



Internally displaced children: A case study in Churachandpur, Manipur

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Abstract

A survey of the internally displaced children under study reveals the complex and multifaceted issues and challenges that these children faced every day. As has been pointed here in this study, it is imperative to recognize the importance of children and to invest in their well-being, education, and nurturing for a prosperous, harmonious, and sustainable future for society as a whole. The need of the hour is to address these issues and challenges and to provide adequate support and protection for these displaced children. One must ensure their well-being, development, and successful integration into their new communities. In other words, the care for now and the afterward is paramount. This involves coordinated efforts from governments, humanitarian organizations, and even the international community.

Key Words: *Internally Displaced Children, Trauma, Healthcare, Nutrition, and Education*

Introduction

The internal ethnic fighting between the dominant Meitei who inhabited the valley and the Zo ethnic tribes (comprising of the many tribes like Kuki, Hmar, Paite, Mizo, Vaiphei, etc., who shared the same ethnicity), who occupied the Hills area surrounding the Imphal Valley has lasted more than five months

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now. When the fights first erupt on the 3rd of May, 2023 (Jon Suante, 2023), many would not have envisaged the fight to prolong till date and that it would cost untold misery and lasting trauma for the loss of lives as well as ones' home. As the fight spreads, many houses were burned and many villages ransacked. Scores of families have to leave behind their land and their precious belonging to seek shelter from their enemies. In such cases, it is always the most vulnerable section of the society who had to pay the price most. Indeed, war and political unrest threatens more the safety of women and children. Even with this ethnic war, many families fled their ancestral home and seek refuge among their neighboring villages where it was still relatively safe.

The worst affected are the children who had to come to terms with the many changes they were suddenly bombarded with. It is often easy to take the casual approach when it involves children thinking that they are still growing, developing and are quite resilient to change. Yet, it is imperative that one tries to better understand the problem and take a closer examination of the challenges experienced by displaced children. As such, this paper examines the complex and multifaceted nature that involves with these internally displaced children. This helps in their rehabilitation, now and in the future to come

Methodology

This study employed mainly as its research methodology, a survey method. "Survey, as a method can be defined as questioning individuals on a topic or topics and then describing their responses" (Jackson, 2011:17). The survey method is a research technique used to collect data from a predefined group of respondents by posing a set of standardized questions. It is a widely used approach in social science research and other fields to gather information about people's opinions, attitudes, behaviors, preferences, and other relevant data.

This method is employed here because, the survey method framework provides a systematic and organized approach to collecting data from a specific population, allowing researchers to obtain valuable information to inform decisions, policy development, and future research. The following describe the key elements and steps involved in the survey method employed by this paper:

- As its research objectives, this paper observed and analyses the complex and multifaceted dimensions of the issues and challenges faced by the displaced children scattered all over Lamka in Churachandpur, Manipur
- The specific group or population that the survey studied were inclusively the children, from breastfeeding child to high school students, i.e., 0 – 15 years of age. These groups represent the most important formative growth and development stage emotionally, socially, and intellectually.
- “As a sampling method, this study will employ a multi sampling technique that combines mainly, random sampling where every individual has an equivalent and autonomous chance of being carefully chosen for the sample thereby reducing bias and allowing for generalizability” (cf. ET, 2023), and purposive (judgmental) “sampling where individuals are selected based on specific criteria, expertise, or characteristics that are relevant to the research objectives” (cf. Research-Methodology, 2023).
- As to implementing the method, a face-to-face interviews and observations of the displaced children was conducted from the various relief camp where these children are kept sheltered.

Internally displaced people (Children)

What does it meant to labelled someone as Internally Displaced People? With all that is going in the world, it is not surprising that there would be different types of labelling displaced people. While the term “refugee” can be broad and meant those people who have fled their home and are seeking safety somewhere else, it can also be specifically understood as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence” (USA for UNHCR, 2022). What this specific definition points to is whether you are fleeing your country or not. If you are not fleeing your country but seeks safety within it then you are among the internally displaced group. Therefore, IDP or “an internally displaced person is someone who is living inside the borders of their own country, but is unable to safely live in their own home or region” (Roads to Refuge, 2018).

