

Armed Conflict and Women: Experience of Women of New Checkon, Imphal East District, Manipur

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Abstract: The state of Manipur has witnessed long years of conflicts between state forces and insurgents and ethnic violence. Struggles for political power, unmet demands and inequality are the major factors that lead to armed conflicts in the state. Evidence shows that women suffer severe forms of abuse during and often after the conflict. Widowhood is one of the consequences many of them faced which change the social economic roles of the women in the household and community. Psychological impact such as trauma and stress remained for lifelong causing much harm in their personal life. This paper attempts to look at the psychological impact of armed conflict in the life of women.

Key Words: armed conflict, women, psychological, trauma, insurgent, state force, widow

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict arises due to a complex set of variables coming together and reinforcing each other at multiple levels and at critical junctures of a country or region's development. It leaves in its aftermath significant development and humanitarian challenges (USAID, 2007). It has catastrophic impacts on humanity – regardless of where it takes place, and regardless of the nature of the armed conflict. Mass displacements, large-scale crimes, disruption of normal civilian lives and the inadequacy of resources are only a few of the myriad issues that challenge people during and after war, until a state of peace is restored (Jayakumar, 2016).

It is estimated that close to 90 per cent of current war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children, compared to a century ago when 90 per cent of those who lost their lives were military personnel. Women usually don't start wars, but they do suffer heavily from the consequences. Conflict spurs much higher rates of sexual violence. It renders women acutely vulnerable to poverty, the loss of jobs and the destruction of assets such as homes. Essential health services crumble, underlined by a maternal mortality rate that is 2.5 times higher on average, in conflict and post-conflict countries (UN Women, n.d).

According to Khaminwa and Malek (2004), women can be affected by war in different ways - Susceptibility to violence, Psychological and physical harm, Increased poverty, Increased rates of domestic violence, Sublimation of women's issues, Mainstreaming complex conflicts, Role shift, Cooptation of conflicts.

Definition of Armed Conflict¹

International humanitarian law distinguishes two types of armed conflicts, namely:

- International armed conflicts, opposing two or more States, and
- Non-international armed conflicts, between governmental forces and non-governmental armed groups, or between such groups only.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Wars are no longer fought in secluded combat zones – the battlefield is in the midst of the civilian population. Civilians, not combatants, make up the largest number of casualties, and among civilians, women are particularly exposed and victimized. War disrupts food supplies, production, health facilities, transport, water and fuel. Parties to a conflict are required under IHL to protect the health, economic and physical security of the civilian population. When they fail, it is often women who have to deal with the consequences. Women in

¹ How is the term "Armed Conflict" defined in international humanitarian law? 17-03-2008

these civilian populations, thus, take on the major responsibilities of coping with these other consequences of armed conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2013).

Northeast India is a heavily militarized region. The region's history of armed insurgency started in the 1950s in the Naga Hills, where an increasingly vocal demand for an independent Nagaland was spearheaded by the Naga National Council (NNC). In 1956, after carrying out a plebiscite on independence, the NNC announced that it had established a Naga Federal Government and a Naga Federal Army. The Union Government of India subsequently launched massive military operations and took direct control over the Naga Hills. Armed conflict soon spread into Manipur and the neighboring hill districts of Assam, and in 1958 these were all declared 'disturbed areas' under the newly promulgated Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) (Kolås, 2017).

Despite their many differences, Northeast India's militant groups have all been formed around demands for sovereign nationhood, independence, or autonomous homelands. While their territorial demands often overlap, such differences can usually be ignored as long as groups maintain strategic alliances. Inter-group violence is more often related to disputes over economic stakes in 'taxation', difficulties in maintaining alliances, rivalry between armed groups, and factional fighting. Kidnapping for ransom, extortion, political abductions and killings, and violent enforcement of general strikes (*bandhs*) are some of the methods used by militant groups to make their presence felt (Kolås, 2017).

