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<http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2015/Feb/4/gender-justice-and-the-media-16.asp>

- In Kashmir, violence against women has become a routine affair. The heart wrenching stories of women being subjected to inhuman treatment unfold every other day. It has been observed that crimes against women are on a constant rise. Be it rapes, molestation, sexual harassment, domestic violence, female trafficking, eve-teasing or abduction, there is no end to woes of women.

While the situation is grim across the globe, Kashmir is no exception, where the situation is even worse. Over the past two decades, the Valley has witnessed unprecedented crimes against women, which many attribute to the ongoing political turmoil. Time and again women have been subjected to physical violence by military and paramilitary forces. And the story doesn't end here. Women in Kashmir have fell victims to domestic violence and sexual abuse by family members as well.

Media researchers argue that the political stalemate of India and Pakistan has led to the abuse and suffering of women in the Valley. The dispute over Kashmir and the consequent political instability has led to serious consequences for the Kashmiri population. Most vulnerable among Kashmiri people are women and children, who often become the targets of physical violence. Due to the weakened political state, perpetrators are seldom brought to justice, while victims live in constant fear of further violence and abuse.

The Jammu and Kashmir Police Crime Branch in 2012 revealed that over the past couple of years, 4,066 cases of crimes against women have been registered. These include 1,797 cases of molestation, 1,279 cases of kidnapping and abduction, 426 eve-teasing cases, 195 suicide cases, 187 rape cases, 1 gang rape, 177 cases of cruelty at the hands of husbands, 4 cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, one case of dowry death, and two cases of immoral trafficking. However, only 1,832 such incidents were recorded in the women police station. As the number of silent sufferers increases with each passing day, it becomes more difficult to tackle the issue.

To look into the possible amendments in the criminal laws related to sexual violence against women in India, Justice Verma Committee was constituted on December 23, 2012. One of the recommendations of the Committee was that sexual offences by armed forces and men in uniform in conflict areas should be brought under ordinary criminal law. The Committee observed that rape and other forms of sexual assault were consistently deployed as an expression of power and must not necessarily be seen as crime of passion only. The recommendation had much relevance in the context of Kashmir. However, much to the disappointment of women in Kashmir, the government of India rejected the specific recommendation of removing the requirement of sanction for prosecuting armed forces personnel accused of atrocities against women.

Every time a heinous crime against women takes places, it is most likely to be reported in the press. Besides, there are many gender issues in the society that ought to get due space in the media, such as gender discrimination, female foeticide and violation of women's rights. It is in this backdrop that this study has been carried out, which aims at

analysing the nature and amount of coverage given to gender issues by leading English dailies published from Jammu and Kashmir.

It has been found that crimes against women dominate the stories in gender beat. This category is in turn dominated by sexual violence against women that include rape and murders, followed by harassment and molestation.

The local dailies have been found to cover gender issues mostly in the form of hard news. Very rarely do the publications come up with soft and feature stories. It is, therefore, recommended that the publications should launch campaigns to fight against the crimes against women. They should come up with series of soft and exclusive stories on the issues. There are numerous cases awaiting justice for a very long time. The publications should bring those cases to fore so as to draw public and government attention to them and thus help them get addressed. Besides, they can also aware people about various laws pertaining to violence against women.

The stories based on gender issues do not receive any special treatment even though they are given due space. Such stories are mostly published on inside pages, except for a few occasions. The news of the death anniversary of 2009 Shopian victims Aasiya and Neelofar was carried on front page by all the publications probably because the issue turned out to be more of political in nature than a gender issue. On the other hand, some other incidents of similar nature are usually published on inside pages. The news related to crimes against women, suicides and other such grave issues spread over one to three columns in space on most occasions and rarely go beyond four columns.

Most of the news stories are based on press releases and wire agencies. A decent number of reporter stories are also carried by the publications, but not enough to depict their seriousness towards gender beat. The publications should assign stories regarding violence against women to reporters rather than relying on official handouts, press releases and agency stories. The publications need to be a little more serious about these issues.

The positive aspects of women have been found to be somewhat missing in the newspapers. Stories highlighting achievements of women, their role and rights are usually fewer in number. The publications should highlight women's positive side as well. They should draw attention to the achievements of women in different spheres and their role in the society by publishing series of success stories of women. Moreover, the publications should generate awareness among people about the rights bestowed on women by the Constitution as well as diverse religions.

(Research paper presented at two-day International Seminar on 'Gender Justice: A Way Forward' held at the University of Kashmir).
