WOMEN'S ACTION IN THE MIZO NATIONAL FRONT MOVEMENT 1966–1987

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ABSTRACT

The signing of the 'Mizoram Accord' or 'Memorandum of Settlement' between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Government of India on 30 June 1986 has been proclaimed as one of the most successful peace accords in the country. Women have been a part of the MNF movement as participants, victims and peacemakers but the history of the MNF movement has generally ignored women's participation and their response to the circumstances of this time. While there has been some attention given to women's role in the MNF and as peacemakers, women's experience as victims of violence generated by the insurgency has been totally omitted from historical records.

This paper seeks to address some aspects of the missing story by focusing on the memories of women who were volunteers in the underground movement and women who experienced the events of this time. Utilizing women's oral testimonies, the paper focuses on how women, with reference to region, tribe and religion, defined their roles and explained their actions.

INTRODUCTION

The geographical area of what constitutes the state of Mizoram today is dominated by numerous ethnic tribes with cultural or linguistic linkages. The people of Mizoram were called Mizos or Lushais (colonial term). The British adopted Lushai – Lu (head) and Shai (to cut) i.e., head cutter, as the official designation of the people inhabiting Mizoram. The first British entry into the Mizo Hills was recorded in January 27, 1871 when the prominent chief of Lushai, Bengkhuaia raided Alexandrapur tea garden, killed a Scottish tea-garden manager Mr James and abducted his six-year-old daughter, Zoluti[1]. The British government sent troops to punish the Mizo raid of the tea plantation and to rescue Zoluti, and thereby the British colonial administration was introduced to the Lushai hills, while Zoluti was rescued after almost exactly a year on 21 January 1872 from Bengkhuaia[2], chief of Sailam village. The British Annexation in 1890 included the northern part of Mizoram under the administration of the Assam District and the southern part of Mizoram under Bengal. In 1895, the British controlled the Lushai Hills and made this area part of Assam. A combination of north and south hills formed a 'Lushai Hills District' in 1898 under the administration of Assam (Shakespeare 1912). The British administration paved the way for the introduction of the Welsh Christian missionaries who entered the Lushai Hills in 1894 and, today, almost 90 per cent of the population has converted to Christianity.

In 1915, the Lushai Hills and other hill districts of Assam were declared a 'Backward Tract' under the Government of India Act. Following the declaration of Lushai Hills as an 'Excluded Area' under the Government of India Act of 1935, the area became even more isolated. This was the time of the beginnings of a political awakening among the Mizo people. After the Indian independence, the Lushai Hill Autonomous District Council was formed in 1952, followed by the upgradation to the status of union territory in 1972 and then a state in 1987. The outbreak of the 'Bamboo Famine' in 1956 is a

landmark in the history of Mizoram politics because of the failure of the Indian government to provide famine relief, whereupon the Mizos felt betrayed (Lalthakima 2008). This resulted in twenty years of insurgency that eventually gave rise to the formation of the state of Mizoram in 1987.

Feminist scholars point out that insurgency, like all political action, involves gendered activities; therefore women's experiences and responses are different from those of men. In the context of Mizoram, scholars on insurgency focus exclusively on masculine activities and describe conflict solely in terms of male participation as combatants, whereas women's contribution to the formation of the state remains largely unrecognized. When peace returned, the tendency was to forget or ignore the violence that women faced, and many people preferred not to discuss what happened in the time of turmoil. There were female volunteers in the MNF movement when the insurgency broke out in 1966. They fought alongside the men and suffered with the men. However, there is no written record of the numbers of female volunteers in the movement even though hundreds of women submitted their names to the MNF movement according to Lalthankunga, a male volunteer, who was an acting information director in the underground government.

With the help of senior MNF volunteers and a brief survey conducted by *Zozam Press*, the researcher has observed that eighteen women entered the underground camp in East Pakistan (currently Bangladesh) to serve as nurses and office staff and performed various supporting roles; some of them entered the battlefield to fight alongside men.

The women who were left in the villages experienced all kinds of exploitation during the armed conflict of the Indian government and the MNF Movement. The enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 in the north-east brought great devastation to the lives of women. This paper is based on personal interviews and utilizes the oral histories of the ten surviving women volunteers along with the wife of the MNF leader and the wife of the appointed foreign minister

in the MNF underground movement, as well as interviews with fifteen women who lived through this period but did not join the movement. The twelve women, who went underground, were asked about their inspiration and responses to the movement including their hardships in the underground camp. The fifteen women from Seling village and Reiek village, who were witnesses, were also interviewed to get a sense of their response to the insurgency. This detailed examination of women's action in the MNF movement explores the existence of the social development of gender identities in insurgent politics.

BAMBOO FAMINE AND THE RISE OF MIZO NATIONALISM

Prior to the colonial period, Mizoram had always experienced periodic *Mautam* or bamboo famines that caused hardship, starvation and death (Nag 2001). There are two kinds of bamboo that flower – in cycles of thirty and fifty years. Mizos differentiate between two types of bamboo collapse and the human famines as *Mautam* and *Thing-tam*. Bamboo flowerings happen in regular cycles and the abundance of food results in an increase in the number of jungle rats. After the jungle rats finish the bamboo seeds they leave the forests and devour crops causing famines. Before the 1958–59 *Mautam* occurred, the Mizo District Council passed a resolution to notify the Assam government of the impending famine and requested an advance in financial assistance of Rs 1,50,000 for preparatory measures (Thangliana 2014). The Assam government rejected this plea, arguing that the anticipation of famine was a superstitious tribal belief, which had no basis in science (John 2002). The Central Government, like the Assam government, ignored Mizo requests to plan for the impending disaster. As predicted, the bamboo famine hit the district in 1958. Although scholars like Sajal Nag and Sanjeev Kumar Dey claim that the famine deaths amounted to more than 10,000 people, there is no official record of the number of deaths. When some locals were asked how many people were affected by the famine, they said the number could be much lower.

However, although there are no concrete facts about how many people lost their lives, the famine obviously brought devastation to the population including political disturbances, significant losses to crops and human property.

In addition, anger and frustration over the Assam government's failure to effectively distribute the insignificant relief that they promised focused attention on other issues and resulted in action by 'The Mizo Cultural Society'. Formed by the educated middle class in 1950 to safeguard the ethnic identity of the Mizos, Biakdiki, wife of the movement leader Laldenga said,

> The basic idea of my husband and his team to form 'Mizo Cultural Society' was to stop the large domination of market by non-Mizos. Except two big shops run by Pachhunga and Buangthang, the rest were non-Mizo owners. My husband strongly felt our culture and religion would vanish if steps were not taken to control this assimilation. Hindi songs and the rich people (non-Mizo) influenced the population at large and many women would have been married to non-Mizos if the Mizo Cultural Society were not formed.

