

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION
AGAINST WOMEN IN
CONTEMPORARY
KASHMIR: A
MULTIFACETED
EXPLORATION**

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Abstract

This article presents an in-depth sociological analysis of gender discrimination against women in the Kashmir Valley. Kashmir is a region where the intersection of history, politics, and culture has definitely contributed towards shaping the lived experiences of women. Situated within a context shaped established patriarchal traditions, the study interrogates how gender inequality becomes embedded in everyday social practices and institutional frameworks. Based on a qualitative research methodology integrating detailed case studies conducted between 2022 and 2023, this study reveals how discrimination manifests in both subtle, normalized ways and overt, institutionalized mechanisms. By examining the interconnections among historico-political spans, religio-cultural norms, and socio-economic hierarchies, the paper emphasizes the multiple and overlapping forces that sustain women's marginalization. Furthermore, it illuminates how patriarchal authority constrains women's autonomy and access to education, healthcare, and employment while perpetuating cycles of exclusion and disempowerment that transcend generations. The article critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal and policy frameworks addressing gender inequality in Kashmir, underlining persistent gaps between legislative intent and practical implementation that limit women's access to justice. The research also examines the roles of civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and individual agency in both challenging and, at times, inadvertently reinforcing discriminatory practices. The findings highlight the need for a holistic, culturally sensitive, and

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multi-stakeholder approach to dismantle ingrained gender discrimination. The article concludes with targeted recommendations, including policy interventions, community engagement, and public awareness campaigns. The overarching objective is to empower women, challenge traditional gender norms, and promote an inclusive environment that upholds women's rights and dignity. This research, based on empirical data from the Valley, significantly frames a sociological discourse on gender and rights, and calls for transformative action by stakeholders at all levels.

Keywords

Gender Discrimination, Patriarchal Norms, Women's Empowerment, Legal Frameworks, Intersectionality, Islamic Ethics

Introduction: The Contested Terrain of Gender in Kashmir

Kashmir is widely recognized for its natural topography, yet this recognition frequently obscures the complex gender dynamics present within its society. Historical, cultural, religious, and social factors collectively shape women's experiences in the region. This article examines persistent gender discrimination affecting women in public institutions and private households. Despite formal guarantees of equality in the Indian Constitution and international agreements, systemic biases, patriarchal norms, and a substantial gap between legal provisions and lived realities continue to impact many Kashmiri women.

This research employs qualitative case studies conducted between 2022 and 2023 in both urban and rural areas of the Kashmir Valley, with all respondent names and organizational details anonymized to protect participants' identities. These case studies present a critical understanding of the diverse challenges faced by women, accentuating both their struggles and resilience. The persistence of discrimination, despite legal reforms, necessitates an assessment of whether formal equality has effectively addressed the rooted societal prejudices. The situation in Kashmir exemplifies this pattern within a specific context, as Nussbaum (2000) observes, women are frequently treated as means to the ends of others.

This research aims to document the experiences of women as they helm the complex and often contradictory dynamics of contemporary Kashmiri society. The study investigates multiple

layers of discrimination within corporate environments, government institutions, and family settings. The case studies identify economic exploitation, workplace harassment, psychological violence, and restrictive cultural norms as prevalent forms of discrimination. The central research question explores how socio-cultural, religious, and economic structures in Kashmir interact to produce and legitimize gender discrimination, and seeks to identify culturally appropriate pathways for empowerment and social transformation.