Data, scope and limitation of the study

From when the war first started between the Meitei and the Zo, the numbers of internally displaced people from both sides are alarming. There were numbers of Meitei families from Lamka, the Zo dominated area, fleeing to Imphal and elsewhere where the Meiteis are in the majority. Likewise, many Zos' families living in Imphal and some other places where the Meitei dominates had to flee to other states like Mizoram and Assam. While other Zo's families were taken care of and given shelter by their neighboring villages in Lamka where it is still relatively safe. The scope of this paper is to focus attention not to the many internally displaced person who went to the neighboring states of Manipur or from other district in Manipur, but only to the internally displaced children staying in different relief shelters at Lamka town. This is because it is not feasible to survey all the relief camps because of time constraint. Moreover, the survey of 44 relief centers as shown in the table below is quite revealing and can set itself as the standard measurement of the condition of the other displaced children.

Table 2: Number of children under study

| Sl. No. | Name of Relief Camp | No. of Displaced Children |
|---------|--|---------------------------|
| 1 | Upper Primary School, Bijang | 26 |
| 2 | Industrial Training Institute, (ITI) Saikot, | 9 |
| 3 | Sub-Divisional Office (SDO), Saikot, | 27 |
| 4 | Christian Revival Church (KRC), K. Phaicham | 39 |
| 5 | Community Hall, Bijang Loubuk | 13 |
| 6 | Upper Primary School, Khawmawi | 21 |
| 7 | LM Academy, Lingsiphai | 15 |
| 8 | Kuki Christian Church (KCC), Molnom | 15 |
| 9 | TD Block, Lingsiphai | 83 |
| 10 | Evangelical Churches Association (ECA), Bijang | 37 |
| 11 | Emmanuel ECA, B Vengnuom | 14 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 12 | Evangelical Churches Association (ECA), K. Salbung | 88 |
| 13 | Community Hall, Leijang Khopi | 20 |
| 14 | Community Hall, M. Songgel | 58 |
| 15 | Rengkai Government Higher Secondary School, Rengkai | 149 |
| 16 | Trinity College and Seminary (TCS), Sielmat | 27 |
| 17 | Sielmat Bible College (SBC), Sielmat | 16 |
| 18 | Community Hall, Zalenmun | 36 |
| 19 | Community Hall, Kholmun | 22 |
| 20 | Community Hall, Zomunnuam | 31 |
| 21 | Lamka College, New Lamka | 42 |
| 22 | St. Paul School, New Lamka | 69 |
| 23 | Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (JNV), Tuinom | 21 |
| 24 | Evangelical Baptist Convention Church (EBCC), Bungmual | 24 |
| 25 | Young Mizo Association Hall (YMA), Hmuia Veng | 26 |
| 26 | Youth Hostel, Hiengtam Lamka | 189 |
| 27 | Kuki Christian Church (KCC), Tuibuong | 6 |
| 28 | Evangelical Churches Association (ECA), Tuibuong | 9 |
| 29 | Kuki Baptist Church (KBC), Vengnuom | 33 |
| 30 | Evangelical Churches Association (ECA), Molnom | 72 |
| 31 | Evangelical Churches Association (ECA), D. Phailien | 47 |
| 32 | Salt Brook School, Tuibuong | 42 |
| 33 | Fishery, Kipgen Veng | 26 |
| 34 | Community Hall, L. Semuol | 12 |
| 35 | Community Hall, EL Cism | 21 |

| | | |
|----|--|-------------|
| 36 | Siamsinpawlpi (SSPP) Residential School, Kanaan Veng | 22 |
| 37 | St Peter School, New Lamka | 23 |
| 38 | Rostad, Compound Veng | 71 |
| 39 | Evangelical Free Church of India (EFCI), Hmar Veng | 34 |
| 40 | Community Hall, K. Salem | 9 |
| 41 | Community Hall, S. Munnuam | 18 |
| 42 | Kuki Inpi Churachandpur (KIC), Tuibuong | 28 |
| 43 | Christian Fellowship Church (CFC), Tuibuong | 12 |
| 44 | Community Hall, N. Molhoi | 23 |
| 45 | Community Hall, Tollen | 14 |
| 46 | Community Hall, Mata | 78 |
| | Total | 1717 |