Here, we might say that the cultural society concerned for nationalism attracted the attention of women too, since Biakdiki indicated that many women were supportive of the intention of the 'Mizo Cultural Society', particularly to protect women from marrying non-Mizos and thus 'saving' women. The cultural society was aware of the fact that the children of rich families who studied outside Mizoram had begun to abandon the Mizo language, imitate non-Mizo behaviour, dresses and despised Mizo culture and practice (Zoramthanga 2016). Observing those children, Laldenga and his team, therefore, founded the 'Mizo Cultural Society' in the 1950. The society addressed the famine and the need to rescue people. On 19 February 1960, on the arrival of the Assam government delegate W.A. Sangma to investigate the famine in Aizawl, the cultural society held protest rallies to express their dissatisfaction with the Assam government and district council's handling of the famine. The Assam government reacted

by punishing the leaders of this rally. R.B. Chawnga and Laldenga, who worked as officer and clerk respectively, in the district council office, were suspended from their posts (Pachuau 2016). Unable to organize further protests, they formed the 'Mizo National Famine Front' (MNFF) in September 1960. Based upon strong Mizo nationalist feelings, they included 'nation' in forming the organization (Zoramthanga 2016). The MNFF intended that relief work and other famine-related issues could be tools for creating awareness about the difference of the Mizo culture and religion and its incompatibility with the Indians (Joy 2014).

But when the famine hit the district, the MNFF worked effectively to distribute famine relief to remote areas or areas that could not be reached by vehicles as there were no proper roads, no organized porters and animal transportation to facilitate food supplies to many villages. The MNFF took the responsibilities, and many youth voluntarily engaged, sometimes carrying loads on their heads to make sure that the relief fund reached the people. By doing so, the group gained considerable support and recognition. Besides, it has been argued that the MNFF gained better recognition than the Mizo District Council under the Assam government during this period (Zoramthanga 2016). Tension emerged between the Mizo District Council and the Assam government, the former criticizing the latter on the delay in initiating famine relief; and the Assam government, in turn, accused the Mizo District Council of producing a false record of the cases of starvation and death. Seeing the popularity of the MNFF, the Assam government sought the help of the MNFF for the distribution of relief materials. After the famine was over and the district resumed normal life, the original intention of the formation of the Mizo Cultural Society was revisited. Eight members of the MNFF gathered at the house of Laldenga to form a party on 22 October 1961, and the MNFF became a nationalist organization known as 'The Mizo National Front'.

Scholars who have addressed the emergence of the MNF Movement have generally linked it to the bamboo famine and the resulting devastation (Nag 2001 and Lalthakima 2008). In fact,

the birth of the MNFF leading to the emergence of the MNF was not a sudden development of nationalist feelings among the Mizos. In actuality, the MNFF was the 'Mizo Cultural Society,' which, purportedly, was concerned with the famine but was using it as a screen for nationalist movement-building.

THE MIZO NATIONAL FRONT MOVEMENT – THE CASE OF WOMEN VOLUNTEERS

While helping the famine-affected areas, the MNFF had worked against assimilation and cultural invasion and to inculcate a sense of Mizo nationalism and difference from mainland Indians. After the MNFF became a party, the MNF adopted the ideology of 'Greater Mizoram,' that is, the idea of a state that included Mizos lived in neighbouring states and countries (Joy 2014). According to Zoramthang (current president of the MNF), the great oratory skills of Laldenga captured everyone's hearts and brought many to tears (Zoramthanga 2016). A large section of the population of Mizoram regarded the MNF as the saviour of the people and its leaders as the heroes of the land (Dey 2013). Following their call for volunteers, more than 15,000 people became Mizo National Volunteers (MNV), taking the vow 'For God and our country' by placing their hands on the Bible (Zoramthanga 2016). Both men and women left their homes and declared their intention to fight for independence from India.

Without any official document, it has been a difficult task to trace the exact number of women volunteers. The *Zozam Press*, one of the first cable-TV operators in Mizoram since 1994 and now a prominent newspaper publisher, conducted a survey in 2006 and the report recorded that fifty-seven women surrendered as volunteers while in Mizoram, but many women did not reach East Pakistan except nineteen single women along with few other women who joined their husbands (*Zozam weekly* 2006).

More than four decades have passed since the movement set up various camps in different parts of Mizoram and many women surrendered to the government before the MNF moved to East Pakistan (Bangladesh). For my research, I contacted some of the famous MNF male volunteers. Following the works of C. Zama and Lalrawnlian – prominent writers discussing the movement – I was able to count eighteen women who reached the underground camp in East Pakistan. In trying to trace the eighteen women volunteers to conduct interviews, I found five women were already dead. Of the remaining thirteen, it was impossible to locate the addresses of three women – Lalpianthangi, Lalramliani and Lalhlupuii. One woman volunteer I interviewed, Chalmawii, said she had met Lalpianthangi at Aizawl Civil Hospital a few years ago but was unable to identify her present location. More recently, I could get a contact for Lalhlupuii from Rebeki but was unable to get her interviewed other than a brief telephone conversation since she stayed more than 90 kilometres away from Aizawl in Thenzawl village. The only thing I learned about these three women was that Lalramliani served as a missionary after becoming an MNF volunteer. In the end, I was able to interview ten women volunteers along with Lalbiakdiki, the wife of a movement leader and Tawni, the wife of an appointed foreign secretary in the underground movement.

Three of the women lived outside Aizawl city in Saitual village, Khawndungsei village in the northeast and Kolasib. The remaining seven volunteers lived in various localities in Aizawl city. While the male freedom fighters were often depicted as having sacrificed themselves for the freedom of the country and have since become famous politicians, women were not recognized as volunteers in the MNF history, politics, or even by their own relatives or in their own localities. A striking example of this was the granddaughter of Zahmingliani who lived in the same locality as her grandmother. When asked about her grandmothers, she said she had never heard that her grandmother had participated in the MNF Movement.

When I approached them for interviews, they questioned how I came to learn they were volunteers. Unlike men who are proud to be known as freedom fighters and are endorsed by the movement and its people, these women were reluctant to talk about their experiences. It was clear that no one was very excited to talk about their participation in the movement, nor did any of them care if the general public recognized them as volunteers.

Despite this initial reluctance, many of the interviewees expressed an interest and appreciation for my research. Nevertheless, they were still reluctant to speak and most of them began by declaring, 'I don't remember anything, speak to other women who could tell you better than me.' It took a great deal of time and patience to get women to tell me their stories, and even then, there were a number of subjects they did not want to discuss. I understood their unwillingness to recount their experiences as stemming from the Mizo belief that politics is men's business, not women's. In another instance, Chalmawii (67), while being interviewed, confessed that it was the first time she was talking about her experience of the underground in front of her children as we sat together for the interview with her eldest daughter and son.

Most of the women revealed that they did not re-connect with each other after they returned from the underground camp. Besides, some women lived in villages outside the Aizawl town. Even then, those who stayed in Aizawl city hardly met except Rebeki, aged sixty-five and Thanhrangi, aged sixty-nine, who remain close friends due to the proximity of their locality. Thanhrangi said, 'We hardly had time for any gathering other than attending funeral meetings of the MNF members.' She said the last meeting they had attended was organized at the funeral of a woman volunteer, Lalthlamuani, almost a decade ago, in 2006.