The complexity of gender discrimination in Kashmir is heightened by the contrast between Islamic principles, which advocate justice and equality, and prevailing patriarchal interpretations. Despite increased emphasis on equal rights in both global and local discourses, significant tension persists between religious ideals and customary practices. This article examines this dissonance, analyzing how the core teachings of Islamic gender justice are frequently overshadowed by tradition. The study seeks to contribute to the discourse on gender in Kashmir and to broader interdisciplinary understandings of persisting inequality.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality, Patriarchal Bargains, and the Ethics of Justice

To fully comprehend the complicated and layered discrimination faced by Kashmiri women, it is essential to employ a sophisticated theoretical lens that can account for multiple, overlapping systems of power and identity. The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides this essential framework. Intersectionality posits that systems of oppression, such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation, are not distinct and separate; they are interconnected and mutually constitutive. They cannot be examined in isolation because their effects compound and transform one another. In Kashmir, a woman's identity is invariably situated at the crossroads of multiple, overlapping identities: she is not only a woman but also a Kashmiri, often Muslim, and located within a specific class, caste, and regional hierarchy (Kazi, 2017). The experience of discrimination for an educated, urban woman from a professional family in Srinagar will differ significantly, and in

fundamental ways, from that of a rural, uneducated artisan from a remote village. An intersectional analysis prevents the homogenization of “Kashmiri women” and allows for a more precise understanding of how different axes of identity shape distinct experiences of privilege and subordination.

Furthermore, Kandiyoti’s (1988) seminal concept of “patriarchal bargains” is instrumental in understanding the complex and often painful dynamics within households and among women themselves. Deniz Kandiyoti argues that women are not merely passive victims of patriarchy; they are active agents who, operating within a constraining patriarchal system, negotiate and strategize to maximize their security, power, and life options. This sometimes leads to their complicity in perpetuating the very system that oppresses them, as seen in cases where mothers-in-law, aunts, or senior female relatives enforce discriminatory norms against younger women, such as in the cases of Mehwish and Khalida presented later. This framework helps explain the complex and morally ambiguous phenomenon of “women discriminating against women,” moving beyond simplistic notions of universal sisterhood to a more nuanced and perhaps more honest understanding of power, survival, and resistance within severely constrained environments. It reveals how patriarchy operates not just through male domination but also through the internalization of its logics by women who then police other women.

Finally, it is crucial to introduce the framework of Islamic ethics concerning gender justice. The Quranic worldview and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) introduced revolutionary reforms in 7th-century Arabia, granting women rights to inheritance, property, and consent in marriage that were unprecedented for the time. The ethical spirit of Islam emphasizes the equality of all human beings before God and the principles of justice (*adl*) and compassion (*rahmah*). Contemporary scholars like Kecia Ali (2014) and Amina Wadud (1999) have engaged in feminist exegesis, reinterpreting Islamic texts to argue for a more equitable framework that distinguishes between the religion’s core egalitarian principles and the patriarchal customs of the societies in which it is practiced. In the context of Kashmir, a predominantly Muslim society, this creates a potent discursive

field where appeals for women's rights can be, and often are, grounded in Islamic ethics, challenging the patriarchal interpretations that have historically held sway. This theological perspective is vital for any meaningful engagement with the community on issues of reform and equality.

Discrimination Against Women in the Workplace: The Economic Architecture of Inequality

Both the formal and informal economic sectors in Kashmir reflect and reinforce broader societal gender inequalities. The case studies presented in this research document a spectrum of discriminatory practices, including overt pay disparities, unfair dismissals, social exclusion, and sexual harassment. Collectively, these practices constitute an economic structure that systematically restricts women's financial autonomy and professional advancement.

Case Study 1: Farzana and the Persistent Pay Gap

Farzana, a highly qualified postgraduate with first-class credentials, successfully secured a position at a private bank in Srinagar. However, during the hiring process, she learned through informal channels that a male colleague with lesser qualifications and significantly less relevant experience was offered a higher starting salary for a comparable role. When she questioned this disparity with the human resources department, management offered vague, unconvincing justifications for "role fit," "future leadership potential," and "negotiation skills." Compelled by acute familial financial pressures, Farzana reluctantly accepted the lower offer, a decision that left her feeling both professionally devalued and personally frustrated. This case is a classic illustration of the gender pay gap, a well-documented global phenomenon that remains stubbornly persistent in Kashmir. It reflects a deep-seated cognitive bias that systematically undervalues women's labour and contributions, often underpinned by the unexamined assumption that men are the primary breadwinners and are thus more deserving of higher compensation (Weichselbaumer & Winter-Ebmer, 2005). This form of economic discrimination has direct and long-term

consequences, affecting a woman's financial autonomy, pension savings, and overall sense of self-worth and professional standing.

