CHAPTER 6

Social Intervention

6.1. Role of *Meira Paibis* and local clubs in preventing domestic violence against women in Manipur

When we talk of social intervention that can contribute to the prevention of domestic violence in Manipur, here the study is confined only to the *Meira Paibis* and local clubs or organisations in the localities (*leikai*). The Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women of 1993 has acknowledged the role of women’s movement around the world in drawing attention to the increasing menace of domestic violence and the nature and severity of this problem. In the Manipur context, the women’s movements in socio-economic and political issues have been quite commendable. Women activists such as the *Meira Paibis* play an active role in resolving social issues, both at the local and state levels. The *Meira Paibis* are among the most known women’s movement in Manipur and is one of a kind in the world and are found in every locality in the *Meitei*-inhabited areas of the State. These torch-bearing women hold torches and roam in the locality at night to keep a check on any unruly behaviour in the locality. Before the start of the *Meira Paibi* movement, there was another women’s movement called the *Nishabandh*. These groups of women were involved in prevention of the use of alcohol and drugs in the society. Their movement to bring down drinking habits amongst the men in Manipuri society is, in fact, a step towards preventing alcoholism from affecting family life. This movement can be said to be a predecessor of the *Meira Paibi* movement.

The popularity of the *Meira Paibi* movement gained impetus in Manipur after the draconian law called the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) was
imposed in the state to combat the problem of insurgency in the State. Under the said law, the armed personnel could arrest any person on mere suspicion. They are also given the power to shoot any person without any proof of their involvement in unlawful activities. The Meira Paibis started night vigils so as to protect innocent people from the misuse of this law by the armed forces. They are, thus, instrumental in maintaining law and order in the society in an informal way.

The activities of the Meira Paibis are influential in bringing about social change through social advocacy and public action. They occupy a certain space in the political arena in the sense that they can question the authorities in case of any infringement on the rights of the people as a whole by the state or non-state actors.¹ In the armed conflict zone of Manipur, women have been coming out on the streets to protect and safeguard the people from human rights violation in the State. Started as a voluntary organisation of women to keep vigilance on atrocities by the armed forces, the Meira Paibis, of late, are no longer a group of women who would gather in the locality to give vigils at night. They have been involved in several other activities which also include issues relating to violence against women.

In recent times, there have been many instances where the Meira Paibis have shown less sensibility in dealing with cases related to women. In extreme cases of domestic violence which resulted in the grievous hurt or death of the victims, the Meira Paibis in collusion with the local clubs have often turned violent and resorted to mob justice by dismantling and burning down the houses of the accused husband and in-laws. Such acts are against the law as the accused persons must be tried according to the law. Also this

is not a wise step as these acts might go against the victim as any evidence to prove that she had been a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband or in-laws may be lost forever in the fire.

However, in other cases of domestic violence, the Meira Paibis and local clubs most often regard them as trivial family matters which should be solved within the family itself and prefer to remain mere spectators. The issue of domestic violence is generally pushed under the carpet. This is because the problem of domestic violence is often individualized and trivialised. The Meira Paibis and local clubs should not take the matter lightly as a family problem and should intervene as quickly as possible so as to prevent further heinous acts that would affect the society at large because individual cases of domestic violence when observed together has the characteristics of a social phenomenon.

Public action results in the shifts in perception and power which, in turn, will bring about major changes in the society. The role of the Meira Paibis and local clubs in solving the problem of domestic violence in the state can be successful only when they can bring about a change in social norms. Firstly, they have to see domestic violence as a social problem and not as something which is justified by silly reasons based on patriarchy, culture and tradition. This is a long term process as this requires a behavioural change of individuals and groups. The Meira Paibis and local clubs, therefore, should be more sensitive to the issue of domestic violence in their locality before the issue goes out of hand and results in the death or injury to the victims. They can contribute in tackling the problem of domestic violence by being the first line of support system to which the victims can share the story of their ordeal.

