Structural Violence, Intersectionality, and Justpeace: Evaluating Women’s Peacebuilding Agency in Manipur, India

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The general scholarship on armed conflict in Manipur, India, ignores the experiences of women as agents. Feminist scholarship counters this tendency, revealing women’s everyday responses to the violence that constrains them. However, this scholarship often fails to be intersectional, and it lauds every instance of women’s agency without evaluating it in terms of its ability to build peace. Employing Kimberlé Crenshaw’s underused distinction between structural and political intersectionality and Saba Mahmood’s concept of agency, I analyze my field research conducted with women’s peacebuilding groups in Manipur in 2014 and 2015. Using structural intersectionality, I first describe the qualitatively different experiences of women peacebuilders living at different social locations. Using political intersectionality as a normative tool, I then show that ethnic and religious hierarchies often disrupt women’s attempts to build peace. Interethnic peacebuilding groups that rely on gender-based solidarity tend to privilege the experiences of the women coming from the majority ethnic group. Other peacebuilding groups, bound by ethnicity, often distrust and resent women who come from different ethnic enclaves. I argue that women’s peacebuilding agency must aim at an inclusive justpeace if it is to succeed. We should evaluate agency, rather than glorifying all instances of women’s responses to violence.

For more than sixty years, armed insurgencies and counterinsurgencies have plagued the Indian state of Manipur, situated east of Assam on the Burmese border. Much of the general scholarship on Manipur attempts to describe, understand, and offer solutions to this violence, and understandably so—such direct violence is easily visible and extremely disruptive of daily life (Hazarika 1994; Baruah 2005). This exclusive focus on direct violence, however, obscures women's agency. If scholarship on Manipur’s violence mentions women at all, it often portrays them as passive victims (Manchanda 2001). Feminist scholarship on Manipur rightly counters this tendency, portraying pictures of women’s subaltern agency in terms of everyday, informal
peacebuilding that responds to multiple types of violence—structural as well as direct (Banerjee, Basu, and Chaudhury 2011; Banerjee 2014). Although this scholarship does important work by making women’s agency visible, it tends to suffer from two weaknesses: it fails to interrogate the intersectional power differentials that circumscribe women’s ability to build peace, and it romanticizes women’s resistance, glorifying it as evidence of an agency that is inherently good.

My ethnographic study (2014–2015) of women’s peacebuilding practices in Manipur employs Kimberlé Crenshaw’s underused distinction between structural and political intersectionality to illuminate a fuller spectrum of women’s peacebuilding agency than has been portrayed before. Structural intersectionality accounts for women’s different social locations, revealing the broad array of women’s agency as well as the diverse nature of structural constraints. Political intersectionality, in turn, assesses the collective results of that agency, marking the potential for some discourses and actions to exclude some women. In brief, structural intersectionality is descriptive, whereas political intersectionality is normative.

I also contribute to the feminist debate on the meaning of women’s agency by affirming Saba Mahmood’s argument that agency should be understood as broader than the progressive ideal of resisting domination. I push past Mahmood, however, in arguing that agency should also be evaluated according to its context. Within a peacebuilding context, neither resistance to domination nor adherence to tradition is inherently good if, in the long run, either inhibits the goal of a lasting peace imbued with justice (Omer 2015, 19–20). Many women in Manipur define peace in terms of justice, arguing that there cannot be one without the other (IN 2014; MP 2015; RU 2015). A famous, hunger-striking peacebuilder named Irom Sharmila founded the Just Peace Foundation with the earnings from her 2007 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights (Just Peace Foundation 2015). Another peacebuilder is spearheading a “Committee for Fast Justice,” which aims at quickening the pace of court hearings in cases involving sexual violence (HN 2015). These efforts mirror a long tradition of women using peacebuilding as an opportunity to address gendered and other injustices (Banerjee 2014; Kolás 2014). Peace, for women in Manipur, is not merely the absence of direct violence. It involves the presence of justice, which requires addressing the structures that act violently upon women and other marginalized groups.

To encapsulate these ideas, I employ the concept of justpeace, defined by John Paul Lederach as a mode of life that “reduces violence and destructive cycles of social interaction and at the same time increases justice in any human relationship” (Lederach 2005, 182). International organizations like the UN initiate ceasefires and oversee peace agreements—what Oliver Richmond terms the “liberal peace” (Richmond 2011). Peace accords often fail, however, and top-down, externalized peace tends to lack elements of economic and social justice that are vital for localized support of peace. Justpeace, rather than the liberal peace, is therefore the appropriate goal: a peace that “rebuild[s] genuine community in areas that have suffered from great division and violence” (Lederach 2005, 41). If women peacebuilders articulate desires for peace and justice, then we ought to evaluate their agency according to whether their actions contribute to justpeace, or a standard like it that emphasizes constructive
relationships. Feminists highlighting women’s active roles in peacebuilding thus ought to guard against lauding all acts of peacebuilding agency, regardless of outcome. The normative tool of political intersectionality, in particular, aids us in evaluating women’s contributions to just peace. Peace built for just part of the population may undermine constructive social interactions among and within groups. If women do not push for a fully inclusive peace imbued with justice, then women’s peacebuilding ultimately fails.

