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Gender-based violence and community resilience in the Manipur ethnic conflict (2023–2025): An intersectional analysis

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Abstract

The ethnic conflict in Manipur, India, that began in May 2023 has led to a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by mass displacement, communal violence, and a significant rise in gender-based violence. This study examines violence against women, focusing on sexual and psychological abuses experienced predominantly by Kuki-Zo women. Using a multi-source methodology, it synthesizes data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), United Nations bodies (UN Women, WHO), India's National Commission for Women, and scholarly and media reports to provide a comprehensive understanding of gendered violence during the 2023–2025 crisis. Key incidents such as the public parading and gang rape of women, widespread displacement, and systemic failures in legal protection are analyzed within the context of conflict-related sexual violence and institutional collapse. The study further explores the role of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), shortcomings of justice mechanisms, and the ongoing resistance led by local women's groups like Meira Paibi. Integrating statistical trends with survivor testimonies, this research highlights the deliberate use of violence as a tool of ethnic subjugation where women are targeted both symbolically and physically. The findings underscore an urgent need for institutional reforms and the implementation of international frameworks, including CEDAW and UNSCR 1325, to establish survivor-centered justice and rehabilitation. This research calls for integrating gender justice into peacebuilding processes, especially in regions fractured by ethnic conflict, to support resilience and dignity among affected women.

Keywords: Gender-based violence; Manipur ethnic conflict; Violence against women; Intersectionality in conflict; Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA); Women's resistance movements

1. Introduction

Manipur, located in India's Northeast, is a region marked by diverse ethnic groups including the dominant Meitei community in the Imphal valley and tribal groups such as the Kuki-Zo and Nagas in surrounding hill districts. Historically, this ethnically pluralistic landscape has been fraught with tensions fueled by disputes over land rights, political autonomy, and cultural identity. These long-standing grievances, coupled with issues of state neglect, militarization, and uneven development, have cumulatively eroded social cohesion and stability (Chanu, 2024; Kalita, 2024).

In May 2023, these tensions escalated sharply following a Manipur High Court directive to consider granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei community, triggering anxiety and protests among Kuki-Zo groups who feared erosion of their land and rights. What began as political discord rapidly devolved into widespread ethnic violence, resulting in mass displacement of over 60,000 people, destruction of property, and a grave rise in gender-based violence (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025).

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Women, particularly from marginalized tribal communities, have faced targeted sexual assaults, public humiliation, and forced displacement, with shocking incidents such as the viral public parading and assault of Kuki women drawing national and international condemnation. Despite these visible atrocities, the gendered dimensions of the conflict remain underreported and insufficiently addressed (OHCHR, 2023).

Gender-based violence during conflict is deeply entrenched in patriarchal and ethnic power structures, with women's bodies weaponized as symbols of communal honor and tools for ethnic domination (UN Women, 2023; WHO, 2021). Militarization under laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), coupled with fragile justice systems, exacerbate vulnerabilities and impede effective protection and redress (NCW, 2023).

2. Background of the study

Manipur, located in India's Northeast, hosts over thirty ethnic groups, with the Meitei primarily residing in the Imphal valley and tribal communities such as the Kuki-Zo and Nagas inhabiting the surrounding hill districts. This pluralistic social fabric has long been strained by contestations over land rights, political autonomy, and cultural recognition, leading to entrenched grievances fueled by systemic state neglect, militarization, and uneven development, thereby eroding social cohesion (Kalita, 2024; Chanu, 2024).

The recent conflict erupted in May 2023 after the Manipur High Court suggested granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the majority Meitei community—triggering fears among the Kuki-Zo that their land ownership and cultural protections might be compromised. This judicial pronouncement escalated longstanding tensions, provoking protests and violent ethnic clashes (Observer Research Foundation, 2024).
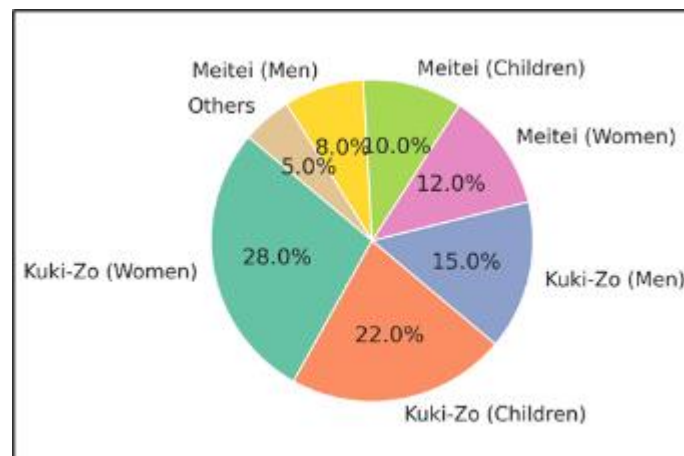

