

## The Role of Women in Peace-building with reference to Manipur state of India

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*Wherever there is conflict, women must be part of the solution.*<sup>1</sup>

Michelle Bachelet

Wars and internal conflicts do not end simply with the signing of peace agreements. To avoid a resurgence of violence, it is necessary to develop and support measures for strengthening the governance, security and justice, and socio-economic capacities of a state. This is a complex task in any society, but daunting in post-conflict situations. While the international and national community can provide assistance and valuable resources, the local population, which has no exit

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1. Bachelet, Michelle. United Nations. Security Council. Gender Action for Peace and Security. New York: United Nation, 2012. Web. <[http://www.una.org.uk/sites/default/files/GAPS NAP Response - Final - Recommendations - 06092013 \(2\).pdf](http://www.una.org.uk/sites/default/files/GAPS_NAP_Response_-_Final_-_Recommendations_-_06092013_(2).pdf)>.

“strategy”, has the greatest commitment to building sustainable peace. It is therefore essential to draw on the assets, experiences and dedication at the local level and among all sectors of society. One distinguished zone often overlooked and underestimated is women. In most post-conflict societies women are actively engaged in peacebuilding while addressing the basic survival needs of their families and communities. Yet they are often portrayed as passive victims, a little regard is given to their actual and potential roles in fostering security. The present paper focuses on the role of women in peacebuilding with reference to Manipur state situated in north-east India.

Manipur, situated on the Indo-Myanmar border, is home to as many as 32 ethnic groups with 29 major tribes and 2 ethno denominations. It is a state in north-eastern India with the city of Imphal as its capital. Its people include the Meitei, Pangal (Muslims), Naga, and Kuki, Zomi and Gorkhali (Nepali) who speak different languages of branches of the Tibeto-Burman family. The state is bounded by Nagaland state to the north, Mizoram state to the south, and Assam state to the west; Burma (Myanmar) to the east.



**Map of India showing Manipur state**

The multiple histories, multiple cultures and multiple identities are spread out and struggling for recognition within a small geographical territory of 22,327 sq km. for the last several decades.

Manipur has been driven by conflicts between the state and the non-state armed groups on the one hand, and among its ethnic groups

on the other, on the issues of exclusivity, governance and integration. Road blockades and protest rallies are common features alongside a large quantity of small firearms in circulation in the state. As many as 5121 people have lost their lives in conflict-related incidents in the state between 1992 and 2008 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, New Delhi).<sup>2</sup>

### **The conflicts in Manipur can be divided into three types:**

#### ***Intra-Ethnic Conflict:***

Here, the conflict is within an ethnic group, such as that between the Kuki and Hmar in 1960 and that between the Thadou Kuki and Paite Zomi in 1997 to 1998, within the generic ethnic group commonly known as the Chin-Kuki.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Inter-Ethnic Conflict:***

Here, the conflict is between two or more ethnic groups, such as that between Naga and Kuki tribes in 1992. This was the first inter-community conflict in Manipur. Both the tribes have been struggling for exclusive homelands. Hence, the overlapping claims over land and territory led to the violent Kuki-Naga conflict which began in 1992 and continued till 1998. It was engineered by rival armed groups belonging to the two tribes. It was one of the major conflicts based on tribal lines which have greatly changed the social equations of the state. It has resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives and damage to private and public properties. Several thousands have been either temporarily or permanently displaced. It has led to the emergence of a number of armed groups with Kuki armed groups being established to counter the Nagas.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Singh, M.Amarjeet. Conflicts in Manipur. Bangalore: National Institute of Advanced Studies,2010.7.

3. Kumar, Anand, Aphun Kamei, et al. Situating Conflict and Poverty in Manipur. New Delhi: Indian Institute of Public Administration, 2011. 28. Print.

4. Ravi, R.N. "Chasing a Chimeric Peace", New Delhi: The Hindu. November 15, 2012. [accessed on 15th November 2012. < <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/chasing-a-chimeric-peace/article4095592.ece>>].

