Peacebuilding in Kashmir: Decolonized Peace-Psychology Practice

Transcript

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Good evening, everyone. I understand it's late afternoon and we've had a long day. So if you all need to just take a quick breather, take a few deep breaths, stretch. We've heard some very powerful stories and narratives. Feel free to do that. And before I begin, I'd just like to quickly check in. How are you all feeling? Emotions, not thoughts. If anybody wants to share quickly. It can just be a word you don't have to tell me the whole story. Thank you. Upsetting. Anyone else? Anyone else? We don't often get time and space to check in with ourselves about our own emotions and feelings, and I'll talk a bit about why this is important in the work I do. But before I begin, I would just like to very humbly state that I would like to dedicate this. It's not really a talk. I don't have a presentation as such. There's some pictures just to situate the context a bit. But my reflections. I would like to dedicate this opportunity to my own mother, to the women in Kashmir, in Gaza, in Sudan, Afghanistan, and many other places in the world who are oppressed, who are struggling and yet striving on a daily basis for themselves and their families and the world, and to try and make the world a better place. And I'm incredibly aware that this is an opportunity that many women out there may not have. It takes a village. So I come with a lot of accountability and responsibility. But I'm also very aware and I would like to acknowledge that while I represent myself and some women in Kashmir, I may not represent everybody in Kashmir because there are marginalizations within marginalizations. So of course, after hearing these powerful narratives on, especially in the afternoon on, from Gaza, from Sudan, I was just sitting and reflecting on what is it that I can really add to what has been already shared out there. And while the world is falling apart and we're sitting and having these conversations, it is a huge privilege to sit and have these conversations about what peace really means. And I've struggled a lot with this concept or this vision for the past two or three years, especially about what is it really about peace? What do we really mean when we talk about peace? And I see so many people like, you know, we've been hearing examples since morning about different people doing different things, organizations, UN in whatever little efforts. And yet there is increasingly more war and conflict and violence in the world and not so much of peace. So what do we really mean by peace today? And I will speak mostly from my own Kashmiri background and peace psychology lens. I work at the intersection of mental health, psychosocial support, arts, conflict transformation, peace building, and I like to bring in a bit of spirituality and religious elements into my

work because the place I come from is rich in, it has a rich culture of, Islamic and other faith backgrounds, history. So I like to focus on that in my work. But before that, I would also like to talk a little bit about Kashmir as a place, as a conflict not many of you may know or may not know. Kashmir is a conflict region. It's the world's most militarized region in the world where the ratio is 6 or 7 is to one person. So 6 Kashmiris against one armed personnel. And Kashmir is occupied partly by India, Pakistan, and there's a little chunk in China as well. So I'm from the Indian administered a part of it. I have to be very mindful of the language I use. One has to really think about what can put you into trouble and not put you into trouble while speaking or sharing about these things. And we've had the ongoing conflict for past 7, 8 decades now. And in 2019 especially, there's been an intentional integration of Kashmir with India by the Indian state or by the Indian government. There was a special Article 370, which was revoked in 2019, which previously gave Kashmir some sort of autonomous constitutional rights, and that's also gone now. So increasingly since 2019, we're seeing lot of enforced normalization of narratives in the name of development, you know, constructing roads, having international conferences, filmmaking, all sorts of things happening in Kashmir. And which has also led to an increase in psychosocial economic crisis, increased fear, anxiety, dehumanization, human rights violation. So things on the ground don't look great at all. And I've been working in Kashmir for the past 14 years. apart from other contexts in the Global South or what we should be calling something else, majority world, but for the lack of the better term, Global South. My bigger advocacy has been around peace building as a field. As I was saying, I really find it deeply unsettling that the peace or the peace making the building that we talk about, there is something wrong with it. That's why we're still sitting and having these conversations. And I, in my experience, have felt that it is deeply colonized, patriarchal, and devoid of emotional space. And by emotional space, I don't mean just doing a workshop on mental health. I mean from everything ground up to the policy level. There doesn't seem to be a lot of space for emotions, for instance. And this is why I start most of my workshops. A lot of my work is experiential in nature. and my talks by asking people how are they feeling, because I can't imagine doing peace-building work without looking at people's feelings, emotions, traumas, fears, which is very critical to build trust, which is really critical to long-lasting peace or sustainable peace that we talk about. But as some speakers were already saying, women are inherently seen as counsellors or nurturers, So when we talk about emotions or well-being in peacebuilding, it's kind of given that it's talked about as a soft skill and not an integral part of peacebuilding. So my bigger advocacy is towards the well-being oriented peacebuilding. And as I said, it's not just limited to a mental health workshop or a well-being workshop. It needs to go beyond because I've been in spaces where people often talk about these things in silos and they think, let's do one mental health workshop and that will sort out some things. When same people, when they sit in policy making spaces and whether we like it or not, the same people who make these policies, they affect our lives. Those things trickle down. I've seen people

