

[Op-Ed](#)

Opinion

A feminist interpretation of enforced disappearance

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A woman shouts during a demonstration to protest the disappearance of 43 missing students.

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Although the crime of enforced disappearance is a major way as a systematic state practice in the Sheikh Hasina regime (2009–2024), the disappearances in Bangladesh were used to resort to perpetrating various human rights against dissenting citizens—all to perpetuate an oppressive status quo.

00:06 / 01:30

Victims of enforced disappearance are largely men, but women are not spared from this macabre human rights violation. After abducting women and girls, perpetrators go on to commit another crime—sexual assault in secret detention centres. For example, in Argentina, state-sponsored enforced disappearance (known as Guerra Sucia or the Dirty War) continued from 1976 to 1983 when government forces disappeared pregnant women and killed them upon childbirth only to distribute the newborns among certain families linked to the military regime.

Female family members of other enforced disappearance victims in Bangladesh came together under the banner of Mayer Daak. Such feminist initiatives have precedents in other comparable contexts too

Even when women do not fall direct victims to enforced disappearance, their suffering as mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters of the disappeared is generally greater than that of their male family members. They make a frantic search and go from pillar to post to gather information about their di
often face ignominy and sexual assaults.

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In “Enforced Disappearance in Peru” (20 University of Madrid (UAM) maintains th multiple traumas for women. They are re breadwinners in the family, face sexual v violence they had suffered.”

00:06 / 01:30

In a country like Bangladesh, most incidents of sexual violence go unreported. One reported case of enforced-disappearance-related sexual exploitation involved police officer Alep Uddin. During the Hasina regime, he participated in detaining many innocent men and is now known to have sexually exploited the (pregnant) wife of one of his victims in a heinous, sacrilegious manner.

After disappearing a man in 2018, Alep Uddin called the victim's wife—who was a university student then—to his office during the month of Ramadan. He threatened her, saying that he would kill her husband in the name of crossfire. He took her to a place near his office, forced her to break her fast, and raped her multiple times.

Such sexual violence against wives of kidnapped men is widespread in Kashmir. In the article “The Half-Widows of Kashmir” (2021), Inamul Haq describes the ordeals of the wives of disappeared men in the beautiful valley. Such women are sexually victimised when they visit prisons and other government-run facilities in search of their husbands.

The suffering of female members of the disappeared explains their active participation in movements against repressive political systems that commit and condone enforced disappearance. This also accounts for the emergence of women's pressure groups like Mayer Daak in Bangladesh, which I discuss below.

BNP leader Sajedul Islam Shumon was one of the earliest victims of Hasina's witch hunt campaign. Government agents forcibly removed him from his residence in Dhaka in December 2013. He has remained unaccounted for since then. Within a couple of months, Shumon's sisters Sanjida Islam Tulee and Afroza Islam Ankhi formed the organisation Mayer Daak partly to get their brother back and partly to create awareness of the prevalence of enforced disappearance on Hasina's watch.

The nomenclature of Mayer Daak or Mothers' call is inspired by Shumon's wailing mother Hazera Khatun whose cry for her son has continued since December 2013. However, in this context, the term 'mother' also includes wives who are mothers to the children of the disappeared. Moreover, it can be used generically to include all women. Accordingly, female family members of other enforced disappearance victims in Bangladesh came together under the banner have precedents in other comparable con

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00:06 / 01:30



Adiba, daughter of missing Chhatra Dal leader parvez Hossain, speaks at a human chain programme staged by 'Mayer Daak' in front of the press club in the capital on 20 August, 2022 *Prothom Alo*

While Mayer Daak in Bangladesh was inspired by the grief of Hazera Khatun over her disappeared son, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Kashmir was spearheaded by another distressed mother. Then 16-year-old Javed Ahmad Ahanger was abducted by members of India's National Security Guard (NSG) from his home in Srinagar on a night in August 1990. His mother Parveena Ahanger was in her early thirties at that time and understandably went through various types of predicaments. Her suffering and search for her son continued until 1994. Its members have continued to hold protests in Pratap Park.

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A similar organisation—Agrupación de Madres (Association of Democratic Women)—was established in El Salvador; in 2022) along with Azucena Villaflor (1924

00:06 / 01:30

Argentina, organised Argentinian mothers of enforced disappearance victims, and spearheaded the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo).

Hebe de Bonafini was a 49-year-old housewife in 1977 when her 26-year old son Jorge Omar was kidnapped by agents of Argentina's military government. Within months in

December 1977 her other son Raúl Alfredo was abducted, and in May 1978 her daughter-in-law María Elena Bugnone Cepeda (Jorge Omar's wife) were also kidnapped and never seen again.

Like Parveena Ahangar in Kashmir, Hebe de Bonafini is an iconic figure in Argentina and called the Mother of Plaza de Mayo. Upon the death of Hebe de Bonafini on 20 November 2022, the Argentinian government declared a three-day national mourning period; and a New York Times obituary regarded her as “widely honored by Argentines for her fight for justice in her country, where more human rights groups have been started to find those who disappeared under the dictatorship.”

For a long time, members of Madres de la Plaza de Mayo staged weekly vigils in Plaza de Mayo, a square situated in front of Argentina's presidential palace in downtown Buenos Aires. They pressed ahead with their campaign even though the government sought to stifle them and disappeared three founding members of the organisation, including Azucena Villaflor.

In “Ambiguous marital identity and conflict: A study of the half-widows in Jammu and Kashmir” (2024), Amit Singh and Anindya Mishra state that, between 8,000 and 10,000 men were disappeared in Kashmir from 1989 to 2006. Their wives are known as half-widows. These women do not know whether their husbands are alive or dead; therefore, it is unclear whether they should be considered married or widowed.

In “The Spectacle of a Good Half-Widow” (2006), Ather Zia of the University of Northern Colorado describes Kashmir's half-widows as “partly married and partly bereaved, and the possibility of being either in totality [is] real.” According to Zia, Islamic jurisprudence experts in Kashmir have chimed in with their opinion that wives of disappeared men can remarry four years after waiting for their husbands. However, about 91 percent of the half-widows prefer to wait for their husbands. Thousands of disappeared Kashmiri men

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00:06 / 01:30



The interim government later released photos of such secret detention centres where victims of enforced disappearance were held under the Awami League's rule. *File photo*

Such half-widows in Kashmir and other places also have to deal with the psychological trauma of their half-orphan children who face the agonising ambiguity of not knowing the fate of their fathers. Thus, the ordeal of half-widows and other female members makes the fight against enforced disappearance a feminist cause. Women's rights groups in Bangladesh and internationally have not yet mounted a unified campaign against this human rights violation. If they join forces with others to end enforced disappearance (irrespective of who the perpetrators are), the fight against this state crime will definitely grow stronger.

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00:06 / 01:30