

The Invisible Hands: The Role of Women in De-escalation and Community Peacekeeping During the 1947 Partition Riots

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Abstract

This chapter explores the overlooked role of women as peacekeepers during the intense communal riots of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. The objective is to analyze the role of women in community peacekeeping and de-escalation during these riots. This study is important for several reasons. Traditional Partition history often reduces women to symbols. They are usually portrayed only through their trauma, violence, or abduction. This approach risks erasing their significant agency. Historical narratives neglect their intentional actions. Their crucial, hidden role has been ignored for decades. This study seeks to correct that record. It honors their resilience and active resistance. It shifts the focus away from passive suffering. This study uses the Feminist Peace and Conflict Theory (FPCT) to understand their formal and informal peacekeeping role. The methodology involves analyzing data collected from secondary sources. The findings identify three primary modes of peacekeeping efforts of women. These include the establishment of immediate survival infrastructure (refugee kitchens, sanctuaries, etc.), de-escalation tactics based on moral authority, and institutional relief mechanisms. The conclusion highlights that the peacekeeping efforts of women, which included providing cross-community protection and organizing intra-community survival, resisted the complete collapse of shared civilization. This provides deep understanding of the complex and non-military strategies of women for riot mitigation in protracted conflicts. The narratives of trauma, and the resilience and agency of women represent a powerful, yet hidden history. This horrifying history of the Partition must be reclaimed to honor the victims and guide future efforts to prevent riots.

Keywords: Women, Agency, De-escalation, Peacekeepers, Partition, Riots.

1. Introduction

The 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan is a pivotal event of the 20th century. This political division led to state failure, mass migration, and communal riots. Extensive violence against women occurred during this time (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Academic research documents the extreme suffering endured by women. Many were reduced to symbols of national honor or faced sexual violence, abduction, and mutilation (Anand and Sharma, 2024). While necessary, this focus has unintentionally overshadowed the stories of women who acted as agents of stability and resilience. The communal riots aimed to destroy centuries of shared civilization. Women's bodies became prime targets for symbolic violence, including stripping, mutilation, and tattooing. In response,

women acted as peacekeepers by providing sanctuary, feeding the displaced, and intervening during conflicts. These actions preserved social bonds and transformed survival efforts into a form of civil resistance.

The state's failure created a vacuum, leading to the emergence of female agency. When traditional male-dominated protection systems fell apart or became violent, women stepped in. They used non-traditional authority, often rooted in moral or domestic roles, to manage crises and provide stability. Thus, the state's failure highlighted the critical need for informal peacekeeping by women for the recovery and rebuilding of local communities. The involvement of women significantly influenced local recovery efforts. The objective of this chapter is to analyze the complex and informal role of women in community peacekeeping and de-escalation during the Partition riots. The methodology consists of analyzing existing secondary data from scholarly articles and archival reports.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Challenging the 'Beautiful Soul' Myth through the Feminist Peace and Conflict Theory (FPCT):

The Feminist Peace and Conflict Theory (FPCT) offers a suitable lens for understanding women's roles in peacekeeping and de-escalation during the Partition riots. The FPCT disputes the idea that women are inherently peaceful, which relates to the 'Beautiful Soul' myth (Elshtain, 1987, p. 288). It establishes a crucial connection among all forms of violence, linking interpersonal conflicts within families to societal, state, and interstate tensions. This framework emphasizes the gendered aspects of these conflicts (Ishwar, 2023). The 1947 riots serve as a clear historical example of this theory. Localized domestic and communal violence tragically became linked to the larger geopolitical and state failure of Partition.

Research confirms the value of female inclusion in peacemaking efforts. "Peace processes that included women as witnesses, signatories, mediators, and/or negotiators demonstrated a 20 percent increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years. This percentage continues to increase over time, with a 35 percent increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting fifteen years" (Stone, 2015, p. 34). This data underscores the importance of women's participation in peacekeeping.