As can be seen from Table 2, this study had surveyed 46 relief camps inside Lamka where a total of 1,717 internally displaced children resides. One can observe that the internally displaced children are placed in different relief camps like Higher Secondary Schools, Colleges, Hostels, Seminary, and even Churches, etc. "It should be kept in mind that the mobility of these internally displaced children is fluid. Some of them, after staying in the centers shifted to the homes of their relatives. While some have rented houses in different places. As such, it is difficult to get the precise figures". However, the aim of this paper is to focus on the issues and challenges of the internally displaced children, it remains sufficient for the data presented to inform the readers on the present reality brought about by the ethnic war.

Issues and challenges faced by internally displaced children (IDC)

An observation of these relief camps reveals the insufficiency of resources to deal with issues brought about by those who are being displaced. For instance, in many camps, there are lack of proper disposal bins, and waste are dumped inside the campus which ultimately lead to the unhealthy environment. More-

over, there is hardly any attempt to collect waste materials. Unhygienic washing space for both utensils and clothing resulted in the spread of unwholesome smells and this could prove a breeding ground for malaria or some harmful bacterial infections. When it comes to toilet, one observes that there is lack of hygiene in many camps. It was also observed that the camps are congested and not child friendly.

Needless to say, these displaced children are facing multitude of challenges due to the circumstances they find themselves in. It has been more five months now with the problem of relocating a distant dream still, these children who had to leave their homes have gone through hardships and trails that most adults wish they would never have encountered in their lifetimes. While some children could move out from their home partially ready with their belongings and in their vehicles, like the children staying at Trinity College and Seminary (TCS), Sielmat Bible College (SBC), and Rengkai Government Higher Secondary School were less fortunate as they had to flee literally with what they wear and without any other resources from their homes.

Various NGOs, district authority, and well-wishers have worked and donated generously for these internally displaced children, and the initiative that they have taken are much appreciated by those under study. For instance, the Rural Women Upliftment Society, an NGO based in Lamka, Churachandpur has taken the initiative to clean the relief camp, conduct medical camp and have launched program focusing on children education (cf., RWUS.ORG). “The government agency here at Churachandpur has organized “an awareness cum inauguration programme of Special Legal Aid and Service Camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)” (Imphal Free Press, 1 October 2023). “The Deputy Commissioner, Churachandpur has also hosted a dinner party for the children and has gifted them “sports and recreational items” (Sangai Express, 21-Aug-2023)

While these goodwill and generosity of many donors have alleviated the perilous conditions of these internally displaced person (IDP) temporarily, yet the needs of these internally displaced children (IDC) still remain. The research

findings of this study disclose pertinent issues and challenges that must still be addressed for proper rehabilitation.

1. Trauma and psychological distress

Many of these internally displaced children here under study have experienced the loss of family members, friends, and their homes. They have seen their love ones being killed and even sexually abused. They have witnessed their homes and shops being vandalized and set ablaze. They have lost their properties and barely escape their villages with their lives. The war scars they have experienced would be with them for their lifetimes now. After all these times, some still finds it difficult to open up and others still scared of loud sounds, while some do not want to be alone. Some have lost their cheerfulness and some are hiding their wounds deep inside.

