



Role of Women Civil Social Organization in Resisting Gender-based Violence in Manipur.

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the status of women and the role of *Meira Paibi* in a Meitei society in Manipur, a conflict-ridden state in North-east India. History has recorded that the women have publicly protested and provided for the people of Manipur without prioritizing self-empowerment. Two organizations 'Young Women Help Organization' and 'Organization for Indian Women against Crime' addresses and documents the story of women related crime and violence – such as domestic violence, family conflict, polygamy, sexual harassment, rape, murder in the family and any other issue relate to civil conflict as an alternative to judicial law. However, they are not operational during times of state emergency. They investigate issues related to the situation of women and children in the camps of the victims of the Meitei-Kuki militia conflict of 2023 under the guidance of COCOMI for the common goal of safeguarding national integrity.

Keyword: Women's organization, Civil Organization, Domestic Violence, Manipur Crime and Violence, Manipur Civil Justice.

Manipur is a state in north-east India with a total area of 22327 square Km. Geographically, it can broadly be divided into hills and plains, where the hills surround the plains, forming a bowl-like structure. It is inhabited by 2,570,390¹ people belonging to various communities, namely Meitei, Manipuri Brahmins, Naga, Kuki, Pangal (Manipuri Muslims), and many other small tribes, including the Mayang (people from mainland India). All the community uses Meitei language as the common language for official and business purposes along with English. Since pre-colonial times, Manipur was a self-sufficient kingdom with both men and women working together, forming a women's network for merchandising and men for securing and protecting the borders. History had recorded many women's movements in Manipur starting with the 1904 *First Nupi Lan* (Women's Agitation) going forward towards a role of the safeguarding and protecting the people as well as the integrity of Manipur. These women along with men had created many women civil social organizations pre- and post-Independence, namely Bharat Mahila Samaj (1933), Manipur Mahila Sanmelani (1940), Women's Assembly Demand Committee (1960), *Nisha Bandh* Group (mid-1950s), *Meira Paibi* (early 1980s), Extrajudicial Execution Victims Family Association (EEVFAM – 2012) any many other NGOs. All these social bodies are formed in response to the atrocities of the governing body, either the British, the state government, or the insurgent group prevailing in Manipur. They had volunteered to preserve the moral values of society and safeguard the human rights of the inhabitants. To date, the *Meira Paibi* (Torch bearer) is protesting and protecting any social or civil injustice in the society.

Two civil social groups that focus only on women-related crime and violence from the valley of Manipur are the Young Women Help Organization (YWHO) and the Organization for Indian Women Against Crime (OIWAC). On 6th June 2011, Manipur recorded a new history on women civil social body. Thousands of women gathered at G.M. Hall at Imphal with the aim of forming a civil social body to protect, help, and enlighten the women in Manipur against crime and violence irrespective of their class, cast, and community. This gathering was led by 30 members, of which 20 are the main work person. WHO was formed on this day, and along with it, a journal named *Nupigi Punshi* (Life of Women) was published to enlighten the readers on the crime and violence faced by women in their domestic sphere. The organization have nine main members and 41 staff with Lawyer Thangjam Shanti Devi as the president cum advisor of the organization. She is also the editor of the Journal. Later, in March 2013, a division of the organization led by Arambam Ongbi Robita Leima founded OIWAC at the Delhi University complex along with the Manipur Students' Association Delhi

¹ As per 2011 census. It is the latest census as 2021 census was not conducted due to COVID-19.

(MSAD), giving the organization a national platform. On the same day, the journal *Women and Crime* was published, with Arambam Ongbi Robita Leima as its editor. The organization has 500 members, including five main Members, distributed in 60 centres. The journals *Nupigi Punshi* and *Women and Crime* are memoirs of the victims of all the crime and violence that the organization had helped solve. In a personal interview, Thangjam Shanti Devi said that these journals are for social awareness, especially for young women. It is a monthly journal, and the stories are incidents of the previous month. The identity of the victims and the perpetrator are not revealed in the journal, unless it is crime related to rape or murder. The motto behind the publication of the journals is that both the president believes in the idea of 'enlightenment through reading'.² This paper brings forward the contribution and achievement of these civil social groups in a disturbed state where women are upfront worriers as opposed to any civil atrocity.