During the Partition riots, women peacekeepers used strategic gender performance, connecting with the concept of 'Strategic Essentialism' explored by feminists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999). They employed the patriarchal myth of the Beautiful Soul to gain access and safety in hostile environments. They emphasized their roles as mothers and wives, positioning themselves as helpers and protectors. This strategy made their presence seem less threatening and subject to repression than overtly male-driven political actions (Naunov, 2025).

Thus, women's perceived non-violence became a strategic tool for de-escalation, allowing them to cross lines and perform critical functions that men from the opposing community could not. Moreover, women who acted as peacekeepers, such as organizing rallies, negotiating, establishing infrastructure, or promoting reconciliation, took on responsibilities typically reserved for men. This shift in roles challenged traditional gender relations and provided women with a newfound public agency. Their informal peacebuilding efforts allowed them to develop organizational skills, such as helping refugees and managing widows' shelters, essential for life after the Partition.

2.2 The Victimhood Paradox: Agency amidst Chaos

Historical narratives focus on violence against women, including mutilation, branding, and sexual violence used as war tactics to dishonor opposing communities. This violence was systematic, targeting pregnant women

predominantly. The subsequent communal riots in India recorded similar incidents. Yet, even amid this chaos, women displayed remarkable agency. Some adapted to new lives with their abductors, while others fought back (Rani, 2025). However, social narratives and state policies often sought to confine women within their *aukat* (ordained boundary). They were largely seen as non-violent victims, with their fates dictated by religious communities (Butalia, 1994, p. 138). This reluctance to acknowledge female aggression or strategic adaptation reveals the societal preference for a non-agency narrative of suffering. It is important to accept both victimization and agency to understand the complex human experience of the Partition.

3. Main Discussion/Analysis

Women's peacekeeping and de-escalation efforts during the Partition riots can be evaluated through three main categories. These include establishing sanctuary and sustenance, using moral authority for de-escalation, and promoting institutional reforms during recovery.

3.1 The Informal Peace Infrastructure: A Means of Sanctuary and Sustenance

As the formal civic order collapsed, women mobilized informal resources and kinship networks to prevent total societal collapse. They transformed private domestic spaces into vital public infrastructure for survival. They provided shelter to vulnerable individuals across religious lines. The need for survival led to the creation of women-led kitchens and shelters in refugee camps. These initiatives became essential community governance structures and service delivery systems. The organized distribution of food and safe shelters acted as a form of preventive peacekeeping. Women-led organizations reduced violence by addressing basic physical and psychological needs. They helped rebuild social capital critical for future reconciliation and resettlement.

The organizational skills shown by refugee women received acknowledgment from high levels of governance. The need to address the serious and large-scale issues faced by refugee women, many of whom were survivors of sexual violence and ethnic cleansing, required a formal response. This resulted in the establishment of a special Women's Section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation in November 1947, led by Rameshwari Nehru. The formation of this section recognized women's unique needs and their vital role in the initial phases of recovery, even if it came late. Moreover, women-led kitchens used traditional recipes and shared methods of food preparation. These kitchens provided cultural and identity continuity. This collective survival framework laid the foundation for resilient collective identities and formal institutions like widow colonies, which separated female resilience and identity from the restrictive communal structures that had failed to protect them.

3.2 The Use of Moral Authority for De-escalation:

Women employed soft power to de-escalate conflicts during the riots. They relied on persuasive strategies and strong moral authority to reduce tension. Their intervention often prevented further escalation, which could have occurred with the presence of armed men or police. The efficacy of women in these roles is supported by research indicating that women are widely considered highly competent in conflict prevention and de-escalation, even within physically demanding environments such as policing (Mangold, 2003). Women strategically complied with traditional gender roles to achieve protective goals. Protests with high female involvement are often seen as less violent and less likely to incur repression than those led by men (Naunov, 2025). This perception provided women with safety and credibility when intervening. They often used shared language around motherhood or family morals to promote peace. Their moral leverage was rooted in traditional social ethics, even amid the violent enforcement of political and religious divides.

