CHAPTER 3

Violence against women in Manipur

3.1. Status of Women in Manipur

Manipur is a tiny state with an area of 22,327sq.km in the north-eastern part of India having a diverse number of communities comprising of the Meiteis, tribals, Meitei Pangals (Muslims), Lois, Nepalis and other non-Manipuris. Thus, this small state of Manipur is home to diverse ethnic groups and sub-groups. The sex ratio according to Census 2011 is 934 per 1000 males and has decreased as compared to 975 per 1000 males in the last Census. Manipur has a literacy rate of 79.85 percent, with male literacy at 86.49 percent and female literacy at 73.17 percent.¹

In general, the women hold a high and free position in Manipur. Manipur is a state where women occupy a very unique position in society since time immemorial. The Manipuri women enjoy much more freedom to move around and so are much more enlightened and intelligent unlike in other parts of the country where women are kept shut inside their homes.² Women have always been held in respect and accorded honour in Manipur. The Manipuris also exhibited tenderness while giving punishments to women offenders, for whom the only punishments were banishments to a Loi village (an outcast village), which entailed at least temporary loss of caste or the punishment

¹ Census of India, 2011
known as Khungoinaba.³ Right from the beginning of Manipur’s recorded history, women as individuals and groups have exercised power and authority in different ways in different historical periods. Historically, women in Manipur have always played a responsible and constructive role in the society.

Manipuri women are usually inspired by ideal women depicted in literature, both mythology and legendary. It may be said that most women while discharging their duties in the families are still following, in varying degrees, the principles and norms prescribed by Imoinu, a mythological Goddess for the maintenance of peace and welfare of the family.⁴

In addition to their household responsibilities, women also participate in social functions and religious ceremonies. Since early times, women have been taking active part in the performance of religious rites and rituals. In the worship of the ancestral God or Goddess called the Lai Haraoba, the rituals are performed by Maibis. Maibis are women, who are experts in the performance of religious rites and ceremonies, without whom, the Lai Haraoba can never take place. Thus it can be inferred that women in Manipur are not barred from participating in the religious and social gathering.⁵

Though widows may remarry, they are prohibited from marrying with their deceased husband’s brothers. However, there is no ceremony for the remarriage of widows.⁶

⁶ supra note 122
There was a custom by which a man of low caste, marrying a high caste woman, can be adopted into her tribe (*salei* or clan), the exact reverse of what prevailed in India, where a woman of high caste marrying a low caste man is regarded as an outcast.\(^7\)

Another important contribution of Manipuri women is in the field of art and culture. They have added a lot to the cultural heritage in dance, literature and the like. The world famous *Ras Lila* is performed by female artists only. Among the early women writers who have contributed in the field of literature, the most notable name is that of M. K. Pramodini Devi. Manipuri women have also contributed a lot in the field of sports. M.C. Mary Kom, Kunjarani Devi, L. Sarita, Bombayla etc. are acclaimed sportspersons of the State.

The responsibility of running the family was, by and large, entrusted to women in the absence of their men folk. The work participation of women in Manipur has been fairly high. The nature of work participation of men and women in the Manipur society is rooted in economical and political characteristic of the state. The 18\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) century has seen much unrest in Manipur. As a result, a system of compulsory enlisting of men in the services started. The system was called *Lallup*. *Lallup* included both Meitei and tribal population. Increased involvement of the men in the State services led to the need for women to take control and manage agriculture. Rice cultivation relies heavily on women’s labour as they are engaged in some work in the fields. Such a type of situation was responsible for making women take a productive role in the economy of the state.\(^8\)


Sometimes women also supplement their family income by weaving clothes and selling them in the market. They are very industrious.

The most admirable feature of the Manipuri women has been their capacity to resist any imposition on them, their families or their State, be it in the social, political or economic field. From the very ancient times, Manipuri women, as a group played active role and participated in the political and social movements of the state. If the king’s policy or programme negatively affected the general interest of the people in Manipur, women appealed to the king to postpone or cancel his order. The common women emerged as a strong political force in collective capacity during the British period also. The first *Nupi Lan* (1904) and the second *Nupi Lan* (1939) were the remarkable examples of the collective force of Manipuri women.