This paper analyses 1413 articles recorded in both journals from 2011 to 2023. With grounded theory as its methodology, the articles can broadly be divided into four groups, based on the type of violence and the brutality of the crime as memoirs. The articles can broadly be divided into four categories, namely, Family conflict (57%), violent crimes (21%), social conflicts and stigma (18%), and monetary crimes (4%). The organizations consider the Meitei cultural and traditional practices and judicial law in handling each case.

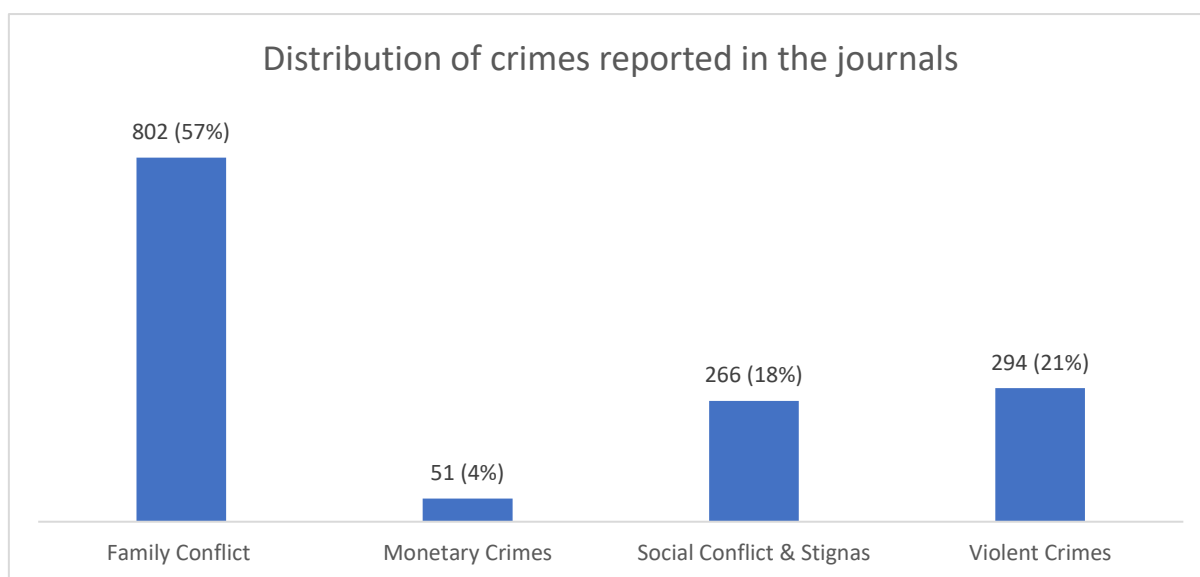


Figure 1: Distribution of crimes reported in journals

I. Cases related to social conflicts and stigmas.

The recorded history of Manipur, especially Meitei community, had recorded many narrations of empowered women in Manipur. However, these empowered women had not called out for their gender upliftment in the context of the society or community framework.

Poverty and the continuous atrocity in the state forced the women out of their homes to manoeuvre to provide for the family. A Meitei woman is free to roam or run a business at the market, provided she completes the household chores before she leaves the house and should return before the sun sets. If she fails, she is vulnerable to accusations of relations outside marriage or punishment from her husband or elders of the family. Therefore, the power lies in the hands of the patriarchs. For any social taboo, it is the woman who faces the consequences. For instance – if a woman is abducted and raped, she will file case against the perpetrator and seek justice, but in Meitei community if the man claims his desire for the women and wants to marry her, the woman and her family prefer settling with marriage rather than filing a case. This practice in Manipur is called *Nupi Chenba* or *Nupi Chingba*³. This led to underage marriage where innocent girls and boys fall for early marriage. In January 2013, *Nupigi Punshi*, a 25-year-old married man, wooed and eloped a 16-year-old girl, violating her maidenhood and seeking marriage. Her mother was against the relationship and sought justice through the organization. For such cases, the organization listens to both the parties and the opinions of the victim and the perpetrator and proceeds accordingly. If the elopement involves a minor, they advise and enlighten the minor to avoid early marriage as it will lead to hardship later and not to think about the izzat or stigma.

