

<http://www.passblue.com/2017/09/05/in-lush-manipur-women-work-for-peace-as-militarization-marches-on/>

In Lush Manipur, Women Work for Peace as Militarization Marches On

PassBlue

Binalakshmi Nepram



Manipuri female leaders from different ethnic groups coming together for a peace meeting. The region has been embroiled in conflict for decades with no letup in sight. BINALAKSHMI NEPRAM

Manipur, a state of exceptional beauty in a little-known corner of northeastern India, was an independent region until 1949 when, in a controversial move, it was merged into the Indian union. Situated in an emerald green valley surrounded by nine blue mist-covered mountain ranges, the state has been seriously affected since 1949 by many continuous armed conflicts.

The government of India has sent in more than 100,000 Indian security forces and paramilitary units to deal with 60 armed insurgent groups.

The state, which borders Burma, is home to 2.2 million people from 39 indigenous ethnic groups and communities whose main lingua franca is Manipuri, or Meitei-lon, part of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages.

In the many years of conflict, 20,000 people have died in Manipur and more than 1,500 extrajudicial killings have been recorded in the state, along with many cases of disappearances. An Indian martial law, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, has been enforced in our region since 1958. Under this act anyone can be arrested, imprisoned or killed on mere suspicion charges.

Manipur is one of the most militarized and weaponized regions of Asia. In these circumstances civilians, mostly women and children, have been caught between guns of the government and those of nonstate actors. The entrenched state of conflict has widowed more than 20,000 women, with many children recruited as soldiers.

What we endure is unknown by the wider world because for decades news from our region was not allowed to filter to New Delhi, and media and visitors were not allowed to

<http://www.passblue.com/2017/09/05/in-lush-manipur-women-work-for-peace-as-militarization-marches-on/>

enter our indigenous territories. We were repeatedly warned not to tell the story of Manipur to the outside world.

In 2007, the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network was launched to respond to the humanitarian crisis inflicted on the women and families who must contend with the violence in the state. We go from village to village when we hear that a killing or violence has occurred. We then support the women and their families, making sure there is food on table, children are sent to school, women are helped to earn an income and file litigation on the deaths of loved ones.

We have helped more than 5,000 women in 300 villages in Manipur as well as across Northeast India and have raised the income levels of women by 35 to 100 percent. For us, the women of Manipur who used to live below the poverty line and have lost loved ones in the fighting taught us that social transformation can happen if a collective intent for change and dedication exists.



A Manipuri in the Bishnupur District has learned to weave in her mud hut to create an income. The long simmering conflicts have left 20,000 women husbandless. BINALAKSHMI NEPRAM

Besides direct survivors' assistance, in 2007 we set up the country's first women-led disarmament organization, the Control Arms Foundation of India. The goal was to point out that conflict exists in our lives, families, communities and nation, and that the heavy influx of small arms and light weapons has led to a huge loss of innocent lives.

Our research found that 58 types of weapons from more than 13 countries have flooded Manipur in the past 40 years. The United States may have never heard of Manipur, but the American M-16 gun is a favorite of many armed local groups. India has imported over 200,000 AK-47s from Bulgaria for counterinsurgency operations. Two to four people are killed every day in Manipur, like a slow genocide. Young men between 19 to 40 years old are all suspects.

We live in times of great irony. India, the land that gave yoga to the world, is currently the world's largest importer of arms, while on a global gender index, we are 104th among 193 countries.

<http://www.passblue.com/2017/09/05/in-lush-manipur-women-work-for-peace-as-militarization-marches-on/>

Despite repeated threats against our foundation's work, we continue to mitigate conflict and rampant gun violence and ensure the rule of law. If working for the rights of female survivors of conflict is called "antinational," so be it.

Because the government of India does not officially acknowledge the conflicts in Manipur, it said at a meeting in Geneva on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) that United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 does not apply to the region. Women of Manipur and around Northeast India, however, realize the importance of this historic resolution and its meaning for women in conflicts.

We have organized peace congregations, trained women in our villages, adopted several resolutions and drafted India's first national action plan on women, peace and security to submit to the government. We also submitted several cases of sexual violence in conflict under Security Council Resolution 1820, but the cases were never published in a UN special rapporteur's report.

There are currently 17 peace talks going on in different stages in Manipur and across Northeast India, but no female participants active in the negotiations. In 2010, the Northeast India Women's Initiative for Peace was formed to promote the role of women in peacemaking, and efforts are underway to found a women-led national action plan on women, peace and security issues.

Nation-building cannot be done at gunpoint and left to men. It must involve women and people of all genders and be done with love, care, dignity and respect. Military solutions, violence and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act have failed in the Northeast for more than 70 years.