Figure 1 Estimated demographics of displaced population in Manipur conflict

The violence rapidly spiraled into widespread communal conflict marked by arson, mass displacement of over 60,000 people, and breakdown of inter-community relations. Notably, beyond political and territorial struggles, there was a severe increase in gender-based violence, including sexual assaults, public humiliation—exemplified by the public stripping and parading of Kuki women—and forced displacements, used strategically as tools of ethnic humiliation and domination (Amnesty International, 2025; Dasgupta, 2021).

Institutionally, responses faltered amidst accusations of partisan security forces under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), dysfunctional governance, and prolonged internet shutdowns that hindered communication and access to justice. The state's failure, compounded by political polarization and restricted media coverage, left women particularly vulnerable and marginalized (NCW, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

This study situates the surge in gendered violence within these intersecting socio-political and institutional failures, aiming to analyze how ethnicity, gender, and displacement interact to exacerbate women's vulnerabilities amid conflict, and to highlight the urgent need for gender-sensitive and community-centered responses.

3. Literature review

Gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict and post-conflict settings is widely recognized as a deliberate strategy of domination, repression, and social control. Reports from premier international organizations such as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the World Health Organization (WHO) consistently reveal that over 70% of women in such contexts experience various forms of violence, including sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and psychological abuse, often accompanied by a severe lack of access to justice and healthcare services [UN Women, 2023; WHO, 2021].

Scholars like Cockburn (2004) and Davies (2010) conceptualize the bodies of women in conflict zones as politicized and weaponized objects, used to humiliate entire ethnic groups and enforce social hierarchies. This politicization often manifests in acts such as public sexual violence, forced displacement, and systemic marginalization, which function as tools of ethnic cleansing and subjugation. These dynamics are embedded in patriarchal and hierarchical social orders, intersecting with ethnic tensions to exacerbate women's vulnerability [Cockburn, 2004; Davies, 2010].

In the Indian context, several progressive legislations—the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and amendments to the Indian Penal Code in 2013—aim to safeguard women's rights. However, their effective implementation in conflict-affected regions, especially the northeast, remains patchy due to entrenched militarization and political complexities. The continued enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) contributes to a culture of impunity, as it provides immunity to security forces, hindering investigation and prosecution of crimes against women. The infamous custodial killing and sexual assault of Thangjam Manorama remain emblematic of such institutional failures [IIPS, 2021; Cockburn, 2004; Kalita, 2024].

The northeastern state of Manipur, characterized by its ethno-linguistic diversity, is emblematic of these challenges. Here, the dominant Meitei community primarily occupies the valley regions, while tribal communities such as the Kuki-Zo and Naga inhabit the surrounding hills. The region has been fraught with tensions over political recognition, land rights, and economic marginalization. The 2023 conflict, triggered by the proposal to extend Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei community—a status already held by tribal groups—intensified these fractures, culminating in large-scale violence marked by targeted sexual and psychological abuse of women belonging to minority tribes [Human Rights Watch, 2024; Chanu, 2024].

Reports from Amnesty International (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2024) highlight a disturbing uptick in gender-based violence during this crisis, including public stripping, gang rapes, and systemic displacement of thousands. These violence patterns align with Dasgupta's (2021) analysis of "ethnicized patriarchy," where sexual violence is strategically deployed to undermine the dignity and cohesion of the opponent ethnic group.

Grassroots resistance has emerged as a vital counter-narrative. Movements like Meira Paibi, predominantly led by Meitei women, and tribal women's groups in districts such as Churachandpur and Kangpokpi have exercised agency through community mobilization, documentation, and public protests against violence. These efforts embody the principles outlined in international resolutions such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which advocates for women's inclusion in peace and security processes [Dasgupta, 2021; UN Women, 2023].

