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Widows of armed conflicts in Manipur

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Abstract

Armed conflicts in the state of Manipur have affected lives of people from all walks of life in some way or the other. Even though it affects people irrespective of their class, caste, religion, community, gender etc. the degree and the way it affects are different for a different section of the society. Effects of armed conflicts are felt to a higher degree and in a different way when it comes to the most marginalized section of the society. Likewise, men and women are affected by armed conflict in many different ways. Women may become both indirect victims when they lose their near and dear ones and direct victims when they are subjected to torture, rape, harassment etc. The present study is the narration of four widows who are the victims of armed conflict in the state Manipur. It is about their life and the challenges they are facing living amongst the armed groups, police, armies, society, and their family.

Keywords: Widows, armed conflict, poverty, harassment, activist

1. Introduction

In a developing country like India, internal discord is a common phenomenon. It is a country with large, diverse, heterogeneous population with different level of prosperity, education and health care. It comprises several distinct geographical regions, races, ethnic groups, religions, languages, and cultures. “According to Barry Buzan, India is a country of several nations. He describes it as a “state-nation” (as opposed to a “nation state”) wherein the state force plays a crucial role in creating and sustaining the concept of nation-hood” [1]. Therefore, the armed conflict has occurred in the various corner of the India i.e. in Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Central India, and north East India which create an insecure environment giving fear, anxiety and terror to many residents, greatly impacting daily life and the region’s development. The militancy uprising of Mujahideen, Lashkar-e Taiba, Maoist, Naxalites, ULFA, BODO, NSCN (K and IM), and many other groups in Manipur disrupt the internal administration of our country.

Armed conflict has given devastating consequences on the society. Men are killed and women and children are tortured and harassed. It has violated the basic human rights and the constitutional rights that have been enshrined by the Indian constitution and international bodies. Indeed, it is true that men are the direct victim of the armed conflicts but the most severely and brutally affected section of the society is the women who are affected by the armed conflicts. It is estimated that “proportion of Indian Widowed has increased from 6.4 % in Census 2001 to 7.4 % in Census 2011 for females and in males, it is increased from 1.8% to 2.0%” [2]. According to Christie Fernando, (2002), many widows in the world over, face extreme poverty, discrimination, and inhuman treatment [3]. Armed conflict in the recent past has increased the numbers of widows, and made their plight even worse. Widows were impoverished as they were miserably deprived of their social security and family support. It is a belief that due to armed conflict, the number of widows and half-widows is said to be more than 15,000^[4] in Kashmir. A woman activist who also runs an NGO (MWGSN)*, Binalashmi Nepram says “300 widows are born every year in Manipur” due to the armed conflicts in the state.

Women and children are the most vulnerable and the worse affected section of the society and among this, the weakest are the widows. They become more insecure when their near and dear one or their husbands got lost and killed. In a patriarchal society, men are the bread earner and protector of the family but the question is what happens to the women if their men, the bread earner got killed in the Armed Conflict. This is the biggest challenge confronted by the widow’s in Manipur, a state torn and bears the brunt of armed conflicts.

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In a society where Emile Durkheim's (1893) term mechanical solidarity still prevalent, widow's especially the young age fears coming out to earn their daily bread. But, many women overcome the fearsome of the societies questioning of chastity or dignity in order to save their family and educate their children. The best suited example could be seen in this small state such as the Ema Market (Mother's Market/ Women's Market) in the heart of the capital city, Imphal. Not only this, most of the market or small vegetable vendors are run by the women in Manipur. Armed conflicts create economic and health crises in the life of civilian population which aggravate poverty which in turn make them suffer more from both mental and social stress. The stress is much more on those women who are the victim of the armed conflict and have the burdens of rebuilding lost assets, maintaining income and raising their children without their husband. The increased poverty due to loss of earning member, loss of livelihood as well as displacement use to give women no other option but to take the path of illegal activities like prostitution, brewing of alcohol and trafficking of drugs which often leave them exploited and it leads to further deterioration of their condition.