These female volunteers were between the ages of 65–85 years when they were interviewed. They had entered the movement in their early twenties. The oldest volunteer, Tinsangi, aged eighty-two was a

trained nurse and worked as a primary school teacher in Kawlailung village when the insurgency began in 1966. She said,

> When the Indian army entered our village, village leaders suggested that I join the volunteers for my safety because the Indian army kept an eye on every government servant in the village.

Heeding their advice, Pi Tinsangi joined the volunteers, fled to the MNF camp in Hliappui village and then shifted to East Pakistan in 1969. The youngest volunteers, Rebeki and Lalthlamuani, joined the movement at the age of sixteen, when they were high-school students. They recounted a number of reasons for joining in addition to being influenced by MNF policies. Although a few women indicated their interest in politics since childhood, they did not have much knowledge of 'politics' and primarily joined the movement for the cause of patriotism. Lalthlamuani (67), however, appeared to be interested in politics since childhood as she shared that being brought up in the *Sailo thlah* (chief clan), she was aware of her family's stand against the first political party in Mizoram, the 'Mizo Union Party', that wanted to abolish the Mizo chieftainship. She believes that her early opposition to the 'Mizo Union Party' influenced her decision to join the MNF on 3 December 1966. Rebeki, on the other hand, was born and raised in a nationalist family, but she joined the movement without the approval of her parents. She confided,

> My mother, who had a long-standing desire for independence, impressed me to join the MNF. She cried the whole night when India gained independence in 1947, because she believed our freedom would be destroyed under the control of India.

Others did not consider joining the movement a political act. Thansangi (68) said, 'I developed nationalist feelings only after we suffered in the underground camp.' Some volunteers joined the MNF for their own protection because they expected to be arrested and knew women were treated very badly in prison. As Chalmawii declared, 'Life in prison was miserable, especially for beautiful women.' From

her experience she said, she felt beautiful women are more vulnerable to sexual assault. Pi Chalmawii, born in 1949, completed Class 6 and worked as a teacher in a private school in Vanchengpui village when the Indian Army accused her of supporting the MNF. Thus, she ran to the forest to join the volunteers. Thansangi said she joined the movement for her safety and said,

> Being the eldest of the siblings, I had no choice other than to join the MNF Movement. I did not want to be arrested or imprisoned; we knew how badly women were treated, and I did not want to face that.

RELIGION, AN IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTOR TO THE MNF MOVEMENT

Religion was considered an important factor that could act as a decisive force in developing regionalism, if one accepts it as the spiritually motivating force and ethically inspiring energy (Lalchungnunga 1994; Menamparampil 2008; Wiranto 2013). In fact, Mizoram was understood to house one of the most solidly Christian population in the region, and Christian ethos is deeply embedded in its social relations. The MNF was also aware of the fact that highlighting the uniqueness of Christianity from Hinduism could be the best way to convince and attract people; and, therefore, they chose the slogan, 'For God and the Country'. They made people believe that God was on the side of the Mizos, and many considered the MNF as an instrument for protecting their Christian culture against the Hindu state (Pachuau 2014). For this, the general volunteers, particularly the women, regarded participation in the movement as a gospel mission for the Mizos. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the church played a significant role in restoring peace. The Zoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (ZKHC; Mizoram Church Leaders Committee) comprised of twenty-four representatives from various

denominations was formed on 30 July 1982. They initiated peace missions between the Indian Government and the MNF, engaging both sides to take their problems to the negotiating table. The ZKHC meeting on 30 May 1983, which included representatives of all the political parties, made a joint memorandum by making an appeal to the government and the MNF to find a solution to the peace process. Based on the memorandum, the ZKHC started dialogues with the government and the MNF. On 28 March 1984, the ZKHC representatives went to Delhi to meet Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the MNF leader Laldenga. After spending over eight days in Delhi, the ZKHC representatives came back to Aizawl. This incident paved the way for the initiation of peace talks; and, subsequently, within a year, a peace accord was signed on 30 June 1986.

While mentioning the significant role of the church in the Mizo struggle, it is worth making note of women's contributions to the church since Christianity took root amongst the Mizos since 1894. Initially, women were employed as Bible Women, and they have become the foundation of Women's Fellowship and the 'handful of rice' project. The Women's Fellowship contribution through the 'handful of rice' project, which began in 1913, became one of the most important sources of income for the Presbyterian Church Synod. It was a practice that asked every Mizo family to put aside a handful of rice each time they cooked a meal. Later, they offered the saved rice to the church. The church, in turn, sold the rice to generate income to support its work. With the support of the income generated from the 'handful of rice' project, the Presbyterian Church employed hundreds of pastors, thousands of missionaries and funded several schools, hospitals, and so on.

Unlike women in the United Liberation Front of Assam or ULFA, who joined the movement for their desire to bring about social and political transformation (Goswami 2015), the women volunteers in the MNF movement were different in certain ways. Significantly, most of the women volunteer's conversations involved their gratitude and faith in God. These women attributed their prayers and faith in God

as what kept them strong in the underground camps. Clearly, religion was important in women's life. Some even proclaimed that their faith in God encouraged them to join to the MNF movement since they considered living under India, where Hinduism was the dominant religion, was betraying their Christian faith. To them, nationalists had made the Mizo movement synonymous with Christianity, so joining the MNF was affirming their faith. I would say Mizo society viewed attachment to faith and the church as indistinguishable from family honour, in which the 'mother' played a key role. This might help explain why these women volunteers, after the Mizoram Accord of 1986, did not want to join politics. Because when the MNF movement functioned as a political party in the government, they were convinced by the idea that politics and Christian life are incompatible and regarded politicians as corrupt and dishonest. Hence, they said that they preferred to be active in the church and not in politics.

When these women spoke about their aims, they stressed the religious and cultural differences of Mizos from mainland India. Their motivation to join the MNF was based on ideals of nationalism. Some referred honestly to self-determination but spoke mainly in terms relating to preserving 'Mizo-ness' against mainland India. Lalchhawni (66), in her interview, spoke about the importance of preserving the land, as it was rich in natural resources. It was undoubtedly visible that the religious differences with mainland India played a vital role in the development of the MNF's ideology. The MNF raised the issues of religious discrimination in terms of neglecting the importance of Sunday for the Mizos. They accused the Indian Government of conducting public examinations and official visits by dignitaries falling on Sundays, like the visit by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on Sunday, 3 April 1953. That the government denied entry to missionaries into Mizoram was also interpreted by the MNF as an attempt to reject Christian enterprise. With the increasing awareness of the ethnic differences, they became suspicious of the outsider and emphasized their Mizo-ness based on the principle of the Mizo cultural norm of *tlawmngaihna*, which literally implies 'service above

oneself' (Lalchungnunga 1994). They perceived Indians as lacking the moral values of *tlawmngaihna*. As Hrangzovi (70) and Rebeki said, 'We do not have a single similarity with the mainland Indian.' They felt that the Mizos, who are of Mongoloid stock, are physically and culturally different from the Aryan or Dravidian of mainland India (Hluna and Rini 2012), and that the two can never be good friends. Thanghrangi explained that her 'refusal to live with an idol-worshipper compelled [her]? to join the movement'. It was evident that they were deeply touched by the aim of the MNF, and their desire to have an independent country inspired them to enter the movement.