Case Study 2: Ruquma and the Impenetrable Glass Ceiling

Ruquma, a dedicated and competent executive in a private manufacturing firm, reported a consistent and demoralizing pattern of being passed over for promotions in favour of male colleagues. She noted with perceptive insight, "The promotion criteria seemed to shift and become nebulous when it came to female employees. For men, it was about potential; for us, it was about proven performance, which was never quite proven enough." Furthermore, she was systematically excluded from key informal communication channels, such as the WhatsApp groups where male colleagues discussed crucial work strategies, client management, and upcoming opportunities. This deliberate exclusion from "informal networks" is a well-documented barrier to career advancement in organizational sociology, creating a "glass ceiling," an invisible yet impenetrable barrier that prevents qualified women from reaching senior leadership positions (Cotter et al., 2001). The continued privileging of male employees for high-profile opportunities such as foreign tours and international training programs serves to entrench this inequality, effectively limiting women's professional growth, network expansion, and exposure to global best practices.

Case Study 3: Shafeeqa and Maternity as a Professional Liability

Shafeeqa, a diligent employee at an automotive sales company in Hyderpora, Srinagar, was summarily terminated from her position precisely when she was nine months pregnant. Upon formally submitting a request for a three-month maternity leave, which was her legal right under the Maternity Benefit Act, her female boss informed her, in a cold, matter-of-fact manner, that her absence would create an "unmanageable workload" and result in financial losses for the company. She was told bluntly that she was "of no use to the company" in her pregnant condition. This blatant case of maternity-based discrimination discloses the fundamental conflict that patriarchal capitalist systems create

between women's biological reproductive roles and their economic participation in the workforce. As noted by Kumar (2012) in his analysis of pregnancy and patriarchy, the female body, in its capacity for reproduction, is often constructed as a liability within the productivity-oriented logic of the market, "putting the freedom of women in question." Despite legal protections, employers often view pregnancy as an inconvenient disruption, forcing women into an impossible choice between their career aspirations and their right to motherhood (Bhalotra & Umaña-Aponte, 2010). This practice disproportionately and uniquely affects women, thereby reinforcing their primary social identity as caregivers rather than as professionals and economic agents.

Case Study 4: Insha and the Hostile Work Environment

Insha, a committed social worker at a local NGO, endured a prolonged and terrifying period of sexual harassment from her male supervisor. His predatory behaviour included insisting on late-night calls under the pretext of urgent work, demanding that she keep her personal phone switched off to avoid scrutiny from her family, strategically rearranging the office layout to place her desk uncomfortably and intimidatingly close to his, and engaging in unwelcome and invasive physical contact under the guise of friendly pats. The situation only abated when she, after months of silent suffering, mustered the immense courage to formally report him to a higher authority, leading to her transfer to another department. Insha's harrowing experience stresses the grim prevalence of sexual harassment, a pernicious manifestation of gendered power dynamics that uses sexuality as a tool of intimidation, control, and subordination. While the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (the POSH Act) provides a comprehensive legal framework, as Kumar (2020) and Chawla (2024) critically examine, its implementation in many (Kashmiri) organizations remains weak, inconsistent, and often subject to the whims of management. Victims, like Insha, frequently fear severe professional reprisals, social stigma, and damage to their reputation, which creates a powerful culture of silence and impunity.