I begin my analysis with a discussion of my organizing concepts—violence, agency, and intersectionality. Then I lay out the concrete, overlapping violences that provoke women’s peacebuilding, using structural intersectionality to describe the diversity of women’s agency and the variety of constraints. Next, I employ political intersectionality to argue that as women peacebuilders work against direct and structural violence, they often do so through exclusionary discourses and practices that preclude the possibility of an inclusive just peace. I close with the implications of this research for the feminist debate on agency.

VIOLENCE, AGENCY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The direct violence that dominates scholarship on armed conflict in Manipur is conspicuous. One actor intentionally hurts another: a member of the Indian military kills an armed insurgent. However, indirect, structural violence occurs alongside direct violence, producing harm by way of a matrix of social forces: the children of the dead insurgent go hungry because their mother cannot find work in a male-dominated workforce. No individual actor appears responsible for the harm that befalls the widow and her children, yet they nevertheless experience harm. Structural violence hurts, and it warrants a peacebuilding response.

Building on Johan Galtung’s foundational question, “Can we talk about violence when nobody is acting?,” Paul Farmer provides one of the most straightforward articulations of this phenomenon: structural violence constrains agency (Galtung 1969, 170; Farmer 2003, 40). To recognize structural violence is to recognize those who work against it as agents. But what does agency mean to Farmer, and how is that understanding situated within feminist theory’s debates on the meaning of agency?

Farmer understands agency in terms of the ability to choose from an array of options. Rather than defining agency as a theorist might, he uses life stories to show how structures like poverty and gender-based discrimination constrict options (Farmer 1997). He ties agency to choosing one’s own fate and overcoming domination. This conceptualization has affinities with those that Saba Mahmood counters in her influential work Politics of Piety. Mahmood laments the progressive, feminist assumption that agency equals autonomy, and that it takes the form of resistance (Mahmood 2005, 5). She acknowledges the importance of the feminist search for subaltern agency expressed in unexpected ways, as seen in the work of scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod and Judith Butler (Abu-Lughod 1990; Butler 1993). She argues, however, that even these works privilege the idea of agency as resisting subordination. Butler,
for example, references examples of resistance when arguing that space for agency appears within the iterative performance of gender norms (Butler 1993, 23; Mahmood 2005, 21). Using ethnographic evidence from the Cairo women’s urban mosque movement, Mahmood counters this assumption, showing that agency can be exerted not only through subverting norms, but by inhabiting them (24). “Docile agents” seek to live more deeply within the virtuous traditions that appear to constrain their freedom (29).

Mahmood’s claim offers a serious challenge to the progressive idea of agency, which Farmer uses alongside his idea of structural violence. However, her important work does not mean that agency never takes the form of resistance. It emphasizes that feminists ought to allow the meaning of agency to emerge within a context, rather than assuming that the progressive definition is accurate in all cases. I use Mahmood’s insistence upon the contextualization of agency to claim that in the context of peacebuilding, feminists should applaud women’s agentic practices only insofar as they support women’s own goals concerning justice and peace. Using political intersectionality’s consciousness of power and exclusion, we should evaluate such agency according to the quality of peace that follows, rather than lauding every initiative as an example of women’s agency. Peacebuilding agency can take many forms—constructing something new, blocking destruction, or transforming what is already present. But these varied forms cannot be peacebuilding agency if they detract from justpeace by propagating divisions and power differentials among women.

Just as structural violence situates harm in a matrix of social forces, intersectionality situates women’s life experiences in a “matrix of domination” (Collins 1990). Rooted in American black feminist thought and critical race theory of the late twentieth century, intersectional analysis critiques a feminism that takes the particular position of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman as universal (Carbado et al. 2013, 303). bell hooks points out that within American discourses on race and gender, “blacks” means black men, and “women” means white women (hooks 1981). Building on these insights, Crenshaw articulates the concept of intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to the ways in which the social location of women of color makes their experiences qualitatively different from those of white women (in the American context) (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). I use structural intersectionality descriptively, revealing the overlapping violences that constrain women’s agency as they pursue peace in Manipur. As women of different ethnicities, religions, and classes, peacebuilders have qualitatively different life experiences. Structural violence thus constrains their agency differently, affecting their targets and strategies as they build peace.