From the 1980s onwards, various ethnic movements plagued the entire Northeast. Most of the movements were non-violent in their initial stages, but gradually assumed severe militant nature. These armed groups' strategy involves a complex mix of political legitimisation, support base, symbolic gestures, and historical narratives. Despite ceasefire between the Union government and the armed groups, violence has dominated the social fabric of Northeast India. Even when violence ceases between the armed groups and security forces, violence between the multiple armed groups continues resulting in deaths of both combatants and non-combatants (Basumatary, 2013). Conflicts in Northeast India are fuelled by the state's diminishing resources, especially cultivable land, coupled with policy failures and structural problems facing shifting cultivators, Mal governance, failure to provide security, ensure transparency, and accountability in public life, and address the significant economic disparities, especially those between urban and peripheral areas (Baruah, 2002; Hassan, 2007 as cited in Kolås, 2017)

Talking about violence against women (VAW), McDuie-Ra (2012) writes that the presence of large numbers of armed men directly causes VAW as scores of cases of murder, rape, molestation, and sexual harassment by members of the armed forces and militant groups attest (p 330). He further observes that women in the Northeast have contested both the external non familial context of VAW and the internal familial context of VAW. In most cases they have been more successful in contesting the external context, particularly VAW carried out by the armed forces, and less successful in contesting internal causes, particularly when this involves speaking out against a designated tribal or ethnic community (p 336).

III. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used both secondary and primary sources of data for the present study. The secondary sources were from published and unpublished documents, books, journals, newsletters and newspapers. For the primary source, Data was collected using closed ended questionnaire, personal interviews and observation methods.

50 women living in New Checkon Area were selected through stratified random sampling method with the help of WAD (Women Action for Development), an organisation working with conflict affected women. Cross tabulation and appropriate statistical tests were used to analyze the quantitative data. Besides tabulation, averages and percentages were also used. Qualitative data will be collected as descriptions, opinions, and interpretations to analyse and draw inferences.

Objectives

1. To find the root causes and impact of armed conflicts on socio economic status and life style of affected women
2. To study the psychological impact and the role of government and civil society organization in rehabilitation of the victims

IV. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

1. Age Category

Age group	No of persons	Percentage
50 & above	19	38

35-50	19	38
25-35	11	22
15-25	1	2
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

The age groups of the respondents as shown in table 1 were classed into four categories. In the age group of 15-25, there were only 1 person (2%) while the age group of 25-35 had 11 persons (22%), 35-50 category had 19 persons (38%) and 50 and above group had equal number as the age group of 35-50. The Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) 1958 was introduced to Manipur in 1980 when it was declared as disturbed area. It is now more than 15 years of armed conflicts in the state. Therefore, we can assume that the conflict victim could probably have been in their 20s to 30s when they face the conflict as they are in their 30 plus and above during the interview in 2012. And few are below the age group of 30 which clearly indicates that these respondents are the victim of recent conflicts.

2. Educational Qualification

Status	No of persons	Percentage
Graduate	6	12
Secondary	4	8
High school	16	32
Primary	9	18
Illiterate	15	30
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Table 2 categorises the respondents according to their age group. The highest number of respondents belong to high school level education (32%) followed by illiterates with a percentage of 30% (15 persons). The next highest numbers are the respondents in the primary level education category and secondary (8%) and the least is the graduates with a percentage of 12 (6 persons). The data reveals that the least educated are affected in larger numbers than more educated persons. According to UNDP' report (2015), at 48%, gross enrolment ratios in secondary education are nearly 20% lower in conflict-affected countries and are far lower for girls. Further, it reveals that 21% of young people are illiterate in conflict-affected poor countries.²

3. Occupational Category

Category	No of persons	Percentage
Vegetable Vendor	13	26
Agriculture	16	32
Private Employed	5	10
Daily Wage	9	18
Petty shop	4	8
Government employed	3	6
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

According to Devi & Singh (2015, p 154), people of Manipur depend on agricultural sector as their main source of livelihood with clear cut division of labour between male and female. The average female cultivation/farm labour in Manipur is 44.43 %. As table 3 reveals, out of 50 respondents only 3 persons (6%) are

² UNDP. (2015). Fast Facts: Youth and Peacebuilding. <http://goo.gl/UYQCR1>

government employed while the rest 47 persons (94%) are in different occupation such as vegetable vendors, cultivator, daily wage, petty shop or privately employed. The data also shows that Majority (32%) of the women are engage in agriculture activities. A large number of women are also involved in selling vegetables. A unique market called Ima Keithel is seen where only women vendors are present. Besides, there are many places where markets are established for women group to sell vegetables and other goods to earn their living. From the table it is obvious that the affected are the low income groups of families. Families who live hand to mouth without any back up resources.

