

Reinforcing subordination

AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN ARMED CONFLICT SITUATIONS

by Roshmi Goswami

Lingthanghuanga is 45 years old today, but tears ushered by pain and shame fill her eyes as she recalls the traumatic events of that fateful day when she was a slip of a girl of 13. She was detained in a room and continuously raped by five armed personnel till she managed to escape through the window and run to the forest crying for help. As the middle-aged woman shared her pain, she also told us that she had never shared this with anyone, not even her husband. Her family members, the community and the church have all preferred not to talk about it or help her to talk about it. She has thus lived life quietly remembering the incident as a shameful act, which had to be hidden deep down within her.

As Liang and others like her from the remote north eastern corners of India relate their stories, it is reinforced over and over again that while all sections of civilian population are affected by situations of armed conflict, “women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex.” Women experience greater violations being caught between different violators. On the one hand, the state targets women and uses violence against them as a means of suppression; and on the other, the community is apathetic to the special problems faced by women. Often also, in such situations of ongoing conflict as the one prevailing in large parts of North East India, gross violations of civil and political rights prevail because of the political situation. This situation is often used as justification to disregard the violations of women’s rights that are either consequences of discrimination

against women sanctioned by the community or of inaction by the state. But as signatories to the Women’s Convention, the state is obligated to address discrimination at all levels. Our study attempted to come to an understanding of the steps taken by the government in strife-torn North East India to prevent discrimination, address past discriminations and accelerate the process of equality. The study, co-ordinated by the International Women’s Rights Action Watch-Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), has also tried to monitor what kind of enabling conditions have been provided for women to assert their rights in an area of conflict. It also tried to monitor the kinds of temporary special measures that have been put in place for women to enable them to handle discrimination and the negation of their rights, which is consequent upon the ongoing conflict. The study was an attempt to understand and

surface inter-linked and underlying causes that make women particularly vulnerable in situations of armed conflict.

The objectives of the study were to:

- ♦ Highlight the depth and different dimensions of violations/discriminations suffered by women in armed conflict situations and get government and non-government organisations to address the specific needs of women in such situations
- ♦ Highlight the lacuna in the existing judicial system in ensuring justice to women who were violated in such situations, and to reiterate the need to ensure gender-sensitive justice
- ♦ Work out strategies to involve women in decision-making in conflict resolution, post-conflict reconstruction and in the peace process.
- ♦ Strengthen the networking of women’s groups in the region on issues of violence against women

The research was undertaken within the framework of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and with an attempt to focus on the fundamental principles of the Convention, viz., equality, non-discrimination and state obligation/accountability.

The Convention promotes the substantive model of equality, which entails a corrective or substantive approach aimed at transforming unequal power relations between women and men. This transformation can be achieved by providing:

Information gathered through secondary sources (human rights documentation by human rights groups in North East India, news clippings, and personal interactions) and two group consultations/workshops brought out the:

- ♦ Ground realities of women's condition and position in an area of conflict
- ♦ Communities/state understanding of the gender dimensions of human rights violations
- ♦ Action taken to mitigate violations and discriminations
- ♦ Provisions made for victims of violations and gaps in

ly devastating for women for it perpetrates women's subordination in an insidiously deep-rooted manner. As pointed out by Radhika Coomaraswamy in the report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women: "By using the honour paradigm, linked as it is to concepts of chastity, purity and virginity, stereotypical concepts of femininity have been formally enshrined in humanitarian law." This has far-reaching psychological impact on the victims for as pointed out by Coomaraswamy, "when rape is perceived as a crime against honour or morality, shame commonly ensues for the victim who is often viewed by the community as "dirty" or "spoiled." Consequently, many women will neither report nor discuss the violence that has been perpetrated against them. The nature of rape and the silence that tends to surround it makes it particularly difficult to investigate women's rights violations." Or as our work has shown, it is particularly difficult to investigate without causing further violence to the victim by making her re-live the whole episode again and again. Our case studies also showed that it is truly "a battle among men over the bodies of women."

The effects of violence on women have different dimensions. Some of our case studies showed that the psychological traumas associated with sexual violation and with the loss or disappearance of family members last long after peace returns. The conflict in the region, which has manifested itself as a low-intensity silent war and which in some areas have gone on for decades, has no frontiers, entering every home, neighbourhood and

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- ♦ Enabling conditions in the form of basic social, economic and cultural contexts within which women may be able to lead their lives with dignity
- ♦ Affirmative action in the form of temporary special measures where women's needs are especially recognised and catered to, and provisions made to remove historical barriers to women's equality

In monitoring state action on gender equality, as pointed out, an attempt was made to assess what the state has put in place for the prevention and prohibition of discrimination, identification and redress of discrimination, imposition of sanctions against discriminating action against women's rights and equality through proactive measures, and acceleration of *de facto* equality.

- ♦ Steps needed to be taken

From all the given data and case studies, we were able to broadly categorise the existing disparity or discrimination against women in situations of conflict in the areas we studied: violence, marginalisation of women's rights, exclusion of women from peace processes, and exclusion of women from decision making.