Political intersectionality, for Crenshaw, points to the tendency of feminist and antiracist politics to marginalize the problem of violence against women of color in the United States (1245). Each discourse inadvertently denies the validity of the other, by focusing on singular aspects of identity. According to Crenshaw, feminism tends to “replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color,” just as antiracism does for women (1252). With its normative critique of subordination, this tool can help white feminists to understand how their own discourses and means of
interacting with others marginalize women of color, even as they claim to be fighting on behalf of those very women. Mariana Ortega describes this phenomenon as “loving, knowing ignorance,” defined as “an ignorance of the thought and experience of women of color that is accompanied by both alleged love for and alleged knowledge about them” (Ortega 2006, 57). Feminist movements too easily critique some hierarchies (such as patriarchy) while implicitly supporting others (such as racism) (67–69). Using political intersectionality in the Manipur context, I will show that gendered discourses often deny ethnic difference, subordinating ethnic minorities within some women’s movements for peace. Such subordination makes a lasting justpeace less likely.

Violences in Manipur

Manipur is one of eight states in northeastern India. Prior to colonization by the British, these were autonomous principalities that identified more strongly with southeast Asia than with India (Scott 2009). Following Indian independence in 1947, many preferred regaining their autonomy to joining the newly formed state. India’s political and military strength brooked no resistance, however, and so northeasterners became Indian citizens in 1949 (Bhattacharjee 1983). Many in Manipur feel a particular sense of outrage at the “forced merger” of 1949, in which King Bodhchandra Singh was made to sign documents ceding political control to the central government (Irene 2014, 49). The merger was never ratified by the Manipur Legislative Assembly, which had formed democratically in 1948 (Hanjabam 2008, 160). Members of the Meitei ethnic majority in particular cite the contentious merger as the motivating force for the armed insurgent groups that persist today (Brara 1998).

For more than sixty years, civilians in Manipur have lived amid four armed forces: insurgents, organized by ethnicity; the Indian military; Indian paramilitary groups that pursue counterinsurgent initiatives; and Manipuri police commandos. Making matters worse for civilians, the Indian government passed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958, declaring Manipur and other parts of the northeast to be “disturbed areas.” AFSPA allows the Indian Army, and its partner paramilitary and police forces, to freely coerce residents to maintain public order. Under the auspices of AFSPA, soldiers can make arrests and conduct searches without warrants, and they can use lethal force against anyone who appears to threaten the peace. AFSPA’s most insidious tenet gives soldiers what amounts to blanket impunity for their actions, as no one may indict a member of the Armed Forces without permission from the central government (McDuie-Ra 2005, 55). AFSPA, originally intended to quash violent agitation for autonomy, has become “a symbol of oppression, an object of hate, and an instrument of discrimination and highhandedness” (Hanjabam 2008, 157).

Manipur also sees inter- and intra-ethnic violence on the communal level. Within the last three decades, major violent episodes have broken out between some of the major ethnic groups of Naga, Kuki, and Meitei (Maring 2008). Groups such as the Nagas also fight among themselves, with tribes splintering off from what was once a
unified liberation front (Manchanda 2004, 6). The regular presence of violent conflict justifies legislation like AFSPA, fostering cyclical violence (Baruah 2005).

In sum, multiple forms of direct violence trouble Manipur. However, structural violence coexists with direct violence, limiting the options of those who pursue peace. I will illustrate ways in which four structures constrain responses to violence in Manipur, affecting women differently from men, and affecting some women differently from others. Structural violence functions according to structural intersectionality, fostering qualitatively different experiences for those situated at different social intersections.

**GEOGRAPHY: HILLS AND VALLEYS**

Manipur is comprised of nine districts: four in the central valley and five in the surrounding hills. The capital city of Imphal lies in the valley. Much of the Imphal Valley is underdeveloped, although when compared to the hills, Imphal is a teeming, electrified metropolis.

The Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act of 1960 ties ethnicity to geography. Meiteis, the majority ethnic group, cannot purchase land in the hill districts where the Naga and Kuki tribal peoples live, although tribal peoples are free to purchase land in the Imphal Valley. This tends to create resentment between hill- and valley-dwellers. Tribal peoples feel that Meiteis have unfair access to Imphal's resources. However, many Meiteis argue that the tribal peoples hold more land than they deserve, as they comprise 40% of the population yet hold 60% of the land (Athparia 2011, 249).

Unequal distributions of power, resources, and property rights turn geography into a structure that constrains agency. Meiteis struggle to grow enough crops on their small tracts of land. Nagas and Kukis in remote hill areas often lie beyond the reach of regular electricity, health services, and development projects (Maring 2008, 128). Thus, both ethnic majorities and minorities have legitimate, geographical causes for complaint. Physical location, in addition to social location, constrains women's peacebuilding agency.

**SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: ETHNICITY AND RELIGION**

Sociologist Rogers Brubaker has done important work showing that the monolithic “ethnic group” does not exist as a coherent entity (Brubaker 2006). However, ethnicity is the most relevant piece of information that one can have about an individual in Manipur. Even as groups shift, ethnicity structures social and political power. As long as we acknowledge its dynamism, it is important to use ethnicity as an analytical tool.