Case Study 5: Rafiya and the Systemic Devaluation of Traditional Labour

Rafiya, a highly skilled needleworker from a rural background, represents the struggles of countless women in the informal and artisan sectors, whose contributions remain largely invisible in formal economic metrics. Her craft, which demands immense precision, patience, artistic skill, and years of training, is systematically and grossly undercompensated. “The payment I receive does not even begin to justify the hours of back-breaking, eye-straining work I put in,” she laments. This exploitation is facilitated by a chain of middlemen and exporters who capture the bulk of the profit from international sales, leaving the actual artisan, the creator of the value, with a pittance. This economic exploitation is a serious form of discrimination that devalues traditionally female-dominated crafts, viewing them as hobbies or supplemental income rather than as serious professions. This keeps women in a cycle of poverty and financial dependence, sabotaging their economic agency (Gangoli, 2024). The global market for Kashmiri handicrafts thrives on the romanticized image of the artisan, while the material reality for women like Rafiya is one of precarity and exploitation.

Case Study 6: Sameera and Vertical Hostility in the Public Sector

Sameera’s troubling experience within a state government department illustrates that discrimination is not confined to the profit-driven private sector. Her female superior, a woman in a position of some authority, subjected her to consistent harsh treatment, public rudeness, and, most alarmingly, the repeated and unauthorized withholding of her salary for minor and often fabricated infractions. This blatant deviation from established bureaucratic norms and labour laws points to a toxic culture where positional power can be abused with impunity, regardless of the gender of the abuser. It effectively challenges the optimistic assumption that female leadership automatically encourages a more equitable and supportive environment for junior women. Instead, it suggests that patriarchal and authoritarian

organizational cultures can be effectively perpetuated and enacted by individuals of any gender, a phenomenon sometimes termed “vertical hostility” or the “queen bee” syndrome, where a woman in authority distances herself from and undermines other women to secure her own position in a male-dominated hierarchy (Derks et al., 2016).

Legal Frameworks and Their Discontents: The Chasm Between Law and Lived Reality

The Indian Constitution provides a remarkably robust and progressive foundation for gender equality. Article 14 guarantees the right to equality before the law, Article 15 explicitly prohibits the state from discriminating on grounds of sex, and Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Specific legislation, such as the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and the more recent and comprehensive POSH Act, 2013, is designed to combat the very forms of workplace discrimination described in the preceding case studies.

However, a significant and troubling chasm exists between “law on the books and law in action,” a gap that is particularly pronounced in the context of Kashmir. A primary structural limitation is the circumscribed jurisdiction of many central labour laws, which often apply only to enterprises employing a specific minimum number of workers. This automatically excludes a vast majority of women, such as Rafiya, the needleworker, who are concentrated in the informal, unorganized sector, where there is no defined employer-employee relationship. While the Unorganized Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008, was enacted with great promise to address this critical gap, its implementation on the ground has been widely criticized as lethargic, ineffective, and failing to provide meaningful social security to its intended beneficiaries (Shyam Sundar, 2020).

The philosophical concept of substantive equality is crucial for understanding what a more effective legal response would entail. Formal equality, which insists on treating everyone the same, often fails to address historical and structural disadvantages. It ignores the very real differences in social starting points. Substantive equality, in contrast, requires that these differences

be actively taken into account to achieve genuinely equitable outcomes (Fredman, 2016). This philosophy justifies and necessitates gender-specific policies such as reservations or quotas. Several Indian states have instituted horizontal reservations for women in government jobs; a similar proactive policy could be genuinely transformative in Jammu and Kashmir, ensuring a critical mass of women in public service. The Supreme Court of India has consistently upheld such measures, noting in landmark judgments that special provisions for women are not discriminatory but are, in fact, essential instruments to overcome their cumulative social and economic backwardness (*Air India v. Nergesh Meerza*, 1981).

The long-pending proposal for a national Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC), envisioned as a powerful statutory body to address discrimination in both public and private sectors, could be a potential game-changer. Its mandate was designed to extend beyond gender to include caste, religion, disability, and other grounds, making it a comprehensive and dedicated redressal mechanism (Government of India, 2008). However, this visionary proposal remains in draft form, a casualty of administrative inertia.