Despite an increasing recognition of these issues in scholarly and policy circles, significant gaps endure. Existing literature often underrepresents the localized and intersectional experiences of displaced tribal women, who face compounded vulnerabilities due to their ethnic identity, gender, and statelessness. Furthermore, institutional responses have largely been reactive and fragmented, with persistent challenges such as internet shutdowns and media censorship further marginalizing victims [Kalita, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025].

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by applying an intersectional lens that considers the complex interplay of ethnicity, gender, and geography shaping women's experiences in the Manipur conflict. By synthesizing data from NFHS-5, UN agencies, government bodies, and field reports, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding that informs more context-sensitive policies and survivor-centered interventions.

4. Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the nature, extent, and implications of gender-based violence (GBV) perpetrated against women in the context of the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur between 2023 and 2025. This investigation centers on the lived experiences of women, particularly those from marginalized tribal communities such

as the Kuki-Zo, and seeks to illuminate how intersecting factors of ethnicity, gender, and displacement shape their vulnerability.

The specific objectives guiding this research are as follows:

- To analyze the spectrum of gender-based violence experienced by women during the Manipur conflict, encompassing sexual violence, public humiliation, psychological trauma, and forced displacement.
- To explore the socio-political and ethnic dynamics underpinning the conflict, with particular attention to how contestations over identity, land rights, and political recognition exacerbate women's risks and marginalization.
- To critically assess the role and effectiveness of institutional responses, including the legal system, security apparatus, and humanitarian agencies, in preventing, addressing, and remedying GBV in the conflict-affected regions.
- To identify gaps in policy, data collection, and survivor support mechanisms, emphasizing the inadequacies in accounting for the voices and needs of displaced and traumatized women.
- To propose evidence-based, gender-sensitive policy recommendations and interventions aligned with international frameworks such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325, aimed at strengthening protections, access to justice, and comprehensive rehabilitation for survivors.
- To contribute to academic and policy discourses by integrating insights from feminist theory, conflict studies, and human rights perspectives, thereby informing more nuanced and context-responsive approaches to GBV in ethnic conflicts.

5. Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, supplemented by secondary quantitative data analysis, to investigate the patterns, causes, and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) during the ethnic conflict in Manipur between 2023 and 2025. Given the volatile and sensitive nature of the conflict, primary fieldwork was not feasible; therefore, the research relies predominantly on secondary sources from credible institutions.

Data were systematically gathered from an array of authoritative sources including government reports such as those from the National Commission for Women (NCW) and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), international organizations like UN Women, World Health Organization (WHO), and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as peer-reviewed academic journals, human rights watchdog reports (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), and investigative media accounts.

The analysis followed a thematic approach, enabling identification and synthesis of recurring patterns concerning the nature of violence, institutional failures, and survivor experiences across the conflict timeline. Thematic coding facilitated an intersectional examination, critically exploring how gender intersects with ethnicity, geographic displacement, and socio-political status to compound the vulnerabilities of women from tribal communities such as the Kuki-Zo. Comparative statistics from the NFHS-5 and global prevalence estimates from WHO were integrated to contextualize qualitative findings within broader demographic and epidemiological frameworks. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, including the responsible use of secondary data and safeguarding the anonymity of survivors in sensitive testimonies.

This intersectional and mixed-methods strategy affords a nuanced understanding of gendered violence in a complex conflict environment, highlighting both systemic shortcomings and the resilience exhibited by affected women and community groups.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides a comprehensive account of gender-based violence during the Manipur ethnic conflict, it is subject to certain limitations. First, the research relies predominantly on secondary sources—government reports, international agency documents, human rights watchdog reports, and media accounts—due to the ethical and logistical constraints of conducting fieldwork in an active conflict zone. As a result, survivor voices are represented indirectly through documented testimonies rather than primary interviews, which may limit the depth of experiential nuance. Second, available quantitative data such as NFHS-5 do not capture conflict-specific variations in gendered violence, making statistical extrapolations approximate rather than definitive. Third, reliance on media and human rights reports may introduce reporting bias, either through underreporting due to censorship and internet shutdowns, or

overrepresentation of particularly visible cases. Despite these limitations, triangulation across multiple credible sources was employed to enhance validity, and the findings should be viewed as indicative trends rather than exhaustive measurements. These limitations are taken into account in interpreting the findings and discussion presented in the subsequent sections