Life in the Underground Camps

In the underground camps, most women worked as nurses and/or performed other supporting roles, such as cooking, mending clothes and collecting wood for fuel, and so on. Tinsangi said they worked hard to roll tobacco cigarettes for men and performed the duties of 'mothers' in the camp. Later, she became a nurse as she was trained to become one before joining the MNF movement. Bualhranga, an educated MNF volunteer, recalled how nurses were respected: 'We put our trust in every woman wearing the nurse's uniform.' The best-educated women became office clerks and typists. Since Tinsang was the only woman who came to the camps as a registered nurse, she gave nurses training in the camps. Her presence in the camp was enormously beneficial to the camp's health and hygiene. Before entering East Pakistan, she helped male volunteers by stitching their torn clothes but concentrated on nursing after reaching the East Pakistan camp. They set up a hospital at Mahmuam village in East Pakistan to look after injured fighters. Tinsangi performed the work of both a doctor and a nurse and at night became the head instructor in the hospital. She had trained eight nurses including three male nurses in the camp and said, 'I was blessed that all patients recovered under my treatment, and I always felt God had made me a nurse to work for my people in the camp.'

The female volunteers in the MNF, unlike women in earlier revolutionary movements in Bengal, played only supporting roles. According to Geraldine Forbes, the women in the Bengal revolutionary groups from the late 1920s to the early 1930s were involved in direct action by carrying messages, hiding fighters, robbing trains and making bombs and participating in assassinations (Forbes 1997). This was partly because of the context of the two movements. In Bengal in the 1930s, the revolutionary groups hid among the general population when the authorities became suspicious of the young male and the young females had a tactical advantage in carrying out direct actions. In Mizoram, the Indian state regrouped people to prevent the MNF from living among the general population. Hence, the MNF leaders and volunteers fled to East Pakistan and lived in camps and the women volunteers played supportive roles as cooks and nurses but did not engage in direct action. Here, we may note the crucial role of women in the local context before the MNF moved underground. When the male volunteers had to hide in the forest away from the village, the women took on the role of feeding the male volunteers and of transmitting important messages from their hiding places. For instance, Rozami from Seling village said, 'We arranged a hiding place in the forest where volunteers could collect our cooked Arum, Tapioca, local cigarettes, including messages.' The women were, therefore, not only supporters but also the lifelines of the people belonging to the MNF (Nag 2012). Although Lalthlamuani said that she underwent military training along with MNF volunteers while in Mizoram, she did not enter the battlefield after moving outside Mizoram. Both Thanhrangi and Hrangzovi, however, said they got military training alongside the men.

In the camps, women lived in a separate tent, and none complained openly about sexual harassment. However, they reluctantly admitted that they felt unwanted and were ignored by the men after reaching underground camps. One of the interviewees argued that she worked hard to take care of the women and often appealed to male volunteers to 'respect the women.' She recalled that some men tried to enter the women's area of the camp when she was away. When I interviewed

this woman, her husband frequently interrupted her and did not allow her to discuss the topic. She furtively confided that every time she talked about this issue, the wives of the volunteers scolded her. She believed these women wanted to preserve their husbands' image, as some of them are popular politicians. It was evident that some males had negative attitudes towards the females in East Pakistan. One interviewee said that a male volunteer secretly put acid in the cloth she was weaving, destroying her hard work, especially as collecting the weaving material had been difficult. She claimed getting married was the only way to escape harassment in the camp. However, this was a topic the women volunteers avoided, implying either that it did not happen or it was not a safe topic for discussion. The fact is most female volunteers married male volunteers and, when interviewed, avoided saying anything negative in the underground camps. However, distressing stories told by women who want to remain anonymous have emerged. For example, one woman, who has a child with a married man in the camp, confided that the man returned to his wife after returning to Mizoram. She remained single and raised her daughter by herself. When she related this story, her daughter interrupted and asked her to stop talking.

It is evident that women suffered in the underground camp. The lack of food, clothing and medical supplies featured in most of their narratives. These women narrated that periodic fasting was the worst experience of the underground camps. Many of them remembered hunger and even periodic fasting as part of their lives in the camps. Rebeki said, 'Hunger and fasting was a part of our lives in the camp; there were times we had to survive without food for more than a month.' They also suffered during menstruation because they had no extra clothes. For Thansangi, the worst experience was staying alert when they shifted from place to place. It was not until they reached East Pakistan that she felt secure because till then the Indian army was constantly in hot pursuit. She remembered women had special problems during the journey, saying that 'it was a bad time for women during the menstrual period since there were no healthcare facilities

and modern materials.' For Chhawni, the worst experience was running from the enemy in the forest. She remembered the setting as dark and rough, the lack of food, and her fear of calling out when she lost track of the friend escaping with her.

Most of the women were married in the camp and suffered during pregnancy and childbirth. Lalthlamuani remembered times when they did not eat for twenty-two days after her eldest daughter was born and an accident when she broke three lumbar bones and her pelvic bone, and there was no proper medical treatment for a long time. To add to their burden, conflicts among the volunteers caused mental and physical torment. For Lalthlamuani, the most painful period in the underground camp was when the leaders fought among themselves. Then, life in the camp was miserable. Some of the volunteers who opposed the leader were arrested in the underground camp. However, everyone avoided making detailed comments on this complex subject. Tawni (85) said that she had brought tiffin for her husband in jail carrying her child on her back, but she was sent away. She said, 'I cried a lot when they banned me from seeing my husband.' These women watched their husbands being arrested by the order of the leader of the movement and were left to look after their families in the camp without any support. Their lives were vulnerable as mothers, wives of the arrested victims and caretakers of children. In fact, the declaration of Bangladesh's independence in 1971 paved the way for a number of families to return home in 1972.

THE PRICE WOMEN PAID: THE AFTERMATH OF THE REVOLUTION

The MNF movement in the underground camp produced a set of experiences, memories for the women volunteers that were not the same as the men volunteers. For instance, after they returned to Mizoram, most of the women volunteers remained homemakers,

while most of the male volunteers became popular MNF supporters and famous politicians. Joining the movement ended the education of those who were still in school. Others, who were qualified, lost their jobs when they joined the volunteers, and they were not reinstated in these jobs. Among the women interviewed, only Tinsangi acquired a pension after a long fight with the High Court, currently looking after the pharmacy shop, and Hrangzovi was the only one who got a government job after they returned. The other female volunteers remain homemakers while Rebeki and Chalmawii look after a small shop in their localities. Thansangi weaves clothes at home.

In fact, some women expressed their disappointment for the treatment they received from the MNF leader who came to power in the government. Zahmingliani said,

> When we were about to leave the camp from East Pakistan, our leaders assured us we would remain a part of the movement. Unfortunately, it did not happen when the movement party held positions in the government, our contribution in the camp was forgotten, and we were completely excluded from the movement.

Thanhrangi spoke about how the MNF leader after becoming chief minister rejected her appeals for financial assistance despite several attempts and said,

> The MNF government favours and compensates only those people who joined the party after the Peace Accord was signed; and we, the true volunteers, who suffered all the hardships were neglected and not offered compensation.

