

Women Waging Peace

POLICY COMMISSION
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This study, *Naga Women Making a Difference: Peace Building in Northeastern India*, chronicles the innovative approaches of Naga women who mediate among armed actors and mobilize for peace and reconciliation across conflict divides. This report documents the activities of Naga women to sustain the ceasefire, strengthen the formal peace process, and encourage the pursuit of long-term stability in northeastern India.

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Women Waging Peace

An operating program of Hunt Alternatives Fund, “Waging” advocates for the full participation of women in formal and informal peace processes around the world. More than 300 women peace builders in the “Waging” network, all demonstrated leaders with varied backgrounds, perspectives, and skills, bring a vast array of expertise to the peacemaking process. They have met with over 3,000 policy shapers to collaborate on fresh, workable solutions to long-standing conflicts.

Naga Women Making a Difference: Peace Building in Northeastern India

Key Findings

1. Using a variety of approaches, Naga women capitalize on cultural and tribal traditions of women’s peace activism to play a critical role in the Indo-Naga peace process. Parties to the conflict—including Naga rebel leaders—publicly recognize the value of women’s contributions to peace in the region.
2. Naga women informally negotiate with Indian security forces, underground armed opposition forces, and a variety of tribal factions and groups to protect their families and communities.
3. Conducting inter-community and inter-tribal events and ceremonies, Naga women cross conflict divides to promote peace and reconciliation, and are routinely relied on as interlocutors, mediators, and facilitators.
4. Naga women sustain an annual ceasefire by mediating between fighting factions to expand talks to include other actors, promoting dialogue designed to overcome obstacles in negotiations, and encouraging various tribes and neighboring states and communities to support peace in the region.
5. The activities of Naga women—and civil society as a whole—have transformed a stagnant peace process with little support into a broad-based popular movement that compels parties to renew the annual ceasefire and continue the search for a sustainable, nonviolent solution.

Recommendations

The *international community* should:

- support formal talks to end the decades-long conflict in northeastern India;
- facilitate a dialogue among civil society organizations, including women, from diverse regional, ethnic, and tribal backgrounds to build trust and a common platform for peace;
- encourage an inclusive process that recognizes the contributions of civil society, and women in particular, to bring stability to the region;
- build upon the role of women as traditional peacemakers in Naga society to help resolve the conflict; and
- provide women’s organizations with technical and financial resources to maximize the impact of their initiatives and their access to all major actors.

The *parties to the conflict* should:

- end the culture of impunity and militarization by:
 - acknowledging the impact of the ongoing conflict on Naga society;
 - penalizing violators of human rights, particularly violence against women; and
 - instituting a process of justice and accountability.
- strengthen the efforts and initiatives of civil society, and women in particular, to bring peace to the region; and
- fully include women in official entities, as mandated by United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), beginning with formal participation in the ceasefire monitoring mechanism.



Introduction

In northeastern India, the 40 tribes of the Naga Hills challenged post-colonial India's political control 50 years ago, asserting themselves as an independent people and claiming the right to self-determination. India created the formal state of Nagaland in 1963, currently inhabited by 1.2 million non-Naga and Naga people, who are spread across several states in the northeastern region.¹ The strategies of the national government, including military subjugation and “divide and rule,” failed to end the Nagas' armed independence movement. The Nagas believe they are a distinct people with a unique history, not part of the political or cultural ethos of India. The struggle continues, and parties to the conflict—various armed subgroups of Naga peoples, the Government of India, the Indian state of Nagaland, and border states and tribes—have failed to negotiate a permanent peace. A ceasefire signed with the dominant armed group, the Isaak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, has been renewed annually since 1997 (most recently in July 2004), while a separate ceasefire agreement with a smaller armed faction was put into place in 2001. Nonetheless, violence still occurs, negotiation is sporadic, and resolution of the conflict is not imminent.