***State Versus People:***

Here, the conflict is directed against the state by the armed groups. The Indian army, including the Assam Rifles, the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force and the Manipur Police, are currently engaged in fighting against armed rebels. With the growth of separatist movement, Manipur was declared 'disturbed area' in 1980 and subsequently the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA)<sup>5</sup> was imposed.<sup>6</sup> There are allegations of the very Act (AFSPA) being misused by the members of the state forces, as the Act allows them to kill anybody on mere suspicion of anti-national activity and no complain can be made against them. Besides killing, there have been number of cases of forced disappearances of young children by the state forces in Manipur.<sup>7</sup>

A separatist insurgency began in 1964, although momentum to a more violent phase did not occur until 1978.<sup>8</sup> The Separatists demand a sovereign state separate from the Union of India, a claimed lack of development, plundering of local resources, and a general discontent is part of their argument. The international Human Rights Watch argues that human rights violations by Indian Security Forces

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5. Armed Forces Special Power Act(AFSPA) is a 1958 bill passed by the Indian government that authorizes armed security personnel to shoot on sight ( and on suspicion) anyone committing or about to commit an offence against the maintenance of public order. It mandates the deployment of the national army, central paramilitary forces organized by the state, and the Indian reserve battalions. No action can be instituted against a soldier without clearance from the central authority, fostering a culture of impunity.

6. Harriss, John. "The State, Tradition and Conflict in the North Eastern States of India", London: Crisis States Programme, Development Research Centre, London School of Economics.2002.

7. Manoharan, Arlene. "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children of Manipur". Occasional Paper (Draft), Bangalore: Juvenile Justice Center for Child and the Law. National Law School of India University [accessed on September 6, 2012.< <http://www.nls.ac.in/ccl/Occasional%20Paper%20for%20univ.pdf>>

8. Chandru, . "MANIPUR- in a strange whirlpool of Cross-Current Insurgency." South asia analysis. N.p.. Web. 5 Jan 2014. <<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers13/paper1210.html>>.

have only fuelled the insurgency.<sup>9</sup> It adds that the Indian Army has at times acted with impunity as anti-terrorism laws in the state make prosecution of human rights violators difficult.

There are currently 34 groups, including non-violent ones, which demand independence from India.<sup>10</sup> In 1999, some of these groups coalesced into an alliance organization called the "Manipur People's Liberation Front." Of these, the three most prominent are the United Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), and People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur. The UNLF is estimated to have 2500 active militants, the PREPAK with 1500, and People's Liberation Army (PLA) with 3000.<sup>11</sup> An Indian news agency reported in 2004:

"As of today, Manipur is the worst case in the north-east as far as militancy is concerned. Apart from the fact that there are more militant groups in the state than anywhere else – at least seven prominent groups operate in Manipur – the rivalries between these outfits often leads to greater violence".<sup>12</sup>

The Kuki insurgent groups want a separate state for the Kukis to be carved out from the present state of Manipur. The Kuki insurgent groups are under two umbrella organisations, Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United Peoples Forum.<sup>13</sup>

The Zomi Revolutionary Army is a nationalist/separatist group dedicated to the defense of Zomis and the reunification of ethnic Zomi people in Burma (Chin State), Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts),

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9. "India: Army Killings Fuel Insurgency in Manipur." . Human Rights Watch, 16 09 2008. Web. 20 Dec 2013. <<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/09/14/india-army-killings-fuel-insurgency-manipur>>.

10. Singh, H. Bhuban. "Insurgency in Manipur." Kangla online. N.p.. Web. 10 Dec 2013. <<http://classic.kanglaonline.com/index.php?template=kshow&kid=834>>.

11. . Chandru. op.cit.

12. "Insurgency is biggest business in northeast." Rediff.com. N.p., 4 10 2004. Web. 3 Dec 2013. <<http://www.rediff.com/news/2004/oct/04spec1.htm>>.

13. . . N.p.. Web. 19 Nov 2013. <<http://www.kukination.net>>.

and northeast India (Manipur and Mizoram). It aims to unite all Zomi people under one governing unit, known as a Zogam, meaning “land of the Zomi” under the Indian Union.

The situation is further complicated because insurgent groups are not united in the same cause. The Nagas wish to annexe part of Manipur and merge with a greater Nagaland (state) or Nagalim,<sup>14</sup> which is in conflict with Meitei insurgent demands for the integrity of their vision of an independent state.<sup>15</sup> There were many tensions between the different tribes and have witnessed numerous clashes between Naga and Kukis, Meiteis and Muslims.

The low-intensity conflict in Manipur that’s being simmering for almost 60 years has killed, widowed, displaced and orphaned thousands of its people. The impact of the conflict has not only been the killings, rapes and torture; from the young student who suffers a deep sense of fear and insecurity to the woman widowed by the gun, no one has been spared the affects of this long-standing conflict. <sup>16</sup> As the worst sufferer of any conflict happens to be a woman either as a victim herself or as a mother, wife or sister; the women of Manipur have stepped forward in the form of various organisations to bring peace in the state, which is illustrated briefly in the following lines.