For instance, Zangkhoham (real name withhold), a 14 years old boy who fled their home from Sugnu area remains sullen and isolated from his friend. He does not like to play or hang out, but choose to be alone. Asked why he was like this, he said that he was sad and feeling depressed. He misses his father and uncle who died so that they may escape. Another boy, Seitinmang (real name withhold), 10 years old from Kangvai area seems to have develop a deep resentment of the people who had killed his grandmother. He remarked angrily that he hated them and would not even learn the Manipuri language! Still, a sweet and cheerful girl, Lhingboi (real name withhold), age 7 from Tuiring area would play and run around with her friends during the day time. One would think that she is happy and nothing amiss concerning her behavior. But the truth seems far from what can be seen. When night approaches, what was once a cheerful and confident girl becomes totally the opposite – she feels trapped and fears being abandoned and even when she sleeps, she would cry out in despair. Her hellish escape from her home and village being burnt had clipped her wings to sleep soundly at night. Nemkhohat (real name withhold), 16 years old from Serou area cannot literally stop her tears from falling whenever she recollected the last time, she spoke on the phone with her father who gave up his life to safe their village from the attackers. Her father told her to be

brave and take care of her sisters, but she is finding it very difficult to carry out his dying father's wish when she herself is struggling to keep it together.

Many of the children uses the 'hate' vocabulary quite often. Some says, "I hate this place (the relief camp) where we are in "I feel suffocated, with no space to play," "I hate Meiteis, and the place is congested, "I hate that there is no internet," "I hate the food we ate, only dal and potatoes, no meat," etc.

"It seems plenty of resentment is simmering and if this goes unchecked, it will be very detrimental for the psychological growth of these children. There are many others undergoing the same psychological trauma" (cf., Dhingra, 2023). Dealing with grief and loss at a young age can have a significant impact on their emotional and psychological development. While the resiliency of children attitude to dire circumstance have often worked in their favor, yet there are still who need to come to terms with the loss of their precious properties and their families. It was also observed that most children expressed their desired to return home.

Indeed, one does not need to imagine much concerning what these children would feel or go through as they flee in urgency "from their homes under threat, witnessing fighting and destruction, seeing violent acts directed at their loved ones, leaving their friends and possessions behind, marching or being transported in crowded vehicles, spending months in transit camps" (Yule, 2000: 696). "While a meta-analysis of eight studies of child and adolescent refugees and asylum seekers reported a 22.7% prevalence of PTSD, 13.8% of depression, and 15.8% of anxiety disorders" (Bürgin and others, 2022: 857). One can expect a prolonged ill-effect of these displacements cause by war, long after the smokes are cleared with some of the children potentially burdened for life if they do not receive proper psychological care.

2. Limited access to education

A paper released jointly by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Global Education Monitoring Report in advance of the World Humanitarian Summit rightly stated that,

“No child should have to pay the cost of war, to be kept away from the classroom because of conflict...It is unacceptable that girls are nearly always the first to miss out. Education is every child’s basic human right. Dreams should not end because of conflict. Futures should not be put on hold because of war. There is no tomorrow for countries affected by conflict unless their children learn today, and not just the basics, but an education that gives them the tools and skills they need to fly” (2016:1).

However, this statement cannot be further from the truth when it comes to these displaced children living in relief camp here at Lamka. The displaced children here have been continually facing disruptions in their education because of this ethnic war. They lack access to formal education, skilled teachers, appropriate learning materials, and safe learning environments and it has hampered their intellectual and cognitive development. To offset this issue of lack of education, some NGOs are doing their best to provide stop gap solutions. For instance, the Rural Women Upliftment Society (RWUS), an NGO based in Lamka, Churachandpur has started a Kids Garden School Program at Rengkai relief camp that caters to displaced children living in “45 relief camps, with a total enrollment of 1,900 children...[providing] essential supplies like notebooks, pencils, crayons” (Shakum, July 30, 2023). However, they can only do so much to meet the needs of these children. Their valuable program has about 50 volunteers for these relief camp and the hours of meeting with the kids inside the camp or anywhere that is available, lasted an hour or so. Another NGO, “the Centre for Community Initiative (CCI) also had worked to bring education to these displaced children by launching an Inclusive Community Learning Centre (ICLC). This ICLC aims to provide storybooks from Pratham Books to support the children who have experienced trauma as a result of the ethnic conflicts” (Donate-a-Book, 2023). Till now, the initiative for the much-needed learning and education from the government have not reach the displaced children in Lamka.