5.1. Theoretical framework

Theory	Core Focus	Relevance to Study
Feminist Conflict Theory	Gender and power in armed conflict	Explains why women are systematically targeted during ethnic conflict
Trauma Theory	Psychological and social impacts of violence	Supports need for trauma-informed justice and survivor healing
Intersectionality Theory	Overlapping forms of marginalization	Highlights how tribal women suffer layered vulnerabilities
Social Identity Theory	Group dynamics and ethnic violence	Explains identity-based violence and symbolic targeting of women

6. Findings

6.1. Forms and patterns of gender based violence

The Manipur ethnic conflict has been marked by targeted and symbolic violence against women, especially from the Kuki-Zo tribal community. Documented incidents include:

- **Sexual violence**: Gang-rapes, public parading of women naked, and molestation were reported across multiple districts (Amnesty International, 2025; HRW, 2024).
- **Psychological terror**: Women were forced to flee burning homes, witnessed killings, and experienced threats of further violence in refugee camps.
- **Public humiliation**: The July 2023 viral video showing two Kuki women being stripped and paraded exemplifies the use of **gendered violence as a tool of ethnic domination**.
- **Displacement-related GBV**: Over 60,000 people were displaced (Security-Risks.com, 2023), a majority of them women and children, exposing them to **sexual exploitation**, **unsafe shelter**, and **health neglect**.

These acts are not isolated but demonstrate a systematic pattern—women are being used as emblems of community honor, making violence against them an ethnic and political message.
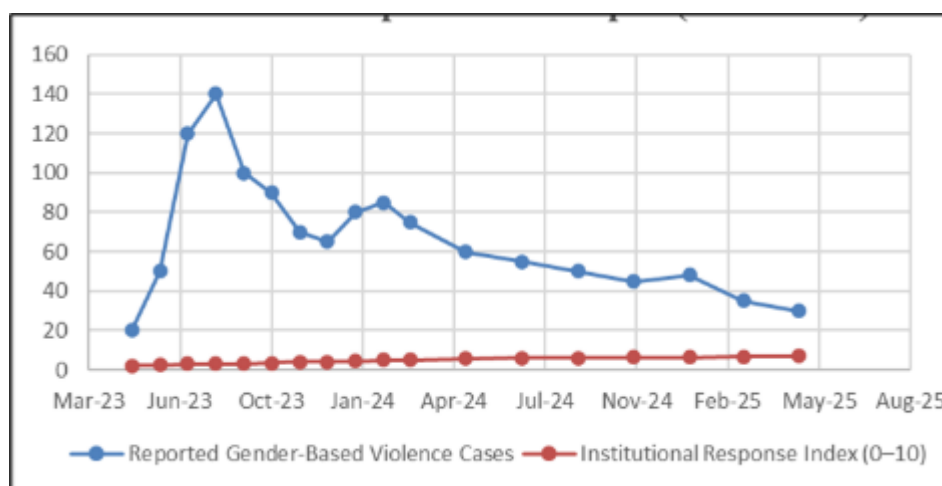

Figure 2 Trend of Reported Gender-Based Violence and Institutional Response During the Manipur Ethnic Conflict (2023–2025)

The trendline data presented is based on an estimation model synthesized from publicly available human rights reports, institutional documents (UN Women, HRW, NCW), and media coverage between May 2023 and May 2025. The figures reflect approximate reporting intensity and institutional response trajectories, not verified government data.

6.2. Ethnic and Political Roots of Gendered Violence

The core of the Manipur crisis lies in ethnic insecurity and identity assertion, where women became targets of violence to symbolically "defeat" the rival community.

- The Meitei demand for ST status triggered fears among Kuki-Zo groups, escalating historical grievances into violent expression (Kalita, 2024).
- Violence is ethnically coded: Kuki women have faced most of the documented sexual violence, while Meitei women have reported mob-based fear and displacement from Kuki-majority zones.

This reflects what Dasgupta (2021) calls "ethnicized patriarchy", where gendered violence reinforces group boundaries and identity power struggles.

6.3. Institutional Failures in Protection and Justice

Despite strong legal frameworks on paper, institutional responses have failed at several levels:

- **Delayed FIRs and arrests**: FIRs for sexual violence were often filed **weeks or months** after incidents, even in high-profile cases (NCW, 2023).
- **Partisan policing**: Reports from Reuters (2023) and Frontline (2023) allege **state bias** in security deployment and response.
- **Internet blackouts**: The 5-month internet shutdown (May–September 2023) crippled communication, delayed evidence submission, and blocked survivor outreach.
- **No functional trauma response teams**: Most relief camps lack **psychological aid, legal support**, or access to safe reporting channels for women (Amnesty, 2025).