4. Family Type

Type	No of persons	Percentage
Joint	14	28
Nuclear	36	72
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Table 4 shows the type of family the respondents practice. A total of 36 persons (72%) live in nuclear families while the rest 14 persons (28%) come from joint families. Majority (72%) of the respondents are nuclear families which mean that it would be more difficult to overcome difficulties. Joint family was a strong trend in Manipur social structure. The people of Manipur especially the Meitei community lived as joint families following patriarchal pattern of kinship. Over time, the joint family has change a lot due to influence of westernization, modernization, privatization and globalization. Today, the system of joint family is giving way to nuclear family for financial stability and management reasons. The data clearly define that majority (72%) have adopted nuclear family slowly moving away from the traditional system of joint family.

5. Marital Status

Status	No of persons	Percentage
Widow	32	64
Married	12	24
Divorce	6	12
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

In addition to representing most of the civilian casualties, women are often the sole providers for their families during armed conflicts. This leads to an increasing number of female heads of households that can be attributed to demographic changes caused by conflicts, which in turn further impoverishes women. Moreover, food scarcity and inequalities in food distribution are exacerbated during periods of armed conflicts, thereby rendering women and girls more susceptible to malnutrition (El Jack, 2003). Table 5 presents the marital status of women, 32 persons (64%) are widows while 12 persons (24%) are married and the rest 6 persons (12%) are divorced. Manipur Gun Survivor Network is a group to which the respondents belong to help them. The network attempt to lift women above the trauma, agony, faced during armed conflict by helping to find a way to heal the scar that decades of violence have caused to them. The data shows the majorities of the respondents are widows, whose husbands were killed during the conflict. And the married represent either their son or family members being killed in the conflict.

According to The North East Network (2004) Widows are another group of women who are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Widows are looked upon as inauspicious and are debarred from attending several Hindu religious ceremonies. The option of remarriage is also not available to them. In many non-tribal communities there are severe restrictions placed on their mobility, the food they eat, the clothes they wear and the people they come in contact with (p. 32). In most of the cases, when the husband is killed during the armed conflict, the wife is denied not just property rights, but the right to live in her marital home as well. With the economy in shambles, it is hard to earn a living. Consequently, a number of women are forced to get into commercial sex work or become drug peddlers to keep themselves and their children alive (p. 33).

6. Occurrence of Armed Conflict

Frequency	No of persons	Percentage
Once	1	2

Twice	3	6
Three times	4	8
Above Three	42	84
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

According to the respondents as per table 6 reveals, 42 persons (84%) have experienced armed conflict more than three times. 4 persons (8%) experienced it at least three times while 3 persons (6%) experienced two times and 1 person (2%) experienced it 1 time in their life time. Human rights group such as Human Rights Alert, Human Rights Law Network, Women Action for Development says that not a single day passes without gun killing during the year 1995-2006 and there were different types of armed conflict between groups (Indian army and insurgency, between different factions of insurgency groups, ethnic and communal violence etc). The finding shows that almost all the respondent had experienced armed conflict in one or the other. And also majority (84%) faced armed conflict more than 4 times which clearly indicates that regular armed conflict is happening in the state of Manipur.

7. Communal Violence due to Armed Conflict

Communal violence due to armed conflict	No of persons	Percentage
Often	43	86
Sometimes	7	14
Not sure	0	0
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

On been asked whether communal violence starts due to armed conflict (table 7) 43 persons (86%) said often while 7 persons (14%) were not sure. Majority of the respondents having very low economic status due education and source of income, it is clear that 14% are not sure whether armed conflicts could be the cause of communal flare ups. Armed conflict in the state of Manipur is very complex. Sometimes, an incident that happens between two rival insurgent groups could lead to ethnic or communal conflict due to wrong information or ignorance.