The *Nupi Chenba* practice also affects the society as it gives license to anyone who wants to marry, irrespective of their age or marital status. In June 2016, A mother sought help from the WHO as her daughter was continuously tortured by her drug addict husband. She also added that they eloped and married when they were in ninth grade, against the opinion of their parents. The parents give in to the elopement as they are

² The presidents had shared their belief in the personal interview.

³ *Nupi Chenba* – to elope with a woman; *Nupi Chingba* or *Faba* – to abduct a woman.

worried about the stigma that will befall their daughter. In cases related to drug abuse, they advise to keep the addict at the rehabilitation centre, or if the woman wants separation, then both the family of the husband and wife are called and discussed for a peaceful separation.

The organizations also welcome men who are victims of such cultural practices. In December 2016, a man approached the OIWAC for justice as his wife had eloped with his cousin. For such cases, the organization condemns and scolds the perpetrator for violating the cultural norms. At the same time, they also make the spouse realize his negligence towards his wife, leading to relations outside marriage. In percentile, the cases related to social conflict and stigma are 18% that the organizations had deliver justice peacefully.

A few more examples of social conflict and stigmas cases are –

Sl. No.	Rough translation of the title in the journal	Date	Journal
1.	Story of a woman who earn her living by selling her body	July 2011	Nupigi Punshi
2.	Help from judicial law against prostitution	January 2013	Nupigi Punshi
3.	A woman eloped with another man while she was waiting for the marriage date for her previous elopement with another man.	February 2014	Women and Crime
4.	A woman was accused that she was involved in inappropriate act.	May 2015	Women and Crime
5.	Against uploading unseen pictures on Facebook	January 2017	Women and Crime

II. Cases Related to Family Conflict

Family conflict is the highest with 57 percentiles, among all the cases that reach out to the organizations. The conflict may be due to various reasons –

- i. Family issues (69%) – conflict with the in-laws or fight due to misunderstanding,
- ii. Extra marital affairs (17%) – polygamy, polyandry, and flirting, relation outside marriage,
- iii. Elopement related (10%) – underage elopement, forcefully elopement, eloped and refused to marry, etc.
- iv. Domestic violence (4%) – Conflict occurs between the spouses due to alcoholism, drug abuse, etc.. The crime can be afflicted by man to woman, woman to woman, and woman to man.