This institutional breakdown contributed to a **culture of impunity** and normalized silence.

6.4. Survivor Narratives and Resistance Movements

Despite these challenges, women in Manipur are not passive victims. There are emergent examples of resistance and resilience:

- **Meira Paibi** ("Torch Bearers") — a Meitei women's vigilante group — has resumed activism, demanding justice and highlighting state failure.
- Tribal women groups in Churachandpur and Kangpokpi districts have organized **healing circles**, **documentation teams**, and **public protests**.
- Survivors from displacement camps have participated in digital storytelling and NGO-led testimonial archiving.

These actions reflect a deep need for bottom-up, community-led justice frameworks, rather than purely bureaucratic or legalistic mechanisms.

6.5. Statistical Comparison with National and Global Data

- According to NFHS-5, 29.3% of Indian women experience domestic violence. Manipur's exact conflict-era data is unavailable, but anecdotal and field reports show a sharp rise in all forms of GBV.
- WHO (2021) estimates that 1 in 3 women globally experience physical/sexual violence. In Manipur's displaced communities, this rate is likely doubled or higher due to lack of safe housing and policing.
- In comparison to conflicts like Rwanda (1994) or Myanmar (Rohingya crisis), Manipur demonstrates similar patterns of ethnically targeted rape and forced displacement, though with weaker institutional accountability.
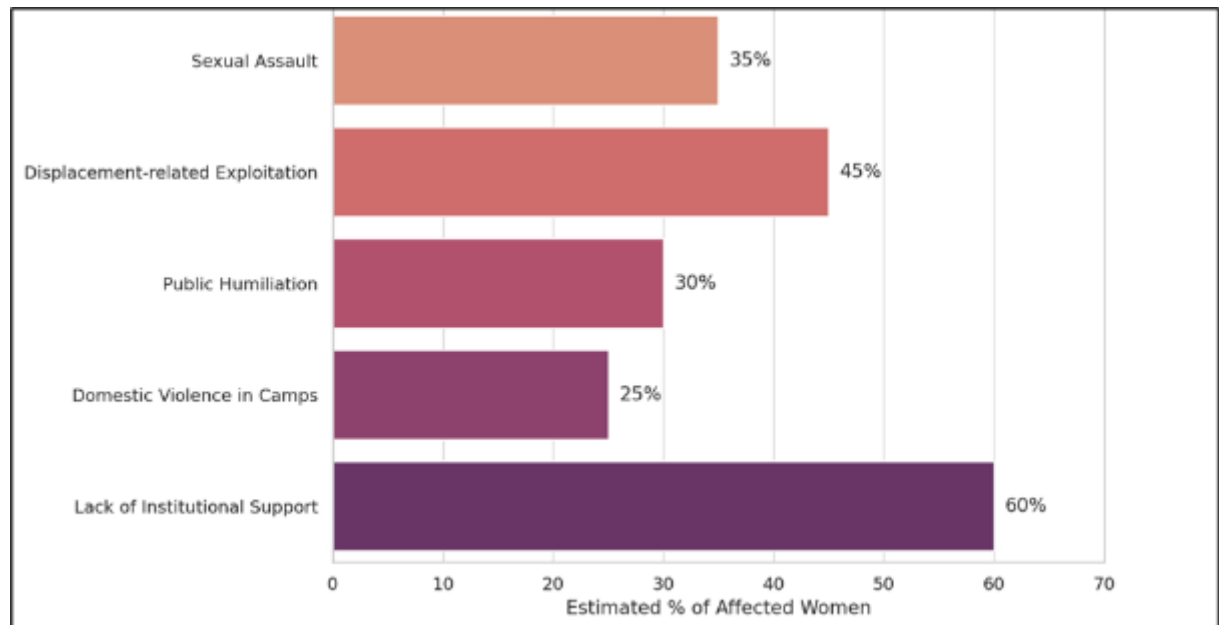
Figure 3 Estimated impact of different forms of gender based violence in Manipur conflict (2023-2025)