Various steps have been taken up by the international and national committees to protect women and stop human rights violation due to armed conflicts. But neither armed conflicts nor the gender-specific impact of the armed conflict has been successfully eliminated or even reduced. Torture, rape, and violation of human rights of women are being continued uncheck during the course of arm conflicts. Thus, women continue to be the worse victims of armed conflicts in terms of economic hardship as well as bearing the burden of managing and protecting their families' and their communities (IRRS, 2014; United Nations Human Rights, 2011; United Nations 2013).

Some of the untold or unheard voices of widows which have been narrated by them during my field visit compel me to pen down a research paper on the topic 'women and armed conflicts'. I have experienced and realized how hard their lives would be living under the constraints of social, economic and political upheavals. The state of Manipur is in turmoil due to the militancy for the last five decades.

2. Narrative of Widows of Armed Conflict in Manipur

Manipur is a small state located in the northeast part of India, where insurgency has taken shelter for almost half a century and since then it has been a place where people have forgotten about humanity and it has turn itself from a heavenly abode into a bloody killing field. With the course of time, many people from every section of society have been killed, exploited, disparaged and have been affected at least in some ways. Many young women become widows having unsecured futures due to social, economic and political constrictions. The extreme violation of human rights and torture remained in this tiny state of India. Numerous insurgent groups create chaotic situation disturbing the smooth administration of the state. The killing of innocent civilians, armed forces, and insurgent groups becomes a mundane talk of the people. The state-bound newspaper headlines are flooded with the one or the other incidents related to militancy. Frequent bands, strikes, and protest are the common happenings in this state.

Some of the narratives shared by the respondents (mostly women victims) would spotlight the current law and order conditions in the state. In such a narrative told by Madabi

(Pseudo name) a 37-year-old woman exclaimed, "I have a keen interest to be a beautician. I have always dream to live happily with my husband and my three children. But who could have known that, my destiny would be ended up in such a tragic way. One unfortunate day, my husband was killed by some armed assailants. Her husband Alec (pseudo name) was an LIC agent as well as a contractor. He used to get government work contract with the help of KCP a insurgents group, (here in Manipur most of the contractor have links with insurgents because the entire government work contract is in their control) but unfortunately the group got divided and consequently they start fighting each other over the control of their tax money, her husband got embroiled and become the victim of the gun. Her brother was also killed by an unknown armed group. His brother was a common man, simple and ordinary Manipuri, having no relationship with any of the unlawful group. He was earning his living by running a small shop where he was selling cassettes. Becha is not sure if her brother's dead is somehow related to her husband's activities. He went out to buy a pan (chewing stimulant mixture of betel leaf and areca nut) after having dinner but he didn't return and was found killed at the gate of their house itself. Madabi had two brothers, one already got killed by UG and the other doesn't treat her well. Her father is bedridden having terminal illness and lives with her only other brother. Now she has no one to support her other than her children and her mother. Before Alec died, he bought a small piece of land as a property for their family but after his death without any source of income Becha's life become helpless and poverty struck, she finally had to sell that property to meet her household expenses and educational costs of her children. But instead of helping her in that trouble situation, his brother was against her decision of selling the property; he scolded her and made her vanished from her parental home. Her brother and her sister-in-law are saying that "if she stays then they will go down....." Now she lives with her three daughters and her mother in the small shop which was owned by her late brother. Apart from her distress condition due to the death of her husband and the death of her brother, the ill-treatment she is receiving from her brother is making her life more insecure and miserable.

Out of all the woes and anxieties she has, what she is worried about the most is the insecure future of her daughters. She wants to raise them well educated to make them live a better life in future. But the only problem is that she doesn't have the resource to afford their education. She is unable to fulfill properly even their basic needs which are essential for life to survive such as food, shelter, cloths etc. The luxury of having Tiffin in the school is far away from her children, she sometimes gets abashed when she get to know that her children use to take food from her school friends. Once in a while, she is forced to make herself and her children go to sleep without a meal, drinking only water. With tears in her eye, she looks at those sleeping girls drowning in thoughts like, what if something happens to her, who will raise and look after them. At some point in time, she has even thought of killing her children and herself to go free from the pain and sufferings. Looking back at those happier moments, remembering her husband she thinks that if her husband is still alive they would have never got to see these days like the way it is. There has not been a single night that goes away without crying.