The following table summarizes the primary peacekeeping efforts of women during and immediately after the 1947 Partition riots:

Table 1: Modes of Peacekeeping Efforts of Women During and Immediately Following the 1947 Partition Riots

Mode of Peacekeeping Efforts of Women	Description of Action	Strategic Purpose/Impact
Informal De-escalation	Using communication tactics, empathy, and gender norms (mother/wife) to intervene in confrontations.	Diffusing violence; using moral authority from perceived non-violence to gain immunity/compliance.
Sanctuary and Protection	Opening homes and personal spaces to shelter vulnerable individuals from the 'other' community.	Providing immediate physical safety, fostering local inter-community bonds against state failure, and transforming private spaces into public safety infrastructure.
Sustenance Infrastructure	Organizing communal kitchens, rationing resources, and managing refugee shelters (e.g., using traditional recipes).	Preventing collapse due to hunger/disease, stabilizing psychological trauma, and creating new social cohesion structures essential for rebuilding human capital.
Institutional Advocacy	Establishing specialized government/NGO bodies (e.g., the Women's Section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation) and voluntary social work.	Recognizing women's unique needs, driving resource allocation for rehabilitation, and challenging patriarchal structures.

Source: Made for the purpose of the study.

3.3 Institutional Support: Post-Riot Recovery and Contested Agency:

Women's peacekeeping efforts were crucial during post-Partition recovery. However, state-led recovery efforts were complex and contested. Women social workers like Anis Kidwai and Durgabai Deshmukh were key peacekeepers. They mediated not only between India and Pakistan but also among survivors and their communities, which often resisted accepting tainted women. Their work revealed unsettling realities. Many women labeled as 'abducted' chose not to return to their families or the new nation-state due to fears of stigma and betrayal (Dandona, 2023). This highlights a significant divide between state-led peacekeeping efforts and those by women. The state's recovery focus on national honor and religious purity contrasted with the personal peace, safety, non-stigmatization, and long-term survival emphasized by women survivors and social workers. Consequently, the political framework failed to address the deep social reconciliation needed for true peace.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings show that women's involvement in peacekeeping during the 1947 Partition was defined by its informality, ethical focus, and practical emphasis on human survival. This approach differed from the state's focus on political boundaries and military control. The undervalued peacekeeping and recovery contributions of women acted as crucial stabilizing forces, preventing total societal breakdown. The findings also suggest that when women participate, peace agreements tend to be more lasting. The new refugee communities that relied on women-led infrastructure for survival and psychological stability showed greater internal stability and resilience than communities with centralized, impersonal, or militarized relief efforts. The organizational skills and social trust built through collective sustenance became the foundation for economic and social rebuilding in the post-Partition society.

However, celebrating this agency necessitates acknowledging the immense cost. The peacekeeping narrative is incomplete without recognizing that the trauma of the Partition continues to affect lives, often shown in the silence and the painful legacy of generational trauma. This deliberate silence, kept by many survivors, acts as a protective measure. It is a final, painful peacekeeping effort to shield descendants from the full horror of their ancestors' experiences. Integrating these profound acts of agency into the official history of the Partition ensures that remembrance is not just a narrative of endless sufferings. It becomes a lesson in deep human resilience. Reclaiming the history of these women transforms collective grief into wisdom. It makes sure that the horror of the Partition serves as a warning for future generations. Their story teaches humility, empathy, and responsibility. It offers a powerful, enduring lesson that conflict resolution begins not with official treaties, but with the immediate, courageous actions of citizens at the grassroots level.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the ignored role of women in community peacekeeping and de-escalation during the devastating 1947 Partition riots was significant and commendable. They acted as unseen forces in the processes of peacemaking and social rebuilding. They navigated the breakdown of law and order using culturally compliant gender roles. They created essential infrastructures for sanctuary and sustenance. Their empathy-driven de-escalation tactics proved effective at the grassroots level. Their informal agency provided both physical security and social cohesion, laying the groundwork for societal recovery. This offers valuable insights for addressing modern riot prevention.

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