### **Efforts of Women groups for peace building in Manipur State:**

#### ***Naga Women’s Union of Manipur (NWUM)***

The Naga Women’s Union of Manipur (NWUM) was formed in 1994 in preparation for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Although each of the 15 Naga tribes in Manipur had its own women’s organisation, NWUM founding members felt a common

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14. Nagalim refers to the entire traditional homeland of the Naga people, which encompasses land in four provinces of north-eastern India, as well as territory in Burma (Myanmar).

15. Chandru. op.cit.

16. Samom, Thingnam Anjulika. The Tussle and the Compromise

forum was needed to install an awareness of the unity of Naga women. NWUM has focussed on asserting women's rights, reflecting the concerns of the professional women, who are its operational core. In its first General Assembly in 1994, it reaffirmed its founding principles:

1. To promote the rights and dignity of Naga Women,
2. Promote traditional values,
3. Improve the living standard of Naga society.<sup>17</sup>

NWUM began to emphasize peacebuilding soon after its creation. Manipur at the time was wracked by bloody clashes between Nagas and Kukis. NWUM has been in the forefront of the campaign to extend the ceasefire to all Naga areas and to build unity among Naga people through public rallies, seminars and workshops. NWUM has been working with NPMHR to monitor ceasefire violations and continues to intervene to keep the peace. In its conflict transformation workshops, NWUM has taught mediation skills to Naga leaders and has participated in forums and workshops that bring Nagas, Kukis and Meiteis together.<sup>18</sup> NWUM's interventions have gained its recognition as a significant resource in peacebuilding.

In mapping Naga Women's contribution to peacebuilding, it should be reiterated that peacebuilding is a process to be built at all stages: pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict. In the Naga situation, the 1997 ceasefire has not meant an end to the conflict; therefore women's role in protecting their communities against violence by state and non-state actors run concurrent with their initiatives to democratize the peace process and foster reconciliation.

Women of NWUM state that "We do more because we can". Their main contribution to peacebuilding and the strategies which have been effective in:

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17. Annual Reports. Imphal, Manipur: Naga Women's Union of Manipur, n.d; Leo Paul. "Naga Women and Human Rights." Raisunriang1998. Imphal, Manipur: National Women's Union of Manipur.1998.14-15.

18. Ibid.

1. Negotiating informally with state and non-state actors to protect their communities;
2. Mobilizing for peace and reconciliation; and
3. Participating in the official peace talks to sustain the ceasefire, extend it to other actors, and forge a more inclusive process.<sup>19</sup>
4. Protecting Communities through informal Mediation

To mitigate the affects of on-going violence in their communities, women intervene to negotiate with state actors and non-state groups, as well as to mediate inter-factional disputes and inter community conflicts. In the period before the 1999 parliamentary elections for example, NWUM records that it intervened 8 times to stop violence from exploding. During the Manipur assembly elections in 2000, NWUM women intervened 10 times to defuse tension between rival factions of the underground forces, the public and the armed groups, as well as between different communities.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Miera Paibis (Women Torchbearers):***

The Meira Paibis began to emerge in the 1970s in protest against social evils but it was the brutality of the army and para-militaries in a sweep at Patsoi<sup>21</sup> in 1980<sup>22</sup> which marked its emergence as a powerful coherent movement. The name Meira Paibis<sup>23</sup> derives from the flaming torches which the woman carry and which have become a symbol of peaceful protest for justice at all levels of life. It is the watchdog of civil rights violations at the community level, initiating and engaging in campaigns against rights violations, such

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19. Manchanda, Rita. Ed. *Women, War and Peace in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.2001.31.

20. Raisunriang2001. Imphal, Manipur: National Women's Union of Manipur.2001.8-9.

21. Patsoi is a village in state capital Imphal in the west district of Manipur state.

22. Samom, Thingnam Anjulika. "Manipur:The Tussle and the Compromise." Infochange Agenda. N.p.. Web. 8 Jan 2014. <<http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/reporting-conflict/manipur-the-tussle-and-the-compromise.html>>.