What is obvious from my interviews is these women do not seem to crave public recognition for their involvement in the movement nor do they care for support from the MNF leaders. Although Zahmingliani and Thanhrangi simply expressed their disappointments over the MNF leaders, in actuality, these women seem to enjoy living humble lives and do not have a high standard of living. Rebeki added, 'Though there is stigma involved in becoming a female volunteer these

days, I really wish the younger generation to remember our courage and sufferings for our country.'

They did not pursue politics after returning home. However, most of them were active members of their churches. By listening to these women, it is impossible to ignore the importance of the church – in their patriotism and in their attitude towards politics. Many shared the Christian view that 'politics is a dirty game', wherein politicians are regarded as selfish and corrupt. The political conflict women experienced in the underground camp confirmed this view of politics. Remembering those days, Chalmawii said, 'I do not want anyone in my family to enter politics because politics is cruel and dirty.' Thansangi said, 'My experience in the camp compelled me to stay out of politics.' Not one woman mentioned received any financial benefit from the movement party, and many said they did not intend to ask favours from the MNF leaders. Interviewing these women in their homes, it was clear they lived simple, humble lives. Although they have suffered, their sacrifices have not been recognized either by the general public or by the leaders whose careers they helped make. In fact, they said they did not want to call attention to the fact that the MNF movement party had neglected them because they wanted no connection or association with politics. Referring to male volunteers who had become politicians, they mentioned the luxurious lifestyles and successful businesses of these men. They did not want to be associated with those kinds of people and preferred to remain silent and left out of the history of the insurgent movement.

VILLAGE REGROUPING: THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF THE SUBVERSIVE GRAND PLAN

Many Human Rights organizations, including the UN Human Rights Committee regard AFSPA, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, amended in 1972, as one of the most draconian pieces of

legislation ever passed by the Indian Parliament (SAHRDC 2015). The Act confers special powers on the Indian Armed Forces to act with force and without warrant in 'disturbed areas' in northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The armed forces, if they feel it is necessary to maintain public order, may fire upon or kill a person acting against the law, destroy a shelter from which an armed attack was made or might be made, enter any building without a warrant and arrest suspicious people without a warrant. Moreover, army officers executing AFSPA were immune from acts committed under this Act until the Supreme Court's decision of July 2016 ended impunity for armed forces. Over the years, AFSPA has been responsible for numerous incidents of arrest and detention, torture, murder and rape. It has been devastating for the people of the northeastern states (Banerjee and Dey 2012).

Beginning in 1967, the Indian army, under the authority of AFSPA, undertook a programme known as 'village regrouping.' Ostensibly, village regrouping carried on under the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act 1953, was designed to prevent the MNF from extracting food and money from the villages (Nunthara 1989). The regrouping plan forced over 80 per cent of the rural population to relocate to villages other than their own to make it easier for the army to fight the insurgents. According to Professor Nunthara, who has studied the grouping of villages, the total number of villages in the Mizo Hills was reduced from 764 to 248 by 1970, and 82 per cent of the total population in Mizoram was directly affected by the regrouping (Nunthara 1981). Civil administration in the grouping centres was carried out under the officers of the Assam Civil Service or senior government employees with military personnel to undertake security arrangement. As a legal safeguard, villagers were made to sign documents indicating that they were leaving their villages of their own free will. Each grouping centre was designed with bamboo fences around 24 feet in height and the second layer of a spike around 60 feet in height with just one entrance. People inside these fences were forced to observe curfews between 7 p.m. to 4 a.m. (Vunsom 1986).

Identity cards would be issued to villagers and barricades constructed to restrict their movement.

Though every family has a story to tell of their sorrow, anger, physical and mental trauma of what Mizo popularly referred to as a period of *rambuai* (insurgency), simply listening to the narratives of women from two villages will emphasize how insurgency affects women, and how they responded to the circumstances of the insurgency period, i.e., from 1966 to 1986. The two selected villages were situated a few kilometres from Aizawl City. Seling village, 15 kilometres to the eastern part of Aizawl town, has 468 families according to the 2011 census (Statistical Handbook 2011). Seling residents were regrouped into Thingsulthliah village under the provision of 'Protected and Progressive Grouping Centre' started on 4 January 1967. After the grouping, the 150 households of Thingsulthliah village increased to 800.

Reiek village, 30 kilometres to the west of Aizawl town, has 360 families according to the 2011 census (Statistical Handbook 2011). When the Indian Air Force attacked Aizawl town with bombs and heavy machine guns at 11.30 a.m. on 5 March 1966, hundreds of families fled to the outskirts of Aizawl, and many people took shelter in nearby villages. This was the first time the Indian Air Force was used to attack Indians in India. Four fighter planes destroyed the four largest areas in Aizawl. Around thirteen innocent people were killed in the first day of the attack. The next day, the Assam Rifles burnt the markets of Aizawl town leading to the area filling with smoke and fire. There were several families permanently settled in Reiek village after this incident (Thanghulha 2014), and it was also the MNF's headquarters for a certain period in 1966. Reiek village occupied grouping centres under the provision of a 'Voluntary Grouping Centre' that was started on August 1970. After the grouping, Reiek noted its population to be 1488.

There was a great deal of suffering in the grouping centres: shortage of drinking water, insufficient rations, poor sanitation and lack of medical facilities. Due to the curfew, people could not continue their

cultivation and had to survive on government rations (Vunsom 1986). Those men who had not joined the MNF, served the army as porters/coolies. Several were sent to Kashmir for border road construction. Even women served as coolies in some villages as evidenced by women's testimonies of their worst experiences of being forced to carry heavy army supplies from their village to distant places (Laichhingi 2014). In the absence of males, the women's traditional role changed in many ways since they were forced to take up responsibilities and activities traditionally carried out by men. Economic hardship and the mixing of villages in the grouping centres destroyed the solidarity that had existed between people in the villages. Some scholars argued that this situation brought about a negative structural transformation in the society, thus exposing it to different kinds of social evils like robbery, alcoholism and crimes. In fact, before the outbreak of insurgency, crime remained almost unknown to the Mizos, with only one murder case recorded in Aizawl from 1920 to 1956. Crime records during 1986–87 revealed that 45 murder cases, 62 rape cases, 608 robberies and thefts and a total of 1157 IPC crimes were recorded in Mizoram (Chawngsailova 2000).

Women in all situations of conflict suffer in a similar way. For instance, studies of Jewish women's experience during the Holocaust point to the way women suffered differently from men. Jewish women, unlike Jewish men, suffered because of their bodies (rape, pregnancy and childbirth) and because of their social roles as nurturers (Ringelheim 1996). As in the case of Mizoram, the process of village grouping produced a set of experiences and suffering for women that were not always equal to those of men. Women carried the extra burden of sexual victimization, and the restriction on mobility deteriorated women's access to health and livelihood. The realities of everyday life with fear, starvation, beating, rape and seeing the family members killed had a consequence on their physical and emotional well-being.