Naga civil society, including prominent women's organizations, has built a broad-based peace constituency that has allowed the ceasefire to survive eight difficult years and three administrations in India's capital, New Delhi. Indeed, in 1997 when the ceasefire was announced, there was limited support for pursuing peace as long as the various Naga factions remained divided. However, today those parties would likely encounter widespread popular resistance if they were to consider abandoning the peace process.

As an extension of the traditional role of Naga women as peacemakers, the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) and the Naga Women's Union of Manipur (NWUM) have worked together to negotiate informally with state and non-state actors to protect their communities, mobilize for reconciliation, sustain the ceasefire, broaden the official talks to include other actors, and forge a more inclusive process. Top leaders of the armed groups recognize women to be significant resources for stabilization.

The Conflict

By the early decades of the twentieth century, as the Indian national movement gathered momentum and discussions took place regarding the transfer of British colonial power to Indians, the Nagas made it clear to the British that they did not want to be included in the new Indian territory but instead wished to create an autonomous Naga state. On August 14, 1947, the

Naga National Council (NNC), composed of members from various local Naga tribal councils, declared independence from the new Indian government. Leaders of the Indian state condemned the Naga demand for autonomy as anti-national, leading to the transformation of the Naga quest for self-rule into an armed struggle for “nothing short of sovereignty.”²

In the 1950s, as the Indian government pursued both diplomatic and military strategies to end the Nagas' demands for independence, some elements of the NNC established an underground Naga government and an armed movement that included men and women. Armed confrontations between underground Nagas and the Indian government soon began. Indian troops, outnumbering Nagas ten to one,³ saturated Nagaland and were armed with extraordinary authority as a result of legislation such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958. The ongoing conflict has militarized and brutalized Naga society. Human rights abuses, including the murder of civilians and sexual violence against women, occur with impunity.

In 1980, three well-known underground leaders—Th Muivah, Isaak Chishi Swu, and S.S. Khaplang—split from the NNC to form the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN). Inter-factional rivalry among the three leaders became increasingly violent. In 1988, the NSCN divided into the Isaak-Muivah group and the Khaplang group. Civilians were caught in the bloody crossfire of the escalating cycle of fratricidal violence, and a daily toll of unclaimed bodies was found in villages and bazaars. This moved the Naga tribal councils to establish a traditional Naga parliament in 1994, called the Naga Hoho, composed of male tribal chiefs elected by popular consensus with a specific mandate to end factional infighting and violence.

The Enduring Tension and Peace Process

In July 1997, the Isaak-Muivah faction of the NSCN and the government of India signed a ceasefire agreement and initiated peace negotiations. In 2001, formal talks were held between the Khaplang faction of the NSCN and the Indian government, and they signed a ceasefire agreement as well. Although the ceasefires have promised negotiation towards a permanent solution, dialogue has failed to resolve many political issues.

When the 1997 ceasefire agreement was announced, popular support was divided, and large sectors of the Naga people were indifferent, alienated, and even hostile. As long as the war pitted the Indian state against the Naga people, the divisions among the Nagas had been of secondary concern. The ceasefire exacerbated the violence among Naga factions. This lack of unity made the ceasefire appear unsustainable, and questions remain regarding a united Naga identity across



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tribes with different languages.

A second consequence of the ceasefire has been the explosion of tensions between Nagas and the ethnically different peoples of the neighboring states in the Indian Union—the Meiteis and Kukis of Manipur, the Ahom of Assam, and various tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh. The ceasefire is deliberately ambiguous as to whether the agreement extends beyond the territory of Nagaland state to all Naga-inhabited areas. Fears of a Greater Nagaland and the division of state territories have prompted violent opposition from these state governments, as well as from the majority non-Naga communities in these areas. Their opposition led to an outbreak of violence in 2001; as a result, the Indian government has backed away from the possibility of extending the ceasefire to all Naga-inhabited areas.

Women's Contributions to the Peace Process

Women have played a vital role in stopping violence throughout Naga history. As socially sanctioned peacemakers, women have historically intervened in the midst of battle and appealed for an end to violence. This cultural and traditional role has enabled Naga women to protect their communities through informal mediation, to mobilize for reconciliation, and to shape the formal peace process.