Her husband's earnings were the only source of income but after his death, no one ever tries to help them except her mother. She couldn't go out for any work as she was already having a three-month-old baby inside her womb. Her mother was working in a brick factory and where she used to earn 90 rupees per day which she used to get after two weeks. By that little amount of money, it was very hard for them to maintain the household expenditure. So the only option left for her was to sell the property bought by her husband. With that money she paid her children's school fee for the whole session and deposit 10,000 rupees each for her three children in LIC and the rest was used to meet other household expenditures. But soon that meager amount of money got consumed and she didn't know what to do and she didn't see any means of livelihood. But fortunately, after she went to WAD organization for counseling and ask for help even in terms of commodity, she has been able to gain enough confidence, with that she thinks she can carry on with her life and can raise her children. There she has met some other widows who share the same faith with her. Apart from counseling and training, she also gets moral and emotional support from other widows by sharing their own experience with each other. But at the same time social stigmas always remain there with her, people often asked if she doesn't have an affair with anybody or if her deceased husband had left her a huge amount of money. She is often left mortified when such question arises.

There are many other similar cases in the state. Such cases not only destroy a family, but also the entire society got affected. The social structure (Radcliff Browns, Meyer Fortes, Strauss and Durkheim) of the society is disrupted due to the insurgency in the state. The normal functioning of many social institutions is changing day by day. This narrative brought light to the suffering of civilians and the handicapped functioning of the government to solve the issue of insurgency. In many incidents, people take law in their hands and leave unpunished. This state has turned into a killing field. On the other side, needy children have high chance to turn into militants. This creates a vicious cycle.

Pinky (Pseudo name), 23 years old is a young widow who is living in the hope of her son Ichathoi. After the untimely death of her husband she became the bread earner of her family and has been carrying the load at this young age. She married Picku (Pseudo name) on October 2005 since then she has never been able to live a happy and peaceful life. Her husband and herself were to face atrocities of army, police and UG throughout her married life. Even though, all her pregnancy period was embroiled with never ending fear, panic and black outs, Pinky was blessed with a baby boy. Picku was a nice, loving and caring husband and father; he was just a civilian working as a contractor but there were some misunderstandings taking his name which is accompanied by continuous intimidation by the armed groups and the army making him desperate and exasperate, and as a result he couldn't sleep for a single day in peace. He found himself in the middle of the two armed groups. Picku was not blessed with a long life; his life was snatched away by the Manipur Police Commandos on 4 January 2009 in a fake encounter. His was beaten gravely; he was found with his skull fractured in several places. There were two bullet holes in his chest, and three in the belly. His whole body was having fractures and injury marks which clearly indicated that he was tortured before he was killed, but on the report none of these were mentioned but only the bullets

wound. All his valuable things like his ring, watch, and wallet were found missing even his shoes were missing. On the day of the autopsy some of his friends from Tekcham clan were present and they took his photographs in that grim condition on their phones but surprisingly none of the photographs were being made available for investigation or as a proof of torture.

Picku was a very loving and caring father, he used to play with his son Ichathoi and brought home toys for him and even sleep with him. Ichathoi is now 4 ½ years old; it happened when he was just 2 years old, he tried to wake up his father from death, and crying so hard. Now he knows his father is dead but still he used to ask about his father but the answer Pinky can give remains the same that his father will come back with his toys. But sometimes when he realizes his father is dead for real, he says he will kill those people who killed his father. This makes her scared and worried about the way and the environment he is going to grow up. What worries her most is will she be able to raise him properly and send him to school against all the odds. What if he is tormented when people say his father had been tortured and killed. How will he react towards them? These are the fears she has for Ichathoi. Now Pinky is earning her living by weaving and can even save a little bit of it for the future of her son. But the other problem is she couldn't save money every month because of the family financial problem and at the same time she is looking after her mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