With the absence of men, women began to break away from the traditional roles they had played in the old village and took over

traditional male tasks and responsibilities. At first, when the grouping began, women took the burden of carrying heavy loads to the new grouping centres. They had never done this earlier in their old villages. They struggled to meet the needs of their households without any alternative means of livelihood as many lost their weaving material in their old village, and they could no longer keep domesticated animals that had served as an alternative source of income in the old village. They have had to struggle to afford food for their families, while their mobility was severely hampered under the threat of the army. Vanlallawmi, from Reiek village, said,

> I was pregnant when my husband was arrested, and my son had already grown up when he was released from jail with a serious injury. As the sole earner, I did every man and woman's work to support my family; and, sometimes, I went to the wild forest to collect roots alongside the men. I did carpentry work to fix and repair our home. Now, I have health problems due to excessive hard labour and am unable to work anymore.

They had to carry loads after the army ordered them to leave their villages for the grouping centres. When the army entered their villages, they wanted to destroy everything that might sustain the MNF underground. These women remembered their efforts to hide paddy in the jungle, because they wanted to save it before the army burned their villages. The original inhabitant of the Reiek Grouping Centre shared the story of how they hid their food grains in makeshift bamboo containers in the jungle. Zochhungi said,

> Our successful paddy field turned into bad luck, we worked so hard to hide our paddy. After the army gave one day's advance notice before grouping began, we ran into the jungle with a basket full of paddy to find a safe place. There was shooting all the way to the jungle, sometimes the mortars exploded right next to us. We had to risk our lives to find a safe place for paddy before the army took it for their own.

Zahmingliani was said to have carried a heavy load of paddy on her back and ran through the area where the insurgents were ambushed by the army. She further claimed that her persistent back pain was due to that incident. Here, it can be argued that grouping villages converted women's traditional roles into new demands; having to carry heavy loads serves as an extension of traditional roles. But performing jobs like these during the grouping affected their physical health as was evident from stories of them facing different health issues.

Studies argue that women suffered the most due to food scarcity (Centre for Northeast Studies 2011). Food scarcity and the declining agricultural production in the grouping centres weakened women's food security. These women declared that starvation was the worst experience of the insurgency with some having survived without food for more than a month. Rovi remembered heading towards the jungle looking for any grass suitable for cooking. The women also alluded to the fact that there have been instances where women have had to barter their bodies to the army in return for food. Most women who were interviewed, however, preferred to avoid this topic.

Pregnancy and child-rearing under these conditions was extremely stressful. In the grouping centres, people had to survive on the rations provided, which was just one kilogram of grain per adult per week. Many women suffered from malnutrition as collecting roots from the forest was not without risk. Besides, they suffered due to their inability to access health services. As Chhingi recalls her pregnancy,

> I was nine months pregnant with my seventh child when we were regrouped from Mualcheng to Tawipui (a distance of 15 kilometres). I carried a heavy load until we reached Tawipui village. There, we had nothing to eat other than a small amount of grain distributed for free but I was loath to eat grain provided by the centre and somehow managed without proper food for several days during my pregnancy. After I gave birth, I was unable to nurse my child and my husband travelled to another village to bring Arum root vegetables. It was only then that I was able to breastfeed my child.'

SEXUAL VIOLENCE: THE DEAFENING SILENCE

The introduction of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India granted Mizoram a separate institution of 'Autonomous District Council' since 1952, which was designed to preserve Mizo customs, culture and religion. The signing of the Mizoram Accord in 1986 preserved this regulation and stated that Mizo customary law could not be amended or modified without the approval of the legislative assembly. This meant that the Mizoram Accord protected the patriarchal construction of the Mizo customary law, effectively working against the rights of Mizo women. For example, a man has nothing to lose in committing sexual offenses. Hence a fine of Rs 20 and Rs 40 still served to protect the man accused of the sexual offence. Regarding rape, the Customary Law of 2006 simply explains what constitutes 'rape' in Mizo custom without indicating a specific punishment for the perpetrator. Rape is defined as a case where a man used physical force to attempt sexual intercourse with an unwilling woman, a definition that erases the difference between attempted rape and rape, with the law only protecting the right of the victim to use any force necessary against the man attacking her (Government of Mizoram 2006). Hence, the penalty imposed by the Mizo Customary Law against sexual violence is insignificant as compared to modern times, and the customary law is totally inadequate in protecting the victims of sexual violence. Despite the need to change the traditional customary law for its vagueness in some specific areas with the changing time, society's attitude towards customary law as intrinsic to their identity and the demand for the approval of the state legislative assembly is an obstacle to modify the customary law.[1]

The women interviewed related how they overcame their fear of rape and molestation by the army. Rovi said, 'We were warned not to stay alone to avoid rape from the army.' Zahmingliani said she pretended to be an old woman, wore old clothes, and walked with her knees bent whenever the army entered their village. She remembered some women looked for a child to put on their backs so

the soldiers would view them as mothers. In 2016, Rebeki published a memoir titled *Ram leh Hnam tana tuarna* (Struggling for the nation) exploring her experiences in an underground camp until they returned to Mizoram. She exposed widespread sexual violence on women by citing the story of her female neighbour who was captured by the army when she ran to escape with a crying child on her back (Rebeki 2016). Lalchungnungi from Reiek said they smeared their faces with charcoal dust to look unattractive to the army but added, 'We did not have a choice because the army had a gun.' This is a clear depiction of the women's fear and attempts to avoid rape. Like in all conflict situations across the globe, in Mizoram too, women's bodies often emerged as battlegrounds, as their sexuality threatened their security (Hmingthanzuali 2016; Banerjee 2005). The women were aware of their vulnerability and tried various means to protect themselves. These attempts are tied to traditional notions of what rape is all about – i.e. sex., so they tried to appear 'old' or 'mothers' because they believed that men who rape want young attractive women (not old women with bent knees and mothers). Because they believed a reductive stereotype of sex, rape and how to avoid rape; to them rape was the crime of a man who cannot control his urges. Therefore, the women were convinced by the notion that by not dressing nicely and looking pretty, they can stop rape by not 'enticing' the man.

They also complained of their existing fear and panic at the sight of the army, even in the present. Rozami, from Reiek related how she escaped from the grasp of the army and said,

> One day, I ran into the jungle and hid in a small cave to escape from the grasp of the army. We were always alert, and going out to attend nature's call was very risky since toilets were normally located far from home. Therefore, we would cut a hole in the house floor for a makeshift toilet. My experience badly affected my life, and till date I panic easily.

It might be noted that the abusive power of the Indian army threatened not only women but also children. From the response, it

can be documented that the fear of the army severely hampered their livelihood and a common advice given to the children was '*Vai kawk suh, a man ang che* (don't point at the army, otherwise they will arrest you) has become a recapitulation of the insurgency to many young children of that period (Varte 2011). These women related how people were treated like animals and innocent people constantly faced torture and beatings without any reason. Because the Army often failed to identify the pro-MNF and anti-MNF, if they noticed anyone in the village helping the MNF, they imposed collective punishments upon the villagers. In this way, the army abused and tortured innocent people on several occasions. Zahmingliani from Reiek recalled how her life was threatened after she found a rifle magazine:

> One day, I found a rifle magazine right next to our house, and the army became suspicious. They took me to their camp, accused me of supporting the MNF. I was badly beaten and very scared of *Hmai Phuihnama* (one army man whom villagers referred to as a bitter taste of Clerodendrum leaves for his cruel acts upon them) because he has raped several women in our village. I can still feel that terrible incident until today.