23. Meira means torch and Paibis means the holder (woman) of the torch.

as arbitrary detention, cordon and search operations, and torture, committed by the security personnel of the federal government of India. Meira Paibi groups have successfully prevented the arrest of young men by the para-militaries by forming a human barrier to protect them. Groups of Meira Paibi have been formed in residential areas of Imphal (the Capital City) and in the villages, and they patrol the streets, usually after sunset. The Meira Paibis often form a large unified and disciplined contingent at public rallies.<sup>24</sup>

On July 15, 2004, a Manipuri mothers' group, the Meira Paibis, stripped in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters in Imphal, holding aloft a banner on which was written in blood red: 'Indian Army, Rape Us'. The mothers were denouncing the rape and death in custody of Manorma Devi (33), accused of belonging to an insurgent group. It was an act of patriarchal shaming, accusing the Indian security forces of using rape as an instrument of war. The event catalysed a nationwide campaign for a repeal of AFSPA (1958) and the arbitrary use of force. Under pressure, the Union government withdrew the Assam Rifles from Kangla Fort, the historic seat of the Manipur kings. A committee was set up to review AFSPA. The Reddy Committee report was submitted, but not officially released. It recommended that the Act be repealed.<sup>25</sup>

Meira Paibis are equally concerned with social issues that damage Manipuri society. It has consolidated their work against narcotics and alcohol abuse among the young. It has been active in exposing those guilty of crimes against women, especially rape and violence, whether by the security forces or the general population.

### ***All Tribal Women's Organization (ATWO) of Manipur:***

ATWO has been at the forefront of building communication, trust

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24. Parratt, John. *Wounded Land: Politics and Identity in Modern Manipur*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication. 2005. 156-157.

25. Manchanda, Rita. "Listen to your mother before you kill your brother." *Infochange Agenda*. 10 2011: n. page. Web. 3 Feb. 2014. <<http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/peace-building/listen-to-your-mother-before-you-kill-your-brother.html>>.

and co-operation between the Nagas and Kukis as well as the non-tribal Meitei community. Their initiatives have included intervening on behalf of arrested youth of any background, visiting the injured from all sides, and supporting all displaced persons.<sup>26</sup>

***Manipur Women Gun Survivor's Network:***

The Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN) dates back to December 24, 2004. On Christmas Eve, Ms Binalakshmi Nepram founder of MWGSN, witnessed the aftermath of the killing of 27-year-old Buddhi Moirangthem in Wabgai Lamkhai village southeast of Manipur's state capital, Imphal. There, a group of three gunmen had dragged Buddhi from his car-battery workshop. Within a matter of minutes they shot him dead. Till date, his young wife Rebika Akham does not know who the killers were and why they killed her husband. A few days after the incident, Ms Nepram contributed Rupees 4500 (USD 110) to buy a sewing machine for Rebika Akham. This machine enabled her to stitch and tailor clothes for the villagers and to secure her a humble living after the death of her husband. This intervention in Wabgai Lamkhai village was first ever of the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network.<sup>27</sup>

Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network was formed in an attempt to help women like Rebika whose lives have been changed dramatically because of the gun killings of a beloved husband, father or son -- be it by state or non-state actors or unidentified gunmen. The Network attempts to lift women from the trauma and agony faced in armed conflict by helping them to find ways to heal the scars that decades of violence have caused to the community. The Network's direct intervention evolves a gender sensitive approach to the gun crisis, supports women economically and brings them forward to play a crucial role in small arms policy. It is the first initiative of its kind in India. The formal launch of it took place on April 26, 2007 in

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26. Raisunriang2001. Imphal, Manipur: National Women's Union of Manipur:2001.8-9.

27. Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network. <http://www.womansurvivorsnetwork.org/>.

Manipur's capital, Imphal.<sup>28</sup>

With many women in Manipur trying to cope with life under the shadow of the gun, Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network attempts to make them economically independent. The Network is working towards building sustainable livelihood measures for women affected by violence. So far, more than 40 women are getting financial assistance as well as legal support for small-scale entrepreneurial work so that they can move on in life with newly found courage. Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network supports women gun survivors throughout Manipur state. To enable them to start a small production unit or other business venture, the Network helps the women to open their own bank accounts and provides them with micro finance in form of interest-free loans of Rupees 3000 to 9000 (US\$ 75 to 225). With the help of this money the women are able to start and carry on work related to silk reeling, weaving, the production of mats made from water reed or even agricultural occupation such as fishery, piggery or mushroom farming. The Network also forms "Solidarity Network" of committed young people who believe in helping the gun survivors and in controlling the use and spread of small arms. They keep in touch with the women gun survivors supported by the Network and assist them in whatever way they can. The Network sponsors education and supports the children of survivors and raises awareness about the effects of gun violence in the community.<sup>29</sup>

***Irom Sharmila Chanu ( also known as the Iron Lady of Manipur):***

Irom Sharmila Chanu, not an organisation but Manipur's own Gandhian icon, comes from a vibrant tradition of women's collective peace activism across the Northeast. Irom Sharmila Chanu, has been on a political fast since November 4, 2000 demanding the Government of India to withdraw the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) from Manipur and other areas of India's north-east. An iconic legend in Manipur's politics, her fast is perhaps the longest political

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28. Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network.[http://www.cafi-online.org/report/Manipur\\_Women\\_Gun\\_Survivors.pdf](http://www.cafi-online.org/report/Manipur_Women_Gun_Survivors.pdf).

