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WHEN UNARMED WOMEN HOLD THE FRONTLINE: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

A member of the Indian security forces deployed to contain the conflict in the country's north-eastern state of Manipur would never pay an armed man to pass a roadblock. Faced with a group of unarmed women blocking the road, however, he finds himself handing over a 'frontline donation' – a small contribution to the very conflict he has been sent to keep at bay. In June 2023, a 1,200–1,500-strong crowd led by women even forced the Indian army to [release twelve captured cadres](#) of a secessionist armed group.

The tropes around women in conflict are familiar: victims to be protected, peacebuilders to be empowered or, exceptionally, armed perpetrators. The women of Manipur

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Women's mobilisation should not be read as inherently peaceful: the same repertoires can be redirected to sustain war efforts.
- Women's collectives should be treated as important actors in the context of conflict; who controls checkpoints and roads (including women's collectives in northeast India) is a leading indicator of conflict dynamics.
- Humanitarian access strategies in contexts such as India's northeast must engage women's collectives that operate roadblocks; negotiating with armed commanders alone will not open roads.

fit none of them. Unarmed and organised at neighbourhood level, they operate the checkpoints, hold night vigils, stage blockades and run fundraising networks that, in their eyes, defend their community. These are the same repertoires that have in the past made the Meitei *Meira Paibi* ('women torch-bearers') internationally celebrated anti-militarisation activists. However, in the context of the current conflict [the same repertoires have been sustaining an ethnic war](#). Kuki women, on the other side of this conflict also use similar strategies.

This brief is based on field research in Manipur, north-east India, near the country's border with Myanmar. It draws on group discussions with around 180 Meitei women at checkpoints and night vigils, and interviews with security forces, non-state armed groups and civil society on both sides of the ongoing [ethnic conflict between Meitei and Kuki communities](#). The brief shows that women's agency in conflict is malleable: the same mobilisation that builds peace can be redirected to wage war. [Policy on women, peace and security has barely begun to grapple with what this means](#).

WOMEN HOLD THE FRONTLINE

Since May 2023, conflict between Manipur's valley-based Meitei and hill-based Kuki communities in India's northeast has killed hundreds, displaced more than

It is clear that this labour is highly organised: rosters, fines and social sanctions make participation mandatory rather than voluntary. These women's collectives can make decisions on who passes and what the money they raise buys. Moreover, it is all the more effective because it is unarmed (the same acts by armed men would be met with force).

PEACEBUILDING REPERTOIRES, REDIRECTED

Today's mobilisation of Meitei women resonates with past mobilisations of women, fought by the same community in the same valley.

In the *Nupi Lan* ('women's wars') of [1904](#) and [1939](#) thousands of women traders from Imphal's mothers' market forced the colonial administration to abandon forced labour and rice export policies. In the 1970s torchlit night patrols against alcohol and drugs are what gave the *Meira Paibi* ('women torch-bearers') their name. During the Indian counterinsurgency against Meitei separatist movements in the 1980s, the same vigils and blockades were turned on the army: the *Meira Paibi*'s [2004 naked protest](#) against the rape and murder of a Manipuri woman by security forces was instrumental in repealing the controversial [Armed Forces \(Special Powers\) Act](#) in the valley and made *Meira Paibi* a byword for women's peacebuilding.

“Our orders are very clear, we cannot engage with the women.”

Senior officer, Indian security forces

60,000 people, and split the state along a security-force 'buffer zone'. On the valley side, many if not most adult Meitei women participate in the war effort. Women staff the checkpoints on roads towards the hills – checking IDs, logging vehicles in registers, and stopping people and goods from reaching the Kuki community – while also screening Meitei men heading to fight and keeping their own community out of the dangerous buffer zone. They act as a 'human seal', in one group's words, 'for people on the frontline so that they can do their job'. Shifts run on village rosters, scheduled around field and household work.

Every night women from each neighbourhood hold vigils, sounding the alarm by banging sticks on lamp posts; absence brings fines and social sanctions. Women also finance the frontline: for example during roadside donation drives one group of six women raised one to two lakh rupees (EUR 1,100–2,200) in a matter of days, deciding collectively to spend it on supplies for fighters and food for relief camps.

In the ongoing inter-ethnic conflict of 2023, however, the torches, vigils and human barricades sustained an ethnic war effort instead. 'The third *Nupi Lan* is still ongoing', a veteran activist explained. Women describe their motivation as instinctive duty – 'we have to fight for our children' – but also as deliberate strategy: 'If there is a man at the check post there will be a fight, so it is better if it's a woman.'

BLOCKADES REDRAW BORDERS

The buffer zone was intended as a temporary measure to stop the violence. Women-operated checkpoints have helped entrench it into a de facto border. Chura-chandpur, a Kuki stronghold city an hour and a half by road from the capital, no longer receives food or medical provisions from the valley. Supplies have to come in via a neighbouring state more than twelve hours drive away, leading to food shortages and a health crisis in hill areas with few hospitals and no specialised care. Roads towards Myanmar, usually essential for cross-border trade, are similarly affected. Blockades staffed by unarmed

women on both sides are redrawing borders, re-routing trade and restructuring the region's political economy – and they work because drivers, traders and soldiers read the women through gender norms that make forcing a passage unthinkable.

GENDERED CONSTRAINTS AND THE STATE

Officers interviewed described operations abandoned for fear that any use of force against the women would bring accusations of excess and sexual harassment. Trained for active combat, they found themselves ill-equipped for dealing with crowds of unarmed women. Their solution was organisational: riflewomen were moved to the front of standoffs, with reserves of women soldiers requested from other battalions and neighbouring states, because women deploying the very same force could not be accused of the same excesses. Gender norms, in other words, determined what a security force could operationally do.

RETHINKING WOMEN IN CONFLICT

Three assumptions need revision:

First, the assumption that the role of women in conflict is limited to that of victims or peacemakers or, occasionally, armed perpetrators. In Manipur they are simultaneously victims of widespread conflict-related sexual violence, and organisers, financiers and enforcers of the war effort. If conflict analysis and early warning only track armed men, they will miss the actors who control roads, determine access, and can mobilise entire neighbourhoods overnight.

Second, the assumption that women's participation is inherently moderating. Drawing on the lineage of a celebrated peace movement, it now sustains blockades that deny food and medicine to a rival community. Support to women's organisations in conflict settings needs the same conflict-sensitivity analysis as support to any other actor – and humanitarian access negotiations must engage the neighbourhood-level women's collectives who actually control the roads.

Third, the assumption that unarmed means marginal. The women of Manipur shape frontlines, trade routes and the operational reach of one of the world's largest armies without carrying weapons. Doctrine, training and

force composition should anticipate gendered, unarmed frontlines – in Manipur and beyond.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is based on the research paper 'The Women's War: Agency and Entanglements at the Gendered Frontlines in Northeast India' by Shalaka Thakur, drawing on field research in Manipur in September and November 2023: group discussions with around 180 women at five checkpoints and three night vigils, and interviews with members of the Meitei and Kuki communities, the Indian security forces, non-state armed groups and civil society organisations.

This research is supported by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, in order to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org.

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