The “Meitei” ethnic designation is relatively stable, but both “Naga” and “Kuki” serve as shifting umbrella terms for multiple tribes, which may change their ethnic
designations according to political expediency (AK 2015). Such change is driven in part by the Indian Constitution’s Scheduled Tribe (ST) system. The Constitution allotst multiple benefits to those coming from STs, leaving tribal groups with a material interest in acquiring this status (Chalam 2007). This reservation system becomes a potential source of resentment for Meiteis, who do not benefit from ST status.

Further fragmenting the tenuous unity of different groups in Manipur, ethnicity also tends to serve as a dividing line for religious affiliation (AK 2015). Many Meiteis converted to Hinduism in the eighteenth century, but most retain some practices from traditional Manipuri religion, centering on the veneration of ancestors. By contrast, Nagas and Kukis are predominantly Christian, due to the influence of eighteenth-century European missionaries (Brara 1998).

Religion, tied to ethnicity, can act simultaneously as a structure of violence and a resource for peace in Manipur. Leaders of ethnic groups often use religious difference to incite violence against others (BR 2015). Even shared religion does not necessarily protect one ethnic group from another, as was evidenced by the Naga–Kuki clash of the mid-1990s (HN 2015). However, one Naga youth leader reports that the values of Christianity serve as the foundation for building peace among Naga factions (IR 2015). The effects of religion are ambivalent but undeniably present, alternately constraining and supporting women’s peacebuilding agency (Appleby 2000).

**POLITICAL INEQUALITIES: GENDER**

Gender interacts with each of the structures explicated here, but gendered power differences may be most apparent in the political arena. Although women in Manipur are known across India for their sit-ins, processions, and demonstrations, men often classify this work as humanitarian, and therefore safely apolitical (AK 2015). Triveni Goswami notes that women’s peace activism is “accidental”—a mere extension of their domestic role (Goswami 2008, 27). Sajal Nag adds, “Women have internalized the ideas generated by men that the domains of politics . . . are exclusively for men” (Nag 2006, 224). Indeed, many women’s groups do not counter this view. They gladly take up the mantle of humanitarianism, defying those who would apply the label of feminism to their work.

However, some women—particularly Nagas—seek to enter formal politics, as members of village tribal councils (Manchanda 2004, 20). They rarely succeed, and if they do, men deem the presence of just one woman as sufficient for representing the “women’s view” (GS 2015). The gendered nature of politics makes it almost impossible for women to participate in self-governance, constraining their agency as peacebuilders.

**MILITARIZATION: LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION**

Soldiers are a ubiquitous presence in Manipur. On a short trip from Imphal to Ukhrul, a Naga-dominated hill district, I saw a dozen paramilitary patrols of at least ten
men monitoring the eighty kilometers of highway. The sense of militarization is also palpable within Imphal itself. The Manipur University campus plays host to an encampment of the Assam Rifles, and Manipuri police commandos often supplement their salaries through bribes. Darkness serves as an unofficial daily curfew, especially for women who fear encountering soldiers after dark. Structures of militarization constrain freedom of movement, the ability to earn livelihoods, and of course, peace-building.

**Women’s Peace Activism**

Drawing from interviews and participant-observation conducted with five women’s groups in 2014 and 2015, I argue that women’s peacebuilding in Manipur, though usually provoked by direct violence, responds to and is constrained by multiple violences, countering the narrow understanding of violence as directly perpetrated by an actor. Following structural intersectionality’s method of gathering experiences from multiple social locations, I present women’s peacebuilding practices according to ethnic groups, while also paying attention to differences in religion and class. This reveals the ways in which structural violence constrains women differently as they pursue peace.

**Meitei Women’s Peacebuilding**

Scholars go back to the *nupilan*, or “women’s wars,” of 1904 and 1939 as the beginning of Meitei women’s long legacy of peacebuilding (Parratt and Parratt 2001). The *nupilan* were impressive feats of activism against unjust colonial structures. In the first (nonviolent) war, women protested British forced labor of Meitei men who were suspected of arson. In the second, they protested British rice exports that created near-famine conditions. The women succeeded in both cases, cementing their status as the vanguard of collective action, and in the process, highlighting the harms associated with structural violence (Borgohain 1982).

The Meitei Meira Paibis (torchbearers), heirs apparent to the *nupilan*, have long been known for their activism—first as social reformers against drug and alcohol abuse in the 1970s, and more recently against human-rights violations perpetrated under AFSPA (Dutta 2012, 19). Twelve of their leaders catapulted into fame in 2004, with a nude protest against the rape and murder of a young Meitei woman, Manorama Thangjam, by members of the Indian military. About forty Meira Paibis marched on the military-occupied Kangla Fort in Imphal, and a dozen of them stripped naked and unfurled banners that read “Indian Army rape us” (Bora 2010). This audacious protest spurred a groundswell of anti-AFSPA activism. In response, the Indian government relinquished control of Kangla Fort.