Violence against women during times of armed conflict is especially horrifying and has been a persistent and widespread practice over centuries. There is almost an unwritten legacy that this is an accepted norm. Until recently, violence against women in such situations has been couched in terms of protection and honour. This has been particular-

community. Normal social and economic life has been seriously compromised and the impact of the violence and the stress associated with the constant threats and anxieties of living in an atmosphere of unremitting aggression and fear has been substantial. Over and above the overt impact of violence, the long-lasting effects of disruption of societal and community life processes that influence health and well-being has been all pervasive and serious. The psychological well-being of individuals is strongly bound to the psychological health of the immediate and larger supporting environment of the family-kin-family. In many areas, this has broken down, leading to disastrous consequences like drug addiction, prostitution, starvation and psychosomatic disorders. Furthermore, continued violence in rural areas has affected livelihoods. Properties have been lost, there is lack of food and personal security even within one's own home. Continued tension and stress are the other effects. With many of the men killed or "missing," there is an increase in female-headed households. It has also resulted in large-scale migrations to the urban centres by women and this is most pronounced in the Bodo-dominated areas of Assam.

Besides the issue of violence that changed the face of women's rights, bringing them into the centre stage in the human rights debates, the Beijing Platform for Action has also identified other critical areas into which immediate intervention and action is needed. This becomes all the more crucial in situations of armed conflict. While the con-

sequences of sexual violence is physically, emotionally and psychologically devastating for the women victims, the survivors of such violations have the burden of silently coping with post-trauma stress almost without any kind of support. This is so because, any kind of sexual violation is looked upon by society as an act of "dishonour" rather than as a violation of the fundamental human right of every woman. This has diverse and far-reaching ramifications. In situations where the conflict is linked with the whole question of identity and ethnicity, this leads to increasing societal control over women's mobility, control over their bodies, and

ties, and this was clear in our case studies. Women of different age groups and occupations, including survivors of sexual violence have had to single-handedly run households as the men have either been killed or have disappeared. Not only were women forced to become the primary bread earners but they also had to grapple with the problems of providing for the family when the means for livelihood were lost and food security threatened. Alternative means of livelihood are not provided, which results in increased powerlessness and dependency of the women. Again, there is the additional burden of having to provide

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how they express themselves. Assertion of ethnicity is often more exaggerated, and patriarchal and fundamentalist values and ideologies are reinforced. The key word is again "honour," and women are expected to keep the "honour" of the community or collectivity by becoming the custodian of tradition and culture. While women are expected to uphold these traditions and both the negative and positive aspects of their native culture without question, men have the choice of being unbound and unregulated by even the positive values and belief systems of their indigenous cultures.

The other burden that women have to carry is additional socio-economic responsibili-

shelter and food to militant groups, but as shelter-providers, they face security risks for the entire family.

The health implications of prolonged conflict are tremendous. There is an acute rise in the incidence of infectious diseases in refugee and relief camps. There is a high prevalence of malnutrition especially among women and children. And of course there is the largely hidden but long-term problems of fear, pain, loss, guilt, anxiety, hatred and depression. But health services often break down or are disrupted. And even if services do not break down completely, health personnel are reluctant to enter and work in conflict areas for security reasons. While this

The Socio-political Background of North East India

The North Eastern Region (NER) of India consists of seven states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura. The region is bound on the north by Eastern Himalayan ranges, in the south by the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chin Hills and in the west by the western mountains. It has over 4,500 km of external frontier with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, making this region geo-politically and strategically significant.

Yet, despite having vast potential resources, the NER stands way below the national average in terms of developmental indices such as per capita state domestic product, power consumption per capita, and road length per square km. In other words, fifty years of planning in the country has made very little change, if any, in the socio-economic life of the region. All these have led to a widespread feeling of neglect by the centre. People have bitter grievances that “colonial exploitation”—extracting the wealth of this region for others’ enrichment—still persists. Most of the inhabitants of the region traditionally had access to their own or community-owned land and resources. Today although the indigenous population does not perceive itself as being poor, they do not feel well off either. There is in them a deep sense of relative deprivation, which has been the basis of much of the unrest and upheaval in the region. Communication and other infrastructure are especially poor in the region. A national research group has estimated that, economically, the region

as a whole is 30 percent behind the rest of the country despite the fact that it is extremely rich in natural resources.

In addition, the region is not a homogenous unit but home to several diverse ethnic groups and sub-groups. Each group is keenly aware of its ethnicity and fiercely guards and asserts their ethnicity with passion and fervour. The hopes, aspirations, ethnic loyalties and reticent nature of the people are little understood by the Indian State, and this has led to a deep sense of alienation in the region. This has naturally resulted in the airing of different political demands of different communities, which manifest in assertions for self-determination ranging from seeking greater autonomy to complete secession from the Indian union.