1. *Protecting Communities through Informal Mediation*

To mitigate ongoing violence in their communities, women negotiate with state and non-state actors. Paul Leo, former president of the United Naga Council—the Naga tribal council in Manipur state—values the particular quality of compromise that women bring to the conflict-torn situation. “When men talk, they reinforce their rigid positions. Women are more diplomatic and willing to compromise. They can be relied upon to pacify.”⁴

Mediating Among Factions: Naga women regularly intercede to halt the inter-factional violence that plagues the Naga people. The NMA and other women’s organizations attribute their role as mediators to their traditional position as respected mothers in the community. They act neutrally, maintaining the trust of all parties, and are therefore often effective in persuading armed actors to abandon violence.

Confronting Indian Security Forces: There are multiple accounts of women who directly intervene in villages and in townships to become a human barrier between civilians and soldiers. Without consideration for their own safety, women physically prevent local boys from being arrested to face torture and execution. Women negotiate with local commanding officers to secure the release of their family members. They

advocate for the removal of army posts in towns and villages, as these posts often lead to skirmishes with the underground armed forces and generate terror among the civilian population.

Challenging the Underground Armed Groups: Village women also appeal to underground groups by walking to their camps and pleading with their leaders not to ambush army encampments, which would make nearby villagers vulnerable to retaliatory attacks. In urban areas, tribal elders ask that women attend their talks with the underground leaders in a strategic effort to keep the discussions peaceful. It is women who expose human rights violations, provoking the underground leadership to take corrective action. Women work through the tribal network and sometimes enlist the support of women within the underground movement, particularly when sexual abuse has occurred.

Defusing Inter-Community Tension: Although efforts to build an understanding and dialogue beyond a crisis response—even among the women—remain difficult, Naga women open channels of communication with other communities and work together to protect each other. They form coalitions with non-Naga women to rescue hostages, provide support to displaced persons, and promote inter-community social integration. Through campaigns and events, Naga women spread the message that there can be no peace for Nagas without peace for all.

2. *Shaping and Sustaining the Formal Peace Process*

The 1997 ceasefire, which is renewed annually, has been a precarious one, strained by many factors and derailed at various points. Yet it continues to hold because Naga social organizations, particularly women, are accepted by all parties as the main stakeholders in the peace process. “Both sides can decide to break the ceasefire. But for whom, after all, are they talking—for us. We’re all stakeholders in the peace,” asserts Neidonuo Angami, president of NMA. Women’s organizations mobilize public support for formal talks, facilitate dialogue between Naga factions, and strategically advocate for mechanisms to strengthen the ceasefire.

Women also shape the formal peace process through their participation in consultations with the Isaak-Muivah group, such as in Bangkok in 2002. Civil society representation has made the official talks more representative and has expanded the agenda to reflect the concerns of the Naga people. For example, after much civil society activism, a major shift in the peace agenda occurred in 2001 when the ceasefire ground rules were expanded to protect civilians from abuse by armed parties. The clause specifically noted that the Indian army and paramilitary forces, as well as the Isaak-Muivah faction of the NSCN, would “act in a manner as not to cause harassment/damage or loss of property or injury to the civilian population.”⁵ This



change in policy demonstrated recognition of the needs of a broader peace that placed civilian security at the forefront of the agenda. Despite these significant contributions, there has not been systematic integration of civil society or women in the dialogue, nor has there been a concerted effort to use civil society or women to advance the peace process.

Although neither consistent nor universal, it can be argued that women's participation in the peace process has led to a shift in social consciousness and a growth in the negotiating power of Naga women. Awareness of women's importance to the Isaak-Muivah faction, after prodding by NMA representatives, was evidenced by the participation of their women leaders in the third Bangkok Consultation in 2002 and again at an assembly in Manipur in April 2003.