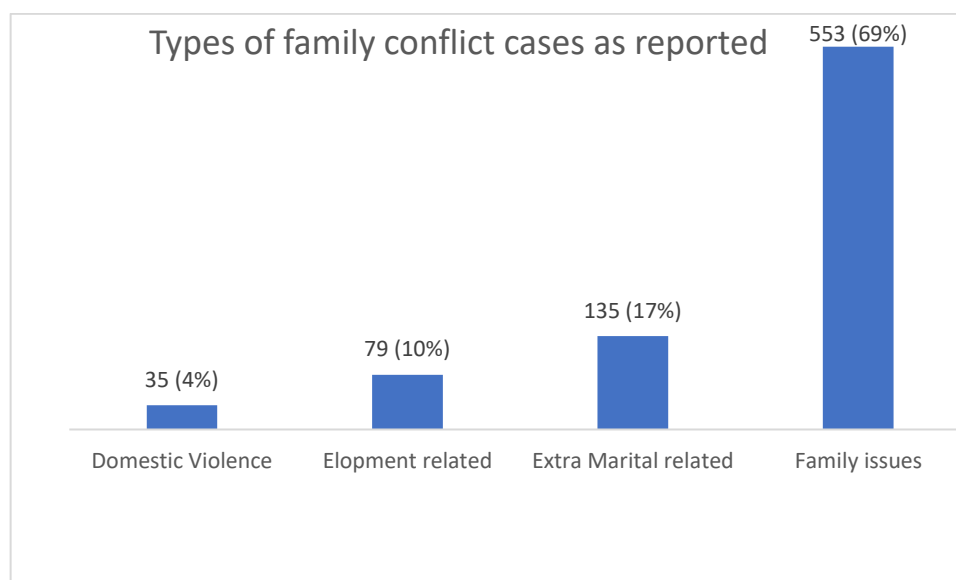


Figure 2: Type of family conflict cases as reported

In February 2014, a woman sought help from the OIWAC to make her husband pay for the physical harm that he had done due to domestic violence. The organization called both parties on a fixed date and listened to the story of both sides. The woman narrated that her husband broke her arm while defending herself from the physical blow of her husband, when she enquires about the money that her law had given. Later, she was tortured multiple times, despite her broken hand, and asked to leave the house. Fearing the social stigma of divorce, she bore the hardship, but the violence became life-threatening, and she could not face it anymore. On the other hand, her husband accused her of not doing the household work properly, so he was punishing her, and he refused to pay for the expenses. For such cases, where the perpetrator is non-cooperative with the call of the organization, they enlighten them with the judiciary law that the law provides against domestic violence, after which they agree to the decision of the organization.

The organization handles domestic violence between the spouse depending on the decision of the victim, if (s)he prefer staying with his/her spouse, they advise and enlighten the perpetrator to clarify the misunderstanding or settle the conflict between the couple either related to alcoholism or drug addiction; and if the victim wants divorce and prefer staying at their maternal house then the organization help her with divorce along with some allowance from the husband (if she is with child or if she wants). For women who don't have any place to return, the organization allows them to stay at the Home⁴ for a few months, and if they want to prolong the stay, the organization arranges a place for them to stay at a government-funded women's home. For domestic violence involving in-laws, the organization criticises and scolds the perpetrator, showing the worst scenario possible if they continue with the abusive nature towards the victim. Among all the family conflicts that came to the organization, conflict with the in-laws or due to the abusive nature of the other family members towards the victim is the maximum. Polygamy, polyandry, and relations outside marriage are other issues that lead to domestic violence in the family after alcoholism and drug abuse. Thangjam Shanti Devi shared her opinion in the personal interview that the rise in polygamy in recent years is due to the misuse of mobile phones by married men and women. The continuous atrocities faced by Manipur ignited the polygamy in the cultural practice. The continuous need for men of the family to stay away from home to defend or guard the border of the kingdom, the Seven Years Devastation,⁵ and later the Anglo-Manipur war of 1891 further add to the decline in the population of men in the community. In addition to these, the population of the men in Manipur was unstable due to the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1954, in Manipur. All these incidents led to the coming up of the women to the frontier, but it also led to the acceptance of polygamy. However, as reported in the 2011 Manipur Census, the sex ratio of the population is 992:1000, where the male population is higher than the female. In such a scenario, if the case of polygamy increases, there might be disbalance in the society.

That being said, extramarital relations and polygamy are still prevalent in Meitei society, and these lead to domestic violence. In October 2012, a 22-year-old woman sought help from the YWHO as her spouse was continuously torturing her. On further questioning, the woman revealed that her spouse was having a relationship outside the marriage and violates her self-respect as he chats with the other woman in front of her. In addition, her mother-in-law does not support her and encourages her son to do as he pleases. In October 2013, a woman approached the OIWAC as she and her husband had not spent any nights together as he was involved in extramarital relations. On digging further, the members found out that the complainant had married her spouse forcefully, as she learned that he was involved with another woman. On the other hand, her spouse clarifies his action that he married her because of the social convention⁶, but he doesn't love her. He was in relation with the other woman for 5 years before the marriage. The members convinced the other woman and the man to put an end to their relationship as he is already married. They conceded the demand of the complaint as it is the social norm that a married man or woman should not be involved in relations outside marriage, irrespective of their desire.