The women interviewed related their terrifying real-life encounters during the insurgency by saying, '*Tuboh leh Dolung inkarah kan awm'* (we were trapped between the hammer and the anvil) (Hmingthanzuali 2016) because they feared both the army and the MNF insurgents. The army tactic had *Kawktu* (pointers or spies) living amongst them, and no one could detect the *kawktu*, but they knew the army killed every person identified by the *kawktu* for helping the insurgents. At the same time, the MNF killed those suspected of being *kawktu*. There were instances when they had to provide food and shelter to the MNF with much reluctance for fear of being caught by an unidentified *kawktu*. Rebeki remembered how the presence of *kawktu* in Aiduzawl village destroyed the lives of the villagers. The army captured all those identified by *kawktu*, hung them upside down from a tree, and beat them brutally which resulted in the village chief

Lalthanzuala Sailo succumbing to his injury right after the incident (Rebeki 2016).

There was a sense of insecurity all around and mobility of the people was largely hampered by the presence of the army. For some women, their access to the latrine at the site of their dwelling became a risk. Prolong exposure to anxiety and fear had a consequence on their well-being since many suffered from post-insurgency psychological trauma. Zochungi, from Reiek said,

> Our miserable life and the shocking sight of bloodshed and witnessing the violence of the army left me in incurable pain. There were indeed horrible memories when armies forced us to come out of the house to see the torturing of our loved ones.

Thangchuailovi, from Seling village, was upset over the damage that the army caused that affected her entire physical health and said,

> It was extremely humiliating after we lost all our belongings. They captured us and beat us brutally without any cause. I still do not know why I deserved to be brutally beaten and asked myself what was it that I had done wrong. Insurgency badly deteriorated my health and I suffered from joint and skull pain and gynaecological disorders.

Their testimonies bear evidence to the different gendered nature of the violence – physical, emotional, sexual, psychological. Some of the responses indicate their overarching struggles to survive. Paula Banerjee rightly claimed, 'The Armed Forces Special Power Act was often used as an excuse to rape and brutalise women … and sometimes, it is used to dishonour [the] entire society' (2014). Because men acting under the AFSPA were given a certain immunity, it meant they were not called to account when they stepped out of line with men and women. Despite this evidence, it is worth noting that not all the armies acted violently with the locals. Siami from Sialsuk, currently residing in Seling, feels fortunate to have a kind army that was loved and respected by the locals and was said to have maintained a deep relationship with the locals, especially those who spoke Hindi.

People were emotionally upset by these experiences and chose not to talk about what had happened. Sapthuami witnessed a newly married woman raped by the army. She also cited a shocking incident of how a wife was raped before the husband. The army pointed a gun at her husband, and her husband requested her to surrender for the sake of his life. The woman was from a village, so she was ignorant of the cases of rape as rape emerged in public crimes only in 1979. In fact, rape of a wife in front of her husband, or of a daughter in front of her father, or torture of a man in front of his family, are all methods the army employed to make the enemy feel powerless. In addition to violence, it is psychological torture and de-masculinizes the men in the community. In another instance, her response indicated how cowardly she thought the husband was because he did not live up to her version of masculinity because, in traditional terms, he should have died to save his wife's honour. However, in reality, they probably would have killed him and raped her anyway. It was an attempt by the army to apply the strategy of humiliation to other men in the context of a patriarchal society's expectations of a man's gendered role in protecting his woman.

Even though sexual violence was a powerful weapon used by men throughout the history of conflict, it can disproportionately affect women's health (DeLargy 2013). But the level of stigma attached to victims often prevents the truth behind the incidence of sexual violence being uncovered. In the case of Mizoram, despite there being widespread evidence of sexual abuse being endured by women, from the responses of those interviewed, it is evident that sexual violations remain largely hidden and nobody is willing to come forward with details. However, no response denied the occurrence of sexual violence, and it was unclear if the interviewers could be among the rape victims. They preferred to say, 'Many women were raped by the Indian army, but it did not happen in our village.' Although there has been a widespread incidence of mass rape in Kolasib and Mualcheng villages, the public got to know of only two women being victims – Zamveli and Hrangliani – from Mualcheng village. Both of them

became mentally unstable after the incident and were taken care of by their siblings. Her younger sister Nghaki looked after Zamveli. Nghaki said that 'Her health severely deteriorated, and there were days when she did not want to speak to anyone. It has been very difficult to treat her.' Rumour claims that Zari, a political prisoner was severely tortured during her imprisonment from 1975 to 1980. She is said to have found strength through God's healing power and was able to overcome fear despite all she had gone through (Hmingthanzuali 2016). Although many women were captured and arrested, it is impossible to know the extent of sexual violence given their silence.

However, those incidents remain hidden behind the insurgency as no one dares to speak out in public because it harms the sentiments of not only the victims but also the whole village. These women preferred to keep quiet and internalize their pain as they did not want to be identified publicly. From my interviews, I understood that there are two views for exposing the realities of sexual violence. While one view agreed to expose the truth without providing identification, the other said that exposing the truth would never change what happened in the past, and it would only put the Mizos to shame.

I understand and appreciate their perception, which is why I did not attempt to get the details of all the evidences of sexual violence from my interviewers. Even then, Lalchungnungi said, 'Witnessing frequent occurrences of sexual violence hurt our sentiments – that is why many women joined the MNF as volunteers.'

C. Zama, who has studied the atrocities committed during this period claims women as well as their families do not like to address the issue of sexual violence because of the stigma attached to rape. When discussing the mental illness of a family member who was probably a victim of rape according to his knowledge, the family explains the mental illness as hereditary, or the result of a dog bite, and so on, ignoring the subject of sexual violence altogether (Zama 2014). C. Zama believes that unless the government offers compensation to a rape victim, no one would come forward because of the social stigma attached to rape. C. Zama's point here is that the shame attached to

rape in a society where women are blamed for sexual violence would result in re-victimization. Some authors argue that stigma can be passed from generation to generation, resulting in the denial of rights, denial of dignity and marginalization (AllAfrica.com). In Mizoram, children born out of wedlock from any period, including insurgency are marginalized. Till date it is not known how many children were born out of forced pregnancy during the insurgency period. In case of church law, they were suspended from membership for a certain period if the pregnancy was outside of marriage. The woman who bore a child without a father was referred to as *nuthlawi*, which by its name is offensive in nature' to 'an offensive term. While the Mizo Customary Law treats Mizo men married to non-Mizo women as equal, Mizo women marrying non-Mizo men are instructed to submit to their husband's culture, and she and her children are denied all rights a Mizo could have in Mizoram.

