistan, similarly branded all groups and ideologies that opposed them as communist. Besides imposing intractable violence on Afghan citizens, this political turbulence eroded the moderate, democratic elements in Afghanistan's political scene (ibid.).

In addition to repressing political dissidents, the communist and later

fundamentalist central governments were either disinterested in or directly responsible for the violence inflicted on women during this period, sharply contrasting women's freedoms prior to 1973. Zahir Shah had endorsed modernizing initiatives aimed at dismantling gender discrimination, including the ratification of the 1964 Constitution, which granted women the right to vote and encouraged coeducation in primary schools and the colleges of Kabul University (Brodsky, 2003). Women capitalized on the monarch's efforts and acquired an increased public and economic presence through the 1970s. In the years before the Soviet invasion, urban women were attending university in large numbers and working as teachers, doctors, engineers, and government officials, including members of Parliament (ibid.). It should be noted that these advancements in women's rights were driven mostly by social and cultural changes, and were not encoded formally into legislation. Therefore, only elite, urban, and economically privileged women were able to access these opportunities, while women in rural parts of the country remained unaffected by the monarchy's emphasis on women's rights (ibid.).

Although women's rights did regress when the Taraki government took power in 1978, the communist regime attempted to seem supportive of women's emancipation in an effort to obtain legitimacy. The PDPA expounded the importance of women's rights and enacted policies like outlawing marriage before the age of 18 and requiring Marxist-style education for both genders (Brodsky, 2003). Unlike previous leaders, whose efforts at women's emancipation had only affected the urban elite, the Taraki administration utilized its

military might to impose its initiatives on the provincial countryside. The PDPA's use of coercive tactics to alter the familial, religious, and tribal practices of rural Afghanistan fueled the growing discontentment against the Taraki government (ibid.). Considering the regime's reliance on mass arrests, political purges, and enforced disappearances, it was clear that these reforms did not signify any actual commitment to progressive ideals like women's rights, but rather were a ruse to appear aligned with the policies instituted by Zahir Shah. The Parcham government similarly paid lip service to women's emancipation, spending most of its resources indoctrinating women with Marxist ideology while violently suppressing political dissent (ibid.).

Meanwhile, the mujahideen groups were primarily focused on ridding the country of communist indoctrination by establishing dominance in their rural territories. Within their fiefdoms, these guerilla fighters were responsible for their own fair share of human rights abuses against Afghan civilians (Brodsky, 2003).²⁰ As a consequence of Cold War tensions, the mujahideen groups received significant funding and armaments from foreign sponsors. This bolstered their anti-communist sentiments and intensified their orthodox and regressive ideologies, which denied women a place in society and severely limited the liberties afforded to them (Brodsky, 2003; Sinno, 2008).

During the state of lawlessness that followed the mujahideen factions' takeover of Kabul in 1992, the hyper-militarized guerilla

fighters terrorized civilians and forced women into marriages, sometimes at gunpoint. Many women, out of fear of being kidnapped on the streets, stopped going to school and work (Brodsky, 2003). A highly misogynistic interpretation of Sharia law, propagated by some mujahideen groups, was also enforced by the Taliban administration that followed. The Taliban's reactionary policies regarding women's conduct subordinated them completely by prohibiting them from working, getting an education, or having mobility outside of the home, among other things (ibid.). In this way, the series of repressive governments in Afghanistan from 1978 through 2001 each engendered progressively oppressive conditions for women and Afghan citizens overall.

The Mobilization of Afghan Women through RAWA

Women have been protesting the political order in Afghanistan since the 1970s, when the student movement was at its peak. High school and university students were actively campaigning for a plethora of ideologies and causes across the political spectrum, and women frequently participated and led these demonstrations. After 1973, as the Daoud administration began to suppress political dissent, women continued to participate in resistance against the regime by engaging in street protests (Brodsky, 2003).

Although women were becoming more aware of their subordinate status in Afghan

²⁰ The mujahideen factions represented diverse ethnic groups and religious ideologies, ranging from royalists to moderate Islamists to radical extremists. However, these

groups were similar in that they were better suited for fighting than for governance (Maley, 2014).

society as the 1970s progressed,²¹ they did not mobilize into a defined women's movement. Additionally, none of the prominent political parties of the time specifically advocated for the advancement of women's rights as part of their main agenda (Brodsky, 2003). Each party's approach to women's rights was also determined by its broader political ideology; conservative organizations justified confining women to the home and discouraged their education and employment in order to protect women's "honor," and while the leftist movements did consider women's rights instrumental to the manifestation of their struggle, they were not interested in institutionalizing women's rights (ibid.).