The first *Nupi Lan* (women agitation) was fought in 1904 against the order of the British asking the men folk of Imphal to go to Kabaw to bring teakwood, bamboo etc. to rebuild the burnt house of the Assistant Superintendent. In December, 1939 another women’s agitation known as the Second *Nupi Lan* again broke out in Manipur against the British policies. The immediate cause of this movement was the scarcity of rice in the *Khwairamband* Bazaar of Imphal due to the British policy of exporting rice outside Manipur. On 12th December, 1939, thousands of Manipuri women marched towards the State Secretariat to press their demands to issue orders to ban export of rice

---


immediately. The British stopped its policy of exporting rice. Though the immediate cause was economic in nature, in the aftermath of this movement, the British authority brought many changes, which resulted in the emergence of a new Manipur. The State witnessed a series of political activities for the establishment of a responsible government. The demand for the introduction of democratic form of government appeared for the first time in the later part of the movement.

During the same time, the trade passed on to the hands of women. All the internal trade and exchange of the produce of the country are managed by them. They play a critical role in the trade and economy of the state. The habit of the country is to have bazaars at convenient spots by the road side, where a handful of women congregate at an early hour, whiling the time away with gossip and light work, and attending to a chance customer when one offers himself. The market places are central to women’s community life and organising. Constant exchanges and trade interests and having a space of their own have led to collective action amongst women.

In Imphal, the capital of Manipur, there is a market known as Khwairamband Bazaar. This market also known as Ema Keithel (Mother’s Market) or Nupi Keithel (Women’s Market) is one of a kind in the world as it is exclusively run by women. Thousands of women occupy regular stalls while an even larger number are seated outside. Apart from the economic activities, the market is also an important venue of social and

14 Bimola. op.cit. pp.115-116
15 supra note 122
political interaction. These women have led many of the mass movements, which characterise the history of the early part of the 20th century in Manipur.

A fish stall in the *Ema Keithel*
Women belonging to the royal family actively participated in the political activities in Manipur. During the reign of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba 33A.D. to 153A.D., the Chief Queen named ‘Laisana’ was a member of the Council of Ministers. She headed the women’s court called the Patcha which dealt with all cases in which women were concerned, such as divorce, disputed paternity, marriage rights, etc., and the president of
this Court was known as the *Patcha Hulba*.\(^\text{16}\) However, certain qualifications were prescribed for the Chief Queen of which one was that she must not be a Naga. She was not merely the wife of the king but also the queen of the people and therefore must be acceptable to them. The Chief Queen should be a role model for the women of the country.\(^\text{17}\)

Rani Gaidinliu is another woman who had strongly asserted the political rights of her people against the British authority. She led a movement representing the political aspirations and desires of the people. There were many other women who took active part in the administration and political affairs of the state.\(^\text{18}\)

The two women’s agitations showed that Manipuri women were always ready to take mass action if any policy of the government affected the interest of the masses. Manipuri women also played a significant role during the statehood movement of the late Sixties.\(^\text{19}\) The *Nisha Bandh* movement started in the Seventies to take up steps to prohibit the use of liquor and drugs in Manipur. It is found in every locality (*leikai*) in Manipur and is supported by many social organisations and non-governmental organisations.

The *Meira Paibi* (*Meira*=torch, *Paibi*=bearer) movement started in the 1980s as a voluntary organisation of the womenfolk to prevent violation of basic human rights of the people in the hands of the armed forces. The *Meira Paibi* movement emerged against human rights violations in the State of Manipur when some areas of Manipur

\(^{16}\) _supra note_ 122


\(^{18}\) _supra note_ 130

\(^{19}\) _supra note_ 129. p.177
were declared as disturbed area under the notorious Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958. The *Meira Paibs* also works for the eradication of social evils which are harmful to the development of the society as a whole. Thus, it is a collective force of women against human rights violation and social evils. Here, mention may be made of Irom Chanu Sharmila who has been on a fast for more than 16 years demanding the withdrawal of the draconian Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.