In the specific socio-legal context of Kashmir, personal laws and localized customary practices have been a persistent zone of contention and struggle. Critics argue that certain interpretations of these laws, influenced more by local custom than by pure religious doctrine, systematically disadvantage women in critical matters of inheritance, marriage, divorce, and guardianship (Kazi, 2017). For instance, despite progressive Supreme Court pronouncements affirming the rights of daughters to ancestral property, customary practices in various parts of Kashmir often effectively deprive them of their rightful share, with property almost exclusively devolving to male heirs. This legal pluralism creates a complex, often paralyzing scenario for women, in which universal constitutional rights guaranteed by the state clash with community-specific personal laws, leaving them in a vulnerable legal limbo. The struggle for gender justice, therefore, must also engage with the difficult task of reforming and reinterpreting these

personal laws from within an Islamic framework, emphasizing the Quran's original intent to grant women economic rights.

Health and Discrimination: A Syndemic of Neglect and Bias

The health sector in Kashmir reveals some of the striking gender-based disparities, shaped by a combination of grave infrastructural deficits, resource allocation failures, and powerful socio-cultural norms. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long acknowledged that gender is a critical social determinant of health, with women often facing disadvantages throughout their lives due to a syndemic of inequities in education, income, social power, and gender-based violence (WHO, 2021).

The public healthcare infrastructure in Jammu & Kashmir is in a state of chronic crisis. According to data from the National Sample Survey Office (2014), the doctor-patient ratio in the region was a dismal 1:3866. This figure is not only substantially worse than the already strained national average of 1:2000 but also stands as a clear contrast to the WHO's recommended standard of 1:1000. This systemic failure disproportionately and devastatingly affects women, whose health needs, particularly those related to reproduction, are more continuous and specialized. A recent performance audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India revealed a staggering 46% deficit in specialist doctors, including gynecologists, pediatricians, and anesthetists, at critical Community Health Centres (CHCs) and Sub-District Hospitals (SDHs) across the Union Territory. This crippling shortage means that basic but essential gynecological, obstetric, and pediatric care is simply unavailable at the local level for a vast number of women (Khan & Pathak, 2022).

The direct consequence of this collapse is an excessive and unsustainable burden on the few tertiary care hospitals located in Srinagar. As reported by a few studies, like Peerzada (2024), even patients with minimal obstetric risks are routinely referred to Lal Ded Hospital, the sole tertiary care maternity hospital in the city. This leads to overwhelming patient loads, dangerously overworked and exhausted medical staff, and prohibitively long waiting times. These conditions, in turn, severely compromise the quality and dignity of care and put patients at avoidable risk. For a woman in

labour from a remote village in Kupwara or Kulgam, this logistical nightmare, involving long and difficult travel while in a critical medical state, can become a matter of life and death. This is a clear and tragic example of how systemic neglect constitutes a form of structural discrimination against women.

Beyond the tangible issues of infrastructure, more subtle forms of gender bias directly affect health-seeking behaviour and health outcomes. Deeply ingrained cultural norms of modesty (*purdah*) often discourage women from seeking consultation from male doctors, of whom there is a majority, for gynecological or other sensitive issues. The persistent preference for male children can lead to the neglect of a daughter's health and nutrition from a young age. The relative lack of autonomy for women in household decision-making, including decisions about their own bodies, often means that their health concerns are deprioritized until they become severe emergencies. Furthermore, the psychological distress experienced by women, aggravated by the constant threat of violence, and the pressures of domestic life, constitutes another significant but largely unaddressed dimension of women's health in the region (Malhotra & Raza, 2019). The focus on overt, physical manifestations of gender inequality often obscures these more subtle, yet pervasively corrosive, forms of discrimination that have a cumulative and debilitating impact on a woman's physical, mental, and emotional well-being over her entire lifespan.