going into mediation with poker faces and being very proud of it that I didn't feel anything in that space. assuming that it made them more powerful and somehow putting logic and rationality over emotions, when biologically we are all emotional human beings and our limbic, which is a feeling, emotional part of the brain, has evolved first and the neocortex, which is a thinking part of the brain, is still evolving in terms of evolution. So not to say that one is better than the other, they all go hand in hand. But that's the kind of vocabulary we're talking about. And then when we also look at women, to go back to situated into the theme that we are talking about today, of course, women are seen as homemakers, peace builders, and sometimes we do double the job, like we're doing things at home and outside. When men are taken away in conflict regions, It's the women who stay back and take care of families. And not to disregard or discredit what you were saying, there are those cases as well. But there's also this glorification of resilience, for instance, in conflict regions. In peacebuilding field itself, every year there's a new buzzword. So mental health became a buzzword a few years ago when COVID especially came, which helped in a way. But also created a lot of misunderstandings. And then now we are hearing resilience training, trauma healing. And the narrative is that if we trauma heal and build resilience of the oppressed people who are asking for their rights, the problem will be sorted out because then they will not ask for anything. Hence we will have peace. And I'm not making this up, I've heard this in UN spaces and other spaces. And this is their definition of how they see the world in terms of peace building. So of course, as human phenomenon, resilience has been there and we remain resilient. And all of those, all of us who come from conflict regions, we adapt. We like my previous generations who have gone through the conflict for all these years have adapted and we've been going on. But I think it's also important to recognize that if given a choice, nobody wants to be resilient. It's tiring. And if I was given a choice, I wouldn't want to be resilient. But of course, it's a human phenomenon and we adapt and we go on with that. And now to bring it to the WPS agenda that the UN has, for instance, it is not really relevant to a lot of contexts, both because of the fancy language it talks in, unfortunately, and it's the same. I've done some work with WPS and YPS agenda. And also because for WPS to really be functional in a place like Kashmir, for instance, India has to 1st recognize that there is a conflict in Kashmir, but internally that's not the language they use. They say it's an internal dispute. So which is very contradictory to WPS agenda in itself. And with peace, especially in terms of what I have been trying to do as a practitioner over the years, is trying to look at, in an ongoing conflict setting, it's really difficult to understand and talk about peacebuilding. Peace is a controversial word as much as it is a privilege. Having a conversation on mental health is a privilege. And mental health is political, just like everything else. So you have to find these other subtle expressions of talking about peace or mental health or use, different kinds of narratives to do then the work you want to do. So over the years, I have been trying to subtly see what are these windows of peace or peace building or windows of calm or if somebody is you can even have a