Irom Chanu Sharmila, the Iron Lady of Manipur
Women blocking a road to get their demands

*Meira Paibis* taking out a *Meira* (torch) rally
The Manipuri women, as a group, played active role and participated in the political and social movements of the state. Women’s collective power in the political arena, hitherto a male domain, was evident in the past during the ‘Women’s wars’ (*Nupi lan*) in 1904 and 1939 against colonial policies. However, as individuals, the political participation of women in Manipur is quite negligible. The visible presence of Manipuri women in the social, economic and cultural life of the State cannot be seen in the political set-up. Out of 60 elected representatives in the 10th Legislative Assembly of the State, there are only three women members. Their representation in the political process and decision-making bodies of the State is far from satisfactory if we take into account the Manipuri women’s mass involvement in the various social and political uprisings in the past.

Manipuri women make crucial economic contributions and hold a distinctive position in social, religious and political life. Within an overall patriarchal framework, women are thus able to develop a power base and group solidarity, strengthened by various women’s organizations. Thus women occupy a relatively higher status within their own communities, in comparison to other mainstream cultures and societies in the country. This portrays a picture of equality between men and women in the region and has given rise to the presumption that violence against women is not a major concern in Manipur. However, reports of violence against women in Manipur have been rising rapidly in the last few years.

3.2. Forms of Violence against Women in Manipur

Compared to women in other parts of the India, women in Manipur are perceived to enjoy a high status in society. Women are accorded esteem and respect, participating actively in public life, contributing greatly to the economy, takes a leading role in cultural and religious practices and festivals. To some extent, the perception is correct, but it is also riddled with contradictions and complexities, which makes it difficult to accept such a statement at face value. Despite being accorded respect and honour at home, and adorned on the public platform, in recent years, women have been more and more at the receiving end of an escalating violence, to which there is no limit, both in the public domain and the private arena of the family. Man-woman’s relationship in the society continues to be a dominating-dominated relationship.21

Much of the violence in the public sphere has been a direct result of the conflict situation in the State which is accompanied by an atmosphere of vagueness, fear and

insecurity to heighten the quotient of aggression. Violence in the public domain shapes the choices women make about their own mobility and those of their family members, and the choices family members impose on women which have lasting consequences when mobility is necessary. Violence against women has become an endemic part of our society.

When one subscribes to the view that the status of women in Manipur is very high, the question arises as to why women are then vulnerable to all forms of violence. Many women fulfil multiple categories in their varied roles inside and outside the household. A heterogeneous form of patriarchy looms large behind the unwavering perception of women’s elevated position in Manipur, a perception common both within and outside the State. As customary practices are reshaped by modern legal and social norms, patriarchy in the State has evolved, yet subordination of women is still prevalent. Just as violence against women has a close connection with women’s status and position, it also has an intimate connection with the ideology of patriarchy, especially in the context of Manipur. In a patriarchal society like ours, violence against women occurs in every step of life in different forms – mental, physical, economic, emotional, and sexual. Despite the involvement of women in agricultural production, paid employment and household decision-making, women are still excluded from formal decision-making institutions.

However high the women’s status in any given society, as long as there is no equality

---


and freedom in the realm of politics, economy and decision-making, the patriarchal element will reign strong and supreme.\textsuperscript{25}

Reports of incidences of violence against women amounting to killing have been on the rise in recent times. The present state of conflict situation has also compounded the problem. Increasing crime against women is an escalating problem in Manipur. Women of Manipur have experienced multiple forms of gender-based atrocities including rape, molestation, kidnapping, intimidation, cheating on the pretext of marriage proposals and job opportunities and various types of verbal, psychological, sexual harassments and abuse of women including eve-teasing. Such actions deepened the sense of victimisation and helplessness of the women of Manipur, and brought both physical and psychological insecurity.

 Manipuri women fit the portrayal of what is called the ‘victimisation of the victim.’ Manipuri women have been the victims of various forms of violence. Yet the strong sense of subsistence and survival compels them to be the source of sustenance for their families. In spite of such strength, the burden of all misfortune and adversity has taken a toll on their lives. They have not been given their due recognition for all that they are worth which is why the women in the State still fall victims to copious crime and violence. There is no economic, political or social empowerment of women in the true sense in our state.

The deteriorating law and order situation in the State has added to the sufferings of the womenfolk. It is quite tragic and painful that women are increasingly unsafe, whether within or outside their homes. The harsh reality is that the elevation of women to a high

pedestal in the socio-economic realm is only another side of the coin because as individuals, most women in Manipur fall prey to one or the other form of violence.