\(^2\) supra note 17. p.875
As everyone knows, women groups in Manipur have always been in the forefront of any movement to maintain the peace and tranquillity of the society; they should lead from the front to tackle the menace of domestic violence which affects the rights and privileges of an individual member of the society. The *Meira Paibis* should actively organize the men and women against domestic violence so as to prevent their occurrence rather than resorting to counter-violence. Therefore, they along with the local clubs should take matters in their hands and act as mediators between the victims and perpetrators and find out a solution to stop further acts of domestic violence rather than resorting to mob justice after a life has been lost or the damage has been done. They can take the role of counsellors in such cases and try to bring peace between the parties. In other words, they can adopt a conciliatory approach in such matters and work as a mediator. Thus they can help to achieve the legislative intent of passing the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act*. Such a women’s movement can become the most effective agency to combat the inevitable consequences of the prejudice and negative discrimination against women.
A woman with a stone during a protest

Men with *Meiras* in hand staging a protest
A house dismantled by Meira Paibs and members of a local club

A dismantled house
A dismantled house

A dismantled house
Members of a local club burning down the matrimonial house of a victim of domestic violence on her death

Mob culture in tackling domestic violence cases
6.2. Contribution of the NGOs

The United Nations defines non-governmental organisation as a not-for-profit, voluntary citizens’ group, which is organised on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations defines international non-governmental organizations as ‘any organization which is not established by inter-governmental agreements’. Article 71 of the United Nations Charter provides that “the Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within their competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Members of the United Nations concerned.”

Non-governmental organisations are agencies of social and legal changes. Not only this, they work for the mobilisation of the masses for participation in the social, cultural and political arena by trying to bring a change in attitudes of the common people. Thus different NGOs work in different fields. Though they are not accountable to any government department, they sometimes work in collaboration with the Government to plan and implement programmes. The relationship of the NGO with the State has been one that has, at times, appeared complimentary and, at other times, stressful. Yet, successful interventions have shown that the combination of the legal mandate of the State and the committed expertise of the voluntary sector can be fruitful.

To highlight the plight of women victims, some women organisations, mostly urban-based have emerged. These organisations are engaged not only in activism to assert women’s rights. Their main purpose is to create public awareness against the exploitative system. In the beginning, these women organisations took up the issue of
abuses relating to dowry, the husband’s violence against the wife and they subsequently took up different types of exploitation of women which were not confined to intra-familial relations e.g. sexual harassment at workplace. Women’s organisations thus played an important role to highlight the problem of domestic violence in the Indian society.

NGOs, whether their activities are spread worldwide or confine to one country, can contribute substantially in different ways in the promotion and protection of the rights of women victims of domestic violence. There is a great diversity in the NGO responses to domestic violence. Preventive, supportive and rehabilitative strategies have been adopted by the organizations to extend help to women victims grappling with the problem. Interventions have variously focused on the victim, her family, society and the State. By far the most significant achievement of the NGO sector has been its ability to successfully publicize the issue of domestic violence such that the thin divide between the public and private domain with respect to violence against women is blurred.

An NGO would deal with a woman seeking assistance based on its organisation policy, expertise, resources, infrastructure and the background of the woman and the stage of violence against her. The NGOs working on women and their rights mainly provides services like shelter, medical assistance, conciliation, counselling, removal of property from spouse’s house, financial or entrepreneurial assistance, skill training, legal aid and legal literacy.  

In Manipur, the NGOs are registered with the Social Welfare Department of the State government. Not all NGOs deal with women. Mentioned may be made of Human

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3 supra note 16. p. 386
Rights Law Network, Women’s Action for Development, Environment and Economic Management Association (EEMA), Young Women Organisation that work specifically in women-related fields. They play a very important role in the emancipation of women in Manipur. These NGOs are doing a lot to provide assistance to women in need of help and protection. They also provide skills and other assistance which might help them to be economically independent. Sometimes the NGOs organize a get together of all women who approach them for help and initiate discussion on topics of everybody’s concern.