It is also pertinent to note the sometimes restrictive judicial interpretation of discrimination in this context. The Kerala High Court, in the case of *Dr. Prasad Pannian v. Central University of Kerala* (2018), made a significant distinction by ruling that mere gender-based discrimination in service matters, such as being denied promotion, does not, by itself, constitute the specific offence of 'sexual harassment' under the POSH Act. This legal delineation highlights the pressing need for specific, strong, and standalone anti-discrimination laws. Such laws should address the full spectrum of biased and inequitable treatment faced by women, and not just the sexualized or overtly violent forms of such treatment. The absence of such a comprehensive law leaves many women like Farzana and Ruquma without a clear legal remedy for the non-sexualized discrimination they face.

Women Discriminating Against Women: The Complexities of the Patriarchal Bargain

Perhaps the most complex, psychologically damaging, and socially divisive forms of discrimination occur within the familial sphere, and are at times perpetrated by other women who are themselves embedded within the same patriarchal system. The following case studies, drawn from intensive field research across various localities of Srinagar, illustrate with painful clarity how patriarchal norms are internalized, rationalized, and enforced by women, a phenomenon powerfully explained by Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain."

Case Study 7: Mehwish's Struggle Against Inherited Patriarchy

Mehwish, a 26-year-old ambitious professional working in the local office of a reputed multinational company in Srinagar, faces a particularly insidious form of discrimination orchestrated by her own grandmother. The elderly woman's pronounced and unshakeable preference for male heirs manifests in a daily regimen of constant criticism, stringent restrictions on Mehwish's clothing choices and social interactions, and, most disturbingly, unwarranted physical punishment for minor or imagined transgressions. This deep-seated bias even extends to subtle mockery of Mehwish's professional achievements in the workplace, damaging her confidence. This case demonstrates with graphic clarity how patriarchal values are transmitted intergenerationally. The grandmother, having internalized the logic of a classic patrilineal system where sons are seen as the providers of old-age security and the carriers of the family name, while daughters are perceived as a temporary liability (*parayadhan*, or someone else's wealth), actively polices and enforces restrictive gender norms for the next generation. She views Mehwish's modernity, economic independence, and assertiveness as a direct threat to the traditional familial honour and the established social order that has defined her own life.

Case Study 8: Farzana's Struggle Against Workplace Jealousy

In a different context, Farzana (a different individual from Case Study 1), who works in the Government Department of Fisheries, faces persistent harassment not from a male superior, but from a female colleague, XYZ. This colleague's behaviour began with ragging when Farzana was a newcomer, escalated to seizing her personal belongings like her mobile phone, and actively creating a hostile environment by spreading rumours and discouraging other female staff from communicating with Farzana. This behaviour appears rooted in a psychology of scarcity and internalized misogyny. In a system with limited opportunities for career advancement for women, some individuals may perceive other competent women not as potential allies but as direct competitors for the few available slots of recognition, promotion, and power. This "queen bee" syndrome, where a woman in a position of authority or seeking authority distances herself from and undermines other women, can be understood as a coping mechanism within an overarching patriarchal structure. By aligning herself with the dominant male culture and rejecting solidarity with other women, the perpetrator may believe she is enhancing her own status and security (Derks et al., 2016).

Case Study 9: Mona's Battle Against Psychological Violence

Mona, a 21-year-old student pursuing her Bachelor of Arts, endures sustained psychological violence at the hands of her maternal aunt. Following her parents' divorce, Mona lives with her maternal grandmother, where her aunt subjects her to a regime of emotional abuse. This includes denying her proper meals, subjecting her to constant verbal insults and belittlement, and systematically undermining her decision-making autonomy on matters as simple as choosing her own clothes. This is a clear and distressing case of emotional and psychological abuse aimed deliberately at diminishing Mona's sense of self-worth and agency. It highlights how women, particularly in joint family structures, can wield power over other, more vulnerable women, reinforcing internal family hierarchies based on marital status, lineage, and generational authority. Mona's narrative aligns with broader societal challenges, emphasizing the critical need for open communication about mistreatment within families and the

cultivation of compassion to improve fractured family and social relationships.