When one goes through the reports of the local newspapers published in the State, it can be noticed that along with reports of women leading the mass movement in the forefront for the implementation of the Inner Line Permit system in Manipur, there are reports of rape and murder of women. Rape and murder are no longer sporadic cases and has become some sort of an epidemic in the State. One thing common in each case of violence against women is the brutality and inhumane characteristic of the aggression which gives a grim picture of the prevailing conditions of women in the State. An appraisal of such brutal incidents indicates that the civilian population as well as the military (both state and non-state actors) has taken to the culture of violence and the militaristic method of settling down issues in the society.

Lives of women have been severely affected to such an extent that in both the hills and valleys of the State while doing their day to day chores, many women have been tortured and raped. The security personnel often violate the dignity of women which is violation of right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India and the right to live with human dignity. There are various instances where the raped victims conceal their awful stories because of fear being stigmatized by the society. The case of Manorama26 leading to the much publicized naked protest was the catalyst for massive protest against the armed forces. It is certain that whenever there is attack on the Security forces by the insurgents, a combing operation is conducted in the adjoining areas, which eventually dislocates normal life of the people and instils fear of rape,

torture, humiliation, molestation, illegal detention and disappearance to the civilians of
the state. Not only this, there are cases where Manipuri women have been condemned as
informers of the army personnel by the militants and given punishment by way of bullet
injury on the limbs and even killed. Thus womenfolk of the State are victims at the
hands of both the state and non-state actors.

In the tiny State of Manipur, violence has become a way of life with an ever increasing
incidence of different forms of violence against women. What is needed is an active and
sustained engagement on the issue of violence against women in the form of collective
people’s movement and not just the collective women’s movement. Such an
engagement has become all the more essential on account of the frequent incidences of
violation of the body of the women and her life in every step. To combat the menace of
violence against women, a women-specific movement is the need of the hour. If the
women community is centrally put in the context of a broader frame of a gender-
specific evaluation, it will not only be a step towards empowerment but also towards
justice. Such empowerment will provide them the means to defend and protect
themselves from all kinds of violence committed by not only armed personnel (state as
well as non-state) but also male civilians. Despite the rich and long tradition of
women’s movements for socio-economic and political causes, there has not been any
gender-centric women’s movement in Manipur.

Though violence against women has increased in Manipur, going by the rate of
conviction in cases of violence against women, it would not be wrong to say that the
law and the criminal justice system has failed to respond or deal effectively with it.
There has been very little effort both in terms of making the law more sensitive to
women and in terms of enforcing it. Women therefore continue to suffer without adequate legal or other redress.

Awareness among the men and women on the protection of rights and issues concerning women is a key to remedial factor. Women alone cannot bring absolute eradication of women aggression. Men should be equally responsible pertaining to the problems concerning women. The perpetrator of the violence against women should be made aware of his unlawful acts and subsequent penalties of it. Both men and women should be equally educated about the use and misuse of law and women should be alerted and encouraged to stand up for their rightful claims in every sphere. The legislators, administrators, judiciary, agencies and non-governmental organizations are required to formulate feasible policy measures and programme to protect women against subjecting them as mere objects. Adequate opportunities for women must be given which include employment facilities, equal participation and encouragement in social, political and economic sphere, fair and equal trails and literacy programmes for women. With the fulfilment of all these, there will be a society based on equality and mutual respect and a society with less violence against women.
A victim of violence
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Cases</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>06</th>
<th>07</th>
<th>08</th>
<th>09</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape and Murder</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape attempt/ Molest.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape/Mur. Attempt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnt</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault/Injury</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnap</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaint</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>1308</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Data showing Violence against Women as per reports from Local Newspapers from January, 2005 to December, 2014. (Source: Women Action for Development
3.3. Domestic Violence against Women in Manipur

A phenomenon such as domestic violence continues to be a major inhibiting feature of many women’s lives in Manipur. As one of the most visible and direct indicators of coercive control of women within the conjugal context, domestic violence encapsulates the range of physical and psychological means to coerce and control women. Male violence crosses class boundaries and has no association with poverty or lack of education. As wife battering is concealed from the public eye, it is difficult to estimate its extent in society. For centuries, domestic violence has been perceived as a part of the normative structure in patriarchal societies and is often justified by both men and women. In most societies, women have been victims of abuse by their spouse and other members of their family. The maltreatment goes unnoticed, unpunished and condoned implicitly.