One Meira Paibi leader who participated in this protest told me that she is a warrior in the third women’s war (IN 2014). Harking back to the *nupilan*, Meira Paibis
serve as a pressure group on the government in times of injustice. Although the Kangla protest erupted after direct violence against a Meitei woman, Meira Paibis’ most common demands have to do with the removal of AFSPA, the demilitarization of Manipur, and questions of property ownership in light of illegal immigration. They also conceive of peace broadly, adding elements like electricity, free movement, and industry development to their desire for the absence of violence (IN2 2015; MP 2015). Thus peacebuilding, for the Meira Paibis, includes justice and development. Meitei peacebuilders organize against structural violence. As I will show, the structures they target and their methods for building peace differ from those of women who live at different social locations.

INTERETHNIC WOMEN’S PEACEBUILDING

Both interethnic peacebuilding organizations that I observed were led by Meiteis. These groups build peace on the basis of women’s human rights, aiming to be inclusive across ethnic, religious, and class-based differences. Both the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network (MWGSN) and the Extrajudicial Execution Victims’ Families Association (EEVFAM) engage primarily with conflict-affected widows. Members and staff from both groups report that all of their women work well together, across ethnic and religious divides. Although much has been written about the Meira Paibis and the Naga Women’s Union Manipur (discussed below), scholars rarely engage with these two interethnic organizations.

MWGSN offers multiple trainings for widows, including instruction on human rights, collecting government benefits, and marketing domestic skills. Their peacebuilding work tends to occur on the level of the individual, the family, and the community, as they work to subtly shift gendered norms about women publicly asserting their rights and working outside of the home.

One Muslim Pangal woman, presently a community mobilizer for MWGSN, became a widow when her husband was killed by an unidentified gunman. Her in-laws would not permit her to leave their house for three months, out of respect for the dead; however, they would not support her and her three children. This woman somehow secured enough food for the survival of her family until the mandated mourning period had expired, but it is clear that the Muslim Pangal tradition of mourning acted with violence. This traumatic experience motivates her work with MWGSN, but it has not swayed her from her religious belief and practice (FA 2014). Her peacebuilding agency simultaneously endorses and seeks to reform Islamic tradition, as practiced in Manipur. She follows religious rules but creates unusual economic space for herself as a community organizer.

MWGSN also supports widows of HIV/AIDS. One such widow faces intersectional structural violence, as a woman and as an individual infected with HIV. Her gender makes it difficult for her to find work, and she cannot afford the private hospitals that could counter the effects of her disease better than the under-staffed and overwhelmed government hospitals. Viewing peace as the protection of all women’s
livelihoods, whether they are at risk from armed conflict or from disease, MWGSN helps her to buy medicine and to grow her vegetable business (MO 2014).

MWGSN staff members also facilitate meetings between widows and local politicians. These can turn antagonistic, as widows try to hold local officials accountable for nationally delineated widow benefits. I witnessed a shouting match between an angry widow and an indifferent politician who claimed that her hands were tied by political higher-ups. Incompetent politicians deny responsibility while widows, often poorly educated and untrained, try to scrape by as laborers.

These stories reveal three structures that constrain MWGSN peacebuilders: gendered religious norms about going out, understaffed health care systems, and the quality of democracy. The effects of direct violence cannot be mitigated without also addressing the structural violence that constrains women’s agency differently, according to ethnicity and religion.

EEVFAM concentrates its energies on the phenomenon of “fake encounters,” in which security personnel—usually Manipuri police commandos—kill an innocent man and then plant evidence to make it look as if he were an insurgent. AFSPA-backed impunity, combined with the promotion system of the Manipuri police, support fake encounters, because those who kill the most insurgents rise most quickly in the ranks. If an insurgent cannot be found, he will be manufactured (Civil Society Coalition 2012, 5). EEVFAM has painstakingly documented and requested prosecution of 1,528 cases of these extrajudicial killings, occurring from 1979 to 2012. In March 2013, a Supreme Court-appointed commission probed into six of these cases, finding that all were indeed fake encounters (Just Peace Foundation 2015, 8–9). The Court continues to postpone hearings on the other cases, however, so EEVFAM members lobby the Court and tell their stories internationally to gain allies. EEVFAM also provides trauma-healing and support groups for widows from all backgrounds who have suffered from fake encounters (BL 2015).