3. Mobilizing for Peace and Reconciliation

Women in the NMA and NWUM organize a variety of initiatives to promote reconciliation in Naga and non-Naga communities, the most well known of which is the NMA's "Shed No More Blood Campaign." On August 4, 1994, 3,000 mothers from various tribes convened in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, to launch the initiative.⁶ In addition to public rallies, the campaign established a non-partisan Peace Team that has conducted a series of advocacy meetings with senior officials in state government as well as Indian military officers. These public and private meetings have reduced the level of tension and violence, provided space for dialogue, and created a broad desire for peace.

Conclusion

Women are integral to the Naga peace effort; without their involvement, no initiative is complete. JoJo Aier, an eminent lawyer in Kohima, notes: "In every public activity, in every public meeting, the men now ask: 'Where are the women? We need the women.'"

The social and political recognition of NMA's and NWUM's contributions has begun to translate into action, as women are increasingly requested to participate in public activities and negotiations. NMA and NWUM facilitate communication among leaders of the underground factions, participate in Naga civil society's advocacy campaigns, and have been included in some high-level delegations and peace consultations.

Yet there remains enormous untapped potential in the role of Naga women. NMA and NWUM must be provided with technical and financial resources to maximize the impact of their initiatives and their access to all major actors. Unlike in most areas of conflict in the world, Naga women are recognized as traditional peacemakers in Naga society; this must be capital-

ized upon to help resolve the conflict. Given the long-standing ceasefire and little forward movement in the process, creative efforts to support and involve women systematically in the formal talks is a crucial, yet simple, way to bring the Nagas one step closer to peace.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Census of India 2001*. <http://www.censusindia.net/profiles/nag.html>.
- 2 Qtd. in Chakrabarti, Suman K. "Naga Peace Plan Deepens Ethnic Wedge." *Asia Times Online* 7 February 2003. 28 September 2004. http://www.atimes.com/atimes/south_asia/EB07Df01.html.
- 3 Mullick, B.N. *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1972.
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from interviews conducted by the author in 2002, 2003, and 2004.
- 5 Qtd. in Kumar, Ram Narayan and Laxmi Murthy. *Four Years of the Ceasefire Agreement Between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim: Promises and Pitfalls*. New Delhi: Civil Society Initiative on the Naga Peace Process, 2002. 136-137.
- 6 Angami, Neidonuo. Documents provided to the author. April 2003.

About the Author

Rita Manchanda is Senior Program Executive for the South Asian Forum for Human Rights. A journalist, writer, researcher, and human rights activist, she has dedicated much of her work to bridging the deep political and ethnic divides between India and Pakistan. She advocates for the integration of women peace builders into the policy arena, firmly believing in the vision of alternate, people-focused security and the power of participatory democracy. Ms. Manchanda is also the founder and a national committee member of the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy and an active member of the nuclear disarmament movement in India. Her many publications include the edited volume *Women, War, and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency and Women Making Peace*. She holds a master of arts in philosophy and international relations from the University of Geneva.

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The Policy Commission is conducting a series of case studies to document women's contributions to peace processes across conflict areas worldwide. The studies focus on women's activities in conflict prevention, pre-negotiation and negotiation, and post-conflict reconstruction—including governance; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and transitional justice and reconciliation. This body of work is pragmatic and operational, offering suggestions, guidelines, and models to encourage policymakers to include women and gender perspectives in their program design. This series was conceived and developed by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini.

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Women, Peace, and Security

Wars and internal conflicts do not end simply with the signing of peace agreements. To avoid a resurgence of violence, it is necessary to develop and support measures for strengthening governance, security, justice, and socioeconomic capacities of a state. This is a complex task in any society, but daunting in post-conflict situations. While the international community can provide assistance and valuable resources, the local population, which has no “exit strategy,” has the greatest commitment to building sustainable peace. It is therefore essential to draw on the assets, experiences, and dedication at the local level and among all sectors of society. One sector often overlooked and underestimated is women. In most post-conflict societies women are more than 50 percent of the population and are actively engaged in peace building while addressing the basic survival needs of their families and communities. Yet they are often portrayed as passive victims, and little regard is given to their actual and potential roles in fostering security.

