I, Manorama Devi, lived in a family just like yours with my mother and brothers in a village called Bamon Kampu, on the road leading to Imphal, the capital of my state Manipur. The incident that took place on the night of July 11, 2004 was nothing less than terrifying. In the middle of the night, seven to eight men of the Indian Army broke open our front door and burst into our house. One officer pointed a gun at my old mother and dragged me out of the house. The army officers beat me brutally and I kept crying out in pain and fear; my relatives could hear me but they could not help. At 3:30 am, the officers presented me with an “arrest memo” and took me with them by force.

My family members did manage to find me. But in torn clothes. My body, riddled with six bullet injuries, scratch marks and wounds on my thighs, was found in the fields not far from my home. To hide the fact that they raped me, my perpetrators fired bullets on my private parts. When people from my village and my family members protested, they said I was an insurgent and that they shot me because I had tried to escape. But my only fault was that I lived in a state where the law gives the military a free hand to do as it pleases in the name of curbing insurgency, terrorism and Naxalism. This law is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958.

Five days after my rape and murder, a group of elderly women who called themselves “Meira Paibi” or Mother’s Front gathered in front of the 17th Assam Rifles headquarters, stripped and held up a banner proclaiming “Indian Army Rape Us”. They said, “We mothers have come. Drink our blood. Eat our flesh. Maybe this way you can spare our daughters.” Due to public pressure the Manipur government then appointed a commission led by Justice Upendra Singh to probe the circumstances of my death. The army has prevented the findings of the enquiry from being made public till today and insists that the state government does not have jurisdiction over the matter. Irom Sharmila, an activist from my state has been on a fast since the year 2000 in protest of AFSPA. She is forcibly fed by the authorities from time to time and is charged with the attempt to commit suicide due to her enduring protest.

I am still waiting for justice because army officers enjoy legal immunity when they act in “the line of duty” under AFSPA and in my case, the army and central government have gone all the way to the Supreme Court to dodge prosecution.

But this story is not mine alone. AFSPA has been in effect in large parts of the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Jammu and Kashmir for nearly 60 years. The law’s wide scope for abuse and the immunity it provides for army personnel has led to many rapes, disappearances, encounters and arrests. There are countless stories like mine and justice has not been served in any of them.
The instances of rape and murder as a result of AFSPA are too numerous to record here and they continue unchecked. In 2013, the Justice J.S. Verma Committee that was appointed to look into possible amendments of criminal laws related to sexual violence observed that “impunity for systematic or isolated sexual violence in the process of internal security duties is being legitimised by the AFSPA” and that “women in conflict areas are entitled to all the security and dignity that is afforded to citizens in any other part of our country.” It recommended that prosecution of army personnel for an alleged sexual offence should not require sanction from the central government and that offenders should be tried under normal law. The central government has ignored these recommendations.

Is a rape survivor like Manorama from either the Northeast or Jammu and Kashmir less deserving of justice? Are the security forces sacrosanct and incapable of sexual violence? Is the rape of a dalit, an adivasi or a Muslim woman in a conflict zone more acceptable than the assault on a middle class, upper caste woman in a non-conflict area? Why is a woman who is raped branded as an insurgent, a Maoist or one with a loose character while her perpetrators roam free?

Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression
againstsexualviolence@gmail.com
www.wssnet.org

REPEAL AFSPA! REPEAL AFSPA! REPEAL AFSPA!

On this day, 10 years after her brutal murder, let us remember Manorama who was raped and killed by the Indian Army. As people of a country that claims to be free, let us resolve to unite across all states and demand:

• Action in pending cases of sexual violence perpetrated by state forces in the Northeast, Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and other situations of conflict.
• Withdrawal of armed forces from civilian areas.
• Repeal of AFSPA and other laws that provide impunity to armed forces.
• Justice for women as citizens of this country and not as subjects under martial law.
• Implementation of the Verma Commission guidelines relating to sexual offences in conflict areas.

In 1974 in Manipur, an officer of the Border Security Force (BSF) repeatedly raped Rose who then committed suicide while her perpetrator went scot-free due to lack of sufficient evidence.

In 1991 in Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir, security troops cordoned off the Kunan-Poshpura villages & carried out a mass-rape operation in which 40 to 100 women were raped. The survivors, who at the time ranged from 13 to 80 years old, are still waiting for justice.

In 1997, army personnel operating in Nalbari district, Assam cordoned off a village area for 3 days in search of militants. After torturing the villagers, they raped 4 teenaged girls. Although a case was registered, no investigation was carried out.

In 2009, in the Shopian district of Jammu and Kashmir, two young women left home for their orchard and never returned. Later their bodies were found bearing marks of violence near a nullah close to the police and army camps. The doctor who did the post-mortem said that the girls were victims of gang-rape & “animalistic behaviour.” All attempts at an impartial enquiry failed and the CBI has closed the case.