8. Root cause of Armed Conflict

Insurgency as root cause	No of persons	Percentage
Yes	47	94
To some extend	3	6
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Table 8 reveals that 47 persons (94%) feel that insurgency is the main cause of armed conflict. The rest 3 persons (6%) feel it is only to some extent. There can be many reasons and factors for armed conflicts in the state of Manipur. Some of the major reasons could be attributed to the central security forces and state security personnel operating and combating the insurgent groups. Among the insurgent groups, there are also inter organizational armed conflict and intra organizational armed conflicts. Therefore the root cause that has led to armed conflict in the state is deeply rooted in mushrooming of insurgency groups for various reasons.

9. Rise of Numerous Ethnic Based Insurgency

Reasons	No of persons	Percentage
Unequal distribution of wealth	5	10
Injustice and discrimination	4	8

Unmet demands	22	44
Leadership	3	6
Political power	16	32
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Poverty and political, social, and economic inequalities between groups predispose to conflict; policies to tackle them will reduce this risk (Stewart, 2002). Reasons on rise of various ethnic based insurgencies, different opinions were captured on the root causes of armed conflict in Manipur from the respondents. Table 9 shows that 22 persons feel that it is due to demands not met by the state. 16 persons (32%) felt it was a struggle for political power as Goswami (2016) said “As I believe that most of the armed conflicts in the Northeast are reactionary movements in which the armed groups fight to maintain traditional status quo and power”). 5 persons (10%) believe it is because of unequal distribution of wealth while 4 persons are of the view that it is injustice and discrimination. The rest 3 persons (6%) attributed it to leadership struggles between groups and personalities.

10. Conflicts Experienced

Types	No of persons	Percentage
Arm forces & insurgents	26	52
Insurgents vs insurgents	18	36
Armed groups & people	2	4
Communal reasons	4	8
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

The state of Manipur is witnessing armed conflict between the government and several insurgent groups, between insurgent groups themselves and conflict between ethnic groups. Of all these, the most conflict that happened is between the insurgent groups and state forces. The respondents have experienced different types of conflict in their life time. 52 percent (26 persons) of them have experienced conflict between arm forces and insurgents. 36 percent (18 persons) said that it was between insurgents and 8 percent (4 persons) saw it caused by communal reasons and the rest 4 percent (2 persons) saw it happened between armed groups and people.

11. Consequences of Armed Conflicts

Consequences	No of persons	Percentage
Loss of property	12	24
Physical harm	5	10
Trauma	18	36
Loss of livelihood	10	20
Not sure	5	10
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Violent conflicts can bring a lot of destructions not only to properties but cause irreparable harm to human especially women and children. Table 11 shows the response of women on how conflict has affected their life. 18 persons (36%) said they lost their jobs, 12 persons (24%) said loss of property, 10 persons (10%) loss of livelihood and 5 persons (10%) physical harm while an equal 10% were not sure. Very often the state formulates strategies to address the visible effects of violence by paying compensation to the victims or their next of kin in case of death. But while material compensation addresses the immediate financial needs, the psychological, social and economic needs of victims who have survived deaths do not receive adequate attention. Much less, the plight of women who become targets of a different kind during times of conflict (Mukhim, 2005).

The extensive conflict in the state has led to wide human rights violations, civilian casualties, extra judicial executions, arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances, sexual harassment, migration and destructions not only to properties but irreparable harm to human especially women and children. During any conflict or violence women and children are the most vulnerable for all type of exploitation and abuse. At the individual level, it has impacted negatively in terms of psychology, social and physical wellbeing. The impact on their psychology cannot be erased easily and it leads to long traumatic, stress and disorder. Of all the consequence impacted on the individuals, trauma is the major concern that needs to be addressed at most. Secondly, rehabilitation of the victims in terms of lost of properties and livelihood.

