



Research Paper

## The Manipur Crisis: Analysing the Nexus between Violence against Women and Political Turmoil

Somosnigdha Pal

(LLM, University of London)

**Abstract** – Gender based violence against women and political conflict are deeply intertwined. History has witnessed time and again that unrest in the political sphere has been a catalyst to various forms of violence against women. The universality of this nexus has recently been exemplified in the political crisis of Manipur that witnessed massive human rights violations of women. This essay, based on Manipur and other major political conflicts from across the globe, attempts to establish strong link between violence against women and political unrest. It also endeavours to explore various factors giving rise to this phenomenon and to understand how the International Human Rights Law approaches this issue.

**Keywords** – Violence against women, political conflict, Manipur crisis, gender-based inequality, women's human rights

Received 15 Oct., 2023; Revised 29 Oct., 2023; Accepted 31 Oct., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### I. Introduction – The Crisis in Manipur

The gross human rights violations in the Northeast Indian state of Manipur, which shook the national conscience to its core, have also raised an alarm among the UN experts<sup>1</sup> including Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups under the Human Rights Council. The ethnic conflict between the predominantly Hindu Meitei and the predominantly Christian Kuki communities has taken a brutal outburst in May 2023 and has called for immediate humanitarian response at the national and international level. This violence, however, is the tip of the iceberg with roots of the crisis stretching deeper. Previously, the state, in numerous accounts, has been a witness of sporadic secessionist insurgencies and the origin of the present conflict can be traced back to 2021. A military coup in neighbouring Myanmar had caused a huge exodus of refugees in Manipur leading to more competition over the state's already limited resources. This also triggered the majority Meitei community to fear that they would be outnumbered by the Kukis who share an ethnic lineage with Myanmar's Chin tribe. Furthermore, a state government initiative to protect the forests by evicting the tribals from forested hills infuriated the Kukis who primarily dwelled there. The simmering discontent was further fuelled by a recommendation by the Manipur High Court to the government to consider granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei community. This implied the possibility of the Meiteis getting equal access to education and employment that were hitherto reserved for disadvantaged and vulnerable tribes like the Kukis and the Nagas. In response, a Tribal Solidarity March was organised in 10 hill districts of Manipur, which eventually broke out into a violent clash between the two communities. What ensued was a series of ruthless attacks and revenge attacks with villages being burnt down, churches destroyed and men and women assaulted and killed. The state got divided along ethnic lines while the two communities fiercely defended their territories.

In this turbulent political climate, an appalling video from Manipur went viral in July, 2023 which contained a 26 second clip showing two Kuki women being paraded by a mob of men who were groping their genitals and assaulting them. The incident had taken place in May when the two women, while fleeing their homes in a riot, were caught by a Meitei mob, were lynched vehemently and were forced to strip and parade naked in the village. The national and international condemnation attracted by this incident brought to light other horrific instances of violence against women (VAW) in strife-torn Manipur, with the most disturbing aspect being that women, irrespective of their ethnic identities, were tortured and abused.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of High Commissioner. Press Release; Special Procedure. 04 September, 2023. "India: UN experts alarmed by continuing abuses in Manipur"

### **VAW and Political Turmoil – A Vicious Nexus?**

This recent gruesome atrocity explicitly illustrates how gender-based violence against women is a commonly prevalent phenomenon in times of political unrest. This relation between VAW and political turmoil is not exclusive to the crisis in Manipur but is a universal issue present across the globe for ages. What is pertinent to note here is that in such situations of violence and armed conflict, women inevitably become the worst sufferers. Feminist studies have shown that gender-based violence in armed conflict enhances women's vulnerability to victimization and hinder their access to key resources. Human senses, often in these critical times, gets immune to the sheer violation of personal autonomy, dignity and integrity. Sexual violence, in myriad forms like rape, gang rape, genital mutilation, forced impregnation and so on, become the single most important weapon of terror used by the conflicting parties. The universality of this phenomenon has found innumerable evidences in the conflicts that have shaped the political landscape in the pandemic and post pandemic world. The crisis in Ukraine has multiplied the vulnerability of women, who are now seeking refuge in other countries, to gender-based sexual violence. An essay<sup>2</sup> by Jane Freedman emphasizes on how their plight is intensified by massive VAW committed during their journey or upon arrival to the destination country. From Syria to Afghanistan, Yemen to Ethiopia, VAW has been a persistent feature in armed conflicts. In the words of Susan Brownmiller, author of the groundbreaking feminist classic *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 'Rape flourishes in warfare irrespective of geography or location'. Through numerous examples from the World Wars to the recent conflicts in Europe, Africa and South Asia, she argues that rape, even though outlawed as a criminal act under the international law, persists as the most common act of war. Sometimes to inflict terror, sometimes to exact revenge and even at times to relieve the boredom of soldiers posted in a foreign territory, rape in conflict situations is not bound by legal or moral norms.