Case Study 10: Nuzhat's Struggle in a Discriminatory Marital Ecosystem

Nuzhat, a 54-year-old mother and housewife, has endured decades of emotional turmoil and neglect due to her husband's open extramarital affair. While the Supreme Court of India decriminalized adultery in the landmark *Joseph Shine v. Union of India* (2018) judgment, it remains a potent ground for divorce and represents an unbearable betrayal and a violation of marital trust. Nuzhat's story reveals the indirect discrimination women face within the institution of marriage. Social and economic pressures, the stigma associated with divorce, the lack of independent financial resources, and concerns for the welfare of children often make it extremely difficult for women to leave unfaithful or emotionally abusive partners. This effectively traps them in extremely damaging and humiliating situations for the sake of social propriety and precarious financial security. Her experience prompts a sober reflection on the societal norms and legal frameworks that continue to disadvantage women within intimate relationships, even as laws modernize.

Case Study 11: Khalida's Struggle against the Tyranny of Tradition

Khalida, now a 50-year-old woman employed with a non-governmental organization, offers a deeply unsettling account of how patriarchal traditions continue to dictate women's lives in the Kashmir Valley. Her recollections of early marital life vividly expose the gendered cruelty embedded within domestic spaces. While the first few days of marriage are customarily celebrated in Kashmir as a period of tenderness and seclusion, locally referred to as "*satan dohan hinz mahrin*" (the bride of the first seven days), for Khalida it became a time of humiliation and violence. Her "seven days of comfort" turned into what she calls "the harsh first seven days." She recounts relentless taunts from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law for bringing what they deemed an "inadequate" dowry and, later, for bearing two daughters rather

than a male child. In one particularly harrowing incident, her sister-in-law hurled a steaming tea-sheet at her, an act of physical aggression that sought to discipline and domesticate her into compliance. Such violence was not incidental but functioned as a ritualized assertion of hierarchy, an initiation that reaffirmed the authority of senior women and reinforced the patrilocal household's control over the new bride. This normalization of abuse reveals how gendered subordination is sustained through intimate acts of everyday power. As Kumar (2019) notes in "Problematizing Gender and Issues of Inequality," the persistence of such practices demonstrates that justice within the family remains an unfulfilled aspiration, necessitating a profound rethinking of how authority, care, and equality are structured within the private sphere.

Conclusion: Synthesizing the Layers of Discrimination and Charting a Path Forward

The evidence presented in this article demonstrates that gender equality in contemporary Kashmir is characterized by complexity and multiple layers of discrimination. Discrimination against women is not a singular phenomenon; rather, it is interconnected and operates across several domains, resulting in persistent constraints.

1. **The Economic Front:** Discrimination manifests through persistent pay gaps, denial of promotions, maternity-based discrimination, and the systemic devaluation of women's labour in both the formal corporate sector and the informal artisan economy.
2. **The Legal and Policy Front:** It operates through the critical gap between progressive legislation and its weak, inconsistent implementation, and through the continued tensions between universal constitutional rights and discriminatory personal or customary practices that are often defended in the name of culture or religion.
3. **The Health Front:** It is evident in a crumbling and underfunded public health infrastructure that fails to meet women's specific needs, and in cultural norms that

systematically deprioritize their physical and mental well-being.

4. **The Socio-cultural and Interpersonal Front:** It is perpetuated through the internalization and active enforcement of patriarchal norms by family members, including other women, leading to psychological violence, physical abuse, and restrictive control within the domestic sphere, the very place that should be a sanctuary.