In October 2000, for the first time in its history, the United Nations Security Council acknowledged that women have a key role in promoting international stability by passing Resolution 1325 on woman, peace, and security. It called on all parties to ensure women's participation in peace processes, from the prevention of conflict to negotiations and postwar reconstruction. The Women Waging Peace Policy Commission was established to examine peace processes with a particular focus on the contributions of women. This study, *Naga Women Making a Difference: Peace Building in Northeastern India*, chronicles the innovative approaches of Naga women who mediate among armed actors and mobilize for peace and reconciliation across conflict divides. This report documents the activities of Naga women to sustain the ceasefire, strengthen the formal peace process, and encourage the pursuit of long-term stability in northeastern India. For the full report, go to www.womenwagingpeace.net.

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Women Waging Peace

Women influence through consensus building rather than through coercion and force. Women are thus experts in ‘soft power,’ an increasingly important approach in modern conflict.

Joseph S. Nye
Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics

Bringing women to the peace table improves the quality of agreements reached and increases the chance of success in implementation, just as involving women in post-conflict governance reduces the likelihood of returning to war.

Donald K. Steinberg
Director, Joint Policy Council
US Department of State

Nations consumed by conflict need the strength of their women. In times of chaos, women bring stability; and at the war’s end, women ensure sustainable peace.

Noeleen Heyzer
Executive Director
United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

Women’s capacity to take a sliver of opportunity and widen it to create a new political forum for moderation is invaluable in efforts to recover after the war.

Rina Amiri
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Women Waging Peace

A program of Hunt Alternatives Fund

Hunt Alternatives Fund advances innovative and inclusive approaches to social change at local, national, and global levels. Founded in 1981 by Swanee Hunt, the Fund currently has three program areas: ARTWorks for Kids, Prime Movers, and Women Waging Peace.

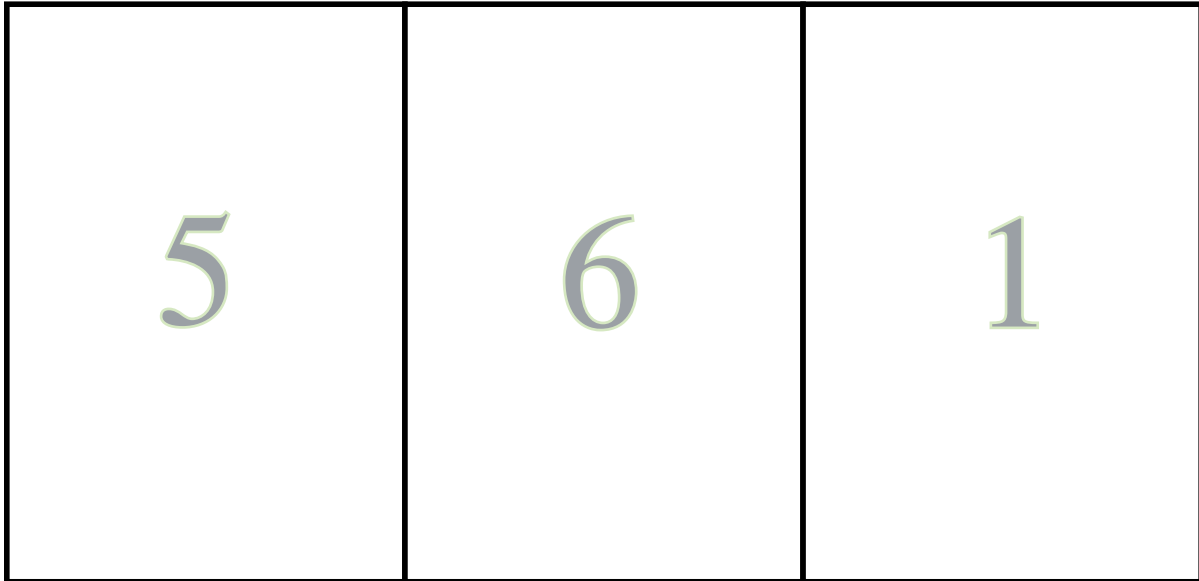
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