'What is most glaring in these atrocities is the weaponization of women's bodies. Women have been used as instruments to exact revenge on the other community', said Annie Raja, a member of the fact-finding team to Manipur from the National Federation of Indian Women<sup>3</sup>. As if these horrific offences against women are not disturbing enough, the insensitive attitude exhibited by the police and administration adds to it. The status report, presented to the Supreme Court by the state government almost three months after the outbreak of violence, provides that a FIR on the viral video case was registered 14 days after the crime took place against 'unknown miscreants'. Despite the clear video evidence of the perpetrators, investigation and arrests were made by the police only after the video went viral. In this regard, a heartless remark made by the Chief Minister of Manipur about how this is not an isolated event and that 'hundreds of similar incidents have occurred in the state' in the ongoing mayhem is even more concerning. In fact, the status report does mention several cases of gang rape but does not clarify the steps taken by the government to prevent the brutality and protect the victims. This serves testament to the fact that government, in most times, becomes a silent spectator as well as a complicit to the violence inflicted to women. Besides, the reluctance of the authorities accentuates how VAW does not attract immediate and gender sensitive response in most circumstances.

### **Key Factors**

This makes us ponder on the elements playing a causal role here. A general analysis of gender-based violence points at the unequal gender dynamics that are deeply embedded in the society. Gender roles in the society and power inequalities in the institutions of family and state (micro and macro level) are the determining factors that make VAW possible in the first place. In other words, the traditional hegemonic status enjoyed by men in a patriarchal setting gives them the liberty to perceive women as inferior beings to be dominated in every aspect. Political tension lays down a fertile ground where the already existing gender-based differences are exacerbated to the extent that women are subjected to gruesome violence.

The fact that a large number of Meitei women too were subjected to gender-based violence in Manipur bolsters the argument that in times of political disruption the communal identity of women becomes secondary while their gender identity takes the prime focus. A similar pattern of VAW can also be noticed in the intense communal riots involving the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities during the Partition of India in 1947. Upon identifying the structure of gender-based violence in a conflict situation, one can conclude that it is used as an instrumental strategy by the perpetrators for acquisition of resources and power. This implies that the unequal gender relations in peace times is so normalized that it paves the way for a reality in which the human dignity of

---

<sup>2</sup> Freedman, Jane. "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugee Women: A Hidden Aspect of the Refugee Crisis." *Reproductive Health Matters* 24, no. 47 (2016): 18–26.

<sup>3</sup> Chowdhury Kavita. *The Diplomat*. 04 August, 2023. "In Manipur, Women Are Both Victims and Instigators of Sexual Violence"

women are shattered and they are reduced to mere objects of plunder. Their bodies are perceived as repositories of community honor and violating them gives a sense of victory and war gain.

In this context, it is justified to question why discriminatory social conditions leads to sexual VAW in one case and participation of women in rebel militias in another. In case of Manipur, women have been both the victims as well as perpetrators of sexual violence. A study<sup>4</sup> of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 also highlights that women were actively present in armed roles during the genocide. A careful analysis of these ethnic conflicts will reveal the intersectional dynamics that link ethnicity and gender in a grid of differential positionings. Research shows that effective gendered mobilization of women can ensure that their sense of sisterhood is undermined by strong allegiance to their ethnic group. This, once again, can be traced back to the patriarchal social norms that require a woman to obey her male counterpart to an extent where she loses her own reason. This analysis also substantiates the fact that women's participation in violence can perfectly co-occur with massive violence committed against women themselves.