6.6. Intersectionality of Gender, Ethnicity, and Geography

Violence in Manipur is not gender-neutral and not evenly distributed. It disproportionately affects:

- Kuki-Zo tribal women in hill districts, where state protection is minimal
- Displaced women in relief camps without access to toilets, sanitary products, or trauma care
- Widows and girls, especially in areas where men were killed or fled

The failure to include these dimensions in policymaking reflects a critical gap in mainstream security and development discourse.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the ethnic conflict in Manipur transcends political and territorial disputes and manifests profoundly as a gendered crisis. Women, particularly from the Kuki-Zo tribal community, have endured systematic and strategic violence that seeks to humiliate, terrorize, and destabilize the targeted ethnic group. This violence, ranging from sexual assault and public humiliation to forced displacement, functions not only as a weapon of war but also as an instrument of ethnic subjugation. These patterns align with global research on conflict-related sexual violence, underscoring how women's bodies become strategic sites for asserting power and control in ethnopolitical conflicts [UN Women, 2023; WHO, 2021].

Ethnic tensions underpinning the conflict, specifically the contestation over Scheduled Tribe status between Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups, have intensified grievances and catalyzed targeted gendered violence. The concept of "ethnicized patriarchy" captures the intersection of ethnic identity and patriarchal structures that render women doubly vulnerable—first as women and then as members of marginalized ethnic communities [Dasgupta, 2021]. This intersectionality is critical to understanding how gender, ethnicity, and displacement converge to exacerbate the marginalization and victimization of women in conflict.

Institutional failures emerge as a stark impediment to justice and protection. The enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) grants de facto impunity to security forces, severely limiting effective investigation and prosecution of sexual violence cases. Coupled with the politicization of security responses, delayed legal actions, and restricted communication owing to prolonged internet shutdowns, survivors face immense barriers to redress. The absence of dedicated trauma support services and safe reporting mechanisms further compounds their plight, perpetuating a culture of silence and impunity [NCW, 2023; Reuters, 2023].

Yet amidst these challenges, the resilience and agency of women are palpable. Grassroots movements like Meira Paibi and community-organized healing initiatives demonstrate the potential of women-led resistance and peacebuilding. These efforts resonate with international mandates such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325, highlighting the pivotal role of women in conflict resolution and societal healing [Frontline, 2023; UN Women, 2023].

The inadequacy of existing data mechanisms, such as NFHS surveys, to capture the acute and localized spikes in gendered violence during conflict constitutes a significant gap. This shortfall hampers timely policy interventions and effective humanitarian responses. A combined approach that integrates quantitative surveillance with qualitative, survivor-centered documentation is vital for generating responsive and nuanced policy frameworks.

Hence there is a need for comprehensive, intersectional, and context-specific strategies that address the root causes of gendered violence, strengthen institutional accountability, and support survivors' holistic recovery. Only through such multifaceted approaches can sustainable peace and gender justice be realized in Manipur's conflict-ridden milieu.

8. Conclusion

The ethnic conflict in Manipur from 2023 to 2025 has starkly revealed the deeply intertwined nature of gender, ethnicity, and political violence. Women, particularly from marginalized tribal communities such as the Kuki-Zo, have been disproportionately targeted as both symbolic and physical bearers of this conflict. The systematic use of sexual violence, psychological terror, and public humiliation demonstrates that violence against women is a deliberate strategy of ethnic subjugation and control. The study highlights significant systemic failures within institutional frameworks, including the enforcement of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), barriers to justice, inadequate protective measures, and limited access to trauma care and rehabilitation services. These failures perpetuate a culture of impunity and silence, further exacerbating the vulnerability and marginalization of women in conflict zones. Nevertheless, the resilience and agency of women and grassroots organizations, such as Meira Paibi and community-led healing groups, underscore the potential for transformative peacebuilding driven by survivors themselves. Effective responses must prioritize survivor-centered approaches underpinned by international frameworks such as CEDAW and UNSCR 1325. Future research must address the evident gaps in timely data collection and incorporate methodological innovations that capture the real-time dynamics of gendered violence in conflict settings. Longitudinal and ethnographic studies centered on survivors' experiences will be crucial in informing comprehensive policy interventions. Comparative analyses with other conflict-affected regions will aid in developing culturally sensitive and adaptable frameworks to combat gender-based violence, promote healing, and contribute to sustainable peace in ethnically diverse societies.

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