Seeing that the advancement of women's rights had not found a definitive place on any organization's agenda, Meena,²² a student at Kabul University, decided to found the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) in 1977. In its initial years, this women-only organization championed the advancement of women's rights and addressed issues like domestic violence, illiteracy, and the cultural subordination of women (Brodsky, 2003). RAWA emphasizes that for women to be liberated from oppression, it is necessary for them to develop a political, cultural, and social consciousness, and this enlightenment will enable the actualization of a democratic society and a more egalitarian social order (Brodsky, 2003; Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

[RAWA], n.d.). Accordingly, RAWA's first initiative was conducting literacy classes for women who came from rural backgrounds or who were homebound by traditional families. These classes aimed to not only educate women, but also empower women to substantiate their rights by first securing their right to education (Brodsky, 2003). RAWA's commitment to women's education and the realization of democracy in Afghanistan has remained constant since 1977 (Brodsky, 2003; RAWA, n.d.).

At the onset of the Soviet occupation in 1979, RAWA modified its mission and declared that the pursuit of women's rights was an essential aspect of the national struggle against the Soviets (Brodsky, 2003). Many argued that women's emancipation should be a secondary concern in the face of the Soviet invasion, and while Meena agreed that women's rights could never be advanced in a repressive country, she contended that mobilizing women in the resistance movement would cause society to "recognize [women's] contribution and this would result in an elevation of their status... This in turn would change their expectations for both themselves and for their society" (Brodsky, 2003, p. 71). For this reason, RAWA's resistance work was, and continues to be, guided by three main motivations: the advancement of women's rights, resistance against undemocratic regimes, and the expansion of its membership (Brodsky, 2003).

²¹ In 1970, 5,000 women organized a demonstration in Kabul after a group of mullahs, or religious leaders, threw acid on women for wearing Western dress. These demonstrators organized a street protest because they believed that the judiciary would not hold the mullahs accountable (Brodsky, 2003).

²² The founder of RAWA is almost exclusively addressed by just her first name (RAWA, n.d.). In some instances, the press reports her full name as Meena Keshwar Kamal, which is a pseudonym that Meena chose for her own security as RAWA's activities became more decisive (Brodsky, 2003).

One thing that is unique about RAWA in comparison to the other organizations analyzed in this paper is that the association's founding and enduring philosophy can be attributed to a single individual. Saeed (2020) explains that individuals that serve as initiators of collective action play a significant role in encouraging women to assert their agency in South Asian movements. This initiator fosters trust between herself and the movement members, and this connection creates space for women to potentially cross social barriers and join the initiator in speaking out about their experience (Saeed, 2020).

For RAWA, Meena served as the initiator that spearheaded the association's work, set the norms of the association's structure, and expanded its membership in the initial years (Brodsky, 2003). The vast majority of women who joined RAWA the first few years after its creation got involved through their direct connection with Meena. The communist regime inflicted indiscriminate torture, arbitrary imprisonment, extra-judicial killings, and enforced disappearances on intellectuals and individuals suspected of being dissenters, and the families and relatives of the victims were subsequently politicized against the Soviets (ibid.). Meena maximized these women's desire to take action against the oppressive regime and presented RAWA to them as a way to avenge the brutalities endured by Afghan civilians. Multiple RAWA members interviewed by Brodsky (2003) recount how Meena would visit their family when she heard that someone in the household had been disappeared or imprisoned by the state, and it was through these visits that she cultivated connections with women.

Her sympathy for the victims of state violence was striking for a time when even neighbors and extended family members often hesitated to support the victims out of fear for the regime (Brodsky, 2003). Zarlisht, a RAWA member whose family was drawn to Meena's work when she was in her teens, explains, "It is difficult for me to express in words the feelings that Meena had toward her people, their pain, and how much she yearned to help them. She also had the ability and gravity to very soon attract their trust and their interest toward her" (Brodsky, 2003, p. 67). In this way, Meena functioned as the trustworthy, inspirational initiator for RAWA, and her ethics of care enabled her to operationalize women's shared experiences of state violence and extend the reach of RAWA's membership and message.

Despite Meena's centrality in the establishment of RAWA, the association is highly attuned to the perspectives and realities of everyday Afghan women. Meena's ability to empathize with Afghan women across class and ethnic lines was enhanced by the pervasive nature of state violence in the 1970s and 80s. Because the Parcham government viewed a variety of ideologies antagonistically and its repressive tactics affected all parts of Afghan society, differences in class, education, and ethnicity were compressed. Meena, an educated, middle-class woman, could easily empathize with viewpoints of women from diverse circumstances (Brodsky, 2003). RAWA members continue to be considered legitimate representatives and suitable advocates for the women of Afghanistan because "RAWA members are not foreign NGO workers working for a paycheck. They, like everyone around them, are widows and orphans, survivors of

trauma and war, dislocation and family tragedy” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 144).