The effects of multifaceted discrimination are far-reaching. These forms of discrimination isolate women, undermine self-esteem and mental health, compromise physical well-being, limit life opportunities, and restrict societal participation. A pervasive culture of silence persists, as victims often fear professional reprisals, social exclusion, or familial disruption.

Recommendations: Towards a Holistic and Culturally-Grounded Approach

Addressing entrenched and multifaceted discrimination requires a coordinated, multi-level, and culturally informed strategy that moves beyond superficial measures to address underlying causes.

1. Strengthened Policy and Legal Interventions:

- **Robust Implementation:** The Jammu & Kashmir administration must treat the enforcement of existing laws, such as the POSH Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, as a top governance priority. This requires mandatory, recurring training for employers and managers, the establishment of fully functional and independent Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in all eligible institutions, and swift, transparent judicial action against violators to build trust in the system.
- **Enacting Proactive Legislation:** The long-pending proposal for a national Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) should be enacted without further delay. At the Union Territory level, a policy of substantive equality, such as legislating a significant quota (e.g., 33%) for women in all state government jobs and local bodies, should be seriously debated and implemented to ensure women's representation in public life.

- **Health Sector Revamp and Gender Mainstreaming:** Urgent, targeted public investment is needed to bridge infrastructure and human resource gaps. This includes creating attractive incentive packages for specialist doctors to serve in rural areas, upgrading district hospitals with modern obstetric and gynecological care facilities, and launching targeted public health campaigns focused on women's health literacy, nutrition, and mental well-being. Gender budgeting should be applied to all health sector plans.
- 2. Deepened Community Engagement and Critical Awareness:**
- **Grassroots Mobilization and Faith-Based Dialogue:** Collaborate with and strengthen local civil society organizations, women's collectives, and religious scholars (ulema) who advocate for a gender-just interpretation of Islamic principles. Support community-led dialogues and workshops that use Islamic sources to challenge regressive gender norms and practices like dowry and son-preference, framing the issue not as a rejection of culture but as a return to its ethical core.
 - **Educational Reforms from School to University:** Integrate gender sensitization, human rights education, and critical thinking skills into school and college curricula from an early age. Education should promote values of empathy, equality, and mutual respect to combat the insecurities and internalized biases that lead to discrimination, including the phenomenon of women discriminating against women.
 - **Strategic Engagement of Men and Boys:** Gender equality cannot be achieved by focusing solely on women. It is imperative to design and fund programs that specifically engage men and boys as partners, allies, and stakeholders in challenging patriarchal norms and redefining masculinities in positive, non-oppressive ways.
- 3. Empowerment and Sustainable Support Mechanisms:**
- **Widespread Legal Literacy Campaigns:** Launch widespread, accessible, and multi-lingual campaigns using radio, social media, and community meetings to inform women of their legal rights in the workplace, family, and society. Knowing one's rights is the fundamental first step toward confidently claiming them.

- **Economic Empowerment with Fairness:** Provide enhanced institutional support for women in the informal sector by establishing transparent supply chains, ensuring fair trade certification and practices, facilitating direct market access through e-commerce platforms, and offering continuous skill-upgradation programs. Actively promote and fund women-led entrepreneurship through streamlined credit facilities and business development services.
- **Establishing Robust Psycho-Social Support Systems:** Establish and adequately fund a network of crisis centres, counselling services, and legal aid cells specifically for women facing discrimination and violence in all its forms. Creating safe, confidential, and non-judgmental spaces for women to share their experiences, access professional support, and rebuild their lives is absolutely vital.

In conclusion, dismantling entrenched structures of gender discrimination in Kashmir requires sustained effort, cultural sensitivity, and collective commitment from the state, civil society, religious leaders, communities, families, and individuals. Progress depends on moving beyond rhetoric to implement meaningful, collaborative, and accountable actions that empower Kashmiri women as active agents and equal partners in society. The resilience and strength of Kashmiri women are evident, and it is the responsibility of society and the state to create conditions that enable this resilience to achieve full citizenship and equality.

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