pause where you're asking yourself, what is happening to us? Is that normal or is that abnormal? Or why am I letting that happen to myself? Because that's one of the scariest things in terms of psychological narrative, when the abnormal starts becoming normal to you, know, in a way, you have no control over who's taking charge of the narratives. So I have been trying to look at culturally relevant, community-based, contextualized and decolonized understanding of peace psychology and peace building in general. And what is normal, what is not normal, and how do these narratives shapes? And do we have any control over those narratives? And trying to build these community empathetic spaces where people often come together and sometimes it's the only space where women come together and they talk about all sorts of other things as well, not just psychologically what's happening to them because of the conflict. Sometimes it's the only space where they talk about domestic violence, abuse or other things. And just to give a disclaimer about decolonization, I know it's another buzzword now, but for me personally, how I understand, I think I still have a long way to go about it. It's something that has happened to me in my journey of peace psychology and it's an evolving process. when I started realizing how a lot of my formal academic education has been in the West. And then when I went back home, a lot of what I was trying to copy paste wasn't making sense. And I had to start from scratch. And when you're young in the field, you go into the field thinking, you know, you're going to go out there and change the world and now tell people how to do their lives. And you get humbled very quickly because you understand that people have been living their lives and they have been healing themselves. And at most and least what I can do as somebody, as a facilitator or peace builder is hold space. And Lederach talks about it as a container, as a metaphor, hold space for them to feel safe. And again, safety is a very debatable concept in a conflict region, what does safety really mean? Can you even create safe spaces? So that's why I'm mindful and instead I use empathetic spaces. But for me, decolonization means to go back to where I came from, beneath the layers of a lot of conditioning of, you know, of course, education in various ways and all sorts of things. We live in a world with so much influx of information today. And to what extent can you really go back is of course also a question. And in Kashmir, we are seeing colonization over colonization. So it is difficult. But in my own little humble effort, I've been trying to pull in elements of art, language, architecture, and bring in spirituality, religion, as I said, and mix it in my work of psychosocial peacebuilding in a way. And I'll give you an example of one of the initiatives that I run at my center and why that's important. And this is also to say that a lot of peace and healing can look different in different places. In Kashmir, for us to eat food together is psychosocial support. I was talking to somebody from Palestine a while ago and they said for them to have freedom to protest on the streets without getting jailed for it is psychosocial support. And for somebody else, maybe, I spoke to somebody in, I think it was Sudan, and they said praying is psychosocial support. So we need to also move away from this whole psychiatric understanding of care model. Healing doesn't necessarily only happen in therapy.

Therapy is also expensive. Not everybody can afford it. Of course, it has its own space. It is needed. I'm not discrediting all of it. But In conflict regions, you also don't have access to resources. You don't have funding. You have people knocking at your doors at 3:00 in the morning, and you don't have the concept of taking breaks, for instance. So how do you work on well-being, psychosocial support kind of mechanism, protection mechanism in a conflict region with limited or no resource and with direct consequences for your own safety and consequences? So I'm speaking from a practitioner lens just to give an example of what it feels like and means to work in a place with ongoing conflict. There's also something that I feel very strongly about, which is there is not enough structural, well-being-oriented mechanisms or protection mechanisms for peacebuilders generally when we will look at frontliners, for instance. A lot of us have been doing this work for a long time. I started doing peacebuilding work at the age of 17 years old when I was first introduced to peacebuilding and psychology, and that's where the concept of peace psychology kind of grew on me. I studied at UWC, United World College. Sorry, I know it sounds like a promotional event by now about UWC, but that's not the intent. But yeah, I started being in peacebuilding at a very young age and then when going back home, I felt very lonely and it was a place filled with trauma where traumas are multi-layered and we're literally walking nightmares and talking traumas all the time. I've intentionally not put a lot of pictures with people's faces in them because it can be a threat. So just to give a context that it is important to also realize that when we do this work on the ground, especially at grassroots level, it comes with a lot of baggage, a lot of heartbreak, and a lot of practical health issues. I was diagnosed with autoimmune conditions a few years back, and a lot of that is because of where I come from and the work I do. And since then, it made me more aware of the realities of doing this work. It sounds fancy when we talk about these things in different kinds of spaces, but it can cost people their lives when they do this work. And of course, I chose to do this work. It's a calling that I have in life, and I still go on. But I think the peace-building field in itself needs to think a lot about what does it mean for us to bring in that well-being, not just mental health. I think mental health is just one. tiny spectrum, one tiny aspect of the huge spectrum of well-being. Because there's financial well-being and people right now who are losing their jobs, it's a huge worry. And there's existential well-being. There's environmental well-being. We're looking at everything, you know, holistically. So what are the protection mechanisms? What are the safety mechanisms for people who do this work? Because the challenges are multifold. As I said, there is societal challenges, there's all sorts of challenges. These are just some pictures from some of the work I've been doing. Some of it is, I use, as I said, my work is very intersectional and I use different kinds of art in my work. The picture on the right is with some students. On the left is with somebody who used to participate in regular protest and used to be jailed. And some of the pictures are from the University of Kashmir with some students. And the pictures on the bottom left are from a group of young people. I've done a lot of work, especially with young people and