The organization also helps women who are subjugated for not bearing male children or are infertile. In January 2017, a mother with three daughters sought help from the YWHO as her husband and his family pushed her out of the house as she didn't bear a son. She requested the members to allow her to stay at her husband's house. She further added that she was married to the family when she was 16 years old and had worked hard and sustained the family for so long. The organization called the family members and her husband and criticized him and his family for such demands and threatened to take legal action if they further tortured the complaint for the same matter. Manipur does not practice child marriage, but the cultural practice of *nupi chenba* allows any couple who elope to enter marital life, irrespective of their age. Many times, the parents try to separate the couple, but the young couple elope repeatedly, leading to early pregnancy or marriage, fearing the social stigma attached to a woman who eloped multiple times.

⁴ Home was built by the members of the OIWAC to provide shelter to woman who don't have any place to go.

⁵ Seven Years Devastation (1819-1825 A.D.) – the period in Manipuri history where its neighbour, Burma, occupied and rule over it. There was anarchy and was the darkest period of in the history. During this period the population of Manipur was reduced to half as they were either massacred or fled to Cachar.

⁶ A woman can also forcefully elope a desire man, generally termed as *nupa phaba* – to capture man. And if he falls into the trap then he is bound to marry the woman or else he had to pay *Izzat Dabi* – compensation for violating the woman.

In most of the cases falling under the category of family conflict, the woman ends up getting a divorce as they reaches out for help when they cannot bear the misery any longer. Many women cling to their husband's place as far as possible as divorce is a taboo in the society. Further, the situation of the widows is more vulnerable in the society. Irrespective of their financial independence, they are often criticised and unwelcomed by their husband's family.

A few more examples of family conflict cases are –

Sl. No.	Rough translation of the title in the journal	Date	Journal
1.	A mother seeking financial support from her husband who was living with his 2 nd wife.	November 2012	Nupigi Punshi
2.	In a fight an 8 th month pregnant woman was bitten by her uncle-in-law	March 2014	Woman and Crime
3.	A woman requested for divorce as her husband eloped with a woman	March 2014	Woman and Crime
4.	6 th month pregnant woman went to her maternal home, but her husband and in-laws refuse to call her back.	January 2015	Nupigi Punshi
5.	Seeking help from the organization as her husband brought another woman	July 2016	Nupigi Punshi

III. Violent Crimes

This category deals with cases related to murder, rape, and sexual exploitation and it is 21 percentiles. Most of the sexual exploitation and rape cases that the organization handled are not reported to the police due to fear of social stigma and the lack of time and money to run after the judicial procedures for justice. The presidents of the organization share that the process of delivering justice is quicker as compared to the judicial law and is free of cost.⁷ For cases related to murder, the members of the organization impart the information to enlighten the masses through the journals. In September 2011, the WHO shared the details of a news story about a mother, Chaobi, and daughter, Meneka, who were brutally murdered by unknown persons. A member of the organization had approached the deceased's family for any possible aid to the family. The sister of the deceased woman narrated that Chaobi had lost her husband a few years back and her eldest son, Ibohal, had disappeared years ago. She believed that Ibohal had joined the insurgent group. On 12th January, a few unknown men called Chaobi to have a conversation at the nearby field. She was accompanied by Meneka and followed them, thinking that they might give her information about Ibohal. On not returning, the other children reported to their neighbours and started looking for them. On the 12th day, the two bodies were found among the pilled straws in the field. The forensic report says that they were gang raped and assault by four to five men and the private parts was violated with iron rod. The case is unresolved, and nobody knows the reason or the culprit for this heinous crime. In a disturbed state like Manipur, the unknown perpetrator can be anyone; it is always better to avoid such encounters or meet such strangers in groups.

On February 2013, a mother seek justice from the YWHO, as her daughter was repeatedly raped by her cousin. On 8th August 2012, her 3 years old daughter was raped by her teenage cousin, but she didn't tell anyone fearing the stigma and hoping that the boy will not repeat again. When the incident happens again, she tells her brother and sister-in law about the monstrous behaviour of their son, but they don't support her. Furious, she informed the locality, and the boy was arrested. However, being juvenile, he was released after a short stay. Afraid that the boy and his family might harm her already mentally disturbed daughter, she seeks help from the organization. The members of the organization collect the evidence and send a letter to the perpetrator's family to clarify the situation and warn the boy and the family not to do such acts again.