A Meitei widow of EEVFAM reports a story similar to that of the Muslim Pangal widow from MWGSN, following the death of her husband in a fake encounter. Manipuri Hindu tradition does not mandate a homebound mourning period; however, when she began to attend meetings with EEVFAM, her community questioned her character. Family members and neighbors suspected that she was going out to meet men, and they assumed that any attempt to dress nicely correlated with a romantic interest that a young Meitei widow should not be pursuing. Only after EEVFAM started receiving publicity for its work did her community understand that she was entering the public sphere for peacebuilding (BK 2015). This widow was thus working against structures like the corrupt police system, a legal system that drags its feet on hearing decades-old cases, and gendered norms about going out in public. EEVFAM members respond to the direct violence that killed their husbands, as well as the structures that indirectly harm them as survivors. Their peacebuilding agency reacts against, and is constrained by, multiple violences. Because of differences in social location, these violences differ from those that constrain many Kuki and Naga women.
KUKI WOMEN’S PEACEBUILDING

Like MWGSN and EEVFAM, the Widows Welfare Association Asia (WWAA) has escaped scholarly attention. It operates much like MWGSN, so much so that the Kuki and Meitei leaders of the two organizations sometimes partner together for large gatherings. However, WWAA is comprised exclusively of Kuki Christian women, and many of its meetings take the form of prayer groups praying for healing and justice (HN 2015). WWAA organizes gatherings to build support networks for women as they try to overcome trauma, learn new skills for employment, and register for government benefits.

Some of the widows’ husbands were victims of security personnel, but many women were widowed by the Naga–Kuki clash of the mid-1990s. This leaves a lingering feeling of resentment, or at least distrust, of Nagas (JG 2015). Thus, WWAA women do not partner with widows from other ethnic and religious backgrounds as often as do the women of MWGSN and EEVFAM. The main structure that constrains their agency as peacebuilders is the ethnic difference that led to high levels of direct violence two decades ago. Even though they share a religious background with Nagas, many Kukis still find it necessary to stay safely within their ethnic enclave, due to past trauma and present fear. However, unlike Meiteis and Pangals, Kuki women do not face discrimination when working outside the home, as the male members of their ethnic group support women’s work (DG 2015). Structural intersectionality shows that ethnic and other differences can make experiences qualitatively different, leading women’s peacebuilding organizations to pursue peace quite differently.

NAGA WOMEN’S PEACEBUILDING

Every Naga woman is born into the Naga Women’s Union Manipur (NWUM), although individuals are free to choose their level of involvement. The NWUM attempts to handle all of the women’s issues in the tribes, but financial and human resources limit its scope (EO 2015). Much of the NWUM’s work responds to direct violence, but a great many initiatives also push back on the structures that constrain Naga women’s agency. A common complaint is the psychological suffering that accompanies militarization. One Naga woman reported a story of some Indian army officers barging into her house and accusing her at gunpoint of involvement with a Naga insurgent group. She answered their questions and brought in witnesses from her village to attest to the fact that she could not possibly be involved with Naga insurgents. The soldiers finally left her alone, but for years afterwards she felt great fear when crossing a military checkpoint or hearing a large truck on the road, because she associated these with her traumatic encounter. She fights against this militarization as an officer in the NWUM (SU 2015).

Naga women also push against political inequality in the course of their peacebuilding work. One of the two women serving on the twenty-member Naga Forum
for Reconciliation reported that she is always pressing the Forum to remember women’s issues and to invite more women into their political work. She said that they respond, “You are there! Why do you want more women?” She quickly counters, “Then why do you want so many men around here?” Naga men are slowly coming to see women as relevant participants in politics, but they still undervalue women’s contributions (GS 2015).

**Political Intersectionality**

Thus far I have used structural intersectionality to demonstrate that overlapping forms of structural violence affect women peacebuilders differently. Meitei, Naga, and Kuki women have different concerns because of their social locations, which direct their peacebuilding in certain ways. Appreciating the diversity of women’s peacebuilding, however, is only the first of two important steps for understanding women’s ability to achieve just peace. The second step requires accounting for the effects of political intersectionality—the tendency of movements to address some hierarchies while overlooking others. I do not wish to diminish the importance of these women’s work by critiquing it. Instead, I affirm it by suggesting reforms by way of political intersectionality, outlining methods of women’s peacebuilding that are more in line with their stated goals for peace and justice.

First, political intersectionality reveals power hierarchies in the histories that scholars and activists use to describe women’s peacebuilding in Manipur. Recall that the nupilan go back to 1904, and that they often serve as the historical and analytical starting point for women’s interventions on behalf of peace. However, the appellation of “women’s wars” is misleading. Scholars and activists alike often fail to ask the all-important intersectional question: which women? The nupilan were conducted by Meiteis (Parratt and Parratt 2001). Holding these wars up as the unqualified origin story for women’s peacebuilding in Manipur diminishes the unique contributions of non-Meitei women.

Similarly, many contemporary scholars engage with the Meira Paibis and the Naga Women’s Union Manipur, but to my knowledge, scholars rarely interview the women associated with MWGSN, EEVFAM, or WWAA. This may be due to their lower visibility in society or, in the case of WWAA, their distance from Imphal. Academic neglect of the work of these groups has collapsed the scope of women’s peacebuilding agency, paying attention to the concerns and actions of some groups but not others.