29. Ibid.

protest of its kind in history and in any part of the world. Irom Sharmila Chanu has not eaten anything, or drunk a single drop of water since November, 2000. She has been forcibly kept alive by nasogastric tubation. She has not combed her hair, nor looked at the mirror and uses a dry cotton to clean her teeth. Her body is wasted inside, her menstrual cycles have stopped. She removes the nasogastric tube at the slightest opportunity available. BBC had carried a report on this marathon fast wherein it had mentioned the deteriorating condition of her health: *"Doctors say her fasting is now having a direct impact on her body's normal functioning – her bones have become brittle and she has developed other medical problems too."*<sup>30</sup> Sharmila says, *"It is not a punishment, but my bounden duty."*<sup>31</sup> Bounded duty towards the people of Manipur, the people of North-East, the people who are not considered to belong to the 'mainland' India.

This incident termed as the Malom Massacre.<sup>32</sup>The army declared that the civilians were killed in an encounter with the insurgents who were about to bomb a parliamentary convoy. However, the locals had a different story to tell, which obviously went unheard. Malom Massacre was nothing new for the people in Manipur as they had witnessed similar cold-blooded killings before when the security forces would go berserk and kill ordinary people, Sharmila could not bear the sight of the blood spilled on the street. Sharmila observed her weekly fast on Thursdays since her childhood. She fasted on that fateful Thursday and "the same fast continues till date", says her brother Irom Singhajit. She went to seek mother's blessings on November, 4 'to do something for the people' and returned to the site of blood-bath and declared her resolution to fast-unto-death till AFSPA is withdrawn. A Gandhian-follower, Sharmila says, *"I was shocked to see the dead bodies. There was no means to stop further violations by the armed forces.... It (fast) is the most effective way because it is based on a spiritual fight... My fast*

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30. . BBC: London, 19 09 2006. Television.

31. . Basu, Amritapa. "IROM CHANU'S SATYAGRAHA – ON A POLITICAL FAST FOR THE PAST 11 YEARS." *Himalayan Voice*. 13 4 2011: 19. Web. 4 Feb. 2014. <<http://thehimalayanvoice.wordpress.com/page/19/>>.

32. . Devi, Bula. "Sharmila-the light of Manipur." *Hindu* [Delhi] 23 10 2011, n. pag. Web. 4 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-openpage/sharmila-the-light-of-manipur/article2563852.ece>>.

*is on behalf of the people of Manipur. This is not a personal battle, it is symbolic. It is a symbol of truth, love and peace*".<sup>33</sup>

Sharmila's individual heroism is integral to the wave of protests against AFSPA. Her peaceful protest against a repressive law has got the recognition it deserves. In 2007, she was co-conferred the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights (South Korea). She has since refused to accept any award until her demand of repealing AFSPA is fulfilled. Sharmila has over the years become an icon of the wave of protests against AFSPA in particular and satyagraha in general. Her recourse to non-violent struggle against the might of the state is a lesson for other movements across the globe.

### ***Other Organisations:***

The Kuki Mother's Association (KMA), Manipur Hmar Women's Association (MHWA), Manipur's Zomi Mother's Association (MZMA), etc. are some of the other women organizations working for peace in the state of Manipur. The Kuki Mother's Association played an important role in bringing to an end the Naga-Kuki ethnic killings in the 1990s.

### **Conclusion:**

As is evident from the above observations, the role of women has been significant in the process of peacebuilding in Manipur and to resolve the intractable conflict here, although with little success. The women organizations and the figures like Irom Sharmila have relied on the non-violent action for peacebuilding and their consistent effort and relentless patience has drawn the attention of all justice and peace loving people and media agencies, which certainly has created a hope for the sustainable peace in the Manipur state afflicted from the conflicts for several decades.

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33. . Dobhal , Harsh. "How many days a woman fast before she's free...". Ed. Harsh Dobhal. *A combat Law Anthology*. New Delhi: HRNL, 2011. 530. Print.