

# MANIPURI WOMEN GUN SURVIVORS NETWORK



*The plight and misery of a woman whose husband has been killed or maimed for life due to the armed conflict situation is unfathomable.*



## Manipur's Leimatol Range and Imphal Valley

Photo by S. Mentschel

**Manipur** is a tiny state located in India's Northeast with just over two million inhabitants belonging to several ethnic groups. Looking back at a history of more than 2000 years as an independent kingdom, Manipur merged with the Union of India in 1949 two years after British colonial rule ended on the subcontinent.

Since then, the state has been witnessing low intensity conflict. Over 20,000 people have been killed in armed violence in the last five decades. Today more than 30 armed groups operate in Manipur. Besides them, dozens of battalions of the Indian Army and several units of Indian paramilitary forces are stationed there.

Manipur is one of the most conflict-ridden states in India. According to official statistics, in 2006 alone nearly 300 people lost their lives. Human Rights groups put the figures even higher. According to them, not a day in Manipur passes without a gun killing.

Women and children of Manipur suffer most in this conflict even when they are not directly targeted. They are traumatized by the deaths of family members. They bear the brunt of the emotional and socio-economic impacts of violence. So many women have become impoverished after the killings of male relatives, who have been working for the survival of the family.

Apart from that, women themselves are particularly vulnerable to violence and intimidation at gunpoint, often used as a deliberate military and political tactic. Also women and girls continue to be tortured, raped and killed at gunpoint.

*An entire family dies even when a solitary bullet is fired at someone. In the killing fields of Manipur, stories of suffering heaped on families through acts of violence are legion.*

*Binalakshmi Nepram*



Photos by B. Nepram



**Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN)** inception dates back to December 24, 2004. On Christmas Eve, Ms Binalakshmi Nepram witnessed the aftermath of the killing of 27-year-old Buddhi Moirangthem in Wabgai Lamkhai village of Thoubal district, southeast of Manipur's state capital, Imphal.

There, a group of three gunmen had dragged Buddhi from his car-battery workshop. Within a matter of minutes they shot him dead. Till date, his 24-year-old wife Rebika Akham does not know who the killers were and why they killed her husband.

Days after the incident, Rupees 4500 (USD 110) were contributed by Ms Nepram and other committed people and bought a sewing machine for Rebika Akham. This was the first ever intervention of MWGSN and enabled her to stitch clothes for villagers and to secure a humble living.

**Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network** was formed in an attempt to help women like Rebika Akham, whose lives have been cut short because of the gun killings of beloved husband, father or son be it by state- or non-state actors or unidentified gunmen.

It attempts to lift women above the trauma and agony faced in armed conflict. It helps women gun survivors to find ways to heal the scars that decades of violence have caused to the community.

MWGSN's direct intervention evolves a gender sensitive approach to the gun crisis, supports women economically and bring them forward to play a crucial role in small arms policy. It is the first initiative of its kind in India.

The formal launch of the Network took place on April 26, 2007, in Manipur's state capital, Imphal.



Launch of MWGSN in Imphal, April 2007. Photo by H. Sanaton

*Take the story of Kumar Mutum of Ukhrul district, who was killed by unidentified people a couple of years ago. Since that incident, it has been a relentless struggle for survival for his widow, Lucy Jajo, and the couple's son, Lanchenba. The countless Lucy Jajos and Lanchenbas in this state have all been created by the "gun culture" .*

*The Telegraph, April 27, 2007*

With many women in Manipur trying to cope with life under the shadow of gun, Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network attempts to make them economically independent. It assists them in small-scale entrepreneurial work so that their life goes on with newfound courage.

The Network is working on measures for towards building sustainable livelihood for gun-affected women in Manipur.

Manipur enjoys a distinct place among the handloom zones in India and like many of the Manipuri women most of the gun survivors are skilled in making handloom and handicraft items. The Network helps women gun survivors to open bank accounts and provides small loans of Rupees 3000 to 9000 (USD 75 to 225). With the help of this money the women are able to carry on work related to silk reeling, weaving and other occupation such as fishery or mushroom farming.

Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network also forms "Solidarity Networks" of committed young people who believe in helping the survivors and in controlling the use and proliferation of small arms.

They keep in touch with these women and assist them in whatever way they can.



Manipuri women supported by MWGSN. Photos by Lakshmikanth

## **Recent Events Organized**

### People's Consultation on the Arms Trade Treaty (Imphal, April 2007)

The Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network, the Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI) and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) jointly organized the People's Consultation on the Arms Trade Treaty in Imphal.

The event took place on April 26, 2007, and was attended by around 70 people from all walks of life. It coincided with the official launch of the Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network and was covered in several local and regional newspapers as well as the electronic media.

The day inspired all to join hands to work together for peace and to demand that state as well as non-state actors who have access to guns should conduct their actions in accordance to human rights and international humanitarian law.

### Global Week of Action against Gun Violence (Manipur, June 2007)

Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network observed the Global Week of Action against Gun Violence from June 11 to 17, 2007. Commemorating the week in Manipur, the Network opened bank accounts for women gun survivors and distributed token gifts for the children of gun victims.

MWGSN also linked up with women writers and journalists to write, document and disseminate the level of gun violence in Manipur. Several testimonies of women gun survivors were published in local newspapers.

## Day of Activism against Increasing Gun Violence on Women (New Delhi, December 2007)

On 5 December 2007, Control Arms Foundation of India and Manipuri Women Gun Survivors Network observed the global day of action against increasing armed gun violence on women. The event was part of "16 Days of Activism To End Violence Against Women", a global campaign that took place from November 25 to December 5, 2007.

The "16 Days" had been used as an organizing strategy by individuals and groups around the world to call for elimination of all forms of violence against women, and to bring issues of violence against women to the forefront in local, national, regional and global arenas.

Distinguished academics, civil societies members, human rights activists, journalists, lawyers observed the day at the Control Arms Foundation of India premises in New Delhi. The participants also launched the "Delhi Declaration on Women & Armed Gun Violence".



Day of Activism in Delhi, December 2007. Photo by Paramita Nath

## **Future Plans**

- (1) The Network will continue to support women gun survivors by giving small loans. This will enable them to start work on their own and to earn an income to support of their families.
- (2) The Network will support women gun survivors financially so that they are able to provide education for their children.
- (3) The Network will keep documenting the testimonies of women and children gun survivors in the valley and the hill district of the state. A second documentary film is planned.
- (4) The Network will ask support of doctors and psychologists, to professionally counsel women gun survivors and deal with their mental trauma.
- (5) The Network will also keep organizing meetings, organize exhibitions to raise the awareness to the wider public on the problems women gun survivors are facing.
- (6) The Network is collecting shoes of victims of gun violence, which will be displayed in an exhibition. Each shoe will depict a victim of Manipur's armed conflict.



## **Manipuri Women Gun Survivor Network**

Reena Mutum

Coordinator

Sagolband Thangjam Leirak

Imphal 795 001, Manipur, India

Mobile: +91 (0) 9971103691 / 9856156273

Email: reenamutum@gmail.com

Binalakshmi Nepram

Founder

B 5 / 146, 1st Floor

Safdarjung Enclave

New Delhi 110 029, India

Mobile: +91 (0) 9891210264

Email: binalakshmi@gmail.com

Cover: Nupi-Lal-Memorial in Imphal remembers the rise of Manipuri women against British colonial rule in 1939. The uprising is known as Nupi Lal or Women's war. Photo by B. Nepram