Perhaps, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 is the only Act which engaged the NGOs at the implementation level. It has thus filled up the lacunae between legislations and the public especially victims to a certain extent. NGOs may work directly with victims and assist in solving their problems. Some NGOs perform the task of Service Providers. Since NGOs concentrate more on service provision, they often collaborate with advocacy groups to provide legal assistance before the government authorities and the court to ensure full protection to victim’s rights. Some NGOs provide rehabilitation for the victims of domestic violence. They also provide legal assistance by taking initiative in bringing those cases before the courts of law where domestic violence has taken place but no action has been taken by the victim to sought reliefs because of the lack of resources or because of ignorance. In Center of Legal Research vs. State of Kerala, the Supreme Court of India observed that the voluntary organisations and social action groups must be encouraged and supported by the State in operating their legal aid programmes.\(^4\)

\(^4\) AIR 1986 SC 1322
To address women’s victimisation, the NGOs and State sectors can initiate a wide range of public intervention strategies. These efforts should concentrate on different dimensions of domestic violence. Some focus on immediate needs such as short stay homes to provide relief from abuse. Others are directed toward long-term or preventive measures such as the monitoring of existing cases, creating opportunities for economic self-reliance, consciousness-raising, and mobilizing the community to stop domestic violence.

NGOs can play an important role in mobilising the public opinion by arranging seminars, conferences and meetings on different aspects of domestic violence. Administrative officers, police officers, judges, advocates and journalists may be invited to participate in such discussions. NGOs may also contribute to the society by providing information and data preparing reports on survey conducted as to the prevalence of domestic violence in the society. Such reports may be circulated as widely as possible to make the people and the government conscious of the facts. Thus, fact-finding and publicity tasks can be performed by the NGOs.

NGOs may perform the task of processing of information i.e. educating women about the extent of their rights and disseminating information about domestic violence and freedom to seek assistance from other non-governmental organisations and institutions. NGOs have made an indelible impact on public life in recent decades, in many ways, by raising public awareness about the various forms of violence perpetrated against women and by helping individual women with shelter and legal aid.

NGOs provide comprehensive victim support systems which include shelters, legal support, counseling and economic empowerment. Thus the NGOs play a pivotal role in
giving protection to the victims of domestic violence. They need to organise themselves in order to increase their visibility and viability in the development process and build pressure on the policy makers for the consideration of gender issues. A single NGO cannot solve the problems being faced by these communities. The people of the society should come together and solve their problems.
An NGO organising a panel discussion on domestic violence against women in Manipur

Members of an NGO interacting with media persons and the members of the community.
A group of Meira Paibi interacting with members of an NGO regarding a case of domestic violence

A woman making dishwash
6.3. Role of the media in creating awareness of the legal rights of women

The role of media in the socio-legal system has been growing in the recent times. It has also been playing a crucial role of bringing up issues of concerned public and to the notice of courts, investigating agencies and the government. The importance of the media is that it is at the heart of the social, legal and political interaction. The mass media coverage of cases of violence against women has increased over the last few years. This raises the inevitable and vexed question as to whether this reflects a general rise in the incidence of crimes against women, or a greater public awareness, and consequently a greater media interest. At the same time, the obvious and well-established fact is that, of the total cases of violence against women, only a fraction are reported to the police, and again, only a small portion of these cases receives media publicity, usually depending on their sensational character. However, with the growing number of women journalists and with an increasing awareness of gender equality, the issues of women’s oppression have been recently receiving a sympathetic and even a feminist coverage. Its solemn duty is to disseminate comprehensive news and views of public importance from diverse sources.

Influence of media can bring about drastic change in society. Investigative journalism and exposure of crimes through the media can influence the enforcement agencies to spring into action and inspire them to work towards more effective implementation of the laws meant to ameliorate the condition of women.