Repeating the scholarly pattern of privileging Meitei stories, journalists often try to sum up diverse experiences of women’s suffering by pointing to one Meitei woman, Irom Sharmila, who fasted in protest of AFSPA for nearly sixteen years (RD 2015). A Naga journalist angrily remarked in an interview:

> How can she replace the suffering of all the other people? It’s just one aspect of women’s suffering . . . . If you talk to EEVFAM, the way they are surviving without their husbands, with the people saying that their
husbands were working with the militants, with their children getting that stigma, it’s so different from what Sharmila is suffering. And if you look at the women who have lost children to torture, who have died before their eyes, who still can’t sleep because of those images... Does anyone have a sense of this population of elderly women in the state? And so this cannot be narrowed to the experience of one lady. (EO 2015)

In these ways, outsiders unintentionally privilege the experiences of Meitei women, excluding the stories of both suffering and agency that are present among Naga, Kuki, and other women.

Just as scholars and journalists from the outside exclude the experiences of some women, so, too, can insiders to peacebuilding in Manipur. MWGSN, EEVFAM, and WWAA all rely on human-rights frameworks. With the exception of WWAA, these organizations welcome women from all backgrounds, on the basis of shared humanity. This dependence upon humanity covers up the ethnic, religious, and class-based differences that make it more difficult for some women to access their services and participate in peacebuilding than others.

The MWGSN and EEVFAM headquarters lie in the capital city. This means that Meiteis and Pangals who dwell in and near Imphal can more easily join their efforts than can Naga and Kuki women who live in remote hill districts (SU 2015). As I researched, MWGSN’s staff was composed of all Meiteis and Pangals. Those Nagas and Kukis who were able to partner with them, such as the Kuki founder of the WWAA, tended to be middle- to upper-class women who could afford the transportation costs associated with a trip into the city. The Meitei perspective thus dominates the human-rights approach, which reaches primarily Meitei widows. Similarly, the EEVFAM officers and participants whom I met were all Meiteis. Several attempts to interview tribal members of EEVFAM failed. Coupled with the relative ease with which I was able to interview Meitei widows, this indicates to me a difference in the women’s situations within the organization. Although staff members and leaders for both MWGSN and EEVFAM insist that members of all ethnic groups work well together, this perspective overwhelmingly comes from Meiteis. I am at risk of privileging the Meitei perspective myself, as my translators and main points of entry into Manipur were Meiteis in Imphal, who were more accessible to a foreign researcher requiring logistical assistance. This further silences the voices of Naga and Kuki women who live in more inaccessible regions.

I hardly blame organizations like MWGSN and EEVFAM for failing to reach women who dwell in remote hill regions, given poor infrastructure and limited financial resources. Nevertheless, the ways in which ethnicity interacts with geography produce organizations that much better serve the needs of some women over others, even as those organizations claim progressive inclusivity under the banner of human rights. The groups must add the lens of political intersectionality to their pursuit of justice and peace, rather than relying on the inclusivity of humanity. Only then will they recognize internal power differentials and direct resources to those who are excluded, however unintentionally.
Political intersectionality points to another potential problem with WWAA's exclusion of women from other ethnic groups from its activities. This practice is understandable and perhaps even necessary: many Kuki women re-experience traumatic memories when they see Nagas. An ethnic enclave enables many of these women to build peaceful lives with others in their community, whereas they may not feel comfortable enough to do so if their community included Nagas. Nancy Fraser promotes the value of such “subaltern counter-publics” that foster agency among marginalized groups, helping them to articulate their needs to the broader public even from a position of dominance (Fraser 1992, 123). However, this isolation encourages the very divisions that caused the direct violence of the mid-1990s, and it cannot contribute to the genuine community required for a sustainable justpeace. One woman with WWAA, remarking on the jealousy of the Nagas toward Kukis, said, “They don't know anything. They're thick!” (HN 2015). This attitude creeps into women's relationships with one another and prevents the creation of a more inclusive peace. I do not argue against Kuki exclusion of Nagas from their meetings, but rather against the disposition that promotes distrust. Peacebuilding should promote Kuki women's trauma-healing while also promoting understanding and respect of people from other ethnic groups. Supporting division actively impedes justpeace, which strives for constructive, rather than destructive, interactions across communities.

The power relations revealed by political intersectionality become even more apparent when turning to overtly political groups like the Meira Paibis and the NWUM. Rita Manchanda reports that Naga women often issue invitations to the Meira Paibis to join various demonstrations on behalf of women affected by the conflict. They complain that Meira Paibis never come to their aid (Manchanda 2004, 62). What Manchanda misses is that Meira Paibis likewise do not understand why the NWUM does not accept their invitations to join their agitations in defense of women's rights (SU 2015). A resentful Meira Paibi leader reported to me that Nagas have “attitude” and “ego” that prevent them from working under Meitei leadership (IN 2014). Feelings of ill-will abound on both sides.