12. Response to Armed Conflicts

Response	No of persons	Percentage
Fearful	32	64
Run away	18	36
Involve in the fight	0	0
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

In situation of any armed conflict or violence, the civilians face numerous dangers, including death, physical harm and injury. The response to this immediate situation during the conflict cannot be the same for everyone because different place and different context have different impact and consequences. When armed conflicts happens, 32 persons (64%) said they get fearful while 18 persons (36%) ran away to avoid consequences. Probably this is so because in north-east India, armed violence has taken its toll on the very notion of “normal civilian life” and led to innumerable instances of violations committed against civilian populations particularly women by both agents of the state and non-state actors. In most operations, be they cordon and search, combing arrests, searches, or interrogation, the armed forced have, under the aegis of the AFSPA done away with the basic, minimal safeguards accorded to women suspects by the Criminal Procedure Code as well as the Supreme Court directives (Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network & Control Arms Foundation of India, n.d).

13. Impact of Conflict

Response	No of persons	Percentage
Psychological	10	20
Hatred	1	2
Insecurity	38	76
Not applicable	1	2
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Conflict can cause lots of side effects, 38 persons (76%) said that it caused insecurity while 10 persons (20%) said psychological and 1 person (2%) of the total respondents felt hatred towards the perpetrators of violence and for another 1 person (2%) it was not applicable. Women who lose their husbands or sons to conflicts have no option but to take over the reins of the family. This change in role compels them to take up some kind of employment to generate resources for the family. This burdensome role can be very stressful. We might think that women cope very well in adverse situations, but the reality is that children grow up missing one parent and never knowing what a father's love is like. They often have to drop out of school to supplement the family income. This creates a psychological and mental block that affects them throughout their lives. No school or state institution has emerged to help deal with the hidden trauma that such children suffer (Mukhim, 2005).

14. Measures taken by Government in Dealing with Armed Conflicts

Measures Taken	No of persons	Percentage
Ceasefire	32	44
Force	5	10
Don't know	23	46

	50	100
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Source: Primary Data

The general trend in Manipur is that when a person (or a victim due to mere suspicion) is killed, particularly in fake encounters, a Joint Action Committee (JAC) is formed to investigate that particular case. But the government remains undeterred as justice is a far cry in Manipur. Retired Sessions Judge C. Upendra has headed twelve such enquiries himself, and found in all cases the encounters were fake, though none of his reports was made public. Similarly, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, reported to the UN Human Rights Council in 2007 that despite the government of Manipur ordering numerous inquiries into the alleged extrajudicial executions, none of them ultimately reached any meaningful conclusions. Petitions seeking the whereabouts of 17 persons who disappeared between 1980 and 2000 are still pending in the courts. The Manipur Human Rights Commission (MHRC) has also been made dysfunctional after its proactive intervention in such cases (Priyabala, 2015, p. 18).

In the course of conflict, the state and central have taken various measures to come to an agreement and bring solution. Peace agreements have been signed between various insurgent groups and the government. Between the years 1990 to 2012, cease fire and suspension of operation were signed. Table 14 reveals that according to 44% (32 persons), government have dealt with armed groups through cease fires while 10% said they use force like AFSPA to deal with arm groups and the rest 46% do not know what kind of steps the government takes.

15. Compensation from Government

Status	No of persons	Percentage
Yes	6	12
No	44	88
	50	100

Source: Primary Data

From table 15, one learns that only 12% have received compensation while the rest 88% did not receive any kind of compensation. With regard to compensation for the conflict victim, the government of Manipur had come up with a scheme called ‘Manipur victim compensation scheme-2011’. The amount of compensation is to be paid to dependents of the victim who have suffered loss or injured as result of conflict. In spite of such compensation being provided, most of the respondents do not know. Patricia Mukhim (2005) also says, while insurgency affects life in general, it has very devastating effects on women, but lack of documentation of the tremendous physical, psychological and mental sufferings undergone by women in conflict situations makes it difficult for the state to make appropriate interventions.

V. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to make universal statement about the impact of armed conflict on the lives of women given differences in culture, geography and context. The impact on the people depends on the extent of conflict on the specify location or areas. During any conflicts or violence, women and children are the most vulnerable and easily exploited. Economic and psychosocially traumatic consequences of armed conflicts are for life long. Widows face double jeopardy in terms of disabilities in their economic as well as social status in the community. As par the findings, the victims do not feel secure to move freely. Besides, no proper measures have been taken up by concerned authorities for the victims of armed conflicts in terms of economic, social or psychosocial support.

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