Pinky has been a very hard working and brave little girl from the childhood and had faced fear and hardship at the early age. Her father was murdered in cold blood by an unknown person but she suspected someone from her locality, because the person was the only one present at the time and place where his father died. Apart from that her younger sister claimed that the man she suspected abused her saying their father is dead. At that time she was not there and after she heard about the unfortunate events from her sister, she directly went to that man's house with 5 litres of kerosene in her hand and she burned down the house and she passed out. That was the first crisis she had to face and the second one was when she got married to Picku, she became a victim of domestic violence inflicted by her mother-in-law. She was abused and tortured mentally and physically. She was treated as if she is good for nothing even after she sacrificed everything she had to the house and the family. The killing of her husband in a fake encounter was the third crisis she had faced and this one brought a drastic change in her life and also in the life of her son. Now she has to look after the family but she can never make her mother-in-law happy. After the death of Picku, she used to face the threat of being vanished from the house and even physically abuses from her in-laws. But she is strong, she stays and helps in household chores and earns for the family. Her mother-in-law is now paralyzed, when she was in hospital Pinky earned money by selling vegetables for her treatment and managed the family.

Now she is a member of Integrated Rural Development Services Organization (IRDSO), a small social organization. And with the help of this organization she is bringing lawsuit against the armed parties that killed her husband. Her only wish is to know what really happened to her husband and what her husband murderers wanted from him and that the fake encounter been brought to light.

Sunita, 34 year old who still does not believe that her husband is death. She feels that her husband will come back and see their children with love and care. She shared the torment she had confronted in her life. "My husband was killed in 2007 by some unknown assailants. He had a rented garment shop at Nagamapal Bazar. Every day he used to come back home at round 6.30 pm but ever since September 28th 2007, he never came back home. With the help of local people a Joint Action Committee (JAC) was formed to search him. The shop remained close for about a week searching for him but no trace of him was found" she said. She felt scared and her children were asking for their father every day and she didn't have any answer to give but to console them that their father had gone to a far place and will come back soon. It was almost 15 days after he vanished, the news channel ISTV (local news channel) flashed the news of her husband's death and police said that he was death and had already been cremated. She went into a state of shock when she heard the news came and she fainted. He was a civilian and did not have any relationship with any UG groups or he wasn't involved in any activities related to UG.

After the death of her husband the task of raising children become only her duty. Her brother in- law has been helping her, for the last 2, 3 years and he has been funding the children's school admission but the question is, how long will he look after them? He too has his own family. Financial help were also coming from her parents' side till 2010 but it stopped coming as they have their own problems. Now she works in the fruit juice (likla) factory and earns 2500 p/m. But still she can't fulfill all the requirements and basic needs for her children and herself. Above all this she has to look after her in-laws and thus she feels that she need a good job with a good income so that she can manage her family and fulfill her children desire.

She is now mentally weak and can't even handle small issues and she is having problems in sleeping and she thinks that she has a suicidal tendency. Now with the help of one Pooja who is also a widow sharing the same faith with her, she came to know about Gun Survivor Network of Women and become associated with the organization. There she is gaining confidence and strength along with emotional supports from the organization and from her fellow members. The only anticipation she has now is to work hard as best as she can and raise her children and expected love and care from them in return.

Renuka (pseudo name) is 29 year old widow with a four year old son. Reenu was a girl with a Hindu background belonging to Meitei community and she got married with Mike (pseudo name) from Paite community having a Christian background on 6th April 2005, violating the social norms and the caste system. So, she was dissented by her family because of breaking the so-called social norms and religious traditions. But she was happy being with Mike and was blessed with a son. Their happiness for togetherness did not last for long; it was a Good Friday, 7th April 2007, Mike and his two other friends were killed by Imphal West Police Commandos. Mike was shot on his forehead and the other two were shot in the mouth. Later that day it was reported by the perpetrators that the men killed were terrorist who were driving suspiciously and were attempting to throw hand grenades at the police. But everyone who witnessed the scene did not see any such things happened. It was just the same regular kind of fake encounter prevailing in