Naga women particularly begrudge the fact that Meira Paibis, who portray themselves as the mothers of all Manipur, often fail to protest the rape and killing of tribal women (SU 2015). Meitei insurgents from the United National Liberation Front committed a mass gang rape against a tribal Hmar woman, and Nagas and Kukis alike went to protest against the atrocity. According to a Naga woman who was present for the protests, the Meira Paibis and other Meitei women were absent and remained silent (EO 2015). The mothers of all Manipur may be only the mothers of Meitei Manipur.

Clearly, both the Meira Paibis and the NWUM, while doing significant work in response to multiple violences, privilege ethnicity over gender, such that ethnic and religious power hierarchies persist (Samaddar and Begum 2014). Their construction of subaltern counter-publics, bound by ethnicity, undermines their attempts to build a justpeace that must be inclusive if it is to be sustained. I ground this critique in women's stated desires for peace and justice. Interethnic organizations like MWGSN and EEVFAM try to reach and involve women from multiple backgrounds, but they
do so far from equitably. Meira Paibis and NWUM invite one another to join their efforts, but resentment often prevents such collaboration. Women of WWAA yearn for peace and yet make no effort to build relationships with those whom they hold responsible for destroying it. We should not laud these counterproductive practices as successful examples of peacebuilding agency. Rather, these practices create new obstacles that constrain the agency of other women peacebuilders. The pursuit of *justpeace* must mitigate the harmful discourses and actions highlighted by political intersectionality if it is to succeed.

**Women’s Peacebuilding Agency and Justpeace**

The women peacebuilders of Manipur exert their agency by responding to multiple violent dynamics. This runs counter to the scholarship that explains violence and peacebuilding in Manipur in terms of soldiers and high-level negotiators, and it calls for a version of peace other than the “liberal peace” promoted by the UN. Analyzing women’s peacebuilding agency through both structural and political intersectionality enables us to see that structural violence constrains women differently, and that women’s attempts to build peace are hampered by power hierarchies that accompany intersectional identities. Following Mahmood, it is also important to note that this agency manifests sometimes as resistance and sometimes as submission or transformation. However, political intersectionality critiques Mahmood’s reluctance to evaluate women’s agency by showing that peacebuilding agency must actively counter power hierarchies and prejudices if it is to contribute to a sustainable *justpeace*. Peacebuilders must not only halt direct violence, but also improve the quality of relationships.

José Medina’s work on the epistemology of resistance offers a potential way forward for peacebuilders. In line with Lederach’s injunctions to build peace by focusing on peacebuilders’ dispositions and character (Lederach 2005, 104–10), Medina emphasizes the need for social change on the epistemic level. He critiques the vices of epistemic arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness, in favor of humility, curiosity, and diligence. Individuals may overcome their active ignorance, or unwillingness to check their own knowledge, through helpful (though uncomfortably frictional) interactions with epistemic others (Medina 2013, 30–39). Building on the work of María Lugones, Ortega’s proposed solutions to the problem of white feminists’ loving, knowing ignorance mirror Medina’s: world-traveling, from their comfortable world of racial privilege to the lesser-known world of women of color. Such traveling requires commitment to genuine relationships, to experiencing the uncomfortable (reminiscent of Medina’s friction), and to learning across linguistic and cultural gulfs (Lugones 2003; Ortega 2006, 69–70).

Women building peace in Manipur thus should strive to interact across epistemic lines, in order to avoid the use of totalizing, harmful discourses and exclusionary actions that undermine *justpeace*. Subaltern counter-publics can perpetuate the domination of marginalized people if they foster active ignorance and resentment. For
example, Kuki women building peace should take the time that they need for trauma-healing, but eventually, they must be willing to pursue relationships with Nagas if justpeace is to be sustained. Meitei Meira Paibis should welcome other women as mothers of Manipur, recognizing that an interethnic women’s movement for peace will more effectively promote the justpeace that they desire, than speaking for all from the location and privilege of some. My research indicates that in order for women peacebuilders to reach their articulated goals of building a justice-conscious peace, they ought to use the normative tool of political intersectionality to evaluate the power relations that stymie the pursuit of justpeace. This peace is not an end to be attained, but rather a way of life that promotes constructive social change. Actions and accusations grounded in ethnic resentment are forms of “destructive relational violence”; constructive social change that builds peace is characterized instead by “cycles of relational dignity and respectful engagement” (Lederach 2005, 42).

Subaltern enclaves should foster open minds and curiosity about others, rather than dismissive anger or fear. Those in positions of privilege, who are not subalterns, should do the hard work of promoting interactions with epistemic others. We must evaluate women’s peacebuilding agency for its contributions to standards like justpeace, celebrating only those practices that build relationships among women, rather than tearing them asunder.

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