A mother seek justice for her 15-year-old daughter who was gang raped by four men on 16th July 2012. On her way to her elder brother's errand, her daughter was abducted in a van by some men. The following day, she was found unconscious under the bed of one of her neighbours. An angry mob demolished and burnt down the house of the perpetrator, but he paid off his punishment of seven years to five months. Disappointed with the law, the victim's mother knocked on the door of the organization for justice. After hearing about the incident, the members immediately initiated an investigation and summoned the perpetrator's family, and if necessary, they organized a sit-in protest to attain justice for such cases.

⁷ Sometime the victim family give them some amount as donation to the organization after the case is solved.

Few more examples of violent crimes are –

Sl. No.	Rough translation of the title in the journal	Date	Journal
1.	Shakila, died from burnt	October 2013	Nupigi Punshi
2.	Farida from Paobite, strangled by her husband	May 2014	Woman and Crime
3.	A woman gang raped by four men	November 2015	Nupigi Punshi
4.	A differently able woman was raped	April 2016	Nupigi Punshi
5.	A girl was found dead at her boarding school	December 2016	Nupigi Punshi

For all these cases the organization either catch the culprit and hand it over to the police. If they cannot capture the culprit, they go on with sit in protest and demand the judicial to capture the culprit.

IV. Monetary Crimes

The cases that are dealt with in this category are cases related to fraud, bribery, and monetary exploitation. It is of the lowest percentile of 4%. Apart from the steady salaried job either public or private, agriculture is the main source of income in Meitei household; in addition to these there are handloom, pottery, horticulture, and animal husbandry. Irrespective of their gender, these means to earn their livelihood are carried out by both, except weaving, which is predominantly a women's occupation. However, the marketing and trading are done by the women at the nearby market or the main market, *Imma Keithel*.⁸ The market is run by women only. However, it would be false to say that the women in Manipur are empowered, as the women who come out of their houses for trading do not enter the sphere willingly; poverty and circumstances deprive them of the choice of a comfortable life at home. Most of the women in the market have their own story of being a widow, wife of an alcoholic or drug addict, etc. Some women belong to well-to-do families, but those are women who have reached or crossed menopause and whose children are grown and earning⁹. They come to market to socialize; otherwise, young women that belong to financially sound families do not enter the sphere of marketing. Moreover, the women traders and vendor-owners at the market are easy prey for the moneylenders. On the other hand, men he has a stable job do not face much hardship unless they fall into alcoholism, gambling, drug abuse, and relations outside marriage. However, if he is unemployed and depends on daily labor, his life is hard due to continuous bandh and strikes in the state, creating a hurdle to everyday work. Therefore, money and the crimes that revolve around it are all related to the desire for a better life.

In September 2013, around 80 women, most of them shopkeepers, approached the OIWAC for shelter as their husbands kicked them out of their houses for being scammed. A couple collected money ranging from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 5 lakhs as chit fund and ran away with the money. Their husbands are after their life and told them not to return home unless they bring the scammed money. The members of the organization called their husbands and made them realize their wives' mistakes and asked them to forgive them. They also share awareness and to be careful of such frauds.

In June 2015, a 60-year-old man approached the YWHO for justice as a woman had taken Rs. 24000, promising him a second wife. To his disappointment, the woman sends a 30-year-old woman who was unwilling to elope with him. This angered him, and he demanded the money back from the woman, which she refused to do. The organization summoned the woman who took the money, but much cannot be done for such case as he knowingly paid for the service, and it is not the woman's fault if the other woman refuses to elope. However, the organization warned both the man and woman not to do the same thing again.

In August 2015, a woman sought help from the OIWAC as she was threatened by a man who gave money in exchange for public service.¹⁰ She told the organization that she was just the mediator between the man and the officer who promised her the job. Now, when the man failed to get the job and the officer is refusing to return the money, the man is after her life. The members immediately initiated the investigation and summoned all the relevant parties. In cases related to money, if the organization could get hold of the perpetrator, they manage to deliver justice to the victims. But if they can't, it is a loss on the part of the victim for being careless.

⁸ *Imma Keithel* – mother's Market. It is also called Khwairamband Market.