women in Kashmir. a district in Kashmir which was notorious for being really volatile and what did it mean for them to then cultivate peace in their lives or even have space for them to talk about their emotions. I just want to shed some light on the topic of half widows, which is very, very close to my heart. And I don't know how many of you know even the term half widows, you probably don't. because this is specifically used for women, these women in Kashmir. It's been coined for them very similar to some of the war widows in Rwanda or Guatemala, the Mayan widows. These are women in Kashmir whose husbands have been disappeared by the forces and most likely killed, but there is no evidence of it. And that's why they're called half widows, because for them to, let's say, claim property, they can't do that. So they have a lot of psycho-socioeconomic, psychological kind of consequences for being who they are. And we, again, because of lack of research and study, which is an intentional thing by this state, they don't want people to inquire too much about these things. And the organizations, there's an organization called APDP Association of Parents of Disappeared People and Jammu Kashmir Civil Society. A lot of their records have gone missing and been, you know, trampled with. But just to say that there is still at least 15, I think 1500 to 2000 half widows in Kashmir, most of who live very, very difficult lives, often thrown out of their in-laws houses as well because there's a stigma and superstitious belief that as well that maybe this woman brought bad luck to the person and that she's thrown out and with her kids. And sometimes I've worked with women whose son had cancer and daughter had severe illness and she was the only one working. So she would go door to door either begging or cleaning houses. So they often don't get respect, dignity in the space as well. At my own center, International Center for Peace Psychology, with this intention, I had started this initiative called Bauun. And from a decolonial perspective, as I said, I use a lot of Kashmiri language in the work I do. So Bauun in Kashmiri means to express with or share with someone who you trust. And in Sufi Islamic or Kashmiri poetry, there's a there's a there's a phrase, which it's a Kashmiri phrase which basically means that you should only share your troubles with somebody who actually understands and empathizes with you. What's the point of sharing otherwise? So the initiative basically is a psychological storytelling initiative and community space for these widows and half widows where they can come together, share about what's happening to them. And as you can see in the pictures, I'm not focused on their faces, but When we go into these spaces, I try to sit with them and there is no structure to these workshops sometimes because sometimes somebody will start crying and sobbing about their husbands, then somebody will start singing a song, somebody will start doing something else. But I always try to start these sessions and workshops by sitting with these women and eating food together because that shows them, that gives them a little bit of that dignity and human respect which they find missing. And some of the testimonials I've received in these sessions, and it's something along the lines of that this is the first time I have laughed after my husband's disappearance in 10 years or 15 years. I know it sounds cliche, but I just get, it's almost, it feels heartbreaking to me

that, you know, that's the kind of state we're looking at. So when we talk about half widows in Kashmir, I have to mention that it's the conflict that led to half widows, not the other way around. And that is why, again, coming back to the Women, Peace and Security agenda, it is not as relevant. And one has to 1st acknowledge the bigger conflict in Kashmir than anything else. I think that is my last slide. And just to conclude, I would just like to leave you all with the thoughts of what does it mean in today's world to bear witness, at the very least, with care, with more conscious intention, purpose, and empathy? And how do we become better allies? And given that, it does come with a lot of heartbreak, as I was just saying, and truth-telling is something that can cost your life. And when we talk about peace in these rooms, whose peace are we talking about? Who's defining the peace and for whom? And are we open to having her hearts broken while we listen to understand, interpret and narrate stories and silences that can cause local people, women included, and half widows their lives in a conflict region like Kashmir? Thank you for listening.