

Women and Children in Conflict: Vulnerabilities and Challenges



Comments 0



Lily Sangpui 9 July 2023 121708 views

Recalling the relevant provisions outlined in International humanitarian law pertaining to the protection of women and children, it is crucial to revisit the plight they face in the light of Manipur violence. Conflicts affect women and men differently in distinct ways. It is important to acknowledge that women and children who constitute the vulnerable section of society are often at receiving end during conflict. Conflict and displacement further exacerbate their challenges in terms of access to healthcare and hygiene, and specific dietary requirements.

Women and children, in particular, are vulnerable to rape, torture, subjugation and other forms of sexual violence. The reason is that women and children continue to be perceived not only as a means to punish individuals or communities they belong to but also as a tactic to demoralize and incite the opponent, to instill fear among the local population. This pervasive notion continues to persist. Shortage of medical resources and support, fear of reprisal in addition to the existing cultural taboos prevented victims of rape and torture to remain invisible. During conflict coverage of women and children issues in media tend to be secondary and less highlighted thereby the problems and challenges face by women and children remain unaddressed and unattended.

Manipur violence that erupted on the afternoon of 3rd of May 2023 left more than 50,000 people displaced living in 350 relief camps set up across the state. It resulted in a colossal loss of life and the destruction of property and places of worship. As many as 201 villages were burnt, and more than 7000 houses were razed and pillaged. According to statistics updated by Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF), a group that represent a conglomerate of recognized tribes in Lamka, till 3rd July there were 41425 reported displaced person. It is speculated that the number could be much more.

Reports have surfaced on the manhandling of women, rape, torture, charring of rape victim bodies, burning of ambulances along with patients, and manhandling of medical staff (ToI, 8th June) (Scroll.in, 5th May). Hospitals were attacked by mobs, and staff belonging to Kuki-Zo-Hmar communities were beaten, threatened, and harassed, forcing them to flee from Imphal Valley. In one horrifying incident a mother, a seven-year-old wounded boy and another woman were burnt alive inside the ambulance during medical evacuation at Iroisemba under Lamsang PS (ToI, 8th June). A deliberate attack on wounded children transported by ambulance defeated the spirit of humanity that humanitarian laws aim to uphold. This is a grave violation of human rights and relevant laws that outline limits on wars. Rape as an instrument to terrorize needs to be condemned.

The vulnerability of women and children is further accentuated on account of 'Infodemic'- a tsunami of both accurate and inaccurate information circulated at unprecedented levels. Conflict environment proves fertile for the propagation of disinformation and fake news directed at specific targets. Disinformation is used widely to vilify certain groups. Although the application of disinformation is allowed as a part of 'ruse of war', however, the devastating effect it has on civilians, women, and children cannot be altogether ignored. Disinformation has not only created detrimental psychological reactions but also help spread terror. Targeted attacks were carried out as retaliatory violence that was built on disinformation despite the then DGP issuing a statement that no women were raped in Churachandpur. A large mob barged into Manipur University, hospitals and other institutes in search of Kuki-Zo-Hmar communities to attack and annihilate them. As recounted by many survivors, they could hear the mob ranting '*Kill all the Kukis*', '*They have rape our women why shouldn't we rape them (kukis women) as well*'. The attack was carried out with precision. The mob checked identity cards and burnt down several documents of the students. One woman in particular was picked up from the street, tortured, enrage her modesty and left to die. In another instance, another victim recalled the terrifying experience of how they narrowly escaped from the clutch of an enraged mob on the 4th of May, "*I was with my sister in the hospital on that day. She had been admitted for delivery on 3rd May. Around 11 am on 4th May, I noticed a mob of hundreds entering the hospital corridors. I stepped out of the room to understand what was going on. To my dismay, I saw that they were searching for and asking for Identity cards. My heart sank momentarily. I was worried for my sister, who was unable to move and had become a second mother to me after we lost our mother. I hurriedly returned and dialled the Army to ask for help. Simultaneously, I instructed the nurse attending my sister to hide in the bathroom, as she belonged to our*

tribe. When the mob barged into our room, they demanded my identity card. Desperate to buy time, I pretended to search and occasionally claimed that I might have left it at home, all the while enduring their blows. The Army arrived in a nick of time. We were then escorted to the Army camp. He further informed me that even after a month had passed, my sister continues to have nightmares about the incident. Some victims have come out to speak in public about the horrifying experience they faced in the hands of mob. One such incident is a female who was badly beaten, her life threatened by a mob of 30 youths.