⁹ *Imma Ibemhal* who learn to keep the shop after her husband died; *Ima Ramani* whose son is in government service and second wife of a retired compounder, etc. *The Mothers of Manipur* by Teresa Rehman.

¹⁰ The corruption in Manipur is such that a qualified person needs to pay certain amount (amount varies depending on the position, higher the rank larger the amount) to the employing officer and ministers.

Few more examples of monetary crimes are –

Sl. No.	Rough translation of the title in the journal	Date	Journal
1.	Fight in the family to sell the newly built house	December 2013	Women and Crime
2.	Seeking justice to obtain her husband's property legally.	March 2014	Woman and Crime
3.	Man paid the alimony but was never introduced to the child.	April 2016	Nupigi Punshi
4.	A differently able woman was raped	April 2016	Nupigi Punshi
5.	A group earn money illegal means	August 2016	Nupigi Punshi

Keeping all the impassable cases, both the organizations conduct awareness programs and campaign to enlighten the public and young women in particular. They share awareness through the journal regarding the misuse of social media, exploitation of women at restaurants¹¹, filming MMS, and prostitution. They have also produced films based on the cases that they have solved to enlighten the viewers. Arambam Ongbi Robita Leima shared her opinion that the cases of young women victimised by men are considerably reduced in 2019- 20 as they are now aware of the cases that can befall them. Young women are also aware of the possible consequences of entering the restaurant. Further, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the decrease in alcoholism and drug abuse also halts the domestic violence in families. Post-COVID, there were few cases related to domestic violence and divorce, but this has decreased tremendously, as put by Ms. Leima.

The crime and violence faced by women in Manipur are connected to poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, or murder. But there is a common thread that brings all the victims here – the loss of trust towards the State and its judicial law. The rights of the women in Manipur are twice violated as compared to any other women in different place – they are expected to be courageous and sacrificial and at the same time they are beaten, tortured, raped, and murdered by the one whom they are sacrificing for; in addition to this there is no one to hear their story as the state is continuously in turmoil. The piles of unresolved cases in the Judicial Court waiting for their turn, the payoff of punishment by rich families, the expensive lawyer for the poor, etc., make such organizations a shelter for the victims. They are there to listen and help with any issue and crime faced by any woman in Manipur. The Manipuri women empowerment is no more than a façade as deep down it is just swallowing the personal pain to fight for a 'bigger' cause.

In the current situation of Manipur – the conflict between the Meitei and the Kuki militants – that started in March'2023 has caused much destruction to both communities. In such a situation, all the civil organizations in Manipur came together under one committee, namely the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity (COCOMI), to achieve the common goal of safeguarding the integrity of Manipur. As Ms. Leima had shared in the personal interview,¹² all the organizations follow the command and guidance of COCOMI and put a halt on their respective task; there is no more separate women's organization. She added that the Meitei women came out and called out for social justice to the people of Manipur. They all had kept aside their domestic concern to fight against the outsiders. All the cases related to women and children during the conflict are handled by the women under the leadership of COCOMI. In such a scenario, is it possible for any Meitei woman to talk about her status or freedom? Or talk about herself when the survival of the society is in question? Can it be called a freedom if she must exercise her liberty within a set timeframe and regulation? Is it enlightenment if she must bear the hardship and torture of her drunk husband within the four walls and call out for state integrity on the road? Is it empowerment if she must unceasingly worry about her vulnerability? A mother who passed the menopause may be powerful and devoid of vulnerability as her children will be with her, but it will be sardonic to call all women in Manipur courageous and empowered. The women of the *Meira Paibi* are not any woman; they are the *Imas*, meaning mother. The women protectors of the Meitei community are not any women but mothers protecting their children. Therefore, it would be wrong to term women in Manipur as empowered. As Ima Ramini rightly puts it, "The government never tried to understand the heart of the mothers."¹³

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¹¹ In Manipur Restaurants are generally referred to dark room eatery place where man and woman go for date.

¹² Leima, Arambam Ongbi Robita. Secretary at Organization for Indian Women Against Crime. *Interview on the Role of Women Organization During State Emergency*. Personal Interview, Manipur. 15 August' 2023

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