Many of these displaced children belonged to the formative age of school going group. They fled their homes without their text books and they have no way of regaining their education as their school buildings were burnt. A bright boy of 9 years, Thongkholen (real name withheld), misses his old school and

rued the fact that they are unable to afford schools fee even though he would very much like to attend classes. Nemneihat (real name withheld), 15 years old girl narrates her woes of being unable to complete her class 10. While she agonizingly described her escaped ordeal, the most hurtful she felt was her lost of education. She wants to become a doctor, but now with her present conditions, her dreams are slowly disintegrating. She wishes things would be the same as they were before and that she would complete her class 10 and go on for further studies. Her childhood friend Baby (nickname), 16 years old girl also felt frustrated at their lack of educational access. It seems, her belated mother's dying wish was for her to become an Army Officer so that she can protect her family. Her voice betrays her sadness at the daunting task that lays before her now. It seems, the most effected by this lack of education are those studying in class 10 as they cannot be admitted to any schools aside from the ones, they have registered in for their Board Exams. The desire was evident by their responses when asked if they want to attend school.

Some private schools offer free admission for displaced children, however, majority of the displaced families cannot afford to buy books, school bags and other necessities for their children. This has resulted in most of the displaced children under the study not receiving their due education. Compared to these displaced children here, the displaced children who are sheltered in Aizawl, Mizoram are given better educational care and the government of Mizoram is opening her hearts to these children so that they can continue to study anywhere without any hassle. As was reported by Bawitlung in India Today,

“per the latest statistics shared by Minister Lalchandama, the current enrollment comprises...2574 students who are internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Manipur. Minister Lalchandama said that there is a provision of free textbooks and school uniforms to all students. Addressing the unique challenges faced by refugees and IDPs in the education system, the state administration has made provisions to ensure their seamless integration. While the traditional rules require students to enroll in Class IX to appear for board exams, Mizoram's administration has taken a compassionate approach” (Aug 08, 2023).

If only this “compassionate approach” taken by the Mizoram government was also given to these internally displaced children here, instead, many of them are just wasting their times aimlessly even when schools are opened. It is interesting to see that Schools here in Lamka are not following what the Mizoram government did. Needless to say, their inability to join school as regular student is a big challenge to them.

3. Inadequate healthcare and nutrition

World Health Organization pointed out that when it comes to healthcare and nutrition, “Refugees and migrants remain among the most vulnerable members of society and are often faced with xenophobia; discrimination; sub-standard living, housing and working conditions; and inadequate or restricted access to mainstream health services” (WHO, 2022). It would not be amiss to state that these internally displaced children are also in danger of being overlooked when it comes to receiving proper healthcare and adequate nutrition. Rural Women Upliftment Society (RWUS) has organized medical camp in two separate occasions, and have also initiated cleanliness drive for these said relief camps (rwus.org). Aside from this, Sielmat Christian Hospital also have conducted medical camps and are offering to treat displaced people for free. The same can be said of the Civil Hospital in Lamka. While in all the relief centers, nurses are sometimes on duty and doctors occasionally visited them, but the nutrition, hygiene, and related health challenges still posed problematic. “These works done by various NGOs, including ActionAid, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and For One Life highlighted the growing demand for medical support within the displaced population” (Shakum, July 30, 2023). However, these efforts are just a short-gap solutions.

Most of the children’s complaints can be summarize as lack of hygiene, and assorted diet. It was observed that some women do not have breast milk to feed their babies and were worried about lack of supplement for bottle feeding. The girls find it difficult to handle the monthly sanitary needs and the pains that ensued. Because they are living in a closed and compact area, often unhygienic, they are more susceptible and more easily expose to diseases, injuries,

and inadequate sanitation. One girl (name withheld) reluctantly brought out that she does not have regular monthly flow, and that she is struggling with both physiological as well as psychological pain. These children often lack access to proper healthcare, nutrition, and sanitation facilities. Even though hospitals and health workers are functioning around the clock, priorities are given to those seriously wounded in the field. The remoteness of the relief camp area where they are sheltered in, and the cause of their present predicament being the state government itself does not help them much in terms of getting adequate health care and enough nutritious food for their daily sustenance.