RAWA’s political magazine, *Payam-e Zan*, provided a similar purpose of identifying women’s shared struggles and serving as a tool for recruitment. The publication documented the violence of the regime, women’s resistance efforts, RAWA’s commentary on recent events, and critiques of intellectuals and political parties that support the antidemocratic administration that was in power at the time (Brodsky, 2003). This publication is how most current members were first introduced to RAWA’s work and it continues to serve as a useful educational tool to help members develop a political consciousness by exposing them to analytical discourse on current events and RAWA’s perspectives. The records of state violations that are included in *Payam-e Zan* are subjected to high standards of corroboration to ensure that they are a factual presentation of the experiences of Afghans, including those in rural areas of the country (ibid.). By accurately characterizing the conditions of women across the country, RAWA emphasizes its credibility as an agent of knowledge and upholds women’s capacity to be effective agitators against violent regimes.

RAWA exhibited a complex positionality during the Soviet occupation because, in addition to resisting the Soviet regime and advocating for Afghan sovereignty, RAWA’s platform of democracy and women’s rights was ideologically opposed to the mujahideen factions that were leading the resistance to the central Parcham government.

²³ Despite these efforts, RAWA could not entirely evade the grasp of its adversaries; two men with connections to a fundamentalist group found Meena in Pakistan and assassinated her in February of 1987. The fact that RAWA

Although the mujahideen groups were glorified for their resistance to a foreign invasion, Meena and RAWA correctly predicted that the factions’ dogmas of fundamentalism would fail to produce a democratic, politically moderate state when the Soviet occupation was over (Brodsky, 2003). Because RAWA’s perspective was inimical to the predominant narrative of Soviet occupier vs. mujahideen nationalist, and was thereby threatened by actors on both sides of the conflict, the security of RAWA members was continually at risk. By 1981, many members had already faced imprisonment for their involvement with the association, so RAWA moved its primary operations to Pakistan (ibid.).²³ Today, RAWA maintains a presence in both Pakistan and Afghanistan (RAWA, n.d.).

One reason why RAWA’s tactics have proved to be sustainable is because it prioritizes the long-term development of an egalitarian society through incremental changes over time rather than engaging solely in more sensational forms of protest. A current RAWA member explains that when the organization is notified that a woman is facing adverse conditions within her family, “[RAWA members] have to work little by little...[a]nd we will see some changes. Talking is very important, especially to the mother-in-law. They have lots of power in the family and things are done according to their wishes; they can even convince husbands” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 38). Rather than encouraging a complete erasure or reversal of problematic cultural practices, RAWA has worked within existing familial practices and social orders to

was undeterred by the death of its founder and continues to actualize her vision nearly forty years after this tragedy is a testament to the association’s adaptable infrastructure and the dedication of its members (Brodsky, 2003).

stimulate changes in Afghan society. This may appear to be a patriarchal bargain, but is an intentional choice, as RAWA members' kindness and patience is meant to juxtapose the destruction and cruelties of the political regime. By making smaller, personal appeals to Afghan women and their families about the importance of women's rights and democracy, RAWA hopes to bring about a "slow and steady change in...one family, which trickles out to the neighborhood, to the next generation, and will eventually create a permanent change in the lives of women and all people" (Brodsky, 2003, p. 126).

RAWA's emphasis on cultivating interpersonal relationships creates a lasting positive impression on the individuals that interact with its members, and foregrounds RAWA's ability to generate alternative spaces and build entire communities based on its democratic principles. After shifting its operations to Pakistan in 1981, RAWA recognized the needs of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and established a handicraft center, where women could earn a living, live together in a community, and continue their education without relying on a male breadwinner (Brodsky, 2003). This project was accompanied with the opening of two boarding schools for refugee children, a hospital that was free of charge for Afghan refugee women and children, and Woloswali camp, a refugee camp that eventually transformed into a small village of over 500 families (Brodsky, 2003; RAWA, n.d.). At present, RAWA programs in Pakistan include 15 girls' schools, nine orphanages, several literacy courses, income-generation schemes, mobile health teams, human rights monitoring groups, and protest organizations

(RAWA, n.d.). RAWA's work in Afghanistan is more focused on providing education and healthcare to Afghan women and establishing economic programs like chicken farms, handicraft units, and bee-keeping projects so that women can feed their families (ibid.).

RAWA's alternative politics has manifested in counter-patriarchal spaces where gender relations and norms can be reinvented. In these localities, RAWA members serve as "role models for women's education, resistance, and activism, as well as of kindness, cooperation, and mutual support among women as well as men" (Brodsky, 2003, p. 130). In refugee camps like Woloswali, RAWA has actualized its aspirations for an egalitarian and democratic society; women enjoy the freedom to work, attend literacy classes, and participate in public demonstrations for the liberation of Afghanistan (Brodsky, 2003). This has created an environment where women can lead lives with purpose and dignity, despite their disenfranchised circumstances as refugees, which is indicative of RAWA's commitment to gradual and sustained resistance to oppressive social practices and political regimes.