Manipur. Mike was a simple civilian, he did not have any prior history of having any kind of relationship with UG, and there were no previous involvements or confrontations with militaries, UG, police or rebels. That day in the early morning Mike went out to take camera roll as his wife asked for it as a preparation for the evening function in the Church for the Good Friday. And on his way, he picked up his two friends to accompany him. After a short while, she heard the sound of gunfire and people from the valley came rushing towards her house and asking about Mike, she felt curious and she didn't understand anything because no one told her anything. She came to know about her ill-fated husband only when one of the relatives told her that husband is in the morgue. She was shattered and lost, paralyzed; she just laid down herself on the bed with her son James (pseudo name) and closing her eyes. She didn't get out of her room until Monday. The member of family, relatives and friends of the three men became so furious and angry that they form a Joint Action Committee (JAC) and general strikes were called blocking the main road. Later JAC also hired an attorney to take the witness statement and start a lawsuit. JAC also drafted a memorandum of eyewitness accounts of the incident on Good Friday and presented it to the chief minister. But they gave 50,000 rupees to hush up all the strikes and lawsuit. But the case is still going on.

When she saw her husband in morgue her tear couldn't stop and everything within her was broken down. It took time for her to get up and fight for her rights and justice. Renuka is now a widow, mother and also an activist who is fighting for the rights of the widows and rights of humanity. She is having hard times looking after her family and her son Jason and at the same time working as a women's right activist. In order to run a family and be able to raise her son she went from door to door, selling food supplement earning commission on every bottle. She could have opened her own salon as she has done a diploma course in polytechnic training institution but it was impossible due to lack of funds for the venture. But later on her beauty salon get started at her home and started to earn some money. That very year Mike died, she was totally shattered, there was no hope for her son, at that time her brother-in-law helped her, and one of her sis-in-law who lives in the United States gave her some money that kept her going for some day.

Now Renuka is the chief of an organization called EEVFAM- Extrajudicial Executive Victims' Families Manipur, she even has got a job in the church and works for widows. She is now an independent woman who works for the rights and justice. Her only hope is now to serve God and raise her son. Now it's almost two year that her husband is no more, in this two years everything got change, raising her son alone and without the love of his father, Renuka often gets emotional breakdown losing confidence but she never show it to her son.

These are the stories of four widow victims of armed conflict in Manipur which I have visited and talked to them. Among them, Pinky was going underground when I met her, as she was threaten by those perpetrators involved in the killing of her husband, she was even manhandled and abused physically. The second time when I met her, she told me that she remained underground for more than two, three months. But now she is home earning and raising her son with hopes.

The similarities among these four widows are

- (i) Their husbands were killed extra-judicially and they want to stop these gun violence and save more women from becoming widows.
- (ii) They become the sole bread earner of the family and they live their life in abject poverty.
- (iii) They are often seen as a wife of the armed groups and they are often ostracized by the society.
- (iv) Insecure, fear and anxiety has been the common mental health problems of these widows.
- (v) They all are concerned about the future of their children.
- (vi) The government has not provided any beneficial scheme to these widows and their children as they are regarded as a family of the armed groups.
- (vii) They all are fighting to get justice and prove that their husbands were innocent.
- (viii) All four of them belongs the age group of 20 to 40 years.

Thus, the condition of women in the armed conflict situation has horrific tales to tell. Life without a partner, a father, social stigmas and intimidation and economic hardship make their life a battle field.

3. Conclusion

Manipur has a long history of armed conflicts and from the beginning, women had suffered indirectly or directly by the armed conflict. Most of the families of these victims belong to lower income group and when they lost their male members, the sole bread earners of the family, these women have to take up the entire responsibilities of their families. These situations often lead to drop in family income and changed their life socially and economically in a drastic manner. They have taken various roads for survival even though the society takes them otherwise; they live their life with courage and determination.

On the other side, these women became powerful, gain independence and earn for their own, came out from the four walls and even became an activist and work for the women's rights and justices. One of the victims which was mention above Renuka said that it is only when his husband died that she gain strength and fight against the atrocities brought by armed conflict to the women and the people. Most of the women victims which I have met are an activist, an independent mother, and member of various women's organization and work for the justice and humanity. It is of a great appreciation that these women organizations are helping the women victims of the armed conflict, supporting and giving them strength. It will be more contented if the state government and the central government give some support to these women and appreciate their courage.

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