Occasionally, a case of domestic violence becomes a media event. And for a while, public figures give the issue their attention and a small amount of progress is made. But when the interest dies down, the curtain comes down and domestic violence is once again relegated to a place where the issue is discussed only by professionals, advocates
and activists. Violence against women becomes the object of media attention and government policy only when such acts of inhumane atrocities against them crossed the extreme limit. It is not because of an increase in the frequency in which it happens, or because the government and public have become more concerned.

Domestic violence must be regarded as a social problem and the media should sensitize the society about it. Domestic violence against women depends on societal attitudes. Value systems in the society are continuously reinforced by social sanctions as well as by the popular media, and have been customarily used by power structures as a weapon to suppress protest or deviance.\(^5\)

The media can bring out matters pertaining to various aspects of the issue of domestic violence. In the wider social arena, the all-pervasive nature of women’s oppression can be brought in the limelight by media coverage. The media have always fulfilled an important watchdog function of not only monitoring social events but also commenting on them in the light of their own ideology. The journalists’ ideological biases vary significantly and shape public perception in diverse directions.

The media should put all efforts to promote awareness about domestic violence and to inform the public about resources available for victims. Here lies the importance of the role of media in affecting public opinion on domestic violence. The media plays a pivotal role in both influencing and changing social norms and behaviour. In the area of domestic violence, media campaigns can help to reverse social attitudes that tolerate violence against women by questioning patterns of violent behaviour accepted by families and societies. The media needs to collaborate with other stakeholders under the

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 to focus on creating new messages and new responses to reduce domestic violence. The media can also play a critical role in other types of advocacy, such as legislative reforms. A positive media attention can generate necessary public support for efforts to fill up any lacunae in the legal system.6

Dominant perceptions of what constitutes news affect the coverage of women and their concerns directly and adversely. Most issues of special concern to women do not fit into the traditional concepts of what constitutes news. The absence of women from the news pages shows the trivialization of matters related to problems faced by women at large. The invisibility and inaudibility of women in society is thus further perpetuated and enhanced by the media. A number of serious women’s issues are not overtly violent or dramatic and, although often involving large numbers, the affected persons are not necessarily part of a readily identifiable group or concentrated in a particular geographical area. Further, many aspects of women’s victimisation are so commonplace and widely accepted that they are not considered sufficiently extraordinary to merit coverage.

This is reflected in the kind of women’s issues which receive attention from the media. Violent atrocities against women provoke far more coverage than less gruesome but no less debilitating forms of oppression. Issues related to women’s work, health, position in society and experiences within the family prompted far less coverage. When such issues manage to make it to the media, it was because they were referred to by one or other of the traditional sources of news – the government, the police, Parliament, the courts, national or international organizations, well-known personalities, conferences and

workshops, etc. Sometimes the media tends to sensationalise violence against women but it seldom focuses on the reasons for such violence and the means to curb/tackle the problem.

Considering the various news reports on violence against women in the media, it is obvious that given the social acceptance of the problem, domestic violence against women is not an attractive topic for the media. The issue of domestic violence against women is approached through bare reporting of the facts and giving mere statistics. There is lack of positive and sensitive coverage of issues concerning women in the media. Except for some irregular articles and news on extreme cases of domestic violence, the media is generally quiet on the subject and hence their contribution towards addressing the issue of domestic violence is not adequate.

The media is one of the key actors that can shape the public opinions and activities of the masses. The construct of domestic violence which exists among the common people is also dependent on its representation in the media. Therefore, it is necessary to have regular public discourse on the endemic problem of domestic violence that has engulf the society at large and probable ways of combating domestic violence against women. In case of inactivity of state machineries and non-governmental organisations working on domestic violence, media representation of the problem may bring them to their toes.
Media persons interacting with people

Media persons at the residence of a victim (Source: Women Action for Development)