Many children are tired of eating the same ‘dal’ and ‘potatoes.’ One boy remarked of how he misses his home where they can eat green vegetables and meat. Indeed, it may seem rude and unthankful to complain while they are relying on the goodness of others for their survival to get a proper meal twice a day which can be considered a blessing. But these are growing children with various needs for nutrients. It is difficult for them to get the much-needed supplement for their proper growth. If these trends continue, it will not be surprising to see these children suffering from malnutrition, infectious diseases, stunted growth, and other health issues. When it comes to these displaced children, “a paradigm shift that places focus on child health and development will help this vulnerable group of children integrate into their new environments” (Baauw and others, 2019).

Suggestions for proper rehabilitation

Displaced children may have limited opportunities for play, recreation, and creative expression which affects their ability to heal, recover, and develop social and emotional skills. Psychological and emotional support must be set and given to these children. Access to a child psychiatrist and professional counselor is a must as a follow-up. “Boothby rightly pointed out that “Many children learn to cope or survive in these dangerous circumstances. But their survival is not without cost. Children exposed to the stress of extreme violence and deprivation also may reveal mental health disturbance years after the immediate experience is over” (Boothby, 1992:112). To put this in perspective, “A

follow-up study of Cambodian children who survived the physical and psychological devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime (1974-1979) revealed 50% developed PTSD four years after leaving Cambodia” (Boothby, 1992:112). It may be possible that some children will come out unscathed from this crisis, but why leave it to chance when care can be provided? As such, the concerned authority must provide adequate aftercare for these internally displaced children even when they go back to their lands and homes.

In regards to the educational issue, these children must be given access to formal and quality education in the places they are seeking shelters. Lamka town has a number of reputed High Schools. Will it be too much a loss if these children were admitted in their respective classes? Even if they need to pay for their educations, the contributed money that is pouring from different sources should be allocated towards their education. “For instance, on the 24th May, 2023 alone, the largest NGO called the Young Mizoram Association donated more than 21 lakhs to the displaced people in Lamka” (Zalengam Times, Thursday, 25th May, 2023). Donations and various forms of fund drives are still continued. From these, funds must flow towards the internally displaced children so that they can get proper education.

When it comes to healthcare and physical well-being, “effective public health strategies and investments are needed to ensure preventive and routine child health programmes are inclusive and accessible for all children” ... “Health knows no borders and access to health care is a fundamental child right” (UNICEF, 2022). It is a challenge to provide care for them, but the risk of losing these children to malnutrition and diseases is real. As such, more care and focus should be directed to their proper diet and supplement as such. It is difficult to ascertain how long will this crisis last, and as is rightly pointed out, “Refugees and displaced people are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and undernutrition” (UNHCR, 2021), and that, “years or decades of forced displacement can take a significant toll on an individual’s health and wellbeing” (UNHCR, 2022), all the more, the need of the hour is to adequately provide enough nutrition and healthcare to these internally displaced children.

Conclusion

Importance of examining challenges faced by displaced children cannot be overstated, they represent the future generation and will shape the society, economy, and culture in the years to come. They are the ones who will lead and contribute to advancements, progress, and innovation. Their potential contribution to the society, both local and nationally, is critical to the overall health of the nation. They are the foundation of cultivating values, ethics, and morals within a society. Investing in children's education and development ensures a well-rounded and knowledgeable citizenry. When children are provided with a stable family environment, appropriate discipline, and emotional support, they are more likely to become responsible and law-abiding citizens. In summary, the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by these internally displaced children, all emphasizes the need for targeted interventions and policy improvements from all concerned authorities.

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