In Lamka town alone, Rural Women Upliftment Society (RWUS) has identified 262 lactating mothers, 91 pregnant women, and 480 infants (children under the age of five). RWUS is one of the few NGOs in Lamka that works towards uplifting indigenous women. Coordinating relief and healthcare support for women and children in conflict, the Director of RWUS, Mary Beth, stated, "The specific needs of women and children are often overlooked due to resource limitations, lack of agencies dedicated for women and children, and the hidden nature of their problems and challenges".

In a conflict situation, most of the relief work primarily focuses on providing basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing. However, the supply of these essentials is consistently limited by finance constraints, lack of funding, and difficulty in procurement. Thus, it becomes challenging to allocate funds for other needs, even meeting the bare minimum requirements becomes a struggle. Displaced tribal population rely for relief and support mainly on donations from individuals and CSOs, and from neighbouring states for the supply of essentials. It becomes difficult to cater beyond the general survival needs of the people. Support from the government remains minimal and inadequate in a state marred by mobocracy and when it is a majoritarian government.

Access to healthcare services and support is critical and pose a major challenge, particularly for the Kuki-Zo-Hmar communities, as major hospitals and healthcare facilities are predominantly concentrated in Imphal Valley. Women face various health challenges, including loss of the ability to generate milk to breastfeed, lack of hygiene and privacy, hot flushes among older women, and insomnia. According to one volunteer in relief camp, most lactating women experience a significant reduction in milk supply for breastfeeding possibly due to long and stressful journey to reach the nearest safe place, often without proper food and shelter. In one instance, a woman gave birth while sheltering in the open forest as their village was attacked and houses razed in flame. There are also instance of delivery taking place at relief camps. In such situations, addressing mother and child health becomes a concern considering information received related to pregnancy complications is low in Manipur which stood at 46.4 % only (NFHS 5).

Children in camps suffered mostly of high fever and vomiting. School children and students in Manipur are losing out on school and education again. Students have to face double the loss of learning and years in education in compare with students from the rest of the country. Amid the mayhem and turmoil, the Government of Manipur issued an order vide No. AO/147/AC/2011 (4)-DE(s) dated 16 June, 2023 for commencement of normal classes from 21st June. The challenge that comes with the order is deciding where to relocate thousands of people who have been displaced. While Imphal valley might not face significant issues in terms of relocation, the problem becomes more severe in the hilly areas due to lack of infrastructure and suitable establishments capable of hosting thousands of displaced persons. It's important to consider that almost 90% of the displaced individuals belong to the Kuki-Zo-Hmar communities, who have lost their homes and are seeking shelter in districts of Churachandpur and Kangpokpi.

What is happening in Manipur is not only colossal destruction but also a humanitarian crisis. Women and children are most affected by events of conflict. Instead of simply viewing them as victims, it is crucial to address their vulnerabilities and challenges and ensure systematic recourse are in place. Women can be elevated as an agent of change and improve their status. Therefore, it is imperative women's voices are not only heard but also given space for their participation in key roles in peace processes, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. There are numerous instances where women's associations have played a vital role in the peace and dialogue process, particularly in advocating for justice for rape victims and in spearheading the cause of women and children. With only 7 years remaining to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) No 3 (good health and well-being) and 5 (gender equality), it is essential for all sections to come together to fight the war for our women and children to prevent any setbacks in the progress made towards these goals.

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