### **VAW as a subject of IHRL**

Gender-based violence, especially against women, has received large scale recognition under international human rights law (IHRL) from the 1990s. Even though acts like rape, physical assault, forced marriage, etc. were identified as violations of human rights in 1975<sup>5</sup>, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, did not carry an explicit provision prohibiting violence against women. It was the massive VAW, particularly sexual violence, in the conflict-ridden Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the early 1990s that engendered major international outrage as well as legal and judicial developments. The adoption of Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) in 1993 was the first step and a landmark in the history of international human rights law for exclusively and explicitly addressing the issue of violence against women. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 laid emphasis on VAW as one of the critical areas of concern for the global agenda for gender equality. But it was not until 2000 that all forms of VAW were criminalized and direct links between gender-based VAW and ethnic cleansing, genocide, terrorism and armed conflict were recognized in the Beijing +5 Review. The Rome Statute governing the International Criminal Court also recognized sexual violence as crime against humanity.

Conventionally, the international human rights law seeks to prevent VAW committed by the state parties. The present legal regime on human rights undisputedly holds that gender-based violence against women perpetrated by the state officials constitute serious human rights violations. However recent developments in jurisprudence, including the precedents set by ad hoc tribunals like the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as well as other judicial and quasi-judicial bodies like Committee Against Torture (CAT), Inter-American Court of Human Rights (I-ACHR) and European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have sought to protect women from gender-based violence committed by non-state actors too. This has stemmed from the well accepted notion that state is the ultimate guarantor of individual's rights. As Kenneth Roth aptly puts it in his essay 'Domestic Violence as an International Human Rights Issue', 'a state has some duty to protect those within its territory from private acts of violence and illicit force. When the state makes little or no effort to stop a certain form of private violence, it tacitly condones that violence.' Accordingly, this imposes state accountability for acts of VAW committed by private persons as well as a positive obligation on states to exercise due diligence.

## **II. Conclusion**

Even though the legal norms criminalizing VAW especially in times of political turmoil are in place, in absence of their effective compliance, flagrant violations of women's rights scourge the society. In conclusion, it is argued that the transition of women from victims to agents of peacebuilding and recovery is the need of the hour. This calls for a feminist approach in policy framing and implementation. The Framework of Cooperation signed between CEDAW Committee and UN Special Rapporteur on VAW can be a guiding light in this regard. Post conflict situations present room for reform and open up avenues for restructuring oppressive societal norms. These opportunities must be grabbed at the first instance by questioning and deconstructing the deeply entrenched unequal power dynamics that operate in the society in general. Furthermore, a gender sensitive responsive mechanism to address the crises of women in conflict areas aimed enhance the accountability and compliance of state and non-state actors can check VAW that continue in the relief camps and refugee shelters. It is irrefutable that sexual violence in conflict amounts to a heinous war crime and it scars women so deep that 'they struggle to recover for years or even decades after the guns fall silent'. (UN Secy. Gen. Antonio Guterres)

---

<sup>4</sup> Brown SE. *Female Perpetrators of Rwandan Genocide*. International Feminist Journal of Politics. 2014

<sup>5</sup> The *Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and Their Contribution to Development and Peace*, adopted by the World's Conference of International Women's Year on 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1975, called for elimination of violations of human rights committed against women like rape, prostitution, physical assault, mental cruelty, etc.

**REFERENCES**

- [1]. Brownmiller, S. (2005). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975).
- [2]. Cook, R. (ed.) *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives*. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).
- [3]. Edwards, A. *Violence Against Women under International Human Rights Law*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- [4]. Davies, S. E., & True, J. (2015). Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: Bringing gender analysis back in. *Security Dialogue*, 46(6), 495–512.
- [5]. Ulrike Krause. A Continuum of Violence? Linking Sexual and Gender-based Violence during Conflict, Flight, and Encampment. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 34, Issue 4, December 2015, Pages 1–19.
- [6]. Freedman, J. (2016). Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee “crisis.” *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24(47), 18–26.
- [7]. Maskey, M., 2003. Political Disruption, Violence against Women and its Impact on Health in Nepal. *Development, suppl. Globalization, Reproductive Health and Rights*, 46(2), pp. 68-71
- [8]. Bardall, G. (2018, February 26). Violence, Politics and Gender. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- [9]. Marshall, J., 2008. Positive Obligations and Gender-based Violence: Judicial Developments. *International Community Law Review* 10, pp 143-169.
- [10]. UN Women. Five-year Review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing + 5) 5 - 9 June, 2000