Despite all this evidence, from the interviews, only Chalbuangi from Reiek received compensation of Rs 4,000 from the government for the reconstruction of her house in 1989. No other women received compensation either in the form of grants or financial assistance for for their suffering at the time of conflict. In fact, most of the women interviewed were illiterate, and they did not know the mechanisms of the state and whom to approach to lodge a complaint. As Vanlallawmi from Reiek village sadly reflects, 'I never knew we could apply for compensation and never heard any family receiving compensation.' Others who understood the state mechanism and sought compensation were ignored. Rami from Seling village said, 'I met the chief minister during the MNF government several times; he ignored my appeal; now I have stopped begging for his mercy. I will survive without their assistance.' Lalpiani from Seling village said,

> We lost our houses and our belongings, my father was beaten to death in front of us and we suffered physically, mentally and financially. Only a few families were granted compensation. There was partiality in granting compensation or we might need to have a better skill of interpreting our sufferings to receive financial aid.

> In fact, even a huge amount of compensation will not suffice to cure our agonies.

As pointed out earlier, most of the women who spoke about their lives declared that their faith in God helped them tolerate their sufferings. Their testimonies often ended with an expression of their gratitude to God for helping them survive. They said their prayers and faith in God gave them courage to live through all those difficult periods.

CONCLUSION

By revisiting the role of women volunteers who went underground during the MNF movement, the need was uncovered to go beyond seeing women as victims, the worst sufferers in a conflict and to look at their efforts towards peace-building. It is evident that women have been part of the MNF movement since its inception in Mizoram. However, some women in the underground camp received military training but were forced to get involved in cooking, nursing the injured, and so on. Likewise, women who were left in the village were encouraged to provide food and shelter to the MNF party when they hid among the general population before shifting to East Pakistan. This division between combat and supporting roles reinforced the traditional division of labour where women's roles in the MNF movement were an extension of their domestic duties and kept them out of the movement (Hedstorm 2015). Therefore, their contributions in the political life of state building are diminished while male volunteers come out as heroes and become politicians.

Through the female narratives, it is evident that Mizo women faced multiple injustices and their subordinate role in the society was largely compounded by the presence of the AFSPA (Banerjee 2014). Besides, a clear evidence of double standards and inequality ruled by the Mizo Customary Law reinforced women's subordinate status in marriage,

divorce, inheritance and property rights. The patriarchal nature of the customary law on sexual offences and sustaining the old penalties without adapting the changes in the value system reinforces men's superiority and intensifies women's vulnerability to various forms of sexual violence in Mizo society.

It can be said that women experienced the same dislocation and violence as men, but women were more likely than men to suffer sexual violence. Because women are expected to feed their families, care for the children and elderly and keep the family together, they suffer when their dependents go hungry, are injured and killed. Moreover, as women are expected to be chaste, they are often blamed for the sexual violence they experience. When peace returned, no compensation was given to the women who were deprived of their livelihood in the grouping centres, or to widows who were forced to take care of their families. Families of rape victims never raised the issue because they feared being stigmatized by society. However, it was not just the families who were silent; women themselves internalized the blame and shame that was deeply embedded in their society, religion and culture. Mizo society, like any other patriarchal society, regards Mizo men as responsible for the protection of women. During the insurgency, men were not able to protect their families; and, in this context, the rape of Mizo women became a double failure of individual men and of Mizo society. This failure became entangled with the church's view of sex outside of marriage and stereotypes of women as temptresses. Neither women nor the society wants to confront the failure of the Mizo patriarch to protect women during the insurgency or the issues of consent and power that underlay the feminist concept of rape.

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MALE VOLUNTEERS, WHO WENT UNDERGROUND DURING THE MIZO NATIONAL FRONT MOVEMENT

1. Mr Zamawia, a defence secretary in the MNF movement (1966–1971) at Tuivamit, Aizawl.
2. Mr Bualhranga, an MNF volunteer (from 1966) at Lianchhungi Book Store, Aizawl.

3. Mr Lalthankunga, an MNF volunteer (from 1966) and former speaker of the Mizoram State Legislative Assembly (2004–2009) at Tuikhuahtlang, Aizawl.
4. Mrs Lalrawnliana, an MNF volunteer (from1966) and ex-Member of Mizoram Legislative Assembly at Tuikhuahtlang.
5.. Mr C. Zama, an MNF volunteer (from 1965) at Chawnpui, Aizawl.

FEMALE VOLUNTEERS WHO WENT UNDERGROUND DURING THE MIZO NATIONAL FRONT MOVEMENT

6. Mrs Tinsangi, an MNF volunteer at Dawrpui, Aizawl.
7. Mrs Laltawni, wife of an MNF volunteer at Bungkawn, Aizawl.
8. Mrs Biakdiki, wife of the MNF leader at Tuikhuahtlang, Aizawl.
9. Mrs Lalchhawni, an MNF volunteer at northeast Khawngdungsei.
10. Mrs Thangmawii, an MNF volunteer at Kolasib.
11. Mrs Chalmawii, an MNF volunteer at Chawlhhmun, Aizawl.
12. Mrs Thanhrangi, an MNF volunteer at Tuikual, Aizawl.
13. Mrs Lalthansangi, an MNF volunteer at Chawnpui, Aizawl.
14. Mrs Hrangzovi, an MNF volunteer at Saitual.
15. Mrs Zahmingliani, an MNF volunteer at Lengpui, Aizawl.
16. Mrs Rebeki, an MNF volunteer at Zodin Square, Aizawl.
17. Mrs Lalthlamuani, an MNF volunteer at Tuivamit, Aizawl.

WOMEN IN SELING AND REIEK VILLAGES WHO EXPERIENCED INSURGENCY (1966–1987)

Reiek Village:

1. Mrs Zahmingliani
2. Mrs Chalbuangi
3. Mrs Lalpari
4. Mrs Vanlallawmi
5. Mrs Rozami

6. Mrs Lalchungnungi
7. Mrs Zochhungi

Seling Village

1. Mrs Rami
2. Mrs Lalpiani
3. Mrs Sapbawihi
4. Mrs Sapthuami
5. Mrs Lalsawmi
6. Mrs Thanchhingi
7. Mrs Thangchuailovi
8. Mrs Lalsiami
9. Mrs Vanlalnghaki, sister of Zamveli, Kolasib

NOTES

1. Her real name was Mary Winchester; Mizo female names end with 'i', and male names with 'a'.
2. In 1928, N.E. Parry (Superintendent of the Lushai Hills, 1925–1928) first codified the Mizo Customary Law in 'A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies'. Parry states that all genuine rape cases had to be reported to the superintendent of the British Colonial. According to him, a genuine rape case was unmistakable as a girl would hasten to complain to the chief and the chief would ultimately send her straight to the court. Parry wrote that rape rarely occurred in villages because there were so many people around that a girl or a woman could easily get help if attacked. A man accused and found guilty of having sex with a girl who was underage was to be fined Rs 40 and *Salam* (flesh of a Mithun); however, the customary law does not specify the age of the underaged girl. In 2006, the Government of Mizoram published the first edition of the Mizo Customary Law that simply followed Parry's version of what constitutes 'rape' in the Mizo custom. Instead of imposing a precise penalty for the aggressor other than stating offenders are liable to fines, the law defends the right of the victim to use any force necessary against the man attacking her.