The conflicts in the various constituent units of the NER have different origins and goals, all rooted in the general lack of development. In Nagaland and in the Naga-dominated areas of Manipur, the issue is non-acknowledgement of the Indian State. Having resisted British rule, they refused to be part of the Indian State. In Mizoram, besides other factors, the conflict has been the result of gross neglect and apathy to the plight of the Mizos during the devastating famine in 1959. For the Meiteis of Manipur, it was the dubious merger with India in 1949 that inspired them to ask questions about where they stood vis-à-vis the Indian State, and Marxism and Maoism have been the ideological hallmarks of their movements. The move to revive Meitism and the violent questioning of the authority of Indian State still continues. In Tripura, it has been a fight for protecting ethnic identity and land

holdings by the indigenous tribal population, as they have been reduced to less than 30 percent of the total populations as against the immigrant Bengalis who came from across the border. In Assam, similarly, the fear of getting swamped by an immigrant population from across the border was the starting point of a long-drawn period of unrest. In the post-independence period, Assam saw a phenomenal increase in the population rate. With the land remaining constant, abnormal increase in the density of population led to chaotic pressure upon arable land, deforestation, soil erosion, fragmentation and decreasing agricultural productivity. The other issue raised at this point was the draining of the province's natural resources by the Indian State without Assam gaining a fair share in the returns. Starting initially as a student mass movement supported by almost all sections of society, one section of the movement decided to take a more violent and radical stand and this violence continues to date. When the aspirations for Assam's greater autonomy and respect for their distinct identity were not heeded and instead were trampled upon, the Bodos rose up in arms to assert themselves. This kind of anger and hurt at being marginalised by the dominant groups in the region created deep chasms of distrust and hostility. In many of these areas, the Indian Army has been called in to handle the conflict, and in many of the states, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 is in operation. This gives unbridled powers to the state to conduct operations to curb “disturbances.”

The effect of all this on women has been especially devastating.

affects both men and women, women in need of reproductive health support services are especially affected. They have to either travel long distances for such services or do without any medical help. They are often unwilling or physically or financially unable to travel. When services are not available, the tendency of the women or by male family members to underplay women's health needs is further accentuated.

Our study also showed that in situations of armed conflict, there is greater marginalisation of women's rights, as both the armed forces and the militant groups reinforce patriarchal values. On the one hand, women are exploited by the state agencies; but on the other, adequate provisions are not made to safeguard their job security or to cope with the greater economic burden and social and psychological tension. At the same time, there is pressure on women from within the community to uphold culture and ethnic identities, which inhibits or obstructs the questioning of gender-biased customary laws and practices. Women lose control over their bodies, sexual and reproductive rights. They are denied decision-making roles and their mobility, restricted.

In addition, any struggle that continues without any solution in sight gradually goes through a downhill process in terms of values and ideologies. Very often, the lesser and ideologically unsound members of a group exploit the situation to settle personal scores. This further perpetuates the subordination of women and establishes male superiority.

But despite the enormous impact of conflict on women,

they do not play a decisive role in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Women are either perceived as victims or as healers, but never taken in as decision-makers in the process. While full attention must be given to the victim-survivors of armed conflict, the method of reconstruction and rehabilitation must necessarily be within the empowerment and equality framework. Women perceive peace as a condition that is free of violence of any kind in society, and this implies the co-existence of all people with basic human dignity. This conception of peace begins from one's immediate family and goes on to cover the state and finally the international sphere.

This was shown in the context of North East India. The extremely low participation of women in decision making bodies—whether it be the traditional bodies or the modern democratic institutions like legislative assemblies—has also largely contributed to the impasse in the conflict resolution process. The lack of political will by the members of the Indian Parliament to pass the Women's Bill has had chain reactions of rejection of women's participation in the political process at the State Assembly levels. Furthermore, the non-representation of women in these institutions has contributed towards ushering in "development" in the region that is not "people-centred" and "people friendly." This in turn has aggravated the situation of conflict.

Women's Role in Peace Processes

However, women's groups have persisted in their own way to express their desire for peace and to condemn violence. The most prominent among such groups are

the Naga Mother's Association (NMA) of Nagaland, the Mothers' Union of Tura and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur. In a symbolic gesture of condemnation and rejection of violence whosoever be the perpetrator, the NMA has persisted in covering the body of every victim of violence with a black shroud. This silent yet eloquent statement has not gone unnoticed or unheeded, and today the NMA is also playing a pivotal role in conflict resolution. The Maira Paibis or torchbearers of Manipur is another important group that has contributed towards bringing normalcy to the aggravated situation.

In all these however, women are in the peace process because of their own initiative. When the state initiates to involve them, it is really to be go-betweeners, to play the role of the "healer" or the "pacifier." There has been no effort on the side of the state or non-state agencies to involve women in actual negotiations. This merely goes to re-emphasise the lack of understanding of peace in terms of mutuality and equality, and of viewing the peace process as a kind of "settlement." Furthermore, the non-participation of women in these processes has resulted in defocusing the fall out of armed conflict on women and in marginalising women's needs and aspirations.

Roshmi Goswami is a founding member of the North East Network and is a native to the region she writes about. She played a pivotal role in the mobilisation of women in her region for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and since then has been involved in shaping the women's movement in North East India. She works full time with the North East Network and is presently the co-ordinator of the International Women's Rights Action Watch-Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP) South Asian Monitoring Network study on women and armed conflict situations.

For more information, write to the North East Network, 42 Deshbandu Society, 15 Patparganj, Delhi 110092, India.