Manipur is not new to the problem of domestic violence against women. In fact, if we go by the statistics, domestic violence against women has grown enormously in recent years. According to NFHS-3 (2005-06), the most common form of violence in all the States is physical violence. Sexual violence is reported least often in most States. But in the State of Manipur, emotional violence and sexual violence are equally prevalent. The prevalence of spousal physical or sexual violence in Manipur is more than 40 percent. According to the National Family Health Survey-3 (2005-2006), Manipur with 43.9% comes behind Bihar (59%), Rajasthan (46.3%) and Madhya Pradesh (45.8%) in the rate of domestic violence against women. This response to questions on domestic violence is quite disturbing as it signals the growing rate of atrocities that women in the State of

Manipur are subjected to. The Government is reluctant to intervene in the private domain of the family, despite the knowledge that domestic violence is a daily occurrence in the State.

Cases of domestic violence are reported high in Manipur. A large number of women continue to be a battered lot within the confines of their homes. Wife-beating and domestic violence is a reality. In such a situation, the supposedly empowered women become docile and subservient, even when their rights are trampled upon. While there have been incidences of domestic violence against women amounting to killing, justice is being denied in most of the cases. Meanwhile, families of such victims, who are not getting justice, are living their lives in dejection.

In general, only a small proportion of women who sought help did so by appealing to the police. One reason women may be reluctant to speak to the police about their experience of violence may be the low representation of women among police personnel. According to a UN report, in almost all countries with available data, the percentage of women who sought help from the police out of all women seeking help for experience of violence was less than 10%. This is also the case in the two districts of Manipur, viz., Imphal (East) and Imphal (West) districts. Victims or their families prefer to take the help of the Meira Paibis or the local clubs or the women organisations. These findings accentuate the assumption that in the vast majority of cases, violence goes unreported to the government officials and so it can be said that administrative records are not appropriate for assessing the prevalence of violence.

Under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, Protection Officers and Service Providers have a pivotal role in the implementation of the Act. The
Protection Officers are assigned the duty of preparing domestic incident report upon receipt of a complaint of domestic violence. A Service Provider may also prepare a domestic incident report upon a request of any aggrieved person. A copy of such a domestic incident report should be forwarded to the Magistrate and the Protection Officer having jurisdiction in the area where the domestic violence is alleged to have taken place.

In the 9 (nine) districts of Manipur, there is inadequate number of Protection Officers and Service Providers in the State as is required under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005. At present, there is no Protection Officer in the Thoubal district of Manipur. Out of the 9 (nine) districts of Manipur, viz., Imphal (West), Imphal (East), Thoubal, Bishnupur, Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Ukhrul and Chandel, only 2 (two) districts have Service Providers during the period of this study. In the Imphal (East) district, there is no Service Provider. The two Service Providers of the Imphal (West) district, namely Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) and the Environment and Economic Management Association (EEMA) are given the responsibility of the Service Providers of Imphal (East) district also. The other district of Manipur which has a Service Provider is Chandel district. There are 3(three) Service Providers in Chandel district. They are – a) Centre for Women and Girls (CWG), b) All Tribal Women’s Organisation and c) Resource Centre for Social Welfare and Community Development.

As per the order of the Social Welfare Department, the Environment and Economic Management Association (EEMA) and the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) has been working as a Service Provider of the Imphal (West) district of Manipur.
Preparation of Domestic Incident Reports are done with the complainant and put up before the Court as soon as possible.

The complainants and respondents are sent to the Service Provider for counselling by the Judicial Magistrates. A counselling session lasts for 2 to 3 hours. The reports are then prepared and put up before the court in time. The Service Provider also attends the court as summoned by the Judicial Magistrate to give evidence for whatever was witnessed and heard during the counselling sessions. Sometimes if counselling alone could not bring satisfaction, the Service Provider visits the neighbourhood of the respondent so as to get a better picture of the alleged acts of domestic violence. In cases where the victim calls for help to rescue her from the perpetrator, the Service Provider, with helpline operator goes to rescue the victim and brought to shelter homes. If needed, the victim is also given medical help. Apart from the cases which come from the court for counselling, the Service Provider also holds counselling sessions of domestic violence cases which comes to it directly.
A victim of domestic violence

A burnt victim of domestic violence