RAWA also manifests prolonged improvements to women's rights through its educational programs. After its founding in 1977, RAWA conducted literacy classes with the hope of educating women as well as preventing women from being brainwashed by the communist regime, a tactic that the government implemented regularly (Brodsky, 2003). RAWA endeavored to forestall the state's indoctrination by encouraging the students in literacy classes to become politically, socially, and culturally conscious, because "education without

consciousness is insufficient to protect women or promote individual or societal improvement” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 107). All of RAWA’s work is initiated through a foundation in education and members are encouraged to attend literacy courses, no matter their education level, so that they can apply their growing understanding to work that helps others (Brodsky, 2003).²⁴

RAWA’s emphasis on the enlightenment of its members and Afghan women overall is emblematic of the association’s dedication to undermining the hermeneutical systems in Afghanistan. While enduring decades of oppressive communist and fundamentalist rule, Afghan society has proliferated antiquated perspectives of women’s position in society, and much of RAWA’s work has consisted of dismantling these assumptions and demonstrating how women are harmed in this social order. Although women can become aware of their hermeneutical marginalization through their work in RAWA, not all Afghan women are afforded this opportunity. Nazia and Parwana, two young women involved in RAWA who first lived in Pakistan and then returned to Afghanistan, note the lack of consciousness evident in some Afghan women they encountered:

[I]n Afghanistan we realized how different we are from girls our age. They didn’t know anything about their rights in the world. Their information was only about their home. They didn’t know how to get from one place to another; they didn’t know or ask anything about their

own family even. They thought that they should obey their brothers and other men. They didn’t care about education like us. They were always dependent on their family and thought they always should be. They didn’t think they should do anything economically because they thought only men should be breadwinners (Brodsky, 2003, p. 150).

Unlike the women engaged in RAWA’s resistance work, these Afghan women did not have the hermeneutical resources needed to perceive the inequities they faced in their lives or to understand their own capacity to contribute to society (Brodsky, 2003). If women lack a conception of their rights or are unfamiliar with the discourse on the topic, their active engagement with their rights is highly improbable. For this reason, RAWA emphasizes the contributions that women make to society in its work to “let women know they are human beings and equal to men” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 110).

These efforts include organizing public demonstrations in Pakistan to condemn the political and humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan. Women are the planners, organizers, and implementers of these marches, and the high attendance of these protests has served to contradict many misogynistic postulations about women’s (in)ability to be capable agitators among RAWA members and Afghan and Pakistani communities at large (Brodsky, 2003). The presentation of women as accomplished agents of social change through

²⁴ Because RAWA spends considerable resources on its education programs, the quality of education that women receive through RAWA is commendable. In fact, some RAWA members living in Pakistan returned to Taliban-

controlled Afghanistan in the 1990s to attend literacy courses there because those classes were considered superior to the education provided in RAWA’s schools in Pakistan (Brodsky, 2003).

RAWA challenges the social norms of women's roles in these societies and supplements RAWA's endeavors to change the realities for women in Afghanistan. In this way, RAWA moves away from addressing singular instances of gender discrimination and instead strives to fundamentally adjust the social and cultural framework within which these injustices occur.

Conclusion

This research project endeavored to delineate the epistemic nuances of South Asian autocracies and understand how South Asian women operationalize their own epistemic perspectives to resist these regimes' architectures of political and gender violence. Through an investigation of the advocacy work done by Kashmiri women to reopen the Kunan Poshpora mass rape case, by Pakistani women to challenge the dogmas of General Zia's military dictatorship, and by Afghan women to champion for democracy under military occupation and fundamentalist repression, this paper has identified patterns in South Asian women's resistance tactics as they seek to attain their advocacy objectives. Across a variety of political structures, women engaged intentionally with spaces of participation and tailored their protest tactics to address the particular epistemic and civil violations to which they were subjected. In the central cases, women's resistance was also complexified by their own intersectional positionalities, but a

precise commentary on the influence of intersectionality on women's dissent of political oppression requires further investigation.

Each organization obtained varying amounts of success in subverting oppressive state practices and securing women's rights, but the members of each association exhibited enduring dedication to their cause and were likely to continue pursuing women's rights advocacy no matter the results of their efforts. In all three South Asian societies analyzed in this paper, women continued the long legacy of gendered resistance in their respective communities and national contexts, which in itself challenges prevailing social structures and predominant narratives about women's political behavior. The results of this study also emphasize the perspectives that must be taken into consideration when characterizing and resolving a political conflict. Women have epistemic advantages for discerning systems of oppression and violence, and their standpoints are significant to the development of culturally sensitive, contextually appropriate approaches to overcoming political antagonisms.

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